5 Practices for Successful Partnerships with Families

Do you ever wonder why some partnerships are successful and some just can't seem to ever work just right? No matter what partnership's purpose is for being, when humans are a part of it each person brings along their own baggage packed with previous experiences. Each person also brings with diverse life experiences, habits and successes or challenges working with other teams and their own idea of how the team should be run. As educators and leaders, the early childhood educator sets the tone and lays the pathway for promising partnerships within the program.

There are five practices that contribute to successful partnerships with families. No partnership can survive without these:

Practice 1: Goals/Expectations

Practice 2: Sense of Belonging: All are unique and valued individuals

Practice 3: Open/Honest Communication

Practice 4: Diagnoses, Analyzes and Resolves Challenges

Practice 6: Consistently Re-evaluates/Makes Decisions Together

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Practice 1: Partners Understand the Goal

With no goal, there is no direction, no common purpose, no result. Everyone follows their own path, which often leads to frustration, confusion, and more work than necessary. Defining a common goal is as simple as creating a mission statement for the program. A mission statement acts as a guide for the program's running and as inspiration to draw educarers and families together with meaningful purpose. In challenging times, these written goals draw everyone back into focus and shine a light on what is ultimately important for the success of the program, the children.

In line with goals are also expectations and responsibilities. When each person is clear of what is expected of them and their personal responsibilities within the partnership, the program runs more smoothly as conflict is reduced.

When expectations are unclear:

- Educators feel disrespected, under-appreciated
- Parents feel frustrated or misunderstood
- Children may develop feelings of insecurity as they sense the tension between their parent and the educator
- Conflict arises

Children's safety and security in the child care program is supported by healthy partnerships between their educator and the important adults in their lives. In addition, children watch the adults in their lives and learn how to act and react in social situations. For these reasons, clear expectations are crucial to a healthy partnership and healthy children.

Often, the program's expectations and parent's responsibilities are outlined in the program's handbook. Expectations and goals that families bring to the partnership are best discussed during the interview process to ensure that the program is the right fit for the family. Family expectations and goals are readdressed regularly throughout the course of the partnership.

For help in writing a mission statement for your program, please read the PDF Writing a Mission Statement in the documents section of your classroom.

Practice Two: Sense of Belonging

Partners who have a strong sense of belonging to the group experience a deeper commitment to the running of the program it's overall success. In successful partnerships, all members are valued for their unique personalities, experiences, points of view, and finds ways that each person can contribute in their own way. They take advantage of the unique differences and talents that each person brings to the table. Developing a sense of belonging includes:

- Recognizing that programming is not one-size-fits-all, but individualized, responsive experiences are allowed and encouraged.
- Acknowledging and appreciating varying points of view, shared experiences and concerns are viewed as learning opportunities.
- Members attempting to bring out the best in one another based on each person's unique qualities.
- Celebrating culture and family backgrounds.
- Preparing for and expecting creativity, innovation and different viewpoints amongst members.

Developing a sense of belonging involves setting healthy boundaries. Healthy boundaries are important for every relationship. Maintaining a close, but professional relationships with families based on trust and open communication is crucial to the child's well-being and development. Because early childhood educators work so closely with children and their families, boundaries risk becoming blurred. Setting boundaries with families does not mean being cold and detached, but offering authentic, warm support, care and education within professional relationships. Healthy boundaries include cultivating warm, caring professional relationships with family adults, providing individualized care and education to all children equitably, gently, but firmly enforcing contracts and policies with all families, offering parent education and support in the form of resources and advice in your area of expertise, and empowering families, without enabling.

Once the line from professional to personal relationship is crossed with families, challenges can occur creating both a strain on the parent/educator partnership and the feelings of security within the child. Common challenges include policy enforcement becoming lax as the educare provider feels uncomfortable enforcing policies and expectations with parents who are now friends, families may begin to pay late, pick up late, or forget important events leaving providers to feel that they are taking advantage. Disrespectful or overly candid conversations regarding policies, other children/families, or personal issues can cause confusion or hurt feelings between the parent and the educare provider. Confidentiality is also at risk as educator may feel compelled to overshare information or "vent" about

other families or situations within the program. Children feel this strain and it effects their feelings of security. Even with the best of intentions, these relationships can in a less than professional manner.

Early childhood educators grow to care deeply about the children and families that they work with. Partners often feel like "one of the family." It's important that that educators define their role and identify the boundaries that are important to the success of their relationships with families early in their career, as well as routinely examine their role to ensure they are maintaining warm, supportive partnerships with families, as well as professionalism.

For more information: The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct helps early childhood educators to define their responsibilities to families and helps those working closely with to build professional relationships.

Practice 3: Open/Honest Communication

It's no surprise that open, honest communication is a component of successful partnerships. Good communication skills are the foundation of every relationship. Practicing good communication skills with family members leads to stronger connections between the early education and care program and home to support the child in the best ways possible. Communicating well with others is not always easy. Remember, partnerships are made up of human beings with a variety of emotions and experiences that that are constantly changing day in and day out. As the team leader, educators must remember that they set the tone for the program. When they set an example for open, honest, respectful communication, others are more likely to follow suit.

Good communication practices in programs strive for the following:

- Members feel free to express their opinions, thoughts, ideas, and solutions to problems without fear of retaliation.
- Members feel heard and validated by one another.
- Members ask questions in attempt to understand, not just to respond. Often times, in communication people have the tendency use the time when others are speaking to think of a response, instead of listening carefully to the speaker.
- Take the time to answer thoughtfully. There's no need to respond to requests or concerns immediately. Let the speaker know that they've been heard, that their communication is appreciated, and that they will receive answers in a timely manner.
- Members are comfortable taking risks in communicating with one another, having tough discussions, and taking action to support the team's mission, knowing both are working towards a common goal.

Communication is one of the simplest and yet most complex activity that people take part in every day. It is the main way that educators and families learn about one another, acknowledge and show respect for each other, and share their expertise. Each family has different ways of communicating with their educator. They may not share information simply because they have not acknowledged to themselves that they have expertise to share regarding their children and family. They also may not understand what is useful for their educarer to know. It is often challenging to share important information and resources with families that are difficult to get to know. A statement in the program's

parent handbook can convey the message that educators are interested in getting to know each family and are looking forward to communicating with them (Keyser, 2006).

Example:

Dear Parent,

As your child's first and most influential teacher, you have provided priceless love and education for your child. You are the expert in your child. We look forward to getting to know you and your child and hope that you will share what you know and understand about your child, so that we can provide the best care and education possible. We look forward to building a partnership with you.

Practice 4: Diagnoses, Analyzes and Resolves Challenges

All members understand that it's okay to disagree. Disagreement is seen as a learning opportunity to understand one another more clearly in the partnership. Disagreement can lead program leaders to clarify goals and expectations or revamp policies, if necessary.

Many disagreements are based on assumptions of what another person might think or do. What people assume shapes how they view and react to others and is often based on personal experiences under similar circumstances. Avoiding assumptions helps people to clarify the problem before creating a solution or to avoid the disagreement altogether.

Instead of basing our understanding of people and events on observations and facts, we often make judgments based on our emotions, beliefs, expectations and wishes.

When we assume that people are inherently good and have good intentions, it's easier to provide support and encouragement. Constructive assumptions are useful reminder that:

- All people have strengths.
- All people have different, but equally important skills, abilities, and knowledge.
- All people need support and encouragement.
- All families have hopes, dreams, and wishes for their children.
- Families are resourceful, but all families do not have equal access to resources.
- Families should be assisted in ways that help them maintain their dignity and hope.
- Families should be equal partners in the relationship with their children's caregivers.

By assuming the best of one another, partners often more hopeful and confident in a resolution when conflict arises. Most conflicts between families and educarers fit into these categories:

- ✓ Family and program needs are conflicting
- ✓ Families and educators hold differing views of care and education of children
- ✓ Communication is inadequate
- ✓ Cultural misunderstandings

When conflict arises, emotions often run high. Problem solving begins with listening and reflecting with the goal of understanding the family member's position before reacting. Keeping a calm, reflective, professional attitude leads to a more successful outcome.

Practice 5: Consistently Re-evaluates/Makes Decisions Together

While often time-consuming and challenging, routine evaluation is a vital part of ensuring that early childhood program practices support the mission and goals of the program. Evaluation occurs in several different ways in early childhood programs:

- Evaluating group and individual progress for developmentally appropriate practice using observation and assessment tools
- Evaluating program activities to ensure that they are up-to-date with current research and best practice for working with children and their families
- Evaluating program policies for effectiveness, clarity, and fit
- Self-Reflection on personal and professional goals and effectiveness

There are a variety of tools that educators can use to evaluate each of these areas within their programs. Program leaders should use the tools that they are comfortable with and are accessible to them. It doesn't matter what they use, as long as their evaluations tools are current, and they are used routinely.

When evaluating children's individual progress, educarers have a responsibility to involve families in making decisions regarding their child's care and education including sharing results and creating goals for their child. The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (2011) provides two ideals to guide the early childhood education and care provider's aspirations in working with children's families:

I-2.3—To welcome all family members and encourage them to participate in the program, including involvement in shared decision making.

I-2.7—To share information about each child's education and development with families and to help them understand and appreciate the current knowledge base of the early childhood profession.

Self-evaluation is an important step in the program assessment process. Reflecting on one's own performance, goals, and professionalism is one of the most difficult, yet enlightening practices that people can do for themselves. Self-evaluation can provide validation that individuals are moving in the right direction to meet their goals, provide inspiration to meet future goals, and serve as a starting point for change.

- ✓ Take time regularly to objectively examine personal and professional goals and feelings.
- ✓ Ask advice of a trusted mentor or friend.
- ✓ Take the time to identify the valuable strengths within.
- ✓ Use strengths to propel growth in areas that need refinement.

Building Promising Partnerships

Building partnerships takes time, energy, patience, and commitment. Following these 5 basic practices puts educare providers and families on the right track towards successful partnerships as they educate and nurture young children in the most important years in their lives. These practices meet the needs of all members of the partnership.

- ✓ Early childhood educators experience greater professional satisfaction and confidence as they lead and set the tone for a positive learning experience for children and their families.

- ✓ Parents feel secure with their program, knowing that the educator has their children's best interests at heart, easing the anxiety that comes with leaving their most valued family members in the care of another, and equipping them with support and education in raising their children.

- ✓ Most importantly, the children benefit by experiencing the safety and security that comes with a healthy parent-provider partnership that models effective relationships, allowing them to grow and learn optimally within their early education and care program.

Challenges will arise, as often happens when human beings work closely together. If parents and early childhood educators remember that they are on the same team and working towards the same goal, they can rise above the challenges and achieve great results together.

Resources

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Keyser, J. (2006). From Parents to Partners. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Mahmood, S. (2013). First-year preschool and kindergarten teachers: Challenges of working with parents. *School Community Journal*, (23)2: 55-86.

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