

INTRODUCTION

As a child care provider, you have a very busy schedule. You juggle parent concerns, limited budgets, behavior issues, and program planning, all while trying to provide the highest-quality care to the children in your program. Quiet times are rare, and after a long day, you may have little time, let alone energy, to think about adding yet another task to your standing to-do list.

So it would not be surprising if you see writing a newsletter for parents as a nice idea, but not something you feel able to fit into your already-busy schedule. In addition, you may not have a whole lot of confidence in your writing abilities. I discovered this to be true even of many of my fellow teachers who were already seasoned contributors to their newsletters. They dreaded their newsletter-writing obligations as much as a public-speaking assignment. However, a newsletter does not have to be a burden. In fact, creating a parent newsletter can actually make your job as a provider much easier. A newsletter can save you time by providing valuable information to all the parents in your program at once. You won't have to keep track of who you told what about upcoming events and policies, and when parents come to pick up their children, you can use that time to focus on their individual concerns instead. The hard work you put into creating a parent newsletter will be more than repaid in the strengthened sense of community and parent involvement you will see.

In addition to being an effective communication tool, a newsletter can also be an opportunity for you to take some quiet time and reflect on the work you do on a daily basis. By highlighting some of the positive activities you are doing, you may begin to appreciate your own strengths as a provider and recognize the unique qualities that each child and parent brings to your program.

If you are still feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of creating your own newsletter, fear not. In the following pages, you will learn, step by step, the process of planning, writing, and designing a newsletter. We will begin in chapter 1 by covering the basics of what a newsletter is and what makes

it a particularly effective tool for communicating with parents. Chapter 2 offers a number of suggestions for finding topics that parents will want to read about. Chapter 3 gives you an in-depth look at how to turn those great topic ideas into engaging and informative columns or lead articles. Although content is of central importance, a newsletter's appearance often determines whether it will be read or not. Fortunately, you don't need fancy software or highly developed computer skills to create a well-designed publication.

In chapter 4, you will learn about newsletter production and how to create an appealing end product with a simple word-processing program. This chapter offers basic information for beginners, as well as a refresher course for more experienced newsletter publishers and contributors, covering key topics such as frequency, size, kind of paper, format, and distribution. Chapter 5 takes beginners to the next level and gives veterans a wealth of valuable information about newsletter components, typeface, and visual design. Chapter 6 offers helpful tips for polishing your newsletter and planning ahead, covering topics from proofreading to scheduling to coordinating volunteers. And chapter 7 presents a laundry list of troubleshooting tips for meeting some of the common challenges of producing a successful newsletter, including keeping parents' interest, meeting deadlines, and dealing with tight budgets.

You already know that communicating effectively with parents is one of the most important ways to strengthen the quality of care you provide to children. This book will give you a time-tested method for making that happen. Let's begin!

1. The Newsletter as a Parent Communication Tool

As an early childhood professional, you value your relationships with parents and use a variety of ways to communicate with them. You have personal contact when parents drop off and pick up their children, or during scheduled parent conferences. You may depend on telephone communication or e-mail. You may send notes home or publish a newsletter. Each form of communication has advantages and challenges.

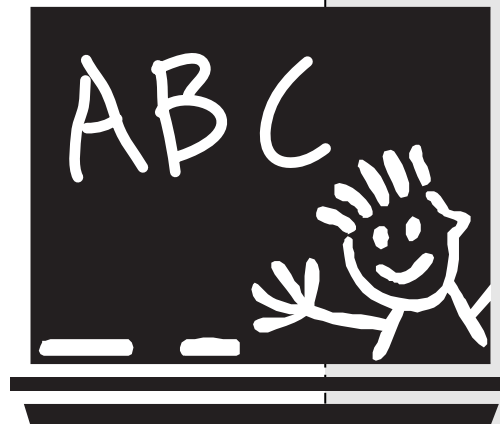
Personal contact provides an opportunity for you to form a bond with parents as you meet them at the beginning and end of the day. You can ask questions of each other and observe each other's emotional responses and body language. You can immediately clarify any information not understood.

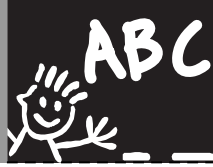
In this chapter:

Advantages of the Written Word

Characteristics of a Newsletter

Purposes of the Parent Newsletter





Although personal contact with parents ideally occurs on a daily basis, you may find instead that it occurs infrequently. The hurried parent often has little time for conversation, and parents may not come to school every day if, for example, their children ride in car pools. Parent conferences offer a chance for in-depth communicating, but they are not daily or weekly events. Most teachers and child care providers cannot rely on daily contact as the sole means of communication with parents.

Telephone communication is valuable, but contacting every parent by phone can be a challenge. It's often hard to find a convenient time for both you and the parents to talk. And telephone calling can be a time-consuming and inefficient way to communicate the same information to every parent.

E-mail is the latest way to communicate with parents, and it is very efficient. Information that needs to reach every parent at once can be delivered with a few keystrokes. But you must ensure that parents without access to e-mail receive the information through alternate means at the same time others do, and keep in mind that some busy parents who do have e-mail fail to read their messages in a timely manner.

ADVANTAGES OF THE WRITTEN WORD

Nothing can beat greeting every parent in person, every day, with a warm smile and a kind word, but this is not always possible. Whether working at a child care center, a family child care, a Head Start center, or a preschool, teachers and caregivers must depend on written materials at least some of the time. Although face-to-face contact may be the most desirable way to communicate, the written word does have some advantages.

Written materials, like newsletters, can be read at one's own pace. Parents can read an article about children's nutrition at seven in the morning or eleven at night. They can read an entire newsletter in one sitting or one page at a time.

Written materials can be reread many times. A parent may save an article and read it again months later. One pre-



school teacher wrote an article called “Saying Hello, Saying Good-Bye” for her school newsletter. In it she discussed the ambivalent feelings that both parents and children might bring to the beginning of a new school year. The next year, the same article appeared in the September issue of the preschool’s newsletter. A parent had saved it and asked the editor to reprint it.

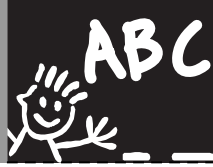
Another parent, who had moved to a different community, wrote a letter to her son’s preschool teacher. She wrote that her son, now a high-school student, was the only English-speaking player on his soccer team. “That article you wrote a few years back about teaching children how to be in the minority has helped me put things in perspective more than a few times. Do you remember which one I’m talking about? I’ve shared it with others here having similar experiences.”

This parent had saved that newsletter article for nearly fifteen years, reread it often, and shared it with her friends. You, too, have probably clipped and saved articles that have particular meaning for you. Being able to reread something that is in print is one of the unmistakable advantages of the written word.

Most teachers or child care providers have, at some time, been caught off-guard by a parent’s unexpected question. Afterward, they may wish they had answered in a different way or had more time to think about their answer. Writing an article about some aspect of childrearing affords you time to think about what you want to say, organize your thoughts, and reword or rephrase your points. You also have time to do research, read articles about the subject, or question your colleagues. You have time to gather book lists or Web sites as further reading for those interested in more information. Your written words can be your best ally, a chance to put your best foot (or words) forward. Your newsletter article is your thoughtful response to a typical, hypothetical, or real parental query.

Newsletter articles also give you a way to address classroom situations and sensitive issues in a manner that is less

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The written word, in newsletter form, gives parents two distinct advantages: They are able to read the newsletter at their own pace and can then reread it later. There are also benefits for teachers and child care providers. They have time to think about how they can respond to parent questions, can write about classroom situations, and can reinforce their philosophies. A parent newsletter is a valuable communication tool with advantages for both parents and teachers.

threatening to parents than face-to-face confrontation. Suppose you have a child who is reluctant for her mother to leave each morning. The mother stays for a time and then asks her child, "Is it all right for me to leave now?" Not surprisingly, the response is some version of "no." You could address transition issues in your next newsletter, suggesting tips for a smooth transition from home to school. Within the context of this article, you could provide guidance and tips

to all parents, without singling out the specific parent and child you had observed. You could suggest that parents and children decide together how they will say good-bye—with a kiss, a hug, or a high five. You could also suggest that parents determine a specific time when they will leave,

that they tell their child when that time will be, and that they then stick to it. The time might be as soon as everyone has arrived, when the children gather to sing their good-morning song, or during some other daily activity that can serve as a parent's departure signal.

A topic you explore in an article in the newsletter may also act as a springboard for discussion. Having the written article in hand allows the parent time to ponder what you have said and may elicit some questions or even disagreement. The written word can spur this opportunity for real dialogue in a way that may not have occurred otherwise. It's also a chance to reinforce your home, school, or center's philosophy. You can return more than once to the many versions of the importance of play in the lives of young children, for example. Adults may need more than one chance to "get it," just as children do.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A NEWSLETTER

All newsletters share some distinctive characteristics. First, their readers have a common interest. The South Street Preschool newsletter will print items of particular interest to the parents and teachers of that school. Much of it will appeal



THE NEWSLETTER AS A PARENT COMMUNICATION TOOL

only to those parents and teachers. People who do not bring their children to the South Street Preschool will not care about the topic of the parent meeting next Wednesday or the biography of the new teacher of the two-year-old class.

Newsletters offer their readers information on a regular basis—typically weekly, monthly, or quarterly. An effective newsletter can be expected and anticipated on a regular basis. Every week or every month, parents will look forward to receiving a newsletter that has value to them.

Newsletters must be timely to be of benefit. It is frustrating to read an invitation to the exciting parent meeting that happened last Thursday. Calendar items must be published so that readers have adequate notice about upcoming events. In addition to timeliness, successful newsletters will be relevant to the lives of their readers. Parents want information that is applicable to their children, or interesting notes about their children's preschool or child care center. The material in the newsletter should resonate with its readers. You should ask yourself why or how each article is relevant to parents.

Newsletters tend to be short, unlike magazines, which provide much more in-depth coverage of the topics they feature. Where the topic of sibling rivalry may get a five-page treatment in a parenting magazine, it probably would be covered in a one-page article in your preschool newsletter.

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Newsletters:

- * have readers who share a common interest
- * offer specific information relevant for that group
- * are published on a regular basis
- * are timely
- * are short

PURPOSES OF THE PARENT NEWSLETTER

Have you ever learned about an organization by reading its newsletter? Think about your publication as a valuable communication tool for parents—and others as well. Someone in your community might learn about your school, center, or family child care by discovering your newsletter. A prospective parent might be impressed by what he reads and may investigate.

Parents of children already in your program can also learn about upcoming events and school activities. You want