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Beginnings Workshop

Creating Partnerships With Families: Problem-Solving Through Communication

by Janis Keyser

Benefits of Strong Family/Caregiver Communication

Communication between families and caregivers is the essential link in quality, appropriate, culturally authentic care for young children. While there are many potential barriers to on-going, honest, two-way communication, its benefits to children, families, caregivers, and programs are unmistakable.

Respectful, effective communication with caregivers supports and empowers families. Parents feel valued, included, supported, and encouraged to be the best parents they can be. Children benefit in a multitude of ways. When children see their caregiver and parent talking comfortably and respectfully with each other, they feel safe and valued. When their caregiver and family members exchange information daily, children's care in both places becomes more consistent, integrated, and responsive. Caregivers reap the benefits because they can participate as part of a team; their work is supported and acknowledged, and they can feel appreciated. In addition, having the necessary family and cultural information to offer children the best care possible allows caregivers greater job satisfaction.

What Families and Caregivers Each Know

Families and caregivers each bring specialized knowledge and experience about children to their partnership. Families know things about their children that caregivers don't. They hold the knowledge of their child's home, culture, family, extended family, and other important people in the child's life. They are the keepers of their child's history including health, developmental milestones, and life experiences. They know their child's temperament, idiosyncrasies, and daily schedule. They intimately understand their child's communication system. They not only hold their child's past, they also impact her future through their hopes and expectations. Families know their own specific child better than anyone else.

On the other hand, caregivers know things about children that families don't. Caregivers know more about all children. They have worked with many children and are familiar with developmental norms, varying temperaments, and learning styles. Caregivers are skilled in creating learning environments, daily schedules, and curriculum for groups of children. Caregivers understand how to work with children in groups and support children's peer relationships.

Obstacles to Respectful, Two-Way Communication

There are numerous obstacles to communication between families and caregivers. Time is a big one. Families have many responsibilities to manage in a day. Pick-up and drop-off times are often hurried or even stressful. Caregivers often don't have extra paid time to meet with families outside of their regular work hours and rarely have enough coverage to talk at daily transition times. There

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may also be language and/or cultural differences that present challenges to mutually satisfying communication.

Caregivers and families can also bring experiences and perspectives that interfere with their abilities to develop trusting, on-going communication with each other. Parents may feel inadequate in the face of caregiver knowledge, expertise or teacher status. Many parents experience guilt when they have to put their child in care which may lead to sadness, resentment, jealousy or criticism towards the caregiver. Some parents may wonder if they can trust a young caregiver or someone who isn't a parent. They naturally feel protective of their children.

Caregivers may fear parent's criticism or experience feelings of inadequacy. They may feel uncomfortable with class issues working in programs they can't afford for their own children. They may be underpaid and under-appreciated for the hard work they do. They may feel critical of parent's lack of child developmental knowledge. Like parents, they naturally feel protective of the children in their care and sometimes wonder if anyone else can take as good care of them as they can.

Understanding the sources of these difficult feelings can help caregivers learn how to identify their own obstacles, to avoid taking things personally, and to support parents through overcoming the interpersonal barriers they face.

Building Two-Way Communication Systems

As we start to think about family/caregiver communication, it is important to explore the vehicles for communication that are already in place and to ascertain whether the current systems support one- or two-way communication. Traditionally, Child Care Professionals have felt that it was their responsibility to be the resource and expert in the parent/caregiver relationship, providing information on program policies, child development, and on parenting strategies. This has put both parents and caregivers in an uncomfortable position. It has set caregivers up to feel vulnerable and inadequate. It has set parents up to feel excluded, incompetent and powerless. Understanding the equitable nature of the partnership puts us in a better position to share the responsibility for expertise.

Once we are committed to an equal partnership, we need to be sure that all of our communication with families conveys that belief. There are both written and verbal communication systems, many of which have been set up primarily for one-way communication. Some systems are more formal, like parent conferences, meetings, home visits, handbooks, parent information forms, bulletin boards, and newsletters. Others are less formal, like parent social events, daily check-ins, phone calls, and notes between families and caregivers.

In looking at each of these systems, ask yourself whether they really encourage active parent contribution.

- Does the parent handbook make it clear that partnership and two-way communication are at the heart of your program's philosophy?
- Does the bulletin board have a place for families to post information?
- Does the daily log or journal have room for parents to note relevant information and observations?
- Do parent conferences include equal talking time for parents to share observations, questions, concerns, goals?
- Do parent meetings have room for parents to meet and talk with one another, to share their expertise with the group, and to develop support networks?
- Do daily check-ins allow time for parents to share information about their child at home, as well as to receive information about their child at school?
- Does your environment invite parents to hang-out and observe? Or does your environment give parents the message that the sooner they leave, the better?
- Do child information forms have room for families to share their unique information about their child's temperament, schedule, habits, family, culture, history, communication strategies, and likes and dislikes?
- Is there an atmosphere in your program that says to parents, "We need your input in order to really meet the needs of your child?" Or does it say, "We've got this covered. We have all the information we need to provide excellent care for your child. You can just drop her at the gate and pick her up in eight hours."

When There are Conflicts

Developing effective two-way communication and strong partnerships are essential to resolving the inevitable conflicts that arise between families and caregivers. A critical part of this communication system is how we use language and how we listen.

Our choices of words and phrasing convey meaning. When a parent comes in at the end of the day for their daily check-in, we can tell them that their child has been making the other kids cry by biting them, or we can tell them that their child is working on social and communication skills and has been experimenting with biting as a way to express herself. Both messages let the parent know that their child has been biting, but the first sets up blame and defensiveness and the second allows for understanding of healthy child development. Thinking ahead about the message you want to convey will help you choose the best words to express yourself in a way that allows people to truly hear you.

Listening is a gift to the speaker and the listener. Listening allows the listener to learn new information from the speaker. But just as importantly, listening communicates to the speaker an interest and respect for them and their ideas. Listening is the strongest tool in conflict resolution.

In any disagreement with a family, it is important to use listening as soon and as often as you can. Even if you think that you know what the parent is going to say, wait for them to say it. Once they have said it, even if you think you understand what they mean, consider asking for more information. Neutral probes such as, "Tell me more", "Would you like to talk about it?", "Is there more you would like to share?" are useful in encouraging people to share their ideas with you.

Parent: I don't want Lizzy playing in the sandbox.

Caregiver: Can you tell me more about that?

Parent: I don't think it is healthy for her. She gets covered with that stuff.

Listening is an essential tool when a parent is angry or upset. When parents feel heard, often their anger dissipates and they can engage in problem-solving with you. Once parents feel you have listened to their feelings, they can also give you more information about what is difficult for them. When a parent has strong feelings, you may need to listen for several interactions before you begin the other steps to problem-solving. You can let the other person know you are listening through your body language, eye-contact, and by reflecting their ideas and feelings.

Parent: I can't ever find his shoes when I come to pick him up. I don't know why you can't keep track of a simple thing like shoes.

Caregiver: It sounds like this has happened repeatedly and you are feeling frustrated about it.

Parent: I'm frustrated and furious. By the time I've hunted all over for the shoes, I'm often late for the bus which puts our whole evening schedule out of whack.

Listening is also useful in a disagreement with a parent's practice, decision or beliefs. It can clarify whether you actually have different beliefs or just different ideas of how to follow through on your beliefs.

Caregiver: I've noticed that your daughter sits in the front seat of your car without a car seat. Can you tell me about that?

Parent: I know she should be in a car seat, but she kept unfastening the one we have and so I just gave up on trying to make her sit in it.

Caregiver: So it sounds like you aren't using a car seat because it was a real struggle to try to keep her in one.

Empathize or Find Common Ground

Often in a disagreement, it is assumed that adversaries don't care about each other's feelings or share any common beliefs. No matter how much you disagree with a parent, there is probably a place you can either empathize or find a shared belief.

Parent: I don't think sand is healthy for her. She gets covered with that stuff.

Caregiver: Your daughter's health is a priority for us, too.

Parent: I'm frustrated and furious. By the time I've hunted all over for the shoes, I'm often late for the bus which puts our whole evening schedule out of whack.

Caregiver: I can see how difficult that makes your lives. It is important to us as well, that you can easily find your child's shoes and get home in time to have a relaxing evening.

Parent: I know she should be in a car seat, but she kept unfastening the one we have, so I just gave up.

Caregiver: It can be really challenging trying to help our kids to stay safe.

Parent: I have to spank her when she uses swear words. It is the only way she'll learn.

Caregiver: It sounds like it is really important to you that your daughter learns appropriate language. That is also a teaching goal of mine.

State Your Idea/Opinion/Experience

Once you have listened and empathized with the parent, it is time to share your idea or perspective. It is important to own your belief, rather than to state it as fact. "In my experience . . . ", "I believe . . . ", "In our program, it is important to us that . . . ", "From my perspective . . . ", "From the perspective of the program . . . ".

Parent: I don't think sand is healthy for her. She gets covered with that stuff.

Caregiver: Your daughter's health is a priority for us, too, and we also value children having lots of sensory experiences with sand, water, paint, and playdough. We believe that working with these open-ended materials offers children a chance to learn important concepts.

Caregiver: It is important to us, as well that you can easily find your child's shoes and get home in time to have a relaxing evening. From the program's perspective, pick-up time is also a very busy time. We are checking in with parents, cleaning up the yard, and helping children get ready to leave.

Parent: I know she should be in a car seat, but she kept unfastening the one we have, so I just gave up.

Caregiver: It can be really challenging trying to help our kids to stay safe, and I still believe that it is absolutely necessary for us to figure out a way to keep our young children in car seats.

Parent: I have to spank her when she uses swear words. It is the only way she'll learn.

Caregiver: It sounds like it is really important to you that your daughter learns appropriate language. That is also a goal of mine. However, from my experience, while spanking may give children a clear message about the limit, it also teaches that violence and hitting are acceptable. It is important to me that we find ways to set clear limits with children without teaching them to hit or be hit.

Define Problem and Invite Solutions

Once you have heard the parent's concern, dilemma, or idea and have shared your viewpoint, you can define the problem and ask the parent to think with you about possible solutions. Often, as teachers, we feel it is our responsibility to come up with all the answers. This can disempower parents and limit the ideas that are generated. You can include parents as equal partners in the resolution by inviting their participation: "Let's think together to come up with some solutions for this problem."

Defining the problem usually means stating the differing viewpoints or needs respectfully, rather than declaring one viewpoint wrong.

Caregiver: So it seems that we have a difference here. You feel that sand play isn't healthy for your daughter and I feel that it is an important part of our program. I wonder if we can come up with a solution where you would feel your daughter was safe and healthy that would also allow her to participate in the sensory activities at school.

Caregiver: So our dilemma is that you really need your child to be ready to go with shoes ready when you arrive to pick him up. On the program's end that part of the day is a very busy time. Let's think together about what each of us might do to ease that transition.

Caregiver: So, it's really challenging to keep your child in the car seat, and yet, I think we both believe that it is the only safe way to ride in the car. Let's discuss some things you can do to help your daughter learn to stay in her car seat. What have you tried so far?

Caregiver: It is clear that you feel strongly that your daughter learn socially appropriate language to use. I would like us to discuss some alternatives to spanking as a way to teach her. What else have you tried?

Choose a Strategy, Make a Plan and Set-up a Check-in Time

Once you have openly discussed the alternatives, you can decide on a plan together. Then it is important to arrange a check-in with each other after the plan has been implemented to see how it is working.

Thank the Parent for Talking With You

Often, it takes enormous courage for parents to bring their issues to us or to respond to our concerns. Thanking parents for bringing up difficult questions and for participating with you in problem-solving conveys the message that you are committed to working in partnership with them.