

Working Together

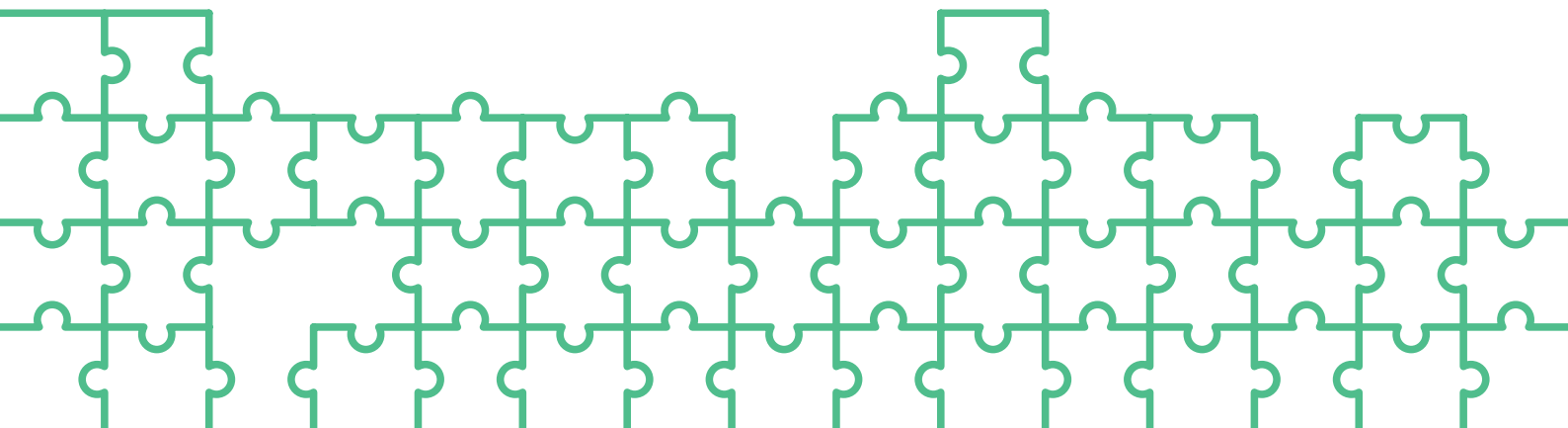
Supporting positive communication between education professionals and parents and carers of children with additional support needs



Module 8

Preventing, understanding and resolving conflict

This module will help you consider how to prevent conflict with parents and provides some practical advice about how to overcome conflict





Background

“Sitting down and talking about the issues honestly with staff at the school helped us to overcome our issues. Things are a lot better now”

Parent

“We felt like we were in a bit a stalemate – mediation helped us to find a way forwards”

Parent

Understanding conflict

No matter how good communication is with parents and how strong your home-school partnerships are there will be times when disagreements or misunderstandings happen, or when things go wrong.

Disagreements may arise between parents and education settings because of conflicting opinions about a child’s needs or different ideas about how to best support a child (for example, what level of support is required and for how long).

Disagreements can normally be overcome with effective communication. Responding quickly, having open and respectful discussions, and listening to and understanding different points of view are all key to making relationships with parents work. Acknowledging disagreements in a sensitive way and dealing with issues directly can relieve tensions and help parents and educators to find a way forward.

Disputes occur when disagreements cannot be rectified or when communication between parents and educators breaks down. A common example of this is when education settings and parents can’t agree on the appropriate support for a child with additional support needs. It is vital that professionals and parents always maintain the best possible support for a child while trying to resolve disputes as quickly as possible.

Disputes often occur when emotions are involved. Anxiety, stress and other pressures can cause people (both education staff and parents) to feel vulnerable or act negatively or defensively. Particularly busy or stressful times (such as the lead-up to the school holidays, during exams or when a child’s additional support needs are being assessed) can impact on the way everyone communicates.

Your education setting should have procedures in place to help resolve disputes internally. If this is not satisfactory for the parent or child, they then have the right to take this to formal review proceedings. Making official complaints is usually the last resort for parents and dealing with issues as early as possible can prevent stress for everyone involved.





Take five minutes to **list** some of the common reasons relationships with parents break down. You can draw on your own personal experiences or things you have heard from colleagues.



Film: Watch this film from Enquire about the importance of communication and the impact of miscommunication



Duration:
3 mins 14 secs

Evidence & information



Common reasons why relationships break down

Miscommunication or lack of information

As discussed in previous modules, all parents have individual communication needs and requirements. Understanding these and maintaining regular contact will help you to prevent disputes from occurring. If education settings are not communicating effectively, parents may feel unsupported or that their views and opinions are not being listened to and taken seriously.

Your education setting might have the appropriate support in place for a child but if parents have not been informed this can leave them feeling anxious or excluded from decisions. Regular and consistent communication will relieve parents' feelings of uncertainty.

Frustration at lack of action or delays

Sometimes relationships with parents break down because they believe their child's needs are not considered important or being prioritised. This can happen if parents feel there is a lack of action or things are taking too long. Helping parents to understand processes and expected timeframes and keeping them updated if there are unexpected delays can help to overcome this issue.

Misunderstandings

Communication is nuanced and, occasionally, discussions or written communication can be misinterpreted. This can sometimes lead to perceptions of judgement, discrimination or parents feeling like they are being shown a lack of respect.

Parents may have experienced discrimination in the past, and their previous experiences may affect the way they interact with staff at your setting. Getting to know parents, and how they communicate, will help you to recognise if there is a shift in your relationship.



Frustration at lack of resource to implement the support needed

A lack of personnel, equipment or financial resource to implement the additional support a child needs is an issue faced by many education settings. Being honest with parents and explaining what you can do now and what you hope to do in the future helps to maintain good relationships. Clearly explain how you are progressing the issue with senior staff or your local authority and keep parents updated.

Personal relationships

All education professionals and parents have their own communication style and approach. Sometimes relationships with parents just seem to click and with others it can be harder to build a rapport and it takes more time. This can be down to personalities or other reasons (for example, a parent's previous negative experience of engaging with education staff). Whatever the issue, it is your role as the professional to make the relationship with the parent work.

If the relationship itself is causing the tension, are there ways you can build on other positive relationships a parent has within the school (for example, inviting colleagues to join you for meetings or discussions)?

Parents are unable to cope

It can be difficult to maintain positive relationships when you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed. When parents are struggling to cope, they may withdraw or alternatively the relationship between both parties could become more tense and strained. Both issues can present a challenge for education professionals. Getting to know parents will help you to understand when they are struggling and may need extra help or support.



Inappropriate language

The language used about a child's additional support needs is very important. It is vital that children are not labelled as "problems", "challenging" or "difficult" – this can understandably lead to anger and resentment from parents. Consider how you will discuss areas where a child is experiencing difficulties. For example, you might say: "I've noticed that Owen is having difficulty staying focussed during afternoon sessions. I'd like to talk about ideas to help him."

Often professionals fall into bad habits of using acronyms. Make sure you use clear, understandable language to help parents stay informed and engaged. Check regularly that parents understand what is being discussed.



Practice reflection

Reflective questions

1. Can you think of a time when a relationship with a parent has broken down? Hopefully you will not have had this experience. If not, think about another area of your life where you've experienced serious disagreement. How was the disagreement resolved?
 - How did this make you feel?
 - What was the impact for you?
 - How did this impact the child?
 - What was the impact for the parent?
 - How did you deal with the situation?
 - What worked well?
 - What would you do differently?

The impact when relationships between parents and teachers break down

As you may have identified above, the impact when parent-teacher relationships break down can be incredibly wide-ranging.

The experience can be demoralising and frustrating for education staff who are doing their best to support a child.

Parents can find it stressful and, because of the communication breakdown, they may feel powerless and uninformed. Relationship breakdowns can lead to a lack of trust and parents feeling that their child is not supported.

Relationship breakdowns between parents and education professionals can create significant barriers to a child receiving the support they need and helping them to achieve their full potential. In some cases, it can also lead to a child missing school or a negative impact on their education experience.



Evidence & information

Key strategies for recovery

When communication has broken down between parents and education professionals, it can be difficult to find a way to progress things. These steps can be useful when you are looking to rebuild relationships.

- > **Consider the situation and discuss with colleagues.** Is there anything you could have done differently? Think about the parent's situation, their point of view and how they might feel. Remember that behaviour is communication – angry conversations demonstrate that parents are feeling extremely stressed or worried. Reflecting on the situation will help you to develop a sensitive approach to improving communication.
- > **Re-establishing a dialogue with parents is important for making progress and getting things back on track.** This can be a particular challenge if communication has been difficult between two individuals. Consider who is best placed to reach out to the parent, and how.
- > **Acknowledge that things have been difficult and try to refocus communication on the best interests of the child.** Getting support right for the child is a common goal that education staff and parents share.
- > **Apologise for any areas of miscommunication.** Admitting where mistakes have been made can help to rebuild trust.
- > **Consider opportunities to bring in a third party who can help support you and the parent to communicate more effectively.** This could be a local charity or mediation service. Reaching out for advice or including them early on may help to prevent the situation from escalating.
- > **Identify new ways of working.** As you re-establish relationships, you may need to consider new approaches to prevent communication breaking down in the future.

Exercise



Film: Listen to this mediator explaining the benefits and process of mediation



Duration:
2 mins 51 secs

Understanding mediation

Every education authority is required to have independent mediation services in place for resolving disagreements relating to children's education. Mediation provides an opportunity for parents and education settings to resolve differences with the assistance of an independent, skilled mediator acting as an impartial third party.

Mediation can help families and education settings build or rebuild strained or broken relationships. Entering into mediation can help parents, teachers and education authorities model how to communicate more effectively with each other. The overriding principle is that those in dispute can create shared agreements on how to resolve their disagreement.

Mediation can be used at any time during a disagreement between an education setting and a parent or child. The process can be used more than once to help resolve a disagreement or parts of a disagreement. It can improve strained relationships, re-establish communication and prevent the escalation of disagreements.

Mediation may not be appropriate in all cases. Parents who have disagreements with the school about issues other than additional support needs may explore the option of mediation. However, parents should also be informed of all other options including school and authority complaints procedures.

Each education authority must publish their chosen mediation provider and contact details which are free of charge to the parent or child.

Enquire has published a [factsheet](#) about mediation.

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Next steps



- Reflect on your learning from this module with colleagues. How do your experiences compare with those of your colleagues? Are there any additional positive strategies that they have identified?
- Identify the mediation service provider in your area and the key person to contact in your local authority if you need more information.