

## Managing difficult conversations

Difficult conversations are usually planned discussions about an uncomfortable topic or a negative experience. The goal of the conversation is to share different perspectives, build mutual understanding and develop respect, not to persuade or win.

This kind of conversation can come up in any area of our lives but when you have a child with special educational needs, they're likely to come up regularly. That's because stress levels can be high, getting the right support can be difficult and resources are often stretched. And at the centre of it all is often a vulnerable child or young person.

This kind of conversation is about sharing views, getting a better understanding of the situation and finding a way forward that works. But they're often accompanied by strong feelings of worry, unease and discomfort. Much as it's tempting to avoid having them, especially if you're not keen on confrontation, it's much better to do them sooner rather than later. Planning ahead and being aware of what might go wrong can help things to go as smoothly as possible.

Here are our top tips.

### Before the Conversation

Sometimes you won't know a conversation is going to become a difficult one. But if you do know you're meeting to talk about something that's going to be challenging, here are some ideas about how to prepare.

- Think about whether and how your child or young person might be involved. It may not be appropriate for them to be there, but

are there ways for them to have their views heard, if they're needed.

- Know your stuff – have all the facts you need and read any notes from previous meetings or discussions
- Write a list of the things you want to make sure you cover – this gives you a focus and something to go back to if things wander off topic. It will also help to make sure you discuss everything that's important.
- Plan what questions you want to ask.
- Think of the responses you might give to questions you could be asked.
- Look ahead at the possible outcomes of the conversation. What do you want to come out of the conversation with? What would you consider to be a success? Try and be realistic – you may need to take small steps to move things forward.
- Think about the environment that the conversation will be held in – is it going to be in a place where everyone feels comfortable? If not, ask if it can be changed.
- Ask who is going to any meeting. Big groups of professionals in meetings with one or two parents can often feel intimidating and unbalanced. Ask for there to be just a few people involved.
- Get help and support from others if you aren't sure about being able to manage the conversation. Ask a friend or family member to help you prepare or come with you if it might make the conversation more successful.
- Prepare for barriers and resistance. You're going to be talking about difficult things – think ahead and imagine what are going to be the most difficult issues to resolve. How will you overcome those possible barriers or other peoples' resistance to change?
- Be committed to a good outcome - get into the right 'headspace'. Recognise and understand your feelings about the

conversation and consider what might make you upset or angry.

### During the conversation

- Remember, everyone involved is there in the best interests of the child or young person.
- Keep your child or young person at the centre of the conversation. If the discussion starts to drift or there are differences of opinion, keep bringing everyone back to what your child wants and needs.
- Ask open questions to find out the full picture. That means asking questions that someone cannot answer with a simple yes or no.
- Listen carefully to each person and try not to interrupt. Try and respect other people's views in the meeting. Sometimes this can be hard, especially if you strongly disagree with something, but in the long run it's more constructive to give everyone a chance to air their views.
- Acknowledge that you have heard others in the conversation. It's OK to disagree with what's being said. If you don't agree with something, you could try saying something like "I understand/hear what you're saying, but I have a different view, or I disagree."
- Try and stay open minded and positive. Think about solutions to challenges, instead of problems and try and stay focused on that.
- If you feel like you're going round in a circle, coming back to the same issue again and again, ask if you can end that part of the discussion and move on. If you've been able to resolve somethings positively, it may help when coming back to the issues that are trickier.
- If you can, keep notes or write down a few key bullet points during the conversation. At the end of the meeting, summarise what has been discussed and any actions.

### After the conversation

- If you need to, talk to a friend or family member and 'off-load'. A cup of tea and a piece of cake might help.
- Take some time to reflect on the conversation. Think about what went well, what didn't and anything could be done differently next time.
- If things didn't get resolved, or you don't feel like there is a way to move on, ask for support. You can contact us for advice.
- If you didn't make notes during the conversation, make some as soon as possible after the meeting, ready for the next time.
- Follow up the conversation with an email to the person you spoke with. Thank them for taking the time to have the conversation and list any actions that were agreed.
- If you said you would do something, make sure you do it.
- Be kind to yourself. You're doing the best that you can.



DIAS information that may be helpful.

These resources are on our website or available as a document by contacting us.

- Meetings form
- Day to day working with professionals
- When things go wrong

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