



Key Person Guidance

Strategies for breaking down barriers with 'hard to reach' parents.

Parents, like their children, come to preschool or nursery, with a multitude of different life experiences and upbringing. They may have developed a range of different values and attitudes.

If they had negative experiences when they went through education, it is likely they may lack confidence with communicating with their own child's educational establishments.

If their upbringing was traumatic or deprived, perhaps they may have a limited understanding and experience of raising children. They may feel threatened by the pressures imposed by society, and only want to escape and hide away. The parents may perceive they have a different parenting style than what is employed at the preschool, and this may make them feel uncomfortable.

If they are struggling now due to mental health issues, or they are in financial difficulty, or they are dealing with stresses at home or with their own relationships, they are maybe more likely to avoid face to face interactions with the educational establishment's staff.

If the parents are fearful of being blamed or criticised for their parenting, they may not want to talk to their child's key person.

If the parents work and are short of time, they are more likely to want to drop off and collect their child quickly.

If the parent cannot read or write or may speak a different language, this may act as a barrier to working closely with the preschool.

If a parent is struggling with feeling happy and confident when they drop off and collect their child, this is likely to have a negative impact on the child's wellbeing and progress.

On the other hand, parents with the above problems may be fantastic with liaising with their child's preschool, they may reach out for support and the children maybe making super progress.

It is very important that preschool staff are completely non-judgemental of all their parents and not make assumptions about them. Instead, staff should show respect, friendship and demonstrate good listening and observational skills. Understand that parents know their child the best. It is a difficult balance to achieve if a staff member is worried about a parent and their children.

This document aims to set out strategies to achieve this balance, with the aim of making a good connection with the parents and introducing them to the Grow my Child Programme.

- **Select** the parent and child that you have concerns about.
- **Observe.** Think about the child's development, is it where you would expect or is there delay? Does the parent make eye contact with you? What is the relationship between the parent and the child like? What is the child's attendance like? Does the child talk about home experiences? What do you know about the child's cultural capital?
- **Share** concerns with your Manager, discuss possible next steps for planning better engagement with the parent.
- **Study** the pros and cons of the 3 different 'relationship models' – Partnership, Expert and Befriending – and decide which elements will be most appropriate to aim for when establishing a relationship with a parent.

- **Think** about your own values and beliefs – are they likely to be consistent with or different from the values and beliefs of the parent?
- **Plan** a bespoke way forward to start building a bridge towards the parent. The aim is to be friendly, on a professional but human level, without being a ‘friend’. Display human empathy and a gentle professional approach.

Ideas:

1. Use body language and facial expressions with the parent at every opportunity – catch their eye, wave, smile, nod.
2. Consider arranging a home visit.
3. Introduce an object to share between the setting, child and parent. This might be a travelling teddy, or a notebook with positive observations about the child, including behaviour or personal skills which the parent has taught. If the child has made a drawing or painting, arrange to support the child to share this at pick up time and take the opportunity to explain what the child achieved.
4. Look for some common ground – perhaps a mutual acquaintance, a shared interest. Perhaps compliment the child’s cheeky smile or ability with something, to the parent.
5. Use social media such as FAMILY or WhatsApp to connect with the parent, share information about the child, and perhaps offer a time to sit together to talk about the child.
6. Make a notice board for parents, to include information about mental health services, and the health visiting service. Make signs that suggest the setting has an open door, time to talk, is non-judgemental and supportive. Display the Grow my Child poster.
7. Consider involving a third party, such as a friend of the parent, who you could ask to pass a message.
8. Over time, it is hoped that the parent will relax and feel more confident with liaising with the Key Person. Look for signs of this – does the parent initiate a conversation and tell you something about their child? Does the parent ask you any questions? Or does the parent want to leave as quickly as possible?
9. Continue to observe the parent’s demeanour, facial expressions and body language. Do they appear stressed or anxious? Try to find the opportunity to ask, ‘Are you alright?’ or ‘Are you worried about something?’ Or ‘Would you like to talk to someone?’ Do you have a quiet place where you can talk to the parent undisturbed?
10. When and if the parent appears to be more relaxed and confident to talk to the Key Person, now is the time to introduce the Grow my Child programme. Show them the Aims document and encourage them to think about taking part in it.
11. Once the parent agrees they would like to participate in the Grow my Child programme, arrange a 30-minute meeting to discuss it, share the documents and set 1 or 2 targets. Explain the EYFS parent information leaflet. Aim to increase the parent’s knowledge of the EYFS.
12. Arrange regular catch-up meetings with the parent to discuss the activities and progress and give ideas for improvement. Complete the Action Plan last column.
13. Finally, ask the parent to complete an evaluation form for you to use to reflect on the programme and consider better ways to involve parents.