
Parent Engagement in Early Learning



Strategies for Working with Families

Second Edition

JULIE POWERS

 Redleaf Press®
www.redleafpress.org
800-423-8309

Contents

ix Acknowledgments

1 Introduction

11 Chapter 1: Developing Relationships with Families

20 *Scenario 1:* “What Is Going On at School?,” or Building Trust

25 *Scenario 2:* Fear of Men, Strangers, and Dangerous Persons, or The Boogeyman

28 *Scenario 3:* The Parent Who Drains You, or “Excuse me, but I have some children here who need my attention.”

33 Chapter 2: Communicating with Families

46 *Scenario 4:* Recommending a Child for Assessment, or “What is wrong with Tim?”

51 *Scenario 5:* When Parents Don’t Read Your Newsletters, or “Why didn’t you tell me she has a field trip today?”

57 Chapter 3: Policies That Work for Families and Staff

66 *Scenario 6:* Parents Who Don’t Follow School Rules, or “But we’re special!”

71 *Scenario 7:* Fear of Health Problems Part 1, or The Sun Devil

76 *Scenario 8:* Fear of Health Problems Part 2, or Typhoid Mary

81 *Scenario 9:* The Parent Who Won’t Leave, or “How can I miss you when you won’t say good-bye?”

88 *Scenario 10:* The Late Parent, or “Is it 6:15 already?”

92 *Scenario 11:* The Parent Who Wants Special Treatment, or “If it’s not too much trouble . . .”

96 *Scenario 12:* The Child with Special Needs, or “Why didn’t you tell us?”

101 Chapter 4: Finding Common Values between Home and School

106 *Scenario 13: When Beliefs from Home and the Program Don't Match, or Holiday*

111 *Scenario 14: Controlling Pretend Play, or "Not my son!"*

115 *Scenario 15: Fear of Losing Influence over One's Own Child, or "Whose child is this, anyway?"*

120 *Scenario 16: Separating Twins, or "Why can't my boys be together?"*

125 Chapter 5: Child Development Issues

130 *Scenario 17: Taking School Toys Home, or "My little Jesse James"*

134 *Scenario 18: The Parent Who Personalizes Her Child's Rejection, or "Then you can't come to my birthday party."*

139 *Scenario 19: The New School Year, or "Where are my daughter's friends?"*

144 *Scenario 20: The Child Who Can Do No Wrong, or "Not my baby!"*

149 Chapter 6: Involving Your Director to Work Well with Families

159 *Scenario 21: Not Really Toilet Trained, or "Oops! Not again!"*

164 *Scenario 22: When a Child Reports an Event to Parents Incorrectly, or "I want to talk to the parents about what really happened!"*

171 Checklist for Analyzing Scenarios

173 References and Recommended Readings

Acknowledgments for Second Edition

Thanks to Kara Lomen for making this second edition the best it could be with her wonderful editing. Thanks to Sherry Nolte for her gentle and helpful editing and Jennifer Ikehara, Michelle Tancayo, Alexandra Domingo, Tamika Smiley, and other University of Hawaii Maui College students for sharing their stories of working with families

Acknowledgments for First Edition

Thanks to the following:

- Marjorie Schiller, who always thinks I am smarter than I am
- Eva Moravcik, who trusted my ego with her mighty red pen and made improvements to this book
- Roger and Bonnie Neugebauer, who believed I had something to say to my colleagues
- Stephanie Feeney, who taught me how to think about professional ethics
- Margarita Kay, who taught me to look at cultural context
- Betty Jones, who pushed me to improve my writing
- Nancy Burrows, who modeled the role teachers can play in improving parents' competency
- Kay Rencken, who helped me find my professional voice
- Nancy Sergeant-Abbate, who taught me how to collaborate with parents
- Beth Wallace, who stepped in at the eleventh hour and saw to it that this book was the best it could be
- Marcie Oltman, Jenny Hanlon, Natalie Dube, Louie Kolberg, Sarah Sivright, Sheila Williams-Ridge, Kathy Zampier, Susan Knutson, Joel Creswell, Jacky Turchick, Rheta Kuwahara, Cheryl Takashige, and Doug Rowe, for sharing their stories of working with families
- All of the families of University of Hawaii at Manoa Children's Center, Dodge Nature Preschool, Valley View Preschool, and Tucson Community School for sharing their children with me

Introduction

Have you ever worked with a teacher who thrives on working with parents? For some teachers, relationships with parents are as fulfilling as relationships with children. Rather than stressing out before parent-teacher conferences, these teachers look forward to the time they will spend talking with parents about the children. Parents seem to listen to their advice and trust them with family issues. These teachers are even able to tell parents hard truths without being met with defensiveness. Are they just natural parent educators? Some may be. Others may have once been uncomfortable working with parents, but as they gained the skills to build relationships with parents, they learned to enjoy this aspect of their work. If you find working with parents one of the more difficult aspects of your job, you are not alone. This book will help you understand how teachers develop natural relationships with parents and teach you the skills you need to enjoy your work with parents too.

But am I talking about parents, or am I talking about families? I call this book *Parent Engagement in Early Learning* because in it I am talking about parenting. Parenting is done by many members of a child's community. For some children, grandparents, aunts, family friends, and others take on the parenting role. In this book, I use the terms *parents* and *families* somewhat interchangeably. When I do, I am referring to all the people who assume the role of parenting a young child.

When I was a young teacher working in a parent-cooperative nursery school, I called a mentor who had worked in another parent co-op for many years. I described the unreasonable expectations of the parents I was working with ("My child can sit still for an hour in church; I don't see why you aren't having her sit still and learn at school"), their lack of follow-through (parents forgetting to bring snack on their day or not staying to clean up after their day in the classroom), and their general lack of respect for my knowledge. My friend said to me, "It helps when you are old enough to be the parent's mother." "I'm not willing to wait that long!" I blurted out.

It didn't take that long. The more confident I became in my knowledge, the more the parents respected me. The surer I was that my expectations of parents were reasonable, the more they followed through on those expectations. Most importantly, the more I relaxed and allowed myself to enjoy these people, the better my relationships with them grew. I can now say that my work with parents has been one of the most enjoyable parts of my career in early childhood education.

One of the keys to working well with parents is learning to see their perspectives. As teachers, we can appreciate children for who they are and take pleasure in their company when we understand their development and their unique way of looking at the world. We enjoy some children more than others, even if we pretend we like them all the same, but as teachers we know how to make relationships with all children. The same can be true of our relationships with parents. Parents are unique individuals, and we will enjoy some more than others, but we can create relationships with all of them. Sometimes the parents who are challenging end up being the parents we feel the closest bond to. Working well with parents makes teaching more satisfying.

Why Is It Important for Us to Work with Families?

Sometimes we see the need to work well with parents as just one more demand on teachers. Aren't children the most important focus of our work? Why should we dilute our efforts and focus on parents as well?

Because it's the best thing for children. Working with families is important because, simply put, it's the best thing for the children. Children gain the most from their early education experience when a partnership exists between teachers and families. When we, as teachers, have a positive impact on the whole family and affect how they interact with their children, we make a contribution that will last a lifetime.

Because we have a lot to offer parents. As early childhood education (ECE) professionals, we have special insight into the needs and interests of young children. When we work with parents, we can help them differentiate between issues that are related to general development and issues that are specific to their children. We can help them keep their expectations age appropriate and offer families solutions to struggles they may be having with their children.

Because parents have a lot to offer us. We need to work with families because parents know their children well—and they can help us find the strategies to best teach their children. They know their children's preferences and abilities and are able to read their children's feelings. Our jobs will be easier in partnership with parents.

Why Do Some Teachers Find It So Hard to Work with Parents?

Talking to parents can practically paralyze some teachers. As one preschool teacher said, "I just dread parent-teacher conferences! I get so nervous—all of my thoughts just leave my brain! Sometimes parents get defensive if I tell them anything less than glowing about their children." Communicating with parents can be especially hard for new teachers. Parents may not demonstrate patience with the learning curve for novice teachers. Anxious parents may cross-examine teachers or hover to make sure everything is okay. Building confidence is hard when you feel yourself being constantly critiqued.

Sometimes there is a cultural or economic divide between parents and teachers. I spoke to one teacher who moved from working with Head Start to a private, upper-income school. She said, "When I was in Head Start, the parents appreciated everything I did and treated me like a professional. Now I have these parents who expect me to wait on them and meet their personal needs. They treat me like I am a servant!"

Sometimes teachers struggle if they are not parents themselves. They may have difficulty relating to the lives and concerns of parents. These teachers may feel defensive about their judgment and advice to parents. Sometimes parents express a lack of confidence in the knowledge of a teacher who hasn't walked in their "parent" shoes.

Some early childhood teachers just relate to and interact better with children than with adults. Some of the traits that make a great early childhood educator—such as finding the behavior and personalities of children inherently interesting or having a talent for staying in the background rather than being the center of attention—do not translate to socializing well with adults.

How Can We Learn to Love Working with Families?

Most of us have what it takes to be good at working with parents. The characteristics that make us good with children can also serve us in our work with parents:

- We know how to facilitate learning.
- We appreciate individual differences.

- We focus on development.
- We are warm and caring.
- We are willing to give others the benefit of the doubt.
- We enjoy the development of competency.
- We develop warm relationships.
- We can make a difference.

We know how to facilitate learning. Teachers know how to create learning opportunities that allow children to construct their own knowledge by finding solutions to what frustrates or interests them. We can do that with families as well. We can pick up on the subtle cues of individual parents to tell us when they are ready to find answers to what frustrates them in parenting. When we know what each and every parent needs, we can guide them toward finding solutions that work for their own families. Our classrooms are laboratories for learning about children. When we share our insights and experiences with parents, and when we invite them into our classroom world, we can help them learn about their children.

We appreciate individual differences. When children join our classrooms, we accept them no matter where they are developmentally, and we celebrate their quirky and unique personalities. If we can find room in our hearts to also appreciate parents as individuals, they will enrich our lives. We can include their special talents and skills when we invite them into our classrooms. We can enjoy their senses of humor, be awed by their insights, and learn from them as people.

We focus on development. Teachers can use these same skills while we work with parents. We can work with a mother who is a genius in her own field but can't quite get herself and her child organized in the morning, as well as the father who is wonderful with his child but hasn't developed self-confidence in the decisions he makes as a parent. We can see that both of these people are still developing as parents. By paying attention to the development of parents, we can have reasonable expectations and not be disappointed when all of them don't make the choices we'd like them to make.

We are warm and caring. As teachers, we tend to be warm people who are comfortable with our own emotions as well as the feelings of others. This characteristic helps us work well with parents who may be experiencing a merry-go-round of emotions while they learn how to parent.

We are willing to give others the benefit of the doubt. We tend to be positive and optimistic people. We expect that even children who are struggling are going to turn out okay. We can use that optimism to anticipate the best in the parents we work with. We can enjoy parents. Some of the aspects we love most about working with children can also be present when working with families.

We enjoy the development of competency. We can tap into the joy of a parent's discovery in the same way we feel joy the first time a child pumps on a swing or writes her name. Watching a parent offer his child a choice rather than getting mad at him or overhearing one parent describe making it through a difficult stage of her child's development can be very gratifying.

We develop warm relationships. As teachers, we appreciate the affection children have for us, and we grow very fond of them. Some of us cry when children leave our programs. We can also enjoy very special relationships with parents. We share a wonderful time in the lives of their children. We are a quiet fan club for each child, noticing growth and achievements together. The relationships we develop with parents, whether professional or informal, can be a source of great enjoyment. As a program director, I loved to listen to easy laughter coming from parents and teachers at conferences while they enjoyed their shared wisdom about a particular child.

We can make a difference. We are not a cynical group. When Sue Bredekamp gave the closing keynote speech at the 2003 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Conference in Chicago, she described the culture of early childhood educators and how it prepares us to enjoy our work with families. One of the most relevant aspects of our ECE culture is our belief that we make the world a better place through our work. When we collaborate with parents to meet the needs of the children we serve, our energies and commitment have an even bigger effect on families and children.

Are You Ready to Develop Partnerships with Parents?

Attitudes and beliefs play a strong role in our ability to create partnerships. Take the following quiz to determine your own readiness.

1. Most parents want what is best for their children.
 True Somewhat true Not true
2. If parents don't agree with me, one of us does not have to be wrong.
 True Somewhat true Not true
3. Children benefit from communication and collaboration between their parents and teachers.
 True Somewhat true Not true
4. My job is more enjoyable because of my interactions with parents.
 True Somewhat true Not true
5. Parents can offer me insight about their children that will help me do a better job.
 True Somewhat true Not true
6. I can think beyond my own preferences and convenience to benefit children and parents.
 True Somewhat true Not true
7. Parents are entitled to the final say in their children's care and education.
 True Somewhat true Not true
8. I am willing to change routines and practices if doing so works better for children and parents.
 True Somewhat true Not true
9. I grow as a professional through interaction with parents.
 True Somewhat true Not true

How did you do? Your reactions to these questions can reveal some of your feelings that may help or hinder your relationships with parents.

If you answered “True” to most questions, you understand the value of parent-teacher partnerships and are ready to get better at them.

If you answered “Somewhat true” to most questions, you demonstrate interest in creating partnerships with parents but often keep your conflicting attitudes in mind. As you find yourself reacting negatively to parents' actions, push yourself to think from their perspectives.

If you answered “Not true” to most questions, you may have attitudes and beliefs that will interfere with building partnerships. Viewing parents as adversaries, problems, or a waste of your time will hold you back from improving your interactions with parents. As you read the following chapters, listen to the voices of parents and see if you can shift your thinking.

Does This Get Any Easier?

Working with parents may not be easy, but it's worth the effort—and yes, it does get easier. This book was written to help bridge the differences in perspective between early childhood teachers and parents. Each chapter provides a framework for thinking through the challenges of creating a family-friendly program—challenges such as developing relationships with families (chapter 1); communicating with families (chapter 2); developing family-and-staff-friendly program policies (chapter 3); developing parent-friendly program values (chapter 4); working with parents on child development issues (chapter 5), and working with your director to build and improve family relationships (chapter 6). Within each chapter, I present

- hypothetical problems from both teachers' and parents' perspectives,
- ways to create a climate of partnership while preparing to address these problems,
- suggestions for what to do (or not do) if the problem being illustrated comes up for you, and
- ways you can take your problem solving a step further to prevent similar issues in the future.

At the end of the book, I provide a checklist to help you analyze the challenges that surface in your work with parents (see page 171).

And who am I to give you advice about working with parents? I am like you. I have taught in many kinds of programs, including Head Start, part-day nursery schools, and full-day programs. When I taught in a parent-cooperative program, I became so frustrated trying to work with parents that I returned to graduate school to learn more about parent education and leadership. I eventually earned a master's degree from Pacific Oaks College with specialization in both early childhood education and parent/community work. I have since worked as a director and teacher in programs with many kinds of parents—parents of children with special needs, international parents, parents who are college students, and suburban parents—and have sought to develop authentic working relationships with families and to support teachers as they work with parents. I now teach full-time at University of Hawaii Maui College, and in every course I teach, I hear about the joys and challenges teachers face collaborating with families. It is my hope that this book provides you with insight into how to improve your daily interactions with families.

This New Edition

I have updated this book in response to the teachers and college students who have used the first edition and provided me with feedback. Thank you all! I've updated the book's information to reflect changes in families and in programs for young children over the past ten years. I have added two new chapters: communicating with families (chapter 2) and working with your program director on family issues (chapter 6). The chapter on relationships now includes information on parent-teacher relationships with special complications.

Within each of the chapters, I have added new scenarios based on challenges readers have shared, and I have included more information for the novice teacher. These example scenarios can be used in several ways. Novice teachers or teachers who are working with a new group of parents can use them to think about situations they may encounter from the parents' perspectives. Taking a proactive look at challenges can help prepare the ECE professional to avoid common pitfalls that may have a negative impact on relationships. Early childhood education students or workshop participants can also use these scenarios as ways to imagine how the theory they are

learning in class can be put into practice. Finally, experienced teachers who are frustrated or experiencing challenges with parents can look for a similar situation in order to find new solutions to conflicts.

Finally, I have included a worksheet for examining challenges in working with families (see page 171). I have designed this worksheet as a tool to help you think about your own challenges, for trainers to use in workshops on working with parents, and for college instructors to use with their classes.

I hope this book has been useful as you work to improve your collaboration with parents. When you are able to enjoy working with families as well as with their children, you will be sustained in our field for years to come.

Developing Relationships with Families

The early childhood education field places a lot of stock in developing relationships between teachers and children. When programs are applying for accreditation, the “Standard 7: Families” section of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation is heavily weighted in importance. Enrolling children, orientation, style of interaction, scheduling—all are done with an eye on how relationships between children and teachers are built or hindered. If we believe that relationships between teachers and parents are critical to children’s experiences, we must also work on developing these bonds.

Strategies for Developing Relationships

You can take a number of steps to develop positive relationships with families. Examine the list below to see if you are already taking these steps or if there are some you could add to your toolbox of strategies.

1. Take time to develop lasting relationships with parents.
2. Be available.
3. Be yourself.
4. Share while staying within your own personal boundaries.
5. Be trustworthy.
6. Remember that the relationship is in service to the child, not your needs.

Take time to develop lasting relationships with parents. One mom describes her feelings for the teacher:

“My daughter loves her teacher, but that’s not the only reason I am crazy about Terry. She’s just a neat person! She really seems to care about me as well as Tiffany. She asks about my day, notices my mood, and shares funny stories about her own child. I feel so lucky to have Terry in our lives.”

It sounds simple, but it takes time and commitment. Think of the steps you take to build a relationship with a new child in your program. You approach her cautiously, giving her time to get used to your presence. You try to pick up cues from her and adjust your own behavior to be inviting without being overwhelming. You give her time to trust you. You demonstrate yourself to be likable. You give her time to figure out that you are here to stay. You hope that you get a chance to have positive interactions with her before you have to set a limit or confront a negative situation.

The same is true of relationships with parents. Acknowledge that they are individuals just as their children are. Some are extroverted or will be easy to interact with. Others will take more time. Some will trust you instantly, and others will need you to prove yourself. Treat your developing relationships with parents as deliberately and as individually as you do with children. Don’t expect the same actions (a friendly greeting or small talk) to be received in the same way by all parents. Reflect on a budding relationship, just as you do with children, and plan the next action with the understanding that a single formula won’t work for all.

You know how to create relationships with children, but how do you go about it with adults? Here are five fundamental ways to lay the groundwork.

Be available. This doesn’t mean chatting with parents when the children need your attention or staying after work for thirty minutes talking about a parent’s new job. Instead, find a way to communicate with parents that works for both of you. This may be a quick conversation at the beginning of the day, phone calls in the evening, texts, or e-mail. If parents find you easy to talk to about little things, it will be easier for them to talk to you about difficult topics.

Be yourself. Sometimes parents idealize their child’s teacher. You seem to have all the answers. Their child doesn’t misbehave with you as he does at home. But a pedestal is a difficult place from which to build a relationship. Don’t be afraid to show your faults. It is not useful for parents to think you are perfect.

Share while staying within your own personal boundaries. Teachers vary in their need for space from parents. You can still keep the amount of space you need while developing relationships with them. You do not need to be friends with the parents of the children you work with. It is also not inherently wrong to be friends with parents of the children in your class. There is no one right way.

Most parents respond positively to clear expectations from teachers. Some teachers are comfortable with more formal relationships—parents call them by their surnames, and teachers keep personal information private. Other teachers may develop easy intimacy with families—they openly share information about their own families and lives outside of school. If the openness is sincere, many parents will respond. Parents may be more forthcoming about their own children’s difficulties if they know the teacher has had similar battles.

Be trustworthy. What may seem like a small thing to you may feel like a betrayal of confidence to a parent. Always ask if information is public (for example, moving, making a major purchase, taking a new job, having a medical condition, or becoming engaged). If parents ask you for casual information about another parent, be clear and friendly in your refusal to give information. For example, if a parent asks you if another child’s parent is pregnant, you can answer by saying, “I really can’t talk about families, but you are welcome to ask her mom when she comes for pickup.” While the parent may be momentarily embarrassed, she will remember that you were trustworthy.

Remember that the relationship is in service to the child, not your needs. Friendships with parents are tricky, especially during the time the child is in your care. Enter these relationships with caution. The child can easily get pushed out of the way while the adults are enjoying each other. Sometimes we need to tell parents hard truths, and our personal relationships with parents should not get in the way.

Complicated Relationships

It is easier to develop relationships with some families than it is with others. Below, you will find examples of complicated relationships, suggestions of ways some teachers worked with these challenges, and tips that may help guide you in similar situations.

Complication 1: Highly Vulnerable Parents

While appropriate boundaries are important, sometimes we are the only people who see isolated parents on a regular basis. We may be in a situation where we can literally save their lives. We could be the ones who see mothers who are experiencing domestic violence and may be the only ones to get them help. Mental illness can fall into this category as well.

A teacher describes:

“Joannie’s mom didn’t look right when she dropped Joannie off at our Head Start classroom. She had obviously been crying for a long time. I asked her, ‘Lani, are you okay?’ She kept her head down. I put my arm around her and asked again. ‘Eh, it’s just no good,’ she said, ‘I’m no good. The kids be better off without me. I think I don’t want to live no more. You take care of my Joannie for me, yeah?’ She started to leave, and I said, ‘Lani, you aren’t going home. Today you stay and play with us. Joannie wants you to play with us today.’ It took Lani awhile to settle in, but she did stay and play with us. The kids seemed to sense that she needed to be there and were so kind to her! When she was busy with Duck, Duck, Goose, I slipped away and called our family case manager. The case manager came right up and spent a long time with Lani. That was two years ago. Lani got the help she needed, and she is doing great.”

Tips for working with highly vulnerable parents:

- Know your resources. You won’t have time to do research once these needs become visible.
- Come up with a proactive plan for parents who may need more. It is important to maintain confidentiality, but there are times when other staff members may need to step in.

Make sure that vulnerable parents know you see them as individuals and as more than their problems. Most interactions should still be about their child and their parenting rather than focusing only on their personal problems.

Complication 2: When Parents Didn’t Choose Your Program

It is more challenging to develop relationships with parents who didn’t choose your program. There are a number of reasons this may happen.

Listen to this divorced father:

“I don’t know why Kathy’s mother picked this program. I guess because her sister’s kid goes there. All they do is play. I want her to go to a school where she actually learns something.”

Sometimes parents are forced to enroll their child in a program to receive subsidies:

“I don’t even like this place. My older daughter went to a better school, but they aren’t accredited, so I couldn’t get the state subsidy to pay for it. If I can just get a raise at work, I’ll be able to move her to that better school.”

The most challenging can be court-ordered placement:

“The only way I could get custody back for the twins was to enroll them in this school. I don’t see why they can’t just be home with me.”

Tips for developing relationships with parents who did not choose your program:

Go the extra mile to build these relationships. It is natural to feel hurt if parents don’t cover up their lack of support for your program. Rather than writing them off, try harder to develop those relationships.

If you find a divorced couple has one parent who likes the program and the other doesn’t, resist the urge to give more time, attention, and information to the friendly parent. You are only supporting the assumptions of the other parent when you behave poorly toward him or her.

Help parents who do not see the value of your program. Guide parents to understand why you do what you do. The trick is to do this without sounding condescending.

Recognize when your relationship has turned the corner with resistant parents. Just make sure not to say something that makes them lose face again, such as, “See, you didn’t think we were such a great school, but now you see we were right!”

Complication 3: When the Parent Is On Staff

This is challenging for both the parent and the other staff. A teacher describes:

“The director has her kid in my class. All the rules go out the window! Whenever I try to discipline her daughter, she just runs to Mommy. The director lets her daughter just hang out with her. I have no authority with this child!”

In this circumstance, it might be best to find out how the director wants you to handle disciplining her child. Look at the next chapter for ideas on how best to communicate the issue.

Being a parent who is also a teacher in the school can be hard. Sometimes you feel as if your child gets less time or attention than the other children because the staff expects you to understand. A parent-teacher describes:

“My son is in the two-year-old room, and the teachers help all of the other children when they need help on the toilet. When my son has to go number two, they just bring him to my classroom! I know they are really busy, but doesn’t my son deserve as much care as the other children?”

Tips for navigating parents who are staff members:

Begin with the expectation that policies for families will be consistent, even with parents who work in the center. You can make exceptions, but be overt about those exceptions, stating them and agreeing to them.

Have the parent-teachers keep their children in their own classrooms until the time when other parents would be allowed to drop off their children. Do not let staff children hang out in your classroom before school begins. This will avoid confusion for the children. It will provide a consistent message to all parents in your class regarding appropriate drop-off time. The other potential problem is you won’t be able to accomplish much if a child is in the room with you outside of classroom hours. If you are trying to leave

the room to gather supplies, leave cupboards open, or work with items that aren’t child-safe, you won’t get your work done and you’ll be frustrated by unmet expectations. Instead, set consistent policies about when children can join your room. (See chapter 3 for more suggestions about setting policies.)

Make sure parent-teachers get the same service as other parents. If your program provides home visits, staff parents are entitled to them too.

When Nothing Seems to Work

If you give up on working with a family, doing so may feel like a failure to you. Before you give up on establishing a relationship with a family, make sure there are good reasons beyond your own level of frustration. You may have reasons such as these:

- The relationship with the parent will only improve if you take steps that are unethical or illegal.
- The parent’s lack of trust is negatively affecting his child’s school experience.
- The parent’s lack of trust is negatively affecting relationships with other families in the program.
- The parent makes staff members feel unsafe.

A parent who is uncomfortable with the ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, or age of a teacher needs to be educated on the benefits of diversity in the life of her child. By helping a parent work through such issues, you can have a profound effect on the child’s life. Take time to help families work through knee-jerk responses to prejudices they might not have even been aware of. For instance, the benefits of having a positive male presence usually outweigh the possible negative fallout. You cannot break the law governing discriminatory hiring practices even if you know parents might be uncomfortable. Once parents develop trust, they will see the unique relationship their child can develop with a male caregiver. This is especially important for children who do not have many men in their lives.

If parents refuse to take part in working with their children’s challenging behavior, the program administrator will have to decide if the child can be accommodated without change. This requires a delicate balance of the needs

of the individual child, other children in the program, and the staff. The NAEYC's "Code of Ethical Conduct" provides assistance in working through when it is appropriate to disenroll a family from your program. Here are some questions that may help you make a decision:

Is the child disruptive? If so, is he disruptive enough to make it difficult for the group to function? Are there changes that can be made to the program (schedule, staffing, or expectations) that will alleviate the disruption?

Is the child thriving in the program? If not, are there changes that can be made (personal attention, new classroom) that will help the child to thrive and grow even if it is not as much as she might with professional intervention?

Is the program's relationship with the family still sound enough to benefit the child? Can parents and staff work together to meet the child's needs, or are too many bad feelings in the way? If it feels too hard, consider whether there are some ways you can change your behavior or your feelings to make the situation better.

If a parent is spreading his negative attitude to other parents and is not responding to attempts from staff to improve the relationship, the family may need to be asked to leave the program.

Staff members need to feel physically and psychologically safe at work. When lack of trust turns to hostility, a teacher is at risk of accusations and may not feel safe in the workplace. For example, when I was a center director, I had a very volatile parent who accused her son's teacher of not liking her child as much as other children and told the teacher she would be "watching her like a hawk" for examples of her son not being treated fairly. I told the parent that we had to meet with the teacher to discuss her concerns before the child could return to school.

If you cannot establish a baseline of trust with a family that allows you to be effective with their child, you may have to help the family leave the program. Be candid with them about your feelings to find out if the placement should continue. You might say, "We seem to be struggling to work together for your child. Perhaps you would be better served with a teacher with whom you can more easily build rapport."

If it is not in the best interest of the child, family, or program to continue the child's enrollment, then make a transition plan with the family to minimize disruption for the child. Give the family ample opportunity to find

another placement for their child, refer them to other programs, prepare the child and other children in the program for the change, and assist the family in enrolling in another program by providing records. Other issues that might result in disenrolling children from your program could include the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Even private programs must meet the requirements of IDEA. There are strict rules governing providing services for children with disabilities.

State licensing rules can also have an impact on enrollment in your program. Check with your state to learn if there are rules that guide your actions.

SCENARIO

1

“What Is Going On at School?,” or Building Trust

One teacher complains:

“I have a parent who doesn’t seem to believe anything I tell him. It’s like he is trying to catch me in a lie. He asks about how his son’s day went. When I share information, he looks skeptical and grills me for more information. The other day he asked if his son could come in on his day off. I explained that we have too many children on that day and we can’t take another. I saw him going over the sign-in sheets and counting the children! Once his child came home with a cut on his elbow, and the dad asked me how he did it. I explained that he fell on the sidewalk. Not five minutes later, he was asking my teaching assistant what happened! How am I supposed to develop a relationship with a parent who doesn’t trust me?”

Dad sees the problem differently:

“It’s important to me that I am a responsible parent. My son is too young to always tell me what happens, so I need to check to be sure everything is on the up-and-up. Sometimes I think the school tries to take advantage of ignorant parents—making up rules to suit them. I am just making sure I understand the rules. The teacher is so defensive. It makes me wonder what she has to hide.”

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Developing trust is often the first challenge to a relationship between a parent and teacher. Trusting others to care for your child can be scary. The younger the child, the more vulnerable she is, as the child cannot speak for herself. Expecting

trust may seem reasonable—who would place their child in a program with people they don’t trust? But trust comes in increments. The most basic trust, which needs to happen before parents can leave their children in your care, is trust that their children will not be abused or stolen. Deeper levels of trust—that caregivers will care about and for the child, like and perhaps love the child, understand the child enough to meet her needs, interact with the child as they would at home, and not place the needs of other children before the needs of their child—develop more slowly. If a teacher or parent perceives a lack of trust, problems will arise in relationship building.

Once a climate of distrust has developed, you need to figure out if it can be repaired. Sit down with the family. You may want another person with you to help you communicate. Share what you have experienced with the family and your concern for how it may affect their child. Remember, it is not the family’s job to care about you.

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. Moving toward positive solutions is easier if you can recognize and avoid certain defensive mind-sets that can make it difficult to develop a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include the following:

“The parent doesn’t think I am trustworthy.” It is hard to keep from personalizing suspicions from parents. Rather, give parents the benefit of the doubt and stay as open as possible. Defensiveness can confirm the parent’s feeling of suspicion.

“The parents will undermine my relationship with the child.” Children are likely to pick up safety cues from parents. Telling parents to stop acting distrustful in front of their children is not likely to help. Children pick up on the feelings of their parents. When parents’ words, feelings, and actions do not match, children become confused.

“The parents will ruin my reputation with other parents.” You cannot control relationships among parents. Parents will share concerns with other parents, and all you can do is hope that your relationship with most parents is strong enough for them to ignore the concerns of others.

“This parent is looking for an excuse to remove his child from my school (or class or home).” Sometimes parents need a face-saving reason for removing a

child from a program when embarrassing factors prompt a change. It is much easier to tell friends that the program or teacher wasn't good enough than it is to say you can't afford the program or you need longer hours than the program provides. You can make it easier for parents to remove their child from the program by being gracious about the exit so they don't need to find evidence against you.

WHAT ARE PARENTS THINKING?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as their actions have an impact on us) can help us to be more sensitive.

“Here we go again.” Parents who have experienced a profound lack of fairness in their own lives, especially in families that are not from the dominant culture, are often eager to protect their children from that experience. If parents are suspicious of you, they may have been lied to in similar situations in the past. It is important to give the message that you will treat all families fairly. This is not about you; it's about society. For some families, you will need to be overt about fairness rather than thinking it will be assumed. Tell families how you have ensured fairness when an action or policy implies fairness but could be viewed as favoring some children (such as enrollment or placement in programs, variable tuition rates, or discipline policies).

“This teacher only shares information with my wife, as if she's the real parent and I am not.” Trust can be difficult for both dads and moms for different reasons. Most men are going to feel in the minority in a preschool environment, and most are unaccustomed to that feeling. Separated parents may be especially sensitive. Noncustodial parents can feel out of the loop or that the school takes the side of the custodial parent (often the mother). Mothers can feel powerless to advocate for themselves or their children. If you think a parent is having a difficult time expressing her needs or those of her children, take the time to clarify.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Each situation will require unique solutions, but the following are some paths you might take.

Ask parents if they are getting the information they need from you. Say something like, “I am wondering if I am keeping you informed enough about class events. Is a short talk at pickup time working for you?”

Listen to the parents' comments without defensiveness. If you allow them to talk without being interrupted, parents may get past negative feelings and figure out what they really want. They may realize you are not the person they are struggling with. They may share things you have said or nonverbal communication messages they have picked up from you that you are unaware of. For example, when your eyes dart from the parent to a child, the parent may read that move as lack of interest rather than you hyper-vigilantly keeping an eye on the class.

Share your desire for communication. Say something such as, “I wish I had time to talk to you at pickup as well. It seems like as soon as you walk in the door, something comes up that takes my attention.”

Ask for suggestions. See what the parent thinks would help to improve information sharing, and create a plan that everyone can live with. “Would phone calls or notes work better?”

AFTER THE PROBLEM IS SOLVED: MOVING TOWARD TRUE PARTNERSHIP

Building trust takes time, and if you stick with the family during the process, it can be very rewarding. In one program, some of the families that teachers struggled with the most eventually established such a strong foundation of trust that they continued to seek our counsel when their child entered high school. The other benefit of building trust is that often families have several children go through the program. You can enjoy a foundation of trust from the beginning when you've already worked with a child's siblings.

Offer families regular opportunities to fill out anonymous questionnaires to give feedback, assess the program, and review your performance. Being able to put their concerns on the table might help them let go. You are likely to receive feedback that can improve your program. Doing this also gives you feedback from many satisfied families. Include information in newsletters or other parent communication about changes you have made in response to questionnaires.

BEFORE YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

The following suggestions can be used to avoid trust problems.

Begin by building a relationship. Acknowledge the need to build trust. When you first meet a family, acknowledge that trust takes time. This can help parents relax

and understand that their feelings are natural. If they feel it is abnormal to have trust issues with a new caregiver, they may be looking for an explanation of what triggered their reaction.

Be available. If you stretch your availability during the early stages of building the relationship, it will be easier for parents to trust that you will find time for them later.

SCENARIO



Fear of Men, Strangers, and Dangerous Persons, or The Boogeyman

One teacher shares her dilemma:

“We had our parent open house at the beginning of the year. Mrs. Johnson asked me about the student interns, so I told her about Joe. She became pale. “A man? I don’t feel comfortable with that. Maybe I can get my daughter switched into the other class.””

Mrs. Johnson explains:

“You read so much about child molesters. I know that they are usually men. It seems like pedophiles get jobs where they have access to children. I would never forgive myself if something happened to my daughter. It just doesn’t seem worth taking the chance.””

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Emotionally, leaving your child with others is risky enough. Asking parents to accept placing their children in the care of someone they find suspect is even tougher.

Consciousness is heightened in new situations. Just as you begin noticing red Volkswagens once you buy one, placing their child in care makes parents notice any new media story about children in child care. Parents read molestation stories. They know that they are ultimately responsible for what happens to their children. They may be receiving comments and even pressure from relatives. A generation ago, it was less common for men to be involved in the care of children, and to some people, it still seems unnatural.

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. Moving toward positive solutions is easier if you can recognize and avoid certain defensive mind-sets that make it difficult to develop a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include the following:

“The parent doesn’t trust my judgment.” We like to believe that the families we work with trust our decisions unconditionally, but it’s appropriate for parents to scrutinize decisions that affect their children. That’s their job!

“Parents are interfering with staffing decisions.” Parents want and need to know who is caring for their children. You would not approve if parents left their children with a babysitter they didn’t know. They also need to know who is taking care of their children in provider-based care.

“The parent is going to make unfair accusations.” Unfounded charges of abuse have been a major concern of caregivers for over a decade. The best way to avoid accusations is to keep the parents as informed and involved as possible. If parents feel free to take advantage of an open-door policy, they can learn they have nothing to fear.

WHAT ARE PARENTS THINKING?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as their actions have an impact on us) can help us to be more sensitive.

“Why would a man want to work with young children?” Some people are less comfortable than others with men caring for children. Is the concerned parent ethnically different from the male caregiver? Is she a single mother who may have less experience leaving her child in the care of a male? Is there a religious issue? Knowing the answers to these questions will not necessarily change your policies but may give you insight into how best to approach the family.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

If a parent has questioned the appropriateness of a male staff member, you may find it hard to keep from becoming defensive. But you can help by providing reassurances.

Explain why you have selected this person to join your staff. Share what you like

about him, the special qualifications he has (including his personality), and the extent of your references check.

Share the benefits of having men as caregivers. Some parents will not have considered that nurturing men can enrich their children’s lives.

Share positive stories from your experiences. Sharing specific stories about how educators who are men have had a positive affect on the lives of children can be helpful.

Explain the precautions you will take to protect all children and staff. Protecting the men on staff from suspicion is vital. Will they (or any other staff members) be alone with children when toileting or dressing? These activities place men at risk for accusations, and having men take these responsibilities may not be worth the potential problems if there are female staff who can handle these tasks. If a man is teaching alone, will other teachers or parents drop into the classroom unannounced? This may give parents confidence.

AFTER THE PROBLEM IS SOLVED: MOVING TOWARD TRUE PARTNERSHIP

Can you include parent representatives in the hiring process? When parents have personal investment in a staff member’s success, they share their enthusiasm with other families. You might even ask a parent who was on the hiring committee to write a welcome letter for the new teacher to share with other families.

BEFORE YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

The following suggestions can be used to avoid problems in trusting new staff members.

Begin by building a relationship. Introduce parents to all staff. Provide introductions in person or through written notices. Have photos and short biographies posted or in promotional materials. Include background information about each staff member. Knowing that a male teacher is someone’s son, father, uncle, friend, and so on makes him seem safer. The best way to avoid demonizing a person is by getting to know him or her.

Be trustworthy. Don’t make statements that are not true. If all teachers help children in the bathroom or rub backs at naptime, don’t pretend that this won’t happen.

SCENARIO

3

The Parent Who Drains You, or “Excuse me, but I have some children here who need my attention.”

This teacher is overwhelmed by the needs of parents:

“Sarah’s mom is so needy. She is single and has no family in this area. I know she’s had some health problems as well. But she acts like our job is to take care of her instead of taking care of Sarah. She comes in when we are in the middle of group time, and she always has ten things she has to tell us, like who is picking up Sarah, phone numbers for where we can reach her, some new worry she has from reading her magazines. It’s the same routine when she picks up. My teaching partner and I both just want to hide when she comes. She volunteers to help in the classroom on Wednesdays, but then she wants to spend the whole time talking to me instead of working with the children. No offense, but I don’t need another girlfriend!”

Sarah’s mom explains:

“It is so hard taking care of Sarah by myself. Her father is such a flake—he makes all kinds of promises, but he always lets us down. Sarah is my whole life. I spend a lot of time at her school so I can be the best mother possible. But sometimes it seems like the teachers just don’t want to know about Sarah’s time at home. They don’t seem very friendly when I come into the classroom. It makes me wonder if everything is okay. I mean, don’t they want parents to be involved?”

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

If a parent has already established a habit of demanding your attention, you need to gently wean her off it. If you withdraw too suddenly, the parent may think she has done something wrong and may put more energy into reconciling. It can be helpful to find a replacement: “Talk to Betsy’s mom about that—she mentioned that too.”

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

Be aware of how your reaction might make the situation worse. Moving toward positive solutions is easier if you can recognize and avoid certain defensive mind-sets that can make it difficult to develop a healthy partnership with parents. Typical defensive reactions include these:

“This parent is taking over my classroom.” Parents don’t always realize that we keep a constant vigil on our classrooms. It appears that we spend some time just standing around. Parents don’t think they are distracting us from observing the children.

“This parent expects me to socialize with her, and it interferes with my private life.” As difficult as it may be, it’s kinder to refuse invitations for social time if you don’t want to attend.

WHAT ARE PARENTS THINKING?

Thinking about how our actions strike emotional chords with parents (just as their actions have an impact on us) can help us to be more sensitive.

“She loves my daughter so much, we have a strong connection. We could be friends.” Some parents are more isolated and so are needier than others. This can be true of parents who have moved from a different country or who are single parents. While you should not socialize more than you are comfortable doing, you also shouldn’t worry that you need to have the same relationship with all parents.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Hiding from a needy parent may seem hard to resist, but hiding will not help solve the problem. Taking actions such as those described below can help.

Acknowledge the parent's need for contact. Say something such as, "I can tell you really appreciate the time you spend in our classroom."

Let the parent know that the children are your first priority. Say something such as, "I'm sorry that at times it seems like I am ignoring you, but the children need my constant attention."

Suggest other modes of communication. Say something such as, "Since I can't stop to give you directions when you come in to do a project with the children, how about if I leave written instructions for you on the clipboard?"

Avoid sending double messages. If you say, "Maybe we can meet for coffee sometime," and then you avoid making a firm date, the parent is left confused. Instead, you can say, "When I am not at work, my family (or studies or personal life) requires all of my energy. I'm sorry I won't have time for social engagements with school families."

Try to help the parent connect with others. You can suggest that she join a parenting club if there is one in your area, or you can mention a fellow parent who lives in the area whom she might be able to socialize with.

AFTER THE PROBLEM IS SOLVED: MOVING TOWARD TRUE PARTNERSHIP

Why not include social support for parents as part of your job? If you know that a parent is especially needy, arrange with your coworkers to cover for you so you have time to chat with the parent. It may be a greater service for the child than you can perform in the classroom.

BEFORE YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

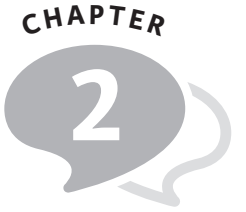
The following suggestions can be used to avoid problems with needy parents.

Begin by building a relationship. Set clear limits from the beginning. Teachers are some parents' only regular contact with adults. Parents develop trust in us and appreciate that we love their children. Sometimes they infringe on our boundaries and want us to become a part of their social circle. We may be the only people who give them attention, and they come to depend on it. Establishing limits without hurting their feelings is tricky. Setting boundaries at the beginning is easier and less likely to leave a parent feeling deserted.

Focus on the parents' perspective. Help isolated parents connect with other parents. Offer social events for families and steer parents toward conversation with each other. Caring for parents' social needs is a natural part of a family-friendly program. Perhaps a volunteer parent can arrange family social events. Some schools have group camping trips, family outings on weekends, and other activities to support parents.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of relationship did your parents have with the programs you attended as a child? How do you think that affected you as a child? What might have strengthened your parents' relationship with your school?
2. Make a list of the parents you get along with the most easily. What do they have in common? Make a list of the parents you have more troubling relationships with. See if you can find similarities that do not blame or judge these families. What steps can you take to move more families from list two to list one?
3. What steps do you take to make parents feel comfortable in your classroom? What else can you try?



Communicating with Families

Communication is one of the most important and challenging parts of working with families. We all have different styles of communication. Often when we are busy working with children, we find it hard to resist blaming parents when communication doesn't go well.

Communication also has a cultural component, and if we are culturally different from the families we serve, this can add another challenge. Some cultures value direct communication. Others find this type of communication aggressive and value a less direct communication style. Some expect eye contact; others find it disrespectful. Some value self-promotion; others expect humble comments about one's self.

Tips for Communicating with Parents

Remember those teachers we mentioned in the introduction? You know, the teachers whom parents always want for their child? The ones parents always want to talk to? The ones who can even give parents criticism that parents will listen to? You can move toward being one of these teachers by building relationships through communication. You can take a number of steps to improve your communication with families:

1. Let parents lead the conversation.
2. Be proactive with information.
3. Focus on parents' perspectives.
4. Plan for addressing problems with parents.