

Teaching Communication Skills at the Bedside

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Learning to communicate with patients and families is an essential skill for medical trainees



But, it can be hard to teach

**Too often,
learners
either**

Do too little: watch a preceptor lead a difficult conversation

Do too much: are sent to discuss a challenging topic without adequate support or preparation

Use these steps to let learners "do one" in a supportive environment that also ensures excellent patient care



3 phases:

- Prep before the encounter
- Observe the learner during the encounter
- Debrief the encounter

Before the encounter

- Establish Expectations with the Learner
 - Let the learner know you might interrupt during the encounter, AND that you will hand the conversation back
 - Brainstorm where the learner might get stuck, and what strategies they could try to address the stuck point
- *Normalizing the interruption will help prevent the learner feeling like they did something wrong when you step in*



During the encounter



Establish Expectations with the Patient or Family Member

Be explicit that the learner will be leading the encounter, You will be taking notes, and You might add things occasionally



Intervene if Needed

Ask "Dr. ____, would it be okay if I added something?" *By asking to add something, you're expanding on rather than correcting the learner.*



Return the Conversation to the Learner

As quickly as possible, hand the conversation back, saying something like, "Dr. ____, would you like to discuss next steps?"

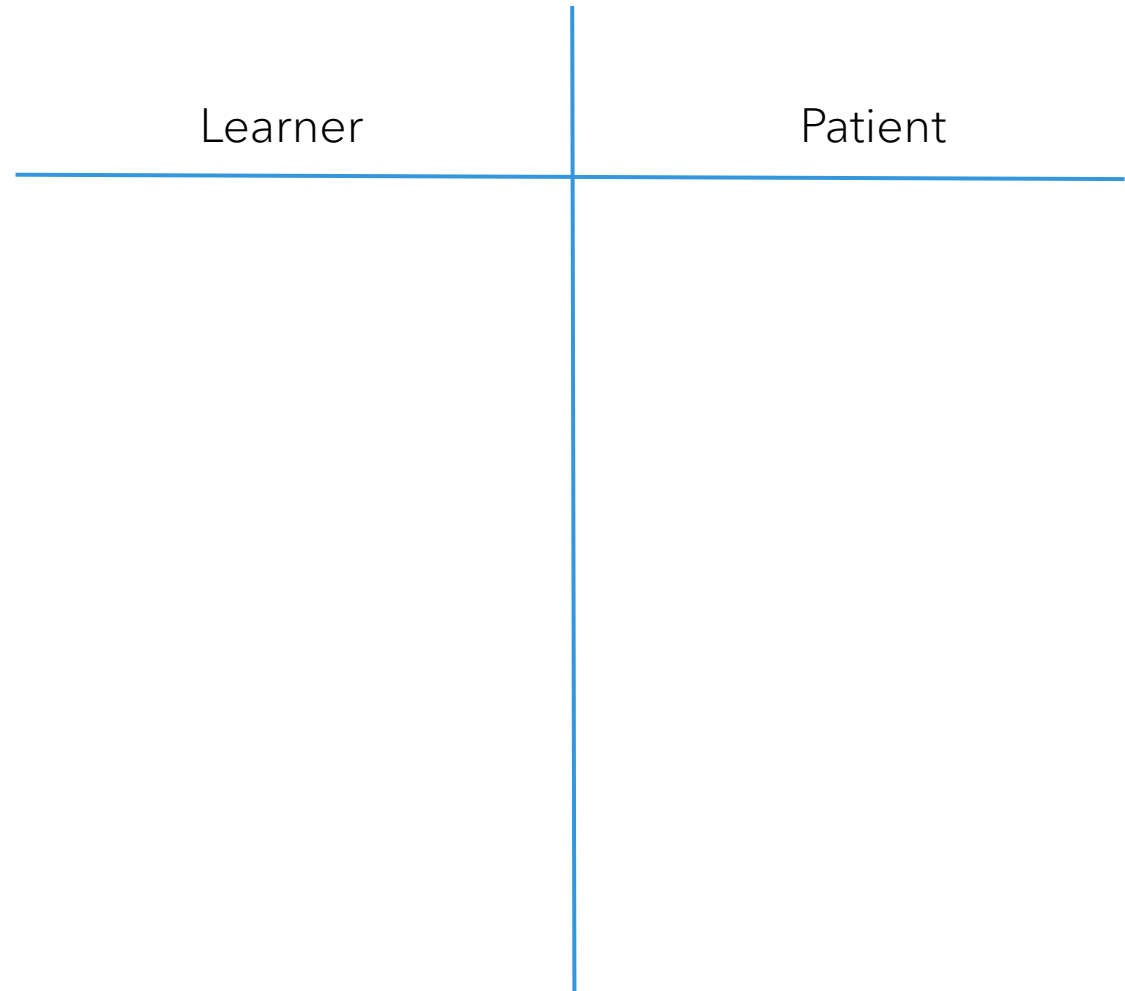
When to step in?

- It's not easy to watch a learner fumble, especially in a delicate situation like breaking bad news
- Try to hold back!
- Intervene to *prevent harm* to a patient/family member or learner, for example:
 - A patient or family member is experiencing a strong emotion the learner missed
 - A patient or family member is confused by information given
 - A learner is feeling overwhelmed or lost



Taking notes

- Divide a piece of paper into two columns
- Write down what the learner says, how the patient responds, and so on
- *This will allow you to be SPECIFIC in your feedback.*



After the encounter

Ask

- the learner for a self-assessment based on learning goals from step 1

Reinforce

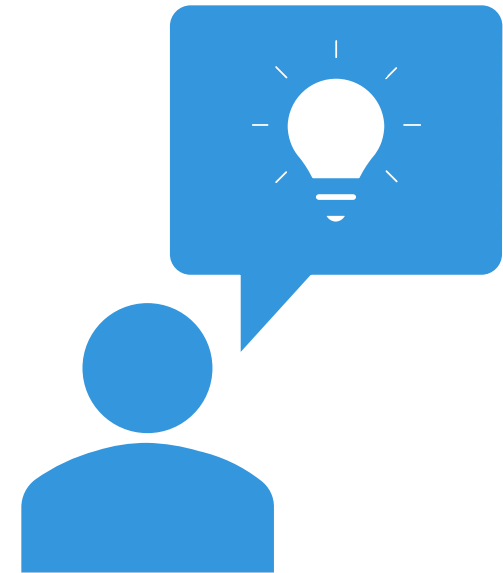
- what was done well (can be multiple things)

Review

- when you stepped in during the conversation (if there were multiple, stick to one). Ask the learners if they can identify:
 - Why you stepped in
 - What you said
 - What effect your words had on the patient or family member

After the encounter

- Brainstorm a takeaway
 - Ask the learner to articulate what they learned from this encounter (and your step-in) that they can use with future patients?



References

- [“Could I Add Something?”: Teaching Communication by Intervening in Real Time During a Clinical Encounter](#)
- [Faculty - VitalTalk](#)