

Parent Feedback: A Critical Element in Program Quality

by R. Eleanor Duff, Mark Tompkins, and Sally McClellan

"Tom, when you drop James off at child care, don't forget to give his teacher this little sack. Remind her that he has his two changes of clothing for the day. I'm leaving work early this afternoon so that I can pick him up. I want to stop in and observe a part of nap time to see how he is adjusting to his new room and rest time. We'll see you this evening! — Mom" This message was taped to a small bag sitting near Tom's briefcase. Three year old James' mother had gone to work early this morning.

Each morning across the nation, parents leave similar messages for each other. A natural happening in the lives of both single parent and dual career families. Child care services currently form and will continue to form an increasingly significant portion of our nation's child rearing assistance.

With multiple stressors plaguing most families today, placing children in group care at earlier and earlier ages and for longer periods of the day is rapidly becoming the rule instead of the exception. As a result, many children are in the care of child care providers for longer periods of the child's waking hours than with their parents. In fact, through the eyes of many young children, a trusted caregiver becomes an important member of the *family*.

It only stands to reason, then, that caregivers, in the ways they relate to

and interact with young children and their parents, are in the position to influence all aspects of a young child's development. For example, the caregiver's personal and professional style and skills of relating to the child will, in great measure, influence how the child will come to view adults beyond his own parents and family and how his language, thoughts, and disposition will be shaped. That same adult will also have influence on the shape and direction of the child's social knowledge and skills.

Parents must consciously ask themselves questions:

- "How well do we know the personal qualities and characteristics of the individuals we have asked to help us raise our child?"
- "What do we really know about the quality of the program and activities they provide?"

- "What evidences are there that this will be a safe, healthy, and supportive environment for our child?"
- "Are these persons willing to work with parents as partners in providing supportive care and education for our children?"

From this perspective, caregivers and teachers must strive to understand each parent's feelings of uncertainty and to recognize the need to communicate a message that goes far beyond their classroom activities and expectations. Teachers must communicate an openness that encourages parents to ask questions and seek assistance.

Since they are often with the child for more waking hours than are the parents, teachers must become well enough acquainted with the parents to share information about their child that they have little opportunity to observe. If the relationship is to be mutually supportive and trusting, parents will have to feel free to share information to help the teacher understand their child more fully; and teachers will have to take the relationship seriously and think about the needs and strengths of children and parents. At the same time, parents and teachers alike must communicate a

mutual desire for a close working partnership.

From a partnership perspective, parents must assume responsibility for three major closely interwoven areas of action: First, they must be well informed about what constitutes high quality child care. Second, they must take it upon themselves to be informed advocates for quality in the program in which their children are enrolled. Third, they must be willing to provide formal feedback to the program director and staff on the quality of the program as their family is experiencing it.

These critical behaviors, however, will not happen automatically. Carefully designed avenues for dialog and discussion must be initiated and established by the center staff. This can be accomplished best through a formal mechanism that provides opportunity for parents to give feedback to teachers.

Assuming the role of informed partners, parents of children enrolled at the USC Children's Center at the University of South Carolina designed the following Parent Feedback Form (PFF) for the purpose of offering an additional form of feedback to their child's teacher and the center director concerning their perceptions of the quality of the center's program. While parents are invited and encouraged to spend as much time as they would like in the center and to participate in all phases of the program, information gathered through use of the feedback form offers still another source of constructive feedback from parents.

For the Children's Center, the Parent Feedback Form plays an important role in structuring expectations for

both parents and teachers. Items on the form actually serve to guide parents in what they may expect to see happening in their child's classroom. At the same time, teachers know that parents will be asked to share their perceptions of each of the items as it is carried out.

This understanding helps teachers to be more mindful of the nature of their interactions with their children and parents. For example, the form should serve as a reminder to teachers in this setting that parents of very young children are eagerly looking for a *caregiving* environment that is safe, pleasant, and supportive of the individual child's development. Many parents experience a great deal of anxiety as they, themselves, wrestle with personal conflicts between their images of the appropriate role for parents and the role that many parents must now play in raising their children.

For the Children's Center, the Parent Feedback Form serves as an important signaling device for emphasizing parent concerns to the teacher as well as providing a non-threatening mechanism for expressing pleasures and concerns about what they see (or don't see) in the classroom. It also provides the program director with another source of information about the teacher's work. This last function might be viewed as particularly threatening unless it is understood that this process provides everyone with another way to identify issues which may not be articulated more directly.

The Parent Feedback Form is completed each spring by parents of children enrolled in the USC Children's Center. Contrary to most standardized practices in questionnaire construction and item design,

most questions are cast in such a way that the parent may respond with either a *yes* or *no*. It is generally felt by the parent representatives and center staff that more parents will respond if they have the option of a quick answer. Space for more lengthy comments is, however, provided for each item. Parents are invited to comment as fully as they choose.

In essence, the form gives parents a voice for expressing themselves about their experiences in the center. It provides an opportunity for parents to reflect upon how they are feeling about the care and education their child is receiving.

While information gathered with the form does not take the place of the personal, day-to-day interaction with parents nor the regularly scheduled teacher/parent conferences, the questionnaire does offer an additional opportunity to provide written comment on important areas of the program.

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Parent Feedback Form

Classroom _____

Date _____

Teaching Team _____

Lead Teacher

Assistant Teacher

This form is designed to help you, the parent(s), provide feedback to your child's teachers and to the center's director. We encourage you to discuss your comments with the teachers. This form should be returned to the center director in the attached envelope.

Directions: Respond to the questions listed below. Use the backs of pages for additional comments. If possible, try to identify specific actions and/or issues in your comments. It is important for you to give teachers positive feedback and support in response to the good things happening in your child's classroom, as well as identifying any concerns that you may have. Your constructive ideas and comments will lead to a better program for all of our families.

Behavior and Attitudes

• Teacher Availability

Is the lead teacher available to you when you expect her or him to be?

• Teacher Demeanor

Does the lead teacher offer you guidance for working with your child?

Are you comfortable asking the lead teacher or assistant teacher for help in working with your child?

Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher seem enthusiastic and happy about their work as teachers?

Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher act and speak in ways that work well for your child?

Does your teaching team appear to work well together?

• Classroom Atmosphere

Is the classroom a comfortable and happy place for your child and for you? Would you like to be a child in this classroom?

Do you feel comfortable with staff arrangements at arrival time in the morning and leaving time at the end of the day?

• Multicultural Learning Environment

Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher relate to children from all backgrounds appropriately and with ease?

Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher provide a classroom atmosphere in which children and parents from many backgrounds can enjoy and profit from each other's presence?

Instruction and Curriculum

Do you know what is happening in your child's classroom? Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher work with your child in ways that seem to be appropriate for his/her level of development?

How do you feel about what your child is learning in this classroom?

How well have you been able to reinforce the classroom activities at home?

Does the teaching team use and encourage the use of many different classroom materials?

Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher encourage children to develop their individual interests? Do they stimulate children's curiosity about new ideas/things? Do they encourage creative ideas and creative use of materials?

Communication Skills

Does the lead teacher tell you what you want and need to know about your child's development, behavior, and progress?

Do both the lead teacher and assistant teacher communicate with you in understandable ways about your child?

Does the teaching team encourage positive relationships among the children in this classroom?

Does the teaching team offer you support and help you to be a better parent?

Are there other things about the teacher's work which you want to mention?

Are there other things that both or either the lead teacher and assistant teacher do especially well?

Are there particular concerns about which you would like both the lead teacher and assistant teacher to give thought?

Have you discussed these concerns with the teacher? (circle one) Yes No

The Program Director

Does the director invite parent discussion and participation in the center's activities?

As a parent, do you feel that the director is sensitive to staff, program, and family needs?

As a parent, I have enjoyed supporting my child's experiences at the center during this past year in these ways:

Your name (optional) _____

Your child's name (optional) _____

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