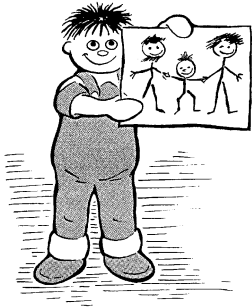


Making Family Connections



Early childhood professionals talk with parents about all kinds of things. Most often, these interactions revolve around enhancing their child's participation in the early childhood program. To foster true partnerships, a conscious effort to promote open communication is key. When parents have a child with a disability, effective communication is especially critical. Whether it is a note, a parent conference, or an informal conversation at the end of the day, every interaction should be:

- **Timely** Whether it is good news, a regular update, or a bad situation getting worse, communicate with parents often and regularly. Share both exciting and difficult news at the first opportunity. When parents see you as open and approachable, they will more likely share information with you in a timely manner as well.
- **Reciprocal** Expect to learn as much as you share as you communicate with parents. This means listen at least as much as you speak (and maybe more). Avoid approaching parents about an issue with the solution already clearly defined in your mind. Leave room in your problem-solving for parent feedback and suggestions. Make certain that both your actions and words reflect your goal to form a partnership with them.
- **Constructive** The purpose of parent/provider partnerships is to provide one another with valuable information, insights, and knowledge about the child. This is best achieved by offering suggestions, asking for feedback, and joint decision-making. As a professional, you should avoid venting, criticizing, or patronizing parents.
- **Honest** Tell parents what **you** really mean because you want them to tell you what **they** really mean. If you do not know how to position their child so he can easily play with toys in the water table, be honest enough to say so. It may seem easier to talk around an issue, but a direct approach is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.
- **Respectful** Be slow to judge and quick to give parents the benefit of the doubt. Let families know you respect their privacy and their opinions. Be especially sensitive about cultural, language, and social differences. Let parents find in you an attentive partner in the care and education of their child.
- **Confidential** As you develop trusting relationships with parents, you may be told or given information that they do not share with everyone. A child's diagnosis, medications, therapies, educational goals, or what is happening at home right now are examples of information you should keep confidential. Whenever you describe a child to someone other than the child's parent(s), confidentiality is jeopardized. While it is natural to want to share events of the day, a child's progress, or concerns you have, being a professional requires you to maintain confidentiality and guard each family's right to privacy.

When you follow these guidelines in your interactions with parents, you strengthen the bonds of partnership: respect, appreciation, and trust. Strong parent partnerships is the cornerstone of quality care and education for all of the children in your program.

Try It Out

A small, spiral notebook of lined paper with space for the date and brief comments can be used to share important information. You can pass along observations about a child's experiences day-to-day in your program, and the child's parents can write about what happens at home, comment about child care activities, or answer/ask questions about what you have written. Either of you may tuck in a child's picture or drawing. The notebook travels from school to home and back with the child's belongings.

These notebooks can be used to alert each other to changes in the child or to follow up important discussions. After a conversation about toilet training, for example, a teacher might write a note that summarizes the discussion and attach an article or the name of a book on toilet learning. The child's progress towards independence in toileting at home and in the program could be recorded as each milestone is reached.

The notebook should never be a substitute for personal communication, but it is an excellent tool that promotes open and frequent communication between parents and providers. Keeping a notebook for children enrolled in your program can be a wonderful way for parents of children with disabilities to note their child's progress and a way for both of you to share mutual experiences. This record can quickly become a treasured part of a family's experience in your program.

A Child Care Provider's Question

QUESTION: How do you include families who don't want to be? We have families who never come to parent meetings or respond to notes we send home. It's like they are just too busy to be involved with their child.

ANSWER: Every family operates differently, and it is unfair to assume that parents are not interested in their child or in your program because they do not participate in traditional parent activities. Building partnerships with parents does not just mean encouraging them to attend special events or be physically present in the program.

Your task is to develop a personalized partnership with each family that allows you and the parents to work together to create a nurturing environment for the child. Parents will differ in how actively they are involved in this partnership. It may help to think of involvement on a continuum from high participation to little participation. For example, involvement might mean joining you and the kids for lunch when you invite them. It could mean taking a quick look at pictures you posted of the children making snack this morning. Or it could simply mean calling your answering machine and listening to a brief summary of program activities you dictate at the end of each day.

It is natural to be excited about the parent who comes in every Tuesday to help out with play activities. It is even easier to appreciate the parents who follow the rules, support the program, and repeatedly tell you how valuable you are to them. But it is also important to recognize the individual needs of families and allow each family a different response to being a partner in your program.

Offer a variety of opportunities, keep inviting parents to take part, and do not be too disappointed if they choose not to participate every time. Work with each family to discover what they need from you and what they are willing (and able) to contribute to your program.

