Establishing Positive Relationships with Families*

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[Introduction]

Hello, my name is Eva. In this course we are going to address the importance of building strong, communicative relationships with the families of children in your care. Throughout the course, we will ask you to evaluate your current practices for promoting parental involvement and provide you with suggestions for forming partnerships with families of the children in your care. Children’s development is influenced by their experiences at home as well as in the childcare setting. Cooperation between families and caregivers is a vital step toward creating optimal circumstances for development.

[Learning Objectives]

Before we get started, let’s look at the learning objectives for this course. After completing this training you should be able to:

- State the importance of family involvement in the classroom,
- Recognize biases that may influence your relationships with families,
- Create a welcoming atmosphere that encourages family involvement,
- Increase parent and guardian involvement in the child care setting,
- Implement effective communication skills, such as active listening, and
- Understand the importance of modeling appropriate practice at all times.

[Benefits of Family Involvement]

“From the family, young children gain a feeling of belonging, a sense of personal, history, the joy of shared meaning and the security of knowing who they are and where they come from. In the larger community, significant adults give children both overt and subtle messages that shape their view of themselves and their families.” (Sanchez, 2010)

Parents are their children’s first teachers, and they continue to be a key source of learning even as children move into child care and other educational settings.

Research has shown that children whose parents and caregivers cooperate, have shared expectations for children, and utilize agreed upon discipline techniques across settings may have stronger social and language skills, and may exhibit fewer behavioral
problems. (Wise & Sanson, 2003) Given the potential benefits of caregiver-parent cooperation, family involvement is an important part of caring for young children. There are lots of other benefits to children, families, and caregivers when caregivers and families establish positive relationships.

1. **Positive relationships between caregivers and families provide opportunities for meaningful learning experiences for children.** Many of a child’s learning experiences will take place while he is in the care of his family. Families can be a valuable source of information about the meaningful experiences a child has had outside the classroom, which caregivers can use to tailor curriculum, activities, and the classroom atmosphere to best meet the needs of individual children. Having good relationships with families assists us in building good relationships with their children.

2. **Positive relationships between caregivers and families allow caregivers to establish a better understanding of a child’s individual needs.** Families provide important information about their children. They are experts on their own children and can provide information on children's preferences, learning styles, health, strengths, and much more. The family is the most important resource in helping us understand an individual child.

3. **Positive relationships between caregivers and families allow caregivers to implement developmentally and culturally appropriate curriculum.** Family involvement creates connections between the home and school environments. Understanding families’ cultural and individual expectations, desires, and aspirations for their children allows caregivers to create continuity between what a child experiences at home and in childcare. This allows children to more comfortably transition between settings because they always know what to expect. Incorporating elements of children’s family and cultural lifestyles into the classroom also gives children the implicit message that they are respected, valued and loved.

4. **Positive relationships between caregivers and families provide a solid foundation for language and literacy development.** It is important for caregivers to understand that families have a powerful influence on children’s attitudes towards language and literacy. By cooperating with families to provide language rich experiences for young children, you can have a lifelong impact on children’s literacy skills. Together caregivers and parents can build a strong foundation for the child’s academic future.

**[Importance of Consistency across Settings]**

Young children need consistency between home and school. When the family’s expectations of the child at home are dramatically different than the expectations caregivers have for the child at school, the child can become confused and may exhibit problem behaviors. Many caregivers notice that children take time to acclimate to the
classroom on Monday mornings after spending the weekend at home. Transitioning between settings can be a challenging process for children when expectations in the two settings differ drastically. Consistency of expectations not only helps the child acclimate to the child care environment, but it is also likely to reduce stress on parents, as children exhibit fewer problem behaviors in the home setting.

Linguistic and cultural consistency are also important for children’s optimal development. A child’s home language and culture play a significant role in the child’s cognitive and language skill development. It is helpful to learn from children’s families about each child’s culture and language to provide consistency between home and school. If caregivers cannot provide linguistic consistency by using the child’s home language in the classroom, they can still incorporate elements of the child’s culture into the child care environment and curriculum. Child care providers can also encourage families to engage in infant-family interactions in the child’s home language, and, when appropriate, caregivers can refer the family to outside resources to support their language and culture.

[Parents’ Attitudes about Education]

Parents have a lifelong influence on their children. An important component of this influence is instilling attitudes about education in their children. Parents enter your child care facility with various opinions about education due to their cultural values and their own experiences with education. Because you work with infants or toddlers, you may be the first contact that families have with education outside their own experiences. If their experiences interacting with your child care program are positive, they are more likely to develop positive perceptions of education, which can lead to their children having more positive attitudes about education later in life.

[Know Yourself]

Each person has a different background and a different set of life experiences. Often our past experiences shape our attitudes and conceptions about other people. Before entering any relationship, professional or personal, it is important to recognize what attitudes you may have acquired from your personal experience.

Caregivers’ biases can influence their interactions with parents and their assumptions about parents’ understanding of program goals or communication abilities. Caregivers are responsible for providing the best care possible to all children, regardless of individual or family characteristics of a particular child. Use the following activity to reflect on your attitudes about people who are different from you. Being aware of your biases will help you consciously focus on respecting all children and all families.

[Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere]

Most parents are, to some extent, nervous about leaving their children in the care of others. Creating a welcoming atmosphere goes a long way toward encouraging parents to
view you as a partner in their child’s growth and development. Let’s discuss a few ways you can intentionally create a classroom atmosphere that makes parents feel welcome.

- First, to start the relationship off right, greet parents in a friendly and warm way the first time you meet, and every time you meet thereafter.

- Next, whenever possible, ask questions of parents about their child’s personality, preferences, needs, and health. The handout called “Asking Parents Questions” gives a few suggestions for questions. Asking questions acknowledges that the responsibility for meeting the child’s needs is shared by the parents and the early childhood professional. (Gillespie, 2006)

- Also, let parents know that your classroom is always open for a visit. Invite parents to stay for a while to observe. This is especially helpful when children are entering child care for the first time, when parents are often nervous about how their children will adjust. If possible, provide an adult sized chair or couch in your classroom to create a space where all parents feel comfortable in the classroom.

- Lastly, work with parents to design drop-off and pick-up routines that work for each individual child. Make a plan with the parents about what will work best for their child when dropping them off for the first time. This may include deciding on a time frame for how long the parents should stay or helping parents come up with a unique way of saying goodbye.

In addition to these strategies, it is worth noting that first impressions have lasting effects. Creating a welcoming atmosphere helps to ensure that families’ first impressions of your child care program are positive. You should begin building relationships with families from the first day they visit your center. Ensuring that parents are aware from the very start that they are welcome in your classroom and a partner in their child’s care immediately opens doorways to communication.

[Strategies for Promoting Family Involvement]

Family engagement is a process, not an event. (Parklakian, Osborn, IM, 2007) This process begins from the moment you first meet a family and continues throughout the time their child is in your care. There are many ways to continually involve parents in your classroom. Next, we will address five primary strategies for increasing parental involvement, and will give you some concrete ways to implement each strategy in your classroom.

[Keeping Parents and Guardians Updated]

The first strategy for involving parents in the classroom is to keep families updated on their individual child’s progress, as well as what’s going on in the classroom as a whole. To do this, you need to create opportunities for ongoing communication with families.
Some suggestions for opening the lines of communication include holding daily conversations with parents and guardians, creating a classroom newsletter, and scheduling conferences with parents and guardians. Let’s take a moment to discuss each of these suggestions in depth.

A. Daily conversations. Intentionally create chances to engage in daily conversations each child’s parent or guardian. Conversations during drop-off and pick-up establish an ongoing dialog. Not only does this show families that their involvement with their child is valued, it also shows the child that her caregivers and parents or guardians are working together as a caregiving team.

B. Classroom newsletters. Another form of ongoing communication with parents and guardians is a classroom newsletter. Many parents and guardians are in a hurry during drop off and pick up times. They may not have an opportunity to use these times find out about what is happening in the classroom. Providing a newsletter that discusses curriculum, important dates, birthdays, and ways to support learning at home can give busy parents and guardians a chance to feel connected. The handout entitled “Sample Newsletter Format” gives you a template you can use to structure your own classroom newsletter.

C. Conferences. Work with families to schedule conferences to discuss their child’s progress. Too often the only time caregivers sit down face-to-face with parents and guardians is when the child is exhibiting challenging behavior. While it is important to work together to resolve concerns, it is equally as important to celebrate each child’s successes. Conferences are also a great time to work together to set goals for a child’s progress and discuss new developments in each child’s abilities.

[Inviting Parents and Guardians to Lead Classroom Activities]

The next strategy, and one of the simplest ways for family members to become involved in the classroom, is to invite parents and guardians to lead activities as part of the normal routine or as a special enrichment experience. Some activities a parent or guardian might lead include reading with or telling stories to the children in the class, bringing a special snack for the class, creating something with the children in the class, or bringing music into the classroom. Let’s examine how each of these parent- or guardian-led activities might look as a part of your curriculum.

A. Reading or storytelling. This could mean having a parent read one-on-one with an infant, or read to a whole toddler class during circle time. Reading with infants and toddlers helps build their understanding of language and prepare them for reading. Storytelling might be a better option for parents or guardians who are not comfortable reading aloud. Storytelling can be simple, or more elaborate, perhaps using props, puppets, or felt boards.
B. Bringing snacks. This can be a simple way to involve parents and guardians who want to spend more time in the classroom, but aren’t sure how to contribute. It is also a chance to incorporate elements of a child’s culture into the curriculum. With toddler classes, parents and guardians can bring ingredients to lead a cooking activity. Be sure to check that none of the children in your care have food allergies, and that all snacks meet your center’s nutritional guidelines.

C. Creating something. Each parent or guardian of a child in your care has his or her own special talent. Some parents’ talents may lend themselves to leading creative activities in the classroom. For instance, a parent who is an artist might lead children to create a class mural. A guardian who is interested in gardening might lead the children to plant and maintain a garden. If you let parents and guardians know that you are interested in inviting them to lead group activities, they may come up with fantastic ideas to enrich the curriculum.

D. Providing music. Parents or guardians can be invited to lead the class in activities involving music, such as sing-a-longs, dancing, or playing instruments. Some parents or guardians might be interested in bringing in instruments or recorded music representing the child’s culture or home language.

[Involving Parents and Guardians in Special Events]

Another strategy for increasing family involvement is to include parents and guardians in special events. Scattering special events throughout the year, and giving families plenty of advance notice about dates and schedules, can provide opportunities for busy working parents and guardians to get involved in the classroom without a huge time commitment. Events such as birthday and holiday parties, child-centered showcases, and parent and guardian appreciation days are also fun ways to involve parents and guardians whose prior experiences with education may not have been entirely positive. Let’s consider how you might incorporate parents into these special events.

A. Birthday and holiday parties. Throughout the year there are many opportunities for classroom parties. Birthdays and holidays are great times to invite parents and guardians to join in the classroom for a special activity or meal. Always follow center guidelines, including nutritional policies, for parties and celebrations. Because of cultural differences, some children may not celebrate holidays or birthdays, while others may celebrate holidays particular to their culture or religion. Be sure that your celebrations are respectful of all cultures represented in your classroom.

B. Child-centered showcases. Child-centered showcases are events typically held outside the normal child care schedule, during which activities from the children’s time in child care are showcased for parents and guardians. For example, host a parent-child Art Night by setting up various art stations around the classroom. Then, invite parents and guardians to participate in the activity with their children. Parents and guardians of infants and toddlers may not know how many different
art activities their children are capable of. Showcases can bring families into the classroom, and can give parents and guardians new ideas for at-home activities.

C. Parent and guardian appreciation days. Everybody likes to feel appreciated. Recognizing publicly that parents are welcome and appreciated can encourage their ongoing involvement. Have an appreciation breakfast or a snack available at pick up or drop off times, along with signs or banners proclaiming your appreciation.

[Letting Families Meet Center and Child Needs]

The fourth strategy for increasing parent and guardian involvement is to ask families to contribute to specific center or child needs. Through work days, wish lists, and family posters, parents and guardians can donate time, materials, or creative energy to make the child care center an even better environment for children in care. Let’s talk about each of those suggestions in greater detail.

A. Work days. Most centers have more work to do than can possibly be performed during regular working hours. Regular maintenance, periodic extensive cleaning, and occasional enhancement projects are a vital part of keeping the child care environment a safe, healthy, and inviting place for children and families. When parents and guardians volunteer for work days, they benefit from feeling more connected to the center, caregivers benefit from the sharing of the workload, and children benefit from the improvements to the environment. Examples of projects that can be tackled during these times are planting a garden, deep cleaning the classrooms, painting indoors or outdoors, or building lofts and playground structures.

B. Wish lists. Many parents and guardians want to be involved in their children’s classrooms but have no time to donate. Classroom wish lists, requesting donations of materials for the classroom, give these parents another way to connect. Parents and guardians can donate items for art, sensory play, or dramatic play. These could be shower curtain rings, fabric, thread spools, sorting trays, mirrors, film canisters, jar lids, driftwood, sponges, pails, funnels, PVC pipe, tubes, sea shells, or any number of other items. Objects with unique textures, smells, and shapes are particularly useful for stimulating exploration in infant and toddler classrooms. All materials in infant and toddler classrooms should be large enough to prevent choking and easy-to-clean in case they are mouthed.

C. Family posters. Best practice dictates that infant and toddler classrooms should include pictures of each child’s family. Family photos can help create home-to-school connections for very young children, and ease separation anxiety. Ask each child’s family to bring a family photo, or ask parents and guardians to create photo collages showcasing their families. Photo collages can include other important figures in the child’s life, such as extended family members, other people who live in the child’s home, or pets. Place photos or collages around the
classroom at the children’s eye level, and use them as a conversation point throughout the day.

[Identifying and Addressing Families’ Needs]

The final strategy for involving families in child care is a little different. While we often think of parental involvement as finding ways for parents and guardians to meet the needs of the child care program, it is important to remember that families have needs, desires, and preferences as well. Taking the time to identify and address parents’ and guardians’ concerns shows a genuine interest in the well-being of the families of children in care, and goes a long way toward fostering communication between child care facilities and families. Tools such as surveys and joint education for parents and caregivers allow parents and guardians to offer feedback about the program and request additional information. Here’s some more information about how to use surveys and parent/caregiver training programs in your facility.

D. Surveys. Parents and guardians often feel like their voices are unheard in their child’s child care program. One way to alleviate this problem is to provide parent surveys, allowing parents and guardians to give their feedback on the program. Surveys can solicit parent input on food served, hours of operation, curriculum, or any other aspect of the child care program.

E. Parent/caregiver education. Most centers focus on ensuring that caregivers are properly trained. In order for the important caregivers in a child’s life to work together as a team, it is sometimes appropriate to offer joint training programs for parents, guardians, and caregivers. This is one way to open up dialog surrounding issues that the parents and caregivers deal with on a daily basis. It can also facilitate a mutual understanding of the rationale behind child care providers’ methods in the classroom and families choices for children’s well-being at home.

The handout called “Parental Involvement Strategies” lists all the strategies we have discussed, and can help you remember what you’ve learned and brainstorm new ways to encourage involvement in your center.

[Communication]

Communication is key to building relationships. It is important for child care providers to have open lines of communication established with the parent or guardian of each child in care before problems arise. Open communication establishes trust and serves as a constant reminder that the caregiver and the parent are a team. It is much easier to have difficult conversations with families if a strong relationship is already in place. Effective communication requires both active listening skills and speaking skills.

[Active Listening]
The first part of effective communication is active listening. Active listening requires collecting information from intellect, emotions, and physical responses to obtain information about an interaction. There are four steps to active listening. They are:

A. Stop - Stop what you are doing and give your full attention to the parent or guardian. This shows them that what they have to say is important.
B. Look – Make eye contact. This shows respect for what the parent or guardian is saying. It also gives the listener a chance to observe the speaker’s facial expressions, making it easier to respond appropriately to the intensity of the situation.
C. Listen – Pay close attention to the parent’s or guardian’s words and tone. Try to understand the information the speaker is trying to convey.
D. Respond – Use body language and subtle cues to convey interest in the topic. Indicate understanding by nodding, periodically chiming in, or repeating or paraphrasing sections of the conversation. It is also important to acknowledge the parent’s or guardian’s feelings. Statements such as, “I see you are upset” convey empathy, and help parents and guardians feel acknowledged.

The following video shows a discussion between a caregiver and a parent. Notice how the caregiver uses the active listening techniques we’ve discussed: stopping, looking, listening, and responding.

[Speaking]

The second component of effective communication is speaking. In speaking with parents and guardians, especially in difficult conversations, it is important to always convey a tone of respect and mutual cooperation. Thinking before speaking goes a long way to eliminate impulsive statements that can damage the parent-caregiver relationship. Always remember that you are the professional, and it is your responsibility to show respect for families, even if they are not showing you respect in return.

In every conversation with parents or guardians about their child, even if the primary function of the conversation is to address a concern, make a point to start and end by saying something positive about the child’s development. This can make parents and guardians feel more comfortable, remind them that caregivers have their children’s best interests at heart, and help everyone in the situation remember that every child has strengths.

Don’t be afraid to ask questions. It is important to gain as complete an understanding as possible of the information parents and guardians have to offer. Especially in tense, emotional situations, a small information gap can lead to a large misunderstanding. Ask questions, and encourage parents or guardians to do so, until everyone is on the same page.

It is okay to admit when you do not know the answer. At times, parents or guardians might ask questions which child care providers are not qualified to answer. Rather than
providing inaccurate information, offer to seek out the correct information, or refer the parent or guardian to the child care director or another knowledgeable professional. Families will appreciate your honesty, and children will benefit from the care of well-informed parents and guardians.

Now let’s return to our video. This time, pay attention to how the caregiver responds to the parent’s concerns using the strategies we’ve just discussed.

**[Modeling Best Practices]**

Parents and guardians perceive their children’s caregivers as knowledgeable professionals, and trust that caregivers know the correct way to promote children’s optimal development. As a result, parents and guardians look to child care providers for examples of developmentally appropriate practice. Everything in the child care environment sends a message to families about what is best for their children, from the physical environment and classroom materials, to the language caregivers use during conflict resolution and the types of food served during snack and meals. Because parents and guardians are always seeking more information, caregivers have to be vigilant, intentionally using best practices at all times.

Parents are likely to use the information they gather from these observations to create environments and routines for the child at home. By modeling behaviors and answering questions about best practices, child care providers can help to build a consistency of care between the home and the classroom.

**[Bringing it All Together]**

During this module, we have talked about the importance of positive relationships between caregivers and the families of children in care. Caregivers need to intentionally seek out opportunities to involve families in the childcare setting and draw on families’ unique knowledge of their children’s individual needs.

Here are the major messages we’d like you to “take home”.

- Parent and guardian involvement is important because children whose parents are involved in the classroom tend to have better cognitive, language, and social emotional skills, and exhibit fewer problem behaviors,
- All families deserve respect, and it is your responsibility to see that your biases do not cause you to disrespect any family due to culture, religion, family structure, age, or any other factor,
- It is important that parents and guardians always feel welcome in your classroom,
- There are five primary strategies for promoting parent and guardian involvement: Keeping families updated, inviting parents and guardians to lead classroom activities, involving parents and guardians in special events, letting families meet center needs, and identifying and meeting families’ needs,
• Every conversation with a child’s family should include positive information and convey an attitude of respect and cooperation, and

• Model best practices at all times, so parents can look to you as an example of how to meet their children’s needs.

Thank you for your participation in this course, and for your desire to provide loving care for very young children in child care.

Resources

For further information and articles please check out the following web sites:

http://www.naeyc.org/

http://www.zerotothree.org/

http://www.pitc.org/


http://www.nacccp.org/

http://www.incredibleyears.com/program/goals.asp


References

http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/ece/15


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