



COMMUNICATING
with Parents or Caregivers

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Communicating with Parents or Caregivers

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A mental health issue can have a devastating impact on a child's success in school and in life. While it is understood that treatment should be sought as early as possible, it is difficult to do so when a mental health issue goes unrecognized. This problem is heightened in the case of children and adolescents if the individuals who play the main role in their health care (e.g., parents or caregivers) do not have enough information.

Parents of students studying abroad face additional challenges: differences in cultural perceptions of mental illness, language barriers, and not being physically there to help their child with day to day care. In these instances, teachers, homestay coordinators, or homestay parents may need to get more involved in the child's care and may have to approach parents to discuss specific mental health concerns. With so many factors involved, it becomes clear that communicating to parents or caregivers about a child's mental health problem is a complex issue that requires a great deal of sensitivity.



"I notice Anne has been feeling sad for the last few weeks. It seems to be having an effect on how she is able to concentrate in class or make friends." After all, a student's social and academic performance is very important to parents or caregivers.

1. Understand that cultural perception is number one.

Even within one city, people have different experiences and backgrounds that shape their beliefs. On a global scale, this effect is more pronounced. Before talking to parents or caregivers, take a little time to learn more about the child's background in order to gain an understanding about how mental health is viewed in their culture or by their religion. Having this information on hand will greatly help in the communication process, and will help you present yourself as a credible, thoughtful, and caring person. Once you demonstrate an understanding of their beliefs, it will be easier to educate them on how mental health is perceived in North America and let them know about the treatments that are available.

2. Do what you can to overcome language barriers.

Parents of international students may not speak English very well—if at all. In these cases, you may need to communicate through the agent that placed them. Even if the parents speak English, be careful to speak slowly and carefully. Do not use alarming language; certain words may sound frightening to a non-native speaker of English, such as "depression," "illness," or "diagnosis."

3. Explain the effect on the child's performance and social life.

Avoiding alarming terms and focusing on how symptoms are affecting the child help circumvent potential differences in cultural beliefs. It also makes it less scary for parents to hear and helps present symptoms in a way that is relatable. For example, if a child is depressed, you could say

4. Don't play the blame game.

It is extremely important not to approach this issue in a way that makes the parent or caregiver feel blamed or guilty. Avoid making comments that imply they have done something to cause the symptoms (e.g., "you aren't involved enough in your child's life" or "you don't provide enough support"). Making these types of statements will put them on the defensive, and may mean they are less open to speaking with you or accepting the suggestions for help that you are offering. The goal is to help the student, and make sure that appropriate care is sought. In order to do this, you and the parents need to be on the same side.

5. Let them know what support systems are in place to help their child.

Parents who hear that their child is in any sort of distress will understandably feel anxious—especially when they are living in another part of the world. Knowing that there are people and programs available to help can go a long way in reassuring parents that their child is being taken care of. Openly communicating options for support also allows them to become a part of the treatment process. Keeping them involved is beneficial to the child, and gives mom or dad a greater sense of control over the situation while they are so far away.

Mental health is a difficult topic to discuss, especially if it is about someone else's child. It becomes even more difficult if the parent is living in another country. Above all, be sensitive to a parent's feelings and cultural beliefs. Getting caregivers and parents involved and on board is an important step to ensuring a child gets the help that they need.

About the Author



Sakina Rizvi is a PhD Candidate at the University of Toronto in the Departments of Pharmaceutical Sciences and Neuroscience, and a Clinical Research Coordinator in the Department of Psychiatry, University Health Network. She has worked as a researcher in mental health for over a decade and has published numerous articles on psychiatric illness.

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