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# Can an Emoji Help When You Don't Know What to Say to a Parent?

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# Can an Emoji help when you don't know what to say to a parent?

By Carol Trivette, PhD

Engaging families can be simple at times yet very hard at others. One of the things that can make it hard for practitioners is when we do not know how families REAL feel about a situation. The situation might concern something you are doing or saying to the family. The situation might concern the child's development or behavior. Or, the situation might concern how the family is changing during deployment or another major life event. But regardless of whether we know what the situation is or not, we might be unsure of what to do or say. If we knew what the parent was feeling, then we might know what to say. What if we carried around a set of emoji expression cards, then families could just hold up a card to indicate how they are feeling....mad, surprised, sad, or confused... maybe then we would know what to say? Would an emoji really help us know what to say next? Probably not.



*Emojis*

**“Negative”** emotions are a little daunting because we might not know exactly what is going on in a parent's life, and we may worry that asking about it might be seen as disrespectful, intrusive, insensitive, or rude. Yet it is very awkward to know that something is wrong with a parent you are visiting and just continue with the conversation as if everything is fine.

We want to be respectful, sensitive, responsive, collaborative, and flexible. What if we just put on a sincere emoji face and say to the parent, “It seems like something is up. Is there something you want to talk about?” Through these questions we are being honest (“it seems like something is up”), respectful (“is there something you want to talk about?”), and yet at the same time we are not pressuring the parent to talk. If the response is “No,” we can respond by saying, “Ok, but if you change your mind, I'll be glad to listen.” This is respectful and sensitive (“OK”), while also demonstrating our willingness to be responsive (“I'll be glad to listen if you want to talk”).

If the parent indicates that they would like to talk about what is happening and they begin to share, then we need to be really good listeners. Remember “listen” has the same letters as “silent.” Respectful listeners do not talk over the other person, make light of the problem, or offer suggestions or solutions. Good listeners are quiet, attentive, and they reflect on what a person says to clarify. After a while if the parent indicates that advice is welcome, this is the time to start a collaborative, empowering conversation. You might begin by asking, “What have you thought might help?” or “What have you tried in the past that helped?” This response is respectful, because it does not appear that you have a magic answer and the implication is that the parent's ideas or previous experiences might be helpful.

Even in a world where parents routinely tell us what they are feeling with an emoji card, we probably still would not know what to say. But perhaps the next time you are in an awkward situation with a parent, you will think of an appropriate emoji. Then, try putting on a sincere emoji face and use one of

these prompts to start a conversation. Just remember that you can only start the conversation, parents do not have to join it. It is their decision and we have to respect that. 😊

This post was edited by Robyn DiPietro-Wells & Michaelene Ostrosky, PhD, members of the MFLN FD Early Intervention team, which aims to support the development of professionals working with military families. Find out more about the Military Families Learning Network FD concentration on our website, on Facebook, on Twitter, and YouTube.