

From Borders to Bridges: Transforming Our Relationships With Parents

by Ann Pelo

"A child enters our school with a story, a life in her family. If we keep the child at the center of our work, we must consider her family, or we have an incomplete child."

— Mara Davoli, educator in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy

For many of us who teach young children, abstract and well-intentioned discussions of "parent involvement" and "parent partnerships" have become commonplace. Yet many of us hold parents at a safe distance, not truly involving them in the life we share with the children in our programs; not building genuine partnerships with them. Too often, we construct boundaries around our classrooms — literally and metaphorically — that keep parents out, at least in any meaningful way.

As teachers we are protective of our classrooms; we claim them as "our turf" and we have a lot of power there. We establish the classroom aesthetic and the rituals and rhythms which shape our days with children. We create the culture of the classroom and set the tone for the relationships that grow in it. We determine the curriculum, choose the books and toys, and lead the circle times. And often, we expect children to leave their families at the door.

We don't truly invite parents into our classrooms, for that would require us to share the power we have in the classroom. Even in conversations about cultural relevance, many of us hold back from sharing the power in our classrooms; we limit ourselves to consideration of things like music, artifacts, and food as ways to bring the lives of families into the classroom, holding back from asking parents to collaborate with us as we arrange our classroom environments, establish daily rhythms, and make decisions about how we'll handle conflicts among children. It is challenging to let go of the power

we hold in the classroom, to embrace the work of true collaboration with parents. Collaboration promises disagreement, negotiation, and compromise, as well as new understandings, warm intimacy, and shared pride.

Collaboration with parents is especially challenging when parents and teachers occupy different economic and social arenas. We teachers are conscious (and often self-conscious) about the low status of our work, and struggle with the low pay and lack of benefits. We may worry about how parents perceive us and our work, feeling vaguely ashamed or embarrassed about our low wages and low status. Some of us resent parents for the ease of their lives, while others of us are reluctant to share our frustrations about our low-status, low-paying work because we know that parents are struggling psychically and financially, as well.

For many reasons, it becomes easier to maintain the protective walls that we build around our classrooms rather than to dismantle the walls and let parents in. Letting them in is certain to disrupt our well-established routines and send us, at least



Ann teaches three-, four-, and five-year old children at Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle. In the last several years, Ann has sought to transform her relationships with the parents in her classroom. She gratefully acknowledges the influence on her efforts of the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, the teachers and family workers in the Child Development Program at Chicago Commons, who introduced her to the image of "borders to bridges," and her recent collaboration with Deadru Hilliard, who teaches at Martin Luther King Day Home in Seattle.

temporarily, into uncomfortable disequilibrium. We'll have to rethink our assumptions and reconsider our teaching practices; we'll have to share the decision-making. But there is much to gain from taking down the walls and building bridges instead.

The children in our programs are spending their childhoods with us. It is not only a delight, but our *responsibility* to know the children as intimately as we can. And we cannot truly know the children unless we know their families. In our adult relationships, it's a mark of a genuine relationship to meet our friends' families. And as we come to know our friends in the context of their families, we understand them in new ways: we see where their endearing and exasperating habits come from; we understand their off-hand comments about their brothers and their aunts and their family dogs in delightful new ways; we learn about their history and about how they came to be who they are.



PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR

That's what we can experience with the children in our care. We can mark our commitment to our relationships with the children by extending ourselves to their families, and, when we do, we begin to know the children in new and unexpected ways. And there's an added bonus, as well. We not only get to strengthen our relationships with the children, but we get to share our love for those children with other adults who are crazy about them, too — and in the process, we gain new adult relationships that nourish us.

Paolo Cagliari, a teacher in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, said that: "In the alliances between parents and teachers, we have the opportunity to be close to the children." Alliances don't have boundaries; they don't have carefully protected turf. Alliances are *relationships*, messy, full of surprise and

delight, deeply emotional, intimate, challenging. Alliances are adventures, long and complex journeys undertaken with commitment and curiosity. Our alliances with parents hold the promise of deep mutual relationships with children and with their families, relationships that grow community.

Juicy, challenging, nourishing community, in which we move beyond the formal roles of "teacher" and "parent" and open our lives to each other as passionate, foolish, tenderhearted people. In this community, we are called to see parents as powerful in their bonds with their children, curious about their children's strength and vulnerability, eager to participate in an exchange of ideas, resourceful and competent, and deeply in love with their children. These parents will do things that irritate us, of course — that's the nature of relationships. But we can keep our focus on building alliances with parents rather than getting snared by our self-protectiveness, fear, and annoyance; we can keep our focus on building bridges rather than boundaries.

So, how do we go about creating new relationships with parents in our programs? Here are some strategies to try:

■ Make families a visible presence in your classroom.

In my classroom, we invite each family to design a page of photos, stories, and drawings that reflect their family's life together; we collect the family pages in a "family book" for the classroom. Each family's page reflects their family's spirit and aesthetic. This book is a treasured item in our room; children linger with the family book often during the day, visiting mamas and papas, brothers and sisters, touching their homes and their friends' homes.

We also ask each family to bring framed family photos that we display on top of shelves throughout the room to create a warm sense of home and community. These photos are treasured by the children: they often hold their family photos when they're sad, set them next to their mats during nap time, proudly display them to their friends, or incorporate them into the houses they build with blocks and fabric.

This fall, in preparation for our first family meeting of the year, the children created a gift for their parents: a mural, done in black ink on white paper, of their self-portraits. The mural greeted parents as they arrived for the meeting, a joyful welcome to our room. During our meeting that night, I invited parents to create a gift for their children in return, a surprise that would welcome them to Hilltop the next morning. The parents decided to make a mural of their families' homes

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

along a single street, symbolizing the community we intended to grow together. They gathered in our art studio and sketched and painted, sharing details of their homes and their lives as they represented them on paper. Their mural delighted the children, and has become an integral element of our classroom this year; children daily stand in front of the mural, studying their home, telling each other about some aspect of their home and their family life, savoring the connection with their parents and with home.

We've begun a tradition at Hilltop, inspired by the child care program at Naropa University, of asking each family to paint a tea cup for their child. We display the stunning collection of richly varied tea cups on special shelves in our room and use the cups for monthly tea parties with families.

We want our classroom to feel more like home than school, more like family than institution. We invite families to bring us wall-hangings, quilts, wood sculptures, lamps, mirrors, and other elements of home, and our physical space is transformed. It feels like home to us all — children, teachers, and parents.

■ Make the life of the classroom visible to families.

As an expression of our commitment to create bridges between home and school, we've created a "curriculum board" outside our classroom. On that board, we post anecdotes about children's play and learning, we share our reflections and musings about our daily experiences, we highlight important happenings in our community, and we keep families posted about on-going project work. We aim to add at least one new posting to the curriculum board each day.

At Hilltop, we value documentation as a central element of our program for several reasons. Our anecdotes, photos, sketches, and transcriptions provide a mirror for children in which they see themselves; looking in this mirror, they are invited to revisit experiences and ideas and to reflect on them. With our documentation, we record the community history that informs and shapes who we are — children and adults — together.

Our documentation also provides windows for parents into their children's lives in our program. Our stories, photos, transcriptions, and reflections offer parents glimpses of children's thinking and feeling, of their joyful discoveries and proud accomplishments, their struggles, questions, hopes, and relationships. We tell parents that, "Your child won't always be a protagonist in the postings, but each day's posting will

give you a taste of the community in which your child spends her or his days, and can certainly be a launching pad into conversation with your child about the day. Chances are, even if your child didn't participate in the particular project or game highlighted on the curriculum board, she knows about it, and can begin sharing her day with you as you talk together about what you read on the curriculum board."

We create an individual journal for each child to record and honor her or his play, investigation, collaboration, and discovery. We invite families to take their children's journals home to read together as a family and to share with visiting family and friends. And we invite families to add to their children's journals, so that the journals become an expression of the bridges between home and school.

■ Create opportunities for sharing stories and reflections.

We want our classrooms to reflect the lives of the people who spend their days there. At Hilltop, we've expanded our practice of creating bulletin board displays and documentation panels from focusing only on the children to including their families and us, the staff at the school.

During parent-teacher conferences and home visits, we ask parents questions about themselves as well as about their children: "What are your hopes and dreams for your child?" "Who are your heroes?" "What do you like about being a parent?" "What nourishes you?" We take notes about families' thoughts and reflections, and create displays in our classroom, reflecting parents' lives and making parents visible to each other.

We've also begun to share stories and reflections that help parents know us teachers: Who are our heroes? What nourishes us? What are our passions and joys outside of our work? Each staff member at Hilltop creates a "bio board," a display panel that highlights her or his life beyond the usual mundane details about teaching experience and educational background. Parents regularly comment on our bio boards, asking questions sparked by an image on a board, or sharing stories, favorite camping spots, or new music they've discovered — building connections with us as they come to know us more authentically.

■ Use parent meetings as opportunities for shared discussion and debate.

For many years at Hilltop, our parent meetings consisted of teachers talking about daily details of classroom life and

parents trying hard to stay engaged with our mini-lectures. When we began to transform our relationships with parents, we consciously stepped away from that model and chose topics that engage parents and teachers in intriguing ways, topics like: What are the rights of children? What does “school readiness” look like? What are the similarities and differences between home and school, parents and teachers?

We’ve developed the practice of announcing the focus for a meeting several weeks in advance so parents know what to expect. Rather than giving parents hand-outs at the meeting, we give them hand-outs ahead of time, so that they have an opportunity to read about and reflect on the topic before they arrive at the meeting; this allows parents to take an active role in the discussion. We take notes during the meeting or ask a parent to take notes, and then give a copy of the meeting notes to all the families, so that everyone knows what happened at the meeting. We create display panels that reflect the experience we shared together at the meeting, and that invites comments and additional reflections from parents who were not there — or who were there and have more thoughts to add.

Here’s an example of what this looks like: This fall families and teachers in my classroom met to reflect on the values we hoped to nourish in the children and in ourselves, and on the ways in which we can begin to live those values in our class-

room practices. We created a value statement together; each family and teacher received a copy of the statement, and we displayed a large-size copy in our classroom.

We want children to feel rock-solid safe. We celebrate their uniqueness and want them to be affirmed in their individuality and encouraged to pursue their passions and interests and to cultivate their gifts. Hand-in-hand with this, we want children to experience community and relationship, to be at ease with a range of people, to embrace difference, and to deepen their compassion for others. We want there to be room for children’s emotions, for exuberant play, for conflict and collaborative problem-solving, and for quiet introspection. We want the children to learn to act for fairness. We want children to see their lives reflected and affirmed in many ways, so that they develop a sense of their history as thinkers, players, and friends. We want children’s family bonds to be nurtured. We value transparency at Hilltop, so that there are many windows into children’s lives here and a sense of seamlessness between home and Hilltop.

As we aim to create programs that deeply respect children, we must open ourselves to authentic partnership with their families, moving beyond trivial or superficial “parent involvement” to genuine relationship. Our efforts to grow these relationships are efforts at bridge-building, so that children encounter many bridges that link home and child care, family life, and the life of our school communities.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

This author talks about authentic partnerships and how to create them. The topic is rich with training possibilities. Consider the following suggestions you could implement sequentially in staff meetings — giving your teachers a chance to investigate the idea of authentic partnerships over time, building skills in doing so during each meeting.

Making families a visible presence in the classroom — You can do it, too!: This author has some wonderful ideas for making families a visible presence in your classroom. During a staff meeting, talk about this idea with teachers — some may want to process the reasons and advantages of increasing family visibility. Then, do a creative mind map of all your teachers’ ideas about how to increase the visibility of families and their cultures in the classroom. Ask each teacher to implement one of the ideas. Keep track of how many get implemented and the increasing number of ways teachers come up with to make families part of their classrooms.

Making classroom life visible to families: Reverse the process by looking at increasing the visibility of classroom life with families. Start by sending teachers back to their classrooms to search for things to make more visible to families. Consider things like curriculum plans, children’s creative artwork, songs, and fingerplays, and much, much more. In small groups, ask teachers to brainstorm ways to raise the visibility of classroom life to families with the things they identified in their classrooms.

Sharing stories and reflections: Teachers know that all families have stories. Pelo challenges us to find a way to share these stories and reflect about their contribution to family life. Start this one simply. Don’t look for *big* stories. Start with the little ones that parents tell you every day — what they did on the weekend, who is visiting, happenings in the family like new babies or birthdays, parent travel. Ask each teacher to write down a story that parents shared with him recently. Then, work with all the teachers to identify ways that the story could be shared, discussed, and considered by the teachers and the children.