

Courting Collaboration:

Dancing Well with Others Toward Improved Infant and Toddler Program Quality

by Dale Evans, Helen Unangst, Barbara Milner, and Kay Albrecht



In 2012, Arizona's First Things First Central Maricopa Regional Partnership Council (renamed East Maricopa Regional Partnership in 2014) funded a quality improvement initiative focused on infants and toddlers. Named First Relationships, the project goals included:



Dale J. Evans, B.S. in secondary education, is an Arizona State Licensing Team Leader, has worked with Arizona Department of Health Services since 1991. Previously, she worked as a certified secondary education teacher, a regional manager, and later as a preschool director in the private sector.



Helen Unangst has worked in early childhood for 35 years in a variety of settings. Since 2007, she has been a Child Care Licensing Surveyor with the Bureau of Child Care Licensing, Arizona Department of Health Services.



Barbara Milner has been a family child care provider, a preschool teacher, a program director, a trainer, a program coordinator, and a coach. She has coordinated on projects related to leadership, program quality, and just completed three years coaching with the First Relationships project.



Kay Albrecht, Ph.D., Houston, Texas, shared coaching responsibilities in First Relationships, wrote *Social Emotional Tools for Life: An Early Childhood Teacher's Guide*, with Michelle Forrester, authored *The Right Fit: Recruiting, Selecting, and Orienting Staff*, now in a second edition, and created *Out of the Box Early Childhood Training Kits* for Exchange Press.

- strengthening caregiving continuity.
- enhancing the quality of the relationships infants and toddlers have with their early childhood teachers, and the relationships that teachers have with children's parents and other family members.
- enhancing children's child care experiences.

The project included a range of experiences, activities, and interventions, including professional development, coaching, resource grants, and communities of practice sessions, implemented over a three-year period (2012-2015).

Why Collaborate? The Project's View

The First Relationships project staff was aware that their efforts — to increase quality

using the recommended practices of primary caregiving and increased caregiving continuity — had the potential to impact the child care program's operating licenses. This meant figuring out implications early on to make sure that suggestions for programmatic changes wouldn't conflict with regulations. In addition, the project staff felt strongly that their coaching and training should align with and include advocating for high levels of licensing compliance on the part of programs. They also felt it was important to prevent making suggestions that might create problems for program participants related to standards or interpretation (particularly related to continuity of relationships, a concept not mentioned in the regulations).



Photograph by the authors

Celebrating Collaboration: Some Challenges Faced

- Getting each other's attention.
- Finding time to meet and to develop shared tools, language, and materials.
- Complications related to timing, the political and organization milieu, capacity issues on all sides. (Because no one was paid to collaborate, it was an added responsibility in addition to full workloads.)
- Collaboration needs time to mature. The longer-term focus of the quality improvement project allowed for a high level of shared experiences, and it also created motivation to sustain it.

Collaborating proactively might keep these issues from derailing excitement and movement toward the project's goals. Project staff planned to support directors in seeing their licensing representative as a partner in problem solving. It made sense to position the directors' quality improvement goals and the licensing representatives' legislative mandate as supportive of one another and help all participants work together.

Project staff also felt that dramatic changes were possible if program outcomes such as primary caregiving, small groups, and continuity plans, were able to emerge successfully. They recognized that regulators conduct their work in a variety of child care settings so their knowledge of the status quo — ways to address and solve problems across programs, and insight into unique improvement strategies that worked — were a

potential source of solutions that might have been unknown without the collaboration.

Why Collaborate? The Regulator's View

As soon as they became aware of the project, the Arizona Department of Health Services knew that there was the potential for misunderstandings to occur, particularly relating to interpretation of rules, knowledge of infant and toddler care, and implementation support for the best practices of the project. They understood the different worldview of licensing and that programs and regulators sometimes interpret what they see differently: Licensing regulators view programs from a regulatory perspective while programs view licensing from an implementation perspective.

There was also an awareness of how the large caseloads in the Bureau of Child Care Licensing and staff turnover or change in regulator caseload assignments might affect the project. At any given time there may be a few programs that require more time from licensing staff. When this occurs, other programs may wait longer for an annual visit or for answers to questions.

They also knew that sometimes programs are reluctant to initiate communication with licensing staff out of concern that they are 'bothering' them or that closer scrutiny may result. These concerns might stem from previous negative experiences with regulators or even 'hearsay,' such as "Licensing said"

Regulators welcomed the opportunity to be part of the team that supported increasing quality in infant and toddler classrooms. There was a willingness to work together to understand new expectations for programs for the youngest children. Licensing staff welcomed communication in advance of the project

roll-out and continued discussion as issues came up.

This proactive approach prevented collaborators from having to backtrack during project implementation. It also accomplished an unexpected outcome: all participants felt more connected to the early childhood field at-large and better understood each other's roles and contributions. A direct result of this increased understanding was the ability of licensing staff to talk about and support the strategies being used by the project during their technical assistance visits with programs not participating in the project.

Why Collaborate? The Child Care Program Participants' View

Program participants' initial interest was most likely focused on receiving an equipment grant. Programs selected for the project had to be in good standing with licensing to receive the grants and materials associated with the project. Later, programs recognized the additional benefits of participating in the project.

Several of the components of the project had the potential to put program participants and licensing at odds. For example, equipment grants were designed to focus on improving physical environments by creating opportunities for infant and toddler teachers to work in small primary groups. Because these small primary groups are different from room capacity groups or even staff-child ratio groups, there were implications for meeting licensing criteria for room arrangement, daily schedule, and staffing patterns. Everyone had to fully understand these ideas and how they might be implemented in order to move forward in meeting regulations and project expectations.

An example of a collaboration that worked related to documentation of training hours: Project participants had to document training hours in a particular way for the training hours to count for administrators. Once project staff had the details of what was needed, aligning certificates with necessary language was easy and resulted in directors getting credit for every hour of project participation.

Celebrating Collaboration: Some Examples

Help! Quickly! Due to an inflexible timeline to complete an order for classroom equipment grants, a decision needed to be made quickly regarding one option for a classroom's new arrangement. It was unclear if the new room design would require any changes to the existing diaper changing area, which could potentially influence whether it could be implemented or not. The program's licensing specialist was on vacation at the time so another specialist visited, checked the plans, and approved the design, allowing the program to move forward with ordering equipment.

Come visit me! Opportunities to share the same space created excitement. When licensing representatives participated in an end-of-year celebration, they heard participants share stories of their professional growth. This, in turn, expanded the regulators' view of the quality improvement program as well as its incremental success. This excited the licensing representatives as they saw that improving the quality of care for infants and toddlers was occurring in different ways than they had observed previously. Programs were excited to share their success with the new design with the licensing representatives and reported that such experiences improved their relationships with their regulator.

Come help us learn. One licensing representative attended a community-of-practice meeting to help directors interpret new information in the context of existing licensing regulations. In this case, the topic was using technology. The representative knew that some of the ideas presented would be impacted by licensing standards. When she was in the room listening to how the directors planned to use technology, she was able to clarify specific considerations to match Arizona's requirements. In this case, a decidedly helpful discussion focused on watching training videos during naptime. Programs found out how to use technology in this way *and* be in continuous compliance with state regulations.

Not once, but more than once.

When directors could explore their questions, for example, related to licensing standards for diapers and pull-up diapers, clarity in understanding resulted and noncompliance was averted. After early successes, generalizations like this occurred more frequently. When a situation was identified and discussed, collaborators could generalize the resolution within their settings, creating shared understanding and clear expectations regarding meeting standards.

An opportunity for advocacy. An interesting opportunity for advocacy emerged in this collaboration. In Arizona, a 'bonus' child is allowed in infant and toddler classrooms under certain circumstances. This additional child changes the way small groups are allowed to function. During a discussion of the impact of the rule on infants, toddlers, and their caregivers, licensing representatives clarified how the rule was interpreted. Project coaches and community advocates shared their concerns about the impact of this rule in writing with the appropriate department and

Lessons Learned about Collaboration

- Adopt a both/and perspective from the beginning.
- Invest time up front in discussing quality improvement project goals and strategies to arrive at shared expectations and reduce the risk of conflict.
- Use an initial willingness to collaborate to invite greater participation. Licensing staff took the time to participate in numerous project events and activities that informed them further about the project and participants' experiences in it.
- Keep the goal of collaboration at the forefront. This keeps things on track, as does understanding each participant's role and obligations.
- Have a venue to raise and discuss issues along the way. This helped prevent problems for programs, increased insight by licensing staff to the dynamics of program implementation related to relationship continuity, and out-of-the-box solutions that benefited both the program's progress in the project and their licensing representative's understanding of what project activities impacted program quality. Issues do arise — some that pose dilemmas.
- Take the time to share information. Licensing staff had to take the time to understand the nuances of the project and staff had to make sure what was being shared with programs (equipment, suggestions for program improvement, coaching kits) were shared in advance with the collaboration committee to assess any potential conflicts and/or get additional suggestions about how the materials would be used.



Photo by Tori Hogan

requested a change in the rule to lessen the negative impact.

In Summary

This experience was successful for all participants:

- Directors learned how to meet the expectations of licensing representatives related to the goals of the quality improvement project.
- Licensing representatives discovered how the quality improvement initiative was helping programs implement small groups, primary caregiving, and relationship continuity, and how consultation on assessment of proposed changes in physical environments could be addressed to ensure success.
- Project staff benefited from guidance related to topics shared during collaboration meetings, and everyone felt more connected and respected as a result.

After the initial experience, collaboration became the preferred approach to problem solving between the three groups. Ultimately, this collaboration leveraged the changes at the program level, the ability of the licensing bureau to resource other programs in implementing recommended practices, and set the stage for the quality improvement project to be supported by licensing representatives when questions came up related to regulations. Everyone involved benefited in this win/win situation, particularly the very young children enrolled in the programs involved in the project.

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