

What to Say When: 5 Hard Parent Conversations in MTSS

The hardest conversations in intervention work aren't with students. Here's language that respects the parent, protects the teacher, and keeps the focus on the kid.

SCENARIO 1

“The intervention isn't working.”

(It is. Slowly.)

WHAT WORKS

“You're right that we're not seeing the jump we'd hoped for yet. Here's what the data is telling me — [specific metric] has moved from X to Y over [timeframe]. That's slower than average for this intervention, but it's moving in the right direction. Here's what I'd like to do: give it two more weeks at current intensity, and if we're not seeing [specific threshold], we'll increase frequency before we change approach.”

WHAT TO AVOID

Defending the intervention. “It takes time” is true and unsatisfying. Parents hear it as “don't worry about it,” which is the opposite of what they need.

SCENARIO 2

“Can we just move to evaluation?”

WHAT WORKS

“I understand wanting to move faster — I'd want the same thing. Here's why I'm asking for a few more weeks of this approach: special education evaluation requires showing that general education interventions haven't worked. If we skip this step, the evaluation team sends us back to do it, and we lose two months. What I'd rather do is finish this intervention cycle with tight documentation, so if we do go to evaluation, we go in with a complete picture.”

WHAT TO AVOID

Making the parent feel they're being difficult. The parent isn't wrong — they're scared. Name the fear, not the friction.

SCENARIO 3

“I haven't heard from you in three months.”

WHAT WORKS

“You're right, and I'm sorry. Here's what's happened since we last talked: [brief honest summary]. I should have updated you at the 30-day and 60-day marks. Going forward, you'll hear from me every three weeks — I'll send a short email after each progress check, even if there's nothing new to report. If you'd rather a phone call, tell me which day of the week works.”

WHAT TO AVOID

Making excuses. “It's been a busy semester” is true for the parent too, and they still noticed. Apologize once, then pivot to the new communication plan.

SCENARIO 4

“My child's teacher is the problem.”

WHAT WORKS

“I hear you, and I want to understand what you're seeing. Before we talk about the teacher, can you tell me what your child has been saying at home about school? I'm asking because the teacher and I see your child for maybe 40 hours a week. You see them for the rest. What you're noticing at home is data I don't have, and I need it.”

WHAT TO AVOID

Defending the teacher, especially in the first thirty seconds. Even if the teacher is excellent, starting with defense tells the parent their concern isn't being heard. Listen first. Defend later, if needed.

SCENARIO 5

“You're right, and I know it.”

WHAT WORKS

“You're right. We missed this. Here's what I'm going to do in the next 48 hours: [one or two concrete, small, achievable actions]. I'll email you Friday with an update on both. I'm not going to promise you the whole plan is fixed — it isn't yet. But you have my commitment that this doesn't drift again, and you have my email if it does.”

WHAT TO AVOID

Over-apologizing. A parent who is right doesn't need five paragraphs of apology — they need to see that you heard them and that something specific is changing by Friday. One apology, one concrete next step, one check-in date.