

Company's Coming

by Donna Rafanello

We all have fond memories of arriving at a friend's house for an evening of good food and friendly conversation. As guests, we had certain expectations about the way we would be treated and the schedule of events for the evening. Usually there were special touches that our host or hostess had added that helped us to feel welcome in their home. From the flowers in the entryway to the place cards on the dining room table, it was apparent that our arrival was expected and planned for.

A high-quality child care program contains many of the same elements as a good party. From fulfilling your role as host or hostess to creating the right ambiance and facilitating introductions, the situations are analogous.

The Director's Role As Host or Hostess

It goes without saying that the director plays a critical role in receiving new families into the center. She sets the tone for everything that follows. Families' first impres-

sions of a center can be very powerful, and you want them to be good ones. What follows are suggestions for welcoming families into your program. While the director plays a key role in facilitating families' transition into the program, staff should be integrally involved in developing family-friendly policies and implementing these on a daily basis.

EXTENDING THE INVITATION

Communicating the mission of your program to prospective parents is the first step to projecting a positive

image. Below are several questions to spark your thinking on the messages you communicate to parents about the program you operate and the role they will play in your center.

- Does your program brochure extend a message of welcome to families?
- Do your receptionist and office staff handle incoming calls in a manner that prioritizes families and gives them the information they need?
- Do you encourage families to bring their children on their first visit to explore the center?
- Do you schedule families' visits to your program at times when classroom staff are available to talk with them about the program?



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■ Does program literature celebrate the uniqueness of each family and communicate the staff's willingness to meet individual needs?

Parents often have ambivalent feelings about enrolling their children in child care. Every effort you make to reassure parents that you will provide them with the information they need to make the right decision for their family will be greatly appreciated.

■ When new families visit your program, do you greet them at the door with a warm smile and a "Welcome inside"?

■ Does your center dress code show parents that you and your staff are professionals caring for young children?

■ Do you help parents with their decision making by furnishing them with a list of questions they might want to ask you about the center and the teaching staff?

■ Does your courteous behavior and professional language tell parents that you conduct business at your center in a professional manner?

CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT

In keeping with the "hospitality" theme of this article, offering refreshments and furnishing your office with comfortable furniture and plants or flowers demonstrates to families that you value their company and think they are special. The word *company* literally means "with bread." When we welcome company into our homes or centers, offering food and drink is one way to smooth the transition.

Margie Carter (1999) suggests a creative way to assess the center environment for child- and family-friendly elements. She suggests

identifying places in the center where, among other things, children and families can nurture relationships. Similarly, directors and teachers can examine their environment from a family-friendly perspective.

Adapting Carter's ideas for these purposes, you might tie a brightly colored scarf on a comfortable chair that encourages mothers to cuddle their infants or place a removable sticker on the entrance to a classroom hiding place where a preschooler and his father can read quietly together. A paper hand print can be placed on the director's office door indicating an open-door policy. A colorful ribbon can be tied to a classroom photo display of children and families. A bow could be tied to a refreshment area located in the center lobby. Adopting a family-friendly attitude requires a keen awareness of the things you are doing right now, and a willingness to identify those areas that could be improved.

Families As Guests in Your Center

Families expect a great deal from programs that care for their children. These expectations are varied and depend on the ages of the children and the parent asking the questions. When we adopt a customer service orientation and family-friendly attitude, we appreciate parents' frailties and their desire to make good choices for their families.

While individual families may look for unique features in child care programs based on their children, there are some common elements to what most parents want to observe in their child's program. Parents want to know that:

■ you were expecting them and planned for their visit.

■ you will personalize the visit to meet their needs and the needs of their children.

■ you prepared an information packet in advance for their use during and after the visit.

■ you will cater to their child's needs.

■ you prepared staff for their arrival.

■ they will be made to feel welcome in your center.

■ you will show them around and acquaint them with the new environment.

■ you welcome their questions and anticipate their concerns.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Those of us who serve as validators to the National Association for the Education of Young Children have adopted a shorthand way of talking about high-quality programs. While we accept the accreditation framework and the quality criteria, we recognize that first and foremost "it's all about relationships."

Few programs encounter great problems equipping their classrooms with the required materials, planning interesting and engaging activities, and ensuring children's health and safety. But as anyone who has visited more than one early childhood program knows, the difference in programs can be seen in the interaction between staff and children, staff and parents, and among staff. Any efforts we can make to deepen our understanding of each other and communicate respect go a long way to improving children's experiences and families' comfort levels.

ADDING A PERSONAL TOUCH

Family photographs and memorabilia often fill people's homes and speak to the relationships among family members and their shared history. So, too, in early childhood programs, teachers' photographs are posted outside classroom doors and photographs of children and families adorn the classroom walls. Personalizing children's family photographs with their story dictations is another way to bring home and school together and communicate to families the link between children's experiences in these two arenas.

Directors' and teachers' efforts to connect families with one another are important ways of building a sense of a community. When a teacher introduces the visiting parent to another parent in the center, she communicates to families "there are no strangers here." "Mrs. Marcus, I'd like you to meet Mrs. Delaney. Her daughter Paige is in your son Michael's room with Miss Amy." With any luck, this introduction can forge a relationship between families that will sustain parents through the challenges of early parenting and support them into the future.

Strong relationships are built on a shared history together. When families enroll in your program, encourage them to share important dates in their families' lives: wedding anniversaries, celebrations of adoptions, birthdays, and other significant events. Ask them about their plans to move to a new house, buy a dog, or take a new job.

Building community in early childhood programs is all about relationships — the relationships we build through commitment and constant attention to children and families. As new families join our programs, we have a unique opportunity to initiate relationships that will support them

through the years that their children are with us. There are key elements to successful relationships with families as I have described. Committing to this process and being respectful of families and the choices they make for their children tells parents that their comfort and happiness are your main concern. This is what any guest wants and what every host strives to deliver.

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