

# Remember Me? I'm the Other Parent

by Gigi Schweikert

**U**ntil recently, my husband, Al, and I shared the responsibility of drop-off and pick-up of our two children at our local community child care center. We each developed our own rituals and methods of coercion for persuading Ashley and Genevieve, two and a half and one and a half years old, to enter the center without kicking and screaming and to leave in the evening without kicking and screaming.

My husband is prepared with an arsenal of tapes from Tchaikovsky to Scottish bagpipes to Kindermusik. I have a hard time enjoying perky kiddy tunes in the early AM hours. When Ashley and Genevieve ride with me, we usually look for school buses and try to guess "what's inside trucks." I tend to spend more time at the center in the morning and Al spends more time at night. He's usually late for work and I'm usually late from work.

I have to confess that I'm not beyond carrying jelly beans in my

pocket for smooth transitions. It can be quite embarrassing at the end of the day when your child, upon seeing you, yells, "Go back to work. We're just starting to have fun."

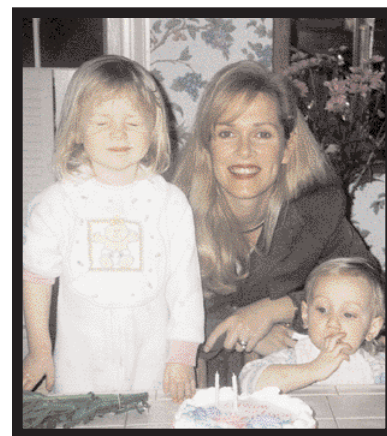
Somehow, I always imagined this slow-motion encounter where Ashley would spot me from across the classroom, toss aside her art project, even if it was her turn to use the glitter, run past the toys, and embrace me with this look of admiration that would make all the other parents jealous. Oh well.

## Sharing the Responsibility

Al and I are both pretty good about signing the children in and out. Al is more talkative and has developed a closer personal relationship with the teachers and staff. I'm the keeper of the "paper," payer of the tuition and late fees, and party volunteer. It's worked out great. We each have a different perspective about center happenings and notice varying details. Our unique outlooks have been invaluable when we discuss Ashley and Genevieve's development, concerns about biting, or teacher changes.

## One Parent Pick Up

A few months ago, everything changed. I stopped working in



**Gigi Schweikert most recently worked for Bright Horizons Family Solutions as a regional manager. She is currently working as a full-time mom and part-time consultant and recently gave birth to her third child.**

anticipation of our third child and a pregnancy of moderate to serious bed rest. Al and I decided to continue Ashley and Genevieve's three day a week schedule at the center. Although the center is close to work but about 20 minutes from home, we thought I would benefit from the rest and the children would benefit from the continuity. But, mostly, they love the center and they are learning so much. Now Al takes Ashley and Genevieve and picks them up every day.

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I eagerly await the arrival of my family and I am greeted with hugs those other parents should see. However, my questions of "How was your day?" and "What did you do today?" are usually answered with "fine" or "played" which I suppose I should be happy with given they are only toddlers. Although my husband will be 40 soon! They can usually tell me what they had for lunch, "chicken nuggets," "watermelon," which is no great surprise since I pack their lunch.

## I Need Information

Not only do I eagerly await my family, but I look forward to receiving every piece of crumpled, glued, or torn paper that makes its way from my children's cubbies to the bottom of their bags or the back seat of our car. I read this stuff like I may have won the lottery. I realize I may not be the norm, but do you really know how those parents you don't see on a regular basis feel?

Unfortunately, some of the information confuses me. I'm not sure which daughter an art project or request pertains to, since there was no name on the sheet. Once I didn't

know if "blue day" was this week or last and maybe I missed it and my kids wore orange. There was no date, just a day. I know teachers are busy, but accurately informed parents make everyone's life easier.

## Seeing the Whole Family

During the past 12 years, I've worked with employer-sponsored child care centers like the United Nations and Johnson & Johnson. These programs are incredible, and the positive benefits to the employer, employees, and children are widely recognized. But in the past, we have tailored our communication and parent partnership building around the parent we see. This certainly isn't wrong, but it's time to broaden our approach and figure out ways to encompass the entire family — parents, siblings, and even extended family.

## Establishing the Relationship

Long before the child enrolls in your program is the time to start establishing a family relationship. Whether you work in an employer-sponsored program or a community center, focus on the whole family and organize your pre-enrollment and enrollment activities to give this message.

- Schedule additional center tours in the evenings and on the weekends and invite children and other family members. You may feel that a parent can see more when the center "is alive with children," but isn't it better to have the whole family see the center? Supplement the tour with a video of "kids in action" or, better yet, have a video prospective families or enrolled families can borrow to view at home and enjoy.

- Hold an open house for families on a weekend. Invite the entire

family and provide activities and refreshments. It's good for recruiting and reconnects enrolled families.

- Arrange a pre-enrollment meeting with the family and director, teachers, and other key staff. Again, invite children, but have activities on hand so the adults can chat. This is your opportunity to meet both parents, to understand from the off-site parent his or her unique communication needs, and to schedule convenient times when the off-site parents can visit the center.

- Supplement questionnaires about children with conversations in person or over the telephone and with photographs. Many centers encourage parents to fill out lengthy questionnaires about their children; these are especially useful for sharing information about diet or special needs, however, nothing can take the place of an interview or real conversation. Ask the parents the questions "live" and sit back and enjoy learning about the child and establishing a relationship with the parents. You'll learn so much more. Parents love to talk about their children, and photographs are always good icebreakers.

## Communication

Good centers rely on many forms of communication to keep parents informed. There are daily sheets, parent bulletin boards, newsletters, parent meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. It is our responsibility to provide the information, and it is the responsibility of the parents to read the information and act upon it. So often I hear teachers say, "Well, they (parents) won't read it anyway." For some parents, those teachers are right, but the majority of parents want to know about things that pertain to their child and, to a lesser extent, the center. So it's still our responsibility to inform

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parents and to do it in a way that is easy to read, reliable, and accurate. Here are a few ideas:

■ Date it, sign it, and check the spelling. Whether your communication is generated by a computer or handwritten, make sure everything you write has the date and your signature, including children's artwork and daily information sheets about children. If I have a question about the sheet, I'll know whom to ask. And many years from now, when I pull out that artwork, I'll know how old Ashley and Genevieve were when they did it. Have someone else check your correspondence. Early childhood professionals who make spelling and grammatical mistakes don't look very professional. Remember, computers can't catch everything either.

■ Give parents regular information about their child. Some centers use a daily sheet that is quite specific. For older children, many centers send home weekly information or keep a journal. These are great methods. Just keep in mind that you should send the information home so both parents can read it, at their convenience. Also, make sure the information is complete. I really rely on the daily sheet to tell me how long my girls slept so I can anticipate when they will be ready for bed. Not all parents want the same information. Ask each parent what is important to them so you can highlight their interests.

■ Organize the cubby. Since my children are on a part-time schedule, their cubbies can be scary places. Along with the leftover snacks and confiscated artifacts from home, the artwork and memos are overflowing. This is great. Your program is sending out information and busy doing interesting things with children. Parents have to be pretty ambitious to sort through cubby info. Place children's artwork

in a file folder for easy travel home and roll large paintings or projects. Staple all memos to the daily sheet. Print especially important information on a predetermined color of paper so parents will be alerted. If possible, send home a weekly reminder instead of daily memos. Put the child's name at the top of each note. If there's a case of conjunctivitis, a field trip, or a parent volunteer request, I need to know which child's room the note is from so I can respond accordingly.

■ Call the parents. Past school experience leads us to believe someone's hurt or in trouble when we receive unanticipated calls, so let the parent know immediately that everything is fine and that you are just calling to say hello. Tell them some terrific things about their kid, and see if they have any questions. Your parent relationships will reach new levels, and the off-site parent will feel connected and involved.

I realize that my husband is going to have more information about the center by being there and that's the way it should be. That's why we encourage parents to spend time in the center and why we create a warm, welcoming environment. I also know that my husband, the on-site parent, has a responsibility to keep me informed — and he does. Al doesn't remember everything, though. He doesn't plead ignorance, he admits it. Sometimes he's overwhelmed with the flurry of center activity and sometimes he's just tired. So let's try to make it easy on those parents we see and the ones we don't. After all, we're the ones who want parents to bring in those milk cartons and signed field trip permission forms.