



Working With Families — Building Strong Relationships



Involving Families

The term *parent involvement* can mean many things. It not only describes parents' participation in activities at the family child care home, but also refers to parents' efforts to encourage their own child's learning at home. It also covers the many ways parents can communicate with providers. Parents' contributions to the child care home may take many forms: they may work directly with their own child; volunteer their time for a field trip or fundraiser; share skills or offer suggestions; or donate toys, dress-up clothes, or other materials for the children to work with.

Providers can encourage parents to get involved by offering varied and meaningful opportunities for families to participate in the life of the family child care home. Providers understand that family members may have other demands on their time that can limit their availability to help, and providers also are aware that not everyone is comfortable participating in the same way. As a result, they offer choices and options for being involved. They acknowledge that families are a child's first and most important source of learning and that they as providers can learn from parents and vice versa.

Here are some important **reasons to reach out to parents:**

- ◆ **To build bridges between home and child care.** Entering child care is a milestone in a child's life because it is often a young child's first extended experience outside the family. From this time forward, the child needs to function in at least two worlds — the home and the child care setting or school. While adults take their multiple "worlds" for granted, it is quite a challenge for toddlers and preschoolers to navigate between two different places, each with its own expectations and experiences. The more providers can connect these places for young children, the easier it will be for the children to make the twice-daily transitions between them. To help children feel comfortable, providers can incorporate materials and

activities like those in children's homes into their family child care setting. This helps children understand what to expect and how to adapt their behavior in the two settings.

Establishing close ties between child care and home may also ease the transition to kindergarten. It sets the stage for parents to continue their involvement from one setting to the other because they may have come to think of themselves as being an important part of their child's educational experiences. And children will have established the habit of sharing their learning activities with their parents.

- ◆ **To increase providers' understanding of children.** The more that providers learn about children's home life and cultures, the better they can support children's development in their family child care home. An awareness of the materials, activities, and values in children's homes lets providers plan meaningful experiences that build on the children's knowledge, interests, and skills. For example, a provider may learn that a child is interested in insects or has a repertoire of gospel songs.

- ◆ **To strengthen parents' understanding of children.** Providers have many opportunities to share information with families about how young children develop. They can also help them become better observers of their own children. This information can be exchanged formally, for example, during a planned conference. It can also be shared informally — for instance, while talking about what a child did that day when the parent or other family member arrives to pick up the child.

- ◆ **To promote child development at home.** Parents are a child's first teacher, and children spend more time at home than anywhere else. Therefore, providers play a critical role in sharing how to apply active learning principles to everyday family situations. For example, grocery shopping becomes an early reading experience when children identify letters on packages; doing laundry becomes a mathematical exercise when children sort and match the clothing items; and both these experiences provide opportunities for parent-child conversations.

- ◆ **To enrich the family child care home.** Parents can contribute in many concrete ways. Parents may want to assist on field trips, for example. If they have special interests and talents, they may choose to share these during occasional visits or they may invite children to visit their workplace or studio. Even busy parents can donate materials, such as old clothes for the dress-up area, empty food containers and cooking utensils to pretend with, and other items that would otherwise be recycled or discarded. Parents feel appreciated when they see the children using the materials they've donated. When parents understand more about what your family child care program does for their child, they can become your strongest advocates and promoters.

Positive Communication Strategies

- ◆ Develop trust.
- ◆ Be clear about expectations.
- ◆ Share feelings:
 - Look for body language.
 - Ask clarifying questions.
 - Put yourself in the parent's shoes.
 - Always focus on helping the child.
 - Be open to trying parent suggestions.
 - Finish positively, and with a plan!
- ◆ Avoid blame.
- ◆ Look for “win-win” solutions.
- ◆ Follow family interests:
 - Remember important dates.
 - Hold regular events that the family might enjoy.
 - Develop ways to communicate with families daily.

Strategies to Promote Relationships With Parents

Providers can use diverse strategies to encourage family involvement. As you carry out these strategies, continually review their effectiveness from the perspective of the five ingredients of active participatory learning. Emphasize the use of familiar **materials** from home that children can **manipulate** as they explore ideas, learn new things, and practice skills. Give children **choices** that reflect family life, and explain to parents how they can offer children many choices in their daily activities at home. Encourage **language and communication** from children in many ways, such as welcoming children's talk about their home experiences and taking the time to learn important words and phrases in children's home languages so children (and family members) feel comfortable communicating with you. Finally, **scaffold** children's learning by building on the experiences the children bring from home and by helping parents extend education from the family child care setting to their home.

Four Elements of Connecting with Families

Below are the four main elements of connecting with families, along with suggestions for carrying them out.

1. Examine your own family roots, beliefs, and attitudes.

To understand the beliefs and practices of the children and families you serve, first reflect on how your own background influences your perceptions of others. The following strategies can help you better understand yourself so you do not unintentionally judge or misinterpret others.

- **List your family origins and living arrangements.** You may be surprised by the diversity within your own family, going back two or three generations. For instance, family members may have moved from one part of the country to another and found creative ways of adapting their language, clothing, food, home furnishings, and so on to local conditions.

Living situations also change within a society or family over time. For example, multigenerational families living under one roof are more or less common in certain cultures or periods of history. Similarly, children may be raised by people other than their parents —

- **Be observant of the children every day.** Providers can observe children on a daily basis. The conversations and activities initiated by children provide a window into their interests, thoughts, and experiences outside of care. So, for example, when a provider saw a child “weaving” strips of paper in a collage, she learned that the child’s mother had a small loom at home. The teacher invited this parent to demonstrate weaving to the children. After the demonstration, children wove with simple frame looms made from wooden banana crates using a variety of materials. Several children laced yarn and twigs through the fence.
- **Reach out to families.** You can welcome families into your family child care setting in many ways. See the list on p. 10 for more ideas on how to connect with parents.

3. Share information about child development with parents.

When parents understand how children are learning in your home, they are in a better position to be partners in the educational process. Providers share information with parents using the following proven strategies:

- **Parent orientation.** When a new child has been enrolled in the program or when parents are considering whether to enroll their child, look for opportunities to present family members with information about the types of experiences their child will have in your family child care home. Encourage family members to visit with their child during care hours so they can see your routine in action and their child can start becoming familiar with the setting and the people in it. Once parents have signed up, provide them with a parent handbook or list of program policies and procedures and a brief description of what you do.
- **Newsletters.** Providers are encouraged to produce a newsletter on a regular basis (for example, once a month). Newsletters provide general information about what’s been happening, share reminders (such as bringing an extra change of clothing), and list upcoming events such as a family potluck. Your program’s newsletter might report on a field trip, describe an activity the children especially enjoyed, or include a drawing that a child made. With digital cameras, it is easy to include photos!

not just today, but in past times of economic hardship or migration. Discovering this type of diversity in your own family tree can help you realize that, in most instances, there is not one right way to do things.

- **Examine your “whats, hows, and whys.”** Examine what is important to you and what makes you feel comfortable and “at home” — such as certain types of food, art, music, or humor; particular topics of conversation; or different levels of affection or reserve. Think about your behavior as a parent, family member, and friend. Reflect on why you behave in certain ways and what it says about your beliefs and attitudes. When you discover these things about yourself, it can help you to become more open to — and respectful of — individual differences.
- **Be aware of personal “filters.”** A personal filter is a combination of your beliefs, attitudes, and lifetime experiences that affect your impressions of other people and events. Once you see the roots of your own beliefs and practices, you can separate your views from those of the families whose children you care for. It is then easier for you to say, “I may not do it this way, but I can see and appreciate why this family does.” Owning up to one’s personal beliefs makes it easier to see things from another perspective.

2. Learn from children and families about their traditions.

Knowing ourselves is the first step; learning about others comes next. The following can help you learn about children and their families:

- **Participate in community life.** This strategy is especially important if you do not live in or near the community your families come from (for example, your family child care home is close to a parent’s job). Joining local events and visiting neighborhood places demonstrates to families that you are eager to connect with them as citizens and community members. It is also one of the ways you can make sense of the experiences and expectations children bring with them. Examples of community participation include shopping at the local markets, attending street fairs and festivals, and getting to know community leaders and services.

- **Formal conferences.** Regular conferences, ideally held at least twice per year, give you another opportunity to share information with families about the program and individual children. At these times, it is also important to invite parents to ask questions, share information about the child and family, express concerns, and offer ideas for the program as a whole.
- **Informal contact.** Drop-off and pickup times provide natural opportunities for providers to chat briefly with parents about what their child did that day as well as about anything noteworthy happening at home. Sending work home also creates an occasion for talking about the child's activities and development — for example, about how the child made a painting or dictated a story and what he or she learned in the process. You can also write notes, make phone calls, and send e-mails — strategies especially important when children are brought by an older sibling or family friend or if daily face-to-face meetings with parents are rushed. It is important to use these informal contacts to share the “good” things children do and learn, not just as a means to discuss problems.

4. Join parents in expecting excellence from each child.

Parents have high expectations for their children and want them to do well. They also want providers to recognize what is special about their child and give them the individual attention they need to succeed. Because providers understand child development, they also know each child is capable of succeeding on his or her own terms. To convey this belief and confidence to parents, use the following strategies:

- **Avoid labeling or stereotyping children and families.** Labels set limits on who a person is and what he or she can become. Terms like “immature,” “shy,” “disadvantaged,” or “bully” are subjective. They often say more about what the labeler sees as “weakness” than they do about the child or family being described. Instead, identify people by their strengths — for example, “Ramon draws detailed pictures” or “Madison’s dad asks many questions about where to find low-cost educational materials.” Careful observation can help you focus on actual behavior, not judgmental labels. Then, even if there is a problem, you can use your observations to examine when and how the behavior occurs and devise appropriate strategies

to deal with it — for example, to help a child who bites express and channel feelings in safer ways.

- **Assume each child will succeed.** When you regard all children as competent learners, you invest in the idea that they can and will do well in a supportive climate. Because providers build on individual strengths and interests, every child has a chance to learn and succeed.

Scenarios

1. "What did you do to Jonas yesterday? He has a huge bruise on his arm."

2. "There is a stain on Penelope's new white blouse. Can't you keep her out of the paint?"

3. "It is so hard getting Mishka ready in the morning. He is so slow, and whines when I try to get him dressed every day."

4. "The traffic has been really brutal in the afternoon after work. It is hard to get here on time."

24 Ways to Connect With Families

Newsletters	Sharing photos or videos of the play room	Personal notes
Phone calls	Child and family photos posted in the play room	Donations of materials from home
E-mails	Volunteer opportunities	Suggestion box
Activity calendars	Getting books from library	Donating outgrown toys
Field trips	Child activity logs	Sharing observations of children
Orientation visits	Making story tapes	Sharing a talent
Parent handbooks	Bringing in a birthday treat	Potlucks and picnics
Parent bulletin board	Parent-provider conferences	Family night

Changing Negatives to Positives

Change these negative statements to positive statements. Think about using an “I” message, when needed. Be sure to acknowledge feelings.

1. “How would you like it if I brought Jessie to your house with a fever? You need to keep Billy home when he’s sick.”
2. “You’re lazy! You always expect me to feed breakfast to Joanna when she comes.”
3. “You are late to pick up Floyd. You need to stop fooling around and come here right after work.”

4. "Why is it that your child, Tony, is the only one who hits the other kids?"

5. "I don't like your attitude when it comes to Veronica's naptime. She needs to lie down in the afternoon. I am not keeping her up just so she'll sleep well for you at night."

6. "You really need to dress Samantha in play clothes. Kids need to play outside, and I am not going to be responsible for her fancy outfits."

7. "Can't you get out of bed earlier? It is not my job to dress Luther when you bring him here in his pajamas."

8. "That was an ugly thing to say. I do the best I can to prepare healthy menus for these kids."