Building Positive Relationships with Parents

Children thrive when they are cared for in a loving and supportive environment that promotes their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Parents are primarily responsible for ensuring that their children are raised in such an environment. For many parents, this means finding and selecting a quality child care program that meets their own needs as well as the needs of their children.

Most parents are sincerely concerned about the quality of care their children receive and want to be involved as much as possible in their child’s daily routines. As a child care provider, it is to your benefit to build positive relationships with parents. Doing so strengthens the overall quality of the child care program and benefits all those involved, especially the children in your care.

Benefits of Parental Involvement

Parents play an instrumental role in the lives of their children. When parents are consistently and actively involved in their children’s daily routines, children do better in nearly every aspect of development. This is particularly true in the cognitive/academic domain. For over three decades, researchers have consistently found a positive relationship between the level of parental involvement and children’s academic success during the school-age years (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). High levels of parental involvement are associated with higher student grades and test scores, better attendance, higher rates of homework completion, more positive student attitudes and behavior, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment rates in postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The benefits of parental involvement do not appear to be limited to school-age children. Emerging evidence indicates that parental involvement in children’s early childhood programs can also have a very positive influence on children’s developmental outcomes. In a three-year study of 708 preschoolers in the Washington, D.C., area, Marcon (1999) discovered that increased parent involvement (e.g., volunteering at school, attending parent-teacher conferences, participating in home visits, helping with class activities) was significantly related to children’s mastery of skills in all subject matter areas.

Involving parents in the work that you do also strengthens child care programs by:

- Helping you gain a better understanding of the unique cultural and family backgrounds of the children in your care
- Providing you with opportunities to support parents in their efforts to effectively raise their children
- Creating a closer relationship between the home and child care environment, which allows for consensus building around shared goals for children
Helping parents become better informed about the daily activities their children participate in at your center or home

Allowing parents to have input into how their children are cared for on a daily basis

Alleviating concerns that some parents have about leaving their children in the care of another adult, and

Instilling trust and confidence in children, knowing that their parents care about their well-being.

Parental Perceptions of Early Childhood Programs and Teachers

To build positive relationships with parents, it is important to understand the expectations they have of you as a provider and of the overall program. In 2004, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) sponsored a study involving over 1,000 parents of children between the ages of birth and 8 who were enrolled in some type of early care and education program (Olson & Hyson, 2005). Their goal was to find out how parents perceive early childhood programs (accredited and non-accredited) and teachers (center- and home-based child care providers). Key findings from the study include:

- Parents tend to be highly satisfied with their relationships with teachers, as well as the overall quality of the care and education that is provided for their children.
- Parents want child care providers to be patient, loving, and kind; for the most part, they believe that their children’s providers live up to this standard.
- Social and emotional development is a major priority for parents during their children’s early learning years.
- Parents prefer “cooperative, respectful communication within the context of reciprocal relationships.” Families noted that parenting advice is not as important as other forms of communication that deal directly with their children’s social and emotional development and performance in the program.
- Parents want regular communication with teachers, but indicated that this is an area that needs improvement. Parents would like early childhood professionals to reach out more to them by asking for their input in matters pertaining to their children.
- Some families (i.e., single-parent, young or first-time parents, full-time working couples, and families from culturally diverse backgrounds) tend to be more receptive to support from child care providers in the form of advice and guidance.
Strategies for Building Positive Relationships with Parents

According to NAEYC (1997), child care programs function most effectively when there is a reciprocal relationship between child care professionals and parents. Reciprocal relationships are described as “mutually respectful, cooperative, and collaborative, with regular and frequent communication about the child” (Olson & Hyson, 2005, p. 67). The following suggestions are intended to help you build positive, reciprocal relationships with parents.

1. **Communicate regularly with parents.** As a child care professional, you possess a wealth of knowledge related to children’s early education and development. Parents also bring to the table critical knowledge about their children, including an understanding of their unique strengths, interests, and needs. To communicate effectively, parents and providers must be willing to openly share this important information. From day one, let parents know that you value their input and would like to communicate with them regularly about their children’s progress. You cannot force parents to share information, but you can facilitate this process by letting them know that it is in the best interest of their children.

Communication can take place at various times and in many different ways. You can communicate with parents via e-mail, telephone, parent-teacher conferences, handwritten notes, or during drop-off and pick-up times. When a parent drops off a child, ask how the child is doing. Find out if the child is sick or if something happened at home to make the child moody or upset. When parents pick up their children, talk to the parents about what their children did during the day. Inform them about the new things learned or the enjoyable activities their children participated in throughout the day. Keep parents informed about activities you have planned for their children. Encourage parents to keep you informed about any changes in their own schedules.

2. **Get to know each child and his or her family as much as possible.** While development is rather predictable during the early years of a child’s life, every child is different. Children possess their own unique personalities, temperaments, talents/abilities, interests, and cultural and family backgrounds. Therefore, it is critical that you make an effort to get to know each child on an individual level. To do this, you will need help from the child’s parents. It’s a good idea to collect information on the child and his/her parents when the child is first enrolled in your program. Ask parents to complete a form (in writing) that will help you get to know the family better. Let parents know that the information they put down on the form will be confidential. Possible items of interest include:

- Child’s name
- Nickname(s)
- Birthday
- Names and ages of brothers, sisters, or other children at home
- Names and types of pets
- Favorite toys
- Favorite activity
- Favorite foods
- Food dislikes
- Food allergies
- Medical conditions
- Bedtime rituals (i.e., bedtime, things parents do to prepare child for bed)
- Fears or concerns (child and parents)
- Religious or cultural traditions observed by the family, and
- Anything special that you need to know that would help the parents and child feel more comfortable while in your care.

3. Involve parents in special activities at the center or home. Parents can be a great source of support to you and your program by being involved in the special activities conducted at your center or home. Activities that are difficult to organize and implement on your own will be much easier with the assistance of parents.

Expect parents to be involved. Your expectations will not only influence your efforts to involve parents but also the perceptions parents have about you as a child care provider. If you expect parents to be involved, odds are they will become involved. Let parents know (verbally and in writing) that you value their involvement. Provide suggestions to parents on ways that they can become involved. Ask parents how they would like to be involved. Finally, provide numerous opportunities for them to actually take part in activities at the center or home.

Ideas that you might want to try in order to enhance parental involvement include:

- Inviting parents to select and read books to the children
- Inviting parents to the center or home to talk about their careers
- Organizing opportunities for parents to have breakfast or lunch with their children
- Asking parents to help with arts and crafts activities
- Asking parents to assist you when you take the children on field trips
- Asking parents to help prepare materials for various activities, and
- Organizing a work day in which parents are invited to help maintain the facilities (e.g., paint walls, repair playground equipment, pull weeds).

4. Involve parents in major decisions that impact their children. As a child care provider, you’re required to make numerous decisions that have an impact on the children in your care. Decisions have to be made regarding daily schedules, activities, curriculum, health and safety practices, how to handle children’s challenging behaviors, types of meals and snacks to serve, etc. Instead of making all of the decisions on your own, seek to involve parents in some of these major decisions. Ask parents to provide you with formal and informal feedback related to the above areas. Create a suggestion box where parents can submit their ideas in writing. When you introduce a new activity or new curriculum, ask parents what they think. You don’t have to incorporate every idea into your decision-making; however, when you carefully consider parents’ ideas and let them know that you value their advice, they will feel more invested in the program. At the same time, you will begin to build more positive, open, and trusting relationships with parents.
5. **Conduct parent-teacher conferences.** The parent-teacher conference has been used effectively in schools for many years to update parents on their children’s progress, and to discuss any areas of concern teachers or parents may have related to their children. These conferences can also be used effectively by early childhood professionals to build stronger connections between the home and child care environments. In fact, regular parent-teacher conferences have been identified as one of the key ingredients in a quality early childhood program (Seplocha, 2004). These conferences provide you with an excellent opportunity to share valuable information with parents, suggest activities that parents can do at home with their children, establish mutual goals, and listen to the ideas and concerns parents may have.

6. **Be open to discussing parental complaints and concerns.** Whether formally (e.g., parent-teacher conference) or informally (e.g., drop-off and pick-up times), it is important to listen to the concerns parents have about their children’s care. It is entirely normal for you and parents to occasionally disagree on various issues (e.g., disciplinary practices, food selection, schedules, etc.). The best way to handle disagreements with parents is to openly discuss them. Let parents know that you welcome their complaints and suggestions. Listen to their concerns without becoming angry or emotionally upset. Try to understand where they’re coming from. If they have a complaint, validate their feelings by acknowledging their concerns. If you are at fault in some way, apologize and do what you can to correct the situation. If parents are concerned about something that is out of your control, you can still let them know that you appreciate their willingness to openly discuss the issue with you. Explore possible solutions that will be acceptable to all involved. Open, honest, and respectful communication is always the best policy for dealing with disagreements.

7. **Be a source of support to families.** As stated earlier, some parents appear to be more receptive to and in need of support (Olson & Hyson, 2005). There will be parents who look to you for answers to questions they have regarding child development and parenting issues. Some parents will approach you frequently and in a very direct way. Others will be more hesitant to approach you with questions or concerns they may have. In the study mentioned earlier on parents’ perceptions of their children’s care arrangements, many parents stated that parenting advice is not as important as other forms of communication that deal directly with their children’s progress in the program. However, this does not mean that you cannot help them become more effective in their role as parents. Most parents are receptive to good parenting information, but the information should be presented in a manner that is helpful to them. As you get to know parents better, you will be able to determine the best ways to share information. Some parents may prefer information in writing (e.g., newsletters). Others may prefer to discuss topics with you face-to-face. Finally, there are other parents who just want to know of a good resource in their community that can provide special assistance. If parents approach you with a question that goes beyond your level of expertise, don’t be afraid to admit that you don’t have an answer. You can search for an answer and get back with them at a later time, or in some cases, it may be best to refer them to someone who specializes in the area.
Conclusion

In conclusion, early childhood experts agree that child care programs function most effectively when there is a reciprocal relationship between child care professionals and parents. Building positive relationships between parents and providers takes time, effort, and commitment; however, the benefits are well worth it. You will experience a greater level of support from parents; children’s needs will be met, and parents will have a greater appreciation for you and your program.