

Chapter 4

Strategies to Propose Referral to Parents

- Tips on Communicating with Parents
- How to Handle Parents' Responses



Chapter 4: Strategies to Propose Referral to Parents

It is usually hard for parents to accept the fact that their children may have possible developmental and/or learning problems requiring referrals. Teachers therefore need to be sensitive to the way they propose referrals to parents, particularly their use of language and communication skills.



Refer to Chapter 4 of the DVD

I. Tips on Communicating with Parents

1. Using Clear and Simple Expressions

- Use simple and common words and phrases to avoid misunderstandings.
- Avoid using medical terms such as ‘disorder’ when communicating to parents about their children’s possible problems as parents are very sensitive to such terms. It is better to use direct description on learning and behaviour of the children. For example:
 - ✗ “We suggest referring Mandy to the doctor as she might be suffering from ‘Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder’.”
 - ✓ “We found that Mandy often leaves her seat and has difficulty to concentrate during class. We suggest referring her to the Maternal and Child Health Centre for doctor’s advice.”

2. Responding to Parents' Concerns

- Maintain active listening to the parents’ views, try to understand and identify their thoughts and feelings on the child’s possible difficulties.
- Pay attention to the parents' responses. Clarify any doubts or misunderstandings they might have:

Parent: “You have mentioned that Mandy is relatively slow in learning. Do you mean that she is mentally handicapped? Does she need to go to a special school?”

Teacher: “Being slow in learning does not necessarily mean mentally handicapped. There might be various underlying reasons. We suggest referring her for a professional assessment so that we can understand Mandy’s problem better and help her learn in a more effective way.”

3. Emphasising on a Common Ground

- Emphasise that both teachers and parents are acting for the best interests of the child and hoping to find ways to manage the possible difficulties of the child.

- Try to build a trusting relationship with parents. Let the parents understand that referral is for the benefit of the child and teachers still have a role to help the child:

Parent: “If the doctor confirmed that my child had problems, you could then kick him out of school! That’s why you are insisting that I bring him to a doctor.”

Teacher: “We suggest referring your child to a doctor simply because we are concerned about his condition. The development of a child has great potential for changes. Timely referral for assessment and early intervention are most beneficial to your child. In fact, we both care about his well-being and hope that he can grow up healthily. Well, how about you take some time to think about my suggestion.”

4. Respecting Parents’ Thoughts and Decisions

- Do not force parents to accept referral if they are not ready.
- Give parents more time and relevant information for them to understand the child’s situation:

Parent: “I won’t bring my child to the doctor!”

Teacher: “I understand that it is hard for you to make a decision right now. That’s fine. We definitely respect your wishes. Here is some information about young children’s development. Try to take a look and do feel free to contact us anytime if you have any questions.”

5. Being Aware of Non-Verbal Expressions

- In addition to verbal communication, messages are also conveyed non-verbally through our facial expression, voice, tone of speech and body language. Therefore, by paying more attention to parents’ non-verbal expressions, teachers can get a better understanding of their emotional responses.
- Teachers should also be sensitive to their own non-verbal expressions when talking to parents:
 - ♦ Choose a quiet place, if possible, for discussion with parents to help both parties concentrate and relax.
 - ♦ Sit with your body leaning slightly towards the parents to show your sincerity and kindness.
 - ♦ Listen carefully and maintain eye contact.
 - ♦ Use a calm tone of voice and maintain an appropriate speed in talking.
 - ♦ Pay attention to own facial expressions, such as having a genuine smile; hold it if the parents seem to be distressed; listening carefully and addressing parents by nodding or patting them lightly.
 - ♦ Avoid exaggerated gestures and body movements which might be mistakenly seen as overacting to the situation.



6. Being Aware of Own Emotional Responses

- Be aware of own emotional responses when communicating with parents. Keep calm.
- Emotions can be contagious. When the other party talks in an angry expression with a hostile tone, one's emotions can be stirred up, leading to an argument.
- Teachers need to remind themselves to take deep breaths and relax before expressing their ideas when parents become emotional.
- If teachers feel that they cannot remain calm, it's better to end the meeting with the parents and find another time to discuss the matter again.

II. How to Handle Responses of Parents

Referring Children for Assessment

Parents respond differently when knowing their children need referrals. Depending on the responses of the parents, teachers might need to use different ways to communicate with them and to help them understand their children's situations.

1. Overlooking the Severity of the Problems

Some parents may be unaware of their children's problems, having overlooked or underestimated the significance. They therefore have never considered the need for referral.

Examples of parents' responses:

- Completely overlooking the problem: "He is still very young. It is very common to find other children his age who do not talk as well."
- Underestimating the significance: "It is very common for boys learning to talk later than girls. He'll catch up as he grows older. He doesn't really need to see a doctor."

To deal with such parental responses, teachers can:

- Raise the parents' awareness of their child's possible problems.
- Enable parents to recognise the importance of early identification of possible problems and prompt referral.
- Provide parents with more relevant information such as information on child development.



Teachers may give the information leaflet “Understanding Your Child's Development – For Parents of Preschool Children” to parents.

- Encourage parents to observe their child. To help them better understand their child’s situation compared with other children, teachers may invite them to sit-in a class.
- Encourage parents to participate in home-school activities, such as seminars and parent-child activities, to foster better parent-teacher communication and experience sharing among parents.

2. Denying the Problems

Parents may be aware of their children's problems but unwilling to accept that fact. They will therefore often deny that their children have problems and decline teachers’ referrals.



Example of parents' response:

“I don't think my son has any problems. He knows a lot. He is perfectly fine. Don't bring up the subject of referral anymore.”

To deal with such parental responses, teachers can:

- Build a positive and mutually trusting relationship with parents and let them understand that teachers also want to help their child.
- Allow time and be patient with parents when talking to them and try to understand their concerns.
- Encourage parents to express themselves and offer them emotional support.
- Provide parents with relevant information to better understand their child's situation.



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- Encourage parents to observe their child’s behaviour.
- Do not force parents to accept the referral immediately or else it will worsen the situation. Allow parents more time to accept the need of referral.

3. Blaming Teachers

Some parents may get angry upon teacher’s proposal of a referral. They might even vent out their anger onto the teacher, as they think that teachers should be responsible for the child’s problems.



Example of parents' responses:

“Did you say that my son has problems? I have paid the school fees. It is your responsibility to teach my son, isn't it? If you think that he has problems, then think of a way to teach him.”

To deal with such parental responses, teachers can:

- First of all, stay calm and avoid arguing with the parents so as not to worsen the situation.
- Take the perspective of the parents.
- Allow time for the parents to calm down.
- Communicate more with the parents and let them know that the suggestion is for the best interests of the child. With the development of a trusting relationship, provide more relevant information to them. Allow them to gradually accept the child's referral need.
- Be responsive to the parents' complaint. But if the parents react in an extreme way, teachers have to set limits. For example:
 - ♦ If the teacher feels being offended, he/she should end the discussion and try to calm the parents down:

“I understand that it may be distressing to you now. However, I wish that we could carry on our discussion with mutual respect. No matter what suggestions or arrangements, the benefits of the child should be of our priority. Let's end our discussion right here. We shall discuss the matter again later.”
 - ♦ When parents put forward an unreasonable request, teachers should avoid giving the parents ambiguous responses. Instead, they should state their position clearly and suggest other solutions:

“Mrs. Wong, we hope that you can understand we are trying our best to help Paul. Your request on arranging one-to-one individual teaching for him is not feasible as we do not have sufficient staff. On the other hand, we also have to take care of other children in the class. However, I will discuss with other teachers on how to support Paul by paying more attention and assistance to him.”

4. Showing Signs of Emotional Problems

Some parents may become anxious and upset. They may feel helpless and even blame themselves.

Examples of parents' responses:

- Being overly anxious — “Is my child mentally handicapped? Does he need to go to a special school? Will he be able to find a job in the future? Can he take care of himself?”
- Blaming themselves — “Indeed, I noticed that Paul was slow in learning. However, I was always too busy at work and didn't have time to look after him. I could only leave him to the maid. It's all my fault that he's the way he is!”



To deal with such parental responses, teachers can:

- Encourage parents to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Assure parents by providing them with factual information if they are too anxious about or overwhelmed by their child's difficulties.
- Give examples of successful cases as encouragement if parents are too pessimistic.
- Provide emotional support to parents. Reassure parents that the teachers are trying their best to support their child in school. Let them feel they are being supported during the difficult times.
- Refer the parents to the Integrated Family Service Centre/Integrated Services Centre in their district for counselling if necessary.

Identifying children's problems and proposing referrals to parents is only the first step towards helping the children. After that, teachers still need to handle the possible learning, emotional and/or behavioural problems of the children in classroom. Teachers can refer to Chapters 5 and 6 in this Manual for further information on effective management of these problems. Moreover, teachers can learn from parents the children's assessment results and follow up progress. If the parents have any concerns and queries about receiving assessment and follow up services, teachers can encourage them to approach the responsible agencies. If necessary, teachers may also contact the responsible agencies with the parents' consent to further understand the situation.

Referring Parents for Social Services

Teachers may refer parents to the Integrated Family Service Centre/Integrated Services Centre for professional advice if the children's problems are suspected to be related to family issues. Teachers can also approach the Centre within the district for further details on the scope and nature of its services and thereby be able to provide parents with relevant information.

However, many parents may be resistant to receiving social services or disclosing their own family problems. In conclusion, whether parents accept the referral greatly depends on their perception of the problems and their stage of readiness to accept change, including: denial, initial awareness of the problem, consideration of service, acceptance of referral and commitment to receiving service. Teachers should respond accordingly, providing as much encouragement and support as possible.

1. Denying the Problems

Example – The teacher found the parent has parenting difficulties. The parent's response:

“Miss Chan, you don't understand. My daughter is very naughty. She won't listen to me unless I shout and give her a good spank!”

To deal with parents who are at this stage, teachers can:

- Build trusting relationship with the parents, and let them understand teachers' intention to help :

“It is really annoying when children misbehave. I understand that you love your child and wish to teach her well. As teachers, we feel the same way. That's why I would like to discuss with you on how to teach your child more effectively.”

- Provide parents with relevant information and raise their awareness and understanding of the problems:

“Surely it is necessary to teach the child if she misbehaves. However, scolding and beating are not the effective ways. Experts have also pointed out that such methods can only temporarily handle the behaviours but are not effective in the long run. Such ways will not only hurt the child, but also spoil your relationship with her. Here are some pamphlets on positive parenting. You may take them home and have a look.”



Teachers may give the information leaflet “Family Health Service, Department of Health – Parenting Programme” to parents.

- Guide the parents to compare their parenting with usual practice by other parents:
“In fact, there are many different ways of disciplining children other than beating and scolding. Have you heard from other parents or noticed how they teach their children?”
- Allow time for parents to consider and accept your suggestions, and discuss with them again later:
“I understand that it takes time for the words to sink in. It's okay. You may like to think it over at home. If you want to talk to someone about the issues we talked about today, or have any questions, you are always welcome to come back.”

2. Noticing the Problems but Taking No Action

Example –The teacher suspected the parents might encounter marital problems. Parent's response:

“It's only between me and my husband. I can't tell others. Besides, social workers can't help my problems even if I tell them.”



To deal with parents who are at this stage, teachers can:

- Firstly, understand why parents have such thoughts:
“Do you have any worries or concerns behind?”
“Why do you think it is no use telling others about your problems? What makes you think that social workers can't help you?”
- Give examples of successful cases if the parents think that no one can help or the problems cannot be solved:
“In fact, I also met other parents who had similar marital problems. After talking with social workers, they not only felt relieved but also learnt how to communicate better with their partners. Their marital relationship improved and their family became more harmonious.”

- Correct parents' misunderstandings if they worry about being labelled:
“It is common to receive help and counselling from a social worker. In fact, an Integrated Family Service Centre/Integrated Services Centre also provides various family activities and interest classes in addition to counselling service. Many people do go and join the activities. So even if you go there, there shouldn't be concerns for being labelled.”
- When parents seem unmotivated to seek help, guide parents to think about the positive situation if their problems were resolved one day. Or if the parents believe that the problem will resolve by itself, help them think about what possible outcomes might there be in reality:
“Have you ever thought about how you would feel and how your family relationship would be like if your current problem could be resolved?”
“Your child is still very young. Solving the problem as early as possible would benefit both you and your child.”
- Do not urge the parents if they decline a referral because it can make the issue worse. Allow time for the parents:
“It is okay if you don't consider the service right now. Here is a leaflet about the Centre for you to read at home. Please do not hesitate to come to me if you have any queries or if you want to talk to someone.”



Teachers may give the information leaflet “Integrated Family Service Centre” to the parents.

3. Considering the Referral

Parents who are considering services may be facing the dilemma of wishing to solve the problems and worrying about the uncertainty of receiving services.

Example – The teacher have found out that the parents are having serious family conflicts. Parent's response:

“I understand that arguments between my husband and me would affect my child somehow. I also want someone to help us. However, I have no idea what seeing a social worker would be like and I'm worried that my husband will get angry about that.”

To deal with parents who are at this stage, teachers can:

- Analyse the pros and cons of the referral objectively with the parents:
“The good thing about seeing a social worker is that you can have someone to listen to you when you are down and distressed. You can also join the activities or groups at the centre to develop your own interests and meet more friends.”
“However, the social worker will need to know more about your family situation before he or she can help you solve your problems.”
- Give examples of successful cases to strengthen parents' commitment for assistance:
“I have also seen other parents who became more relieved after seeing social workers. Their children also joined various activities at the centre and became much happier.”

- Discuss possible solutions with parents if they have any concerns or obstacles to receiving the service:

“If there is no one to help looking after your child when you go to see the social worker, you may contact the Mutual Help Child Care Centre, Occasional Child Care Service or Neighbourhood Support Child Care in your district. Here is some information for your reference. If the appointment with the social worker might keep you late for picking up your child, we can help taking care of him for a while.”



Teachers may give the information leaflet “Daytime Child Care Services” to parents.

- Allow time for parents to make decisions.

4. Accepting the Proposal for Referral

Parents might have decided to accept the referral to services but yet have no concrete action plan. Teachers can discuss in more details with the parents to provide further assistance to them:



- Provide parents with relevant information, such as the address, contact number and map of the Integrated Family Service Centre/Integrated Services Centre and information about Occasional Child Care Centres or Neighbourhood Support Child Care.
- Provide them with as much information about the centre and its services as possible, such as the centre’s environment, the services provided and the procedures for seeing a social worker, with the purpose of giving the parents a general impression and allowing them to be better prepared.
- Discuss the action plan with the parents, such as the most convenient time for them to go to the centre, the centre's location, the transportation available and the arrangement for short-term child care, in order to enable the parents to carry out the plan more easily.
- Appreciate the parents' decision to accept the service and encourage them to follow through.
- Remind the parents to ask for assistance from teachers when necessary.

5. Having Accepted the Service

Parents may give up partway even if they have accepted the service. Teachers can:

- Actively communicate with the parents and follow up with their situation.
- Note if the parents encounter any difficulties or need any assistance, or if their children need any special support at school.
- Appreciate and recognise the parents' commitment and efforts.

