A good talk may be the turning point for a child or young person who is at risk of becoming involved in crime. Early support of the child or young person and its family may lessen the risk considerably of embarking on a life of crime. The leaflet addresses people who are in direct contact with children and young people. It contains some simple tools that may make it easier to carry out the first planned and often difficult talk with children, young people and their parents.
The Danish Crime Prevention Council
Odinsvej 19, 2
2600 Glostrup
Denmark
Phone: (+45) 43 44 88 88
Fax: (+45) 33 43 01 39
E-mail: dkr@dkr.dk
Homepage: www.dkr.dk/eng

Editors:
Steen Hansen
Sandra Vinding

Layout and illustrations:
Trine Freisler Design

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The work group:
Asta Biigaard, health visitor, Middelfart Municipality
Steen Hansen, information officer, The Danish Crime Prevention Council
Astrid Heindorff, SSP-joint council and SSP-consultant,
Ballerup Municipality
Ole Lauridsen, police sergeant, The Danish Crime Prevention Council
Annette Kastrup Pedersen, educational consultant,
The Danish Crime Prevention Council
Grethe Refshauge, senior master at the teachers training college
National Institute for Social Education.
Sandra Vinding, social consultant, The Danish Crime Prevention Council

February 2004
We *must* talk about it!
The crime preventive talk
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Supplement: Check-list
A good talk can be the turning point for a child or young person who is at risk of becoming involved in crime. However, many of the people the council co-operates with have drawn attention to how difficult it can be to take the initiative to a talk with children or young people who are at risk of becoming involved in crime - and their families. The difficulties may be based on e.g. uncertainty as to interpreting confidentiality, how to interpret the signals given by the child or young person who is at risk of getting involved in crime, fear of the reaction from the family or lack of practical knowledge as how to carry out a talk. Furthermore, the initiator’s personal courage and professional skill play a part.

The Danish Crime Prevention Council has through its organisation close co-operation with societies for professional frontline workers such as health visitors, teachers, police officers and social workers. The aim of this pamphlet is to give these frontline workers some simple tools that may make it easier to carry out the first, planned and often difficult talk with children, young people and their parents. Early support of the child or young person and their parents may lessen the risk of entering onto a criminal career considerably.

The leaflet contains short, practical guidance as to why and when frontline workers must react to children and young people who are at risk – and how to prepare and carry out the talk.

In the middle of the leaflet there is a check-list that may be taken out and placed on your desk or taken with you in your pocket.

Information about The Danish Crime Prevention Council and about Co-operation between Schools, Social Services and Police (SSP-Co-operation) can be found on homepage: www.dkr.dk/eng.

Chief Constable Lars Rand Jensen
Chairman of the SSP-committee

Anna Karina Nickelsen
Secretariat Director
The necessary but difficult talk

Why must you react?

The decisive thing is that ‘someone’ takes an initiative when children and young people are starting to walk down a dangerous path. This initiative might well come from you. Although it is painful for both the parents and the child or the young person to face the consequences of crime, it is better to intervene quickly than to ignore the signs. But the task is not easy if you are at the same time uncertain as how to interpret what you have observed. However, your initiative may be decisive for whether the child or the young person at risk becomes a person that the others ‘are not allowed to play with’, or whether the child or the young person can change to a good and beneficial course. Furthermore, the talk gives you the opportunity, after having got to know the child or the young person and its family better, of finding out whether there is reason for concern or not. In some situations you have not only a human duty, but also moral, ethical or formal obligations. This could be e.g. intensified supervision. These duties are discussed on page 22.

When must you react?

The first time you realise that there is professionally based concern that a child or youth is at risk of developing criminal behaviour, you must react. You must take what you see, hear, and sense seriously and you must use your professional
knowledge and experience and the policy at your workplace to decide whether to take the initiative to a talk. There are a number of changes in behaviour that may indicate whether it is time to take this step – even though you may be in doubt as to whether it is necessary.

You may have noticed that the child or the young person:
- has started spending a lot of money
- ‘hangs out’ more often
- does not keep appointments
- shirks school
- stops going to spare time activities
- is often together with local tough boys
- chooses not to have contact with adults
- chooses to be with criminal types or drug users
- bullies or is him/herself bullied
- becomes more restless, quick-tempered, or introvert
- breaks down and is inconsolable
- repeatedly gets into the same conflicts without learning from them

The summary is not exhaustive and the examples mentioned do not as such and by themselves mean that something is wrong.

Other indications may be changes in other people’s reactions:
- ‘He’s sure to be a big success one day’
- the child or youth is no longer company that is sought after
- sensible friends avoid the child’s or youth’s company
- other parents become worried about what the child or youth might persuade their own child to do.
However, you must remember that some young people may be subjected to prejudice and to being left out and are thus not themselves the cause of being spoken about in a negative way. When you add up the sum of what you have noticed, you have to use your professional knowledge in order to determine the degree of seriousness of your observations and to decide whether a talk is necessary.

When you lose courage to carry out the talk  
how do you get it back

Talks with children and young people who are at risk and with their families can be difficult for everyone concerned to carry out. Even for highly experienced professionals it may, for a variety of reasons, be difficult to find the courage for these talks.

It is a general and well-known phenomenon that difficult talks are connected with some kind of resistance among professionals. This resistance may show itself as restlessness, nervousness, doubt, uncertainty, and general disinclination to carrying out the talk. Is the talk really necessary – and am I the one to take the initiative?

The reasons for this disinclination can be many and various. Maybe you know the child, the young person or the parents in other contexts, where they have been difficult to co-operate with. Maybe the subjects you need to talk about are controversial and go beyond normal limits. Maybe you know that if as a parent you were in the same situation you would get angry, uncertain, worried, and break into tears.

Of course, it is true that we all in certain situations when we talk to other people step into unknown territory, the consequences of which we never know in advance and where we may lose our footing for a while. Your restlessness and worry and the emotional reactions from the family are all quite natural.

Face the fact that you may fail. But the fear of failing should not stop you from carrying out the talk. We all make mistakes from time to time and if you accept the possibility of making mistakes during the process, they can usually be rectified.

It is essential to remember that you specifically can make a difference by carrying out the talk.
As mentioned, these talks are necessary because they can contribute to impeding a development that may sooner or later lead to a criminal career. Therefore this talk in combination with your professional competence is exactly what the family needs.

Thorough preparation of the talk, a secure and good interdisciplinary network of colleagues, humility and kindness towards the family and their feelings during the talk, all contribute to the meeting and the talk being helpful to the child or the young person.
Preparing the talk

It is decisive for the way the talk develops that you have considered some things thoroughly before you decide to invite the family for a talk.

What is the problem?

First you have to be clear in your own mind in what way and to what extent you and perhaps your colleagues in the interdisciplinary co-operation are concerned. You have to make the problem clear at different professional and personal levels so that you are able to describe the problems to the child, the young person, the family and your colleagues respectively.

A decisive starting point in order to be able to act in a case of a professionally based concern is that the description of the problem is short and precise.

This is done best by describing the problem, partly in one sentence that the parents can understand it.

The problem is made clear, uncovered and acknowledged at the following three levels:

**Observation**

Specific interdisciplinary observation

Making the problem clear by considering specific facts such as e.g. observations, things that have been noticed, and things you have noted in the case record by the professionals involved. By stating the problem in one sentence you may achieve the greatest possible clarification of the basic problem.

**State the problem in one sentence so that the parents can understand it.**

**Concern**

Expressed in relation to ethics/values that have been formulated in the surrounding world. E.g. an offence

Making specific the concern that you have and which is based on your professional knowledge and the values that cover you and your institution

**State this concern – and possible consequences.**

**Assessment**

Observations and concerns expressed and translated for professional abstract reflection

A professional assessment of the problem and a carefully considered and contemplated description. These considerations can and should be included in potential information.

**State the problem in one sentence so your colleagues can understand it.**
understand and partly in one sentence that your colleagues can understand.

This systematic way of dealing with the situation will contribute to making it clear to you how necessary a talk is and to making you feel more sure about what it is that you want to achieve. The parents must be presented with the observations and the description of the problem. The specified description of your concern and the assessment you will need as background knowledge during the talk. As the talk progresses you will receive further information, which in the end will increase or lessen your concern so that afterwards you be able to make a new assessment.

Before the talk you should particularly think about what possible reactions, consequences and possible sanctions there may be. It must be possible to present these thoughts, in the same way as the description of the problem, in two different ways. Partly so that the family can understand them and partly so that your colleagues can understand them.

The aim of the talk
The first meeting has at least three aims:
• to make clear how each of you sees the problem
• to present possible consequences – among these the inclusion of other authorities or institutions
• to agree on what is to be done next
The following facts must be considered and described in advance:

- What do you want to be the outcome of the talk?
- What kind of talk do you want? (e.g. informative, supportive, centred round the problem or confrontational.)
- What resources does the child or the young person possess? - in your point of view?
- What resources do you think the child or the young person possesses? - in the family’s point of view? (Clarified further during the talk.)
- What are your expectations of the child or the young person?
- What do you think are the child’s or the young person’s and the family’s expectations, hopes and dreams for the child or the young person?
- Do your expectations and assessment of resources correspond with theirs?
- In what way do you think the problem is important to the child or the young person and the family?
- Which short and long term consequences may it have if the problem is not solved?
- How can you make sure that the family understands what you are saying? (Here the three levels in the model may be used – see page 8.)

Types of questions and techniques for questioning are described on page 19. You may find further inspiration in the books mentioned in the bibliography. And you may perhaps practice with a good colleague.
Practical preparation

You are responsible for a pleasant and nice atmosphere during the talk. Therefore you have to consider in which room the talk is to take place and whether to have water or coffee on the table. In some cases you may choose to visit the family – that is up to you. However, it is necessary that the talk takes place in a quiet environment where you can talk without being interrupted.

Set aside between 30 and 60 minutes for a talk. Make sure that there is time in your schedule for further clarification at the end of the talk should it turn out to be necessary.

Interdisciplinary

Remember that you are or will very quickly become part of interdisciplinary co-operation which will together lift the task with each member’s professional opinions and practice. Clarify your role and responsibility as party to solving the specific problems. It is important to stress that interdisciplinary co-operation must never develop into a conflict of interests between the family and you – ‘them and us’.

In this connection, remember that only the necessary professional persons should be present at the meeting with the family. It may be necessary for the professional team to clarify professional limits and their tasks mutually and in advance. Who has which tasks and why?

Mental preparation

Before the meeting you should consider what influence your concern and the facts of the case have on you. This aspect should also be talked over with your colleagues or the team first. There are a number of ethical and human aspects in difficult talks that affect us all deeply. As a professional you may feel that you are partly responsible for whether other people succeed or fail. Your concern may influence you but that is exactly why the talk is very important. Take your concern for the child or the young person seriously.

How do you prepare for the talk?

When you have made it clear to yourself what it is that you want to say, it is important to find a good way both of saying it and of becoming aware of the views of the other party in the talk. Just as you prepare what the talk is to be about, you can prepare how the talk is to develop in a good way.

Prepare to meet the other party with open-mindedness, interest, and respect.
Open-mindedness

During your preparation of the talk you will – consciously or subconsciously – create a mental picture of the person you are going to talk with. The good thing about preconceptions is that they work as points of reference in our meeting other people. Without them we would not know what to notice.

Preconceptions may, however, play a trick on us, so that we confuse the points of reference with the reality that they were supposed to lead us to. So, the question is: how can you be well prepared for the talk with the other party and still keep an open mind?

• Be aware which ideas you have about the other party in the talk and about his or her life.
• Accept your ideas as necessary points of reference in the talk.
• Be aware that your ideas are provisional and incomplete, maybe even wrong pictures of reality.

Interest

Thus you have paved the way for an interest in meeting the other person and in the talk you are going to have. What does it mean to be interested?

We distinguish between sticking our noses in other people’s business and taking an interest and looking into new aspects that emerge during the talk.

Constructive interest presupposes that you are aware of your preconceptions and enter into the other party’s life.
Check-list
The Crime Preventive Talk

You can take out the check-list and place it on the desk or have it in your pocket.

The Danish Crime Prevention Council
Check-list for ‘We must talk about it’.
The crime preventive talk

1. Preparing the talk.
   ❑ What is the aim of the talk?
   ❑ Who is to take part?
   ❑ If several people take part: agree on your mutual roles and how to supplement each other during the talk.
   ❑ How important is it that both parents are present?
   ❑ Where and how is the talk to take place? (The framework.)
   ❑ Be aware that all parents are vulnerable with regard to their children.
   ❑ Remember that parents always do their best. Sometimes that is just not good enough.

2. Establishing contact.
   ❑ How and by whom are parents prepared and invited to the talk?
   ❑ Give a short description of the background either in writing or verbally.

3. The meeting
   ❑ Take pains over the introduction: Say hello nicely – ‘Thank you for coming’, and create a pleasant and secure atmosphere.
   ❑ Make the aim of the meeting clear: Why are we here? What is it that we want to discuss?
   ❑ Make the length of the talk clear (min. 30 min. – max. 1 hour).
   ❑ Start the talk with the parents by telling them of your observations and your concern. ‘I have noticed….’
   ❑ Present your concern and give examples: What you have observed, when, how, how much …?
   ❑ Get the parents themselves to talk about their child. ‘How do you feel…..?’
   ❑ Stay focused. Do not get defensive if the parents react with anger or aggression. These reactions are natural.
   ❑ Stay focused on what gave you cause for concern.
   ❑ Avoid professional jargon and language that may give offence or will maybe not be understood.
   ❑ Treat the family with the same care, open-mindedness and respect as you would want in a similar situation – without losing focus concerning the child’s problems.
- What do the parents think can or should be done?
- What do you think can or should be done?
- If necessary inform them of the guidelines set down by the law.
- Work out a plan of action that everyone can accept.
- Make an appointment to follow up on the meeting.
  When shall we talk again?

5. Conclusion of the talk.
- Summary. ‘We have talked about …’, ‘We have agreed to …’
- Does the family think that there is anything you still need to talk about or that needs clarification?
- Do you agree that you have come to a good agreement?
- How do you feel about having had the talk?
- Say goodbye nicely. ‘Thank you for coming’.
  ‘If you want to you can phone …’

6. Feedback in the professional network.
- What went well and what did not go so well?
- Did I/we say what I/we wanted to say?
- Did I/we say it in a way that enabled the parents to understand and recognise the picture I/we gave of the child?
- What did the parents communicate to us?
- Did we come to mutual understanding?

The check-list has been worked out from a draft made by Dorte Haagen Larsen, PPR, and Marianne Jensen, the Remedial Teachers Team, Ballerup municipality. Published by the Danish Crime Prevention Council, 2004.
Odinsvej 19, 2.
2600 Glostrup
Denmark
Phone: (+45) 43 44 88 88
Fax: (+45) 33 43 01 39
E-mail: dkr@dkr.dk
Homepage: www.dkr.dk/eng
Respect
Respect is to acknowledge the other person’s point of view, self-perception, perception of reality and to accept these as being the other person’s attempt to make sense of their life.

This implies that first of all you make yourself familiar with the realities of the other person’s life and then acknowledge his or her views. But what if it is different to yours? Can and should we acknowledge views we do not agree with? Yes, because that is not the same as accepting them.

So, you need not share let alone accept the other person’s views in order to acknowledge them. Acknowledgement means that you understand the other person’s views and differentiate between them and your own.

Through this kind of acknowledgement you further a dialogue in which different or opposing views are not necessarily competing truths but the possibility of gaining insight into each other’s worlds.

In some cases this is the aim of the talk. In other cases the talk aims at changing an inappropriate pattern of behaviour. In any case, the meeting of different views of reality are prerequisite to gaining an understanding of each other’s points of view.

Balance of power
In the kind of talks we are concerned with here, the balance of power is consciously or unconsciously not equal. You represent ‘the system’ that has legal authority. The family sees you as someone who can notify the social authorities.

The family represents the private sphere and is subject to rules laid down by the law and society. It is important that you are aware of this balance of power – the family is sure to be. Your concern and your presentation of yourself and the problem together with your ability to listen to and understand the family all contribute to toning down the inequality in the balance of power. These things may also contribute to establishing mutual trust, which will lead to a better solution, because the problems are solved in a nice atmosphere and together. (Note also the section about communication, page 18).
Establishing contact

Consider and plan how you want to invite the family to the talk. It can be very important to the child or the young person and the whole family’s attitude to you that it is done in a way so they understand why it is important that they come. It is worth stressing that the problem must be solved in co-operation in which the whole family plays an important part.

You may invite the family by phone but in that case the call should always be followed by a letter. (See a suggestion for a text on the next page).

Being the host

You are the host at the talk - and thus responsible for a successful meeting. Being the host means that you introduce yourself and present your intentions clearly and that the child or the young person and the family should be regarded as guests, if the meeting does not take place in their home. It is also important that everyone has the opportunity of introducing themselves.

If you intend to take notes and write things down during the talk, say so from the beginning – and say why.
Example of a letter to parents

Tom and Tina Hansen
High Street 15
9876 Newtown

Dear Tom and Tina,
I am writing to you because I have for some time now noticed that Thomas has changed quite a lot. He seems more restless than before and has started teasing the other pupils. He no longer seems to be one of the group. He does not seem to be happy.
I think it is more than just the ordinary problems with being young.
I have tried talking to Thomas about it but his answers are very evasive.
Maybe he has only changed at school, or maybe you have noticed the same changes as I have?
Therefore I think that you, Thomas, and I should meet and talk things over.
I suggest a meeting on Monday 16 May 2003 at 3 p.m. at the school's office.
If the time or place is not convenient, please phone me so we can make another appointment.

Yours sincerely,

(Thomas’ teacher)
The Meeting

The development of the talk

You have planned the place, the time, and the length of the meeting and the participants have been invited. The talk should progress in the following way:

1. **Presentation phase**: Contact. Who are we? What is the reason for the meeting? How long will it take?
2. **Defining the problem**: Contract. What are we going to talk about?
3. **Work phase**: Assessment and analysis.
4. **Concluding phase**: Checking understanding and planning. What is going to happen? What else is needed? When, how and who follows up on the meeting?
5. **Evaluation**: How was the meeting? Say goodbye in a nice way.

Defining the problem

As you and the family may have different opinions as to the problem, defining the problem must be done by mutual analysis. In this way the family has the same opportunity of defining the problem as you have had. Important information is to be found at the very beginning of the talk. What is foremost in the mind is also said first. Make a note of the words and try to find out what they mean. But only comment on what is said. Use active listening and check that you have understood what has been told you in the way that the family sees it.

Take your time and use both your professionalism and your intuition to understand the family’s view of the situation and what each of them thinks of what emerges during the talk. Show your understanding by e.g. repeating their words.

Within the overall view of the problem there are several different and specific ways of presenting the problem. The facts that you get and the story behind them are important pieces of information about the family’s perspective and they contribute to defining the contexts in which the problem arises. Some of these contexts may turn out to be quite different from what you as a professional had considered in your preparation of the talk. The important thing is that you find a mutual perspective together. You continue to place yourself at their disposal to understand the contexts in which the problems of the family and the young person arise. It may for example turn out that crime is a symptom – a way for the child or the young
person to ask for help. This behaviour may also be a sign that the family lacks the ability or the tools to tackle the situation and that it needs advice and guidance.

Stay focused and at the same time try to understand the overall picture. Furthermore, consider how your message, the family’s message and the child’s or the young person’s perspective reach a point at which you agree as to the long term and short term consequences. Moreover you have to agree as to who is in fact responsible for solving the problem. It is for example possible that the parents do not share your concern or that the family members have different opinions as to the content and seriousness of the situation.

The analytic phase is not to be dealt with superficially although it may take time. The process gives both parties the possibility of listening to each other and thinking. It is all right to make your own current remarks about what is said but do not try to convince, condemn, give advice or start a discussion.

You can show that you are human in the professional talk if you e.g. say: ‘I can imagine how upsetting it must be when the police phone you and you have no idea what has happened’.
Communication

Language
Your body language reflects both your conscious and your subconscious feelings and attitudes. Your thoughts show in the way you speak and reveal whether you respect and accept the people you are communicating with. They also show in the way you contact them, in your way of breathing, your eye contact, the position of your hands, arms, and legs and in the spoken language.

Professional language creates distance. Parents, children and young people feel they are being interrogated and this prevents the talk from being positive. Therefore you must explain the words as simply as possible whenever you are in doubt as to whether the other party understands your expression.

An example of different ways of understanding a word: 'Maybe your new husband could be felt to be a threat to your son?’. ‘Oh no, he has never threatened him!’

Slang is also often language that requires translation between generations. Humour shows that you are human but be careful using it with people who are in a difficult situation or who have a different sense of humour or different values from you.

Active listening
Active listening implies that you listen to what is said in its entirety – to the entire meaning of what is said. You have to pay attention to both the contents of and the feelings behind what is said. Ask clarifying questions that elaborate the underlying meaning but avoid talking about your own associations. The person you are talking with will feel accepted and will listen to what he/she is saying, test his own thoughts and consider changes. In this process you will also change your view of the person you are talking with and any opposition there may be will be dispelled. Remember also that there must be peace and quiet during the talk and time to think things over.

Defence mechanisms
In all communication you have to be aware of your own and the other person’s limits. Anyone who expresses his/her opinions and feelings has his/her own natural defence mechanisms. These may be denial, repression, transference, and resistance to change.

The mechanisms are in defence of the basic rights we have as human beings but they may feel like an aggression turned against you because as the representative of the public you pre-
sent the problem that has to be solved.
Aversion to seeing the perspectives in a talk may for example manifest itself as anger. Social skills and insight are required from both the sender and the recipient if they are to stand by direct and responsible communication.
There are many more defence mechanisms. Some of them you can feel in yourself when you have to start something difficult, while others are subconscious. An inappropriate defence mechanism may be removed if a secure, confident atmosphere and involvement in the nature of and the solution of the problem are created in the course of the conversation.

Types of questions
- Wh-questions are good, as they lead to open questions. *(Note, however, that the word ‘why’ often results in long explanations. So, use precise, clarifying questions that begin with where, what, which, when, how etc.).*
- Clarifying questions create a feeling of being heard and understood: ‘Tell me about a situation where things went exactly as you thought they should’, or ‘What do you think of other people in a similar situation?’
- Remember caring questions and statements: ‘I feel that you got very upset when … Am I right?’ or ‘It must be very hard to have that knowledge.’
- Ask about connections …. or differences: In the mentioned situations you are happy .... when are you angry?
- Repeat what has been said so that you can be sure that you have understood and summarise connections: ‘So what you are saying is that ….’
Action

At last when you are able to express a common definition of the problem, you have to check it with the family members. Then you have a common starting point and can go on to finding possible, realistic solutions. These solutions are summarised in a plan of action. An important point in this plan of action is an agreement as to who does what and when. The plan of action is a common platform from which to progress – in which it will turn out that the family members have already had some thoughts. That is the advantage of sticking to the process.
The conclusion and feedback

It is always necessary to conclude a talk with a child or a young person by thinking it over and if possible by getting feedback from a colleague. It is useful to go through the various phases of the talk both with regard to the process and the contents. What went well and what did not? Did anyone make mistakes? How were these rectified? In this way you will personally be better equipped to continue work with the specific child or young person at risk, and you will also be better equipped to carry out a new talk.

In the middle of the leaflet you will find a summary of the description of the contents and of the development in the professional talk.
Advice in connection with passing on information

- Respect the parents. No matter what the conditions are, the family is and will continue to be the child’s most important base. Respect that the family may have different norms.
- The parents are involved from the beginning. The parents are told if information is passed on.
- Do not tell the parents that information has been passed on just before a weekend. The parents should not carry the burden of this information without having the possibility of getting quickly in touch with the person who has sent it or the contact person.
- Open and honest communication.
- Relate to what is specific. Describe what you see.
- Handle confidential information correctly.
Advice concerning information that is passed on about private and confidential matters concerning individuals

- Involve the parents as much and as early as possible.
- Open and honest communication. Be specific – say what you see.
- Put yourself in the family’s place.
- Give information only about what you are asked.
- Tell the parents what is written down.
A good talk may be the turning point for a child or young person who is at risk of becoming involved in crime. Early support of the child or young person and its family may lessen the risk considerably of embarking on a life of crime. The leaflet addresses people who are in direct contact with children and young people. It contains some simple tools that may make it easier to carry out the first planned and often difficult talk with children, young people and their parents.

**We must talk about it!**

The crime preventive talk