

# Communication skills for educators

Effective communication helps develop partnerships, share information and respond early if there are challenges.

## How does good communication help?

Effective communication benefits everyone, but it's especially important when thinking about mental health and wellbeing.

Communicating well helps create a shared understanding and a partnership with the other person/people. There are many benefits of this, here are just a few.

- **Stronger relationships:** Builds trust through honest, respectful communication, which in turn allows people to be open about their thoughts and feelings. This helps support effective collaboration.
- **A better understanding of what's happening at home and in the community:** Allows you to understand the strengths and resources of the family. If there are challenges, you're then well placed to learn how it might affect the child or young person and identify any supports that might be helpful and appropriate.
- **Opportunities to model positive social interactions:** Provides children and young people with examples of effective communication, helping to support their social development and relationship-building skills.

## Communication considerations

Strong communication skills are essential to build partnerships. Some things to think about when you're communicating include whether you are the correct person to have this

conversation – check in with your senior or wellbeing staff for support:

- **Timing:** Can I give this person my full attention? If not, you could say, "I only have five minutes right now, but let's arrange a time so we discuss this in more detail". This lets the person know the conversation is important, even if you can't attend to it right away.
- **Environment:** Is this a good place to have this conversation? Consider privacy.
- **Your feelings:** Reflect on your emotional state - Consider how you might be feeling about what's been said. If your emotions are heightened, you're more likely to misread the other person or respond hastily, without careful thought.
- **Family background:** Culture, personal values and beliefs that may be different to your own can impact communication.
- **Distractions:** Effective communication is difficult if you're multi-tasking. If you're distracted, you're likely to miss non-verbal cues. Try to avoid distractions and stay focused.
- **Different ideas:** Listen to what the other person wants to discuss and try not to be distracted by what you think is most important.
- **Dismissing:** Don't be reassuring when there may not be a positive outcome (for example, by saying "You'll be fine").

- **Judging:** You don't have to agree with someone else's views, but setting aside judgment, blame or criticism can help you fully understand their point of view.

It's also important to consider whether families would like an interpreter, community spokesperson, or First Nations Liaison/Education officer to be involved with discussions.

Find out more about [preparing for difficult conversations](#).

## Key communication skills for educators

Communication skills are easy to learn – they just require practise. Skills include:

### Information-sharing

This encourages everyone in the learning community to:

- be aware of a child or young person's strengths and challenges
- develop a common understanding
- work together to support all individuals' wellbeing and development
- support one another.

Information that may be helpful to communicate includes:

- the child or young person's interests, strengths and challenging behaviours
- social supports outside the early learning service or school
- developmentally appropriate and expected behaviours. You can use the [BETSL Observational Tool](#) to help guide you.
- family and community expectations, circumstances, and understanding any cultural protocols
- the learning community's expectations and practices.

### Non-verbal communication

This includes people's body language, tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions during

face-to-face conversations. We sometimes rely on non-verbal communication more than words to convey meaning and understanding throughout a conversation. This is especially so when trying to communicate complex feelings, ideas and concepts.

### Empathy

Empathy shows the other person you understand their perspective without passing judgment. It communicates respect and acceptance, which helps to build trust. It doesn't mean you have to agree with each other, but it means being able to respect and accept differences.

Ways to be empathetic toward others include:

- showing respect for other people's point of view
- having a sense of goodwill or kindness
- valuing the experience, knowledge and commitment others bring to a partnership
- being aware and responsive to other people's lived in living experience.

### Active listening

To listen to someone properly, you need to tune in and give them your full attention. Active listening involves:

**Attending:** Create a comfortable space for the conversation, make appropriate eye contact and use attentive body language such as nodding, leaning forward and smiling. You can use minimal acknowledgers, such as "mm" and "uh-huh", which encourage people to continue speaking and are very effective in helping the speaker feel that you're interested in what they're saying. Some people prefer not to maintain eye contact as a personal preference or cultural protocol. Not maintaining eye contact can be a sign of respect, or comfort level of the individual.

**Following:** It's important to keep the conversation going. You can use open and closed questions, encouraging body language or verbal sounds and clarifying queries. These prompts show you're engaged with what's

being said, without interrupting the flow of the speaker. Open questions encourage more detailed responses, rather than a “yes” or “no” answer. For example, “What are your concerns about your child?” or “Tell me how it happened?”.

**Pauses and silences:** Pausing encourages the other person to continue talking, and silences are useful when they’re still thinking about what’s been said. A person might open up more when you resist the temptation to fill a silence.

**Reflecting:** Reframe what the other person has said into your own words to show them you’re listening, and that you understand what they mean. This involves rephrasing what you’ve heard, and reflecting the feeling of what someone’s saying or showing through their body language. Reflection shows you have empathy for their situation. It also builds trust and can prevent misunderstandings. After you reflect back to someone what you’ve heard, they can confirm the accuracy of your impression, or correct it.

**Prioritising:** Focusing a conversation on the main content helps ensure the most pressing needs are discussed. For example, say “I can hear that there is a lot going on for you right now. Can you tell me what the most urgent issue is for you right now, so we can focus on that?”

Educators need to fully engage with students' perspectives and needs, showing genuine interest and understanding. They can do this by paying close attention, asking clarifying questions, paraphrasing to ensure understanding, and providing thoughtful responses.

## Look after yourself

Having difficult conversations can be challenging. It’s important to look after your own [mental health and wellbeing](#). Remember to reach out for support from your support network - colleagues or senior staff.

## Be You Resources

Learn more about creating welcoming, culturally responsive learning environments in

[Reflect, Respect, Respond: Protocols for culturally respectful engagement with First Nations communities](#)

Learn more about how to [prepare for difficult conversations with families](#).

## Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about how to have conversations with children and young people about their wellbeing in the module [Inquire](#).

Learn more recognising behaviours that might indicate early signs of mental health issues, how to talk about it, and how to provide support in the [Early Support](#) domain.

Learn about creating and maintaining strong partnerships with families in the [Family Partnerships](#) domain.

## External links

Australia Institute of Family Studies – [Talking about parenting: Why a radical communications shift is needed to drive better outcomes for children](#).

headspace – [5 ways to effectively communicate your feelings](#).

ReachOut – [3 steps to better communication / How to have difficult conversations](#).

