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NF05-626 Communicating with Families: *Building Relationships*

Mary K. Warner
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mwarner1@unl.edu

Debra E. Schroeder
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, dschroeder1@unl.edu

Mary Nelson
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mnelson1@unl.edu

Eileen Krumbach
University of Nebraska&#8211Lincoln, ekrumbach1@unl.edu

Sarah Effken Purcell
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, spurcell2@unl.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Authors
Mary K. Warner, Debra E. Schroeder, Mary Nelson, Eileen Krumbach, Sarah Effken Purcell, Kathy Bosch, and John DeFrain

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NF626

Communicating with Families:
Building Relationships

Adapted by: Mary K. Warner, Debra Schroeder, Mary Nelson, Eileen Krumbach, and Sarah Effken Purcell, Extension Educators; and John DeFrain and Kathy Bosch, Extension Specialists

Successful child-care providers, preschool teachers and elementary teachers begin to establish positive relationships with the children in their care or classrooms as soon as possible. Here are some guidelines for making closer contact with the children's families.

Show that you really care about each child.

An old Danish proverb states, "Who takes the child by the hand takes the mother by the heart." If early-childhood professionals keep this proverb in mind, they will recognize that families want providers and teachers to pay attention to their child and to treat them in a special way. This can be demonstrated every day through kind words and deeds. Pay attention to the little details that show you truly care, such as sending an extra note home with parents, making sure children's hands and faces are washed after a meal or that they have mittens on when they go out to play. If you do not pay attention to the little things, families may think you are too busy or not motivated to really care for their child.

Make personal contact with the families through face-to-face communication.

Take advantage of the opportunity to greet families and have a friendly conversation about their day when they arrive to pick up their children. Rather than mingling only with your coworkers or friends, visit with families at school programs and community events.

Treat families as individuals.

Communicate with families on a one-to-one basis, and be sure to allow time to visit with them privately. Connect with them as individuals, not just as Jake or Susan's family member.

Listen and respond carefully to family members.

This will show you are really interested in what family members are thinking or feeling. Try the following so family members do not think you are too busy to care.

- Provide ways for family members to share their concerns. Ask, "What changes have you seen in Toby's behavior?" Or, "What are Jack's favorite foods at home?"
- Listen carefully when family members talk to you. Maintain appropriate eye contact and other nonverbal clues.
- Ask appropriate questions and invite them to elaborate on what they are saying by saying, "Tell me more."
- Try to remain silent long enough for family members to gather their thoughts after you have asked a question. Avoid interrupting them or quickly responding with additional comments.
- Respond to family members' questions and concerns honestly and directly. Share some ideas or resources to help them find the answers to their questions. If you do not know the answer to something, say so.

Treat family members with respect and consideration.

Greet family members when you see them and use their proper names. Pronounce and spell their names correctly.

Use terms that family members are familiar with such as "children playing together" rather than "cooperative learning." When you address letters or notes, use "Dear Family Members" rather than "Dear Parents." If possible, arrange to have relevant program materials translated in the home language of the families in your care or classroom. Use a translator if you feel it is necessary. Learn a few words in their family's home language.

Honor family confidentiality.

Families are busy and there are many things going on in their lives: deaths, illness, divorces, job challenges, financial worries and more. These family concerns may have been shared with you by a family member who needed to talk and trusted you. Maintain that trust. Keep personal information confidential (unless it involves child neglect or abuse).

Focus on family strengths.

Look for ways to enhance building relationships by focusing on family strengths rather than faults.

- Identify one strength each family in your care has and build on that during the year.

- Avoid labeling families. Instead of thinking Sarah comes from a broken home, shift your thinking to, "Sarah comes from a family in which her grandmother is very supportive."
- Listen respectfully when children share information about their families. Rather than saying judgmental things like, "Oh, how awful," try saying something like, "That must worry you."
- Make sure classroom materials reflect the cultural groups and family compositions of the families of those in your care. This is a very clear sign that you value each child's family.
- Try to look at things from the family's point of view. An example that can help you appreciate the family's situation might be to think, "This is my only child's first day of school."
- Provide positive feedback to families about their child's progress. Comments or short notes about things both you and the family are working on together go a long way toward helping families become partners in the educational process.

Share control with families by including them as partners in the care and education of their children. Interact with them in ways they feel most comfortable, whether it be a phone call or in person. Learn from family members. What words do they use and what nonverbal behaviors are working? And finally, collaborate with family members on decisions regarding their child's care and educational experience. Decide together on certain goals for the children and ways to achieve these goals.

Make frequent attempts to include families in their children's early education. Use handouts at orientation, a weekly newsletter or give parents opportunities to volunteer in your classroom. There are a variety of practices that promote family involvement.

Child Rearing — Provide families with Web sites, videos, computerized phone messages or publications on child development.

Communicating — Create opportunities for informal conversations between family members and you, such as an open house, breakfast with the children at the center or a coffee klatch, which can bring families and providers closer together. Encourage families to read their child's daily activity sheet and to take the time to discuss their child's day with the teacher or you.

Volunteering — Identify talents, times and interests of family members through a survey. Invite family members to participate in your program on a one time or ongoing basis. Activities could include helping with fund-raisers, securing donations, helping with parties, providing supplies for an activity or special program, or sharing a favorite hobby or family custom.

Learning at Home — Provide calendars that describe simple daily or weekly learning activities families can try at home with their children. Offer a workshop or include articles in newsletters on ways family members can teach specific early learning skills at home.

Representing Other Families — Encourage family participation and leadership on center, school or community advisory councils or committees. Support families as they become involved in advocating for children and families in your community.

Finally, don't be afraid of change. Try not to get caught in habits that may not be practical to families today. If in the last several years it worked to have a breakfast for dads on the Father's Day weekend and this year the kids are really working on a classroom camp out, change to breakfast cooked over a campfire with the dads helping.

Strengthening relationships with families need not be a time consuming or overwhelming challenge. The rewards can be great as you strengthen not only your child-care setting but also the families with whom you work.

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