# Developing Relationships with Parents

he early childhood education field places a lot of stock in the importance of developing relationships between teachers and children. The "Relationships Among Teachers and Children" section of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation is heavily weighted in importance when programs are applying for accreditation. School entrance, orientation, style of interaction, scheduling—all are done with an eye on how relationships between children and teachers are built or hindered. If we believe that relationships between teachers and parents are critical to children's experiences, we must also work on developing these bonds as well.

# Tips for Communicating with Parents

Remember those teachers we mentioned in the introduction? You know, the teachers that parents always want for their child? The ones to whom parents always want to talk, who can even give parents criticism and have parents listen to them. You can move toward being one of these teachers by building relationships through communication. You can take a number of steps to improve your communication with families:

- 1. Take time to develop lasting relationships with parents.
- 2. Be proactive with information.
- 3. Focus on the parents' perspective.
- 4. Talk it through with a colleague.
- 5. Take time to react.
- 6. Use the principles of active listening and respectful communication.
- 7. Give parents the benefit of the doubt.

# Take Time to Develop Lasting Relationships with Parents

One mom describes her feelings for the teacher:

"My daughter loves her teacher, but that's not the only reason I am crazy about Terry. She's just a neat person! She really seems to care about me as well as Tiffany. She asks about my day, notices my mood, and shares funny stories about her own child. I feel so lucky to have Terry in our lives."

It sounds simple, but it takes time and commitment. Think of the steps you take to build a relationship with a new child in your program. You approach her cautiously, giving her time to get used to your presence. You try to pick up cues from her and adjust your own behavior to be inviting without being overwhelming. You give her time to trust you. You demonstrate yourself to be likeable. You give her time to figure out that you are here to stay. You hope that you get a chance to have positive interactions with her before you have to set a limit or confront a negative situation.

The same is true of relationships with parents. Acknowledge that they are individuals just as their children are. Some are extroverts and will be easy to interact with. Others will take more time. Some will trust you instantly and others will need you to prove yourself. Treat your developing relationship with parents as deliberately and as individually as you do with children. Don't expect the same actions (a friendly greeting or small talk) to be received in the same way by all parents. Reflect on a budding relationship as you do with children and plan the next action with the understanding that a single formula won't work for all.

You know how to create relationships with children, but how do you go about it with adults? Here are six fundamental ways to lay the groundwork.

#### ★ Be available.

This doesn't mean chatting with parents when the children need your attention or staying after work for thirty minutes talking about a parent's new job. Instead, find a way to communicate with parents that

works for both of you. This may be a quick conversation at the beginning of the day, phone calls in the evening, or e-mail. If parents find you easy to talk to about little things, it will be easier for them to talk to you about difficult topics.

#### \* Let parents lead the conversation.

Don't try to direct every conversation. Sometimes the parents who have something important to tell you need to get around to the topic in their own way.

#### ※ Be yourself.

Sometimes parents idealize their child's teacher. You seem to have all the answers. Their child doesn't misbehave with you as he does at home. A pedestal is a difficult place from which to build a relationship. Don't be afraid to show your faults. It is not useful for parents to think you are perfect.

#### ★ Share while staying within your own personal boundaries.

Teachers vary in their need for space from parents. This will not interfere in developing a relationship with parents. You do not need to be friends with the parents of the children you work with. It is also not inherently wrong to be friends with the parents in your class. There is no one right way.

Most parents respond positively to clear expectations from teachers. Some teachers are comfortable with more formal relationships parents call them by their surnames and teachers keep personal information private. Other teachers may develop easy intimacy with families—they openly share information about their own families and lives outside of school. If the openness is sincere, many parents will respond. Parents may be more forthcoming with their own children's difficulties if they know the teacher has had similar battles.

#### ⋉ Be trustworthy.

What may seem like a small thing to you may feel like a betrayal of confidence to a parent. Always ask if information is public (for example, moving, making a major purchase, taking a new job, having a medical condition, or becoming engaged). If parents ask you for casual information about another parent, be clear and friendly in your refusal to give information. For example, if a parent asks you if another child's parent is pregnant, you can answer by saying, "I really can't talk about families, but you are welcome to ask her mom when she comes for pickup." While the parent may be momentarily embarrassed, they will remember that you were trustworthy.

# \* Remember that the relationship is in service to the child, not your needs.

Friendships with parents are tricky, especially during the time the child is in your care. Enter these relationships with caution. The child can easily get pushed out of the way while the adults are enjoying each other. Sometimes we need to tell parents hard truths, and our personal relationship with parents should not get in the way.

#### Be Proactive with Information

Emily's mom said the following:

"It was amazing! I drove up to pick up my child from school and there was an ambulance in the driveway. I ran up to the door, terrified that something had happened to Emily. There was the teacher, greeting us with information before we entered the classroom: 'The children are listening to a story with Sally (the other teacher). One of the children in our class had a seizure at school. We had to call an ambulance to care for her.' She then handed us a preprinted letter that addressed how to talk to our children about seizures, which they had written in case something like this happened. Because I was informed, I was able to calm Emily rather than having her deal with a scared mommy."

Sometimes we avoid telling parents about less pleasant experiences in the hope that they won't find out and with the notion that what they don't know won't hurt them. The information may be for the whole parent body (a lice outbreak or a teacher leaving the program) or for a specific family (a child getting hurt at school or losing a belonging that is later found). This is a bad policy for two reasons. First, parents will not trust us if they learn teachers are keeping secrets. They will feel it is necessary to dig up information that is being hidden from them. As they investigate, we become less forthcoming and the relationship dissolves. Second, it is damaging for children to have experiences that their parents cannot help them understand. Even if parents never find out something you didn't want them to know, it is harder for children to deal with memories they are harboring if their parents do not know or understand their experience. Parents can accept almost anything if they are told honestly and assured mistakes won't happen again. I have known of parents forgiving teachers for forgetting children on field trips, accidentally hurting a child, saying something careless, and even losing control of their anger.

Share daily experiences with parents often enough that they are not startled by a request for communication. If parents are not accustomed to chatting with you or receiving written communication, contact will take on greater importance. Slipping something into conversation is easier when communication happens often. If you have information that is hard to share with a parent, keep the following in mind:

#### ★ Keep a calm demeanor even if you are nervous.

#### ※ Don't forget to breathe!

Parents pick up on nonverbal cues.

#### ★ Begin with assurances that everything is okay.

Sometimes people don't listen as they are waiting for the "punch line." A conversation about a child getting hurt can start: "She's okay now, but . . . ," or a conversation about a child's misbehavior can start: "She understands now, but . . ."

#### ★ If you are unsure about the parent's reaction, don't bring it up in front of the child.

If the child reacts to the tension between you and the parent, the whole situation can escalate.

#### ※ Talk to the parent out of earshot of other parents.

The worst thing that can happen is for another parent to hear part of the interaction. Because it would be inappropriate to tell the other parent about the communication due to issues of confidentiality, you would be unable to tell them anything about the conversation with the first parent. The parent who overheard can end up having to make up a story in her own mind to explain what was overheard. For example, a parent might overhear part of a conversation about a toy getting lost and assume that the teacher and parent were talking about a child getting lost.

#### ★ Make arrangements for follow-up conversation if necessary.

It might be that you have told the parent something they need to digest before the dialogue continues. Suggest the parent call you later or agree to meet him at school early the next day.

#### ★ Avoid giving unwelcome news in writing before verbal contact.

This is especially a problem with e-mail. If information needs to go in writing, it can follow a conversation. Don't forget that anything you put in writing can be read by others (including lawyers!), without the supporting context.

# Focus on the Parent's Perspective

This parent believes her request is reasonable:

"I just asked if my daughter could stay awake during naptime. We are flying out tonight to visit my folks, and I wanted her to sleep on the plane. The teacher started telling me that she makes all her phone calls while the kids are sleeping and how it would be hard for her to keep my daughter awake. She's not the one who has to be on that plane with a restless child who won't sleep!"

If you start communication based on an understanding of the parents' perspective, you can choose your words more carefully. It is not the same as communicating with colleagues. Avoid using technical jargon. Terms such as *manipulatives*, *fine motor coordination*, and *self-regulation* may mean different things to parents. Give them information as it pertains to their child, their roles as parents, and how it affects their lives. They are less likely to be concerned with the needs of the whole class, your needs, or the school's needs than they are with their needs and the needs of their children. This is not a matter of being selfish. The parent's job is to think about the needs of her child and family. Your job is to balance the needs of all of the children and the program as a whole and to find a solution that works for everyone.

In order to keep yourself focused on understanding the parent's perspective so you can solve the problem, ask yourself questions like these:

#### \* How does this issue directly affect the parent?

The impact on the class, the other children, the other families, or the teacher will not be viewed as the parent's problem.

#### \*What do you want the parent to do?

It is fine to communicate "FYI" information to parents, but be clear that the information is your message. You are not asking for action. You may want to just let parents know that their child had a meltdown before lunch, but you don't expect them to do anything. If this meltdown is a continuing problem, you may ask the parents to take action. If you do want action, have a couple of alternatives in mind. Maybe you will suggest that the child eats breakfast or that the parents let you know if he doesn't eat so you can offer an earlier snack.

#### \* Are you keeping an open mind?

If you are unwilling to accept any alternative solution, you are likely to experience conflict.

#### ★ Are you truly listening to the parent's point of view?

If you are thinking about how you are going to respond to what the parent is saying or prove her wrong, you are not truly listening.

# Talk It Through with a Colleague

This teacher describes her problem:

"Boy, did I step in it. I just tried to mention to Mrs. Jones, as she was picking up Doug, that he pocketed a toy car today. Could she check to be sure he didn't have any other school toys at home. She just blew up! Said her child wasn't a thief! Made a scene in front of the other parents!"

If you are a novice teacher, have particularly difficult information to share with a parent, or have not developed a positive relationship with the parent, you may benefit from practicing the conversation with a colleague. If the colleague will take the role of devil's advocate or even difficult parent, you can be better prepared for the conversation. Some questions to discuss together include the following:

#### ★ What is the best timing for the topic?

Sometimes it is important to talk to parents right away (before they hear about it from someone else, such as their child). At other times it is better to let everyone cool down before broaching the topic.

# ★ How will you bring up the topic?

Talk through your opener. Should you be prepared with resources? If you are talking to a parent about a concern that involves his child, it will help if you can provide supporting articles, brochures, or community resource information.

# ★ Should you invite a colleague to join in the discussion?

If tempers are likely to flare or you are concerned about being misquoted, having a coteacher or director with you might help. If nothing else, you might want to make sure someone else is in the building.

#### ★ How can you share information as clearly as possible without being too blunt?

You may find that role-playing the conversation with a coworker can help.

#### Take Time to React

Kiko is a new teacher:

"Timmy's mom asked me if I thought he was ready for kindergarten. I said, "Sure." I mentioned the conversation with the head teacher and she disagreed. She thinks he's too immature. I don't know how to bring it up to the mom now."

If a parent brings an issue to you, don't be afraid to tell them you need to think about what they've said or gather more information. Here are some steps to keep you out of trouble:

1. Take time to cool down if the conversation is heated or pushes your buttons.

You can't take back words once they are said.

Make sure you have the authority to make promises if asked. Giving permission to parents to do something out of the ordinary, and later telling them your supervisor doesn't approve, makes both you and your supervisor look bad.

3. Take the time you need to gather information.

A school superintendent vowed to always return calls from parents within twenty-four hours, which sometimes proved to be a bad idea. She didn't take time to gather facts first. By taking the time to respond most appropriately, you demonstrate to parents that you are taking their issue seriously.

4. If there is a delay in getting back to the parents, let them know you haven't forgotten.

If you are waiting for information, let them know what the holdup is (for example, you're waiting to speak to the director who is on vacation, or you want to check licensing regulations) and when you will respond. You don't want to give the impression you are ignoring the conversation in hopes the parents will forget about it.

# Use the Principles of Active Listening and Respectful Communication

Rita shares how she uses experience from her personal life to improve her communication with parents:

"My husband and I are in counseling, and I find the same advice our counselor has for us about how to communicate also works well with

the parents. I had a mom come to me, ready to really let me have it. She was mad because her daughter's stuffed animal was lost. I pulled her aside; listened to her without interrupting; and demonstrated that I understood her by saying, "This isn't the first time Boo-Boo has been lost. It's really frustrating, and I know Sierra can't sleep without Boo-Boo." Then I made a commitment for a short-term and a longterm solution: "Let's find Boo-Boo now, and tonight I'll think about how we can keep this from happening again." We looked around and found the bear, and the mom relaxed. She suggested buying another bear like Boo-Boo so it wouldn't be a problem if the bear was lost again. It was great that she went from being mad at me to feeling like we are a team."

Communication between parents and early childhood educators should reflect the best of what we know about respectful communication. We have ongoing relationships with parents, and strained communication won't help. Children notice the relationship between the important people in their lives their parents and their teachers—and any tension between them will upset children. It is especially rewarding when you see the respectful communication techniques you are using find their way into the communication between parents and their children. Here are some cues for respectful communication:

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Don't interrupt. Hear the feelings that drive the words.

#### ★ Demonstrate that you understand the message of the parent.

Phrases such as "I hear you saying . . ." or "It sounds like . . ." may feel stilted when you try to use them, so find a way of expressing these ideas that fits you. Some teachers use "I wonder if . . ." or "Do you feel . . ." as other ways to reflect back.

#### ★ Use words to express that you understand the issue from their perspective.

If parents don't think you get it, they may give up or become frustrated. When you show that you understand why they feel the way they do, parents will be ready to move to finding a solution. It also gives you the opportunity to correct your assumptions if you read the situation wrong. You might think a parent is angry when she is actually worried. If you don't understand, ask.

#### ★ Be sure to avoid blaming the parent for the situation.

If you are raising a difficult issue, describe the problem in nonjudgmental terms, the consequences of the problem, and, if appropriate,

your feelings. It may be that your feelings need to be kept out of it to keep the interaction professional. For example, "When you are late picking up Abby, I am late picking up my daughter at her school, and she worries if I'm late."

#### ★ Keep the conversation on track.

If the parent becomes accusatory, don't take the bait. You can say, "I'm sorry you feel that way, but right now we need to find a solution for this issue that will work for all of us." If the parent brings up unrelated issues to put you on the defense, you can say, "Let's talk about that when we are done dealing with this issue." Be specific rather than general.

#### ★ Avoid inflammatory words.

Generalizing behavior makes people feel judged and defensive. Describe the events that need to be talked about (for example, "You have picked up Abby ten minutes late twice this week, and tonight you are thirty minutes late") rather than generalizing about the behavior (for example, "You are irresponsible about pickup time"). Words to avoid include rude, disrespectful, selfish, or other words you would not want people to use to describe you.

# \*When you've found a solution, say it again to make sure you both heard the same thing.

Restating is a way of clarifying and making sure that you have understood each other. Try saying something such as, "So you are going to write his name on his shoes. I will check after nap to see that they are in his cubby." The parent has a chance to hear the expectation and can correct it if necessary.

# Give Parents the Benefit of the Doubt

Sharon shares what she learned:

"I used to get so annoyed with Felice's mother. I would give her information about school procedures. She'd nod and say, "Okay," but she would never follow through. I finally realized she doesn't understand English as well as I thought she did. Now I take more time to show her what I mean, and I can see in her eyes if she understands me."

Lilian Katz believes that people tend to attribute their own mistakes to circumstances—traffic was bad, the clocks are wrong—and other people's mistakes to character flaws—she is flaky, she comes late because she likes to make an entrance (NAEYC Annual Conference, 1995, Washington, D.C., "The use of NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct within child care facilities").

The Dalai Lama says, "Assume positive intent." High expectations and a strong sense of forgiveness can go a long way in communication.

# When Nothing Seems to Work

If you give up on working with a family, it may feel like a failure for you. Before you give up on establishing a relationship with a family, make sure there are good reasons beyond your own level of frustration. You may have reasons such as these:

- \* The relationship with the parent will only improve if you take steps that are unethical or illegal.
- \* The parent's lack of trust is having a negative impact on his child's school experience.
- \* The parent's lack of trust is having a negative impact on relationships with other families in the program.
- \* The parent makes staff members feel unsafe.

A parent who is uncomfortable with the ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, or age of a teacher needs to be educated on the benefits of diversity in the life of her child. By helping a parent work through this issue, you can have a profound effect on the child's life. Take time to help families work through knee-jerk responses to prejudices they might not have even been aware of. For instance, the benefits of having a positive male presence usually outweigh the possible negative fallout. You cannot break the law governing discriminatory hiring practices even if you know parents might be uncomfortable. Once parents develop trust, they will see the unique relationship their child can develop with a male caregiver. This is especially important for children who do not have many men in their lives.

If parents refuse to take part in working with their children's challenging behavior, the program administrator will have to decide if the child can be accommodated without change. This is a delicate balance of the needs of the individual child, other children in the program, and the staff. Here are some questions that may help you make a decision:

#### 1. Is the child disruptive?

If so, is he disruptive enough to make it difficult for the group to function? Are there changes that can be made to the program (the schedule, staffing, or expectations) that will alleviate the disruption?

#### 2. Is the child thriving in the program?

If not, are there changes that can be made (personal attention, new classroom) that will help the child to thrive and grow even if it is not as much as he might with professional intervention?

#### 3. Is the relationship with the family still sound enough to benefit the child?

Can parents and staff work together to meet the child's needs, or are too many bad feelings in the way? If it feels too hard, consider whether there is some way you can change your behavior or your feelings to make the situation better.

If a parent is spreading his negative attitude to other parents and is not responding to attempts from staff to improve the relationship, the family may need to be asked to leave the program.

Staff members need to feel physically and psychologically safe at work. I had a very volatile parent who accused her son's teacher of not liking her child as much as other children and told the teacher she would be "watching her like a hawk" for examples of her son not being treated fairly. I told the parent that we had to meet with the teacher to discuss her concerns before the child could return to school. When lack of trust turns to hostility, a teacher is at risk for accusations and will not feel safe in the workplace.

If you cannot establish a baseline of trust with a family that allows you to be effective with their child, you may have to help the family leave the program. Be candid with the family about your feelings to find out if the placement should continue. You might say, "We seem to be struggling to work together for your child. Perhaps you would be better served with a teacher with whom you can more easily build a rapport."

If it is not in the best interest of the child, family, or program to continue the child's enrollment, then make a transition plan with the family to minimize disruption for the child. Give the family ample opportunity to find another placement for their child, refer them to other programs, prepare the child and other children in the program for the change, and assist the family in enrollment in another program by providing records.

#### Scenarios

# Scenario 1: What Is Going On at School? or, Building Trust

One teacher complains:

"I have a parent who doesn't seem to believe anything I tell him. It's like he is trying to catch me in a lie. He asks about how his son's day went. When I share information, he looks skeptical and grills me for more information. The other day he asked if his son could come in on his day off. I explained that we have too many children on that day and we can't take another. I saw him going over the sign-in sheets and counting the children! Once his child came home with a cut on his elbow, and the dad asked me how he did it. I explained that he fell on the sidewalk. Not five minutes later, he was asking my teaching assistant what happened! How am I supposed to develop a relationship with a parent who doesn't trust me?"

Dad sees the problem differently:

"It's important to me that I am a responsible parent. My son is too young to always tell me what happens so I need to check to be sure everything is on the up-andup. Sometimes, I think the school tries to take advantage of ignorant parents—making up rules to suit them. I am just making sure I understand the rules. The teacher is so defensive, it makes me wonder what she has to hide."

# What Is the Problem?

Developing trust is often the first challenge to a relationship between a parent and teacher. Trusting others to care for your child can be scary. The younger the child, the more vulnerable she is, as the child cannot speak for herself. Expecting trust may seem reasonable—who would place their child in a program with people they don't trust? But trust comes in increments. The most basic trust, which needs to happen before a parent can leave their child in your care, is trust that their child will not be abused or stolen. Deeper levels of trust—caregivers will care about and for the child, like and perhaps love the child, understand the child enough to meet her needs; caregivers will interact with the child as they would at home and will not

place the needs of other children before the needs of their child—develop more slowly. If a teacher or parent perceives a lack of trust, problems will arise in relationship building.

Once a climate of distrust has developed, you need to figure out if it can be repaired. Sit down with the family. You may want another person with you to help you communicate. Share what you have experienced with the family and your concern for how it may affect their child. Remember, it is not the family's job to care about you.

# What Are You Thinking?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. It is easier to move into finding positive solutions if you can avoid the following mindsets, recognizing them as unhelpful to developing a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include the following:

- \* "The parent doesn't think I am trustworthy." It is hard to keep from personalizing suspicions from parents. Rather, give parents the benefit of the doubt and stay as open as possible. Defensiveness can confirm the parent's feeling of suspicion.
- ※ "The parents will undermine my relationship with the child." Children are likely to pick up safety cues from parents. Telling parents to stop acting distrustful in front of their children is not likely to help. Children pick up on the feelings of their parents. When their words, feelings, and actions do not match, it will confuse the child.
- ※ "The parents will ruin my reputation with other parents." You cannot control relationships between parents. Parents will share concerns with other parents, and all you can do is hope that your relationship with most parents is strong enough for them to ignore the concerns of others.
- ※ "This parent is looking for an excuse to remove her child from my school (or class or home)."

Sometimes parents need a face-saving reason for removing a child from a program when embarrassing factors require a change. It is much easier to tell friends that the program or teacher wasn't good enough than it is to say you can't afford the program or you need longer hours than the program provides. You can make it easier for a parent to remove their child from the program by being gracious about the exit, so they don't need to find evidence against you.

# What Are Parents Thinking?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as theirs do with us) can help us to be more sensitive.

#### 溪 "Here we go again."

Parents who have experienced a profound lack of fairness in their own lives, especially families who are not from the dominant culture, are often eager to protect their children from that experience. If parents are suspicious of you, they may have been lied to in similar situations in the past. It is important to give the message that your treatment of all families will be fair. This is not about you, it's about society. For some families, you will need to be overt about fairness rather than thinking it will be assumed. Tell families how you have ensured fairness when an action or policy implies fairness (such as enrollment or placement in programs, variable tuition rates, or discipline policies).

#### 🔆 "This teacher only shares information with my wife, as if she's the real parent and I am not."

Trust can be difficult for both dads and moms for different reasons. Most men are going to feel in the minority in a preschool environment, and most are unaccustomed to that feeling. Separated parents may be especially sensitive. Noncustodial parents can feel out of the loop or that the school takes the side of the custodial parent (often the mother). Mothers can feel powerless to advocate for themselves or their children. If you think a parent is having a difficult time expressing her needs or those of her children, take the time to clarify.

# Solving the Problem

Each situation will require unique solutions, but the following are some paths you might take.

- 🔆 Ask the parent if they are getting the information they need from you. Say something such as, "I am wondering if I am keeping you informed enough about class events. Is a short talk at pickup time working for you?"
- Listen to the parents' comments without defensiveness.

If you allow them to talk without being interrupted, they may get past negative feelings and figure out what they really want. They may realize you are not the person they are struggling with. They may share things you have said or nonverbal communication messages they have picked up from you that you are unaware of. When your eyes dart from the parent to a child, the parent may read that move as disinterest rather than you being hypervigilantly keeping an eye on the class.

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Say something such as, "I wish I had time to talk to you at pick-up time as well. It seems like as soon as you walk in the door, something comes up that takes my attention."

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See what the parent thinks would help to improve information sharing, and create a plan that everyone can live with. "Would phone calls or notes work better?"

# After the Problem Is Solved: Moving Toward True Partnership

Building trust takes time and if you stick with the family during the process, it can be very rewarding. Some of the families that teachers struggled with the most eventually established such a strong foundation of trust, they continued to seek our counsel when their child entered high school. The other benefit is that often families have several children go through the program. You can enjoy a foundation of trust from the beginning with the siblings.

Offer families regular opportunities to fill out anonymous questionnaires, giving feedback, assessing the program, and reviewing your performance. Being able to put their concerns on the table might help them let go. It also gives you feedback from many satisfied families.

#### Before You Have a Problem

Read through the following list and check off what you have already accomplished (see pages 2–12). If many of the checkboxes are blank, you have work to do to solve the problem and create an environment where problems are easy to solve.

#### ☐ Begin by building a relationship.

Acknowledge the need to build trust. When you first meet the family, acknowledge that trust takes time. This can help parents relax and understand that their feelings are natural. If they think they shouldn't feel that way, they may be looking for an explanation of what triggered their reaction.

#### ☐ Be proactive with information.

Share information without fail. Even if you aren't sure that parents need to know something, tell them anyway. Tell them about the scratch on their child's knee, the tears the child cried at rest time, the lunch box you lost. Do so matter-of-factly—you are presenting information that parents need to have. Your honesty will build trust.

#### ☐ Focus on the parents' perspective.

Use the principles of active listening and respectful communication. Listen to parents' concerns without defensiveness. Try to be reassuring without being condescending. Remember that teaching parents to trust others is your job as much as teaching children to trust others.

# Scenario 2: Fear of Men, Strangers, and Dangerous Persons, or, The Boogeyman

One teacher shares her dilemma:

"We had our parent open house at the beginning of the year. Mrs. Johnson asked me about the student interns, so I told her about Joe. She became pale. "A man? I don't feel comfortable with that. Maybe I can get my daughter switched into the other class."

Mrs. Johnson explains:

"You read so much about child molesters. I know that they are usually men. It seems like pedophiles get jobs where they have access to children. I would never forgive myself if something happened to my daughter. It just doesn't seem worth taking the chance."

#### What Is the Problem?

Emotionally, leaving your child with others is risky enough. Asking parents to accept placing their children in the care of someone they find suspect is even tougher.

Consciousness is heightened in new situations. Just as you begin noticing red Volkswagens once you buy one, placing their child in care makes parents notice any new article about children in child care. Parents read about molestation stories. They know that they are ultimately responsible for what happens to their children. They may be receiving comments and even pressure from relatives. A generation ago it was less common for men to be involved in the care of children and to some people, it seems unnatural.

# What Are You Thinking?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. It is easier to move into finding positive solutions if you can avoid getting into the following mind-sets, recognizing them as unhelpful to developing a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include the following:

- | \*\* "The parent doesn't trust my judgment."
  - We like to believe that the families we work with trust our decisions unconditionally, but it's appropriate for parents to scrutinize decisions that affect their children. That's their job!
- ※ "Parents are interfering with staffing decisions." Parents want and need to know who is caring for their children. You would not approve if parents left their children with a babysitter they

didn't know. They also need to know who is taking care of their children in provider-based care.

#### \* "The parent is going to make unfair accusations."

Unfounded charges of abuse have been a major concern of caregivers for over a decade. The best way to avoid accusations is to keep the parents as informed and involved as possible. If parents feel free to take advantage of an open-door policy, they learn they have nothing to fear.

# What Are Parents Thinking?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as theirs do with us) can help us to be more sensitive.

| Why would a man want to work with young children?"

Some people are less comfortable with men caring for children than others. Is the concerned parent ethnically different from you? Is she a single mother who may have less experience leaving her child in the care of a male? Is there a religious issue? Knowing the answers to these questions will not necessarily change your policies, but may give you insight into how to best approach the family.

# Solving the Problem

If a parent has questioned the appropriateness of a staff member, you may find it hard to keep from becoming defensive. You can help by providing reassurances

- ※ Explain why you have selected this person to join your staff. Share what you like about him, special qualifications he has (including his personality), and the extent of your reference check.
- \* Share the benefits of having men as caregivers. It will not have occurred to some parents that nurturing men can enrich their children's lives.
- \* Share positive stories from your experiences. It can help to share specific stories about how educators who are men have had a positive impact on the lives of children.
- \* Explain the precautions you will take to protect all children and staff. It is especially important to protect the men on staff from suspicion. Will he (or any other staff member) be alone with children when toileting or dressing? These activities place men at risk for accusations and may not be worthwhile. If he is teaching alone, will people drop into the classroom unannounced? This may give parents confidence.

# After the Problem Is Solved: Moving Toward True Partnership

Can you include parent representatives in the hiring process? When parents have personal investment in a staff member's success, they share their enthusiasm with other families.

#### Before You Have a Problem

Read through the following list and check off what you have already accomplished (see pages 2–12). If many of the checkboxes are blank, you have work to do to solve the problem and create an environment where problems are easy to solve.

#### ☐ Begin by building a relationship.

Introduce parents to all staff. Provide introductions in person or through written notices. Have photos and short biographies posted or in promotional materials. Include background information about each staff member. Knowing that he is someone's son, father, uncle, friend, and so on makes him seem safer. The best way to avoid demonizing a person is by getting to know him or her.

#### ☐ Be proactive with information.

Write policy statements and share your safety precautions. The parent handbook can prepare parents for inclusion of men on the staff. Most parents aren't aware of required or voluntary background checks on staff members. Sharing that you have researched possible criminal records relieves parents. Start the process of parents and staff meeting each other sooner. If parents aren't caught by surprise, they are less likely to react.

# Scenario 3: The Parent Who Drains You. or, "Excuse me, but I have some children here who need my attention."

This teacher is overwhelmed by the needs of parents:

"Sarah's mom is so needy. She is single and has no family in this area. I know she's had some health problems as well. But she acts like our job is to take care of her instead of taking care of Sarah. She comes in when we are in the middle of group time and she always has ten things she has to tell us, like who is picking up Sarah, phone numbers for where we can reach her, some new worry she has from reading her magazines. It's the same routine when she picks up. My teaching partner and I both just want to hide when she comes. She volunteers to help in the classroom on Wednesdays but then she wants to spend the whole time talking to me instead of working with the children. No offense, but I don't need another girlfriend!"

Sarah's mom explains:

"It is so hard taking care of Sarah by myself. Her father is such a flake—he makes all kinds of promises but he always lets us down. Sarah is my whole life. I spend a lot of time at her school so I can be the best mother possible. But sometimes it seems like the teachers just don't want to know about Sarah's time at home. They don't seem very friendly when I come into the classroom. It makes me wonder if everything is okay. I mean, don't they want parents to be involved?"

# What Is the Problem?

If a parent has already established a habit of demanding your attention, you need to gently wean her off it. If you withdraw too suddenly, the parent may think she has done something wrong and put more energy into reconciling. It can be helpful to find a replacement: "Talk to Betsy's mom about that—she mentioned that too."

# What Are You Thinking?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. It is easier to move into finding positive solutions if you can avoid getting into the following mind-sets, recognizing them as unhelpful to developing a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include these:

#### ※ "This parent is taking over my classroom."

Parents don't always realize that we keep a constant vigil on our classrooms. It appears that we spend some time just standing around. Parents don't think that they are distracting us from observing the children.

#### ※ "This parent expects me to socialize with her and it interferes with my private life."

As difficult as it may be, it's kinder to refuse invitations for social time, if you don't want to attend.

# What Are Parents Thinking?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as theirs do with us) can help us to be more sensitive.

#### 🔖 "She loves my daughter so much, we have a strong connection. We could be friends."

Some parents are more isolated and so are needier than others. This can be true of parents who have moved from a different country or single parents. While you should not socialize more than you are comfortable doing, you also shouldn't worry that you need to have the same relationship with all parents.

# Solving the Problem

#### ※ Acknowledge the parent's need for contact.

Say something such as, "I can tell you really appreciate the time you spend in our classroom."

#### ※ Let the parent know that the children are your first priority.

Say something such as, "I'm sorry that at times it seems like I am ignoring you, but the children need my constant attention."

#### ※ Suggest other modes of communication.

Say something such as, "Since I can't stop to give you directions when you come in to do a project with the children, how about if I leave written instructions for you on the clipboard?"

#### 🔆 Avoid sending double messages.

If you say, "Maybe we can meet for coffee sometime," and then you avoid making a firm date, the parent is left confused. Instead, you can say, "When I am not at work my family (or studies or personal life) requires all of my energy. I'm sorry I won't have time for social engagements with school families."

#### **X** Try to help the parent connect with others.

You can suggest that she join a parenting club if there is one in your area or mention a fellow parent that lives in the area she might be able to socialize with.

# After the Problem Is Solved: Moving Toward True Partnership

Why not include social support for parents as part of your job? If you know that a parent is especially needy, arrange with your coworkers to cover for you so you have time to chat with the parent. It may be a greater service for the child than you can perform in the classroom.

#### Before You Have a Problem

Read through the following list and check off what you have already accomplished (see pages 2–12). If many of the checkboxes are blank, you have work to do to solve problems and create an environment where problems are easy to solve.

#### ☐ Begin by building a relationship.

Set clear limits from the beginning. For some parents, teachers are their only constant contact with adults. They develop trust in us and appreciate that we love their children. Sometimes, they infringe upon our boundaries and want us to become a part of their social circle. We may be the only people who give them attention and they come to depend on it. It is tricky to establish limits without hurting their feelings. Set limits from the beginning. It is easier to set boundaries to begin with and is less likely to leave a parent feeling deserted.

#### ☐ Be proactive with information.

Set boundaries. If a parent wants your attention when you need to be with the children, let him know that this isn't a good time but he can call (or e-mail) you later.

#### ☐ Focus on the parents' perspective.

Help isolated parents connect with other parents. Offer social events for families and steer parents toward conversation with each other. Caring for parents' social needs is a natural part of a family-friendly program. A volunteer parent can arrange family social events. Some schools have group camping trips, family outings on weekends, and other activities to support parents.

☐ Use the principles of active listening and respectful communication. Give nonverbal messages that now is not the time to chat. If you are on the floor when the parent enters, stay there rather than rising to talk. The parent is then forced to bend down or join you on the floor, which usually keeps conversations short. Demonstrate the need for you to break away from social conversation by leaving suddenly to deal with a child. Keep your eyes on the children rather than on the parent to send a clear message about your priorities.

# Scenario 4: Recommending a Child for Assessment, or, "What is wrong with Tim?"

One teacher shares:

"I have been working with children for years, and I have good instincts about when something is just a phase a child is going through and when there is a problem. We've been talking to Tim's parents since he started the year. We gave him the benefit of the doubt for the first month of school, but he just wasn't catching on to routines as fast as I expected. We let his parents know what was going on. We'd give them a quick report at pick-up time, and they seemed like they appreciated the information. We had our first parent-teacher conferences this week where we told his parents we wanted to have Tim screened. We had the papers right there and everything so we could get right on it. The educational coordinator of our program was there too so she could explain how the process worked. Tim's parents seemed really eager to follow through and signed the papers right away. They asked if we thought they should take him to a child psychologist, and we advised them to wait until we saw the screening results. Well, that was Friday, and they haven't brought Tim to school all week. Wednesday they called the director, really upset, ready to take Tim out of the school. They told her that we don't like Tim! What happened between Friday and Monday?"

Tim's parents explain:

"We put Tim in a new school this year, and we've been really happy until now. The teachers really seemed on top of things. We had confidence that all was well. On Friday we had our first conference and found out that the teachers think something is really wrong with Tim. We had no warning and just walked into this meeting to find one of the program administrators there with papers to sign to have Tim tested for being autistic or something. We were so shocked, we didn't know what to say. I felt so ashamed that my son was in such trouble and I didn't even know it! They seemed to have it all together—knew who we could take our child to—so we were relieved that there was a plan of action. Once we got home I called my sister-in-law who is a psychologist. She said there's nothing wrong with Tim. The behavior the teachers described is perfectly normal, she says. We were relieved that she didn't think there was anything wrong with Tim but now we realize that the teachers think he is a problem. We don't feel like we should even bring him back there."

#### What Is the Problem?

Multiple issues are involved in this case. Most are related to the teachers and parents not understanding each other's perspective. One of parents' greatest fears is that there is something wrong with their child.

#### \* Parents are worried about their children's future.

One of the important phases in a parent's development is the imagining phase (Galinsky 1980), when they make pictures in their minds of their children as adults, including their occupations and families. A possible developmental delay can change that image.

#### 🔅 Parents may feel quilty.

It's hard to think that someone else noticed something about their child that they missed. If parents can't trust doctors and other professionals, what else could they have missed?

#### 🔅 Parents may blame themselves.

It's easy for parents to feel responsible if something is wrong with their child. Was it their genes? They may remember relatives that have had problems. Was it bad parenting? Maybe it's from that glass of wine mom had when she was pregnant or from going back to work too soon or being too permissive.

# What Are You Thinking?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. It is easier to move into finding positive solutions if you can avoid getting into the following mind-sets, recognizing them as unhelpful to developing a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include these:

#### 演 "If I don't get this child help, I will be irresponsible."

You are aware of the benefits of early intervention. In the past few years, teachers have felt a greater sense of alarm over early identification. The bottom line: it is ultimately the parents' responsibility.

#### 漠 "These parents are just in denial."

It is hard to be patient while parents work through their own feelings. It is hard for a teacher who has not been a parent to relate to the complexity of emotions a parent who is confronted with this possibility might feel.

#### ※ "They don't trust my judgment."

When confronted with something you don't want to believe, it is natural to look to others to support your position. If teachers are not gracious about parents' need to get corroboration, they may permanently damage the relationship they have with them.

# What Are Parents Thinking?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as theirs do with us) can help us to be more sensitive.

#### \* "The teacher doesn't understand my child."

Behaviors that may seem atypical in a child may be more typical of children in her cultural group. Self-help skills (feeding, dressing, toileting) are expected at an early age by mainstream American culture. But in some cultures, these skills are not expected or taught until much later. Secondlanguage learners may understand less than they appear to. Keep in mind that a child's atypical behavior may be related to how much they understand what you've told her.

#### \* "The teacher is saying my child is dumb!"

Different cultural groups have varied attitudes toward doctors, mental health specialists, and differently abled people. Do your homework to find out about families' attitudes and beliefs before talking to them about concerns.

# Solving the Problem

If you plan to talk to parents about concerns about their child's development, you can take steps to ensure a positive outcome. When approached with sensitivity, parents can team with teachers to learn about a child's needs and how to best meet them.

#### **Provide** parents information about screening.

Learn whether the health insurance carried by the parents provides screening, or pass on the names of public organizations that can provide evaluation. If parents are resistant to recommendations that their child be assessed, you will need to ensure that you have given parents clear information, make resources available, and repair any uneasiness between family and school.

#### 溪 Take a step back.

Assure parents that you have their child's best interests at heart, and give them time to think through your suggestions. Be clear in your attitude and in your behavior. The parents are the decision-makers where their child is concerned.

★ Be conscious of your behavior toward both the child and family. The parents may be a little wary or defensive as a result of the interaction. Be sure that you do not react defensively or cautiously. The family needs to know that nothing has changed.

#### 減 Make a plan with the parents to meet again.

Give parents time to think about what you have said, and then plan to discuss the issue again. Arrange it for a time that works for them and invite them to bring along a support person, such as a grandparent or family friend.

#### Cooperate in screening.

Many screening tools include checklists or questionnaires to be completed by the teacher.

- ★ Be available for parents' questions or concerns during the process. Parents have a lot of information to absorb and decisions to make. You can help.
- 🔖 Learn what you can about meeting the needs of this child. Identifying a child as having special needs doesn't make that child a lesser member of your class. Often, special educators, speech pathologists, and other therapists recommend to do just the kinds of activities that we typically provide in preschool. Rather than focusing on a diagnosis, find out what you can do to help a child with this specific set of behaviors or gaps in understanding. Share your successes with parents.

# After the Problem Is Solved: **Moving Toward True Partnership**

Teachers can be great assets to a team putting together an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for a child with a disability or delay. Home visits from the teaching staff can add insight, as can encouraging parents to observe the child in school. If the child needs special services, a teacher can be an important member of the team even if services are provided elsewhere. Ideas for classroom routines and activities can be suggested by speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and other specialists. Teachers can offer ideas for favorite activities and ways for winning the child's cooperation with the specialists. It is a great relief for parents to have the teacher they have learned to trust involved in their child's special education.

#### Before You Have a Problem

Read through the following list and check off what you have already accomplished (see pages 2–12). If many of the checkboxes are blank, you have work to do to solve problems and create an environment where problems are easy to solve.

#### ☐ Begin by building a relationship.

Share information with parents over time. Have at least three conversations with parents to report positive comments about their child before talking to them about something difficult. It is important for parents to know you like their child and see his positive qualities before addressing concerns. Yes, early intervention is important but a few months are not going to be as detrimental for the child as it is for parents whose own feelings are out of control.

#### ☐ Be proactive with information.

Invite parents to spend time in the classroom. If parents see how their child behaves when compared to other children in her class, they may already have a feeling for what you tell them.

#### ☐ Focus on the parents' perspective.

Find out how parents view their child. This can happen in a conference before the child enters the program or, ideally, in a home visit. Communicate with parents with an open mind. Listen to what they have to say about their child and give their opinions credence. There may be other explanations for the behavior you see.

#### ☐ Take time to react.

Record observations of the child so you have clear examples to give parents. Share your observations and thoughts.

# Discussion Questions

- 1. What kind of relationship did your parents have with the programs you attended as a child? How do you think that affected you as a child? What might have strengthened your parents' relationship with your school?
- 2. Make a list of the parents you get along with the most easily. What do they have in common? Make a list of the parents you have more troubling relationships with. See if you can find similarities that do not blame or judge these families. What steps can you take to move more families from list two to list one?
- 3. What steps do you take to make parents feel comfortable in your classroom? What else can you try?