

The **PERCS Conversation Guide** is a psychosocial discussion tool for professionals working with parents. It supports collaborative, respectful conversations around the impact of parental and family adversities, such as mental and physical health issues, substance use, and family and domestic violence on children's daily lives.

The guide provides example questions to help you explore five important domains in a child's life. It is designed to help you recognise parents' strengths and hopes for their family, and opportunities to support and improve children's mental and physical health, resilience and wellbeing.

There are four broad stages to the guide:

1 What is the entry point?



Look for opportunities, or 'entry points' to engage the parent in conversations about their child. Potential entry points include:

- The parent presents with an issue or circumstances that might impact on the child.
- The parent expresses concerns about the child's behaviour or circumstances.
- The professional explores the child's mental health and wellbeing through:
 - open enquiry
 - concerns around parental, family, or social adversity.

2 What are you curious about?



Consider the five PERCS domains:

- P** Parent-child relationships
- E** Emotions and behaviours
- R** Routines
- C** Communication and meaning-making
- S** Support networks

This guide contains example questions to assist professionals in their conversations with parents.

3 Conversation with the parent



Conduct a collaborative and respectful conversation with the parent to arrive at shared understandings and decisions, using the six principles of parent engagement:

- Child-aware and parent-sensitive
- Curiosity
- Collaboration
- Strengths and hopes
- Context
- Respect

These principles will support the development of the trusting therapeutic relationship.






4 Provide support



Provide support to parents to lessen the impacts of adversity on their children:

- Use a strengths-based approach to support a positive parent-child relationship and improved social and emotional wellbeing for children.
- Provide resources to parents regarding child development and parenting practices.
- Practice integrated care and make warm referrals to other community supports or specialist services.
- Continue to work with the parent around their initial presenting issue.

This guide provides a pathway and example questions for exploring the five domains of a child's life.

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| P |  | <p>Parent-child relationship</p> <p>A safe, secure, responsive and nurturing relationship between a child and their parent/caregiver is key to building resilience.</p> | <p>Professional's role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify if/how parents feel/ stay connected to their child in the face of challenges. Promote parents' confidence and a positive parent-child relationship (warmth, acceptance, stability). | <p>ASK Example question</p> <p>What's it like being a parent to (child's name?)</p> |
| E |  | <p>Emotions and behaviours</p> <p>Children need to feel loved, safe and confident that their emotions will be listened to and responded to in a nurturing way.</p> | <p>Professional's role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help parents to understand and be responsive to their child's emotions and behaviours. Help to develop a shared language around emotions. | <p>ASK Example question</p> <p>Has your child or family lived through a traumatic event or period of time?</p> |
| R |  | <p>Routines</p> <p>Routines and rituals provide children with a stable base, especially in times of stress.</p> | <p>Professional's role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage parents to create routines and predictability in their children's lives. | <p>ASK Example question</p> <p>Are you able to make time to read or play games with (child's name)?</p> |
| C |  | <p>Communication and meaning-making</p> <p>Through respectful and effective communication, children can express emotions, make meaning from experiences of adversity, and develop their resilience.</p> | <p>Professional's role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support parents in understanding the impact of adult issues on their child. Guide parents in helping their children make sense of life events through questions and conversation. | <p>ASK Example question</p> <p>Is (child's name) able to share their thoughts and feelings with you?</p> |
| S |  | <p>Support networks</p> <p>Safe and supportive networks outside the family can be key to a child's social and emotional wellbeing.</p> | <p>Professional's role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help parents to identify and develop a consistent, positive support network for their child outside of their immediate family. | <p>ASK Example question</p> <p>Who do you think would notice if (child's name) was struggling?</p> |

The PERCS Conversation Guide offers ways to initiate respectful and collaborative conversations with parents. The way you engage with parents is a key part of these conversations.

The six practice positions for effective engagement are informed by evidence and practitioner experience, and may already be a part of your work. They will assist you to focus on engaging parents in non-judgmental, non-stigmatising conversations about their parenting role, and their child's social and emotional wellbeing.

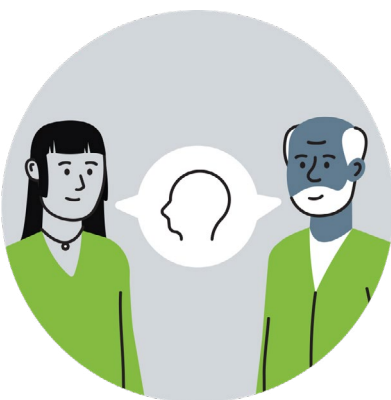


Child-aware and parent-sensitive

A child-aware approach acknowledges and considers the experiences and needs of the client's children, ensuring they are not 'invisible' to services. It considers the wellbeing of those children and their role in the client's life, even when children don't directly access the service themselves.¹

A child-inclusive approach involves children in conversations about their social and emotional wellbeing where it is appropriate to do so.

A parent-sensitive approach identifies, acknowledges and validates clients and draws upon the parenting role as a key source of meaning and motivation in their life. This includes being aware of stigma and the additional fear of judgment about their parenting ability, which can complicate the development of a trusting therapeutic relationship.^{2,3,4,5}



Curiosity

A curious stance involves looking holistically at what is happening for your client, rather than simply focusing on their diagnosis or symptoms. It involves gently exploring the parent's mental health and how it may be impacting on other areas of their life, such as their relationships, family functioning and routines.^{5,6,7,8}

Being curious is about putting yourself in the shoes of the parent and their children. It asks you to be mindful of, and sensitive to, issues such as:

- trauma history, family and domestic violence, financial insecurity and housing instability, and how they impact on clients as parents
- the parent's potential fear of being judged
- being open about the limits of confidentiality, whilst also being sensitive to the parent's fear that you may report them to child protection authorities
- the parent's own self-judgment, internal critic and sense of shame
- the parent's own experiences of being parented
- intergenerational cycles of trauma and disadvantage.



Respect

Respect involves considering each parent's unique story, values, culture, perspectives, needs and plans, and recognising their role as an expert in their own lives.

It also involves empathic, non-judgmental, respectful use of professional expertise that:

- is warm, genuine and transparent, in order to build trust and a place of safety
- includes open and honest conversations around consent and mandated reporting
- seeks to empower parents through knowledge of the above
- acknowledges and validates the client's parenting role, regardless of what shape it takes
- respects parents' knowledge and understanding of their own children and family
- is very mindful to avoid judging parents who are facing challenges
- views parents as more than just the challenges they face.^{2,7,9}

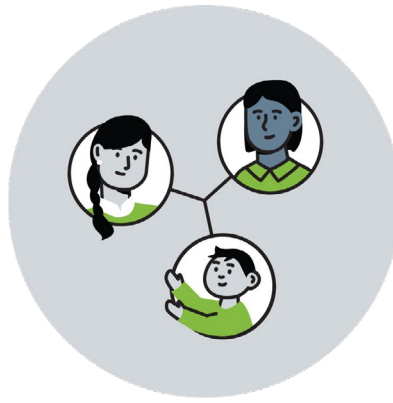


Contextual understandings

Understanding the parenting and family context is key to working collaboratively with parents. This involves asking open questions about the client's life, including their:

- family of origin
- current relationships and family/kinship/friendship supports
- child raising circumstances (e.g. any access, custody, shared care or kinship care arrangements)
- commitments (e.g. employment, volunteering, study, caring)
- culture and spiritual beliefs
- attitudes to parenting and childhood.

Contextual understandings are key to providing culturally competent service delivery.^{10,11}



Collaboration

Collaboration involves supporting parents to feel confident and competent, providing them with choices, and encouraging them. It involves the sharing of knowledge – the client's knowledge of their own life, and the professional's knowledge of their field.

You can work collaboratively with parents by:

- helping them to recognise their own strengths, resources and ways in which their parenting is going well
- empowering them to make their own decisions
- encouraging them to have self-compassion
- acknowledging and calling on their parental expertise – their knowledge and understanding of their own children
- taking time to understand the child's needs and hopes for their family
- working on a plan for support that is based on the parent's and child's identified needs, hopes and concerns about their family.

A trusting, collaborative therapeutic relationship allows for meaningful participation and shared decision-making.^{4,5,8,12}



Strengths and hopes

This involves identifying, highlighting, reinforcing and building upon the hopes, strengths, efforts and positive qualities of parents, and the resources available to them.

It is important to demonstrate the belief that your client, as a parent, wants the best for their children. You can do this by:

- asking questions about the values which underlie parents' hopes for their children
- exploring what is important to parents in their relationship with their children
- empowering parents to see how things are improving, in order to build and strengthen their self-efficacy
- recognising that culture is a source of rich tradition, resilience and strength for many parents and children, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.^{3,8,9,12,13}

References

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PERCS Conversation Guide

– infants and toddlers

example questions

This version of the PERCS Conversation Guide includes example questions tailored for use with parents of infants and toddlers. These questions have been designed as a guide to practice. They should be used with sensitivity, in conjunction with the six practice positions outlined in the guide.

This guide is not intended to be prescriptive. The order and emphasis given to each of the five domains should be tailored to suit your work context and the family's culture and circumstances.

You do not need to ask questions from every domain, every time. Instead, work on those areas that are relevant each session.

Trust may take a few sessions to develop, so questions can be revisited if necessary.

The language used in a guide only and should be adapted to suit the individual worker/client.

The parent's unique situation and level of stability should always be kept in mind when using this guide. It is crucial to think about what the parent is feeling at the end of these conversations, and to ensure they leave your sessions with a sense of hope.

For more resources, visit emergingminds.com.au

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Parent-child relationship

Engagement questions

What's it like being a parent to (child's name)?

What has it been like to get to know (child's name)? What do you notice about how they communicate with you?

Can you describe (child's name) to me?

How would you describe your relationship with (child's name)?

What activities do you and (child's name) enjoy doing together? (Prompt: How does [child's name] show you that they are enjoying an activity?)

Can you describe a time recently where you and (child's name) felt really connected? (Prompt: How did you know in that moment that you felt connected? What did [child's name] do that showed you they felt connected?)

Can you describe a time recently where you and (child's name) felt less connected? What did (child's name) do that showed you they felt less connected?

Exploring the impact of adversity on infants and toddlers

Have you noticed any differences in the way (child's name) responds to/interacts with you during 'tough times'? (Prompt: How do they show you if they are feeling distressed during these times?)

What helps to soothe them during these tough moments?

What are you finding the most challenging about being a parent?

What aspects of the adversity affect your relationship with (child's name) the most?

When there are times of stress in your relationship with (child's name), what supports you to get through these times? What does (child's name) do at times of distress? What helps you respond to them?

How does (child's name)'s relationship with their other parent change when things are tough?



Emotions and behaviours

Engagement questions

How can you tell if (child's name) is feeling joyful or happy during their day?

When (child's name) is upset, what do they do?

How do you feel when your child cries or shows distress? How do you respond in those moments?

Is there anything that helps you feel calmer when (child's name) is upset or when things are tough?

Is there a person who you can ask for support if your child's distress is high?

What, if any, of (child's name)'s behaviours do you find particularly difficult to respond to?

How confident do you feel in helping (child's name) with their tricky or 'big' emotions and behaviours? What would help to improve your confidence?

What do you notice about (child's name) as you watch them play? (Prompt: What activities or play does your child enjoy?)

How do you feel when your child is exploring?

Does (child's name) use movement like running, jumping or rocking if they are having big feelings? In what ways does this seem to help them?

Exploring the impact of adversity on infants and toddlers

Does (child's name) appear more unsettled than usual when times are tough? If so, what do you notice/how can you tell?

What do you imagine (child's name) might feel about what is happening?

Has your child or family been through a traumatic experience (e.g. loss of a loved one, natural disaster, family violence)?

What changes do you notice in (child's name)'s behaviour or responses to you at these times?

What do you worry about most with (child's name)?

Have any of (child's name)'s other caregivers (educators, family members) noticed or expressed worry about specific behaviours and emotions? What have they noticed?



Routines

Engagement questions

Are there any cultural routines or rituals that are important for your family?

On an average day what do you think are (child's name)'s favourite moments? What about their least favourite moments?

What parts of the day or week do you think are working well for (child's name)? What are the busy/relaxing/fun times?

How does (child's name) feel or respond during daily activities such as bedtimes, sleeping or mealtimes?

Are there any times of the day when cooperation is not going so well? What do you find challenging?

When do you and (child's name) find time for play or activities? What do you do that you both enjoy?

How do you look after yourself, your child and household tasks?

What other commitments do you need to fit in?

Exploring the impact of adversity on infants and toddlers

How do routines at home change when you are facing tough times? (Prompt: What do you think [child's name] notices about these changes?)

Are there ways that some of these routines could continue, even when times are tough? Who can help with this?

Has (child's name)'s daily behaviour (e.g. sleeping, eating, toileting) changed during tough times?

What happens for (child's name) when you're not with them?

Do other people know about their daily routines?



Communication and meaning-making

Engagement questions

How do you help (child's name) to understand and make sense of their world? Do you talk as you're doing things together? Do you talk about what's happening around them?

What do you notice about how (child's name) communicates with you? (Prompt: What cues, looks or facial expressions do they use?)

Are there any toys, stories, songs or places that are particularly comforting for (child's name)?

How does (child's name) express or show they want physical comfort or connection? How do they show when they don't want physical connection?

What opportunities do you get to spend time talking with (child's name)? What do you talk about?

What are the best ways for you and (child's name) to reconnect if they have had a tough day?

Are there any stories, games or play activities that help you and (child's name) to talk about their feelings or experiences?

Exploring the impact of adversity on infants and toddlers

What helps you to understand if your child is feeling safe or unsafe? (Prompt: What might they see in your face or behaviours, or hear in the tone of your voice?)

How does (child's name) feel when they need to be separated from you or be cared for by someone else? What is it like for them? What's it like for you when you must drop them off?

Is there anything that makes drop-offs and transitions easier for (child's name)?

What helps you to provide reassurance to your child when things are tough? What sense might they make of any changes they notice during tough times?



Support networks

Engagement questions

Who does (child's name) enjoy spending time with? (Prompt: Do they have a close relationship with another adult?)

How does (child's name) play/get along with other children?

Who supports you as a parent and a family?

Are you and (child's name) part of any activities, groups or communities?

Does (child's name) attend childcare or preschool? What do they enjoy the most/least about childcare/preschool?

How would you describe your relationship with their educators? Do you meet with them?

Exploring the impact of adversity on infants and toddlers

Who do you think would notice if (child's name) was struggling?

Who helps you when you are going through tough times or feeling unwell?

Do you have anyone who emotionally supports you and that you feel safe to talk with?

Who might offer you practical help if needed?

Who else knows about what you've been going through? Can they help to support (child's name) when things are tough?

Have you talked to (child's name)'s educator/s about some of your experiences? Can they help to support (child's name) when things are tough?

Who do you think would notice if (child's name) was struggling?