

Momentum

by Jackie Legg

“Parent Power”

Many articles have been written on how to build good relationships with parents. Creative directors, in their efforts to fulfill their complex and demanding responsibilities, are now looking at the parents in their program in a new light. They see them as a valuable human resource. They have discovered *parent power*.

The ability to mobilize parents depends on establishing initial strong relationships. Parents have to understand the program. They have to feel comfortable within the center. They have to see their relationship with the director and staff as that of a partnership in providing care for their children. Centers which foster adversarial relationships cannot expect parents to provide more than minimal support.

Parents As a Referral Service

Programs have been forever dependent on parents for referrals. It has been established that satisfied parents are the best form of advertising. Parents can also be used to provide references to prospective clients. It is helpful to keep a list of parents who would be willing to talk to inquiring parents. Choose those who often express some enthusiasm for your program. By carefully interviewing the prospective parents and identifying their primary concern, it is possible to match them with a parent who can reassure them about this point.

Parents As Volunteers

Traditionally, we have asked parents to serve as volunteers for special events (field trips, holiday parties, etc.). Directors are now expanding the volunteer concept to help them stretch their valuable personnel dollars. Parent volunteers, with some

orientation and training, can replace classroom teachers to enable those teachers to attend training sessions or to observe at other programs. As an additional benefit, parents leave with a better understanding of the skills required to work with children. This understanding and empathy is invaluable to parent relations and support.

Parents As Advisors

Many directors have captured parent participation by creating parent advisory boards. Not only is the parent advisory board an important forum for listening to parent concerns and feedback, it is also a very effective way to build consensus around sensitive issues. Prior to price increases or policy changes, discussions at advisory board meetings can be helpful to explain rationale and overcome objections.

Advisory boards can be focused on a specific task such as fundraising or staff appreciation—an area that parents embrace with enthusiasm. Planning holiday celebrations, furnishing staff lounges, remembering birthdays . . . the possibilities are endless. Not only are parents involved in a positive way, but it sensitizes them to the human needs of teachers. In a sense, it allows them to nurture the teachers who nurture their children.

Parents As Fundraisers

Fundraising efforts initiated and coordinated by parents are much more effective than those dictated by the administration. Ideally, the fundraising activities are tied to the purchase of specific materials or completion of a special project. Allowing

parents to orchestrate the event insures their commitment to the success of the campaign.

Parents As Project Coordinators

One midwestern center involved the parent board in the design and equipping of an expanded playground area. The director researched materials on developmentally appropriate play areas and prepared a packet for the parent committee, complete with budget restrictions. After brainstorming ideas, the parents agreed upon a plan, prepared a list of materials, and solicited parent volunteers for various committees. Materials which couldn't be scrounged were bought at wholesale. The playground was completed in two weekends, considerably under budget!

Parents Provide Skills and Expertise

Often parents have skills or access to services which can be tapped for the benefit of the program. It is helpful to know the professions/employments of your parents so you can identify potential assistance. Some centers utilize parents to type and duplicate their newsletters and parent notices. One progressive center has a task force composed of parents who are human resources professionals. The task force is assisting with a local wages/benefits survey and analysis to help the program make some decisions on benefits packages. (Parents were appalled by the low wages and lack of benefits that plague our profession.)

When possible, tap into parent expertise when making decisions outside your realm of experience.

- Ask your computer expert parent to advise on computer purchases.
- Identify a parent in the medical field to help you find a consulting physician or dentist. Ask them to review your health policies and procedures. Ask them to be on call for medically related questions.
- An attorney parent (or someone who works in a legal office) can review your personnel handbook to insure that your policies are legal and complete. Ask them to review contracts or leases before you sign them.
- The parent who is familiar with auto mechanics can help you develop a preventive maintenance/safety program for your van.

- A parent who has experience in the nutrition field could be helpful in reviewing your menus.

- Compile a list of parents who provide critical services (plumbers, electricians, air-conditioning repairs, etc.). You may need to pay for these services when required, but you can be assured of quick response if their child is in your center.

Parent Donations

Parents should not be overlooked as a source for donated materials. Parents are usually delighted to donate; you just have to create a system for identifying your needs. Toys and books which children have outgrown are always appreciated. One director completely replenished the center's library with a community book drive. (Bookplates were pasted inside identifying the name of the giver.)

Another center created eight new prop boxes with donations from parents. They simply sent a newsletter identifying the benefits of dramatic play and asking for specific items (dress-up clothes, kitchen utensils, household objects) to complete the boxes. They displayed the boxes at a parent open house, generating more contributions.

Consider updating your playground with moveable materials (tires, crates, lumber). Parents are a wonderful source for these materials. Make sure your wish list includes items for the woodworking center (wood scraps, sandpaper, hammer, nails, screwdrivers, etc.), the cooking center (broiler ovens, hand mixers, hot plates, etc.), and the construction center (wood scraps, industrial wire scraps, natural collage materials, etc.).

Parents As Problem-Solvers

Parents are invaluable partners in problem-solving. Facing an insensitive landlord who refused to allow the center to expand into unoccupied retail space, one Texas center rallied parents around their plight. Parents launched a massive letter writing campaign not only emphasizing current social issues, but also citing the other area merchants who benefited because they came to the center twice a day. The director copied the letters and sent them to the merchants, thereby creating a second level lobbying effort.

Not only did the landlord reverse his decision, he moved another tenant into the vacant spot to give

the center adjacent space. The entire process unified the center and stimulated many discussions about the difficulties providers encounter when they are forced to compete in a commercial environment.

Parents As Advocates

Wise directors are beginning to sense a need for parent power on a higher plane. Previously, we have overlooked parents as potential advocates for child care issues. It behooves us, in this time of changing social sentiments, to keep parents informed and involved in all aspects of the early childhood field. Educating parents about current trends, qualitative standards, staffing challenges, local regulation changes, and federal legislation can only lead to their broader understanding and increased involvement. Our advocacy efforts will never be truly effective until providers join ranks with consumers (parents) in our quest for available, affordable, high quality care for all children.

The potential is there! In this age of ever-diminishing resources, now is the time to mobilize . . . energize . . . maximize . . . your own *parent power*.

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