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## It Takes a Village

**I**t takes a village to raise a child. We've all heard that. But what does it take to create a village? In a village, every grown-up has a valued, understood role in the education, health, welfare, growth, and development of the children who live there. All of the grown-ups understand this, and all of the children take it for granted. Similarly in the early childhood field in the United States, if you want to influence the lives of children and their families or influence the status and cohesiveness of the profession, it does not matter what level within the field you currently occupy. We can all be advocates and leaders regardless of our roles. We each have a valued and essential role in creating the village that will raise all of our children.

In early childhood care and education, we are still working on creating that village for children—working on truly understanding and valuing each of our roles in raising America's children. Leadership at all levels within an ECE program is a key part of leadership at the local, national, and international levels. This chapter looks at how we each have a role in creating that village for the children, their families, and our profession. Advocacy, storytelling, effective communication, team building, and collaboration are all ways to practice leadership at all levels in our field by increasing our cohesiveness and our connections to each other.

## Leadership at Every Level

The strength and enthusiasm of leadership at the middle and lower levels of any group or program creates the strength and enthusiasm at the top.

In order for a program to do its best for children and families, leadership must be present at all levels within every early child-

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hood care and education setting, whether that be a family child care home, a center, a school-age care program, or a preschool. Leader-like actions and qualities must come from every teacher, assistant, aide, and support staff member—every adult. We need to recognize the leadership ability we bring to our own circles of influence—the people we interact with on a regular

basis—and begin to make connections between this leadership ability and the ability to influence what happens in our lives and in the lives of children. Leadership does not occur only at the top levels, and it is not always the sole property of the “person in charge.” In practice, it is spread throughout all levels, which is essential for a healthy system. Everyone throughout any program or organization must be ready to take leader-like action so each level can function effectively.

Leadership builds on itself. Many of the best leaders in almost any field have come up through the ranks of leadership. Barbara Bowman, president emeritus of the Erikson Institute, began her career as a classroom teacher. Very few people develop leadership

skills in a brief moment of activity. The leadership talents of some may be well hidden until later years, but with patience, practice, reflection, and the right circumstances, leadership talent will develop and emerge.

Unfortunately, many people imagine that leadership skills such as advocacy, team building, and collaboration belong to professors, lobbyists, and leaders of large professional organizations. Too many people turn leadership into something that they feel they could never attain. This kind of thinking is not only untrue, it seriously inhibits our ability to mobilize the ECE profession and draw on the unique strengths and skills each of us has to offer in the social change process. Any advocacy, team building, or collaboration—any leadership—at any level adds to our power and to our ability to turn things around. The only tools we need are actions and words. The bottom line is that you have to *say* something to or *do* something with someone else, and you have to tell others that you are doing it. Here are some ways to get started.

- Pick an issue or topic that generates strong feelings for you, find out more information about it, link your issue or topic with a larger group of people such as a community organization, decide what you will say or do, and then get going!
- Leadership at all levels means taking action or speaking up wherever you find yourself and wherever you are needed. How do you take action? When do you speak up or speak out?
- Leaders and advocates take action on their good ideas. How do you take action on your good ideas? How long does it usually take you to move from idea to action?
- Arrange times to interview those you consider leaders, at all levels, in a leadership situation. How did they develop their leadership skills and abilities? What challenges have

made them who they are today? Who influences them in their lives? What makes them unique? Arrange times for others to observe and interview you. What do they notice about what you do? How do their observations match with your image of yourself as a leader? What can you tell them about your own leadership development?

## Team Building

Team building is essential if everyone in an organization is going to be a leader some of the time. Team building in early childhood care and education happens when you create processes, interactions, and activities that help turn a group of people into a team that is effective and efficient at meeting the needs of the children and families you serve as well as your organization as a whole. It is about gathering together all of the people who work in your program (the cook, the driver, the secretary, and the custodian as well as teachers, assistants, and aides) so that everyone has an opportunity to see their roles in working together toward a common goal or vision.

Most ECE programs already have some team-building activities, such as bringing teachers together to think about programming and curriculum or to learn new skills; having a potluck, picnic, or dinner event together; or (in larger programs) having “secret pals” or exchanging gifts during holiday seasons. The best way to build teams is to have every adult who is part of the organization participate in some way. Remember what we said above about every person taking leader-like action at some point so the organization works well? In order for this to happen, everyone in the organization has to be seen as part of the team. For example, custodians contribute to children’s learning when they take responsibility for discipline, playground supervision, and modeling appropriate responses to disagreements and conflicts.

Team building is also a way to strengthen your work with your colleagues. It is a way to begin recognizing how each role adds to the leadership the children see in your environment. In my daughter's preschool program, "Miss Fellie," the cook, was just as important in her daily life as "Miss D," her teacher. Every day, my daughter would come home with a story about what Miss Fellie said or did and what she knew about each child's eating preferences. You can start team building by first thinking about who the team is right now and what each person brings to it.

## ask yourself

On a sports team, each player has a different role and brings a different strength to the team effort. Make a list of every adult in your program. What is the number one strength or gift each person adds? What would the team and the children be lacking if that person were not there to bring that strength or gift?

What is your relationship with each of these adults? Do you have regular conversations about what each of you wants for the children involved or the families served? If not, ask what each person wants most for the children.

What is each person's relationship with the children? You can learn a lot about who the children think is part of the team by observing their interactions with the other adults in the environment. Ask each adult if they feel like they are part of the team. If yes, ask how. If no, find out why.

Are there support staff in your program? Are they invited to and do they participate in regular program meetings? If they are not part of program meetings, you can suggest that they be invited.

In your role as a leader, you have daily opportunities to talk about your team and to talk with team members. You can be a part of recognizing that everyone is on the team and acknowledging the leadership that takes place on every level in your work setting. You will begin to think differently

about your interactions with coworkers, and you will add to the overall team building that takes place in your program.

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## Collaboration with Families

It is impossible to raise a child in any village that does not involve that child's family! Joining forces and resources with families will strengthen your ability to provide children with what they need to reach their full potential. Family involvement and parent involvement all focus on the important roles of parents and families in the care and education of their children. A number of books have been written on ways to increase and enhance collaboration with parents and families and the importance of having them serve in an ongoing and highly visible capacity in centers, schools, and other early child care settings.

Working with families also will strengthen your leadership ability. Working with families is different from working with colleagues. They play a different role in the lives of their children than you do, and they have different kinds of concerns about their well-being. Of course, they also may come from a different background than you do—a different culture, class, language, or any other continuum of diversity. Learning to balance all these things while you uncover your shared values and your shared vision for the children is the essence of leadership.

The strongest form of collaboration with families is, of course, making sure they have equal voice and equal say in the decision-making process. And this collaboration must be more than just a legal formality or a token gesture. Parents want to feel accepted and encouraged to participate in meetings and activities. Few parents become involved if meetings and activities focus on parents' shortcomings or assume that parents cannot be experts on their own children's strengths and challenges. When parents have equal participation with the early childhood professionals who care for and teach their children, their self-esteem increases, and they enjoy the opportunity to participate as members of a productive and satisfying group. You will also have a stronger, more meaningful relationship with parents and families if they feel they are working with you on behalf of the children.

## ask yourself

What is your relationship with the adult family members of the children you serve? Do you have regular conversations with each of them about what they want for the children or the families served? If not, ask each person what he wants most for the children.

## GETTING TO KNOW FAMILIES

There are a variety of steps you can take to collaborate with parents to strengthen children's abilities and increase the parents' participation in the leadership process. You can begin a relationship by simply finding out more about each other. Select a family you have not spent much time with and just focus on getting to know them better as people. What are their interests? Hobbies?

What foods do they like best? These little things are the beginnings for having conversations about bigger things, such as goals for children.

Once you have moved beyond the initial discomfort of speaking with a family you don't know very well, you can ask parents and family members if they have a goal they would like to set for the child for the year—a goal you can work on collaboratively. For example, a couple of parents may want their children to retain their home language. You could label or name a few items in more than one language throughout your program as a way to reinforce

**G**etting to know more about the community your program serves is another way to practice leadership at all levels.

home language. Begin by letting parents and other adult family members choose the focus of your collaborating efforts. By “letting them go first,” you are demonstrating that you do want an equal collaboration, that you respect their role as their children's first teachers, and that the collaboration will be beneficial to

them as well. You are giving them some control—an essential component of facilitative leadership.

As you increase your collaboration with families, they will begin to increase their relationship with you and they will be more open to collaborating with you on a goal that you select—for example, parental/family support in helping a young child use words to express her feelings. It will become increasingly easier for you to form a team with them and work together for the best interest of each child. You will be able to join your forces and resources, recognizing that each of you holds important information about who the child is and what the child needs. The kind of collaboration you learn by working with parents and families will

transfer to other areas of your life and to other areas within the profession as well.

## GETTING TO KNOW THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY

You can increase your leadership skills by extending your collaboration with families to include the surrounding community. You don't have to be the head of your program to begin collaborating with the surrounding community and finding out more about it. Getting to know more about the community your program serves is another way to practice leadership at all levels. For all children to be successful we must create new relationships between the children, teachers, parents, and the community—create the village. The first step is to find out more about the community you serve and the relationship you and your program have with the community.

### ask yourself

Find out what neighborhoods and communities your program serves. Where do the children live? Do community kids attend your program? Do you know why or why not?

What elementary schools are in the community? Do the children you serve attend more than one? Get to know the kindergarten and first-grade teachers. Invite them to visit your classroom or home program; then, visit theirs. In June, have a potluck with parents of children you serve and invite the kindergarten and first-grade teachers who will have the children next year.

Study the community's history. If the families you serve live in the community where your program is, ask them about the community's history. Has it changed over the years? Is the population growing older or younger? What do you think this means for your program?

## ask yourself

How many community organizations are in the neighborhood you serve? Make a list of them and then introduce yourself. Let them know you teach children in the community and get some information on each organization's mission and services.

Check out organizations such as The Urban League and The Boys' and Girls' Club of America. What do they do? Ask your coworkers if there are ways you can work together.

Does your program have an advisory group or board of directors? If not, use the information you've gathered from the community to make suggestions for a new advisory group or board of directors. Be sure that the members are also involved with some of the community groups and organizations.

Doing all of the activities noted above will increase your collaboration skills, make you more knowledgeable about the community you work in, and enhance your role as a member of your work team. And, of course, you will be increasing your leadership ability at the same time.

## Advocacy

Leadership in advocacy involves building bridges between the early childhood care and education settings and the communities we serve. All of the issues we face go beyond our work and into the homes and the communities of the children. By finding the links between professional, home, and community issues, we can identify starting points for advocacy. Advocates share their knowledge with others, going beyond good intentions and acting on what they know. Here are some ways to stretch your leadership wings in the area of advocacy:

- Start a parent-teacher association (PTA) for your program if one has not been established.
- Find out where various candidates stand on issues involving children, and vote responsibly.
- Tell parents, friends, and neighbors how you intend to vote and why.
- Pick two or three highlights from a report on the connection between wages and program quality in early care and education, and share them with every adult you meet.
- Find out if the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker in your community have children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews. Strike up a conversation about the children they care for and how they are affected by public policy.
- Speak at a conference on how you are developing your leadership and advocacy roles within the field.
- If you are not comfortable presenting at a conference, make arrangements to host an informal conversation on a hot topic at your table during lunch.
- Contact elementary schools and community organizations. Find out what issues you have in common.
- Always be prepared to explain what you do with children and why.
- Support your colleagues in getting more training and education, and support accreditation for your workplace.
- If you are not ready to give testimony at a public hearing, go support someone who is.
- Maybe you are already an actively engaged advocate. Mentor someone else to become an advocate!

Leadership in creating a village means finding the “yes” and the “how” in advocacy, not focusing on the “why I can’t.” Opportunities for advocacy, like opportunities for all leadership, are presented to us many times throughout the day. Always ask yourself what you can do right now to turn the current situation into an opportunity to speak up or take action on behalf of children, families, and our profession.

Leadership requires the ability to articulate your program’s mission, goals, and purpose in ways that others can understand. Your best voice may come from telling stories. In every village there is a storyteller, a person who explains the past, interprets the present, and predicts the future, all through stories. When you tell a story, you bring bits of information to life. Storytelling is certainly no stranger to most ECE teachers!

## ask yourself

In what ways do you talk about child development theory to parents and others in the community? What do you say about what you do and how you influence children’s growth and development?

What stories can you tell in your own little circle of influence that can spread out to larger and larger audiences?

Have you told the parents a story about how pretend and symbolic play create the foundation for future reading skills? This would be an excellent way to advocate for developmentally appropriate activities for children.

Listen to the stories told in your work environment. What do they tell you? What do you think they mean? When you retell the stories, how do you explain what they mean?

**A**lways ask yourself what you can do right now to turn the current situation into an opportunity to speak up or take action on behalf of children, families, and our profession.

There are so many stories we can share with so many people in so many places. And, don't be apologetic in your telling of a good story. Early childhood educators must become more courageous in standing up for ourselves. The stories we are telling are true and we hold the key to how the story eventually ends. We know that things like higher wages, funding

for training, support services for families, and child-friendly legislation all increase the quality of what we do and we should not apologize for that. Leadership as an advocate requires our strong voices. Children require our strong voices because no matter how small you think your voice is, it is bigger and stronger and louder than most children's voices.

**summary** In helping to create the village, you can use advocacy, storytelling, effective communication, team building, and collaboration with families and communities. Many of these techniques are already familiar to you from the work you do with children, other staff members, and families every day. These activities provide abundant opportunities for everyone at every level of early childhood care and education to lead the way toward better programs, more effective organizations, and a brighter future for the children in our country. Whatever your position in your program, you are a leader in creating the village that can care for all children.

In chapter 5, you will have the opportunity to take a closer look at empowerment, followership, and advocacy. You

will think about the kinds of environments that lead to empowerment and your role in creating them. In the section on followership, you will look at the other side of leadership—the strengths, skills, and responsibilities of followers. Then, you will bring empowerment and followership together and take another look at advocacy and its role in changing the ECE profession.

**story time**

**Wei is the director of the after-school program in the community center. Most of the children who participate in the program are East African. For some time now, Wei has been thinking about the fact that the after-school program staff have very few relationships with the East African community and even less knowledge about the history, needs, assets, and resources of the community. The few times she has attempted to have the parents and staff gather informally, she noticed that every single conversation she overheard was based on the familiar roles of the staff and parent discussing the child in the context of the program.**

**Wei had recently read that when people have an opportunity to interact regularly in situations that take them out of their familiar roles, they begin to discover other shared interests and values and have more authentic conversations about more and more topics. A first step for Wei is to provide an opportunity for the staff to see the children outside of the program. One of the parents tells her about a community festival in which the children will perform a short skit and participate in a parade. Wei decides to work with the children to create invitations to the festival to give to the staff. Creating more complex relationships between the staff and the East African community will take some time, but Wei is excited. She has just received a copy of Participatory Action Research Project Report from the East African Child Care Task Force and many of the action items for the community blend well with the program's mission and goals. Wei knows that attending the festival is just the beginning of an influential collaborative community partnership.**

## more reading

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