



# Communicating with Parents

by Margie Carter

Everywhere I go I see early childhood programs struggling to find a more effective means of communication with and involvement of parents in their programs. Though everyone believes this is a critical component of quality, hardly anyone is satisfied with what is happening. There is a longing for something more, something different.

The longing we feel is about some deeper issues in our lives — lack of time, lack of extended family and community. Instead we have tight schedules, traffic congestion, the stresses of single and shared parenting, low wages, precarious health, and financial instability plaguing both the workers and families in our child care programs.

It seems like staff and families could be a mutual support system for each other; but instead, they typically have complaints and irritations with each other. There is a genuine dissatisfaction with the level of communication between them.

To be sure, there are exceptions to this state of affairs, but that's what they are, exceptions. Caregivers long for the kind of respect,

support, and community involvement they hear their Italian counterparts have in the schools of Reggio Emilia. Most families in the U.S. don't know about Reggio, but they have their own ideas of what they want from their child's program, their worries about school readiness, and the pressures placed on their family life. They find they just can't take the time to read a notice, help with a field trip, or attend a meeting.

Child care staff and parents are each unsettled by the expectations they have of each other. In many settings I hear things like:

Parent: "When I ask Robert what he did in school, he says he just played. Aren't you teaching him anything?"

Teacher: "When we had our parent meeting, only four people showed up. Don't these parents even care about what their children are doing?"

Director: "I spend hours every month putting together a parent newsletter to keep families informed. Judging from the questions and comments I get on any given day, I don't really think anyone reads our newsletter."

At the heart of these mutual frustrations is genuine desire to know what's happening on the other end, along with the parent and caregiver's need to be understood, appreciated, and respected.

Is there a way to get beyond the disappointments and gripes and create the kind of communication we all long for?

## **Strategy:** **Introduce parents to a new quality of knowing**

The programs I see with better success in parent involvement and communications have gone beyond the typical gimmicks or generic ideas we typically read about. Instead, they have created a tangible way for parents to see their children and the life of the program where they spend oh-so-many hours.

With an active practice of creating individual children's portfolios and documentation displays charting evolving understandings, skills, and curriculum projects, there is a smoother flow of communication and a growing sense of community among parents.

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In writing about what is needed to make an alliance between schools and families succeed, Loris Malaguzzi says,

*Teachers must leave behind an isolated mode of working that leaves no traces. Instead, they must discover ways to communicate and document the children's evolving experiences at school. They must prepare a steady flow of quality information targeted to parents but appreciated also by children and teachers. This flow of documentation, we believe, introduces parents to a quality of knowing that tangibly changes their expectations.*

*With regard to the children, the flow of documentation creates a second, and equally pleasing, scenario. They become even more curious, interested, and confident as they contemplate the meaning of what they have achieved. They learn that their parents feel at home in the school, at ease with the teachers, and informed about what has happened and is about to happen.*

*The Hundred Languages of Children*  
(Norwood, NJ: Ablex Press, 1993)

The idea of “introducing parents to a quality of knowing that tangibly changes their expectations” is a powerful one and not something that can happen over night. First, the caregivers and teachers have to have that quality of knowing. Documentation displays contribute a great deal to that *quality of knowing*. Then, teachers must develop skills to articulate what they understand, translating their professional knowledge into user-friendly language.

For the *quality of knowing* to deepen for both teachers and parents, we have to move away from superficial reports about lunch, birthdays, and crafts projects in our communication to parents. These are akin to idle chatter when

it comes to the real meaning of what might be happening in our programs. Observant teachers building on children’s interests, experiences, and relationships in their curriculum planning have a wealth of significant classroom events to re-represent to both the children and their families. The sense of history and community that grows from this shared documentation is the stuff dreams are made of. It has little to do with the small boxes in a typical lesson plan or a write-up that is posted for parents.

Master teacher Ann Pelo describes her beginning work with documentation this way:

*Picking up on the children's interest in the wheelchair accessible sign we noticed on our neighborhood walk, I returned to sketch a curriculum web with “wheelchair accessibility/ramp building” in the center. This was not intended to be the curriculum plan for the month, but rather a guidepost for traveling with emergent curriculum. I also wanted to begin a record of our project, our classroom history as it developed.*

*In the weeks that followed, I took many photos, made and kept copies of the children's letters and drawings, and transcribed tape recorded conversations among the children. These were displayed for parents as a map of our growing curriculum . . . the children used the documentation as a common frame of reference and would often take out the “Ramp Book” (a display album) and tell each other the stories of the photos and letters in it.*

### **Strategy:** **Parents introduce themselves with documentation displays**

During this past year I’ve heard several wonderful examples of

programs getting parents involved in creating documentation displays about some aspect of their family life. At the Enrichment Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, parents were given a list of possible ways to create displays about their families to post during the Week of the Young Child. Most used photos as part of their display, incorporating varying forms such as mobiles, poems, stories, and family trees.

Carolyn Edwards at the University of Kentucky described a documentation project which involved creating family history displays.

Wrestling with what to do about diverse and divisive perspectives on holiday practices among the families at their center, the staff at Kidspace Child Care in Seattle, Washington, invited each family to take home an empty display board to fill it up with representations of their favorite winter holiday practices. As these were returned for display in the center, families and staff discovered common values as well as unique ways of celebrating.

### **Strategy:** **Create dialogue in newsletters, on bulletin boards**

Rather than limit our precious bulletin board space and routine newsletters to announcements and fluffy news, why not turn them into avenues of dialogue between parents and staff? Try gathering input from different folks on topics such as “childhood is a time of . . .,” “what school-readiness means to me,” “my favorite childhood summer memory,” perhaps using these write-ups with related photos or illustrations.

If our child care programs provide

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ways for parents and staff to get to know each other better, relationships of mutual interest and respect grow. This is in contrast to a bulletin board or child's cubby packed with notices that no one has an interest in reading.

**Strategy:**  
**Post questions rather than reports**

Parents are often frustrated when they can't get much information from their children about what went on during the day. Teachers find they don't have time to write much more than a quick summary of what went on and, more often than not, this summary isn't of great significance to parents.

To help parents apply what we know about building verbal expression in children, try posting an open-ended question, rather than a report, on the classroom door at the end of the day. For instance, if you had a pet snake visit the classroom, suggest to parents: "Ask your children what animals they think make good pets." Or, if you are doing a curriculum project around water, suggest that parents raise a question about where water

comes from or goes when they are washing dishes or getting ready for a bath.

Helping parents learn the value of using descriptive language and open-ended questions will assist them in soliciting stories from their children. This, in turn, will encourage parents to stay in closer contact with caregivers and teachers because they value help and expertise.

**Strategy:**  
**Spread the news of successful partnerships**

There are always parents who go out of their way to build a relationship with their child's caregivers, who eagerly seek out advice and work closely to maintain consistency between home and their child care center. As you recognize this happening, ask if you can share this story with others. Broadcasting these examples of how a good partnership works (via your newsletter, bulletin boards, or other visual displays) will capture the attention of other families in your program and enhance their interest in forming a closer caregiving partnership.

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*Margie Carter is a college instructor, frequent speaker, and consultant to early childhood programs around the country. A portion of this article comes from the new book she has co-authored with Deb Curtis, **Spreading the News: Sharing the Stories of Early Childhood Education**, available from Redleaf Press.*

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