

creating environments for relationships

by Margie Carter

One of the late Tom Hunter's best loved songs is "We've Been Waiting for You," recorded on a CD by the same name with Bev Bos and Michael Leeman. Tom's songs always address some aspect of the longings of our hearts, children's and adults'. Apart from encouraging everyone to sing them, with Tom's passing I have renewed energy to use the message of his songs as a provocation for examining what we're doing in our early care and education programs. This is especially useful when I encounter directors and teachers struggling to document how their programs meet all the NAEYC accreditation criteria or how they can move up the rating scale of their state's Quality Rating Incentive System (QRIS) program.

I remind directors and teachers that at the heart of all those numerical quality indicators is an understanding that we must create environments for relationships to grow. When there are respectful, caring relationships between all the parties — teachers, the children and

their families, and among the children themselves — everyone has a sense of belonging and a foundation to be a confident learner. For a moment we put aside the criteria and the rating scales and reconsider their environment and practices in light of the lyrics of one of Tom's songs: "We've been waiting for you to come to this place. . . . Wherever you're from, we're glad that you've come. . . . We've been waiting for you to come to this place."

Let's look around, starting from the front door, in the office, hallways, and classrooms, for indicators that you've been eager to welcome each child and family. What will these children see and experience that helps them know that you're glad that they've come? How will your conversations with families convey that message, on the phone, in person, in your enrollment forms, during daily arrival and departure routines? What will they experience in your family meetings that will make them eager to come after a long day's work or job search?

Right from the start

When families first phone a center to inquire about openings, the conversation typically focuses on hours, fees, and policies. In today's uncertain economic

climate when centers are worried about maintaining enrollment and reducing staff hours, directors would do well to approach these first encounters as the beginning of a relationship, rather than a marketing sound bite. Keeping Tom's song in mind, you might say something like, "I would love to show you around our center and learn about what you are seeking for your child," rather than just describing where you do and don't have openings. Once they come for a tour, don't keep a family waiting or deluge them with paperwork before you've had a chance to visit, offer refreshments, and move around the center meeting some of the staff and children. Find ways to invite them to tell you about their child and favorite family activities.

Strategy: Rethink the use of forms

Meaningful relationships rarely begin with a focus on paperwork. Consider how to ease the burden of filling out forms for families. Could some of it be entered right on the computer, saving both you and the family the tedious, isolating experience of processing paperwork? Beyond forms, could each family get a 'welcome kit' with items that suggest "we want you to feel at home here"?



Margie Carter is a teacher educator and mentor who travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. The ideas in this article are expanded upon in books she has co-authored with

Deb Curtis which are available, along with training tips, on their web site, www.ecetrainers.com.

Possible things to include might be:

- a center t-shirt, mug, or backpack
- a homemade book with favorite center songs or recipes
- a center calendar with photos of seasonal center activities and important dates to remember
- a directory of center families and staff with photos and brief statements of special interests
- perhaps blank labels to personalize for the child's cubby, nap cots, and other personal items.

How about designing a form with spaces for photos and little descriptions about the family that can be filled out and added to a classroom family book? My colleague Deb Curtis literally takes Tom's song and creates a little booklet "We're Waiting for You at the Burlington Little School" to send out to each family before the child's first day in her room. Each of the pages has a photo with captions of things children do in the center. Deb reports that many children arrive already eager to explore particular areas.

Strategy: Rethink home visits

From its early history, Head Start has always had teachers and family service workers do home visits of each enrolled child. Over the years both families and teachers have developed some conflicting sentiments about these visits. How-

ever, when done with sensitivity and an eagerness to begin a relationship, the value of home visits for all early childhood programs is undisputable. If teachers use the time to play with the child and share information about themselves — their family, favorite activities, and approaches to teaching — and invite families to visit the classroom whenever they can, home visits can launch a respectful relationship.

Strategy: Make sign-in areas an invitation to linger

Knowing that families often have stressful mornings before they even get to you, consider ways to ease drop-off and pick-up times with a transition area that includes more than an obligatory sign-in sheet. A reassuring or inspiring quote for the day, periodic fresh flowers, muffins or snacks to take along in the car are all examples of things that offer a message of caring.

Children can be involved in making these little surprise items to leave at the sign-in desk, a thoughtful way to strengthen their connections with their families as well.

Technology can support relationships

While there's no substitute for face-to-face relationships, in today's world you can use technology to mediate connections between families and your center. Find out each family's preferences for getting periodic messages, photos, and stories of what their child is up to at the center. Then, take care not to inundate or neglect their method of choice. As a parent, imagine getting a call or message or an annotated little photo tucked into your mailbox during your child's first weeks at the center, giving you an example of how she or he is forming friendships, finding enjoyable activities, and stepping up to new challenges. Providing the time and technology

for teachers to create these gifts for families is one of the best uses of the marketing dollars in your budget.

Strategy: Use photo stories to strengthen relationships

Digital cameras are now a standard tool for teachers, but they must be used thoughtfully in order to help teachers represent and expand the life of their program. The goal for taking photos is not so much scrapbooking or documenting everything that happens. Rather, photo stories or documentation should be used to capture and revisit the moments and extended explorations that represent the meaningful relationships and high-quality experiences children and adults have in your program. This requires teachers to think about their values and goals for children and to spot them in action.

Help teachers:

- Learn some basic photography guidelines for composing, choosing, and cropping pictures so they illuminate the details and discard the extraneous. As with support for arranging every detail of their classrooms, teachers need guidance in setting up systems for organizing and using the photos they take.
- Encourage them to go beyond captions or supposed objectivity in writing observation stories with photos; suggest they put their personal voice in the story with thoughts about why this moment was so important or their reflections on the details they noticed of the children's competency. In this way photo stories both strengthen and give evidence of how well the children are known, a fundamental ingredient of a strong relationship.

This brings me to another remarkable song from Tom Hunter that I've



**We've Been Waiting for You
at the Burlington Little School**



Sign-in forms and other paperwork can be put in a binder on an attractive table to welcome families each day. Photo by Nancy Gerber

begun to use frequently in my teacher education work. "You Will Know" is a song about the feeling you have when you are known, when you belong. "There are

people I spend time with, who know me inside out. . . . You'll know quite simply, it's not hard to tell, you'll know when you know, that you are known full well." Wonderful images of children in early childhood programs have now been added to this and some of Tom's other songs (see "As Human As They Can Be" DVD listed below) which I think can expand the horizons of anyone striving to improve quality in your early childhood program.

The Kitchen Table at Stepping Stones Children's Center Burlington, Vermont

The idea of the kitchen table came from a staff development day when we were looking at our core-values, especially the feeling of home. We noticed that our environment truly welcomed children, but there was no truly welcoming space for adults and children together. We began talking about the idea of the kitchen table, something every home seems to have and adults and children gather around frequently. Having years of experience as a carpenter I offered to build us an adult-sized kitchen table, a first for me. The children and I walked to our neighborhood lumber store and picked out some great pieces of cherry just right for the project and hauled them back to Stepping Stones. They helped to plane and sand the pieces of wood to prepare them for the glue up. Lots of measuring and marking and squeezing the glue bottle. Children of all ages helped on this including a child with Cerebral Palsy who contributed by using his wrist to depress the trigger on the drill.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LIZ ROGERS



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The table was soon finished and it has been a fixture at Stepping Stones that has welcomed hundreds of children and families each day. Many hellos and goodbyes have been said around this table. Many friends have scooted over to squeeze another friend to enjoy a snack. Laughs, cries, and countless stories have passed over its well-worn top. It has been there for so many moments — like a toddler's first attempt at pouring, someone's last snack before kindergarten, birthdays, holidays, and a resting spot for many tired legs. In honor of Tom Hunter I have to say it is the spot that says "We've been waiting for you" each morning since its creation.

— Jason Hartwick, Stepping Stones teacher

This photograph of the kitchen table was taken by four-year-old Gavin, an avid participant in my ongoing photography project work with the children. Some of the dishware highlighted in the photo was made by the children, too. Someday I hope that all our plates and cups will be made by our own hands and served on our own handmade table with the food that we make together.

— Liz Rogers, Stepping Stones teacher
and Pacific Oaks instructor



Recommended resources

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2007). *Learning together with young children*. St Paul: Redleaf Press. Available at www.ecetrainers.com.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning*. St Paul: Redleaf Press. Available at www.ecetrainers.com.

Hunter, T. (2008). "As Human as They Can Be" DVD. Available from Song Growing Company: www.tomhunter.com.

Hunter, T., Leeman, M., & Bos, B. (2008). "We've Been Waiting For You" CD. Available from Song Growing Company: www.tomhunter.com.

You might also consider sending some teachers to the annual summer Northwest Teachers Conference, co-founded by Tom Hunter and continued by teachers who can't imagine missing a year without the renewal and challenge that this gathering offers them to teach with courage and integrity. (Visit www.tomhunter.com.)