

Provider-Parent Relationships: 7 Keys to Good Communication

If we want children to thrive in child care settings, then it makes sense to intentionally build positive relationships with the adults who play the largest roles in the children's daily lives: their parents*. Good communication is essential for building those relationships, but good communication doesn't just happen. As child care professionals, we must be reflective and intentional about achieving effective parent-provider relationships through good communication.

Below are seven steps that child care professionals can take to set the stage for a positive partnership.

The Seven "Be-s" of Effective Communication with Parents

Be interested. As child care professionals, before we ever open our mouths to speak, we should first reflect on our attitude toward parents. We should ask ourselves some questions that help determine our interest in parents: "Am I interested in you as a person? Am I curious about what you think, what your experiences and perspectives are? Do I want to hear what you have to say?" It is easy to tell when someone is truly interested in another person. We can hear it in their voice and see it on their face. And it makes a big difference in the way the other person responds. To establish constructive relationships with parents, the very first step is to show genuine interest in *each* parent and family and to convey that interest in each interaction, starting from the first. Remind yourself often that every person has a story, and every family has a unique life.

Be humble. Although it may be true that child care professionals know a lot about young children and their care and learning, parents can sometimes feel intimidated or put off by this expertise, especially if the child care provider comes across as all-knowing. The truth is that there is a lot that child care professionals don't know, especially about any individual child. If our goal is to work *with* parents for the well-being of their child, it is helpful to maintain a view of ourselves and parents as co-contributors, with each having valuable but insufficient information that is needed to understand how best to support the child. When we approach parents with an attitude of curiosity and humility, parents in turn will be more likely to approach us and seek out our opinions and suggestions. Then we can figure things out together, which always has a better outcome for children.

Be respectful. Most child care professionals say they believe parents are children's first teachers. But sometimes we don't come across as respecting that role when we are talking with parents. Even if we happen to disagree with a parent's decision or viewpoint, it's still important to maintain an attitude of respect for the parent's role and for the values and experiences that shape their decisions.

Be intentional about expressing your belief that parents want what's best for their child and that their role as the parent is incredibly important, even when you may not agree with a specific decision or approach. When you acknowledge and affirm parents in this way, it helps establish trust and opens the way for dialogue in which your viewpoint is more likely to be considered.

Being respectful also means doing everything possible to make sure that communication barriers are overcome. To communicate with parents who have limited English proficiency or a disability that affects communication, look for resources and supports that facilitate communication between you and those parents.

Be inviting. We can't assume that families *know* that we want to hear their perspective. Although much of our conversation with parents will be about the child, also expressing an interest in the parent is likely to invite a deeper level of trust and openness. For a variety of reasons, some parents need to be intentionally invited to communicate with us. And nothing invites communication like being asked a good question! Ask questions that show you are interested and are paying attention. Ask open-ended questions that invite thoughtful response. Ask follow-up questions that reflect sincere interest in what the parent is sharing. To help develop question-asking skills, try practicing with other providers/teachers during staff or professional development meetings.

Be a good listener. Most people don't have a natural talent for listening. But anyone who has had the experience of being in a conversation with a good listener will appreciate the powerful effect it can have on the quality of the dialogue and the relationship. So how do we listen well? Here are a few tips:

- **Convey the message "I'm listening"** with your eyes, face, and body as well as with your words.
- **Wait for a response.** Allow pauses. Don't be too quick to jump in. Some people are very quick to speak, and others take more time to translate thoughts into words.

Be wholly in the moment. This can be challenging in a busy, noisy child care setting, but do your best to give a parent your full attention, even if it's only for a brief moment during pick-up or drop-off time. If you or the parent want to have a longer, more serious conversation, move to a quieter place so that you can give him/her your full attention. If that isn't possible, apologize for not being able to focus fully and set up a phone call or meeting for another time.

Be positive. Don't communicate only when there is a problem or concern, or when you want something from a parent. When parents come to expect only negative messages, they are likely to avoid the messenger. When the major communication time is during drop-off and pick-up, problems and concerns tend to be the messages that are

communicated because they are the most urgent. A proactive, multilayered communication *plan*, on the other hand, can help keep the majority of the messages to families positive, constructive, and encouraging. Share fun stories and be sure to tell parents about the positive things you observe in their child. Be particularly mindful of sharing positive stories and comments with military families during the stressful times of deployment, reunification, and relocation. Parents will most likely be worried about how their child is faring during these times. Your encouraging, positive words will go a long way toward easing that worry.

Be creative. Never before have we had so many different ways to communicate with one another! Child care professionals need to take advantage of as many of these methods as necessary to meet the needs and preferences of families. Families are busy, busy, busy! Better to send the same message multiple ways and risk minor annoyance than to rely on one way of communicating that isn't effective for all parents. Ask individual family members often whether they are getting information that you send out to all of the families and to them in particular. Never assume that they actually see the note you put in their child's backpack or the news post on your Facebook page. Be creative. Be responsive. If covering all these ways of communicating feels like too much, ask parents, interested staff, and/or volunteers to help.

When communicating with military parents, it's especially important to ask them about the best methods for communicating, particularly during deployments. The best methods will depend heavily on the technology at their location and Operational Security (OPSEC) restrictions for their mission. [Read more about challenges to communicating with military parents and suggestions for overcoming them in [this article](#).] We may need to go an extra mile or two to keep a deployed parent in the loop, but the extra effort is well worth it in helping them feel confident and involved while away from their children.

The Benefits of Good Communication

Research indicates that children benefit when those who are most involved with their everyday well-being and learning have warm, meaningful communication. Those benefits can be seen at many levels. Children notice how we get along with their parents, and they hear how we talk together (or notice that we don't). When providers deepen their conversations with parents to the point when they become true collaborators in children's care and learning, children benefit exponentially. Intentionally establishing good communication with parents from the start will also make it easier to work through difficult conversations that may arise later.

** Although most of the time the primary caregivers will be a child's parents, that is not always the case. Particularly for dual-military and single parents, primary caregiving may at times be shared with grandparents or other extended family members or close friends. Throughout this article, we've used the term "parent," but all of the information and recommendations apply to whoever is providing primary care for the child at home.*

For More Information

To learn more about ways child care providers can support and communicate with families, check out the following eXtension Alliance for Better Child Care articles and other resources:

- [Coping with Change: Young Children in Military Families Find Comfort in the Familiar](#)
- [Supporting Dads in Child Care: Let's Play!](#)
- [Supporting Young Military-Connected Children When They Are Most Vulnerable](#)
- Reschke, Kathy. [If I'd Only Known: Enhancing Parent-Provider Communication](#). eXtension Military Families Learning Network blog post.
- Powers, Stephanie. [The Power of Partnerships](#). July 2009 issue of the *Zero To Three Journal*.
- Diffily, D., & Morrison, K. (1996). *Family-Friendly Communication for Early Childhood Programs*. Available from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) online store at <http://bit.ly/10QPzfk>.