

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Chad Kordt-Thomas, LCSW
 Infant-Family and Early Childhood Mental Health Specialist

PRESENTER INFORMATION

- ▶ Infant-Parent Psychotherapist
- ▶ I consult regularly to early childhood care and education professionals who are anticipating having difficult conversations with parents

FOR ALL OF US THERE IS THE EXPERIENCE AND THE WAY WE FEEL ABOUT IT.

- ▶ I dropped my child off at child care / preschool.
- ▶ Versus
- ▶ This is how I felt when I dropped my child off at school.

PAY ATTENTION TO

- ▶ WHAT a parent says and does
- ▶ Compared to
- ▶ HOW the parent says and does it.

PARENTS' ANXIETY TAKES MANY FORMS

- ▶ Avoiding you
- ▶ Seeming to deny there's a problem
- ▶ Frustration
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Being overly worried
- ▶ Not seeming worried enough

COMMON PARENT EXPERIENCE

- ▶ Parents often worry that we will make them think and talk about more than they can **manage**.
- ▶ I try to have **small** conversations with parents over time.

HOW YOU TALK TO PARENTS MATTERS

- ▶ How you are is as important as what you say.

▶ (Pawl & St. John, 1998)

TRY PLACING PARENTS' EXPERIENCE AT THE HEART OF THE CONVERSATION

▶ **Utility:**

- ▶ When parents feel acknowledged and respected in a consistent, on-going way, they are more open to collaboration.

(Johnston & Brinamen, 2006)

IT'S HARD TO RESPECT PARENTS IF YOU AREN'T FEELING RESPECTED BY THEM

- ▶ Try returning to what parents' anxiety can look like.
- ▶ Try remembering a time someone helped you even though you were inpatient.
- ▶ I remember the many times I've been inpatient, frustrated, and even downright rude with a customer service representative on the phone.

CUSTOMER SERVICE ANALOGY

▶ **Utility:**

- ▶ I think of the times I was anxious, impatient, and frustrated, although my frustration really had nothing to do with the customer service representative.
- ▶ Especially when that representative kept her cool, **acknowledged** my frustration, and **kept trying to help** me.
- ▶ Even though I didn't get the answer I wanted, I felt grateful because I was heard and I felt that she tried to help.

TRY ON A STANCE OF "WONDERING WITH" PARENTS

▶ **Utility:**

- ▶ Invites parents to collaborate with us.
- ▶ Helps parents see that understanding something complex is a process rather than a single moment in time.
- ▶ Helps parents slow down and consider multiple reasons for a situation

(Johnston & Brinamen, 2006)

WONDERING WITH

- ▶ I **wonder** what makes drop off hard right now.
- ▶ I **wonder** what his crying tells us about what he'd say if he had words.
- ▶ I **wonder** how we can work together to make this better.

GIVE PARENTS AN ESCAPE ROUTE

- ▶ Can I tell you my idea?
- ▶ Here's what I'm thinking. Does this seem okay or does it seem like I'm off base?
- ▶ I'm guessing you've got a lot on your plate now and may not want me adding something else.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

- ▶ How do you understand her challenges?
- ▶ Tell me about your idea about ____.
- ▶ What do you expect might happen?
- ▶ What are you hoping will happen?
- ▶ How did you make that decision?
- ▶ I wonder if we can think about ____.

(Johnston & Brinamen, 2006)

YOU CAN COME BACK TO A CONVERSATION

- ▶ Seems like this isn't a good time to discuss this, I wonder when we should come back to it.
- ▶ Can I have your permission to come back to this idea at another time?
- ▶ I know you don't want to talk about this now, but I'm worried that if we let too much time go by that ____.

SUPPORT FOR YOU!

- ▶ Find a trusted colleague to think things through before particularly difficult conversations with parents.
- ▶ Debrief with that colleague after.
- ▶ We all need support with challenges.
- ▶ It's too much to hold alone!

REFERENCES

- ▶ Johnston, K. & Brinamen, C. (2006). *Mental Health Consultation in Child Care: Transforming Relationships with Directors, Staff, and Families*. Zero to Three Press.
- ▶ Pawl, J. & St. John, M. (1998). *How You Are Is As Important as What You Do in Making a Difference for Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families*. Zero to Three Press.

CHAD KORDT-THOMAS, LCSW

- ▶ Website: www.chadkordt-thomas.com
- ▶ Email: chad@kordt-thomas.com
- ▶ Tel: 00-1-415-596-0293
