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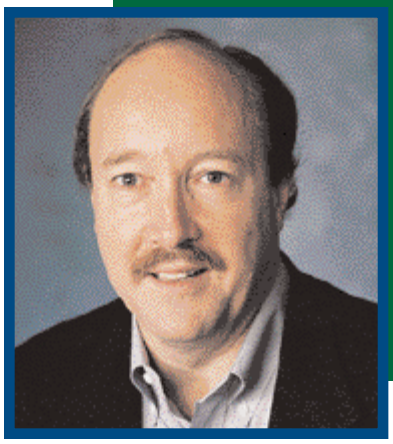
Living in the Real World



Parent Partnerships: What They Don't Teach You Can Hurt

by Jim Greenman

I get teachers fresh from college or voc-techs and they have no conception of what it is like to work with parents. Sometimes I think if they were taught anything at all, it was wrong, or maybe they just slept through it. — A very frustrated director

Parents are the hard part — compared to parents, kids are easy. We face so many issues and all sorts of people: some clueless, many wonderful, some arrogant, and a lot who need parent education. — Jenny, a 22 year old very, very frustrated child care teacher

It is a lot easier for people like me to conceptualize and write about full parent partnerships than to make them happen in real life, particularly when you are a teacher face to face daily with flesh-and-blood parents. Many teachers, particularly new teachers, are quick to express how parent relationships are the most difficult part of their job, interfering with the real work of making quality happen for children.

While it is unfair to tar the multitude of teacher training with a broad brush, the director and teacher sentiments expressed above are common. So what should we teach teachers to prepare them for the real world of child care and to develop the partnerships so necessary to quality?

Child Care Is Not School

The relationship between parents and child care is not (or should not be) the same relationship that they will have with most schools, even nursery schools. Schools generally assume the responsibility to educate the child in the best manner they see fit and to share information about the child's progress. After all, schools are society's institution to ensure that all children get what they need to be members of society. The parents' job is assumed to be mostly to keep informed, support the professionals, and do their part at home. Their presence is usually on the perimeter of the classroom.

Child care is different. If the parents' responsibility is to raise their child, be the expert on their own child, and make sure the child is cared for in accordance with their values and standards, then, in child care, *it is the parent's job to pay attention and influence the day-to-day particulars of their child's care*. This is an important point and one that makes many of us uneasy; sharing information is one thing, sharing power is quite another.

To help make the conceptual shift, suppose that you were a parent with lots of money looking for child care. You might hire a nanny or seek out the specific care you want from the best programs in the area. You would expect *influence* over your child's care, not just information about the care received. Your purchasing power would back up your parental prerogatives. You might well want advice and education from the child care professional(s), but you would certainly expect it to be given respectfully with full awareness that what you do with your child is your choice.

As a good parent, you want control over the care, but as a typical sensible

***Jim Greenman is vice president for education and program development at Bright Horizons Family Solutions. He is the author of the new book* Places for Childhoods** *(Exchange Press, 1998); co-author (with Anne Stonehouse) of* **Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs** *(Redleaf Press, 1996); and author of* **Caring Spaces, Learning Places** *(Exchange Press, 1988).*

parent, you would use your financial ability to find caregivers you trust; and you would rely on their judgment for most decisions.

Understanding the Parent-Teacher Relationship: Inherent Tensions and Difficult Issues

A few years ago, my mother way dying of cancer. It was my first experience with the business of dying. On one particular day, I left a center where I had just participated in a highly charged meeting with a director and the unhappy parents of a child who was having a very difficult time transitioning to the preschool. Waiting in the reception area of the oncologist's office with my mother, there was quite a commotion from one of the interior offices — sobbing and angry voices. Later, I asked the doctor how he got used to being in the middle of emotional storms. He shrugged, "People tend to get pretty steamed up when faced with fundamental issues and you don't get any more fundamental than death." Or the well-being of your children.

Few occupations demand the day-to-day intimacy and the navigation of emotion-laden issues that are expected of child care teachers in high quality child care programs. What is surprising is not that there are tensions and occasional conflict between parents and teachers, but how well the relationship usually works. All the ingredients are there for problems.

Parent Roles

Teachers naturally tend to view parents only as child care parents — how they go about their lives in the narrow slice of life that parents and teachers occupy together. If we drop that perspective and look at parent behavior from society's expectations, it is clear there are some inherent tensions that often lead to predictable conflict when parents are taking seriously their most important roles.

Child Protector. The most basic, primal role of parents is to protect their children. Parents who don't perform this function adequately are not well thought of. What kind of parent lets his child run out in the street, fall down a well, or get beaten up by other kids? So what reaction should we expect from a parent whose child is bitten, or injured on the playground, or seems to be in the throes of despair when left at the center. *What kind of a parent am I if I can't protect my baby from being chewed on by some ferocious toddler?*

Primary Educator. *If my child grows up ignorant, no one will look to her child care teachers as the culprits.* Hearing that the brain is busy wiring itself and the first three years are critical and assorted contradictory information that education needs to begin at birth, parents are going to be very concerned about what's being taught.

Family Provider. *I want the best for my Kevin, and sometimes that means working long hours and two jobs. I know that may mean some longer child care days than are ideal, but what can you do?* Parents are told they have to begin saving immediately for college and retirement, to say nothing about braces, or private school, and all the other things that come up.

Child Care Consumer. *When I buy a car, I'm supposed to look under the hood, slam the doors, kick the tires, take a test drive, and hit the brakes. As a child care consumer checking out a center where I may spend over $50,000 for two kids, shouldn't I be as demanding?* Well, yes, only remember that we are under the hood, we are the tires, and we are the doors. Sometimes the conscientious, savvy, assertive child care consumer is a good role model but a royal pain.

Role tensions are bound to create some friction, no matter how wonderful parents and teachers are. Our role is to create a safe place that educates and challenges a group of children and satisfies parents who may well not agree on what is safe, what is appropriate education, and what are the right challenges. The parents' role is to choose a program that works for their own child, not the group, and seems in line with their beliefs and values. It is surprising that there is not more tension.

Parent Insecurities

Talk to parents and it doesn't take long to identify some basic insecurities that most parents feel to one degree or another:

- What do I *really* know? About raising a child? About the child care I chose?
- What do they think of me? Of my child?
- Do they understand my child care guilt?
- Do they know how complicated and hard my life is?
- Will they understand and like my child?
- Will they understand and respect me?
- Is my child attached? *Too* attached?

Parents are often surprised to find out that many parents are at times insecure. But as a parent with a post-graduate education in child development, even as director of a center where my child attended, I often felt all of those feelings above: clueless,

anxious, insecure. There were times when I was nervous about approaching Emma's primary caregiver, a teacher I hired and could fire if I chose, because I was anxious about what she thought of me as a parent. Insecurity as a parent comes and goes, often recurring with a vengeance during the first teen years.

Teacher Insecurities

And whom do parents sit across the table from in those little chairs when they meet to talk about their child? Teachers, who of course come with their own insecurities — many of whom may be attracted to working with children because they are more comfortable with children than adults. Some are too young to make the leap from identifying with the children to identifying and empathizing with parents. Scratch below the surface and many teachers feel anxiety similar to that of the parents:

- What do I *really* know? About raising a kid? About this child?
- What do they think of me? My low-paid/low-status work?
- Do they know how complicated and hard my work (and my life) is?
- Will they *understand* and *respect* my work and me?
- Will they worry that their child is not attached to me? Is *too* attached?

Predictable Difficult Issues

Insecure parents, insecure teachers, role tensions, and, add to the mix, ongoing issues likely to cause conflict:

- "My child's needs" versus the group.
- How much "academics"?
- Child illness — mine and those infectious others.
- Aggression/biting.
- Special needs.
- Parent schedule/lateness.
- Affording tuition.

Only Human

And how do we, everyday people, behave in potentially difficult interactions when we are insecure? Well, clinically speaking, we often get weird. Some of us withdraw; others do the opposite and become more confrontational, more assertive. Some talk too much; others practice avoidance, or denial, or simply give in or "go limp" and often become resentful about it later.

A Letter from Joey's Mom

We ask parents to tell us how they would like us to care for their child, and Joey's mom certainly took us up on that seriously. Two single-spaced pages of specifications:

I do not kiss him on the lips. Too many germs on the lips. It would be greatly appreciated if you could keep Joey away from any kids who have colds, fevers, earaches, etc. as best you can (every other kid in the room, of course!) *because I can't miss any more work.*

I feed him holding in my left arm with his head resting on my upper arm, the bottle at 75 degree angle . . . I rub his legs and knees, talk to him . . . (8 lines of details later). *He likes his mouth dabbed very lightly. I let him play with the diaper.*

Diapering — I normally diaper him about 5-10 minutes after feeding . . . (he turns red and grunts). He has a hanging ducky at home by his changing table and he swats at the ducky so I say a rhyme: Ducky wucky had a duck, ducky wucky went cluck (sound effects) cluck (then I say the words cluck, cluck). Ducky wucky was a duck, was he. He loves it . . .

After feeding and diapering him, I sit him on my lap and talk with him, then put him on his back in the crib and crank his mobile. I sing . . . I say . . . Then I position him so he can see himself in the mirror or I lay him . . .

Sleep — Joey's eyes become tired looking when he is ready for a nap, or he sucks his thumb or twiddles his hair . . . if he can't settle down, I lay him on my right side with his head resting on my right shoulder and his left hand tucked under my arm . . .

Crammed into two pages, we have a minute-by-minute account of Joey's every move as an illustration of how to care for him at the center.

How would you expect teachers to react to this? Disbelief? Fear? Flight — *you can have Joey as your primary care child!* Joey's mom is actually doing what we asked of her — but taking her role so seriously it causes us concern. How teachers react depends of course on who Joey's mom actually is. If she is a young single parent, fresh from parenting classes, under the watchful eyes of Child Protection Services, the letter may seem poignant, almost heroic. But if, instead, we get an e-mail from a 42 year old psychologist, artificially inseminated to have her child without a father, what do we think then — *the neurotic parent from hell?*

When we are face to face with aloofness or "in your face" questioning or denial, we will label the behavior based on how we see or stereotype the other person. Distant behavior may be viewed as arrogance if it is a parent in an expensive business suit. We may suspect race-based hostility if it is a person of another color, or perhaps only shyness if it is someone we think of like ourselves.

Understanding the Nature of Partnership

Teachers usually come to child care with no real understanding of what partnership with parents is and is not.

Partnership is not:

- *Parent involvement* or *parent participation*. An active parent presence is wonderful and important in its own right but is not parent partnership.
- *Parent education*, again usually a good thing when desired and offered with respect.
- *Becoming friends*, which may or may not be a good thing depending on the individual's skills at respecting boundaries.
- *The same relationship with each parent*, even in the same family.

Partnerships are all about power and shared decision making. Success depends on:

- Mutual respect.
- Understanding and appreciating the perspectives of each.
- Two-way communication.
- Common goals.
- Realistic expectations.
- Teamwork.
- Equality or defined roles, rights, and responsibilities.
- Shared decision making.

Understanding the Job: A New Metaphor

Teachers and parents live in a very real world. Two potentially insecure populations coming together to share decision-making responsibility for a profoundly complex, emotional, intimate experience: sharing the raising of a child, sharing deep concern and love. There are a large number of predictably difficult issues that provide a rich field for conflict. And both teachers and parents often misunderstand the complicated partnership expected in quality programs.

Having said all this, most parent-teacher relationships actually work pretty well most of the time. They succeed because teachers and parents want them to succeed and try hard to make them work. Much like a marriage, an even more emotionally complex partnership, parent-teacher relationships depend on caring, give and take, and effort.

In practice, it seems to me that teachers come to the job with a false metaphor for what the job will be like and for success on the job. We seek and expect calm seas and smooth sailing. Waves are viewed as signs of trouble. Anything that rocks the boat is an aberration; and we may cast around for whom to blame. Until the seas are calm, we are unsettled and anxious.

A better metaphor is that when we create a family-friendly program, or even better a family center (see "Beyond Family Friendly: The Family Center, *Child Care Information Exchange*, March/April 1997), we recognize that we will certainly have the waves that come from individualizing care and empowering parents. At our best, we are fearless and calm sailors who don't lament or deny the waves that stem from role tensions, insecurity, and delicate issues. We understand that excellence demands that we try to have it all: meeting idiosyncratic individual and group educational and care needs, providing exuberant challenge and safety, and both using our knowledge and expertise and maximizing parent partnership. Sometimes we capsize, but we always right ourselves and sail on.

Adapted from material in *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs* by Jim Greenman and Anne Stonehouse (Redleaf Press, 1996).