

# The Importance of Parent-Provider Relationships in Early Education

by Gloria D. Julius

Early on in my career, I encountered a challenge that many of today's parents face. I was living away from my extended family while expecting my first child, and I found myself wondering, who can I trust to care for and educate my child while I'm at work? Who can my family turn to for support as we raise a child?

In the years that have passed since I first considered these questions, the parenting world has changed. Now, more parents face the same circumstances. Fewer than one-third of children in the United States have a stay-at-home parent, compared to a generation ago when more than 50 percent of children had a parent at home, according to the Center for American Progress (<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ChildCareFactsheet.pdf>). Jobs and new opportunities take families all over the globe, which



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its more than 350 schools. In her role, Gloria also serves as a company spokesperson on education and child development-related topics and writes for the Primrose Pointers for Parents blog. With more than 40 years of education experience, Gloria has served the education system on all levels in the public school sector. She began her career as an elementary school teacher and went on to serve in more senior administrative roles in elementary education, including coordinator of reconstituted schools for the Maryland State Department of Education. Prior to joining Primrose, Gloria served as the chief learning officer for Calvert Education Services, a 100-year-old home schooling and virtual learning education provider. At Calvert, she was instrumental in increasing the academic standards and in delivering high-quality programs. Additionally, she created a professional learning community that develops curriculum aligned with research-based standards and provides professional development and support for parents and students. As an innovative, results-oriented leader, Gloria employs a team approach that unites teachers, staff, parents, and students around teaching and learning. Her passion is early childhood education, and she strongly believes that music is a key foundational early learning element for young children. Gloria received her doctoral degree in educational policy, planning, and administration from the University of Maryland College Park. She earned a master's degree in education with a concentration in curriculum development from Towson University and a bachelor's degree in elementary education with a concentration in music from Elizabethtown College. Additionally, she has received numerous certifications in education leadership, early childhood education, and elementary and middle school. In her spare time, Gloria likes to play piano, walk, read, and spend time with her granddaughter.

means many face parenthood without a support system of close relatives and friends.

As a result, it's more important than ever for early education and care providers to be trusted partners to parents.

## The Importance of Parent-Provider Partnerships

Strong relationships between parents and providers impact all aspects of the early education and care experience and play a critical role in empowering children to succeed. Healthy childhood development depends on the quality and reliability of the children's relationships with the important adults in their lives, according to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Young-Children-Develop-in-an-Environment-of-Relationships.pdf>). This roster of important early childhood influencers includes early education and care providers for the approximately 12 million American children under the age of five who attend child care each week ([www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2015/09/02/119944/a-new-vision-for-child-care-in-the-united-states-3/](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2015/09/02/119944/a-new-vision-for-child-care-in-the-united-states-3/)). For these children, it is crucial that they know that the primary adults they interact with daily — their teachers and parents — have a positive relationship with each other.

A strong parent-provider partnership yields a secure, healthy environment that fosters the growth and development of a child's intellectual and social-emotional skills. Researchers working with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report that strong parent-provider relationships have several additional benefits for parents, providers, and children alike ([www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/family\\_provider\\_multi.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/family_provider_multi.pdf)). Parents who have positive relationships with their child's provider tend to be more satisfied with the education and care services their family is receiving and are more engaged with the school. Educators in these partnerships experience more positive feelings toward their jobs and have improved relationships with

families. As a result, children whose parents and child care provider have a positive relationship adjust to new settings more easily and exhibit fewer problem behaviors than children who do not.

The importance of strong parent-provider partnerships is indisputable, but these relationships are more easily discussed than formed. Forging positive, trusting relationships takes conscious effort by both parents and providers. Sometimes the role-sharing can be stressful: frustration can stem from a perception that something is done better at school than at home (or vice versa), the fear that a child may like a caregiver better than a parent, or the tension that develops when concerns aren't properly communicated. These issues may all be resolved when parents and providers form positive, healthy relationships as partners in a child's care and education.

### What Makes a Good Partner?

Like all relationships, developing and maintaining great relationships between parents and child-care providers requires constant effort and attention on both sides. But what actions are worth investing in as an educator or early-education administrator? Below are three foundational characteristics that define a strong parent-provider partnership. These practices should be set as priorities by teachers, leadership, and staff members in child-care settings.

**Open communication:** Communication is the most important factor in parent-provider relationships and can have a significant impact on children's early learning experiences. To help a children reach her full potential, teachers need information from parents about their child's development and personality, and parents should be informed about what and how their child is learning, how she interacts with others in the classroom, and how learning can be extended at home. Both parties' understanding this mutual and continuous need for information and the importance of it is the first step in forming a positive relationship. Often, an introductory conversation is helpful for parents and providers to fully recognize the significance of sharing knowledge and communicating openly.

**Mutual respect and trust:** Communication between providers and parents is most productive when mutual respect and trust also exist. Nothing can prepare parents for



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the day they must entrust the care of their child to people who are still virtually strangers. It is vital that parents and providers begin to build a sense of mutual respect and compassion starting with their very first interaction. This process begins with educators, who should be respectful and supportive when approaching parents each day, regardless of personal feelings. A respectful action can be as simple as smiling and greeting parents warmly when they drop off and pick up their children.

**Responsiveness:** A key factor in building trust with parents is responsiveness, and it can set the tone for the relationship as early as when parents make their first phone call to inquire about the school or center. Once a child is enrolled, it is crucial to identify and respond to parents' needs, questions, and concerns in a consistent and timely manner. It is important for providers to always follow through on promises made to parents. Additionally, providing information and resources on topics that are important to parents and always approaching their requests with respect and a willingness to accommodate them further helps establish trust.

When prioritized, these three characteristics work together to form the foundation of a valuable partnership that ultimately helps provide a better learning experience for each child and benefits providers and parents alike.

### How to Support Parents

As providers, there are a variety of ways to bring these characteristics to life to create and sustain healthy

partnerships with parents, including the actionable steps below.

**Communicate your desire to partner with parents.** While this may sound like a common-sense recommendation, it is important to vocalize to parents your desire to work together to provide the best early education and care experience for their children. Partnership is a two-way relationship. Collaborate to set realistic expectations for what a partnership looks like, and initiate regular check-ins to ensure you are both getting the information you need from each other to benefit the child.

**Provide at-home activities for children that extend learning and involve parents in the learning process.** As a parent, I understand firsthand that well-intentioned advice offered by other family members or educators can feel condescending and unwarranted. Besides offering such advice in a supportive and respectful nature to parents, try providing take-home activities, which can be child- and parent-initiated and therefore are a nonthreatening way to engage parents. For example, at Primrose Schools we frequently send children home with a bag of special math activities for parents and children to explore together. The optional activities allow parents to engage with their children's educational experience on their own terms in a way that's led by their children, and this engagement typically leads to a stronger school-home connection.



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**Maintain a solutions-oriented mindset.** Parents and providers who respect one another typically approach challenges — from biting or hitting to picky eating — with a supportive and solution-oriented mindset. They are able to collaborate on issues as equals rather than competitors.

**Use a variety of communication methods.** As a provider, determine the best avenues to relay information to parents so they feel involved and comfortable asking questions while simultaneously not feeling like they are being inundated with information. For example, at Primrose Schools our teachers can use 360Connect, a mobile application that provides parents with daily reports about meals, naps, and learning experiences along with photos from the day. For more in-depth communication, establish with parents upfront that significant changes in a child's routine — either at home or in the care setting — should be discussed face-to-face in advance.

**Address concerns immediately.** A problem cannot be solved until someone knows about it. If you have questions or concerns about a child's behavior or development, discuss them with parents as soon as possible. This sets the precedent for parents to raise their own questions or concerns about their child's care, allowing parents and providers to work together to find solutions to problems as they arise.

**Only discuss positives in front of children.** The Harvard Center on the Developing Child (<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Young-Children-Develop-in-an-Environment-of-Relationships.pdf>) states that young children "experience their world as an environment of relationships." As educators we know that young children pick up on much more than most adults think. It doesn't take much for children to sense tension, especially between the important adults in their lives, including their parents and teachers. Therefore, it's important to have any potentially negative or tense conversations with parents without children present. Children may interpret these conversations as a sign that their teacher does not like them, which will impact their relationship with their teacher and ultimately their learning. To be the best partner for children and their families, be sure to keep interactions positive and solution-oriented.

These are just a few of the ways providers can support parents in their family's early education and care experience. By prioritizing communication, responsiveness, trust and respect, parents and providers can forge the type of supportive relationship that today's parents desire.