

A GUIDE TO NAVIGATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: Advocacy, Boundaries and Conversations that Matter



Ph: 0499 969 234

Email: admin@kinshipcarersvictoria.org
www.kinshipcarersvictoria.org



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GPV/KCV acknowledges the peoples of the Kulin nation as the traditional owners of our great land and offers respect to Elders, past and present.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that Aboriginal culture existed in Australia before European settlement and consisted of many community groups. Further, we acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of this land as the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

GPV/KCV acknowledges that laws and policies of the past have inflicted grief and suffering on our fellow Australians and regrets the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

GPV/KCV believes that a society that is inclusive of all is crucial to individual and community wellbeing and will behave with respect towards all irrespective of their race, religion, sexuality, gender or socio-economic background.

GPV/KCV acknowledges 13th of February as National Apology Day, the anniversary of then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, delivering the National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in 2008. GPV/KCV will take steps that promote a happier and healthier future for Indigenous Australians, particularly the children and young people.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is here to walk alongside you as you navigate some of the conversations that matter most — with schools, case workers, birth families, or even within your own home.

It's not a script, and it's not about getting it "perfect." Instead, it's a guide to help you:

- Understand why conversations feel difficult.
- Learn strategies to stay steady and set boundaries.
- Feel prepared to speak up with confidence.
- Remember that you are not alone; many carers face the same challenges.

You can read it from start to finish, or dip into the sections that feel most useful right now. Each page is short and practical, with examples drawn from carers' real experiences.

Keep it nearby for the next time you have a meeting, phone call, or family conversation that feels heavy. Use it as a reminder that your voice matters and that it is possible to advocate with clarity and care, even when things are hard.



WHAT MAKES A CONVERSATION DIFFICULT?

Conversations are never just about words. They carry history, emotions, power, and hope. For kinship carers, the conversations you step into are often deeply personal. They may be about the children and young people you care for, your family, or your role as a carer. It's no surprise they can feel heavy.

Difficult conversations usually share a few things in common: emotions are high, the stakes feel important, and there are different perspectives about what needs to happen. When these collide, conversations can quickly feel overwhelming or unsafe.

The following pages explore some of the reasons why conversations feel difficult, and offer examples drawn from real experiences carers often face.

EMOTIONAL WEIGHT

Strong emotions like grief, frustration, guilt, or fear can make it hard to think clearly or speak calmly. These feelings are human and valid, but they can also cloud the way we communicate.

Sometimes we don't feel safe enough to show how we feel. Other times, we worry that if we do speak up, we won't be understood. This tension can make it even harder to advocate for what matters.

Examples:

- Feeling overwhelmed or angry when a case worker doesn't follow through.
- Grieving the loss of an old role or relationship while adjusting to a new one with a child.
- Carrying a fear of being judged by professionals, even when you're doing your best.

COMPETING STORIES

Every person in a conversation arrives with their own story about what's happening. These stories are shaped by their role, values, and perspective. Sometimes those stories clash.

This doesn't mean anyone is lying; it often means they are telling the truth as they see it. But when stories don't line up, it can feel like we're not being heard or respected.

Examples:

- A teacher insists the child's behaviour needs to change quickly, while you know they first need safety and support.
- A birth parent downplays safety concerns that you know are serious.
- A child has a very different memory of an event than you do.

IDENTITY AND SELF-WORTH

Conversations that touch our identity or worth can feel especially difficult. When someone questions our competence or care, it cuts deep. For carers, these conversations can hit hard because you've already given so much.

Being seen as "too soft" or "too strict" can feel like a personal attack. Feeling invisible in meetings can leave you questioning your role. And when professionals frame you as a problem instead of a partner, it can erode confidence.

Examples carers shared:

- Being told you're not managing behaviour "the right way."
- Being overlooked or dismissed in meetings.
- Worrying that raising concerns will make you look difficult rather than caring.

PAST HURT AND HISTORY

Old wounds show up in new rooms. If you've had to fight to be heard before, it makes sense that you might walk into new conversations on edge.

History with systems, schools, or family members can shape how safe (or unsafe) a new conversation feels. It can also make small comments or behaviours land much harder than they might for someone without that history.

Examples carers shared:

- Feeling frustrated because previous attempts to raise issues went nowhere.
- Family tension resurfacing during new decisions.
- A power imbalance with teachers or principals, especially if your own school experiences were painful.



CONFLICTING NEEDS AND GOALS

Sometimes people want different things but don't say them clearly. Other times, your goals might be misunderstood or deprioritised.

For carers, this can feel like hitting a wall. You want long-term healing and safety for a child, but the system might only measure short-term outcomes. You know emotional regulation matters, but a school may be focused on academic goals. These conflicting priorities can leave you feeling unheard and stuck.

Examples:

- Advocating for a child's long-term healing while systems only measure short-term changes.
- Managing emotional and behavioural needs while schools push academic results.
- The extended family is pushing for contact that doesn't feel safe or appropriate.

COMMUNICATION STYLE

People communicate in very different ways; tone, pace, timing, or language can all affect whether we feel connected or disconnected. Even when intentions are good, differences in style can create misunderstandings.

Professional jargon, rushed meetings, or indirect communication can all add to the sense that you're not being heard. Sometimes it's not the message itself, but how it's delivered, that creates the barrier.

Examples:

- Feeling overwhelmed by professional language or fast-paced meetings.
- Feeling ignored because you need more time to process or speak up.
- Struggling to read between the lines of indirect or unclear communication.

THE CONVERSATION FIRST AID TOOLKIT

Before we dive into the details of stress and regulation, it can help to think of yourself as having a **first aid kit for conversations**.

Just like a physical first aid kit holds plasters, bandages, or pain relief for when things go wrong, your conversation first aid kit is full of strategies to help you stay steady when emotions run high.

Your kit might include things like:

- Practices to help regulate your body and your nervous system.
- Reminders of your boundaries —what you will and won't take on.
- Phrases or questions that help bring the conversation back on track.
- Supports you can lean on afterwards, like a trusted friend or a quiet space.

No one else can stock your kit for you; it's about knowing what works for you. The next pages explore these tools in more detail.



STRESS AND REGULATION – WHAT HAPPENS IN OUR BODY

When conversations feel difficult, our bodies respond as if we're under threat. Stress is both a physical and psychological reaction, and it can hijack our ability to think clearly or stay calm.

In stressful moments, you might notice:

- A racing heart or shallow breathing.
- Tense shoulders or clenched jaw.
- Sweaty palms or a dry mouth.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering details.
- Anger building up inside our body
- Or, a longing to avoid the conversation

This is your nervous system moving into survival mode. It's designed to keep you safe, but it can make it harder to stay steady in conversations. If we engage in these conversations while in this state, we may detract from our message due to heightened emotion.

Understanding what's happening in your body is the first step towards managing it.



REGULATION STRATEGIES

Regulation means staying steady in your body and mind, even when emotions are high. When we're regulated, we can stay in our "thinking brain" and respond instead of reacting.

Different strategies work for different people. Some carers use physical movement, others rely on grounding techniques, and many use a mix of both.

Practical strategies include:

- Taking a few deep breaths or using a guided breathing exercise.
- Going for a short walk, stretching, or using gentle movement.
- Holding something grounding in your hands, like a stone or textured object.
- Use calming music, doodling, or sensory activities to steady your focus.
- Having a short phrase you repeat to yourself, like *"I can pause, I don't have to rush."*

Try a few approaches and notice which ones help you stay centred before or during conversations.

BOUNDARIES: THE WHAT

Boundaries are the limits that keep us safe and steady. They clarify what we will and won't do, and allow us to stay connected without overextending.

For kinship carers, boundaries are not about being cold or distant. They are about protecting your energy and ensuring you can keep caring over the long term. Without them, difficult conversations can leave us drained or resentful.

Think of boundaries as the lines that let you remain present without being consumed. They protect both you and the relationships that matter.

BOUNDARIES: THE HOW

Establishing and holding boundaries takes practice. It can feel uncomfortable at first, especially if you are used to always giving. But boundaries create clarity and respect.

Examples of holding boundaries in conversations:

- *Slowing down*: “I need a moment to think before we continue.”
- *Protecting role clarity*: “That decision isn’t mine to make, but here’s what I can contribute.”
- *Insisting on respect*: “I’d like us to keep the tone calm so we can focus on solutions.”
- *Creating next steps instead of rushing*: “Let’s pause here and revisit once more information is available.”

Boundaries don’t close doors, they keep them open in ways that feel safe and manageable.

PREPARING FOR CONVERSATIONS

Going into a difficult conversation without preparation can feel like going into a storm without a raincoat. Planning won’t solve everything, but it reduces overwhelm and helps you feel grounded.

Before a conversation, consider:

- **Your goal**: What do I most want to achieve?
- **Your key message**: If I had only 30 seconds, what’s the one thing I’d want them to hear?
- **Possible barriers**: What challenges might come up, and how could I respond?
- **Support needed**: Who or what could help me feel steadier going in?

Even making a few notes can help you stay focused when emotions run high.

HELPFUL PHRASING AND GOOD QUESTIONS

Questions are powerful tools. They can open doors or shut them. The way we phrase questions can:

- Create clarity instead of confusion.
- Reduce defensiveness instead of escalating conflict.
- Invite collaboration instead of shutting someone down.

Examples of questions that help:

- Open questions require more than a yes or a no response, so we get more insight and clarity: *"Can you tell me more about what you've noticed at school?"*
- Clarifying questions are really helpful to get specific on details: *"When you say support will be in place, what will that look like day-to-day?"*
- Future-focused questions help us move beyond the current problem and look towards actionable steps: *"What small step could we take this week to improve things?"*

Think of phrasing as your ally. The right words can soften a hard edge and make space for shared understanding.



SOLUTION-FOCUSED THINKING

It's easy for conversations to spiral into problems. Shifting towards solutions doesn't ignore the difficulties; it gives energy to what might actually move things forward.

Instead of asking, *"Why is this always going wrong?"* you might ask, *"What would make this a little easier next week?"* This doesn't ignore the problem; we still acknowledge it, but we now hold the problem and the potential solutions at the same time.

Solution-focused thinking helps carers reframe conversations so they feel less like battles and more like collaborations. It doesn't mean everything will be fixed quickly. It means you're guiding the conversation towards hope, clarity, and action.

Helpful phrasing:

- *"How can we work together to move towards solving this?"*
- *"What would help this child feel safer right now?"*
- *"What's one small step we could take in the short term?"*

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

As you prepare for or reflect on a conversation, it can help to pause and gather your thoughts. This doesn't need to be long or complicated — even a few minutes can make a difference.

A simple reflection checklist:

- What makes this conversation feel difficult for me?
- Which regulation strategy will I use to stay steady?
- What is my main goal or key message?
- What challenge might come up, and how will I hold my boundaries?
- What is one helpful question I could ask to focus on solutions?

You don't need to have all the answers. Just having a clear sense of what matters most will help you step in with more confidence.

Every time you step into a conversation with care, you are showing up for yourself and for the child. That is powerful, and it deserves recognition.

You may not always walk away with the outcome you hoped for, but you can walk away knowing you stayed true to what matters most: safety, love, and dignity.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND ABOUT WAGTAIL

Support services

If this booklet has stirred up strong feelings or memories, please know support is available:

- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 | lifeline.org.au
- **Beyond Blue:** 1300 22 4636 | beyondblue.org.au
- **WellMob (First Nations social and emotional wellbeing resources):** wellmob.org.au
- **Kinship Carers Victoria:** 0499 969 234

About Wagtail Institute

The Wagtail Institute exists so that all children and young people can have safe and magical childhoods, supported by adults who believe in their future. We work alongside carers, educators, and practitioners to strengthen wellbeing and embed trauma-informed practice.

For more resources, workshops, and conversations, visit:

- wagtailinstitute.com
- Wag Tales podcast (on all podcast platforms)





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