

Building Compassion-Based Relationships with Families & Other Caregivers

Section 12

Communicating Difficult News to Clients and Their Families

When working with clients and their families, it can be challenging to effectively and compassionately communicate difficult news. The American Academy of Pediatrics, however, offers various, easy to remember, approaches to the challenge of entering into and maintaining a difficult conversation with a family that can be applied in various settings:

1. SPIKES

- a. **Set-up:** Consider privacy, who to include in the conversation, sitting down, and building rapport.
- b. **Perceive:** What is your understanding of the situation/issue? (Consider using the Ask-Tell-Ask strategy at right)
- c. **Invite:** Utilize a warning phrase such as “I’m so sorry, but I need to share some bad news with you...”
- d. **Knowledge:** Share knowledge using understandable language, give information in small pieces, and check in frequently.
- e. **Empathize:** As described throughout this toolkit, empathy is the ability to share in another’s emotions, thoughts, or feelings, and is crucial in providing quality, compassion care.
- f. **Summarize** and strategize with the client and family.

2. Ask-Tell-Ask

When deciding what and how much to share, a good place to begin is where the client and/or family are in their understanding. Ask-Tell-Ask is a way of making sure that they understand what you say.

- a. Ask the client/family member to describe their current understanding of the issue (e.g., Can you tell me what you understand of _____’s condition? What have the other providers been telling you about the situation?).
- b. Tell the client/family member in straightforward language what you need to communicate – be it bad news, treatment options, etc. Do not give a long lecture or a lot of detail. Provide information in short segments. Avoid jargon.
- c. Ask if the client/family member understood what you just said. Consider asking them to repeat in their own words, or ask them with whom they are going to share the news and what they are going to say to that person. Give them a chance to ask questions, so you can clarify.

Holding a Family Conference

When difficult situations arise, such as major changes in health status or new or complex needs or concerns, family conferences can be an important, yet sometimes daunting, process of engaging family members and providing compassionate, quality care. [This video](#) below offers 7 essential steps that can help you effectively and empathically inform, connect and make important decisions with clients and their families. And while this video takes place in a hospital setting, the steps can be beneficial to all health care providers in all settings when a family conference is appropriate, and can be adapted to conferences in which the client is an active participant.