Checking the Lines for Communication

by Rachel Friedman

The story

Recently the staff at our school had the opportunity to participate in a dialogue between board members, teachers, and the director of the school. This dialogue, which was scheduled during one of the regularly scheduled staff meetings, was initiated by a board member. Her objective in meeting with the staff was to raise the staff's awareness of the unique needs of the at-home mother.

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She explained that mothers who had careers in Corporate America before choosing to stay home to raise their young children come from environments where lines of communication are clear and relationships are understood in the context of organizational hierarchy. In contrast, lines of communication are often blurred in early childhood settings and relationships need to be reestablished regularly as children move through a program. In addition the parent-teacher-child triad is a relationship that is built upon trust and need and not a clear hierarchy.

Prior to the meeting there was an air of curiosity, nervousness, and even defensiveness among the teachers. The mother who had initiated the dialogue and another who shared her experience were both highly visible members of the school community. The mothers raised three main issues (Issues I-III below) with the staff.

Issue I:

- *Perspective.* One of their comments stemmed from a parent's feeling that the teachers were not direct in communicating information about their children's behavior. This parent wanted to know the *bad stuff* about her child: Did her child push? Interrupt? Did she sit and participate in circle time?

Issue II:

- *Honest Communication*. These parents felt as if the teachers were giving them an overly glowing view of their child's experience.

Issue III:

- *Out of the Loop*. These mothers asked how they should respond when their children shared stories that raised concern (e.g., incidents of biting, pushing). This parent felt that she did not have the information needed to be able to respond to her child and that she wished to be kept apprised of everything that was happening in the classroom.

Issues I & II: Perspective and honest communication

Staff members responded in the following manner to these two issues:

- The classes meet for approximately 2.5 hours. Most of the children come to school prepared to separate from their parents and interact with their teachers and peers. Most days at preschool are *good* days.

- Expectations of children's behavior differ from adult to adult and from parent to teacher. Behaviors that parents and teacher struggle with are not necessarily the same.

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- The preschool environment is geared for young children whereas other environments are not designed specifically for this age group.
- Most teachers hesitate to share daily observations of a child's undesirable behavior with parents unless a pattern of behavior is noticed and well documented.

Discussion and suggestions

It is clear from the comments of both the teachers and the parents that the issue of perspective was central to the dialogue. A parent typically deals with one or two preschoolers per day, a teacher with 15 to 20 or more. Challenging child behavior that parents observe may not be displayed in the classroom or might be overshadowed by the behavior of other children.

Secondly, the relationship between parent and child is very different from the relationship between teacher and child. Although teachers engage with the parents and children, their relationship with the children lacks the unique emotional bond that exists between parent and child. A teacher goes home at the end of the day; the parent takes the child home at the end of the day.

Throughout the dialogue the interactions between the participants were respectful. The teachers recognized that these women were parents of the children in their classrooms and the parents recognized the teachers for their knowledge of their children and their ability to work with a group of children.

Suggestions for staff

During the dialogue the teachers shared the different ways that they had been communicating with parents. During the meeting and in conversations afterwards, the staff came up with five ways of tackling the challenges of perspective that could be integrated into the program.

Addressing

We believe that with sensitivity the differences in perspective can be *addressed*. This could happen in meetings between staff and parents, in the welcoming school letter, and in the all-school news bulletin. It can also be reinforced in various communications throughout the school year. Examples of acknowledging differences in perspective include asking parents to send their child with shoes that children can put on independently because there are 20 children and two staff, explaining in a newsletter why all children must wait until 8:30 am before opening the door or why all children are asked to bring a nutritious lunch.

Documenting

Teachers should be encouraged to increase *documentation* and accessibility to the documentation. This would enable parents to have another view of their child's experience at preschool. Parents would have evidence of how their child behaved, that he is being appropriately supervised and that he is one of a larger group. Have cameras available and use them to photograph the children throughout the day. Display these photos for all of the families to see. Having access to the happenings of the day may help parents feel more at ease.

Volunteering

If possible, invite family members to *volunteer* in the classroom. Careful consideration of placement for the volunteer and their child is important, but maintaining flexibility is also important. Although volunteering in the classroom is not a solution for every family and child, I believe that it is worth the effort. Find time to take one or two photos documenting all volunteers' visits to the classroom; it will be appreciated later.

Communicating

Communicate with families about what is happening in the classroom. Our school has left communication with families up to the discretion of the individual teaching teams. Some teams use the white board to list highlights of their morning while others send home a weekly newsletter. Parents can transmit messages to the teacher via the school phone at drop-off or at pick-up. Whatever method of communication your school utilizes, make sure that all families are aware of the strategies for both sending and receiving messages.

Understanding

Try to *understand* the parent's perspective even if you do not agree with it. Parents can be embarrassed by their child's behavior and sometimes even by their own behavior. Preschool is like a stage; it is a public display of who parents are or who they want to be and sometimes children do not play the role that is expected. (At 15 months of age my son bit another child on the cheek. The bright red circle on this other child's face was noticed by every other parent in the school's observation booth. I remember wondering whether other parents thought that this behavior came from home.)

Issue III: Out of the loop

The third situation is one that is more difficult to address because the issues of separation, loss, and control are reawakened. For many parents the preschool years are parents' first experiences of not only being away from their child but also having their child in the care of a stranger. Parents typically assume control over their children; leaving a child at preschool is a (temporary) loss of both the child and control. Gentle acknowledgement of this struggle can be helpful.

Suggestions for parents

The staff suggested various strategies to help the mothers with this third issue:

- When a child shares a story with a parent that raises concern, the parent could respond as follows, "That sounds like maybe it was _____ (fill in the blank with the appropriate emotion)." Listen and provide support ("I am glad that you are okay and that your friend is okay, too."). Depending on the situation you might want to add, "This sounds like something I should talk to your teacher about" and follow up with the teacher.

- Teachers will not be able to give details about other children's behavior. This holds true for issues that involve all children. However, teachers can talk about strategies that they use in class for handling challenging situations.
- Early childhood classrooms provide children with a safe environment in which to try out behaviors. Children are exposed to a wide range of behaviors that differ from their own. Early childhood programs offer children the opportunity to learn that in different settings there are different expectations of behavior. There are moments that teachers ask for silence, allow whispering, encourage loud voices, work, walk, and wait together. These limits placed on behavior reinforce social learning skills.

- Parents should feel comfortable talking with their child's teacher. Help the teacher by clearly identifying the methods of communication that work best for your family.

- Consider letting the child experiment in class rather than immediately turning a child's experimentation into *an item for a behavior modification chart* or even a great emphasis on being *good* or *how Johnny was today*. As the leader of the classroom, the teacher addresses behavior through modeling and through a straightforward, unemotional approach. These strategies, along with a dose of peer pressure, usually reinforce the desired behavior.

In closing

The staff meeting took place in one of the preschool classrooms. The familiar environment, the presence of the director, and the mothers' encouragement that the voices of the teachers be heard enabled the teachers to express themselves freely.

Overall the staff felt that the meeting had been a success. All participants were respectful even when the messages that they were hearing challenged their long-held beliefs. Everyone that participated left the discussion feeling that they had learned something new and that their views had been heard.

Follow up

Informal conversations among the staff followed the initial discussion with parents. Some of the questions that were later raised by staff included:

- Are there guidelines for communication that the school could provide for families? For teachers?

- Each staff member communicates differently with parents. Some use weekly newsletters, others a daily whiteboard. Is there a need for consistency?

- How do staff relay information to families? How can families relay information to the staff? Do these methods work for all?

- Is there sufficient opportunity for parents and teachers to relay information to each other?

- How can we ensure that progress made in the initial meeting will not be lost?

References

There are many sources available that address the issue of communication between school and home. This meeting took the communication process one step further — not only was there communication, but there was dialogue about the quality of communication.

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