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Ideas for Training Staff

Considering Our Curriculum in Working With Families

by Margie Carter

Over the last ten years or so, the term *parent partnerships* has become part of our professional discourse. This is an improvement over the earlier term *parent education*, which conveys the idea of an unequal relationship where teachers are the experts and parents are in need of lessons from us. As a profession, we've come to recognize the implied discounting, if not arrogance of this attitude, and how it restricts our ability to form mutually respectful relationships with the children's parents.

Understanding that our success with children is inextricably tied to our relationships with their families doesn't mean we necessarily know how to form these partnerships. It's a complicated process, given our limited contact and time for conversation, and the inherent tension in a relationship where someone is paying for our services and accountability is seen as a one-way street.

As I watch programs struggle with this, I've been searching for a way to shake loose the habitual way we tend to think of and refer to working with families. We need to draw on the best of what we are already doing while breaking out of the box that confines our thinking. This leads me to ask: What if we approached our work with families using the same thoughtful ingredients that lead to in-depth meaningful curriculum with children? How would we define these ingredients and what would this *curriculum* look like with families?

Assess How We Think About Curriculum

The dictionary defines curriculum as the set of courses of study offered by an institution. In early childhood, we have a different emphasis, basing our curriculum planning on what we know about child development, children's interests, and evolving skills and knowledge.

When you ask most child care teachers about their curriculum, they point to a set of activities scheduled into time blocks for a day, week, or month. This may be driven by some desired learning outcomes or individual planning for children, or it may come from some commercial curriculum or activity book. I advocate for a more emergent approach to curriculum and suggest moving away from topical themes as a way of thinking about what children need to learn. To help teachers think of curriculum in a broader way, I often use some version of the following training strategies. Recently, I've extended this to see the parallels for our work with the children's families.

STRATEGY
Explore questions at the heart of your curriculum

Ask each teacher to take a piece of paper and divide it into three columns. In the *first column*, they should list words or phrases they would use to finish the following sentence: "In my work with children, I try to see them as . . . ." For the *second column*, ask them to divide the column in half, writing on the left side "I try" and on the right side "I avoid." Then fill in words for each side which finish the sentence: "To help children develop a positive sense of themselves. . . ." Finally, for the *third column*, write words or phrases to complete the sentence: "What works best for me in developing a relationship with each child is. . . ."

As they finish, ask teachers to pair up and compare their lists for each column. For the whole group discussion which follows, I explain that their thinking about each of these three questions is really their fundamental curriculum with young children.

The first column tries to get at an initial discussion of what the Italian educators from Reggio Emilia call our *image of the child* which consciously or unconsciously influences how we plan for, respond, and relate to the children. The

In my work with children, I try to see them as . . .	*To help children develop a positive sense of themselves . . .*		*What works best for me in developing a relationship with each child is . . .*
	I try . . .	*I avoid . . .*	

thoughts expressed in the next two columns get to the heart of what we in the United States stress in early childhood education. Whatever curriculum topics or activities we may plan for children, the words in each of these three columns reflect the real themes we should be pursuing with them.

Ask the group to look again at the three columns and for the word *children*, and substitute the words *parents* or *children's families*. Are any of the words they wrote now unsuitable? Are there any additional words they would like to add? In most cases, teachers feel that the words are the same for what they should be doing with the children's families, though they may not have thought of it in this way before. Seeing these parallel themes allows us to draw on what we know works well as we try to push ourselves toward out-of-the-box thinking.

STRATEGY
Consider the ingredients of thoughtful curriculum planning

When time permits, I ask teachers to develop a list of the ingredients that have been part of their most successful in-depth curriculum project with children. These often fall into the following categories, which is how I try to record their responses.

With more limited time, I just list the headings to allow us to discuss the ingredients:

- Planning the environment (both physical and social/emotional)
- Reading cues for planning and responding
- Providing appropriate props and activities for different learning and communication styles and different cultural frameworks
- Developing learning goals for oneself as a teacher
- Negotiating goals with an evaluation of the learning process for children

For each of these ingredients, teachers can name what they do for children and consider the parallels for their work with parents. Most programs have put their attention and resources towards a child-centered learning environment for children; but when we look at how welcoming it is for the children's families, we often discover that there are few comfortable places for adults to sit, limited places where they see their own family life reflected, and an over-reliance on notices and printed information for communication.

As we assess changes that could be made in both the physical and social/emotional environment and how the props and communication systems could be improved to be more welcoming of families, I draw on the many examples outlined in the book Deb Curtis and I have co-authored, *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing and Improvising in Your Program*. (Redleaf Press).

Unless they have specific training on working with infants and toddlers or on using an emergent approach to curriculum, teachers often need help in learning to recognize cues, communication styles, and behaviors that stem from cultural values or perspectives. If you discover a need for more training in this area, you can turn to the work of Janet Gonzalez-Mena, *Multicultural Issues in Child Care* (Mayfield Press); the great print and video resources from West Ed Infant and Toddler Training Program, *Essential Connections: Ten Keys to Culturally Sensitive Child Care*; Sharon Cronin's *Umoja*; Ellen Wolpert's video and guide, *Start Seeing Diversity* (Redleaf Press); or Margie Carter and Deb Curtis' *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* (Redleaf Press).

Teachers are often puzzled by the suggestion that curriculum planning involves developing learning goals for themselves. In thinking about this for our *curriculum* with the children's families, I stress that our task is not only to get some new perspectives on families but to get to know ourselves at a deeper level. Learning to recognize the values and beliefs that shape our attitudes and actions is part of our professional development. We need to discover our strengths and passions, as well as our hot buttons and biases. Our learning goals for ourselves as teachers are intricately tied to our success with children and their families.

Seek to Understand the Parents' Point of View

When I ask teachers to describe the barriers that are in the way of creating good relationships with families, they often point to things in the parents themselves. It seems harder to initially consider the barriers that might be within us or in our organization's systems. As we work to explore this, we consider specific examples of these barriers to partnerships:

- Negative or disrespectful attitudes or communications (often unintended)
- Differences in values, beliefs, and experiences that make it hard to see or respect the other's perspectives
- Inappropriate uses of power

Strategies for exploring these barriers can include viewing sections of the video *Essential Connections: Ten Keys to Culturally Sensitive Child Care,* or short scenarios extracted from *Multicultural Issues in Child Care,* or *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice*. After practicing on someone else's examples, you can then work on analyzing situations your teachers are actually experiencing themselves.

STRATEGY
Consider the opportunities you have

In reading Janice Fialka's powerful little book about a mother's experiences navigating social service and educational institutions on behalf of her child with special needs, *Lessons From My Son* [self-published — call (248) 546-4870 or e-mail ruaw@aol.com], I was inspired to adapt her thoughts for professionals — "You Can Make a Difference in Our Lives" — into a general message to teachers from children's families. Each of these could become a focus for training or goal setting for teachers and programs.

Message to Teachers From Children's Families

- You have the opportunity to not avoid, judge, or be irritated by our feelings and concerns.
- You have the opportunity to decrease our sense of isolation, powerlessness, and loss of dignity.
- You have the opportunity to see our good intentions, our strength, and our desire for a meaningful family life.
- You have the opportunity to help us learn more about you, what you value and care about.
- You have the opportunity to share resources with us.
- You have the opportunity to recognize and celebrate our family's victories.
- You have the opportunity to help us become part of a caring, pro-active community.
- You have the opportunity to help us rediscover the hopes, dreams, and power we have in our lives.

Margie Carter is a college instructor, video producer, and co-author of four books. She travels widely to speak and work with early childhood programs. Her newest book with Deb Curtis, *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching,* will be published by Redleaf in the fall.