

Parent Partnerships

RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

by Christine Snyder

Families establish a unique set of hopes, values, and goals for their children based on love, experience, and instinct. As educators and caregivers, we are invited to be a part of the small circle of people who have a tremendous impact on young children's growth and learning — and, ultimately, their long-term well-being and success.

Working with families is a central component of caring for young children. Yet families and caregivers play unique and appropriately different roles in children's lives. Caregivers are typically responsible for children's care and educational needs during specific times from day to day for the course of a year or two. Families, on the other hand, are responsible for all of children's needs over the course of a lifetime.

These two roles naturally come with different perspectives on goals for the children, as well as different day-to-day expectations. But when we can be open to the unique and valuable insight families provide, the opportunity to work as a team blends the two views to create a



Trust is the cornerstone of successful relationships with parents in your program.

positive, whole experience for children. Because young children are dependent on adults to care for them and assist in their learning, a genuine, positive relationship between parents and teachers is essential. More than anyone else, families provide us with valuable information about their child's routines, interests, and preferences. We are dependent on families to offer us insight about how their child interacts with others, engages in a group setting, and communicates.

Building relationships with parents is not without its challenges, though. Each family-caregiver partnership may be facing a different challenge. But anticipating and identifying these challenges can help us work toward a responsive

relationship with flexible strategies to focus on meeting the needs of the child in a way that works for each individual family.

From the outset, teachers and caregivers need to intentionally identify strategies that can be used to establish strong, positive family partnerships. A give-and-take, reciprocal relationship with families sets the tone for future interactions and influences the overall success of the child in the group care setting.

Learning by Listening

Relationships between parents and caregivers must be built on trust and the shared belief that we each are acting on the best interests of the children and value input from one another. The best way to establish trust with families is to begin by listening.

The opportunity to build reciprocal trust with parents starts when families first express an interest in your program and come to visit. Making them feel welcome and really listening to their perspectives and questions from the



Teachers include props in the learning environment that encourage children to role play things that happen in their own homes.

beginning will go a long way. Depending on the children’s ages and the goals their parents have for them, parents’ concerns could range from sleeping patterns, eating habits, and potty-training to specific developmental goals such as walking, talking, or writing. When you are open to listening to parents and are responsive to their unique needs and

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concerns, it sets the tone that you value their input and viewpoint.

A dialogue that begins with listening also helps caregivers and administrators learn more about the families in their care. When programs are well-informed about the families they serve, they are more capable of making accommoda-

tions, and therefore can provide better service and care to children.

Before the child’s first day in the classroom, we can learn about his or her family through dialogue, family questionnaires, and home visits. Home visits allow for a personal, focused connection in which the teachers can interact with the family — including siblings — see the child’s favorite home toys, and engage in a one-on-one conversation with the child’s parents or primary caregivers about shared goals and expectations for the year. As the year progresses, we can gain valuable insight through many informal and formal channels, such as daily conversations, family events, teacher-family conferences, social media interactions, or simple observations during regular interactions.

Embracing Diversity in the Classroom

Of course, caregivers have their own unique cultural backgrounds and values, and that presents a common challenge in building strong relationships with families. For example, our own experience might lead us to make assumptions about family structures or indicate a

value of one type of family structure over another. Teachers who grew up in a two-parent home with a mother and father, for instance, may unintentionally assume or imply that a family has two parents, that they are married, or that there is one man and one woman. In fact, for many years, state-created enrollment forms requested the contact information for the mother and father — an immediate exclusion of homes with two mothers, two fathers, or grandparents providing care for the child. Although our own experiences and values may be different, we should take care not to let our personal biases impact our understanding of families and our ability to establish a positive relationship. Instead, it is important to ask questions, build trust, and learn about families with an open mind.

This is especially important at the outset — that we, as caregivers, are open-minded and willing to build an atmosphere of trust in which families feel comfortable sharing their culture with us, recognizing differences as valuable components that make each of us unique and special.

Once we have overcome the initial challenge of recognizing our biases, the next step is taking positive action to embrace those differences. “We have finally established the essential idea that home cultures and prejudices and discrimination in the larger society deeply affect children’s development, and that early childhood programs must address these realities,” says Louise Derman Sparks, co-author with Julie Olsen Edwards of *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*. “The biggest challenge now facing us is to put these basic premises into daily practice in our ECE [early childhood education] organizations and programs.”

Understanding a family’s unique culture gives us many opportunities to do just that. Incorporating materials that represent children’s home lives builds a stronger sense of self and a sense of belonging in the classroom. Including props that children can use to role play their families’ hobbies or jobs allows

them to play in ways that are familiar and similar to their home lives. Likewise, including empty food boxes from children's homes or dishes that match what children use in their homes sup-

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ports children in cooking in the ways that they see their families cook.

Photographs of families are another great way to build familiarity, comfort, and a sense of belonging. Before school begins, you might ask families to supply some pictures that represent important

aspects of their culture and members of their family. This may include photos of people who live in the household, places the family travels to frequently, close friends, and family members who live far away.

Photos of children can be placed at each child's cubby so they and their families can easily find their belongings and comfort items. A poster for each child with family photos can be posted around the room at child height so children are able to look at, see, and touch photos of family members throughout the day. Children will also benefit from teacher-made books of family photos in the book area, photos of family members to carry around, or — for infants and toddlers — photo mobiles hanging over

diaper-changing areas. These family photos, when placed in a variety of areas throughout the classroom, will make families feel welcome and included in the play space. In addition, opportunities for children to explore family photos will help children become more familiar with the families of their classmates.

Effective Communication With Families

Another common bias we may have, whether personal or cultural, is a preference for certain modes of communication. Establishing trust through dialogue is the foundation of strong relationships with the families we serve. It's imperative, then, that we meet families' needs and preferences when communicating with them about their culture, their values, and their child.

Sharing family photos in the classroom helps children become more familiar with the families of their classmates.



As caregivers, while we are unique individuals, we may have a standard set of strategies that we use with parents: verbal communication at dropoff, monthly written newsletters, text message reminders, etc. However, when interacting with individual families, we must take *their* personal preferences into consideration. If we overlook the way that families communicate, it's possible that one side or the other is not getting the information that is needed. Parents who speak English as a second language or are not able to read may not understand important messages you send about the program or their child — and they may be afraid to tell you.

Regular communication with parents will help to establish and maintain relationships with families. Common ways of communicating with families include bulletin board postings, text reminders, social media sites, blogs, flyers, email reminders, phone calls, and face-to-face interactions.

While we want to offer information in a variety of forms to meet the needs of all families, it is also important to recognize and accommodate for the individual communication preferences of each family. This may mean that general information for the class is sent via email, with a hard copy included for families who don't use email. For family members who are able to frequently drop off or pick up, bulletin board postings can serve as regular, accessible reminders. Conversely, if families are not in the center frequently because transportation is provided or due to their work hours or location, a different method of communication — such as phone calls, text messages, or emails — would be more appropriate.

It's not just the varying modes of communication that present a challenge. It's also finding the time to communicate and connect with families. Due to varying program and family dynamics, many families may find it convenient to touch base at dropoff or pickup times. Other families' work schedules require a friend or nanny to take care of dropoff

and pickup. In addition, many families travel for work or serve in the military and are stationed in locations away from their families. "I travel a lot for work," said Bobby Sepulveda, 40. "I appreciate that [my daughter's] teachers take the time to send me a quick email now and then, to communicate something that was important to her. I like to know what's going on at [her] school when I'm gone for weeks at a time, and the fact that her teachers take the time to update me reminds me that she's in good hands."

Even when families are able to be physically present in the environment frequently, it may still be a challenge to engage in meaningful conversation, as both you and the parents are busy tending to children. Again, awareness of these differences between one family and another and a willingness to communicate in ways that accommodate each individual family ensure the openness, respect, and trust that are the necessary foundation of strong family engagement in your program.

Welcoming Families

Just as it's necessary to learn as much as we can about the family life of children in our care, we need to be intentional in providing education to

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families about our program and what they can expect from their child's experience in group care. The goal of welcoming families includes providing information about the daily routine, program philosophy, and educational goals, as well as the opportunity to meet and interact with the staff. When parents feel



Keeping parents up-to-date will help them feel more comfortable leaving their child in your care.

informed about their child's experience in a group setting, they will feel more comfortable about their relationship with you and leaving their child in your care.

To start with, it is necessary that the enrollment process and general operating procedures focus on the needs of the family. This includes a thorough orientation process that helps parents learn about the program and about the experiences their children will have during the day. Families should be informed of center policies, such as what will happen in the event of inclement weather or child illness. Staff should also be available to provide information on an individual basis and assist with the school application and enrollment process as necessary.

Families also benefit when caregivers can provide ideas for additional resources in the community. These resources could include developmental screenings, family support groups, financial resources, diagnostic special needs services, or other service referrals as needed. In addition to helping families meet the needs of their child, presenting yourself as a valuable, reliable resource will increase the likelihood

that families will be open with you about changes to their child's needs.

Creating Community in Your Classroom

When parents and children first enroll in the program, welcome them by providing a tour of the care space and other important areas such as the child's cubby, parent information boards, and lending libraries. Children and families will feel more comfortable when they can easily navigate the space and find the things they need.

In order to provide information and predictability, there should be a daily schedule posted for parents, as well as a pictorial routine for children that matches the posted routine and is positioned at the child's height. When parents have an idea of what occurs in their child's day, they are better able to make a smooth transition between home and group care, and are able to discuss events in the day that were important to the child. "When I can ask my son about specific times of the daily routine, he's much more willing to reveal details about his day," said Alison Krause, 26. "I like to know what he's been doing, of course, and it gives him another chance to review and make sense of his own day."

Part of any daily routine should be greeting both parents and children in a warm, friendly manner as they arrive. This will ensure a smoother transition and reassure parents about their child being in group care. Welcoming children and families by name lets them know that you value them both as individuals and as an important part of the classroom community. Offering families a place to bottle-feed or nurse their babies supports their family decisions and individual schedules. Likewise, allowing parents to stay for part of the dropoff transition (if their schedule allows) will assist with children's separation anxiety and also increase parents' familiarity with and sense of belonging in the program. "For my son's first year of preschool, I participated in greeting and large-group time every day, because I could," said Adam Robson, 42. "A lot of parents don't have the opportunity to do that, but for my son and I, it became a regular, important part of our own daily routine. And it really helped my son overcome his initial anxiety at being away from his parents."

In the event that parents are distressed at dropoff or pickup time, it is important to acknowledge their feelings and offer the support they desire. Parents may

benefit from having extended time to stay at the center during these times of day. Or they may simply need your support and your understanding that it can be difficult and emotional to leave a child in group care. How children react to saying goodbye or reuniting with their families may vary, so it is important to be sensitive to children's needs, too. Parents' comfort level at leaving their children often has a significant impact on how children respond to being in group care. The more we can ease parental distress, the more likely we are to help children be comfortable as well.

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of belonging and connection to all areas of the community. An effective program should include many ways for such connections to be built between families and children, which increases the sense of community as well as promotes a positive sense of self and others. We can build this sense of community through social events in the classroom and by connecting families with common interests. Frequently, families get to know one another during dropoff and pickup times, as well as classroom events. This often leads to play dates or ride sharing to transport children to and from group care.

Parents can also be invited to participate in policymaking committees. Their unique perspectives can contribute to an approach sensitive to meeting the needs of all families. Opportunities for parents to get involved in the center can include

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Day-to-day conversation with parents helps provide a fuller picture of the child.

volunteering in the classroom, attending evening events for socializing, sharing hobbies or talents as part of a learning experience for children, or attending parent meetings.

The Program-Home Connection

From the start, caregivers should help families feel welcome to participate in the assessment process. It's beneficial for caregivers to include families in initial goal-setting sessions, because that gives an understanding of what families hope their children will learn throughout the year. It also assists caregivers in knowing what kind of information families would like to hear about from day to day.

Each day in a HighScope classroom, caregivers take anecdotal notes while playing with children. This information can be used to share stories with families during pickup times and to complete daily notes on children's biological routines and experiences. Families can add to the store of anecdotes collected by caregivers to create a more complete picture of each child's development and to help with intentional planning and formal assessments. This reciprocal exchange can occur informally and day-to-day, in addition to the two or three scheduled conferences each year.

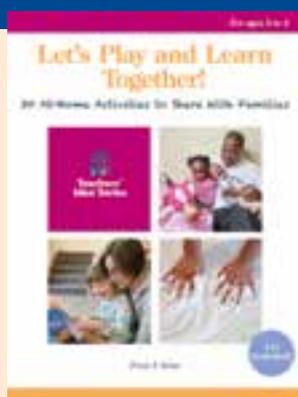
Integral to their child's healthy development in our care is the parents'

investment and willingness to make the vital program-home connection. We can do this by informing parents about the curriculum and offering ideas to extend their children's learning at home. This may happen in the form of workshops focusing on various topics in the curriculum, newsletters with tips and suggestions for parents, bulletin boards with content connected to classroom experiences, a resource-lending library for parents to take home information about the curriculum, or play backpacks with tips for interactions to guide parents in play experiences at home. When parents integrate these experiences in a

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variety of ways in their home, these too become part of the home culture.

Caring for children in their early years is a unique opportunity to engage as a team, with caregivers and family members collaborating to meet both the educational and non-educational needs of the infants and toddlers. We can establish an effective approach to supporting children by initiating a relationship with parents built on trust, taking into consideration differing viewpoints, building connections between home and school, and incorporating the importance of family partnerships into all areas of classroom and program practices. When we intentionally plan for strong relationships with families, we ensure a brighter future for all children. ■



Partner With Parents

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