
Connecting the links of child care

Links Are More Than Little Pig Sausages!

by Pauline Davey Zeece

During my early childhood, I learned a lot about life and the universe at Pete's Market. Weekly grocery shopping excursions with my mother and five siblings were rarely, if ever, uneventful. At Pete's, I learned that it was best to use a bag when grinding coffee beans, that my younger brothers were quick enough to spring a mouse trap with their fingers (most of the time), and that my mother was a little apprehensive about sex education.

My admiration for and awe of Al, the butcher, was obvious, and must have contributed to my mother's decision to send me to pick up the meat order each week at Pete's. My conversations with Al were wonderful. I felt like a big kid as he described the contents of each neatly tied butcher-paper package.

I can still hear and feel the kindness of his words when he asked me (on cue) if I needed anything else. "Don't forget the little pig sausages," I would reply predictably. He always acted as if I was in control of the ordering of the sausages. The rituals made me feel responsible and competent.

I am not quite sure when I learned that the rest of the world used the term *link* sausages. It was, however, after I had moved far away from my childhood and Pete's Market. I do remember that this adult discovery made me chuckle and that the term *link* has had special meaning for me ever since.

Linking Up: The Big Picture

Good programs are full of good links of all kinds. Meaningful connections within a child care system require effective linking among all those who participate in or who are affected by a program. This is sometimes called a systems perspective because importance is placed on the quality of the relationships between people, programs, and the community. Thus, each relationship provides an opportunity for building and strengthening links and for affecting all the systems connecting them.

• The Director/Staff Link

The quality of relationships between director and staff members sets the tone and direction for all interpersonal links in a program. These links are strengthened when staff members are listened to and respected, when their actions are acknowl-

edged and valued, and when their contributions are seen as both meaningful and unique. The relationship is further enhanced when directors provide opportunities for professional advancement and growth, extend support during struggles and challenges, and offer compassion in times of hardship or even failure. Thus, the chief characteristic of this link is the comprehensiveness of its nature — links are built and sustained when staff are supported during good times and bad.

• The Staff/Staff Link

Building strong links among staff is a key task for a director. Administrators who link well provide means for staff to work constructively together, to plan successfully for the present, and to project in exciting ways for the future. They provide a mechanism by which staff can negotiate conflicts and agree to disagree. They also set the stage for the successful management of peace within a program.

So often programs operate in a reactive way under the pressure of multiple demands. There may be little direction or understanding about how to use time and resources

well when no real conflict or crisis is in place. Effective directors keep a finger on the pulse of a program and manage its *health* during all stages of its growth and development. They recognize that strong links among staff do not happen by accident. These evolve from thoughtful, sustained actions and activities which help workers to see that they are part of something larger than themselves. Directors who believe and then act upon the idea that the greatest success is a collective one strengthen the staff/staff links in a program.

- **The Program/Parent Link**

Between director and parent.

Despite the generic name, directors know that child care programs are not designed to care exclusively for children. Good centers care for families. This means that the development and maintenance of healthy parent/program links is critical to quality programming. The role of the director in building these links is twofold: to build an effective director/family relationship and to facilitate the positive relationship between staff and families.

Rapport with families is earned, not bestowed. Families invest in and link with programs when directors convey the message that family ideas, their participation, and most of all their children are valued.

Linking occurs when administrators exhibit fairness in business management, openness during crisis and confrontation, and competence in program implementation. Families bond when directors are viewed as allies, not adversaries; when directors are seen as resource people, not avenging experts; and when directors function as facilitators, not critics.

Between staff and parent. Helping foster the staff/family link is yet

another challenge for directors.

This relationship is one of the most powerful in a child care program — for provider and parents together are the guardians of children's well-being and self-esteem. Directors strengthen links by serving as facilitators when parents and staff need to talk, as mediators when they need to conflict constructively, as menders when they need to defuse or repair, and as pragmatists when they need to move on or make other arrangements. Directors build this link best when they do not *take sides*, but rather take stands based on careful analysis of the issues at hand.

- **The Program/Child Link**

Building the program/child link can be deceptively complex. Directors provide indirect support for children by modeling respect, by ensuring that every child has an *invested* caregiver who knows that child and his/her family, and by providing resources to staff to structure an environment that is uniquely respectful of each child and his/her culture. The link is further cemented when directors work to provide programming that is developmentally appropriate. All of this contributes to the building of children's sense of competence and belonging.

Directors sometimes link with children in a very special way when they intervene on behalf of an abused or neglected child. Though such action may be personally or politically painful, protection of children is central to the mission of quality early childhood programming. Without protection, children do not thrive (or survive in some instances). When children do not thrive, all meaningful links are weakened. When children are damaged, so too are links.

- **The Program/Community Link**

Quality early life experiences contribute to communities, as well as to families. Quality child care lays the foundation for the development of the competent, productive workers of the future. Directors who build links within the community are able to see the *big picture* of the overall community child care need. They are able to realistically evaluate the long-term payoffs of good programming. Thus, competent administrators network and share information to improve community-wide awareness of quality early childhood education programming and focus attention on the collective needs of all families who utilize child care services. Linking well with the community facilitates the development of collaborate partnerships to establish common goals and to address comprehensive solutions. This in turn strengthens the link and promotes better outcomes for everyone.

Making Links That Last . . . A Shared Adventure

Simply acknowledging the importance of links, however, is not enough to ensure high quality programming. Talking of linking alone creates neither meaningful relationships nor better services for children and families. Rather, linking and facilitating linking takes a specific commitment of action by a director. It requires leadership which supports the notion that building links creates better programs.

I will be returning to my hometown this summer after a 15 year absence. My logic and my mathematics tell me that Al will not be there. I am not even sure that Pete's Market exists any more. But I will drive by because what I remember best about

Building the Links

The process of linking is enhanced when directors:

Establish a shared vision. Shared vision is much more than wanting quality programs for children and families. It involves a unified view of *how* such programs are to be created and maintained. This view becomes the framework or driving force as links are formed.

What is YOUR vision or greatest hope for the program you administer? Do others know of this vision? How do your views mesh with those of staff? of parents? of community professionals and advocates? What mechanism does your program have to develop, implement, evaluate, and adjust its most important goals? How do you foster collective ownership and feelings of pride and partnership in program goals?

Provide time to link. Some links are forged out of convenience, others emerge out of need. But strong links among all elements of a program do not automatically develop. This may happen because links are both obvious and subtle. Some of the most powerful links are unshared or misinterpreted because they exist at a subconscious or nonpublic level, because people are embarrassed to acknowledge their existence or importance, or because a program offers neither the time nor the mechanism by which links can be discussed or shared. Thus, linking well involves a time commitment to enable people to talk with, react to, and better understand each other. Staff members need a mechanism for sharing and planning and growing together in the context of the child care setting.

How are relationships encouraged and fostered in your program? Is time given in staffing patterns to allow for regular interaction among all those involved in programming? Is nurturing of links a part of job expectation for staff and for YOU? Are workers rewarded when they build quality relationships? Do you make time in your schedule to regularly interact with community members?

Reward and chronicle successes. All links carry a unique history and an emotional tag. You may be surprised at the depth of emotion and pride that surfaces when people start to discuss the links they feel with others connected to your program. Ask staff to share how they know when a link has been made with a parent, a colleague, or a child.

One teacher reported holding a sobbing child after his father had died and crying with him. The intensity of her recounting made it clear that something very moving had been shared. This is a link.

Another director reported removing a painful splinter from a child's finger (upon parent request). Three years after the child "graduated" from the center, the director met her at a community function, and the child smiled and held up her finger and said, "See, it's still okay!" This is a link.

A parent stopped in my office just recently to tell me about a teacher who had taken her own time to advocate for an older sibling in the public school system. The last thing that was shared as he left was: "This teacher made me feel like I was an okay parent. I felt I had made a difference in my child's life and that I had a right to ask for explanations about my child's difficulties." This is a link.

A community leader in a small town recently commented at a civic function that she did not know what she and her employers would do without the local child care center. This is a link.

What are the strongest links in your program? How do you know? Is there a mechanism in place rewarding those who make magic as they create these links? What system could be set up to foster and record the development of all links in your center?

that time and place is the special link which I had with Al as a small child. That is the power of creating meaningful links — they last; and they impact in ways we may never understand and only hope to know and to feel. They create for those who are involved in and affected by the work of a child care center the notion that *we are all in this together*.

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