



Parents as Partners

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The relationship between parents and child care providers can be a source of tension or a source of mutual support. Our feelings about how to care for young children tend to be deeply held and personal, so there is a lot of potential for judging and feeling judged. At the same time, you and the parents have a very important common goal: the wellbeing of their child. Children benefit when parents and teachers consult with and learn from each other. And they feel more secure when they see that their important caregivers respect and support each other. You can build relationships with parents that will support both of you in caring for their child.



FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

Every child care provider finds some parents challenging. Their communication style may clash with yours; they may treat their child - or you - in ways that you dislike. How can you build a partnership with these parents?

The key is to find some strengths you can build on. For example, notice positive connections between parent and child.

If a parent pushes your buttons, take some time to reflect on why this issue bothers you so much. You are entitled to your feelings! But sometimes it helps to think about how the issue might look from the parent's perspective.

RESPECT THEIR ROLE AS PARENTS

As you know, parents are the most important influence in a child's life, and a strong, positive relationship with parents gives a child a solid foundation. So it's important to support that relationship. The child is part of the family. Parents need to have a say in their child's care.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Start building a positive relationship with each child's parents from Day One. Make sure you know their names and try to find out a little about them, to form a connection.

Try to exchange a little information about the child every day. Parents will especially appreciate hearing about positive things you notice, but it's also important to talk about your concerns. Ask how the child has been doing and what's been happening in his life; ask for suggestions about caring for him.

For more ideas:

From Parents to Partners, Building a Family-Centered Early Childhood Program

by Janis Keyser

BUILD TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Teachers sometimes assume that their role is to inform and guide parents. But building a partnership requires two-way communication. Share information, but also ask questions - and listen!

Teachers can give parents valuable information about typical patterns and stages of child development. Families can give teachers a wealth of information that helps them understand and work with this particular child: significant people and events in the child's life, the family's goals for the child, the family's care giving practices (eating, sleeping, discipline, handling transitions, etc.), the child's temperament (what stresses and comforts her, how he expresses feelings, etc.), and much more.



INVITE FAMILIES TO PARTICIPATE

Children feel happier and more secure when their families are part of the place where they spend their days. If families feel included, they will respond more positively to child care providers. And their contributions can enrich your environment. Many early childhood programs display pictures of children's families. They may encourage parents to bring in items important to their family and culture or to share an activity with the children – something special they know how to cook or build. It may prevent problems if you first share some classroom guidelines with parents (for example, avoiding negative labels like “mean” or “bad” for children's behavior).

HOLD SPECIAL FAMILY EVENTS

- Potluck dinners or volunteer work parties.
- Discussions or classes on parenting.
- Parent meetings where parents can ask questions, share ideas, or contribute resources.

TRY TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER'S VIEWS AND GOALS

When parents describe their childrearing goals and practices, you may hear things that clash with your own views. Building partnerships with parents (and colleagues!) means working with diversity, accepting the fact that people have different opinions on these emotionally charged issues. It means looking at your own reactions and where they come from - your experiences and culture - and trying to understand the other person's views. Respectfully ask the parent to explain more about his ideas -- try to understand what the issue looks like from her point of view. And look for common ground!

Even if you don't agree with a parent's practices, you probably share some of the same goals. If a parent says, “Spank her if she talks back,” you probably share his goal of teaching the child respect. If a parent gives candy to an injured child, you and she probably both want the child to feel comforted and cared for. You can explain your ideas on the basis of these common goals, and sometimes you can learn from the parent's approach.

COLLABORATE ON SOLUTIONS

When you and the parent communicate about conflicting goals, you can problem-solve together. For example, messy play is a valued part of early childhood programs, but many parents don't want their children or their children's clothes to get wet or dirty. Parents and teachers together can work out solutions that honor both goals: changing the children into different clothes for messy play, putting on plastic aprons for water play, etc.

When a parent makes an unusual request, before you say, “That's not how we do things here,” think of a positive reason why the parent is making this request. Can you find a way to make a small change that would at least partly satisfy the request? When your program is receptive to the parents' feelings, there are important benefits for the child: continuity between child care and home, the example of the adults cooperating, and goodwill between the people they depend on.