

more than lip service

Partnering with parents

by Madhavi Sudarsana

"Jacob, come here and put on your jacket. Your mom will be here any minute."

"But I do not want it. I am hot."

"Hot or cold, Jacob, Mama does not like it if you are not wearing this jacket."

This dialogue occurred every afternoon around 4:45.

Jacob's mother, Lisa, had told us that when Jacob is playing outside he needs to wear his jacket. Sometimes the weather would be warm, and Jacob, as active as he is, complained about being hot. But we still had to put the jacket on. We all agreed that Lisa's demand was unreasonable and if the weather was warm we would not put the jacket on. But at the same time we did not want Lisa to get upset.

We had a problem but then we also had a solution: Put the jacket on at 4:45.



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Jacob's pick up time was 5 p.m. and Lisa was always on time. So we let him run around till 4:45 and then forced the jacket on him. It worked. Lisa was happy to see the jacket on. We did not feel guilty about forcing him to wear jacket in warm weather. It was a win-win situation until one day...

Lisa came to the center to pick Jacob up at 4:30. Jacob was running around without a jacket. It was not our time to put the jacket on. We were caught. Lisa grabbed him and put her hands on his ears. She muttered something and then forced the jacket on him. She was visibly upset. Neither of us initiated a conversation.

What did we do? What was so wrong?

In hindsight we realized that our behavior was totally disrespectful of Lisa and her parenting:

- ▼ We pretended to show respect to avoid confrontation.
- ▼ We played a game with her, leaving her to wonder if she could trust us.
- ▼ We told Jacob that he needed to put on the jacket because of his mother's instruction, but we also communicated to him non-verbally

that his mother did not have proper judgment. We confused him with our mixed messages.

- ▼ We built thick walls of prejudice and opinion between us instead of opening up channels of communication.
- ▼ To top it off, we assumed the "Know-It-All" position.

The next day when Lisa dropped Jacob off at school, she told me curtly to put his jacket on him. She also said that he had gotten sniffles because he did not wear his jacket yesterday. She sounded very concerned and skeptical of our willingness to follow her instructions. I did not want her to leave thinking that Jacob was not safe with us so I asked her, "Yesterday, I saw you putting your hands on his ears. I was curious about it."

"Jacob gets cold when his ears are cold," she said in a dismissive tone that suggested that she thought I was asking only for the sake of asking.

It was enlightening. "You do not want his ears to get cold. That is why you insist on putting the jacket on," I reflected.

“Yes, that’s right. If he wears a jacket, then his ears don’t get cold,” she said happily.

Now life was easier. I started checking Jacob’s ears everyday. If his ears were cold, I put his jacket on. We even worked out an arrangement to have a thinner jacket available when it was not very cold. I did not have to say, “Put the jacket on. Mommy is coming.” Instead I started saying, “Your ears are cold so you need your jacket on.” Jacob responded to this request more easily.

After a week or so, Lisa came early and Jacob was running around without a jacket. She gave me an accusing look. “I checked his ears. They are not cold,” I said quietly. Lisa double-checked and nodded. I felt her unspoken gratitude.

Since that day, Lisa never asked me about Jacob’s jacket. She knew that I would be taking care of her son in the way she wanted me to. The trust was built. And we had no barriers.

Lesson learned

If I had taken the time to talk with her earlier, it would have been better for all of us. I learned my lesson, “If you do not know why parents are doing what they are doing, ask.” Most of us come to this profession to work with children. We want to work with ‘little’ people, but ‘big’ people come along with the little ones; it’s a package deal. The parent initiates a partnership with us when his child enters our program. Parents give us their most precious gift and trust us to care for it until their return. This trust does not come automatically. It takes time to build. Every conversation and interaction contributes to a successful long-term relationship.

Rules to live by

Here are ten rules I have adopted in building trusting relationships with

families. You may want to incorporate them into your practice:

▼ **Accept that parents know their children better than anyone else.**

Teachers might know about general child development, but not about each and every individual child. Compliment parents on doing a great job with their child. Parents of young children, especially working parents, often have a lot of guilt about leaving their child in care. Your positive feedback reassures them that you value them as parents.

▼ **Admit your mistakes immediately.**

If you are a bigger person, parents respect you more. It also encourages them to share their concerns with you.

▼ **Ask for help when you do not know what to do about a particular behavior.**

Parents are always eager to help. Knowing more about how a parent deals with a particular problem and then discussing the important of consistency between the program and home initiates a partnership.

▼ **Know what you are doing and be prepared to explain it logically.**

This is the time to use your knowledge about child development and apply it to a particular situation. This helps parents to see the bigger picture. Also, it portrays you as a professional in the field.

▼ **Share as much information as you can with parents, especially when the child first enters your program.**

Parents want to know what happened during the day. Giving them some factual information, as well as some observations, assures them that you are paying attention to, and caring for, their child. Encourage them to observe their child at school. This promotes a feeling of openness.

Once they trust you, they will not have a need to ask you everything.

▼ **Greet parents as they walk in.**

Remembering their names is very important. Try to remember the details that they have shared about their schedule (for example, a parent complains about not having enough time to spend with their child due to a sudden increase in the workload. You might want to check in with her about this after some time has passed to see how it’s going). It helps to maintain communication and to build an empathetic relationship. Learn parents’ body language. It tells you when to initiate a particular conversation gently.

▼ **Write a short note to the parent about something positive that happened that day or make a phone call to share an interesting incident.**

This way parents do not expect your phone call only when things go wrong. When you say, “I want to talk to you” and the parent does not become defensive, you can see that you have achieved this level of trust.

▼ **If the child gets injured at school, write a detailed account of the incident. This is particularly important if you are not going to be around when the parent picks up their child.**

This is apart from a formal accident report. If you know that the parent is likely to get upset, a quick call prepares them for the situation.

▼ **Be honest.** Nothing beats being truthful. It encourages an open, trusting relationship on both ends. When you are honest and fair with parents, they know that you will be the same with their child.

▼ **Have a sense of humor.** Working with children can be difficult for teachers and parents. A little laugh

lightens things up. When parents see how much joy you take in their child and the other children, they feel welcome in the program.

Summary

Lisa's example is not a unique one. As early childhood professionals we face many situations where parents ask us to follow certain routines in caring for their children. For example:

- ▼ A parent asks you to put her 18-month-old daughter on the potty every hour and read to her till she goes.
- ▼ A parent asks you to keep her child indoors when everyone else is outside as she does not want her child to catch cold.

- ▼ A parent asks you to follow a naptime routine that contradicts with your philosophy.
- ▼ Parents make demands of us that may affect our staff:child ratio or our ability to supervise a group of children while attending to their child specifically.

Parents' requests are not always reasonable. However, to reach mutual understanding, both have to negotiate. This cannot be achieved if we do not have an open relationship with parents. Respect, honesty, and communication are the key elements of partnering with parents in its true sense.

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