



<https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/starting-school/>

## Discussing observations

As educators, meeting and working with families will build a more comprehensive picture of a child's learning characteristics and behaviours. Drawing on your observations, your conversations with families can lead to informed evaluations and timely contacts with school staff and allied health professionals.

Effective communication with families is dependent upon respectful engagement and listening with an open mind. Discussions about students should be positive and strengths-based, with a focus on collaboration and solutions.

### What can you do to establish a relationship with families to support their child?

Having and maintaining a positive dialogue with families is central in supporting your student. Successful partnerships between families and educators enables positive outcomes for students.

- Make a plan for engaging with families before school starts.
- Send a welcome message (in person, by email, by phone).
- Offer manageable options for communicating formally and informally.
- If possible, organise the first meeting to be in person.
- Ask how they would like their child to be involved in discussions.
- Discuss their aspirations for their child for the school year.
- Plan a follow-up meeting or phone call.

### Preparing for a meeting with families

- Check if the family has any support needs which need to be accommodated during the meeting, such as a interpreter or cultural liaison person. Many families of neurodivergent children are themselves neurodivergent and might have preferred ways of communicating.
- Encourage the family to bring a support person or an advocate to the meeting to support them, or speak for them if they wish.
- Ask if the family have any concerns they wish to discuss.
- Organise for no more than 2 professionals to be present in the meeting to help create a supportive atmosphere.
- Set up a distraction-free space for the conversation (for example, a meeting space away from the classroom).
- Arrange furniture so that participants have a choice about where they sit during the meeting.
- Use your observations to highlight key points for one or two topics that you wish to discuss.

*We really have to think about the communication preferences of the families as well and understand that there are many different preferences, particularly if they are autistic or neurodivergent. So the same way that we understand and provide accommodations for children, we must also provide accommodations and understanding for our families who may also be neurodivergent themselves.*

— Associate Professor Josephine Barbaro, Director of Identification and Diagnosis, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University



## What to do during the meeting with families

- Allow time to introduce all participants and settle into the meeting.
- Acknowledge your shared intent to seek the best for the student.
- Start the conversation with a focus on the student's strengths.
- Explain the intent of the observations and the type of information you have gathered (the what and the why). If you have shared the observation guide ask if there are any terms that need explanation.
- Ask the family about their support needs.

### Things to remember throughout the conversation:

- Focus on the key concerns arising from your observations.
- Ask questions.
- Listen to the ideas participants bring to the discussion.
- Paraphrase their ideas to confirm your understanding.
- Be brief, clear and concise when describing a behavioural issue.
- Use your observations to illustrate the issues you are raising.
- Provide easily understood information in small increments.
- Allow time at the end for additional questions.
- You may find the conversation brings up other concerns. It is important to stick to the point of the discussion. Note any additional concerns and confirm those that you can follow up.

[Tips for successful meetings](#) [PDF] provides more suggestions.

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*Video: Discussing and managing difficult conversations*

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## What to do as a follow-up

- Give practical guidance about next steps using evidence from your observations about what is working well.
- Emphasise the value of a positive school–family partnership.
- Provide communication options and ask families what they would prefer.
- Suggest and confirm how often you will meet.
- Clarify additional topics agreed to be followed up and by whom, and set reasonable expectations of when this will happen.
- Arrange for a check-in with participants to ensure they feel listened to and supported.

## How can you develop an understanding of the family's and child's background?

Ask about:

- any family or cultural practices you need to take into account
- languages used at home
- daily family routines
- activities each family member does with their child
- activities the child does with siblings or play companions
- methods they use to attract the child's attention, how they praise their child and how they help calm their child
- their views about learning and progress

- their aspirations for their child's schooling experience.

## Discussing sensitive topics such as food and drink, toileting, and communication preferences

- Make a positive start by highlighting the child's skills and strengths.
- Discuss your observations about the emerging skills (what the child can do with help).
- Ask questions about food and drink routines at home.
- Discuss how self-care is modelled at home.
- Show how objects and photos can help the child follow sequences of steps.
- Ask about communication preferences used at home and in the community.

[Discussing self-care](#) [PDF] provides more suggestions.

## How can you develop partnerships with families that are positive, supportive and child-centred?

- Show appreciation that families want to be involved and for the time they spend communicating with the school.
- Position yourself as a partner in their child's learning journey.
- Reinforce that you are coming together for the best interests of the child.
- Focus on finding solutions rather than on behaviours of concern.
- Praise their efforts that have resulted in any positive changes in their child.
- Encourage questions about your observations and your teaching approach.
- Encourage ongoing communication.
- Share information about services and support groups available.
- Provide a list of resources, books and websites.

*It's really important for teachers to be aware with families that at times there's challenges. Families may not have ever had a connection with or worked with a child with a disability previously. This might be their first introduction to a person with a disability, so there is going to be a challenge in how they are managing before we even start looking at the educational context. So I think being understanding and showing empathy to families is really, really important.*

— Rachel Scheuboeck, Manager, Inclusive Practice, Special Education Resource Unit,  
Department of Education South Australia

## Conversation guide for educators

Both educators and families can work together to support the child through positive discussions. This [Conversation guide for educators](#) [PDF] provides a list of topics and question prompts you can use when talking to the child's family about your observations you recorded in the [Observation guide](#) [PDF] which you can use to document your observations of the child. In taking a child-centred approach, you will be able to draw on the knowledge families have of their child and ensure productive discussions with them.

## Maintaining a communication book

A communication book (in printed or digital format) is a way you can share important observations with families each day. You can let them know what worked well for the child that day, and any difficult moments the child experienced. It also allows educators and families to track student progress over time.



Families could also use the communication book to let you know any concerns they have about their child, and anything you need to know about their child’s wellbeing.