

## Handle with Care: Overcoming Challenges with Families

- ✓ Strengthen your confidence and find encouragement as we explore the variety of changing needs and unexpected challenges that child care providers face working with families each day.

Sometimes, as early childhood educators and human beings, we forget our credentials: the qualifications, expertise, and credibility that we have in our chosen profession. Remembering who you are and what you have achieved is empowering and will boost your confidence in overcoming any work challenge that presents itself! Keep these in mind to look back on and remember your commitment, experience, and professionalism in early childhood education.

**What is your experience? Who are you in this profession? What is your title?**

**How many years of commitment to the profession? \_\_\_\_\_**

**How many children have you educated and cared for over the years? \_\_\_\_\_**

**How many hours of training have you taken? \_\_\_\_\_**

**What are you most confident about in your work?**

**What is your passion and expertise in your work?**

- ✓ Personality traits, learning styles, and past experiences impact the parent/provider relationship.

### ***Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken ~ Oscar Wilde***

Everyone is different. This is no surprise, but even with that knowledge it can be very difficult to work with someone whose personality differs from our own. Too often, we expect people to be just like us. To think like we think, value what we value, and expect what we expect. It would be much easier if everyone thought the way we thought, but that would make life dull. Different personalities and ideas are what make the world a vibrant place! It's what drives us to learn, grow, and advance!

Understanding ourselves helps us to develop the ability to understand the perspective of others.

A link to the True Colors test can be found at [www.stacyboysen.weebly.com](http://www.stacyboysen.weebly.com) under the Resources – Working with Families tabs.

- ✓ Reflect on current practices and formulate clear boundaries to promote successful, trusting relationships with parents that positively impact children's development and provider career satisfaction.

*What are your policies that are necessary for the running of your program? Which ones can you bend a little, which ones are set in stone? Write your unbendable rules in the box:*

What policies are frequently “broken” or misunderstood? Make a list:

Revamp the policies that are frequently misunderstood. Create policies that help the program to run smoothly, are reasonable for parents, and help you to enjoy your profession. **Re-word or change the above policy to be clearer to families. If it is already clear, what professional action will you take to enforce this rule, so that it’s workable in your program?**

**Establish Healthy Boundaries:**

*What strategies do you use to establish and maintain professional boundaries with families? What issues arise when boundaries are crossed in the family-educator partnership? Favorite phrases for saying no.*

**Looking to the future, what improvements can be made, if any, to the policies or practices in your current program to ensure your career satisfaction?**

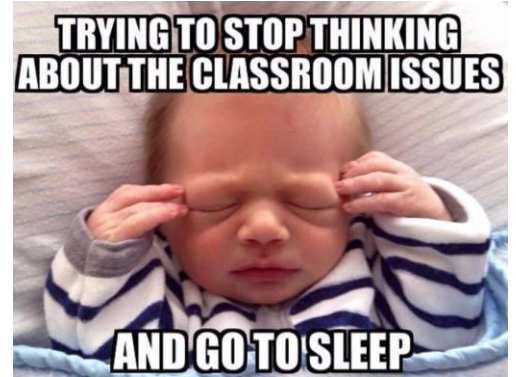
*Great early childhood educators are in short supply. To quote a MN expert on child care business and finance, “in order to end the child care crisis, we need to first support the providers that are currently in the field.” Support starts with you.*

**How can you support your fellow early childhood educators and retain these important role models for future generations? Who can you encourage today and how?**

## Overcoming challenges: Putting Persistent Challenges to Rest

As early childhood educators, we work closely with children and their families. As much as we may try to separate business and personal lives, it's difficult to do in this emotionally invested profession. There are challenges that present themselves and situations that replay in our minds, sometimes waking us up in the middle of the night. When these situations arise, instead of avoiding or stressing over them, work through them with confidence.

**Press Pause and Breathe.** You've just been blindsided by a challenge that wasn't even on your radar. Before you speak, take a moment to breathe. Don't say the first thing that comes to mind...it's probably not constructive. Say something like "that's an interesting thought. I'll consider that and get back to you on Friday." This will give you time to think through the parent's request or comment and develop a thoughtful, professional response. Your initial reaction might be over-reaction, when in reality the request or challenge might not be as problematic as you originally thought. Either way, pressing pause and letting the family member know that you'll get back to them gives them a timeline for your response and gives you time to work out a solution or stance on the issue.



**Refer Back to your Policies.** Often times, issues are coming from a place of misunderstanding or miscommunication with policies. Remember, your policies were created, whether by you or another professional, so that the program will run smoothly for all and for you to enjoy your work and remain in the field. Policies are meant to be followed. If there's a policy that isn't working for the program - rethink it. If there is a policy that is frequently misunderstood – clarify it. Like classroom rules, when parents have clear, consistent rules they feel secure in the program, things run more smoothly, and the focus remains where it should be – on the children.

For example, let's say your program has the policy that payment is due on the first day of the week or a late fee is applied. If parents are consistently allowed to pay on the second or third day without consequence, this becomes an unwritten policy. Enforcing the original policy will become confusing and possibly upsetting for the parent, who is now accustomed to playing late. It's best to stick to the policy to avoid misunderstanding.

Occasionally, there may be times that you will flex the rules a bit for a family going through crisis. That's okay, as long as the choice to flex the rules is yours. Be clear of the time period that the rules will be flexible and give a timeframe to the parent. Write an addendum to the contract and have the parent sign it to ensure clarity.

**Listen with the Intent to Understand.** Avoid formulating a response while people speak. Instead, listen carefully and seek to understand parents while they share their concerns with you. Validate their emotions and challenges. Empathize with them. You've likely felt frustrated like this before. You can understand how they feel and acknowledge that feeling ("I can see that you're upset about \_\_\_\_\_. I can see how that would be frustrating.") and ask questions to understand further, if necessary. Validating and empathizing doesn't mean you agree or are willing to change your practices, but it does communicate to the parent that your relationship with them is important, even if you disagree, and that their feelings are understandable. Once you understand them, you can gently point the parent to your policies or reflect on them to see if this is an area that you can make a short-term policy change for special circumstances, as long as you are fully willing to do so, or if it's time to part ways.

**Everyone is Fighting a Battle We Know Nothing About, Be Kind.** Sometimes, a parent's challenge is simply not about you. Before jumping to actions or conclusions, reflect on this families past behavior and practices. Has something changed? Look for ways to encourage and appreciate parents. As much as early childhood educators need appreciation, so do parents. Throw them a compliment every now and then to let them know you notice their efforts.

**If it is You, Apologize.** Hey, we all make mistakes. Acknowledge it, make corrections if possible, learn from it, and move on.

**Shut Down Aggression:** Disrespectful or abusive behavior is not to be tolerated. You deserve to be treated with respect. Parents that yell, curse, threaten or belittle you or others in your program need to be dealt with swiftly, firmly, and calmly. If you feel uncomfortable with a parent's behavior, calmly ask them to leave. Don't hesitate to terminate them or speak immediately to your supervisor. Document these issues with the date and time, indicating who, what, when, where, why, and your response to the situation and any witnesses present. Contact your licenser to keep them informed of the situation and establish a record in case they file false accusations against you.

Remember, little eyes are watching and learning from you how to handle stressful situations and the appropriate ways to resolve conflict. If you or a parent is upset, schedule a time to talk it over without the children present and outside child care hours, when you can devote your full attention to reaching a solution.

**Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator:** As an early childhood educator, upholding professionalism in the workplace is of utmost importance, as well as demonstrating a commitment to the field of early childhood education. The National Association for the Education of Young Children outlines a Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment for early childhood educators. This Code is a guide for professional responsibilities and actions of early childhood educators. It helps to outline professional responsibilities with children, families, colleagues, and our community and society. It's a very helpful tool when navigating through challenges with families. In fact, sometimes it can guide you right to the answer you're looking for to help you solve challenges with confidence.

Ethical responsibilities for early childhood educators include practices such as upholding confidentiality, informing families of program philosophies, practices, and policies, involving families in decision-making, communicating with families in ways that promote understanding, and referring families to appropriate services and support.

**NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct:** [https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Ethics%20Position%20Statement2011\\_09202013update.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Ethics%20Position%20Statement2011_09202013update.pdf)

**Iron Sharpens Iron.** Finally, collaborate with colleagues who are inspirational and encouraging and be that light for others. Spend time with people who bring out the best in you, challenge you to strive for more, and walk beside you as you reach your goals and dreams.

*"Find a group of people who challenge and inspire you.  
Spend a lot of time with them and it will change your life." ~Amy Poehler*