

Lessons in Parent Communication: Insights from the Parent Co-op Model

an interview with cover director, Donna Kesler

“Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.”

—Anne Morrow Lindberg

“Communication is something so simple and difficult that we can never put it in simple words.”

—T. S. Matthews

The annual chicken pox epidemic has just hit! Three of the children in the four year old room are out for the duration, and the others are subjected to a daily spot check. But the parents of the victims have arranged an informal child care arrangement so that each family takes care of all three children every third day. Mom and Dad are losing less work time, and the crayon art includes lots of red spots.

It's the night before the NAEYC validators are due to arrive. A team of parents is hard at work washing windows, realigning the books in the resource room, and raking leaves in the dark. When they leave, four weary hours later, there isn't a fingerprint to behold (until 6:31 the next morning).

Marcus looks mighty proud as his classmates follow him into his mother's office in the mapping department of the US Geological Survey Office. She lets all the children look through big magnifying glasses, try on her lab coat, and take a turn on her swivel chair. Each child goes back to school with a bright new mapping pencil.

These are stories of enthusiastic cooperation, so it's not surprising that they all happened at a parent cooperative child care center. In the

parent cooperative model, parents have actual legal ownership of the program. They have power over the hiring and budgeting processes, input on curriculum development and long-range planning. They begin their participation in the program with a sense of investment.

These stories, however, could come from any quality child care program. Parents in programs of every variety of legal status come to feel an investment in a center because of various levels of their own involvement and because of what the program provides for their children. Their sense of investment develops over time.

Every program benefits from a pervasive spirit of commitment; but the cooperative model is based on it. Why do feelings of commitment develop? How does effective communication happen? A look at the Reston Children's Center through the eyes of Donna Kesler, its director, may provide insights that will be useful for any early childhood program. Donna tells her story:

A Base of Responsibility

There is a feeling that parents have more invested here, more responsi-

bility and more involvement. That's one of the first things we tell parents when they call for information. This kind of mutual accountability is emphasized right up front. If this isn't what parents want, they go to another program.

Specifically, families have a ten hour work commitment to the program each year. About one-third give more than that. We offer them many ways to give of their time:

- **Workdays.** Every other month, we have a four to five hour workday at the centers. Parents come and do everything from grounds maintenance to cleaning closets, repairing books, and preparing curriculum materials.

- **On their own time.** At home, parents draw illustrations, make labels, wash, mend, and sew. Once a month, our lost and found items are taken to a local children's used clothing store where we sell them or donate them to charity. People tour garage sales looking for specific items we need.

- **Program support.** Parents come into the program to share their hobbies and talents. Others with special skills do building maintenance like plumbing or electrical work or work on landscaping. In the office, parents help put together the bills once a month and prepare the enrollment packets. They help in the kitchen and with our computers. Some do photography and maintain our scrapbook. Some offer legal advice.

- **Field trips.** Parents make it possible for children to visit their worksites, a favorite field trip. When we're studying where children live, we get in the van and drive past their homes. Some parents arrange to stay home and invite the children on a tour.

- **Board of directors.** Our Board consists of nine elected members and is served by five committees. Committees take care of such tasks as setting up the budget, preparing fundraising projects, doing long range planning, designing salary and benefits packages, maintaining the building, designing the brochure and parent handbook, and (last, but not least) hiring the director. Participation on the Board or its committees is another way of satisfying the family time commitment.

- **Art fair.** We do an annual art fair which raises more community awareness than money. Families, adults and children, set up tables in a local shopping center and offer different creative art activities for children, like making puppets and all kinds of airplanes, doing marble painting, and decorating faces (always a hit).

- **Lecture series.** When a staff member died a few years ago, we used money donated to initiate a parent education lecture series. Parents help in many ways to make sure that the evenings go well—speaker arrangements, set up and clean up.

An Attentive Response

We try to make involvement as easy as possible for parents. In many ways, we let them know that we are sensitive to their needs:

- **Child care.** We try to provide child care for as many different events as we can—meetings, lecture series, committee nights, and workdays.

- **Workday photos.** We take photographs of parents on workdays which are displayed first thing Monday morning. When children notice the things that have changed, we show them the pictures of their

parents doing this for us. It helps children understand that their parents care about their lives in the program.

- **My mommy was here!** After meeting nights when children are not present, parents are encouraged to leave paintings on the easels to greet their children in the morning.

- **Birthday observances.** Most parents want to provide treats when their children celebrate birthdays. We also suggest that they might want to plant flowers in the garden or give a new book to the library—to do something that is a more lasting observance, something the child can enjoy for a long time.

- **Family dinners.** Each program has its own family dinner, in addition to our all school picnic at the beginning of the year and our center-wide dinner in May. This year, the dinner will have an international theme. Many parents will be involved, particularly those who have come from other countries. They will be wearing native clothing and preparing special dishes.

- **Family outings.** Some years we have had family outings where the school van is used to take four or five families to Baltimore to the aquarium or downtown to the Smithsonian on the weekend. We do the organizing and arrange for families to sign up; it is up to the families to plan the event.

An Effective Communication System

Parents need to know what's happening if we expect them to support our efforts. Our system has several formal and informal aspects:

- **Parent orientation.** At the first of the year we have a parent orientation for new families. We show them a

video about our organization and go over our policies.

- **Parent conferences.** We schedule two conferences a year, but they're really available anytime. We ask parents to come into the building when they drop off their children, so there's a lot of informal communication going on all the time.

- **Weekly newsletter.** Each program has a weekly newsletter about what the program is doing—"Peanut Butter and Jelly Express" for the preschoolers and "Cuts and Bruises and Other Great Things" for the schoolagers who named their own.

- **Monthly newsletter.** I produce a monthly newsletter that talks about the organization—happenings, grants, other areas the whole organization is involved in, and a board report.

- **Staff training.** Staff receive training sessions on working with parents and communication styles. A clinical social worker does a staff meeting once a month, so each program works with him three times a year. Frequently, the topic is parent communication or working with parents to meet the needs of a specific child. Staff are also given a large amount of reading material on communication—and they read it!

A Ripple Effect

We have a low turnover rate in our program. I think it's due in large part to the feeling people have about working here.

- **Staff expectations.** Staff that may have taught other places are always a little surprised that parents are as involved as they are here. We tell them to expect to talk to parents every day, which probably happens everywhere. But the whole idea of seeing board members walking

through the program every day, along with parents they know are working on various committees, is new. It gives them a much stronger cooperative feeling. They sense that we're in this together. Expectations on both sides are very high.

- **Teacher appreciation.** A teacher appreciation dinner is held once a year, usually in February/March, when everyone has kind of had it. It's an adult evening where we can see each other dressed up. Usually we give a gift to each teacher and honor specific teachers for career or life milestones. Last year, they gave each teacher a unique watch; the face is the logo of the center. This year, parents gave a talk about how they view the staff as professionals doing important work, and gave everyone business cards as a token of that spirit of professionalism.

A Reflection

It seems to me that all these things we've talked about can be accomplished in any program. In our model, parents do have more voice in how money is spent and who is hired and what fees are charged. That's the power of the co-op. Every program gains from parent involvement; for us, it's built in. Other programs, then, have to find different ways to elicit this feeling of commitment. Parents, staff, children—we all benefit.

Donna Kesler is our cover director for this issue. Read about her on page 2. The Reston Children's Center is a member of Parents Cooperative Preschools International which has 347 members, including individuals and organizations.
