Communicating with Parents of Children with Special Needs

You talk with parents about all kinds of different things. Most of these interactions revolve around enhancing their child's participation in your program. To foster partnerships with parents, you need to consciously promote open communication. When parents have an infant or toddler with a disability, effective communication is especially critical.

When communicating with parents, whether through a note, a parent conference, or an informal conversation at the end of the day, every interaction should be:

- **Honest.** Let parents know what you really mean because you want them to tell you what they really mean. If you do not know how to position their child so he can easily play with the toys in the water table, be honest enough to say so. It may seem easier for you to talk around the issue, but a direct approach is more likely to lead to positive solutions.

- **Respectful.** Each interaction helps to build a lasting relationship with parents. Be especially sensitive about cultural differences. Let families know that you respect their privacy.

- **Timely.** Whether it is good news, a regular update, or a bad situation getting worse, find a way to communicate information to parents on a regular basis. Share news promptly. Do not wait to let parents know both the high points and the low points of their child's day.

- **Constructive.** Helpful communication clearly identifies what needs to happen next. Do not leave the family hanging. Offer suggestions and ask for their feedback on the next step or steps to take. Imagine getting a note from your child's teacher that describes a list of problems but does not give you any idea of what to do next!

- **Reciprocal.** Prepare to learn as much from parents as they learn from you. Listen as much as you speak. Avoid approaching parents about a problem with the solution already clearly defined in your mind. Leave room for parent feedback and suggestions. Make certain that both your actions and words represent your goal to form a partnership.

**Ideas to Facilitate Communication with Parents**

There are hundreds of great ideas for communicating with parents. The following ideas focus on implications for children with disabilities, but each strategy facilitates effective communication for all parents in the program.

- **Create a Child Care Notebook.** A notebook can be used to establish and maintain ongoing commentary about the child's experiences. This tool is important because it provides a vehicle to relate important events of the child’s day for parents to review and comment on. The notebook can be used to ask or answer questions or alert each other to changes in the child. Parents can write about what happens at home, comment about child care activities, or ask or answer questions about the information you have shared. Many times these notebooks are used to follow up important discussions. When sensitive information needs to be conveyed, it is generally a good idea to speak directly with the parent. The notebook should never be a substitute for personal communication, but it is an excellent tool that promotes open and frequent communication between parents and professionals.
• **Celebrate Special Events.** Many early childhood professionals celebrate some traditions or major events, such as birthdays or losing a tooth. Parents can be encouraged to participate as well. Joining in fun activities is a great way for parents to become more involved, and it introduces them to the children in your care and their families. It also provides an easy way to let parents see the kinds of experiences their child enjoys in your program.

• **Launch an Out-to-Lunch Program.** Parents who have jobs often have difficulty finding time to become actively involved in the child care experience. In response to this challenge, one provider started an out-to-lunch program to encourage family members to stop in and have lunch with the children. This type of activity makes lunch time extra special for the children and allows you to visit with parents and get to know them better.

• **Initiate Discussion Groups.** How many times have you brainstormed with parents about planning a bedtime routine, toilet training, or guiding behavior? These discussions are an important part of educating parents and represent one more way that parents indicate their trust in you and in the program you have created. In one fairly large child care center, the staff planned a series of discussion groups for parents about several frequently asked questions. These discussion groups were held one evening a month with one staff member scheduled to facilitate. There was no invited guest speaker and no staff person assigned as the resident expert. The parents learned what worked and what did not from the discussion and from the sharing of each other's experiences.

• **Construct a Parent Bulletin Board.** A bulletin board carefully placed near the entrance to a child's classroom is a great way to communicate with parents about what their children are doing in your program. It attracts parents when you address their interests. Sibling issues, announcements for parent support groups or workshops, and fliers describing community family events are a few examples of information that may interest parents.

• **Extend an Invitation to Play.** Many adults are not accustomed to small chairs, the chatter of many children, or the "chaos" of a really fun group activity. When a parent stops by to visit or to pick up his child, you may have to offer an invitation to participate. The invitation can be as simple as "Come on over" or as direct as "Can you help John put on his paint smock?" By giving parents a clear idea of how they can join in, you are actually communicating a much bigger message. "Come join our circle time" really conveys "We're in this together."

• **Post a Brainstorming List.** To elicit input from parents, the director of a child care center put up a very large blank piece of paper titled "What do you think?" Periodically, underneath this heading was a question about a dilemma the staff was struggling to solve. A pen was attached and, over the course of a week or two, parents gave valuable input on the current issue. Using this method, parent input helped the center staff decide whether or not to use cloth diapers, how to renovate the playground, and how to involve children in recycling.

• **Let Parents Know You Can Use Their Help.** It is not always easy to ask parents for help. You want to appear competent and be able to assure parents that you can provide appropriate care for their child. Remember that a partnership involves mutual support. Because parents have had to learn many of the same skills you are learning in order to care for their child, they are an excellent resource for you. A parent whose toddler has significant motor delays, for example, became frustrated when the child care provider did not use proper techniques to pick up and hold her son. When the provider finally asked this parent for help in positioning the child, the parent felt relieved and reassured that this trusted individual was really interested both in her child and in providing the best possible care. This child care provider tells parents when they enroll their children in her program that she will be requesting regular feedback so they can work together to help the child have a wonderful experience in her program. From the start, parents know that they are considered partners. As this child care provider realized, children's parents are almost always ready and willing to contribute when you let them know you need help.