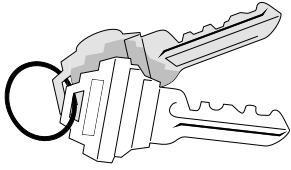


Keys to Building Partnerships with Families



Your “real” job is to teach young children, right? Well, yes, and since every child is part of a family, part of your job is to interact with families. Most often, child care providers and families learn from each other—building a partnership together. An effective partnership requires communication, and in many cases, determination. It is a commitment that cannot be overlooked. Parents of a child with a disability, for example, may have unique or more specific questions about the program, your ability to care for their child, and your willingness to learn the new skills you may need. Families need assurance that you will work with them and their child to create a warm, trusting relationship. Here are some keys to enhance your ability to be responsive to families as you build partnerships with them:

↔ **View each family as unique.** Although there may be similarities, the specific needs, interests, and concerns of families vary greatly. Part of developing a partnership is recognizing each family’s unique characteristics and being creative in interacting with them. The impact a child with a disability may have on the family is difficult to predict. It clearly changes the family structure—there are new demands, worries, challenges, and delights. It is less clear what resources a family may need, so it is important to take time to listen and learn as each family tells their own story.

↔ **Approach each partnership as a new beginning.** Some parents have had bad experiences in the past. They may be worried that they and their child will have a hard time fitting in again. New beginnings allow teachers/caregivers and families to identify the best strategies to meet both partners’ needs, starting today.

↔ **Ask questions.** Parents may not know what kind of information you need. Asking respectful questions can give you information about both the child and the family. Open-ended questions like “tell me about John’s favorite toys” provide more information than specific questions like “does John like to build with blocks?” Encourage families to share details that might be applied in the child care setting. When asked to describe a typical day with her child, one mother said that the hardest part of taking him any place was managing the wheelchair. As a result, the caregiver and the mother took time to generate plans for preparing for the program’s frequent field trips, before any permission slips were sent out.

↔ **Use several strategies for regular communication.** A notebook could be used to communicate on a daily basis, parents could be encouraged to stay to visit when they drop off or pick up their child, or “phone dates” could be scheduled at a mutually convenient time such as during nap time. It often helps to have options for families so they can choose. Some information is not as easily shared in a note and requires personal contact. Other times, families may prefer a more private way to communicate with you, especially when conveying sensitive information. You create barriers for families and yourself when you limit communication to only one or two methods.

↔ **Share achievements as well as challenges.** Parents need to feel part of the program and know that their child is having many different and positive experiences. Rather than bringing in the family to report on a negative situation, you will want to talk often and about everything. A parent who has never seen his child play with play dough would be thrilled to receive a note (or picture) describing his child’s most recent creation. When problems do arise, it is helpful to have established a pattern of communicating so that the relationship is strong enough to share difficulties as well as triumphs.

↔ **Include brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents.** Some children may also have foster parents or long-term respite care providers who assume a parenting role. Each of these individuals plays an important function in the life of the child. When caregivers and family members are partners, children have the opportunity to benefit from all the nurturing they collectively provide.

A true partnership combines the strengths of both individuals to create something that neither could do alone. Caring for young children is not always easy, but the rewards can be as great as the challenges. Building partnerships with families is also a challenge, but children come to your program as part of a family. It is difficult to be effective with children if you fail to recognize the importance of being connected with their families.

Try It Out

In order for relationships between parents and caregivers to honestly be "give and take," good communication must be established, constantly encourages, frequently available, and a high priority. An interactive parent bulletin board might just be the answer for sharing both outgoing and incoming information. To be truly interactive, both the provider and the parent must have equal opportunities to pass on requests, suggestions, interesting new information and announcements. Some caregivers call it their *Give-and-Take Board*. A "give-and-take" parent bulletin board has:

- Paper and pencils handy for easy use.
- Push-pins and tape so anybody can easily put up displays, information, pictures, and questions.
- Announcements about upcoming events in the program or community.
- Parent suggestions on parenting or program activities.
- Celebrations for parent participation in the program or staff tributes.
- Information from articles or training opportunities.

Features or topics for the *Give-and-Take Board* include:

- Can You Believe It! - updates on children's and teachers' activities and achievements
- Mom and Dad Say . . . - suggestions from parents
- Teacher's Corner - training events, special requests, program information
- How About a Hand? - sign-up for projects, field-trips, or help for a special event.
- Picture This! - pictures of children, teachers, and parents.

A *Give-and-Take Board* should not be the only kind of communicating you do with parents, but it is a great start!

Parent Story

Okay, I'll be honest. I didn't even want to take my son to child care. Nobody could possibly take as good care of him as I could. Nobody but me knew how to adjust his wheelchair "just right." Nobody but me had ever soothed him after a seizure. For three years it had always been just us—Big Pete and Little Petey. Once I handed him over to a child care provider, I thought I would be handing over my opportunity to make "Daddy" decisions for Petey as well.

I mean, here was this nice lady who had been caring for little kids for almost 12 years. And here was me, who just had my little boy. So she'd probably tell me what needed to be done, and I would have to follow her lead. The thought kind of rankled. But I had to work to make ends meet, and you can't keep a little guy at a construction site. So, I was feeling pretty down as I filled out the forms to get ready to "give" Petey to Luisa to take care of during the day.

My first surprise came during that very first visit. Luisa handed me a sheet of paper asking questions about the kinds of things Petey liked to eat, what toys he played with, and if he needed something special to be able to

sleep. So I guess I did know a few things that could help after all! Luisa also asked if I could stay to show her and her assistant some things about Petey's wheelchair. We got to talking, and Luisa told me that she asks parents for information about their kids so she can continue to do the good things that happen at home. I told her that I would do anything to help Petey succeed in her program. She said she would ask if she needed anything else.

A few weeks later, I heard Luisa mention to another parent that she needed some repairs done to the house the program was in. I figured she would ask me to help out with that because I'm in construction, but you know what she asked me to do? She asked me to bring in pictures of me and Petey together so that the other kids would know who was important in Petey's life. Y'see, I'm not just a construction worker at Petey's child care, I'm a much more important person . . . I'm a *Dad*.

