Meeting All Children’s Needs Through Parental Involvement

BY JAN DOWLING, HIGHSCOPE FIELD CONSULTANT AND SPEECH AND LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST, ALPINE SCHOOL DISTRICT, AMERICAN FORK, UTAH

A child’s first community is the family or household into which the child is born. Families are unique, with their own composition, culture, language, strengths, interests, needs, and concerns. Families who have a child with special needs often have additional concerns, along with the particular strengths they have developed to help their child thrive.

Children flourish, learn, and grow in their family community in the few short years before they enter a preschool program. When they do begin preschool, they become a part of another community. They gain new acquaintances and develop important relationships. However, even after children begin attending preschool, the majority of their time is still spent at home, with their family members. As teachers, we appreciate that, and we work to find ways to encourage and support families to remain engaged in their child’s early learning at home and become involved in their child’s learning at school. We are especially sensitive to the challenges faced by families who are raising a child with special needs and value how the care and support provided by the program can supplement their own.

Parents are always welcome in a HighScope classroom. Their participation is encouraged and recognized as vitally important. Teachers of-
ten talk with parents as the parents drop off or pick up their child or when they come to visit the classroom. Teachers also meet with parents periodically to review children’s progress and discuss information from the Preschool Child Observation Record (COR). This article will address many ways that we, as early childhood educators, can include and encourage parents as part of our education team. It focuses in particular on the kinds of support we can provide when a child with a special need or disability is a member of our class.

**Make It Easy for Parents to Access Your Program**

Make sure parents know you want their input and that you value them as part of their child’s education. Make yourself available and approachable. Recognize your personal biases and filters, such as opinions about lifestyle or professional choice, and put them aside.

Let parents know a little about yourself. Provide them with a short biography including your qualifications, but more than that, let them know something about yourself, such as your personal interests. Explain why you choose to work with children. Doing this will make you more of a “person,” not just someone in the role of “teacher.” It will help to lessen their anxiety about leaving their child in your care, and they will be more likely to feel they can approach you and talk to you about child development and specific situations related to their child.

Sometimes we don’t realize the knowledge and expertise we have. Usually parents recognize it and appreciate it. But it can make them feel like they know less about what is important for their child than they actually know. They often feel less relevant or valued than the “expert.” They need reassurance that their knowledge and insights about their child are unique, and that you as a teacher depend on them for this vital information.

Although we have a level of knowledge and expertise that we can be proud of, parents are experts on their children. They have information about their child that only they can bring to the table. They see their children in many more settings than we do. They have more opportunity and time to see and work with their child than we do. Therefore, it is important for parents to feel we are partners with them in meeting the educational needs of their children.

Parents can provide us with information on the child’s development, strengths, and needs, and they can share strategies that they use at home. This can include ways the family has adapted the environment, for example, to help a child with mobility or perceptual difficulties. We may be able to use some of these ideas in the classroom. They give us background information on the child’s history and development and any
family factors that may affect the child’s learning. For example, a move, the arrival of a new sibling, an illness, or the loss of a job can all influence a child emotionally, which in turn affects the child’s ability to concentrate on learning new knowledge and skills. Parents recognize if strategies and instruction are helping the child learn.

Parents also provide important cultural information. In one preschool setting I visited and consulted in, a parent provided me with the vital information that, in the home culture of some of the children in the class, it was considered disrespectful for a child to look an adult in the eye. Without knowing this, a teacher might misinterpret the child’s behavior as shyness or not paying attention. She also let me know that in parent classes the parents would agree with the authority figure (in this case, me) whether they did indeed agree or not. I might then move on to the next topic without giving them time to voice concerns or ask questions. Had I not known these two cultural differences in advance, my own and the children’s efforts may have been misinterpreted, and time wasted. Parents also have a long-term viewpoint as they consider their child’s future — they are concerned about what and where their child will be next year and beyond. Being “inside” the educational system, we sometimes forget that parents do not have access to essential knowledge (for example, who in the agency makes placement decisions) and may inadvertently not recognize or address their concerns. That perspective, experience, and knowledge is helpful to us as we strive to meet the individual needs of all of the children in our classroom.

At the same time that parents may underestimate their own contributions, they may have unrealistic expectations of what the program can accomplish. For example, it is not the role of the program to “correct” a child’s disability. Our job is to work with and build on a child’s strengths. Parents of children with special needs, like many other parents, may also have a traditional view of school as the place where children are drilled on specific academic
knowledge (ABCs, 123s). We may have to explain how all young children, regardless of their developmental or ability level, learn through play that follows their own interests and that they initiate. Our job as educators is to scaffold (support and gently extend) that learning, not to determine or direct it. Finally, while we strive to help families negotiate the medical and social service system, our primary job is to be educators. We cannot be all things to all families. Rather, we serve best when we are the best teachers we are capable of being!

Understanding parents’ concerns and being proactive in addressing them is a positive way to engage parents and establish productive home-school relationships. So what are some ways we can encourage and support parent involvement in our classrooms, and what are specific considerations we might want to keep in mind if a child has special needs? There are several things we can do to encourage parental participation and make it easier for parents to approach and get involved in the educational process.

**When a Child Has Special Needs**

1. Help parents facilitate Individual Education Program (IEP) goals for their child. When a child has special needs, the parents and teachers are members of another important educational team — the IEP team. An IEP is a legal document detailing programs offered to a student by his or her local public education agency. The IEP process addresses concerns and issues such as evaluation and eligibility for services, program development, and where and how a child will receive special education services. It is developed at least yearly but can be updated or changed by the team at any time. Parents are always members of the IEP team, and if you have a child with a special need in your classroom, you may be asked to participate in the IEP process too. Perhaps it was agreed at the IEP meeting that services would be provided at your site. Or maybe services are provided elsewhere and parents have opted to have their child attend your program in addition to this or as an alternative. Either way, it is important to be aware of the IEP and appreciate the role of parents in their child’s development.

Preschool is often the first time that parents learn of their children’s special needs, and they need understanding professionals to support and guide them as they come to terms with the implications for their child’s education. And preschool teachers are often the first professionals to bring up concerns to parents and initiate the referral process. Therefore, it’s important to know the special education services available in your school district and whom to contact.

The following is an example of how teachers in one preschool worked in partnership with parents to consider a child’s needs and seek appropriate services to support the child’s learning.
Alysia was having difficulty in her neighborhood preschool. She seemed frustrated and defiant. Alysia’s mother had sensed that something felt “wrong” for some time and hoped that enrolling Alysia in the neighborhood preschool would help.

The preschool teachers observed Alysia’s interactions with other children and wondered if some of Alysia’s behavior might be attributed to limited communication skills. They suggested that Alysia be evaluated by her local public school district. It was determined that she had a language disorder and was enrolled in speech therapy. After the evaluation, the preschool teachers met with Alysia’s mother, discussed her concerns and Alysia’s communication, social-emotional, and curricular goals and, together, created a plan to support Alysia.

Alysia’s mother has formed a partnership with teachers and therapists to address her daughter’s educational needs. Alysia’s mother also stays involved with preschool activities and communicates regularly with the preschool teachers. Although not all parents are able or willing to participate so fully in their child’s preschool experience (due to a variety of factors, including work responsibilities, language barriers, and denial of the problem), it is still important for us to let them know we are open to their ideas and will involve them in whatever ways are feasible and comfortable for them.

2. **Share daily updates about children with their parents.** It is very helpful for all parents to know what is going on in class each day so they can talk to their child about their day. But often children with special needs are not able to communicate what happens each day. A journal kept in the child’s backpack is a great way for teachers to share daily happenings with parents. An idea for keeping communication simple is to create a short form with room to share one or two specific things about the day, such as what the child did at small-group time or large-group time, what he ate for snack, or the names of special playmates. You might include a line for notes from the speech therapist or physical therapist. In one classroom, the teachers created a form that could be copied onto cardstock and laminated. Each day a teacher used an erasable marker to complete the form and then put it in the child’s backpack at the end of the day. Parents were then able to read the form and talk to their children about the day. Parents then used a wet cloth to erase the form before sending it back.
with the child in his or her backpack the next day. A similar but alternative option for families and teachers who are comfortable communicating via technology is to make a template of the form and e-mail or text this information to them each day.

3. Address parents’ questions and concerns. There is a good chance that the parents of your classroom children with special needs have just as much anxiety about preschool as their child has. So be ready to support the parents too. Explanations to them about what goes on during each part of the day will help. Willingness to answer all their questions (which may be thousands) will be a huge help. One of my most memorable parents was a nervous father of a boy on the autism spectrum. His son rode the bus to school, and this father would often drive behind the bus to watch and make sure his son was fine. He had plenty of questions for us, for example: Did the bus driver know his child liked to sit in the same seat every day? Did the teachers respect the fact that his son would not eat foods with a particular color or texture? With reassurances from the teacher and aides, he was able to become less anxious about his son’s adjustment.

Often, conversations with parents of children with special needs are difficult. No matter how apparent the disability is or how long the parents have known about it, the grieving process happens over and over and over again. When a conversation about sensitive issues needs to take place, it is helpful to schedule a parent conference rather than attempt to talk to the parent in passing. Parents may want to talk about a difficult behavior or concern when they pick their child up; if so, acknowledge the concern and ask them when would be a good time to talk about it so you can really give them, and the topic, the time they deserve.

When conducting conversations of these types, it is helpful to rely on your High-Scope training. Use information gleaned from the COR and discuss child strengths and accomplishments first. Listen to parent concerns and find common ground. Rely on anecdotal notes and your training about what makes a good anecdotal note. Describe what you see; do not label, diagnose, or guess. Gather as much information as you can that could be helpful to parents. Don’t be afraid to tell them you may not have all the answers but that you care deeply about their child and will work with them to find answers.

Parent reactions will vary and at times may be emotional. It’s hard to be the bearer of the news but harder to hear it. Be careful and sensitive. Allow the parents to have time to think about what you are saying and to process it.

4. Create opportunities to talk with parents. If parents drop off and pick up their children, make the most of these times. Give parents a specific detail from something their child did that day. To do this, you may need to make adjustments to your daily routine. In one class I worked in, about half of the students rode a special needs bus home.
The other half had parents who came to pick them up. The teacher wisely ended the day with a “winding down” transition type of activity. In this case, the teacher would set out an activity (usually using the same activity each day for a week at a time) such as specific books, ABC activities, or floor puzzles in the book area. At the end of the day, the children would gather in the book area to participate in the activity. When the bus came, some children got on the bus and other children left with their parents as parents arrived. This enabled the adults in the room to talk to parents, help with coats and backpacks, or help children to the bus in a relaxed and casual manner.

5. **Communicate with parents in different ways.** Use a variety of communication styles to involve parents, such as parent conferences, classes, newsletters, flyers about available resources, websites, and e-mail. Communicate using language that is understandable to everyone. A classroom bulletin board can also be a useful tool. However, be respectful of confidentiality issues. Above all, be sure to communicate with parents frequently!

6. **Provide opportunities for parent involvement in the classroom.** Extend frequent invitations for parents to visit their child’s school and spend time in the classroom. As you provide a variety of opportunities, recognize that not all parents will feel comfortable helping in all ways. Some may relish the opportunity to read with children in the reading area, or help children decorate cookies at a class party. Other parents may not feel quite as comfortable interacting with children. It is important that we meet parents at their comfort level. Perhaps they can help with materials preparation or some other “behind the scenes” activity. Some may want to just observe. Even limited involvement includes the parent, and they...
will enjoy the experience, learn from you and the children, and become more invested their child’s education.

Ask parents if there is a topic they would like introduced and talked about in class — for example, if a child is going to have a new sibling. Or if the child has a special need, perhaps a parent would like to explain to the class about their child’s disability — or maybe they would like you to. For example, one year we got a new student in our class who was missing limbs. His parents were very worried about the reaction he would receive from other students in the class. So before he came to the class, the teacher, using a doll, explained the situation to the class and told the children that their new classmate would be sitting in a special chair and would be moving around the class in different ways, but that he was more like them than different and would still love to play with and talk to them. That student is now a third grader with lots of friends who engage with him and explain to visitors to the school that “Kevin is a cool guy with a cool wheelchair that he moves with his shoulder.” We have also explained to children about other special needs, such as when a student uses pictures or a computer to communicate or uses Braille.

In summary, parents are an important part of the educational team. In the IEP process, their involvement is mandated by law. We also know that parental involvement is best practice, and our HighScope parent-teacher teams make decisions together. They teach each other, treat each member with respect, and are sensitive to differences and needs. We know that encouraging, including, and valuing parental input provides the best outcomes for children.

Jan Dowling is a HighScope field consultant. She works as a speech-language pathologist for the Alpine School District in American Fork, Utah, where she specializes in work with preschool children with special needs. She co-authored the book I Belong: Active Learning For Children With Special Needs (HighScope Press).
Talking to Parents About IEP Goals

BY TERRI MITCHELL, HIGHSCOPE FIELD CONSULTANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD ADMINISTRATOR, CANYONS SCHOOL DISTRICT, SANDY, UTAH

Sharing with parents how their child’s Individual Education Program (IEP) will be implemented in the classroom can help alleviate their concerns about how their child’s goals and development will be supported and monitored. In this article, we’ll look at information a teacher shared with the parents of a child named Alysia. The teacher explained how Alysia’s parents’ communication goals would be supported and embedded within the daily routine of the classroom.

A Conversation With Alysia’s Parents

The teacher begins by confirming that one of Alysia’s communication goals is to use a two- to three-word phrase. The parents agree and ask, “When can Alysia practice this in your classroom, and how will you practice this with her?” The teacher responds, “Alysia will have many opportunities to communicate within our daily routine.” Then the teacher walks the parents through each part of the day and shares the following examples:

• **Greeting Time:** “We sing a greeting song every day and discuss what is written on the message board. Often children call out the messages and say what they think they mean. I will encourage Alysia to share her own ideas, whether it is by a single word or gesture, or even repeating what one of her classmates has stated, as a way of helping her understand how verbal and nonverbal communication carries meaning.”

• **Planning Time:** “Alysia will be able to use a variety of props, photos, and drawings to share her choices. For example, she might indicate where she plans to play by choosing a toy from that area. As she becomes more comfortable using words, I will encourage her to describe the materials and how she plans to use them.”

• **Work Time:** “This is the time Alysia is able to carry out her plans and interact freely with adults, peers, and materials in the classroom. Adults will be supporting and expanding the words Alysia uses. For example, if she says, ‘book,’ I might say, ‘You want me to read you this book.’ Later Alysia herself might be able to say, ‘Read book’ or ‘Read me a book.’ I can also help with interpreting for peers as needed. For example, if Alysia says ‘red’ and points, I might say, ‘Jonah, I think Alysia is asking you to move the red crayon closer to her.’ Suppose Jonah does this and Alysia smiles in response — the two of them are then forming their own bond. At a later time, Alysia may use a short phrase when addressing Jonah directly. Moreover, if Jonah speaks to her in short sentences, she might be motivated to do the same with him. Sometimes, children learn more from one another than they do from adults!”

• **Cleanup Time:** “Alysia is very good at matching pictures — she will be able to help her peers put items away by matching the labels on the toys with the labels on the shelves. By adults and children occasionally attaching words to the labels (for example, I might say, ‘You put the puzzle on the shelf’), Alysia will gradually learn new words and simple phrases.”

• **Recall Time:** “This is when Alysia can share what she did during work time, including talking about the materials she used and peers she interacted with. Again, she can use the words she has but I will have props and pictures to support her communication.”

• **Snack Time:** “Often at snacktime children continue their conversations about what they have done at work time. This is also a wonderful time to initiate new conversations. Children share the responsibilities of passing out napkins, cups, and milk, and they talk about what they are doing with one another. We eat together family style, which provides a nice atmosphere for conversations. You can help me involve Alysia by telling..."
me things that Alysia has done recently at home, and I can introduce those ideas into conversations. You've already told me some of her favorite foods. By serving these at snacktime now and then, she might comment on the fact that she likes them or eats them at home.”

• **Large-Group Time:** “Everyone meets together as a whole group in our block area. We sing songs and move in different ways. Children who want can take turns being leaders in these activities. We encourage children to change the words in songs and will ask Alysia for her ideas. We will also encourage Alysia to name and demonstrate movement ideas, for example, patting their shoulders. We can provide picture cards of the movements until she is able to name the movements.”

• **Small-Group Time:** “This is when children work in small groups to explore materials, practice skills, and form concepts. As I move among the children, I will also have the opportunity to work one-on-one with Alysia. Alysia will have many opportunities to describe the materials and how she is using them, as well as to exchange ideas with me and her peers. These activities will support her vocabulary growth, and gradually she will begin to combine the new words she is learning into short phrases and then simple sentences.”

This example illustrates how focusing on parents’ concerns about their children with special needs within the context of the daily routine and learning environment can help to create a vision for family members that their young children can participate, belong, and thrive in a HighScope classroom!

---

Terri Mitchell is a HighScope field consultant and currently serves as the Early Childhood Administrator in Canyons School District in Sandy, Utah. Prior to joining Canyons, Terri was an educational specialist for the Utah Personnel Development Center, where she directed the training initiatives for early childhood special education classrooms across the state of Utah. Terri is a certified teacher in special education and early childhood special education. She has contributed her experience with instructional coaching, assessment, and systems change to the development of several high-quality early childhood programs. She co-authored the book *I Belong: Active Learning For Children With Special Needs* (HighScope Press).
In a HighScope early childhood center, everyone understands the importance of working together in teams. We value the input of each person. We also appreciate the added dimension that parents bring to the table. But sometimes it can be difficult to involve parents, and some parents may also be hesitant to get involved. In this workshop, we will discuss the importance of parent involvement, consider what might be holding us — or parents — back from involvement, and generate ideas to encourage more parent involvement.

What you will need:
• Continuum charts as described in activities #1 and #3
• Paper/pencils
• Chart paper/markers
• Parent scenarios (listed below) reproduced onto cards or paper
• Notecards

As Participants Arrive:
As participants come into the room, have several pieces of chart paper on the walls with a horizontal line on them. On the first paper, on one end of the line, write “Olympic swimmer,” and on the other end, “Nonswimmer.” On the next paper, on one end write, “Iron Chef,” and on the other end, “Can’t boil water.” And on the last piece of paper, write “Loves dogs,” and on the other end, “Loves dog catchers.” Tell the participants that they are to mark an X on the line where they fall on the continuum.

Opening Activity
1. Break participants into small groups. Give each group a piece of paper and have the group members choose a note taker. Tell the groups that they are in charge of a large, extended family reunion. We’ll call it the “Reunion of the Century.” We want to find family members whom we have not seen for years or maybe don’t even know about. (If a family reunion is not a typical get-together for the members of your group, choose another major event that takes a significant amount of planning and expertise, such as an area-wide preschool conference). Have the group generate and write a list of activities and events that will need to be planned for the reunion, such as finding a facility to hold it in, deciding who to invite, developing a menu, thinking of games or activities to do, and sending out invitations.

Ask participants if any of them want to plan and carry out this event by themselves or if they would rather create a handpicked team to plan, prepare for, and carry out the activity. Have each table make a list of the type of skills helpful for the family members they want on their team, based on these family members’ strengths and interests. Have each small group share their team members with the large group. Point out that the teams include family members with particular knowledge or skill sets. These may include skills to carry out specific activities (such as organizing the games or food), to arrange for and manage facilities, and to communicate — for example, we may not know all of our relatives, so we’d better have someone who knows all of the relatives who will be coming! And there may be other “specialists” a group thinks of. Point out the comparisons between their ideal team, with roles assigned to fit each person’s skill set, and a preschool team. On our teams, we have the activity specialists — the teachers; we have facility experts — administrators; and we have people who really know the relatives or participants coming — the children’s parents. Point out that each member of the team brings something to the table that is important for the event/preschool experience to be a success. Point out that the team benefits from all of its members. All team members are needed, each member of the team helps in his or her own way, and each member finds and fills his or her own niche.

Central Ideas and Practice
2. With participants working in small groups, have the group members list on chart paper the ways they currently include parents as participants in their classroom. Remind them to
think deeply and include everything parents do, large or small. Share the lists with the entire group. Point out that they are already doing a lot to include parents and to encourage parent participation. Also, as you go through the lists, point out that some of the ideas listed occur daily (such as talking with parents at dropoff and pickup) and that some occur weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Some activities are casual and informal, and some take more planning and preparation. They all help include parents in the program.

3. Refer to the continuum charts on the wall. The marks will fall to the right or left of the page. Point out that most things in life are not “either/or” categories — we are not either Olympic swimmers or nonswimmers but fall somewhere in between. We are not either Iron Chefs or noncookers but fall somewhere in the middle. Parent involvement is also a continuum. It is not that parents are either involved or not involved with their child’s education; rather, there is a continuum, and parent participation falls somewhere in the middle. It may change from year to year or even month to month. Have the table groups discuss the various involvement levels of parents in their classroom and try to discover reasons for the varying degrees of participation. Discuss as a large group the reasons for varying degrees of involvement, and list them on chart paper. The list should include time, resources, cultural differences, and such. If a group does not bring up the comfort level of parents, be sure to include that. We in the early childhood profession are quite comfortable with small children and sometimes forget that others may not be comfortable with groups of young children or with adults in school settings.

4. Next, tell the group that each classroom will be getting a new student and, therefore, a new parent. Give each table a card with one of the parent descriptors on it (see parent descriptors following this article). It is okay if more than one table gets the same parent. Explain that they are to read the scenarios and decide how they will approach the parent and invite him or her to participate in the classroom, based on what little they know about the parent.

5. Next, have each table group generate some ways to support that parent’s involvement at the parent’s comfort level, and have the groups share their conclusions and ideas with the group. If there is time, you can rotate the cards and add to the large-group list.

Application Activity

6. Ask participants to work with a partner and to reflect on their own classes and the parents they work with. Ask them to think of and share a technique they can use to invite involvement by the parents who are not currently very involved.

Implementation Plan

7. Give each person a notecard and ask participants to individually write and complete the following statement on the card:

Two ideas I will take back to my class from this workshop are...

Parent Scenarios:

1. Haresh is a new student whose parents just moved to your area from out of state. Haresh’s father was transferred from a metropolitan area with an extensive mass transit system to your area, which has little mass transit. Haresh’s mother speaks some English but does not drive. She is nervous about her son coming to preschool, but she wants him to learn English before he goes to kindergarten.

2. Marnie’s older sister attended your preschool last year. Her mom knows you and your program well. She comes to your room often. She teaches yoga and even teaches a mom-kiddie yoga class. She has offered to do a large-group yoga class in your preschool any time you would like.

3. Sylvia has selected your preschool for her daughter because she loves your emphasis on child initiation and choice. Sylvia is an artist who wants to encourage her daughter’s self-expression. Sylvia has always been pleasant to talk to but you rarely see her. She keeps to herself and seems very hesitant to talk to other parents.

4. Maren’s mom is an emergency room physician. She is very involved in her children’s education and comes to the classroom if and when her schedule allows.

5. CJ’s mother is at her wit’s end. She has her hands full with a very active four-year-old CJ and one-year-old twins. She is very concerned about her inability to get CJ to listen to her and do as she asks. She has asked for advice from you about CJ’s activities and how she can be a better parent. She’s concerned, confused and, well, just plain tired.
Welcoming the Family at a Conference

By Julie Hoelscher

Our interaction with each family in our program has one essential goal — to enhance both staff and family understanding of one unique child’s development, interests, and skills. This reciprocity empowers family members to become more effective in their interactions with the child, and it encourages them to take an active part in their child’s education. It also enhances a teacher’s ability to learn more about each family’s interests, culture, goals, strengths, and concerns. This knowledge improves the teacher’s capacity to provide appropriate support for the child and family.

The Family Conference

One tool for exchanging this knowledge — and confirming your shared interest in the child’s well-being — is a family conference. HighScope teachers have regular conferences with families — that is, at least twice per year. During the conference, the teacher uses the Family Report Form of the Child Observation Record (HighScope, 2003) to summarize observations and share anecdotes in each area of a child’s development. HighScope teachers give parents an opportunity during the conference to share stories from home and to both ask questions about the early childhood program and offer suggestions for encouraging their child.

Planning Successful Conferences

As you plan and implement your family conferences, consider the guidelines described below.

Be flexible about the scheduling and location of the conference. Try to be flexible so you can accommodate parent schedules. Sometimes the only opportunity to meet with a family is during the lunch hour or on a weekend afternoon. Although the conference should ideally take place in the classroom, where you can more easily share thoughts about the child and the program, transportation or scheduling difficulties may necessitate meeting at a parent’s workplace, a coffee shop close to the family’s home, or another location. Wherever you meet, make sure you can talk with parents in confidence, free of distractions.

Establish a welcoming environment for the conference. Just as you consider what makes the classroom warm and inviting for children’s play and family visits, pay attention to the physical atmosphere you create for these formal meetings with parents. For example, think about what the environment will be like during the conference. How is the lighting? What is the room’s temperature? Would it be appropriate to offer a light snack? Do you have enough adult seating for the conference? Attending to these details conveys to the parents that you want them to be comfortable.

The “psychological” environment you establish is also important. Pay attention to your facial expressions, tone of voice, language, gestures, breathing, and posture. Look interested and receptive to listening as well as speaking. Send the message that your time belongs to the parent throughout the conference. Be patient and focused; don’t look or act as though you are eager to move on to something else. Watch for these nonverbal signs in family members, too. Match the pace and tone of the visiting family. For example, slow the speed of conversation or use formal terms of address if this is how they are most comfortable interacting. If family members seem anxious or distracted, you can help them relax and focus through your conscious behavior toward them.

Make the exchange of information mutual. Make it clear that your goal is to become partners with families and learn from them, encouraging them to articulate what they know about their child and family, not to designate this time as a forum for dispensing expert advice filled with jargon, or giving parents a long “to-do” list. As a first step toward this goal, when parents arrive at the classroom for a conference, sit next to them instead of across the table from them. Sitting next to parents puts them at ease and establishes your equality, whereas positioning yourself on opposite sides can signify that this is your turf, and that you are in charge.

Additionally, as you share your anecdotal notes, pause to give parents time to think and then respond. For example, Mrs. West, a teacher, shared this anecdote about Harry with his mother: “Harry dribbles the basketball on the asphalt on the playground.” Harry’s mother responds, “Harry’s dad always has a basketball game going in the driveway with a buddy on the weekends. Harry used to watch from the window, but his dad now motions for him to come outside toward the end of the game, and has taught him how to dribble. He picks Harry up and lets him toss the ball inside the hoop.” This anecdotal sharing gives Mrs. West important information about a family interest in basketball. She might use this information as she chooses books for the classroom, dribbles the ball during outside time with Harry, or as she converses with Harry about his interest.
in basketball and the time he shares with his dad. In this two-way exchange, the teacher and parent each learn something valuable about the child’s interests and actions in the other setting.

**Share activities families can do at home.** As you exchange information about children’s interests and the curriculum, talk with parents about how they can extend their child’s learning at home. Use the family conference to suggest activities that incorporate common household materials the family uses during ordinary routines. For example, you might suggest that the family include the child in folding socks from the laundry basket as a sorting or one-to-one correspondence activity. Trips to the supermarket can offer many opportunities for children to see print in their surroundings or to recognize the letters in their name.

**Offer options for getting involved with the program.** Invite parents to volunteer in a variety of ways in the program. Not every family will be able to participate in the classroom or attend a field trip, but family members can contribute in other ways. For example, in one program, a mom really enjoyed putting the photographs from a class field trip into a homemade book that included children’s comments. The teacher sent the photographs and child anecdotes home for the parent to assemble. This book was popular in the book area for quite a while. Another way for busy families to get involved is to bring recyclables or donate unused clothes and equipment to the classroom. You can show family members the work children create with these materials and/or share photos of children using the contributed items. Be sure to let families know that you appreciate all types of involvement.

To sustain all of these connections with families, remember to thank the parents for supporting the program and its curriculum, participating in class activities, and coming to family conferences. Children and families, staff members and programs — all will benefit from a warm welcome!

**References**


---

Julie Hoelscher has been an infant/toddler caregiver, preschool teacher, early childhood center director, resource counselor, teacher trainer, elementary school reform coach, and an Early Childhood Specialist at HighScope Educational Research Foundation. She is currently a part-time HighScope field consultant and a volunteer in local early childhood programs. Hoelscher is coauthor of the HighScope book *Activities for Home Visits: Partnering With Preschool Families* and also writes articles on classroom teaching practices for HighScope’s Extensions newsletter.
HighScope Enters Into Partnership With Excelligence® Learning Corporation

HighScope is entering into a partnership with Excelligence Learning Corporation DBA Discount School Supply®. Excelligence, based in Monterey, California, has been a leading developer, manufacturer, distributor, and retailer of products for child care programs, preschools, elementary schools, and families for more than 25 years.

The partnership has two areas of focus. First, HighScope’s research and professional development departments will work with Excelligence’s product development team to create original products. These products will be available exclusively from HighScope and Discount School Supply. The second area of focus is Discount School Supply’s exclusive role as distributor, along with HighScope itself, of HighScope curriculum products in the early childhood market.

Clay Shouse, HighScope Vice President, comments, “Discount School Supply has a long reputation for high-quality products at reasonable prices. This partnership will provide a convenient way for programs to implement HighScope and allow them to focus on their goal of high-quality programs with positive child outcomes. We know that with all the demands on preschool programs today, anything we can do to support our curriculum will help teachers have more time to work with the children.”

Kelly Crampton, Excelligence Chief Executive Officer, says, “We are extremely proud to work with HighScope, which is so highly respected for its research, its creation of curriculum and assessment tools, and its professional development. Our partnership will allow the innovative talents in both organizations to work together to provide extraordinary products that will benefit early childhood educators and the young children they serve.”

Cathy Adams, Excelligence Vice President of Merchandising and Product Development, adds, “We have decades of product development experience that we will use to support HighScope’s concepts. The result will be ease of use for teachers who follow the HighScope approach and greater accessibility for teachers who would like to explore it.”