

CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS



IN THE MOMENT TIPS PART 1

As the pandemic has worn on, many people are overwhelmed and exhausted. Some people have experienced loss, increased stress, and they just want things to be back to normal. Many people want to put the pandemic behind them, especially being required to wear a mask. You may feel some or all of these feelings, too.

As a caregiver, you may experience many rewards along with lots of demands. This is especially true when wanting to protect the health of yourself, young children, and their families. There are many different opinions, suggestions, and ways of following health practices during the continuing pandemic. Parents and people in the community may disagree with getting vaccines and/or with wearing masks. When there are differing opinions and suggestions this can result in confusion, frustration, and anger. Sometimes, these feelings can result in parents being upset with you or your child care program because their views may be different than what is required by your program.

Below are some tips to assist when you are confronted with someone who may disagree with you and display anger. The goal in using these tips is to try and keep the person from getting angrier, especially when young children are present.

When an adult is frustrated and/or angry, try to:

- **Notice your breathing**, take a deep breath, and keep breathing
- **Stay calm** (sometimes it is helpful to pause with a drink of water)
- **Speak slowly and confidently** (e.g., the decision to wear masks was made to protect the health of children and teachers in our program, we want all families to feel safe bringing their children here)
- **Keep your voice steady, quiet, and calm.** We naturally match the volume and intensity of the person we are talking to, so it can be hard not to raise your voice when someone is upset with you but talking at a normal volume and calmly will help calm the other person as they match you
- **Use positive words** (e.g., Would you like to sit down? I understand you want what is best for your child.)
- **Listen** to the person's concerns
- **Offer reflective comments** to show you have heard (e.g., It sounds like you are angry/frustrated, I hear that you do not agree with our policy to wear masks and you are upset.)
- **Express empathy** to show you have understood (e.g., This has been such a difficult year, The changing guidelines are confusing and can be frustrating).
- **Give choices when possible** (e.g., would you like to talk more about this in the director's office or outside?)
- **Talk to someone supportive** once you are safe and the conversation has ended.

Do not:

- Argue or interrupt
- Raise your voice
- Talk too fast
- Threaten (e.g., your child will not be able to come back here if you won't wear a mask)
- Turn away
- Try to resolve the problem while the person is angry/frustrated

It is not your job to stop the person from being angry, but these steps may help to make the person feel heard and hopefully calm down. It is only when people are calm that you can work together to deal with the situation and their concerns.

If you feel physically threatened, remove yourself from the situation and call for assistance.

References and Resources:

Mental Health First Aid USA and the National Council for Behavioral Health
NSW Gov



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for Infant Mental Health

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SUPPORTING YOURSELF AND CHILDREN FOLLOWING DIFFICULT INTERACTIONS

PART 2

Having a difficult conversation with a parent of a child in your care can challenge your patience and emotional control. Sometimes parents have strong reactions to the rules of the child care facility or to changes in how things will be done. They might express anger, frustration, or confusion about things that they do not agree with, such as children being required to wear masks, not allowing parents into the building, and more. After having these tough conversations, you, and others who were nearby, might be experiencing strong emotions and any children that may have witnessed the interaction may also have feelings about what they saw.

Below are some suggestions of how adults can quickly calm the anxiety, anger, or overwhelm they might be feeling because of a difficult conversation. Additionally, there are also ideas of how to talk with young children about what they may have witnessed.

For adults:

Take deep breaths

- Try square breathing – inhale for the count of 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4 – repeat 4 times.
- Try 4-7-8 breathing – inhale slowly for a count of 4, hold for 7, exhale for 8 – repeat 4 times.
- You will hopefully notice that you can slow your counting down a little each time.

Do some grounding

- Try 5-4-3-2-1 – Name 5 things you see, name 4 things you can touch, name 3 things you hear, name 2 things you can smell, name one thing you can taste
- Follow the 3-3-3 rule – Name 3 things you see, name 3 things you hear, move 3 parts of your body
- Move your body – go for a walk, do some jumping jacks, stretch, etc.

Talk to someone who listens

- Talk with someone about how you are feeling. Avoid talking about all the details of everything that happened, as this can spiral into even more anxiety and anger. Instead talk about how you are feeling and what you plan to do next. (e.g., “I am feeling overwhelmed and angry about how a parent treated me this morning. I don’t feel like I have control over the rules, but I still got yelled at. On my break I am going to talk to the director about talking to the parent in the future.”)

For children:

If the children witnessed adults in conflict

- Talk about feelings that the adults were expressing (e.g., “One person was yelling, they must have been very angry.” “A grownup was walking around fast; they must have been upset.”)
- Ask children how they are feeling after watching the adults and validate that it’s okay to have big feelings. (e.g., “Everyone feels angry sometimes, its okay to feel angry when hard things happen.”)
- Help children label their emotions when they don’t have the words. (e.g., “I see you went to the corner and are crying; you must be scared.” “You are crying and hugging your friend, it looks like you are sad.”)
- Use calm down activities for the children (e.g., leading them through deep breathing, having them stretch, listening to calm music, going to a cozy corner.)
- Talk about what children can do when they have big feelings. If this is something that the children already know, review calm down activities with them. If this is something new, ask the children to talk about how they feel better when they are upset.
- Support children to feel emotionally and physically safe and then help them transition to a new activity when they appear ready.



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IF POLICE WERE INVOLVED PART 3

If police were involved

- Ask children what they already know about police. Ask “What does a police officer do? What is their job?”
- Young children may not know much about what police officers do or they may have misunderstandings based on what they’ve seen on TV. It may be helpful to describe what police are supposed to do.
- Children may have different experiences with police, it is important to acknowledge different experiences and emotions children might be feeling.
- Support the children as they talk about their feelings, label the feelings they are expressing they might not have words for (e.g., “I see your face is red and your voice is loud, you sound angry about what happened.” “I see your head is down and you are crying, you are feeling sad.” “You went to the cozy corner and are holding a bear; you look like you are scared.”
- Support children to feel emotionally and physically safe and then help them transition to a new activity when they appear ready.
- Remember that this may come up again and children may want to talk about it several times. It’s ok for them to work through what happened over time.
- For more information and suggestions, visit:
<https://parents.britannica.com/how-to-talk-to-young-children-about-the-police>



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