

Conversation Guide: Talking With Parents About Early Learning and Family Support Programs

Child Welfare-Early Learning Navigators



Washington State Department of
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

How To Use This Document

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families' (DCYF) Child Welfare-Early Learning Navigator project team created this document to help DCYF workers have supportive and productive conversations with parents when making referrals to early learning and family support programs. The first few pages provide advice on how to introduce early learning as a concept. Pages 2 and 3 provide best practices for navigating a conversation with parents. On pages 4 and 5 are suggestions for how to navigate resistance and answer some of the more challenging responses parents may raise. For a list of information regarding the different programs that may be available in your area (e.g., age of eligibility, service format, and documents needed for enrollment), please see the supplemental publication *Conversation Guide - Early Learning and Family Support Programs - Early Learning Programs In Washington (EL_0032B)* available at www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pubs/EL_0032B.pdf.

Introducing Early Learning Programs

Most adults have only a loose understanding of early childhood development, relying on analogies that paint children as sponges, blank slates, or plants to be nurtured. These tend to oversimplify development, elevating certain types of needs while downplaying others.¹ When you start talking with a family about early childhood learning and family support programs, don't expect that these programs will immediately "click" with parents.

When explaining early learning to parents:

- ✓ Avoid jargon.
- ✓ Emphasize the child's overall well-being.
- ✓ Talk about healthy growth as a way to build resilience and maximize potential.

.....
"Early learning and family support community resources are there to help ensure families have support for children's healthy development."

"Babies are born learning. Very young children are learning through play, the active exploration of their environment, and, most importantly, through interactions with the significant adults in their lives."²

"Children in high-quality programs, such as Head Start, are less likely to be in special education or repeat a grade in school, more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college, and more likely to be employed and earn more as an adult."
.....

1. FrameWorks Institute, "Framing Early Child Development Message Brief." (2009). Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
2. Quote from Zero to Three (zerotothree.org).

Caseworkers are essential in laying the groundwork to connect parents to early learning programs. During the initial face-to-face or subject interview, caseworkers can inquire and document what the child is already engaged in (e.g., asking if they attend a child care or other early learning program). In addition to identifying what early learning supports the family may be interested in, this will help define the risk and protective factors to complete the investigation, as well as help workers to understand who is caring for the child and how the child functions.

If your office has a Child Welfare-Early Learning navigator,³ they can connect directly with parents to talk further about the early learning programs available to them. Asking about the family's engagement in early learning programs will help the navigators to get a sense of the needs of the child and family. If the caseworker provides the navigator's name and lets the family know they will be calling to talk about early learning, families are more likely to remember and be ready when the navigator calls. If the parent seems eager, caseworkers can share the navigator's contact information, or call the navigator together with the family right then.

If your office does not have a navigator, you can call Help Me Grow at 800-322-2588 for support with locating and connecting families to early learning programs in their geographic area.

3. Funded as a three-year (2020-23) position through the Pre-School Development Grant, the navigators are currently working in Aberdeen, King South-East, King South-West, Long Beach, Shelton, South Bend, Sunnyside, Toppenish, and Yakima.

Best Practices for Conversations with Parents

Empower the parent as the decision-maker by asking for their permission at the beginning and throughout the conversation.

- *“Is now a good time to talk?”*
- *“Would you be open to talking about programs that can help ensure your child’s healthy development?”*
- *“Your caseworker told me you may be interested in _____ program? Is that right?”*
- *“Can I tell you about some programs that are available to your family?”*
- *“Do you think that this may be helpful?”*
- *“Your decision whether or not to enroll in these programs will have no bearing on your case.”*
- *“These programs are voluntary. If you give it a try, you can decide later whether it’s a good fit for your family.”*

Focus on building a connection, listening to the parent, and save “information” until the end of the conversation. Ask parents how they feel their children are doing, do they have any concerns for their children’s development or behavior, are they currently in any type of services or child care? Listen for caregivers to share their goals.

- *“I have some ideas about programs that may be helpful, but before I jump into those, can you tell me a little more about what’s going on with your family right now?”*
- *“I understand that _____ has been challenging. Can you tell me more about that?”*

Start from the frame that the parent is the expert and promote belief in the client’s abilities as a parent. Building self-esteem and confidence can be helpful drivers of change.

- *“You know your child best.”*
- *“You are the expert on your child.”*
- *“I can tell that you care a lot about your child’s healthy development.”*

Seek to understand family context, validate concerns, and think of addressing the families’ most urgent need first.

- *“I hear you talking a lot about feeling like you don’t have a lot of time. Sounds like you’ve got a lot on your plate right now.”*
- *“I can also help locate or connect you with child care or preschool if that is needed.”*
- *“I hear that your child is doing really well and you feel they are on track developmentally right now. This is great! The _____ program is designed to ensure this progress continues, so that your child is able to reach their fullest potential both now and in the years to come in school”*
- *“This program is not designed to tell you how to parent your children. The intention is to build on the strengths you already have, to offer new ways of promoting your child’s development, and to advance your child’s social, emotional, and cognitive skill development.”*

Normalize the services/need for support.

- *“These services are available to all families.”*
- *“Many families I have worked with have told me that their children have benefitted from these programs.”*
- *“All types of kids, including those on a typical development track, benefit from these services.”*
- *“We all have times when we need more support.”*

When you explain the programs, emphasize parent choice and flexibility in how the programs are delivered.

- *“Some programs will come to you at home. For others, you can meet at a child care program or even a community place like a library or school”*
- *“Programs typically have recommendations for how often they meet with you, however, there is often flexibility with this if you feel like you want to participate, but have a busy schedule.”*

Best Practices for Conversations With Parents *Continued*

If you sense the parent may not be open to the referral full-stop, lower the stakes and break the decision into smaller pieces.

- *“Would you be willing to talk to a provider from the program to learn more about the service?”*
- *“You don’t have to decide now. Can I call you again in a few weeks to see how you’re thinking about this?”*
- *“Can I text/email/mail you some more information?”*
- *“Would you be interested in talking to another parent from the program?”*

Remember that many families have had many negative experiences with child welfare, education, and other state “systems” and that this may be a key source of their resistance.

- *“These programs are all voluntary.”*
- *“These programs are voluntary. If you give it a try, you can decide later whether it’s a good fit for your family.”*
- *“Your participation will not affect your Child Protective Services (CPS) case.”*
- *“What concerns do you have about sending your child to a program with people you don’t know? You are more than welcome to tour the facility, meet all the staff, and spend time in the classroom with your child until you get to know them and feel more comfortable.”*
- *“You have a lot of choice with this program. If you give it a try and like the program, but are not connecting well with the home visitor, you can say so and ask to switch providers.”*

If the parent expresses interest in the program, be sure to practice a warm hand-off. A warm hand-off is a practice of engaging the family to help them navigate the enrollment process. This will promote collaborative communication, improve relationships between the parents and the program referred to, and ultimately support a more successful connection.

- Offer to introduce the family to the program or call the program together.
- Ask about barriers that the family may have to address to access the service (e.g., transportation, ability to print application, etc.).
- Double check to make sure contact information is correct.
- Ensure family knows what the next steps are and what to expect. (e.g., who will contact them next, what they need to do next).
- Tell them you will follow up and check back with them soon.



How to Navigate Tough Conversations with Parents

You may find parents do not think that the programs are a good fit for their family or are resistant to accepting a referral. It is important to respect their decision and not pressure families into accepting services. At the same time, resistance may stem from fear of change or the unknown. In these cases, it can be helpful to dig into and respond to some of their concerns. Signs that clients may be feeling resistant include:

- ✓ The client may interrupt you.
- ✓ The client seems distracted (looking at watch, cell phone, etc.).
- ✓ The client may get defensive.

When this happens:

- ✓ Avoid a head-on argument or trying to persuade the parent to see it from your point of view.
- ✓ Express empathy and try to remain non-judgmental.
- ✓ Demonstrate that you've heard what the other person has said by repeating back or paraphrasing what they've said.
- ✓ Engage the parent as a team member in brainstorming solutions; ask them what an alternate viewpoint or other solution may be.

In the cases where families decline referrals, the goal may be to plant a seed for parents to access these services later on. This could include:

- ✓ Setting them up to have a later conversation with you
- ✓ Self-referring in the future, knowing what is available.
- ✓ Calling the Help Me Grow hotline number (800-322-2588).



How to Navigate Tough Conversations with Parents *Continued*

Here are some common responses you may encounter:

What Parents May Say	How to Respond	What You Can Say
<p>“There’s nothing wrong with my child.”</p> <p>“We don’t need this service.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Reframe the program as providing support. ✓ Validate their feelings in a positive frame. ✓ Normalize the need for support. 	<p><i>“Programs develop activities that support and teach children at all levels.”</i></p> <p><i>“The program is designed to help children meet their full potential.”</i></p> <p><i>“I know that sometimes the kids in my life just get bored. These programs can give kids a few hours of fun that are also educational.”</i></p>
<p>“I don’t want strangers raising my children.”</p> <p>“I’m a stay-at-home parent and I want my kids to stay home with me.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Validate their feelings in a positive frame. ✓ Talk about how other members of the family may also benefit from these services. ✓ Demystify services for parents and encourage them to get involved. ✓ Normalize the need for support. 	<p><i>“I know it’s helpful to have someone else to talk to. These programs are designed to support parents as well. Do you feel like you have people in your life that can support you as a parent?”</i></p> <p><i>“If you’d be more comfortable, these programs really value parent engagement. You’d be able to participate in the program with your child, or volunteer in the classroom.”</i></p>
<p>“I’m too busy for this.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Validate their feelings in a positive frame. ✓ Explain how programs can be customized to fit their needs. ✓ Emphasize that programs are optional. 	<p><i>“I hear you saying that you think it will be difficult to make time for this. Would it be helpful to know how much of your time the program would take before deciding? Some of our programs can come to your home if that’s easier for you. It’s your choice whether or not to enroll your child.”</i></p>
<p>“I signed up before/was on the waiting list and no one ever contacted me.”</p> <p>“I already tried to apply and I didn’t qualify.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Don’t try and correct parents if this doesn’t seem accurate. ✓ Validate their experience of the situation. ✓ Offer a solution of “what we can do differently this time.” 	<p><i>“I’m so sorry that happened. That would be very frustrating to not have heard back from someone. Part of my role is to follow up with providers and help ensure families who are interested get enrolled. Could I do that for your family?”</i></p>
<p>“I’ve heard about horrible things happening to kids while at daycare.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Validate their feelings in a positive frame. ✓ Ask more about what their concerns are, address each unique concern as needed. ✓ Provide a balanced perspective of the program. ✓ Demystify services for parents and encourage them to get involved. 	<p><i>“I can understand how you might feel that way, can you say more about that? If you’d be more comfortable, these programs value parent engagement. You can participate in the program with your child or volunteer in the classroom.”</i></p> <p><i>“You will get to make the decision of whether or not a program is meeting your child’s needs. If you need to make a change at any time, I can help with that.”</i></p>



www.dcyf.wa.gov

If you would like copies of this document in an alternative format or language, please contact DCYF Constituent Relations (1-800-723-4831 | 360-902-8060, ConstRelations@dcyf.wa.gov).

DCYF PUBLICATION EL_0032A (04-2021)