

I Confess, I've Changed

by Gigi Schweikert

Do you recognize any of the parents below? Perhaps some of them have children enrolled in your center or home.

- One parent picked up her child late three times in a week and then brought cupcakes to the caregiver to make up for it. *(Well, at least she brought the cupcakes.)*
- A parent forgot to pay his tuition and when reminded responded by saying, "I thought my wife paid you. Are you sure?" *(No, we'd like to charge you double.)*
- "Please make sure you zip up my child's coat when you go outside and also don't forget to wash her face after she eats," comments one parent. *(I think we can handle that.)*
- One parent left her child at the center all day so she could shop for a holiday party. *(Doesn't that parent want to spend any time with her child?)*
- A parent actually left her child with the child care provider so she could go work out. *(Are we here to babysit?)*
- "Please don't take my child outside today. She's not feeling well." *(Policy states that children who are well enough to come to the center are well enough to go outside.)*
- One parent likes to keep her child up late at night so she and her husband can play with the baby. The child is sometimes tired when she arrives at the provider's home in the morning. *(We get to deal with a child who needs a morning nap.)*
- I know a parent who puts a four month old in a swing in front of the TV, "Sesame Street," of course. The parent says that is the only

way she can get dressed in the morning. *(Isn't there a better way?)*

- A parent wanted the center to feed her child dinner one evening. *(Maybe we should put her pajamas on, too).*

- You've probably heard about the parent who wanted to dress up her infant as a bumblebee for Halloween and paraded the child around the center to take pictures. *(Not exactly the DAP approach to infant curriculum.)* The father said, "My child's grandparents are really going to love these photos."

Any of these parents familiar to you? In my child care career as teacher, director, and administrator, I've encountered all of the above, and most likely you have, too. You've probably even heard staff say things like, "Don't these parents



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realize that we are experts when it comes to working with children?" "Why are parents taking advantage of us?" "Don't they appreciate us?" "Why did that parent have children anyway?" "The child spends more time with us than with her parents." I'll admit I've asked these questions about parents myself.

And although I've become more tolerant over the years, less judgmental, and more customer-focused, I never really understood the realities of being a working parent. Not until recently when I became a parent. The parents described above aren't parents enrolled in your center, unless you're caring for my seven month old daughter, Ashley.

During the four short months my daughter has been in care, my husband and I are the ones who have managed to commit these heinous child care crimes. Yes, I was late three times in one week, and I really did bring in cupcakes. Yes, my husband really did dress Ashley in an overpriced, catalog purchased bumblebee outfit and I took two rolls of film. Now that I am confessing, I'll even admit that one night we each thought the other was picking her up and we both arrived at home with take-out food and no child.

Are we bad parents? Uncaring? Thoughtless and disrespectful? No, we're working parents living in the '90s with demanding jobs, trying to meet the mortgage payment, keep those jobs, and give Ashley a wonderful home and childhood. Understandable, you say, but how come there are those parents who aren't late, who don't question our child care expertise, and who basically follow the rules?

Parents are like their children. They come in all shapes and sizes with different wants and needs. Maybe

my husband and I need to be more organized, we'd like that ourselves. I do know that I'll never be the "super parent" who after the baby is down for the night completes another report for work, finishes labeling all her child's clothes, even the socks, and prepares homemade baby food from organically grown vegetables, all before retiring for the evening. I'm not that kind of parent.

So what kind of parent am I? As a new parent, I'm vulnerable and passionate. I care. I want the very best for my child. I know her like no one else knows her. I want to have control over and influence how she is cared for and educated. And although I feel guilty sometimes that I need time away from work and family, I realize that I can't be the best mom I want to be unless I have time for me.

Parents Are Vulnerable

Parents want you to like their child and they want you to like them. They want you to think they are good parents, but parents don't always know how to behave in the child care environment, even me.

When I dropped Ashley off at the center for the first time, I knew where to park, where her room was, and "big stuff" like when the center is open and what happens if you or your check is late. All important things — but I didn't know the "little stuff" that would help me, such as where to hang my coat or put down my purse as I settled her in for the morning and, when I left, did I hand her to a teacher or put her on the floor?

I must admit with all my experience and training I felt somewhat uneasy. I wanted to be a "cool" parent and do it exactly right, but I didn't know how.

To help parents feel less vulnerable, you might consider the following:

- Plan a pre-enrollment meeting with parents to acquaint them with your center or home policies and also include a "mock" drop-off and pick-up run.
- Involve a teacher from the child's room. She will probably know even more details about the classroom than you and this is a good time to start building the parent/teacher relationship.
- Call the parents after their first day, congratulate them on making it through this important day, and ask if they have any questions. We parents are sometimes afraid to ask.
- Pair newly enrolled parents with veteran parents to help them become more acquainted with the program from the parent's perspective.
- Send out a questionnaire to parents about six weeks after they've enrolled to help you better understand the parents' and child's experience thus far. Include questions about communication, bonding with the primary caregiver, and any concerns.
- Hold a tea or lunch for a group of new parents so they can discuss their new experience at the center and support one another.

Parents Are Passionate

While I'm at work, I think of my daughter often. And sometimes when I'm immersed in a project and time lapses and I haven't been thinking about her for a while, I feel guilty. What do I think? I wonder if I have made the right choice to work and leave Ashley in the care of someone else. I wonder if the person watching her will cut her

peaches just the right size, read *Pat the Bunny* five times with the same enthusiasm, and hold her tightly when she cries.

I must admit that the hectic morning ritual of a parent leaves me with little time to think except to try to remember her bottles and change of clothes and my briefcase. But once or twice after I've dropped her off and I've settled in for the ride to work, I find myself shedding a few tears. Not because I have to work; I like to work. Not because I don't trust my caregiver; she's great and Ashley loves her. But because I'll miss the way my daughter rubs rice cereal over her right ear, chews on her Raggedy Ann, and wakes from naps with bright red cheeks. Because I'm a parent.

You may have experienced the parent who dissolves into tears or bursts out in anger. It could be over a bite or a pacifier that was lost. Parents react differently to similar situations, but all parents are passionate. Some just don't let it show. They know their children and want what is best for them.

Creating an environment in your center or home that is understanding and accepting of the passionate way in which parents approach and respond to the care and education of their children will make your program more successful.

- Listen carefully to upset parents. Seems simple, but do we really listen or do we begin to judge? Usher the distraught parent into your office or another private area and give her an opportunity to vent, sort out her feelings, and then begin working together to resolve the problem.
- View parents as experts on their children. Depend on their knowledge and expertise to provide the

most positive experience for their child.

- Provide many opportunities for parents and caregivers to communicate: informal conversations during drop-off and pick-up; daily written communication about each child's day; frequent parent/teacher conferences; and telephone calls, faxes, or e-mails from caregivers just to tell parents something wonderful about their child and to ask, "How are things going?"
- Search out parents' opinions as you develop program and policy. We usually work very hard to educate and communicate to parents about our decisions regarding educational philosophy and policies, but do we really allow parents to help shape our program? Give parents the chance to control and influence how their child is cared for and educated.
- Hold regularly scheduled parent meetings for various groups. Organize them for the entire center or home, by classroom or specific age group, and for specific topics such as transition, biting, or curriculum.
- Create parent support groups or partnerships so that parents can benefit from the experiences of other parents who have already been through things like transition and biting.

Good Parent? Good Child Care Provider?

Do you have to add parenthood to your resume to be a good child care provider? You've probably heard many parents say, "I could never do what you do." And they're right! It takes a special person to care for young children. Just being a parent doesn't make you a good caregiver, but understanding your parent customer does. Whether you're a

parent or not, take the time to find out what it feels like to be a parent using your program.

- Take a tour of your center. Ask another staff member to give you or a colleague in your community the same tour parents receive. How does the program look and feel to an outsider?
- Fill out your application and enrollment materials. Are the forms neatly presented, well organized, precise, and user-friendly? Or are they time consuming and redundant?
- Survey your parents annually and during difficult times of the year such as when children transition to new rooms. Sometimes parents feel more comfortable sharing information that is written and confidential.
- Be more visible. Arrange your schedule so that you are in the classrooms, hallways, or lobby when parents are most likely to be in the center. You'll hear and see lots as parents pick up and drop off or visit during lunch.

No, you don't have to be a parent to care well for a child. But you do have to care about parents. Work hard to understand what it means to care wildly and irrationally for a child, juggle a full life, and constantly swim in uncharted waters as your child grows and your family develops.

"The birth of my daughter has significantly impacted my role as a regional manager. As a working parent, I have a deeper understanding of the realities and complexities that our parent customers face each day. . . . From experience, I know that the services and programs our clients offer their employees truly make a difference in the lives of corporate families."