

# Working with Parents: Do's and Don'ts



Children's interests and needs are best met when child care providers communicate, plan, and problem-solve with parents. However, many providers find that the desire to form meaningful partnerships with parents does not always match what actually happens. Many are searching for strategies to help them develop genuine give-and-take relationships with the parents of children in their programs.

The secret to effective partnerships with parents is to work together in the best interest of the child. This includes developing a relationship where you learn from parents and parents learn from you. This important relationship is particularly significant when children have heightened physical, medical, or emotional needs.

Certain issues can weaken or get in the way of developing *effective* partnerships with parents. Either of you may be operating from a traditional model where teachers are "experts" and the parent's role is to learn from the teacher and support his or her

decisions. A give-and-take relationship can also suffer when providers don't share information and their observations with parents. Feelings of competition or an inability to accept child-rearing differences may also impact parents and providers working together.

Following is a list of "do's" and "don'ts" that can help you ensure that parent partnerships happen in your program.

**DON'T** view yourself as the "expert" or use statements like "I'm with him 9 hours a day so I know best" or "I've been in this profession for 10 years, and I know what is best for children." **DON'T** avoid sharing important information because you worry about hurting parents' feelings or making them angry. **DO** respect the parents' role and get information about children and their families' culture and values. **DO** share your experiences and observations.

**DON'T** set goals for children without parent input or use strategies that differ from parent requests. **DO** use conversation and conference times to seek parents' input rather than simply give a report. **DO** work *with* parents to set mutual goals for their child, establish effective strategies, and measure progress toward achieving goals.

**DON'T** use negative terms to describe diverse family types or jump to conclusions about children who are not from two-parent homes. **DO** recognize that all family types (single parent, dual career, divorced or blended families) can be healthy and successful.

**DON'T** assume there is a correlation between the amount of time spent in your program and how much parents care about the child. **DO** realize and accept that involvement will vary according to individual parent schedules, beliefs, and needs. **DO** encourage a range of involvement knowing that there will be some who work hard to simply get their child to your program on a regular basis and others who may attend every parent meeting and even volunteer their time.

**DON'T** judge families against your parenting style or beliefs or think that parents would be more successful if they would only parent a certain way. **DO** celebrate diversity in family cultures, beliefs, and parenting practices. **DO** what it takes to get to know each family.

**DON'T** ignore families' requests *or* get over involved in personal family issues. **DO** empower parents to ask questions, access services, and be the best they can be.

Parents are the most important influence in a child's life; they have a wealth of knowledge about their children to share with and benefit you. In turn, your insights about a child can support a parent's role as well as enhance the child's success in both environments. True partnerships benefit parents, child care professionals, and most of all, partnerships are good for children.

## Parent's Give Feedback

What do parents have to say about developing partnerships? The following questions and responses are excerpted from the parent surveys used in a licensed preschool program.

**Do you have opportunities to share information and participate fully in decisions about your child?** · *I always feel like I can talk to either teacher if I have a concern or question. They are also comfortable with asking and sharing things with me. · I think people like to tell and hear about their kids. I guess I would have liked even more parent teacher conferences. · I felt very involved in the program and respected.*

**Are the preschool teachers available to you when you need them?** · *Always—I can reach them at school, on the phone, and at home. This tells me that they care! · The best things about this program are flexibility and a warm, accepting atmosphere.*

**Do you feel adequately informed about what is happening in your child's program?** · *[The teacher] called me and kept in touch quite a bit since we don't get to be involved much because I work. · The newsletters are great. They let me know what's up even when my child doesn't.*

**Does the program meet its goal to "work with parents as partners in the early care and education process"?** · *The teachers make the program! They go out of their way to include the parents! For our child with medical difficulties (AD/HD), it was parents, teachers, and child working hand-in-hand. · Yes! Each child and family is unique! . . . the teachers make sure that everyone fits in positively.*

## A Child Care Provider's Question

**QUESTION:** *What do I do when a parent wants me to use teaching or guidance strategies that do not fit with accepted early childhood practices?*

**ANSWER:** It is important to remember that a partnership means *shared decision-making*. When parents and providers disagree, respectful communication is the key to developing a shared decision and plan. You can start by exploring the issue with the parent to find out why it is important to the family and to share the reasons for your current practices. Understanding each other's perspective is essential to the shared decision-making process. Sometimes, parents and providers are really promoting the same goal and the process ends with a meaningful conversation. Other times, there are deeper concerns and you may need to develop a plan together for exploring the concern. Occasionally, you might see the appropriateness of a parent goal and decide to adapt your program accordingly (and *visa-versa*)!

When there really is a difference in beliefs—such as when the family values completing a task over allowing the child choices—you can use the following process. First, *seek a compromise* that allows you to embed some of the parent's goal into your daily routine without violating your philosophy, such as implementing a planning process with the children at play time so they can practice making choices and then encourage following

through. Second, if a compromise is not achievable, you can *agree to disagree*. This is particularly useful when different approaches will not hinder a child's success at home or in the program, such as allowing the child to choose among play areas in your program and work on task completion skills at home.

Finally, you and the parent(s) can examine the fit between what the child needs and the child care environment by talking openly about similarities and differences in beliefs. Often you will find that there is enough in common to support the child's best interests. Sometimes you find that your differing opinions are getting in the way and/or the fit is not working for the child. When this is agreed upon, your best option is to work with parents to find a program that better matches their needs. This outcome is not about who is "right" or "wrong," rather it is an opportunity to recognize and accept that there are a wide range of family styles and practices *and* diversity in child care programs.

