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informal assessment

as a tool for supporting parent partnerships

by Johnna Darragh

The importance of professional-family partnerships has long been emphasized within the field of early childhood education. Today these partnerships stress shared power as opposed to an expert-learner relationship — where the professional is the expert and the family member is the learner — which was once advocated in the field. One of the overarching goals of these partnerships is to establish bi-directional, mutually supportive relationships between the professional and the program's families. Referred to as co-constructed relationships, goals include creating an environment that supports family involvement, provides families with social support, and promotes family empowerment (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004).

Building relationships through ongoing assessment

Many strategies contribute to forming such co-constructed relationships, including daily conversations between the professional and family members and regular newsletters that keep families apprised of classroom information and happenings. However, one of the most effective tools that supports co-construction is ongoing assessment, which provides a common base (knowledge of the child) on which families and profes-

sionals can build relationships. As a part of this ongoing assessment, informal strategies — including observational data collected from both the professional and the families and daily communication between these parties — greatly enhance co-constructed relationships between the early childhood program and the child's home.

The five dimensions of co-constructed relationships

Five dimensions contribute to co-construction (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004). The following provides an overview of each dimension and how observational strategies and daily communication can be used to support these goals. Also illustrated is how Teresa, a family child care professional, uses informal assessment strategies as a tool.

Dimension One: Responding to family interests and needs

Co-construction responds to the needs of children, families, and educational environments. Goals for infants in Teresa's program include supporting both the children's and their families' independence and security within the environment.

Four-year-old Ani has been with Teresa since she was six weeks old. When Ani was a baby, she was rocked to sleep, and by three months of age spent much of her days viewing the world from a secure vantage point on Teresa's lap. As Ani has grown, her inter-actions within the environment, as well as the expectations that her parents and Teresa have for her, have changed. Through daily communication and ongoing feedback and discussion, Teresa and Ani's parents have formed an effective partnership. Within this partnership, Ani's parents share their ongoing concerns and perspectives on Ani's development, and Teresa is able to respond in a way that supports the family's development.

Although Teresa has general developmental goals in mind for each child, she works with each family to discover what their goals are for their child, and how they think their child's development



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is progressing. The goals that families have for their children's development are also included in Teresa's observations and communication, and the desired outcome is *shared goals* between the program and families.

Dimension Two: Engaging in dialogue with families

Relationships between home and educational environments are born out of trust and mutual respect. An ongoing dialogue based on families' own experiences and areas of expertise is an essential ingredient in supporting these relationships. Teresa provides information about:

- what children and families can expect within her family child care home
- how children spend their day in the environment
- how families can support learning in the home environment, and
- how to implement strategies that complement what is occurring within the child care environment.

Teresa solicits information from families based on their home environment, as well as the families' long-term perspective on their children's development. Here we can see that the goal of dialogue is bi-directional: teachers and families both provide information that, in turn, shapes the nature of home-educational involvement. Within Teresa's goals for infant/toddler assessment, dialogue provides a foundation for ongoing communication and assessment of a child's functioning in the two environments.

Teresa has observed that 25-month-old Antishay is able to feed herself soup at lunch with a wide-handled spoon. When her father reports concern over the child's lack of independence at mealtime at home, Teresa is able to suggest a utensil modification based on her observations of Antishay's abilities at child care.

Dimension Three: Building on family funds of knowledge

Embracing the co-constructed nature of family involvement means recognizing families as their children's first and most important teachers, and understanding that strengthening families' abilities to support their children's development promotes positive developmental outcomes. Teresa realizes that families play the role of experts on their children's development and learning, and she treats families as resources and sources of important information. In the context of assessment, Teresa places parents' interpretations of their children's behavior at a priority.

Before each child starts Teresa's family child care program, families are asked to complete a questionnaire identifying what they see as their child's strengths, as well as what areas they believe need strengthening. Teresa refers to this information on an ongoing basis. In her daily communication with families, she will often ask questions about their perceptions of their children's changing developmental needs. Families are assured throughout the process that the information they share will remain confidential, and each family signs a permission form when their child enters the program that allows Teresa to conduct ongoing assessment. This assessment includes daily observations of children's progress, challenges, and needs.

Dimension Four: Training parents for leadership

Participation in early childhood programs and advocacy for one's child is a learned skill, and Teresa works to cultivate family leadership skills. "In a system where schools hold the power, parents must acquire the skills to be effective advocates for change" (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004). Change might include advocating for different strategies within the early childhood environment, different curricula, or alternative methods for parental involvement.

Skills that families acquire in early childhood programs can assist them in navigating future educational environments, and in serving as long-term advocates for their children's development and best interests. This training for leadership begins when children are infants.

In her early childhood classroom, Teresa works to cultivate family empowerment in many ways. One way is through truly valuing parents' voices. Teresa makes sure that she listens and responds to family concerns, and gives feedback about the important information they share regarding the child's development. For example, when three-year-old Justin's father expresses concerns that Justin's language is difficult to understand, Teresa responds by conducting observations and letting his father know the results. She also tells him how glad she is that he brought his concerns to her attention. Although his language seems to fall within the range of typical development, she will keep an eye on his development through regular assessment practices and ongoing communication.

Through each of Teresa's efforts at communication, she tells the families that their voices matter, and by valuing their input, she works to support their long-term advocacy for their children.

Dimension Five: Facilitating connections across children's learning contexts

Families determine how much time their children spend in the home, in the early childhood program, and in community contexts. Supporting families in taking a contextual view of their child and to be the primary negotiators of the overlapping spheres requires attention to empowerment, as well as the provision of specific skills to support and advocate for children. In Teresa's program, families are not only equal participants in their children's care and education, but they also receive ongoing education and training about the importance of high-quality care in the lives of their

children, as well as how to evaluate care and advocate for high-quality.

Jesse's family is moving to a new state, and her parents have approached Teresa about how to select a new early childhood program. In addition to providing Jesse's parents with information about selecting high-quality care through the local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, she spent a good deal of time talking with them about what types of programs they were looking for, and what kind of environment they felt would best meet Jesse's needs. Together, Teresa and Jesse's parents developed a plan for how the parents would identify and evaluate Jesse's future experiences in early childhood programs.

Summary

By incorporating each of these dimensions, Teresa makes extensive efforts to become an agent of social support who works to create a level playing field in terms of families' competencies in supporting their children's overall development. Assessment plays an important role in these efforts by keeping the focus on children's development, which sparks a dialogue between families and professionals leading to the creation of shared interests and goals. By working together in co-constructed partnerships, professionals and families share the power in determining what is best for children.

References

Lopez, E., Kreider, H., & Caspe, M. (2004). Co-constructing family involvement. *The Evaluation Exchange*, X(4), 2-3.