



Cultivating Quality COS Conversations: Tips from Families and Practitioners

DEC September 2022

Room 4C at 2:15 – 3:15 PM

Naomi Younggren, Lauren Barton, Stephanie Moss, Henry Matthews

Who's joining us today?

- **Parents**
- **Practitioners**
- **Local administrators**
- **State administrators**
- **TA providers**
- **Federal representatives**
- **Higher education**
- **Other stakeholders**

Session Topics

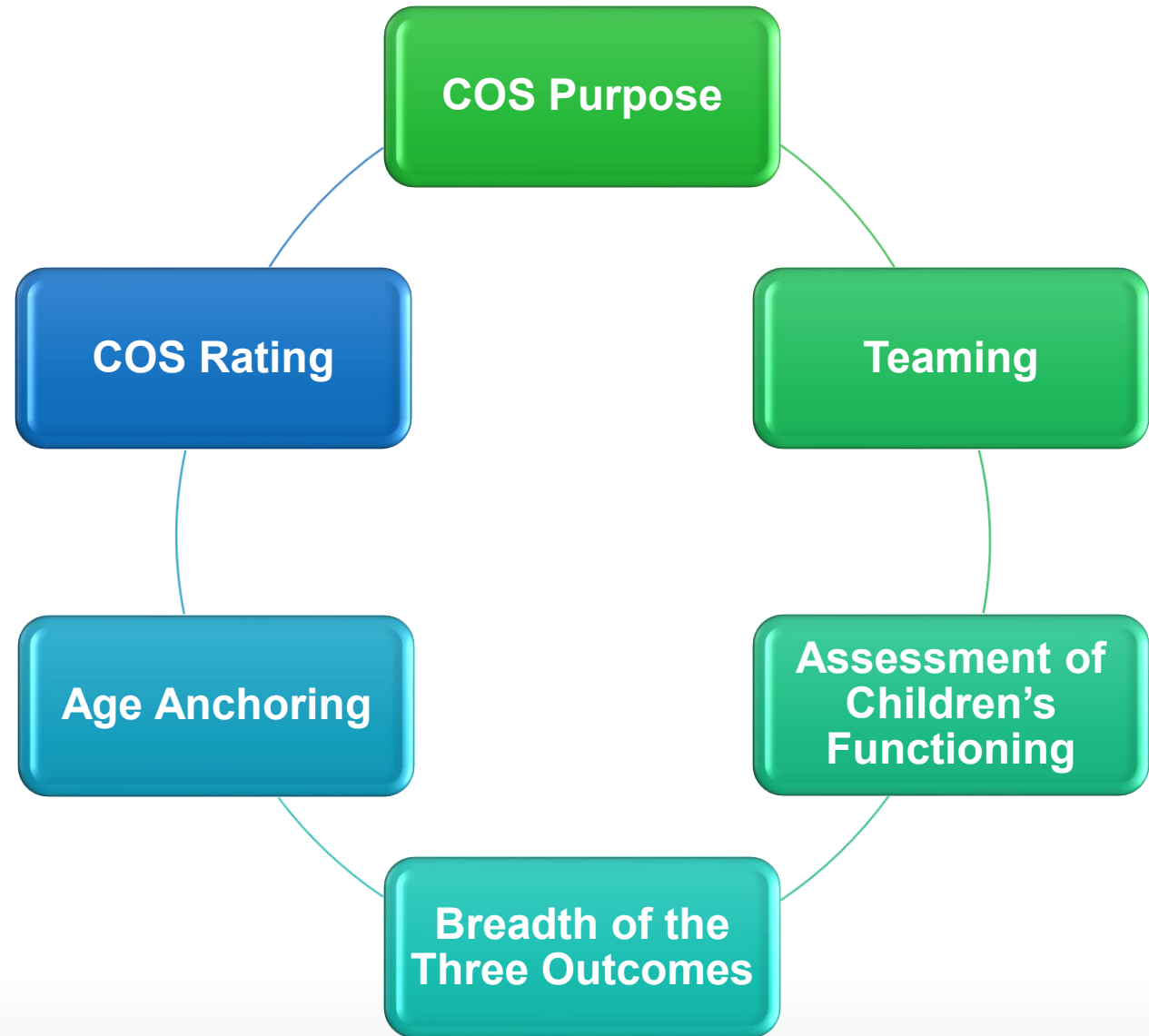
- Describe **challenges** and **benefits** of talking with families about their child's functioning, relative to age expectations, as part of the COS process.
- **Learn tips** for easing COS conversations
 - Gain **practitioners' insights** about these conversations with families.
 - **Hear from families** about their reactions to these conversations.
- Explore **tips and their application** in EI/ECSE programs.



Handout

**RELATED RESOURCES FOR
EACH OF THE SEVEN TIPS**

COS Conversations



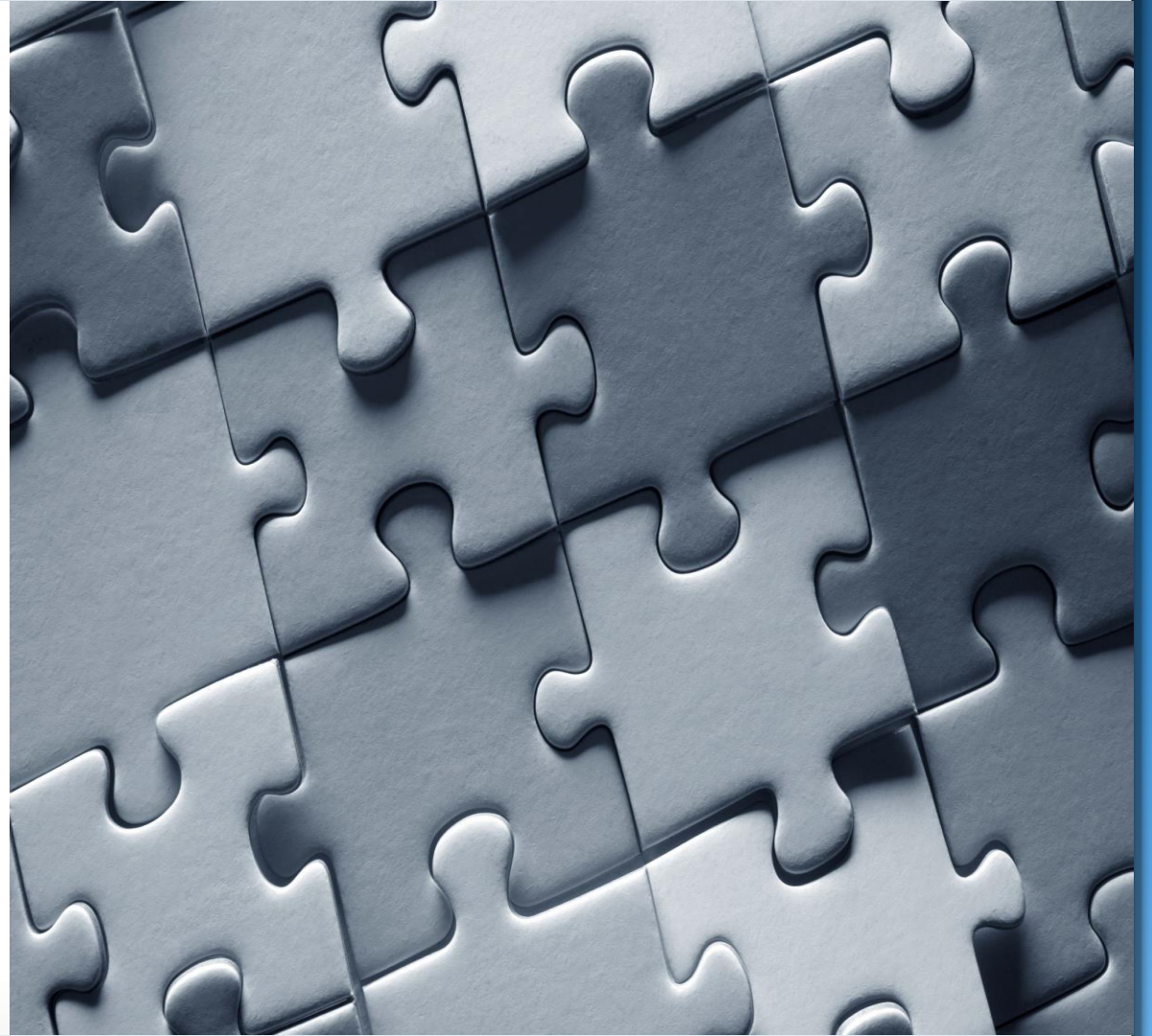
COS conversations grow over time



Conversations happen in the context of emotions and team member experiences



Challenges Exist



What are some challenges you've experienced or heard about regarding COS conversations with families?



Some Challenges – Some Different Perspectives

Practitioners:

- “It is tough if the parent gets upset.” (sad/mad)

- At times, it can be difficult when a parent is not aware of typical childhood milestones and the range their child is functioning”

Parents:

- “When they start with all the concerns (which families hear as negatives)”
- “It felt like they didn’t believe me, that they thought I was making things up or blowing things way out of proportion, when I know my own kid best.”

- Sometimes the practitioners read the paperwork and forget that the person that they are speaking to is not a professional but a parent.”
- “I wish I had known more and been more comfortable to ask my questions”

We acknowledge these conversations can be challenging. What has been your experience?

Practitioner Insight

Some families say “this COS meeting was the most challenging because **it really hit home** and kind of solidified maybe their biggest worries about their child because he wasn’t... in fact he was much further away from where they thought he was developmentally and that, of course, was hard to hear. [That] is the hard part about doing the COS.”

Parents' Insights

“ I think that this conversation is **important and it's helpful** in the long run...”

“Please **don't avoid the conversation** because you're worried how I'll react. I want to know where my child is even if it is hard to hear in the moment. I also want descriptions that help me know that you're describing what I see my child do, not just summaries without explanation.”

From a parent perspective, what are your thoughts about having these sometimes-difficult conversations?

Benefits Beyond Challenges



What are benefits
of engaging
families in COS
conversations?



Practitioner Insight

How do you think families benefit from COS conversations?

“Some parents find that it really helps them feel like they have a **better sense of where their child is** and have a better sense of **what the expectations are at their child’s age**, and where there might be some gaps and where there are some strengths. In fact, probably most parents say that.”

“**I haven’t had a family say they wouldn’t go through it again....** it was difficult, but it seems to help them have a realistic expectation going forward of what the next steps are going to be as we plan together to support their child.”

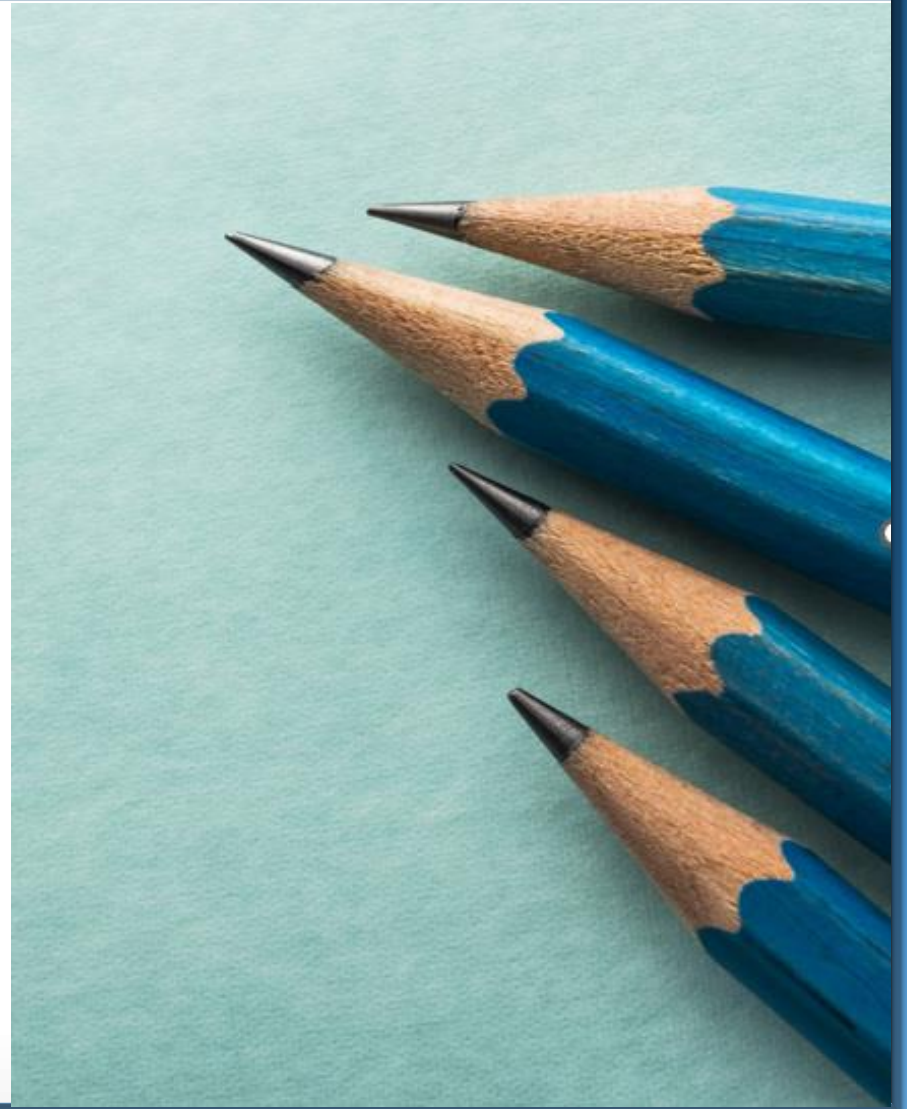
Parent Insight

“The part I like the most is being able to see where a child is in the beginning and where they are at the end of our time together.”

What is something that stood out to you about the program measuring child outcomes?

Seven Tips

For having quality COS
conversations with families



Tip #1

Build your own
COS capacity
and be prepared
for each family
conversation

“I would say that now
COS is easier as I have
a better understanding.”

“**Make notes** during the assessment in the 3 areas; have a note taking summary sheet so I can highlight the age appropriate versus stuff that is behind in each area.”

"Practitioners **need to understand why** we do the COS and how to compare a child's function to same age peers before they can help families. Have a **variety of tools** to use to prep for the conversation."

Practitioners' Insights

What do you do to prepare for COS discussions?

“**Review** the summary before meeting with the family.”

Tip #2

Help each family understand why we measure outcomes and what to expect

Practitioners' Insights

“...the better job I do to **prepare a family** with the materials to have this discussion, the easier it goes, the more involved the parents are in the discussion and because they've had a chance to really think and prepare and kind of understand what are we going for there, what are we looking to talk about and what's the end point.”

What helps these difficult conversations go well?

“**Explaining the process** of early global outcomes is easier in the beginning at enrollment. We have a brochure that we may utilize to explain the process and to guide the conversations.”

“I think it's helpful for them **[families] to know** that they are supporting continuing EI services for others by giving feedback on the COS.”

Parents' Insights

What would you like practitioners to do when having conversations about outcomes measurement?

“**fully explain** the rating system and exactly what it is measuring and looking at. Where concerns are listed, explain why those are concerns and what it means going forward if anything.

A lot of times, **practitioners assume** because we have heard the verbiage, filled out the forms before, that parents completely understand the process.”

“**Have a follow-up.** Give the parents the paperwork and information and follow up in a few days after they have looked at it and gotten over how the information made them feel.”

“**I wish I had known more** and been more comfortable to ask my questions...”

Tip # 3

Intentionally discuss the child's functional use of skills relative to age expectations

Practitioners' Insights

“I try to always make sure I’m **thinking in terms of the child’s actual age** and able to discuss those expected developmental skills, etc. with families. When you are able to tell them what to expect, it’s easier to share this information.”

“Assessing and screening **function at every step of the process**...sets you up for knowing function rather than discrete skills alone.”

How do you emphasize function and children’s skills relative to age expectations?

“I have been **open and honest** from the beginning about what is expected for a child this age. I let them know what I see, what may be atypical, etc. and I have conversations when I hear mis-information.... I make sure to give them evidence-based information.”

Parents' Insights

What would you like practitioners to do when discussing your child's functioning relative to age expectations?

“Where concerns are listed, **explain why** those are concerns and what it means going forward if anything. When asked about the future, **be realistic but not in a negative way.**”

“**Break it down** to easy speech and do not rush the parents. Encourage parents to ask questions.”

“When there are some skills that are really high and some that are really low, **help me understand** how to help with that.”

Reactions

How could these tips be incorporated into your program practices?

1. Build your own COS capacity and be prepared for each family conversation
2. Help each family understand why we measure child outcomes and what to expect
3. Intentionally discuss child's functioning and use of skills relative to age expectations



Tip #4

Individualize the process for each family and encourage their input and expertise

Parent reminder

“I think ...that *not* having the conversation at all is *not* the way to go. Just figuring out at the right pace for each family the way to introduce it...”



Practitioners' Insights

“I also make it clear that **this is a team discussion and that we will all chime in.**”

How do you individualize the process for each family?

“**Starting with what the child is doing** now and then talking about what milestones come next [before] jumping to their chronological age.”

“Determine **which outcome to start with**; Outcome 1 might not always be the best start...”

“Fold the **decision tree in half** to minimize the visual of the 7-point range.”

Parents' Insights

What helped or hindered you to feel like a valued team member?

“Save time to **let me talk** and ask questions and share.”

“There are **no wrong or stupid questions or comments**. Write the information down and don't feel intimidated to ask them to repeat or go slower if needed.”

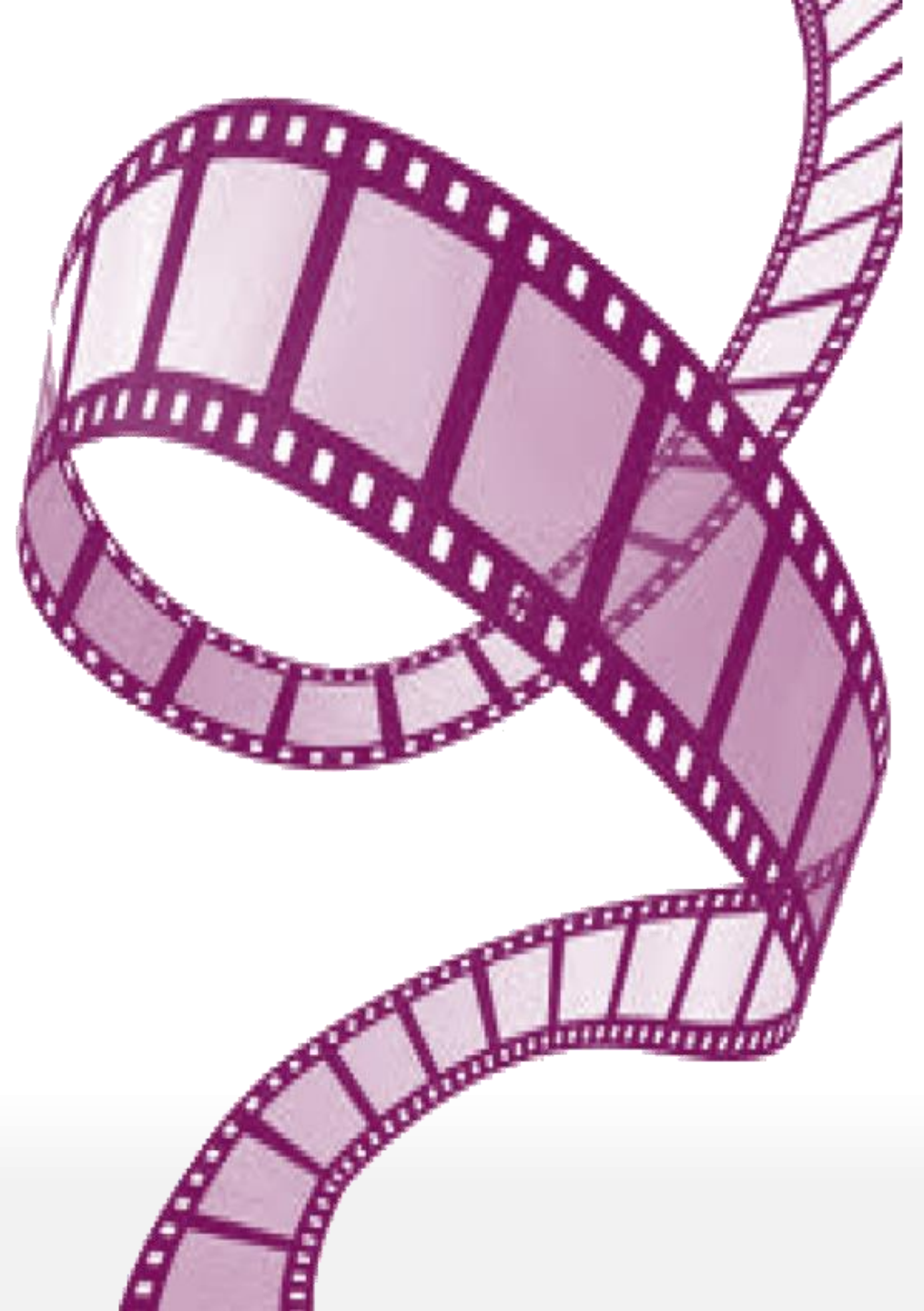
“Don't be sexist. I participated in some meetings where the practitioner's eye contact and direction of the conversation were toward the mother. I even had someone want to reschedule the meeting because mom wasn't there. It's 2022. **Dad's do stuff, too.**”

“As a Black mom you could feel the **sense of being inferior** to white counterparts. Medical degrees vs. common sense went out the window with no respect.”

Parent Insight

Professional observations are reliable snapshots of children's behavior in certain settings, whereas parental perspectives are based on a full-length feature film.

Suen, Logan, Neisworth, and Bagnato



Tip # 5

Listen and
acknowledge
emotions

I've learned that people will forget
what you said, people will forget
what you did, but people will never
forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou



Goodreads.com

Practitioners' Insights

“It is definitely a **balancing act** between providing hope and facing reality that their child is behind. I continue to add the age anchoring, just as I would with other kids, but I also do a lot more explanations.”

“Parents may be **processing difficult news** or facing the fact their child has significant delays or challenges that the family will face.”

COS can be associated with complex emotions ...what have you observed?

Parents' Insights

COS can be associated with complex emotions ...what have you experienced?

[The COS touches on the]...
“**precious expectations a mom has for their child.**”

“sometimes **feel so overwhelmed** that you child is never going to do things that “normal” kids do and that there is no hope”

“...feel like they're **blaming you** or criticizing your parenting. This is especially true if some of the things happen at school, but not at home or even the reverse.”

Practitioners' Insights

“when parents share concerns, **validate and listen** without adding too much; show concern or care; focus on the good and reassure that we are here to support. We don't end the meeting with this conversation!”

What helps you actively listen and engage families in COS conversations?

“remember that **each family is unique**, and I prefer to listen in the beginning.”

“**read your family**... do not overwhelm them, ask questions along the way.”

Parents' Insights

What are some reactions you remember about practitioners listening to you ?

“After I got frustrated, it was better. **One person heard me** and said “Let’s figure this out. It sounds like we need to observe more closely to understand what is going on. **After that it felt like we were both working to understand the same thing.**”

“I remember one of his teachers saying, ‘He made me a better teacher.’ Someone else said, ‘We made changes after ideas developed for him, but they helped all the kids here.’ **Those comments felt good** after all the conferences where everyone emphasized everything he wasn’t doing and how much it disrupted things.”

Tip # 6

Remember
that words
matter

“How we share
information and meeting
the family where they
are is just as important
as the information”

Practitioner Insight

What are your word choices in these discussions?

“I have learned to **use the parents’ words** to recap...”

“I just choose my words carefully to **be respectful** and not hurtful....”

“we **use the words** of younger child, mix, some skills, etc.; it seems ... a lot easier [than using 1-7 rating numbers].”

“**age-expected** feels less judgmental than age-appropriate”

Parents' Insights

What do you hope practitioners keep in mind during COS discussions?

“...remember that this **one point in time** and not a permanent reflection on what [the child] can or cannot do. This is information to help them plan and set up supports if needed.”

“Be honest and speak in a simplistic language that I can understand.”

“we are talking about a child, my child. I always put a picture of my child on the table with the team so people would remember it isn't just a list of skills and things he does and doesn't do, but **a whole person** with thoughts and feelings”

“Very clinical which is great for documentation, but as a parent, the **lack of description for each entry rating makes it hard** to fully understand exactly what my child was graded on....”

Reactions

How could these tips be incorporated into your program practices?

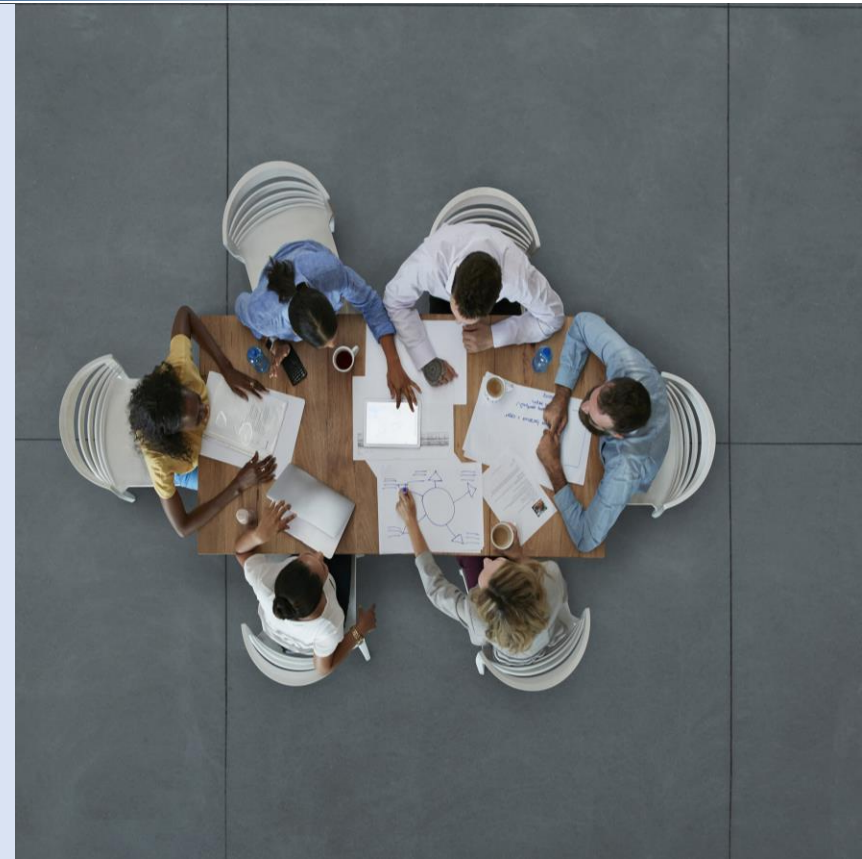
4. Individualize the process for each family and encourage their input and expertise
5. Listen and acknowledge emotions
6. Remember the words matter



Reactions

How could these tips be incorporated into your program practices?

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2. Help each family understand why we measure child outcomes and what to expect
3. Intentionally discuss child's functioning and use of skills relative to age expectations
4. Individualize the process for each family and encourage their input and expertise
5. Listen and acknowledge emotions
6. Remember the words matter



Tip # 7

Use COS concepts throughout IFSP/IEP entry to exit processes

Practitioners' Insights

“I usually start to get their [parent] input about where they think their child is compared to same age peers **right from the intake** and then I explain more at the screening and definitely at the evaluation. I put a lot of age anchoring into the COS, so usually by this time my families have an idea of where the child is.”

What tips do you have for embedding COS?

“I would tell providers **not to wait** until the COS process to do age anchoring. I think that leaves parents not clear about what is going on. Involve them the whole way.”

Tip #1

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Tip #2

Help each family understand why we measure outcomes and what to expect

Tip # 3

Intentionally discuss the child's functional use of skills relative to age expectations

Tip #4

Individualize the process for each family and encourage their input and expertise

Tip # 5

Listen and acknowledge emotions

Tip # 6

Remember that words matter

Tip # 7

Use COS concepts throughout IFSP/IEP entry to exit processes

Share back....

Thinking about these tips and cultivating quality COS conversations with families...what questions, ideas, and plans to you have?



Thank you!



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