

Making Families Welcome

by Deadru Hilliard

For anyone who enters the center, our goal is for them to see that parents and families are valued in our program. We want them to come away with a feeling that if they had children this is where they would like them to be, and that they feel honored referring us to others.

Parents and families play a very vital role in the classroom because they are children's first teachers. Children observe and interact with others in ways that have been modeled for them, mostly by their parents. When new families enter into our class, there are a number of ways that we try to make them feel welcome.

INITIAL CONTACT

Our main goal is to learn about the child. We ask parents to come in and talk with us about their child. We allow them to find out if we fit their needs and to get an overview of what the center is all about. We ask what it is they need from us other than child care. This may be their first encounter with someone asking them to think more in-depth about what they want for their child. They may be dealing with leaving their child for the first time, so we spend the first half-hour just talking. We ask them to share some insights about their family and to elaborate on what expectations they have.

Many times parents can feel rushed about having to choose a space in a short period of time. When we talk with them and share knowledge about this experience, they then begin to gather their thoughts and give us their perspectives. We ask them to look at the many different ways in which other programs do things, starting with something as simple as watching how our staff and other centers' staff operate, before making a choice. We talk about the community within the classroom where families come together and how the tone is set and partnerships are established. It can be the beginning of a trusting relationship and in some cases a lifelong bond.

RELATIONSHIPS BUILT BETWEEN PARENTS AND STAFF

As we thought about rearranging our classroom, we came up with an idea of putting adult size chairs around the different play areas. They are used to invite parents in to sit and talk

with teachers or to observe children in their play. Parents are encouraged to give us feedback about their observations or any suggestions about the room. Interaction with parents and other children also happens during this time, allowing for families to form new relationships and community.

When enrolled in the center new parents are introduced to all staff from the director to the kitchen manager. Each staff member plays a key role in how well the center is maintained. Parents become familiar with all of those who come in contact with their child as well as those who spend a major portion of their day with that child. Parents can utilize any staff person to gain resources and information even when their child's teacher is not present. This establishes a commitment to work together and with their child so that all transitions to the next level go well.

Parents are taken in to talk with the lead teacher of the class where they get to see just how parents are represented. They begin their conversations once again around the child and talk about what their values and goals are. There is a specific requirement we have of parents on the first day their child begins and that is to spend one hour of class time with us. We want parents to feel comfortable in their choice and utilize this time to ask questions and start a connection with teachers and other staff.

REPRESENTATION OF PARENTS

Once we go over schedules, lesson plans, signing in and out, and other center requirements, parents are given a tour of the class. There are many displays and boards that represent families. They speak of what their hopes and dreams are, what



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BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

they see in their child, and ask how we can help. We offer the chance to reflect on what parents themselves wanted to be when they were growing up and in what ways their child mirrors them.

Framed photos of families are brought in to be placed throughout the room on shelves, countertops, and in children's areas of play. As you watch you will see children engage in conversation with other families while learning about identity. Another of our mini-activities includes parents creating display boards that best describe their child's world. Through pictures and open-ended materials, parents come up with elaborate designs that give children a positive image of themselves.

What I have learned by having parents do these projects is that: 1) the experience gives us a chance to engage like old friends sharing our stories; and 2) it allows us to sustain our commitment to work with each other and collaborate together.

In parents' busy everyday lives they sometimes fall into the habit of just picking up their child out of routine. Parents need to know that they are valued and that we commend them for the job that they do every day for their child, making a continuous effort to provide and take care of their families. Our conversations are not always about unwanted behavior or filling out paperwork. They also consist of talking about current events of the world or sharing stories about one's family and having the connection from adult to adult. Sharing a bit of ourselves can open parents up to talk about difficult issues and concerns, or to just ask for those necessary resources that they may feel uncomfortable going into detail about. We assure them that we chose to be an extension of their families and we will go the distance to help them succeed, all the while caring for their child.

Once we have established a relationship, parents find themselves losing track of time because they come in and we begin to talk and share. It's not that they don't have other things to do, but there are times when these genuine and authentic moments of communication just happen.

When sharing with parents I try and give them as much information to work with as possible. They are as efficient and capable as we are but their day can be filled with lots of events that they have not had the time to deal with. Our mission statement not only speaks to children but is inclusive of parents in creating internal growth for them too.

COMMUNICATION

Keeping the lines of communication open with parents can be done in many ways. Some parents call throughout the day and some use the computer to receive information through e-mail. Others leave notes or pass questions on to the staff person who is there when they arrive or leave. We have a board that is set up for this particular task. If a parent leaves a note for me while I'm out of the building, other staff transfer information onto the staff board under my name. It is then our job to check for any messages and return any calls necessary. We don't want to miss the chance to help in whatever way we can, because parents may lose their comfort in asking and the relationship can become distant.

Parents who don't know one another use our parent meetings, potluck luncheons, and yearly celebration times to get better acquainted. We don't want these events to be the only time they talk, so our job then becomes how to keep them connected. One of the ways I like to do this is to ask for a parent's permission to share information or insights with other families and for them to be open as resources if possible. Their children also assist in this by talking about their day and sharing what goes on throughout the classroom. Parents become familiar with children's names and begin to ask us who they are so that there is a face to place with the name. This allows both children and adults to begin to explore new friendships outside of class.

We find out many different things about one another in these gatherings. It benefits us all when we come together and talk about children, work, and life itself. Asking families continuously for feedback about the things that work for them and what does not, helps us maintain our commitment to them. We want our environment to reflect all of those whom we serve. Giving parents this strength and power now will help them become even stronger advocates for their children when they transition out of the center and into other learning institutes.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Introduce me, too: It's the little things that count — and this little idea is a powerful one. Introducing every staff member to new families, from the director to the cook and custodian, validates the team it takes to do our jobs well.

Big chairs for big people: The suggestion to add adult furniture often scares teachers. Children will climb on them and parents will sit in them (perhaps forever!!!). Open up a candid discussion about finding a way to comfortably include families in the child's classroom space while setting realistic and shared boundaries.