

Working with Parents

A guide to creating effective working
relationships for childminders



Business
success for
Childcare



Welcome

Childminders regularly tell us “I find it easy to be firm with the children, but would like to be more assertive with their parents”. This Working with Parents guide is designed to help you plan and prepare for conversations. It will help you plan ahead and take the anxiety out of communicating necessary changes. Following the four steps will build your confidence in raising issues with customers or responding to concerns that they put to you, showing you how to:

Be clear about what you are aiming to do and why

Assess what your customers need

Plan what you are actually going to say

Overcome their concerns



Having that Conversation

The sorts of challenges that you may find difficult to discuss with parents are:

- Chasing late payments
- Introducing price increases
- Discussing difficult situations
- Consistent late pick-ups at the end of the day
- Plus others specific to your own situation

To prepare for successful conversations on these or any other issues, there are four steps you need to work through in advance, to ensure you feel confident and in control. As you become skilled in using these steps for preparation, they will become second nature and useful for those times when you are caught 'on the hop'.

> Step 1 What do I want to achieve?

Whether you are introducing changes or just ensuring that both you and your customers are working within the terms of your contract you need to be clear about what makes the business work for you. You need to understand what is really important to you, what you can 'live with', and therefore be clear about what you specifically need to happen.

You may be able to 'live with' pre-arranged late pick ups on most nights of the week, but take your own children to activity clubs on Wednesdays and Fridays and need to leave home at 6pm prompt. So your customers need to arrange for someone else to pick up if they will be late on a Wednesday or Friday.

> Step 2 What do my customers need?

You increase the likelihood that parents will listen to your aims if you have taken into account what is important to them, either for themselves or their child.

Parents may need to buy extra hours if they have late meetings or travel long distances.

> **Step 3 What can I say and how can I say it?**

A little preparation before you communicate your aims or respond to a statement from customers can make the difference between a discussion and a disagreement. Small changes in the way you say things can change the message that your customers take from you.

“I realise from how we are working together that you sometimes have problems picking up on time if you have a late meeting. With notice, I can usually change my plans to help by keeping Katie later on Monday, Tuesday and Thursdays and I am happy to do that if it helps. On Wednesdays and Fridays though I have commitments of my own which I must keep and so need you or a friend to pick up by 6pm at the latest.”

> **Step 4 How can I overcome concerns that my customers raise?**

Even if your customers are in general agreement with you, they may ask questions and raise concerns about changes. Parents may not feel very confident about being able to meet your needs in the situation, and being comfortable responding to the “...yes, but...” statement is key to ensuring that you both agree on a final outcome that is likely to be adhered to.

“Yes, but I don’t always know the meeting will be late until the day.”

“I’m happy for you to ring me on the day to say you will be late if it is a Monday, Tuesday or Thursday, or to let me know who else will be collecting Katie if it’s one of the days I can’t work late myself.”

Let’s look more closely at how you can use your understanding of yourself and the knowledge you have of your customers, to have constructive conversations on issues that are key to your business.

After each of the four sections there is an opportunity to use the questions to prepare for a real life conversation that you would like to have with one of your customers. Think of a specific issue that you want to raise or a concern of theirs that you want to discuss with them, and work through the questions to make sure that you are ready for a successful conversation that will achieve the outcome you are aiming for.





➤ Step 1 What do I want to achieve?

In any situation there will be a ‘best’ option for **you**, and it is important that you are completely clear about what that is, so that you can communicate it to your customers with confidence. If you are not 100% sure about the ideal solution for you, then it is not surprising that your customers get a sense that you are totally flexible on the matter (parents may possibly interpret it as confused or indecisive), and will understandably press for their best solution to the situation.

Be disciplined in answering the questions:

Who do I need to do what? When do I need them to do it by? Why is this important to me?

- I need to raise the fees for all children by 20p per hour from the beginning of July in order to cover my costs.
- I need Charlie’s parents to bring him before 8.30am each morning or I am waiting with my own children to leave for school and we are in danger of being late.

Understanding what drives my business decisions

It is important to be precise in what you need in each particular situation, and in order to do this, you need to be clear about how your business fits with your own life and the needs of your family and home.

Does my business work for me? You can measure whether it meets your personal needs by checking to see if your business allows you to do what you want with your family and/or home, or if it prevents you doing the things you want to do.



Take this opportunity to think about and jot down your thoughts on the following:

How can my business work better for me?

For example

By my customers being clear that I will have an annual fee review.

How you will “personally” measure its success:

- What will it do for you?

Ensure I will continue to cover my costs and enable me to pay for the annual family holiday.

- What will it prevent you having to do?

Compromise on my own standard of living.



This is an example of how it works.

Marion is clear that her goal is to run a successful childminding business with 2 children until her daughter Hattie goes to school, when she will then take on 5 children. She really enjoys spending time with her children and is keen that Hattie plays and interrelates with others - childminding meets both their needs and she gets a great sense of achievement from watching the children playing well together. As she meets and contracts with new parents she explains the motivation she has for running the business, and how important the social aspects are to how she plans time and activities. Parents will then be aware of what is a priority to her, and if they want to raise an issue or concern about relationships between the children they know she will have strong views on the subject.

➤ **Having that conversation.**

- What do you want to tell your customers?

- What does this give you and why is it important?

➤ **Ready for Step 2?**

- ✓ You are now clear about the personal benefits of running your business.
- ✓ That will help keep you focussed on developing the best working relationships with your customers. You can be very specific about what you need when you are advising them of changes or trying to resolve concerns that they have.
- ✓ You are also now in a position to help them understand what is important to you and that will help them prepare for conversations more constructively too.

But what are your customer's priorities?

➤ Step 2 What do my customers need?

Each set of parents you deal with will have a unique set of reasons for needing childcare, and they may also have very specific requirements and priorities about the care their child receives.

The more you understand about what is really important to your customers, and what leads them to needing the childcare you offer, the more likely you are to be able to address key issues with them successfully.

e.g. Understanding the budget constraints that some parents have, together with their desire for high quality and consistency in childcare, may allow you to start a conversation about fee increases in this way:

'I know it is really important for you to get high quality childcare for Yasmin, whilst keeping to your budget which you said is quite tight, so in reviewing the fees this year I have tried to reflect the increase in costs that I am having to meet, whilst keeping the price as low as possible.'

The questions you need to ask of yourself are: Given your aim in Step 1, can you answer these below?

- What are my customer's views on this matter?

- What is important to them in this situation?

- What do my customers want for their child in this situation?

- If I change what is happening now, what would appear reasonable to them?

The better you can become at 'stepping into your customer's shoes' before you address an issue or respond to concerns raised, the more likely you are to prepare for a successful conversation.

Not wrong or right but different

The challenge you face as a childminder is that some of your customers have priorities and values that you may not agree with and it is important to see that they are not necessarily wrong or right, they are just different!

So...

Like Marion, you might place a strong value on relationships and are therefore keen to tell Sarah's parents how well their daughter played with a friend. However, Sarah's parents may place a high value on skills and so take little interest, but demand to know if Sarah completed any puzzles or did any drawing today.

Neither is wrong or right - they are different.

So, be interested in the views and priorities of each set of parents. Ask them what is important to them, why they hold certain things as a priority, and about the demands and constraints of their work or commitments. It is energy well spent, and will save time in the long run when you are working with them and making suggestions to enable you to provide the best all round care for the children.

➤ Having that conversation

- What do my customers want?

- How can my aim support what they want?

- What do I need to ask in order to have a better understanding of their priorities?

➤ Ready for Step 3?

- ✓ You have established what you want to do and why that is important to you - helping you to be clear about why this needs to happen with facts and a logical explanation.
- ✓ You have considered the needs of your customers and their children.
- ✓ You know how your aim can support their requirements.
- ✓ Perhaps you have realised that questions need to be asked to better understand their circumstances and priorities before you can present your aims effectively.

But, what are you actually going to say?



Step 3 What shall I say and how shall I say it?



Using the right words, and saying them in the right way, will help you have useful conversations with your customers and enable you both to come away feeling happy with not just the outcome, but also the way you are working together.

Understanding Ourselves

The more you understand about your own behaviour, the more effectively you will communicate with your customers, so let's look at two key facts about our own communication;

Fact 1 You communicate with others by the words you use, the way your voice sounds and what you do with your body (body language)

Imagine the different ways that you can say:

Would you like a drink?

The meaning changes slightly as you emphasise different words – try saying these out loud with feeling:

Would you like a drink?
Would **you** like a drink?
Would you **like** a drink?
Would you like **a drink**?

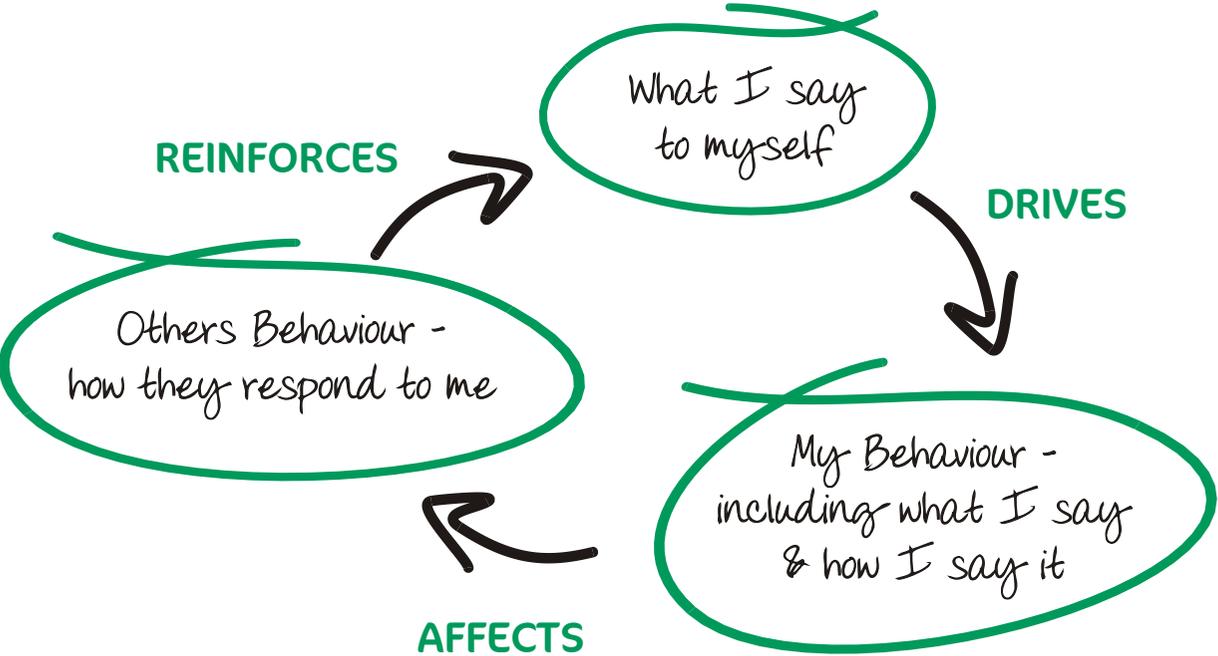
How we feel about a situation or individual can be evident not just from what we say, but how we say it. If our feelings can change the meaning of a simple question like this, think how significantly the meaning can change when you are giving your opinion or making a judgement on a child. How different will your customer's reaction be to the following statement delivered in two different ways?

Almay's eating has **not** been very good today
Almay's **eating** has not been **very** good today

This means that you need to think carefully about what you are saying to yourself before you communicate, so that an unhelpful message does not leak out. In the example above we do not want your customers to get the message “as usual Almay is being difficult” when we were actually trying to say “Almay has had a good day but she has not eaten very much”.

Fact 2 You are constantly talking to yourself about the people and situations around you and depending on what you are saying to yourself, the message that your customers will receive will change.

If you feel nervous about asking for a fee increase, and the voice in your head is saying that you do not believe that they will be prepared to pay it, you may start the conversation aggressively and will end up with a battle (look at the end of this section for how you can make a difference to the conversation).



We can describe what happens as a never ending cycle, and you can probably identify some relationships you are familiar with which follow this route.

'If you think you can or you think you can't you are probably right'
Henry Ford

So...

A typical situation may go like this:

Paula has had a hard and busy day and Jo, the mother of a child that started with her three weeks ago, is 15 minutes late. For the first five minutes she thinks nothing of it but after 15 minutes she starts to get cross.

By the time Jo arrives Paula has worked herself up and is determined to speak to her.



After all, this is the second time she's been late. Last time she said there was a crash on the motorway but what if she's just taking me for granted? It's typical of some customers to think their work's more important than my family life!

Paula greets Jo and then comes straight to the point.

"I realise your work is important to you but so is my family time and if you can't respect my need to finish work at a bpm maybe you should be looking for some alternative childcare."

Jo, who is hassled by going back to a new job and trying to fit in, feeling guilty for being late and was not expecting this response, is taken aback and says:

"Well if that's how you feel, I will"

She takes her child, gives notice the next day and Paula initially feels that she is well rid of a difficult customer. After a couple of days she starts to wonder.

"They were a nice couple and the child was lovely, Jo hated leaving her and always paid on time. I wonder why she was late that day? I wonder if things would have got better as she established herself in the job?"

"I will ask Jo for an explanation and then be very clear with her that I need her to be on time, or agree late pick ups in advance in the short term. That way I can fit them around my own commitments."

Paula would have spoken to Jo differently if she had stopped to think and challenge some of what she was saying to herself. Making a judgement on what a customer thinks was not very helpful in this situation, as it did not allow Paula and Jo to have a useful discussion.

We suggest that Paula **checks, challenges and changes** what she is saying to herself:

Check, challenge, change...

- > **Check** what you are saying to yourself
- > **Challenge** whether it is helpful to you, your customers and the children
- > **Change** it to something which will allow you to have a useful discussion with your customer

So...

here are some examples of how other childminders have challenged and changed what they say to themselves:

- When dealing with late payments

I might embarrass him if I tell him he's late again... **challenge and change to...** I will listen to his explanation and remind him that I rely on the income from my business and need him to pay on time.

He never listens to me... **challenge and change to...** I will listen to what he says and then he will listen to me.

- When dealing with late collection

I can't say no... **challenge and change to...** It's OK for me to say no if I need to without feeling guilty, I have my own children to look after as well.

She doesn't think childminding is actually work... **challenge and change to...** I will respect her need to do her job properly and she will respect my timescales.



Try saying one of the following statements to yourself next time you prepare to have a conversation and you feel nervous. See how it changes the way you speak and the way you feel!

"I have been clear in contracting with my customers so I will be helpful where I can but will state clearly when I cannot do things for them."

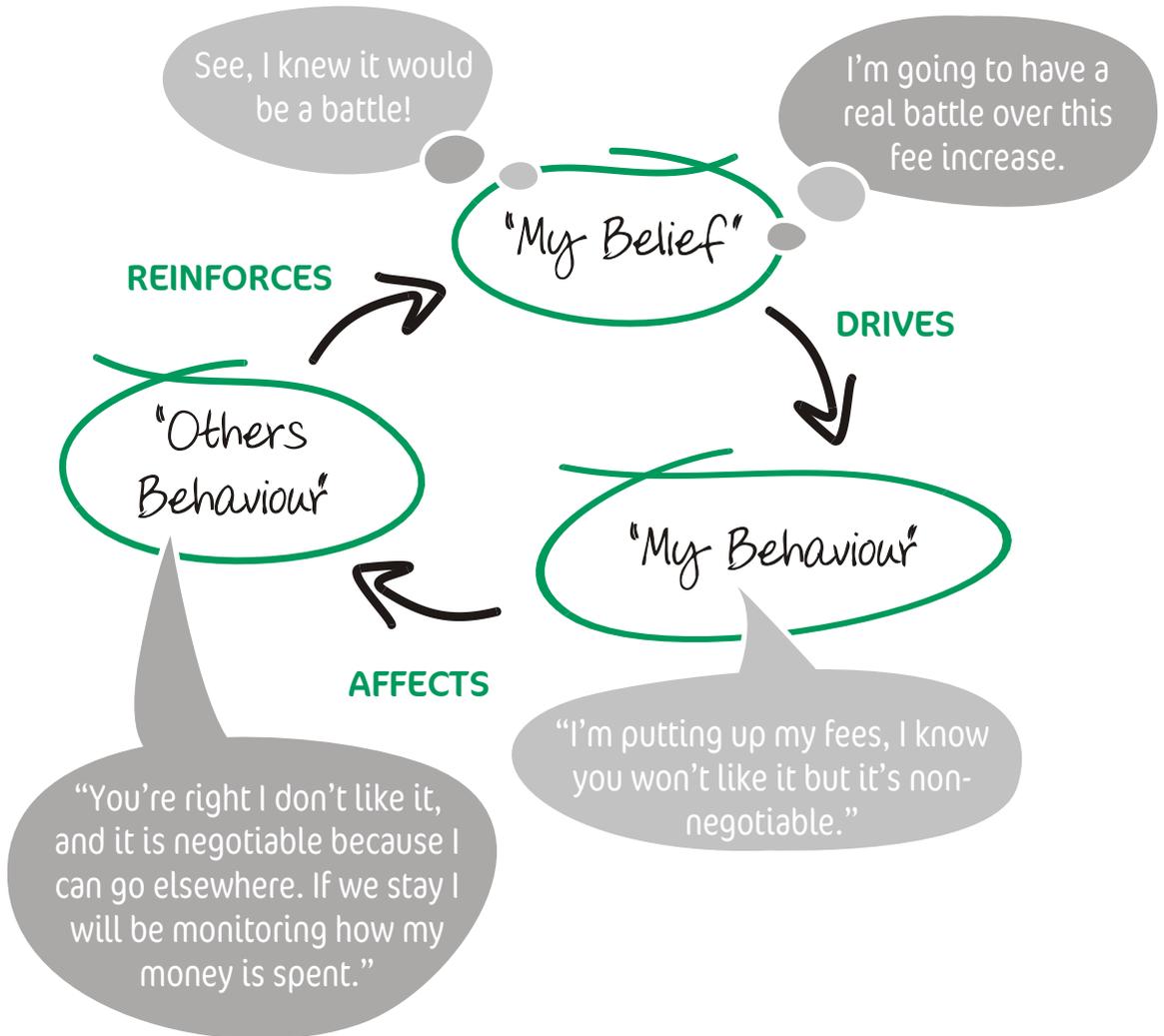
"I can ask my customers questions as it ensures I fully understand what they want for their child."

rehearse!
rehearse!
rehearse!

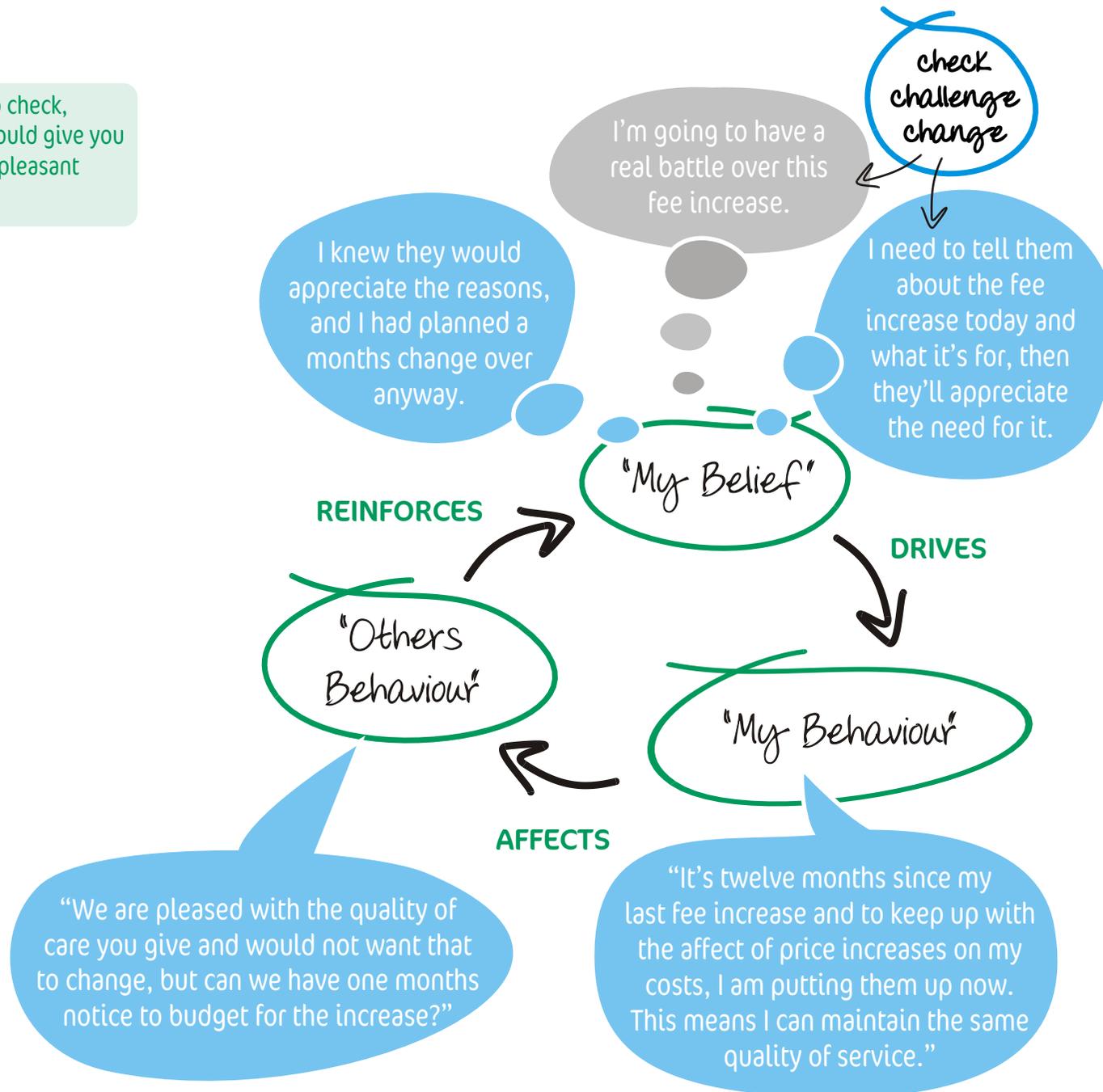
"Both my customers and I spend significant time with the children so we will share our opinions to ensure their child gets the best care."



If the voice in your head is telling you they won't like your proposed fee increase, the conversation could well go like this...



However, taking time to check, challenge and change could give you a far more positive and pleasant outcome...



A Check list for helpful conversations

You may feel that you would like to be more assertive in certain situations, but what does that mean?

The good news is that:

- you do not become aggressive or always try to get your own way
- you do not have to agree with things you don't want to in order to make others happy and
- you already know how to be assertive because you are in many other situations.

Think about the last conversation that you had with a customer that didn't go very well and you're sure that at least one of you left the conversation feeling dissatisfied.

What did you do?



YES NO

	YES	NO
Did you start the conversation?		
Were you clear about what you wanted to say?		
Did you listen actively by summarising what you had heard and checking your understanding?		
Did you keep eye contact and smile (if appropriate)?		
Did you ask many questions?		
Were you willing to give and take factual, specific feedback?		
Did you confidently say 'no' if you weren't happy about doing something?		

If you answered 'Yes' to all the above you were doing a good job in discussing the issue and communicating assertively. However if there are some 'No' responses this gives you some areas to look at to improve your communication skills with your customers and ensure you are not being perceived as aggressive or a 'push-over'.



If one of your customers pays late one week, remind them immediately of when the money is due.



Here are some suggestions of how you could approach the situations you face regularly - assertively.



Responding to late payment...

Take the initiative and address an issue before it builds to become a problem. If one of your customers pays late one week, remind them immediately of when the money is due and ask them how they will get it to you,

"Carmen, the fees are due today and I need them by tomorrow morning at the latest, how can you get them to me?"

Be clear that the next morning is the latest you will wait, there is no need to apologise or explain if it is an agreement in the contract. Keep your face friendly and open and state clearly when the money is expected.

If your customer gives an explanation and asks to bring it the following day, you have to make a decision whether that is acceptable and if it is not, show that you have listened by summarising the explanation but restate the time that you need the money,

"I am sorry that there was a problem with the cash-machine, they can be a pain, however I still need the money tomorrow morning as I rely on it to pay some key weekly bills. How can you get it to me by tomorrow at the latest?"

Remember you will find it easier to restate your case if you have already told yourself that it's OK to say No!

Discussing a difficult situation

At times you may find yourself needing to discuss a difficult situation with parents. Remember the tip on being factual, and state simply and clearly what happens and how you responded.



The more aware you are of what you are saying to yourself and how that can alter the message you give to others, the more control you can have over what you say and how you say it.

So...

- Listen to yourself
- Ask 'Is what I am saying helpful' in communicating the actual message I want to get across - check, challenge, change.
- Be clear and factual in what you say
- Listen to the response, summarise to check your understanding

➤ **Having that conversation**

- What am I saying to myself about this conversation?

- Is it helpful in communicating the point that I need to get across?

- What could I say?



➤ **Ready for Step 4?**

- ✓ You have established what you want to do and why that is important to you.
- ✓ You have considered the needs of your customers and their children and how your aims can support their priorities.
- ✓ You have checked what you are saying to yourself about communicating your plans.
- ✓ Having challenged your 'self-talk', you have changed both your thoughts and the words you plan to use.
- ✓ You know how to conduct the conversation assertively.

But, what if my customers disagree?

Step 4 How do I overcome concerns that my customers raise?

Whether you are the one that initiates the conversation, and therefore have time to plan what you are going to say, or whether it 's one of your customers coming to you with an issue, handling their concerns is key to success.

The simple rule of thumb is:

Whatever your customers concerns, ask some questions to find out more about them and help think through a solution.

If a customer comes to you and says:

"I don't think Yasmin is getting enough to eat here!"

you could respond quite justifiably by saying:

"It's your responsibility as parents to get her to eat healthily"

or

"Well it's not my fault that she's a fussy eater."

Both responses are arguably correct but neither is very helpful.

Try responding with facts and objective logic, looking for a solution:

*"OK, what would she normally eat during a day at home?" "I have tried that here but she refuses it."
"How do you cook it? I'll try that, but if she still refuses, we will need to agree on what we try next."*

So... for instance:

Concern	Response
Paul's clothes are always messy when I pick him up.	Yes, the children do often make a mess with paint and food play, which can find its way past my aprons. If you would like to leave me with a spare set of clothes, I would be happy to change Paul when this happens.
I can't afford to pay any more.	I'm frustrated by the increase in prices myself, but maintaining the same quality of childcare I have given over the last year is now costing me more. What options do we have here which can help?

Concern

I don't think that the kids are getting enough fresh air in the day.

I feel you are being too restrictive by insisting we pick up by 6pm.

It's a lot of money to charge when you're working at home.

Response

They have been playing outside for an hour each morning and afternoon, how much time would you like them to spend outside in order to feel they are getting enough fresh air?

I understand that it's causing you problems, however it was clearly stated in the contract, because after 6pm I have my own family commitments. What's causing you to arrive later than 6pm?

Like all businesses, I incur costs, which I have to cover to stay in business and offer this level of quality. Are my services and fees now outside your budget?

So remember, if you feel that your customers are throwing a lot of concerns into the conversation, the best way of handling those concerns is to find out more about them first. You will then have won a hearing from those parents and be able to clearly re-state your position and help them find a solution to theirs. This will lead to a balanced discussion of the situation and the best chance of coming to common agreement.

Having that conversation

- What concerns might your customers raise?

- What questions can I ask to understand more?

- Can I alter my initial aim and still meet my needs? What would it be now?
- Can I re-state my aim in a way which shows I understand the concerns of my customers, but together we need to find a way to make the change as I must run a sustainable business?
- What would I say?

No more steps, but at the back of this guide is a template you can use to help prepare for other conversations in the future.

Summary

Ensuring that you have a good working relationship with your customers is critical to your ongoing enthusiasm and enjoyment in running your business. Developing a partnership with them is good for the health, safety and development of the children and the peace of mind of all the carers involved.

No one can guarantee to get on well with everyone they work with, but planning communications by following these four steps can help you have the best working relations possible. Being clear about what you want to achieve will enable you to:

- Be clear about what you are aiming to do and why
- Assess what your customers need
- Plan what you are actually going to say
- Overcome their concerns

Having worked through 'Mind your Business' and 'Working with Parents' you know what you need to do to run a successful business that meets your needs, and have some guidelines to help you communicate as effectively as possible with your customers.

Take the initiative – address any issues that you feel are holding the business back and be confident that you can work with parents to find solutions to problems and come to agreements on one thing which is a priority to you all – supporting and caring for the children most effectively.

Remember, consciously plan and prepare for effective communication, and it will eventually become a habit – and a good one!



➤ Having that conversation

Concern	Example	Preparation
I want to advise my customers that...	If Tariq is picked up late, then I will charge for the extra time.	
This will enable me to / is important because...	Cover the additional cost of drinks and snacks and my daughters bus fare to take herself to football training and swimming club.	
My customer wants...	Flexibility and to not have to worry about being late.	
My aim will help by...	Allowing them that flexibility and to continue to know that I am working late happily.	
What am I saying to myself about this conversation?	They won't like having to pay more and will want me to continue to do it for free.	
Challenge and change to...	They will understand that keeping Tariq for longer costs me more and impacts on my own family life.	
I will actually say...	<p>Since I having been looking after Tariq, there have been a number of occasions when you have had to pick him up later than we agreed. Whilst I am happy to have him, this is impacting upon my own family life and I am incurring additional costs which up until now I have covered out of my own pocket.</p> <p>To continue to offer you this flexibility, I really do need to cover my costs and so will be charging £5.00 per hour for each late collection, which I can add onto the monthly bill to make life easier. I also need advanced notice.</p>	

Concern	Example	Preparation
What concerns might my customers raise?	This means quite an increase over the month. You are here anyway so what does it matter?	
Questions to gain understanding.	How often are you late? What causes this? Could anyone else collect Tariq for you? I need to cover my costs, which include getting my own daughter to activity clubs if I can't take her, I can't think of any other way I can help you without being out of pocket myself, do you have any suggestions? Is adding it to the bill the best way for you? How much notice can you give me of a late collection? How will you advise me?	
I will respond by re-stating that...	These costs must be covered both in terms of the direct cost of keeping Tariq for longer and the subsequent travel costs for my daughter. By charging £5.00 per hour I can do this and still offer you the flexibility you need, thus taking the pressure off. You will also be able to use this additional service with ease, knowing that Tariq is safe and I am working late willingly and happily – by prior arrangement of course.	



Business success for Childcare



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