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The ECE Social Worker: A Vital Piece of Any Family-Centered Program

by Kelli Didomenico

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“When schools build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement.”

— Anne Henderson and
Karen Mapp (2002)

In a study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Lab, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, made the observation in the introductory quote. Studies like this reveal that children who have a strong family support system have a better chance for success in an educational setting.



Kelli Didomenico brings over 20 years of experience to her role as Director of Family Engagement at The Children's Workshop. In her role she welcomes and supports children and families directly and supports the company's center directors in encouraging families to become actively involved in their child's education through parent committees, family events, and by volunteering in the classroom.

Additionally, she reaches out to form partnerships that enhance the services that The Children's Workshop can provide for its families. Kelli earned her bachelor's degree in Social Work from Rhode Island College. For more information about The Children's Workshop and its foundation, please visit www.childrensworkshop.com and www.childrensworkshopfoundation.org.



Quality initiatives, whether at the local, state, or federal level, are all emphasizing family engagement and encouraging programs to do more to bridge the gap between school and home life. How has your Early Childhood Education (ECE) program implemented family engagement? What strategies are you employing to get your busy families to spend more time at your school, engage with other families, and actually listen when you offer support or referrals? This is not an easy thing to accomplish.

Increased family engagement not only improves the child's chances of success, it also greatly improves parenting skills, parental and family resilience, and helps ECE programs connect families with the resources they need. Of course, it

makes families feel more connected with the program too, and thereby makes them less likely to leave. It's a win-win for all stakeholders, and, ultimately, investments in family engagement improve quality overall.

ECE programs across the country are serving families with a whole host of pressing needs — without the resources to assist them. Borrowing from the field of social work, holistic services for families (an increasingly popular model of service delivery in ECE) are redefining high-quality services for young children and families. A key component of this model is the social worker employed by ECE programs.

To take action in the lives of families, the ECE program needs to define a true family-centered approach that seeks to provide wraparound care to support not just the child in the classroom, but all family members at home. This family-focused model allows the organization to increase student retention, provide important services, and build bridges in the community to help every family succeed.

The Case for Increasing Overhead

We live in a world where cost cutting and expense watching are championed; where using words like *downsize* or *cut back* is rewarded; where cutthroat management gurus are reality television heroes. Obviously expense management is essential to the longevity and success of any operation (for-profit or non-profit). However, there is a clear limit to how lean you can get, especially in an organization that exists to provide high-quality services for our youngest children and their families.

All ECE programs that have been able to weather the recent economic downturn have had to make some difficult decisions and get creative with cost-cutting measures. These decisions have been vital. Yet the smart program owner or manager knows that there is one area where ECE programs should always invest: family engagement.

ECE program leaders need to recognize the growing need for family support and resources. To fill this need, successful ECE programs may consider creating a special position in the company for a social worker. This is a role that is not required, not common in the industry and not cheap; but it is necessary. Families need the support of someone who will take their calls directly, answer questions, reply to their comments and address their concerns. This person also can train and support program staff in forging relationships with families and community partners, partnering with them to provide the services that struggling families so urgently need. Hiring a social worker shifts the business model of the

ECE program to focus on family, community connections, and a therapeutic approach to child care.

A social worker can build partnerships with community agencies to provide better services for families. For example, at The Children's Workshop one such partnership is with an agency called Kids Connect. Kids Connect is an inclusive therapeutic child care program that helps children with special needs to be successful in mainstream child care settings. The collaboration allows families of children with special needs to choose a local child care facility instead of traveling long distances for a special program. Often, when centers are unable to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities or behavioral issues, the child is suspended and bounced to a different program. Advocating for these families and forging a relationship with an agency like Kids Connect may allow a child to stay in the ECE center of choice and interact with mainstream children within a stable environment in the community.

There are many other ways that cash-strapped programs could benefit from the services of a social worker. A social worker can make arrangements with local nonprofits or community partners to exchange services. For example, a local high school offers parenting classes for pregnant teens and they need a space to meet. A local ECE program has an infant classroom equipped with cribs, high chairs, safe play areas, and baby supplies. The ECE program allows the high school to host classes at the center after hours. In return, the high school sends students with an interest in the field of early education to volunteer at the center as unpaid interns.

Many colleges and universities require students to complete an internship in their field as part of their education. A social worker can connect with college students in many fields including Early Education, Social Work, Psychology, Pediatrics, and Nursing to volunteer at the center. These internships can help an ECE program without increasing payroll costs. Practicing students can also bring new ideas and techniques from the classroom into the field, potentially improving the ECE program's overall curriculum and enhancing the uniqueness of the program. These students eventually graduate and become ideal candidates for the ECE program with a preexisting understanding of how the center operates.

A Family-Focused Business Model

How does a family-focused business model work? Hiring someone with a background in social work equips your ECE program with a focused staff member who has already prepared for emergencies that many parents are ill-

equipped to handle. For example, imagine that one night a single working mother picks up her children at your center and returns to her apartment to find her locks were changed. Her landlord ran into some legal troubles, and as a result the state seized the property where she was living. With no relatives or friends in town, she may not know where to turn. If her program has a family-focused model in place, the staff at the center can call the social worker and offer immediate assistance. An experienced social worker would know how to find emergency housing for the family and would have established partnerships with community agencies that can provide the distressed parent with legal help. The program can collect food and clothing for the family from other families at the ECE program to help as they try to get back on their feet. These actions foster a sense of community within the program and instill loyalty in the family that they helped and those who witness it.

In addition to strengthening the families at the ECE program, the social worker can also train teachers and other staff members on how to deal with such difficult situations. With a background in guidance, counseling, and support, a social worker can:

- show teachers how to communicate with and assist a vulnerable parent.
- support teachers when they need to have difficult conversations about a child's behavior or development.
- act as an unbiased third party if arguments ensue.
- advocate for teachers who need to make calls to Child Protective Services about a child's condition or situation, assisting them through the process and advising them on how to respond to questioning.
- provide a new perspective on a situation through the lens of their experiences.

Furthermore, a social worker can assist teachers in furthering their education. He or she can develop relationships with local colleges and universities to help employees earn certifications and degrees to move forward in their field as professionals. A social worker can set up cohorts with educational institutions and assist in finding grants and scholarships.

For children with behavioral issues, a social worker can build bridges with community resources to provide support. For example, perhaps an ECE program has a family that has a particularly difficult behavioral problem

erupting at home. The social worker can refer the family to a program where the parent and child can be supported in developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Having previous knowledge of the system, a social worker can coach the family, giving them the confidence they need to advocate for their child and take control of the process. With the results of the IEP, the social worker can assist the family in finding the proper placement for the child and even go so far as to provide wraparound care and supervision for the child at the ECE program for the rest of the day, if appropriate. Knowledge of the administration and connections with community members will help the family get through a difficult situation, ultimately resulting in a healthier environment for the child.

Community involvement can make a world of difference to a family facing insurmountable obstacles. The role of a child care center and its connections to the community are vital in the life of a family. An ECE company that shifts its business model to focus not only on the child in the classroom, but also the family foundations at home, will add immeasurable quality and benefits to the program. Building bridges in the community allows the ECE provider to offer services beyond child care, retain children in school longer, and build stability in family life at home. These practices help retain customers and ultimately strengthen the bottom line. More importantly, they fulfill our shared mission to nurture children, support families, and build communities.

Reference

Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: The National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.

Photograph <http://www.freeimages.com/profile/anissat>

