

Introduction

I remember the unbridled enthusiasm I brought to my first preschool teaching job more than thirty years ago. I was so excited to be working with children, and I was intent on saving the world through my work. I began to get a little discouraged when Christopher's dad didn't want him wearing a dress in the fantasy area and when Araceli's grandmother brought her to school dressed for a party every day. Soon parents became my project. How could I convince them that they should be more like me? Now I can't even imagine what my conversations with those parents sounded like. I probably owe each of them an apology, but more than that, I owe them my gratitude for sticking with me and helping me learn about the strength, wisdom, experience, love, and investment each of them brought to parenting.

Most teachers are drawn to the profession because of their love for children and their skill in working with them, but almost all of us have discovered that working with children's families is as much a part of our jobs as working with children. For most of us, this discovery has come in stages. The first stage of the developmental path many teachers have taken can be labeled "Save the child." Most of us have had the experience of knowing one or more children we wanted to take home with us. "If I could just save this child from her parents, her life would be much better." After our imaginary houses were filled with numerous children, we discovered the need to come up with a new paradigm. The second developmental stage is "Save the parents." If we can't rescue all the children from their parents, we can at least teach the parents everything we know about good child development practice so they can care for their children the same way we do. While this kind of thinking has some merit, it fails to acknowledge the gifts, resources, goals, and culture that all parents hold for their children. The final developmental stage in this theory is "Partnership with families." This is where we acknowledge that both teachers and parents have the knowledge, expertise, experience, and resources that are needed for the best education, care, and support for every child (Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer 2004).

When I heard Ellen Galinsky talk about family-centered care in a keynote address several years ago, I finally had the words to describe what I had been discovering since my early days working with children and families. Families—not just children—are in the center of care, and as children's primary teachers and advocates, families are essential partners in the care and education of their children.

Our work with families evolves as we explore the implications of family-centered care. Our language has been changing as well. It is challenging to find language that includes and describes all families, genders, cultures, and abilities. In this book the term "family" is often used instead of "parent." This is an attempt to include *all* of the

significant people who care for the child: aunts, uncles, grandparents, foster parents, older siblings, neighbors, adoptive parents, friends, and parents. The term “family” can be confusing in some contexts because it includes young siblings and others who might not need to be consulted or involved in events, such as an individual conference with the teacher. In these situations “parent” is used. When it is used, it refers to any and all people who are taking a primary care role with a child (outside of the child care setting). The terms “parent” and “family” are thus used somewhat interchangeably in the book.

Similarly, this book is intended for any person who cares for children in a professional way: teachers, family home child care providers, in-home child care providers, friends, neighbors, and relatives. Whenever the term “teacher” or “provider” is used, it refers to any of these people. The terms “school,” “classroom,” “child development program,” and “program” are also used interchangeably and refer to any setting where child care and education are taking place.

The Reflection and Exercise boxes throughout the book are intended to help you connect with and understand the information in the book and apply it to your own thinking, practice, and experience. They are not formal exercises that you need to do exactly as they are written. Use and adapt them so that they will work for you. I encourage you to take some time with them because they are intended to make the book an interactive, hands-on learning experience, which we all know is the best way to learn. Enjoy!

REFERENCES

Gonzalez-Mena, Janet, and Dianne Widmeyer Eyer. 2004. *Infants, toddlers, and caregivers: A curriculum of respectful, responsive care and education*. 6th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.



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The Importance of Family-Teacher Partnerships

◆◆ It's all about relationships!" you might hear as you walk by a group of teachers attending a training workshop. This slogan should be the cheer for the early childhood profession, because it truly is the cornerstone of what we do well in our field. Early childhood teachers understand that creating relationships with children is essential to their practice. Teachers learn how to develop trust and attachment in their relationships with infants. With toddlers they create connections that promote children's budding sense of autonomy. Teachers form relationships with preschoolers that encourage children's initiative. From strong, trusting, responsive relationships between children and adults come cognitive development and literacy, social, and emotional development, as well as language and physical development. The critical nature of children's relationships with adults in their early development is highlighted by theorists such as Erik Erikson, who told us that the first human emotional milestone is the infant's trust and attachment to a caregiver (Erikson 1963), and Lev Vygotsky, who showed us how important social interactions are to children's developing thinking skills (Kearsley n.d.).

What is less obvious to the early education profession is the importance of another relation-

ship in the lives of young children. The relationships that occur among the important adults in a child's life are as important as the relationships between a child and those adults. Children's emotional safety and sense of well-being are deeply affected by the adult relationships surrounding them. Children are also taking an intensive observation course on relationships: they learn how to communicate, express caring, solve problems, and work together from watching the adults around them. This course includes all the significant adults in a child's life, not just family members, and their relationships with one another. The relationships between a teacher and a child's family members have tremendous potential for affecting the life of a young child. Another early childhood theorist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, sheds light on this in his model of human ecology (Bronfenbrenner 1990). Bronfenbrenner says that people don't develop all on their own but that their development is affected by all the different systems they are a part of (such as their family, their school or educational program, their church, and so on) and also by the way those systems interact with one another. For this reason Bronfenbrenner sees the interactions between home and school as very important in the child's development. He advocates for building bridges

between home and school that include “ongoing patterns of exchange of information, two-way communication, mutual accommodation, and mutual trust” (Bronfenbrenner 1990). What are children learning from the relationships they see between their early childhood caregivers and teachers, and their important family members? Most of us remember the feelings we had watching our parents or other family members laugh, love, or argue together. For example, one teacher, Angelica, remembers fondly the times her parents sang together after all the children were in bed. “I would lie there listening to them sing, and I had the warmest, safest feeling.” Another teacher, Chris, remembers the arguments his mother and grandmother had. “There would be a few short, sharp words, and then the air would be icy. You could feel the anger, but there weren’t words for it. I felt scared as a child, but I didn’t know what to say or who to turn to because my most important people weren’t talking about it.” When we read about these memories, it’s easy to see how the interactions between these important family members affected the children involved, helping them feel either safe and comfortable or afraid and confused. What do you suppose the children learned about how to express love or anger? They possibly learned that love is expressed through doing things together, or that anger should only be expressed “nonverbally.”

Here’s another example: one parent, Tamara, remembers an encounter between her father and her kindergarten teacher. “My father walked me to school on my first day of kindergarten. When we got to the school, he went up to the teacher to introduce us. The teacher smiled at him and said, ‘Hello, Mr. Mendoza.’ I had never heard my father called ‘Mr.’ My father beamed, and I immediately fell in love with my teacher.” Why do you think this interaction was so powerful for the child involved? What did the child learn about respectful relationships between adults? What did she learn about who was welcome at

her school? How do you think this relationship between her teacher and her family affected her learning? This example shows us how very important the relationships between teachers and parents are in the lives and success of children, and illustrates Bronfenbrenner’s point. Where are we in the early childhood field in developing these sturdy bridges between home and school?

THE TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

While a few teachers are accomplished and experienced in building strong relationships with families, many teachers struggle with this essential task. Some feel competent working with children but lack the same confidence and experience working with adults; some are motivated to develop relationships with families but aren’t sure where to begin; many have begun the process of building relationships and have come up against what feels like a dead end. Let’s listen to some teachers.

“I have always wanted to work with children. It’s the adults that are hard for me.”

“I love working with children. They are so much more natural than grown-ups.”

“I would love to have a meaningful relationship with each of the families in my program, but where would I get the time?”

“If I could just work with children and ignore their parents, I would have the perfect job.”

“I know parents mean well, but they often just get in the way when I’m taking care of their kids.”

“When I’m with the children, I know what I’m doing. When I’m with the parents, I feel tongue-tied.”

“It’s hard when the parents hang around in the classroom. I just want them to go, so I can teach.”

“It seems like parents either ignore me or criticize what I am doing with their kids.”

“I finally decided to post the parents’ names by their children’s cubby, so I could at least greet them by name in the morning.”

“I love every other part of my job, but I’m terrified of the parent conferences and parent meetings.”

These statements represent the feelings of many teachers, especially those who have been attracted to teaching by their interest in and love for children, not their desire to work with adults. Building relationships with children is different than building relationships with adults. Many excellent teachers struggle with even the simplest day-to-day communications with parents, and most of us have experienced the challenge of negotiating differing opinions, miscommunication, and misunderstandings with parents about the care and education of children.

REFLECTING ON YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT WORKING WITH FAMILIES

Use these questions to explore your feelings about working with families, and discuss your thoughts with coworkers or fellow students:

What are your feelings about working with families?

What do you enjoy about it, and what is hard?

What do you consider your strengths in working with families?

What do you hope to learn that will help you feel more comfortable and be more effective in working with families?

THE PARENT’S PERSPECTIVE

Like teachers, families have a range of feelings about their relationships with their children’s teachers. Some families don’t even consider that there could be a place for them at school; some would like to have a relationship with teachers but

are uncertain about how to do it; some families have clear ideas of how they would like to be involved but perceive roadblocks in communication; and some are actively frustrated with their interactions with teachers. Here is what some parents have said about their connections with their children’s teachers:

“I have so many questions for the teachers, but they seem so busy with the children, I don’t feel like I should interrupt.”

“There is one teacher that I can talk to about my child, but when she isn’t there, I don’t get any information.”

“I often have information I want to tell the teacher about my child’s needs or health or about what is happening in our family, but I can’t figure out a good time to talk to him.”

“I love spending time with my child in the program. I learn so much from watching the teachers and seeing what my child plays with and who her friends are, but I wonder if I’m in the way, if the teachers just want the school to be for the kids.”

“I’m curious about what my child does there all day, but when I ask him, he says, ‘Nothing,’ and I never hear from the teachers.”

“Sometimes I feel embarrassed when I’m in the classroom and my child is acting up. The teacher always seems to know what to say, and I’m afraid to open my mouth and sound stupid.”

“I’d like to do a special activity with the kids, but I don’t know how the school feels about parents in the classroom.”

“I’d like to know more about the school, like their policies and what they are teaching the children, but I don’t know who to ask.”

“I told the morning teacher that my child needed to be taken to the toilet, but she didn’t tell the afternoon teacher, so my child had an accident in the afternoon. I was really frustrated.”

BUILDING BRIDGES: DO WE REALLY NEED THEM?

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes, “There is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools” (2003). Is it really necessary for teachers to have good relationships with parents? What if teachers decide not to tread on the tender geography of family partnerships? Can’t they just focus their energies on the children in their care and let parents worry about what happens at home? In fact, this is the way many good teachers have been doing it for years. But as we can see in the preceding examples, children, parents, and teachers all suffer when we fail to cross the borderlands and build the essential link between teachers and families. Children miss out on consistency of care and education and on the opportunity to see the people from two parts of their lives come together cooperatively for their benefit. Families don’t experience the teacher’s respect and support for their important role in the education of their children. These parents also miss the opportunity to partner with and learn from their children’s teachers. Teachers who don’t have ongoing mutually respectful relationships with families lose a crucial chance to learn about the children in their care. They miss the potential resources and information families can offer to help teachers do the best job possible. This missing knowledge and resources make their jobs more difficult and less rewarding. On the other hand, the benefits of family-teacher partnerships for children, teachers, and families make the learning, uncertainty, and challenges of building and nurturing those partnerships well worth the effort.

FROM RELATIONSHIP TO PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships are a unique kind of relationship. They are different from some of the relationships that currently exist between teachers and parents. A partnership is a relationship between equals;

each person in a partnership is equally valued for his or her knowledge and contribution to the relationship. This doesn’t mean that both partners bring exactly the same thing to the partnership. It means that each is respected for his or her unique contribution. In a partnership people are interested in understanding the other person’s perspective, engaging in two-way communication, consulting with each other on important decisions, and respecting and working through differences of opinion. People in partnership often discover that working through these differences increases the trust in the relationship; they find that they are enriched by the experience of working toward shared visions and goals.

Most of us have “partnered” with families in one way or another. On one end of the continuum partnership may include teachers making simple requests of families like “Who can bring a piñata, make phone calls, wash the nap sheets, or fix the slide?” On this end of the continuum the teacher and program staff make most of the decisions, and parents are just responsible for choosing whether they can do a certain task. On the other end of the continuum families create and design the program, hire the teachers, and consult on all decisions—large and small—that affect the program. Between these points, along the continuum, are many ways for both families and teachers to use their initiative, share resources, and collaborate with each other. When families and teachers truly team up, it can provide benefits for everyone: children, parents, teachers, and the program. Partnerships provide teachers and families an ally, a listening ear, acknowledgment for their important work, and information to help them do a better job. At first it is easy to see how this kind of partnership can benefit children. What is less obvious is how it benefits parents and even teachers. Ultimately, it benefits the program and the larger community as well because it is the basis for larger networks of support. Are you interested