



# Child Care plus+

WINTER 2000

Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

Vol. 10, No. 2



## + 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 strate-

gies, 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. + SHW

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## + FROM THE SOURCE

### Making the Team

Do you share information about children in your program with disabilities or developmental delays with the specialists and therapists—or special education teachers—who are also working with them? Do you have written permission from parents to do this? Do you know what an IFSP or IEP is? Do you know how to use it to include each child in existing program activities and routines? When you enroll a child with disabilities or delays, do you simultaneously make sure you become a *contributing* member of their early intervention or special education team?

Inclusion sometimes takes support and resources beyond what you already have available and that means working with parents to develop partnerships with other team members. The questions above describe the ways any provider can get necessary support. Meaningful inclusion for each child takes everyone's best efforts. Inclusion may require you to become familiar with needs and learning strategies you have not seen before. You cannot expect to be able to do this alone, and you do not have to do it alone!

During enrollment, ask parents for the information you need to prepare yourself and your program to meet their child's needs. Ask about the team of other professionals who may be working with the child. Make sure you also describe your program's activities, and ask parents what you need to know about their child to fully include him or her in each one. +

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## + MAKING IT WORK

### Parent Conferences

Meeting with parents without distractions or interruptions is important. Scheduled conferences are valuable opportunities to connect when you are prepared to *listen to parents as much as you talk*. Prepare by creating portfolios (samples of the child's work, photographs, observation records, and anecdotes); reviewing the child's previous learning goals; and reflecting on the child's progress. Parents need time to prepare as well. Guidelines given prior to meeting can help parents be active participants in the conference. Guidelines might include:

1. A general statement about the purpose and format of the conference. *Our conference is a time to talk together without interruptions. It is a time for us to share information—I will have things to share with you and I look forward to hearing about your observations, questions, and suggestions. We will also work together to talk about what is important to you and your child as members of our child care community and set goals and develop plans for meeting the needs of your child in our program.*
2. A list of commonly asked questions to spark parent ideas. *Parents frequently have questions to ask during conference time, such as: Who does my child play with? How do you handle biting? What centers does he play in most? What do you enjoy most about my child?*
3. A copy of the child's previously discussed interests, strengths, and goals for parent inspection and analysis.

Allow ample time together to discuss the child's progress and consider any new interests and goals. +

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## + NOTES FROM HOME

### Parents 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.* +

## + SPOTLIGHT

# Building Parent Partnerships at Enrollment

Your enrollment process is one key to promoting parent partnerships in your program. Parents may be new to your child care setting or have mixed emotions about leaving their child in child care—particularly during the first few days. Using an enrollment process that focuses on getting to know each child *and* family will establish the importance of parents as your partners.

Welcoming families into your program involves giving parents information like a policy paper or handbook, a description of program activities and routines, your program philosophy, and necessary medical and emergency contact forms. Inviting parents to describe their child's strengths, interests, and needs as well as their parenting goals and practices is of equal importance.

Once parents have selected your program for their child, you will want to start right away to set the stage for ongoing communication and information exchange. This can be done by developing a friendly form to guide their observation during an initial visit to your program. These ideas invite relevant information specific to the child and might include the following statements:

● As you look around our space, you will see the play areas listed below. Check the area(s) you think will interest your child most. List items (theme-related toys like trucks or dinosaurs or items with action elements like open and close or that make sounds) that could be added to further interest your child.

- |   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Library/Writing            | <input type="checkbox"/> Art          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Easel Painting             | <input type="checkbox"/> Blocks       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moving and Music           | <input type="checkbox"/> Puzzles      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housekeeping/Dramatic Play | <input type="checkbox"/> Outdoor Play |

- ▶ Describe any areas or play materials that do not look appropriate or safe for your child.
- ▶ Make notes below of any comments or questions you have as you walk around.
- ▶ Please take a minute to visit our parent corner. If you see articles of information that interest you, help yourself. Do you have topics we could add?
- You know your child best. Your input will help us get to know you and your child so we can work together from the beginning. You are welcome to complete the rest of this form at the table in the

parent center or to complete it at home. Take as much time as you need. It is very beneficial for us to get this information from you before your child starts to make the most of our first days together.

- ▶ List your child's siblings and favorite playmates.
- ▶ Describe your child's favorite toys or play activities at home.
- ▶ Does your child have a favorite book or character?
- ▶ List the words your child uses for important functions (hungry, drink, toileting)
- ▶ Does your child have a favorite blanket, stuffed toy, or other important attachment object he or she will bring into the program?
- ▶ Describe what you enjoy most about your child.
- ▶ Tell us what you want most for your child during the time she or he spends in our group.
- ▶ Describe needs or preferences that I should know to enhance your child's success in our program.
- ▶ How does your child like to be comforted?

● Regular communication about your child's strengths, interests, progress, and needs will be an important task for you and for us. Our program uses many ideas to make communication with families a regular part of each day including informal conversations, notes, phone calls, and scheduled conferences. It helps to know about your schedule and preferences for exchanging information with program staff. Check all the ways you like to share information:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Personal notes             | <input type="checkbox"/> Daytime phone calls |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scheduled conferences      | <input type="checkbox"/> Evening phone calls |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Completing forms like this | <input type="checkbox"/> Home visits         |

Conversation at  drop off time  pick up time  
Others:

The author of this and other articles in this newsletter is Susan Harper-Whalen, a national consultant for Child Care plus+ and director of a campus preschool program. You may contact Susan for information about using enrollment to begin building partnerships with parents at 1-800-235-4122. +

## + What do I do when . . . . ?

**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 com-

mon 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. +

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Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and information about working together with parents.

Call 1-800-235-4122

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

*Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code* by S. Feeney and N.K. Freeman seeks to inform, not prescribe, answers to the tough decisions that teachers face as they work with children and families. The authors clarify key points about ethical conduct and decision making and offer questions to stimulate reflection and discussion on critical issues that confront early childhood practitioners. Order for \$8 from NAEYC (#110), 1509 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1426.

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*CHILD CARE plus+*

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