

Child Care plus+

+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:

- **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.
- **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.

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. + CC+

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+ IN FOCUS

You will find it easier to build connections with family members when you offer a variety of ways for them to communicate with you. Some people are very chatty and feel comfortable visiting each day at drop-off or pick-up time. Others prefer writing notes or sending e-mail messages. Some enjoy meeting at set times, and others want to participate in classroom activities. Each opportunity allows parents to tell you more about themselves, their child, and their unique family culture.

* Be open to family perspectives and values. * Create a form asking about family talents and interests, the names of important extended family members, and family traditions, if any. Parents could complete the form, or you could complete it in a face-to-face or telephone interview. * Ask parents to teach you their child's favorite songs, bring in a beloved book, and describe family play activities and routines. * Arrange to visit the family in their home. * Find ways to use the home language in your program. * Offer parents opportunities to share family recipes, family pictures, and family experiences. * Be ready to negotiate, and not ignore, conflicts that may arise because your cultural values differ from the family's (around toileting issues, perhaps). Knowing about individual family cultures can enrich your program as you plan curriculum, field trips, and parent activities. This is one time when the benefits far outweigh the effort. +

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+ 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. +

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+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

A *true partnership* involves the practice of give and take between parents and teachers learning equally from one another, working together to establish goals for the child, and providing parents with a genuine opportunity to become involved in decision-making about the early childhood program.

At the *token* level, parents are given minimal opportunities to become involved in the program—perhaps bringing treats or helping with a field trip. A *taken* approach acknowledges parent involvement but indicates an underlying belief that teachers really are the best decision-makers about a child's experiences in early care and education programs.

At the *fix-it* level, parents are eagerly invited to help in the program and to attend program functions like board meetings, education nights, or open houses. However, *fix-it* involvement is focused on educating parents—indicating an underlying belief that program methods and values are superior and that children's needs will best be met if parents come around to the program's way of thinking.

Some professionals suggest that parent involvement in early childhood programs seldom reaches a level of *true partnership*. The nature of parent involvement in the past, teachers' not knowing how to create home/school partnerships, and early childhood professionals' unspoken beliefs about parents may be barriers to truly collaborative relationships. As a result, parent involvement often starts and stays at a *token* or *fix-it* level. What do you think? +

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+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

From the very first time parents contact you, there are opportunities to encourage partnerships. Let's look at a chronological sequence of interactions that parents typically experience when they enroll their child in a child care program. Each interaction has a simple partnership goal. While each activity might look slightly different from one type of program to another, the partnership goal can still be met.

Initial Contact	Goal: To share your philosophy of working with young children and their families.
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Building partnerships begins with the first call a parent makes to your program. Whether or not you have an opening, this call or visit can be used to describe your program and communicate your philosophy about caring for young children. This is also a chance to *listen* to parents and find out what they need and want for their child. You do not necessarily need to know everything, but you can show a genuine interest in their child.

The First Visit	Goal: To provide an opportunity for parents to see your program in action.
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Parents may want to visit your program before enrolling and sometimes even when you have no openings. This is especially true when you have presented your program well during the initial contact. The parent's task is to get more information; your task is to welcome the parent into your program as a guest and provide a sample of the kind of positive interaction you have with parents.

Enrollment	Goal: To gather information from parents about their child and their family.
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You enroll the child *and* the family in your program. Although there are usually forms to fill out, enrollment is a critical time to explain to parents how you will partner with them to meet their goals and their child's needs. You can help parents understand the role they may have in their child's child care experience.

Getting Acquainted	Goal: To establish a working relationship with parents.
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Once the child is attending regularly, you can develop a relationship that fits both the parents' expectations and commitments and your desire to have them participate in your program. Your goal is to show them that you have a

broad view of parent partnerships and that you appreciate and acknowledge *the many* types of interactions you have with parents in your program.

Planning Together	Goal: To create children's developmental goals with parents.
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Look for opportunities for set mutual goals for the child's benefit. Planning together combines your professional expertise and training as an early childhood professional with specific information about the child that only a parent can provide. Toileting is a good example of a skill that requires collaboration and input from parents and early childhood professionals together.

Sharing the Excitement	Goal: To keep parents informed about children's day-to-day activities.
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Exciting things happen in the child care setting every day. It is easy to forget that parents do not have the opportunity to see these magical moments. If you let parents know about fun things that happen, you will be in a better position to talk to them when challenges arise.

Resolving Problems	Goal: To find mutual solutions to problems.
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Even in the best partnership there will occasionally be challenges. Both parties must feel that there is a safe and productive way to manage conflicts, solve problems, and bring about positive change.

On To The Future	Goal: To provide a sense of closure as the family leaves your program.
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When a child leaves your program, you can provide valuable information to the preschool, kindergarten, or child care provider in the next setting. The family who is leaving is in a wonderful position to give you feedback about your program. A brief exit survey for parents lets them know—one last time—that you value their input. Give them an opportunity to tell you what worked and what didn't.

It is your responsibility to carefully foster parent partnerships and be sure that the message given to parents is encouraging, welcoming, and accepting. This process starts with the very first phone call and should continue throughout the time parents have their children enrolled in your program. +

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+ 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 the 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 differ-

ent 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. + CC+

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Child Care plus+ publishes a step-by-step guide to selecting child care for young children with disabilities called *A Great Place To Be Me*. This 16-page guide describes how to find a "match" between the child and family's needs and what the early childhood program has to offer. Early childhood programs may want to study this resource to discover what they can do to help parents choose child care wisely. To order, send \$8.00 to Child Care plus+.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators. *CHILD CARE plus+* is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$ 8.00 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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