

When concerns arise

Talking with parents about their child's development

by Denise Caverner

When I talk with teachers about the children in their classroom who are exhibiting challenging behaviors and ask about the barriers they face when working with these children, I hear, "The parents!"

As child care professionals we understand the importance of a team approach when working with children. We recognize that parents are their child's first and most influential teacher. We also recognize that parents can offer us information about their child that will help us better understand each child's individual needs and unique behaviors.

So, what is going on? Why are parents a barrier? Don't we have the same goals for the children?

Partnering with parents

As child care professionals there are many benefits to being open to parent



Denise started her career in Early Childhood Education 20 years ago as an aide and is currently a Director. She has presented at conferences on topics such as Brain Development, Classroom Behavior Management, and Mental Health Activities in the Preschool

Classroom. As she was gaining her Early Childhood Education, she found that her classes in Psychology were very helpful in understanding the needs of children in her class and in working with children who had challenging behaviors. She continued her education in Psychology and currently holds a Masters of Arts. She also has a certificate as an Infant Mental Health Specialist.

involvement and maintaining open communication with families. This work can be simple and enjoyable as we share positive interactions of our classroom's daily activities. But, what if we have to share a concern about a child's development or we need to discuss a behavior issue? When faced with sharing a concern with a parent, an anxious and uneasy feeling can occur. We may dread the moment the parent walks in the door and we are faced with having to speak with them. In fact, I once saw a teacher yell out to a parent as she was walking away, "I think that there is something wrong with your child!" How we approach this situation and the communication style we use can make the difference between a meaningful conversation intended to help a child be successful and alienating a parent.

Obstacles to communication

When a teacher and a parent engage in a conversation about a child, there are barriers that both parties need to watch for: fear, defensiveness, and anger, to name a few.

Fear: It can be difficult for parents to hear unpleasant news about their child. What if there is something

wrong? The parent may try to avoid all conversations with you, believing they can delay the uncomfortable news. The parent may appear to be in a hurry when dropping off and picking up their child or they may send another adult to do the job. The teacher has fears, too. There is the fear of having to engage in an uncomfortable conversation. What if the parent gets mad at me? What if she yells at me or cries? Uncomfortable feelings can cause us to avoid the situation altogether. The situation may be avoided until the situation can no longer be ignored. By this time there can be built-up anxiety and feelings of despair.

Defensiveness: Parents naturally want to protect and defend their children. When uncomfortable information is shared with parents about their child, their first response may be defensiveness. They may respond in a negative manner or give you some illogical reason for their child's behavior. They may interpret your words as an attack on their parenting. On several occasions when I have shared observations of the child's behavior, I have had parents tell me they are not concerned because this is how they behaved as a child or that the parenting style they are using is the same that their own parents used and

they turned out fine. When the parent begins to make these types of statements, they are personalizing the information and it will be difficult to move forward. The child care professional may also become defensive. If a parent challenges the teacher's observations of their child or the information they are sharing, the teacher may feel they need to defend their knowledge and teaching competence. Teachers may use professional jargon to prove to the parent that they are educated and know what they are talking about.

Anger: Uncomfortable feelings can turn to anger. A parent's feelings of fear and/or defensiveness can manifest in angry outbursts. On one occasion, a mother responded to a teacher's concerns about her child's behavior by sending the father to the center to 'chew out' the teacher. Feelings of anger can build within the child care professional, too. Teachers may feel angry at having to be in the uncomfortable position of having to speak to a parent. There may also be feelings of anger towards the situation as the child continues to create havoc and disrupt the class.

Recognizing these barriers to effective communication can help break them down and assist in facilitating successful interactions between parents and professionals. Your style of communication and how you approach and speak with parents can open the door to a (more) constructive relationship.

Steps to effective communication

To assist you in being most effective in your communication with parents, here are some steps that you can take that will contribute to a positive outcome.

1. *Institute a Parent Involvement Plan:* A parent involvement plan needs

to be in place from the start. A well-written plan:

- Helps to ensure that communication occurs on a regular basis and not only when there is a concern.
- Articulates the important role that the parent plays in their child's development and the many ways they can contribute to their child's learning.
- States the program's goals and philosophy in working with children.
- Puts into writing how communication will occur.
- States the times that the teaching staff will be scheduling conferences.
- Lists the volunteer opportunities and how parents can become involved in the program.

Discuss the plan with each parent at the time of enrollment or orientation. I recommend having the parent sign the plan and giving them a copy. A strong plan will set the tone for the program and send the message to parents that your program staff work as a team with parents to help children be successful.

2. *Validate the parent's role.* When speaking with a parent, it is important to remind them of the positive effect they have on their child.
 - Share with the parent some real-life classroom stories that reflect this. For example, when I spoke to a parent about her daughter's behavior, the mother shared that she was having difficulties with her at home. I told the mother that while I was working with Mary in the home living area, I saw her caring for one of the dolls. I explained to the mother that I could tell that she had been teaching Mary how to hold her baby brother with care. It was difficult for this mother to recognize the positive behaviors her daughter was exhibiting. I was able

to share some positive examples with her and credit her with teaching these to her daughter.

Some parents may not recognize the influential role that they play in their child's life. They may also feel that they do not have the same knowledge in child development that the teacher has.

- Help parents recognize their attributes and that together a stronger team is formed.
- Call on parents for their knowledge of their child. Ask for their input and have them share their child's strengths and what techniques are working at home.

3. *Provide proof.* When there is a need to speak to a parent about a child's behavior or development, provide support for what you are saying.

- Share information and/or observations gained during class time.
- Have developmental screening and assessment data available. (Remember that unless you are licensed to do so, you should never make a diagnosis.)
- Be specific when describing the child's behavior and/or your concern without comparing the child to other children. By using a screening tool or assessment that is standardized, you can share with the parent how their child's development is progressing.
- Show the parent work samples or observations. This turns the focus away from the child and to the skill level and/or behavior in question. This makes the conversation less personal, allowing you to focus on helping the child work on a specific task or behavior.

4. *Be positive.* Every parent wants to know that their child is liked, loved, and wanted. If you, the child care

professional, appear to be disappointed or cold when Johnny comes to school, you may be sending the message that you do not care.

- Use your early childhood skills to separate the child's behavior from the child.
 - Respond positively to each child and continue to remind parents that your goal is to help their child be successful and that you are on their side.
 - Consider the child's strengths when developing an action plan. If the child enjoys and interacts well with other children, the plan should include peer interaction. If the child struggles with peer interactions but builds elaborate block structures, the plan should include his block-building ability.
 - Stay on task, describe the concern or the unwanted behavior, discuss appropriate expectations, and then develop a plan on how to get there together.
5. *Help the parent be successful.* By giving parents the right tools, you can help them to be consistent with what is being provided in the classroom.
- Have ideas ready that parents can use at home to help their child.
 - Bring written information or handouts to the meeting.
 - Send interactive activities home for the parent and child to work on together.
 - Encourage parents to spend quality time with their child.
 - Invite the parent to volunteer in the classroom. This will allow you the opportunity to model behavior and share ideas.

All of these activities will help you build a stronger relationship between you and the parent and between the parent and child. These activities will have positive effects that will make a

tremendous difference in the child's behavior in the classroom.

6. *Create a safe place.* Prioritize your conversations with families.
- Set an appointment time that is convenient for the parent, when there will be a low chance of interruptions. This will send the message of respect and set the parent at ease to communicate openly.
 - Provide a safe and respectful environment for these conversations by offering a confidential area to meet and speak with each other.
 - Ensure that others cannot overhear your conversation.
7. *Use open communication.* Good communication skills will help the parent feel more comfortable.
- Maintain an open stance both physically and verbally.
 - Sit facing the parent and look at the parent when you are speaking and listening to him.
 - Show the parent that you are listening and that you are truly trying to understand what she is trying to say.
 - Repeat what you hear the parent say (active listening). Use a phrase such as "It sounds like you are saying . . ." to clarify what you heard. Wait to see if the parent corrects you or confirms the message. Sometimes we need to hear ourselves say something out loud to clarify what we mean.
 - Document what is said and any decisions that are made during the meeting. If an action plan is developed, ensure that all have read it and are in agreement, then make a copy for everyone involved.

8. *Availability of resources.* As I worked alongside teachers to find solutions to what seems like an increasing number of children with challenging behav-

iors, we decided to make this a focus for our program. We instituted a number of activities that communicated our interest in families:

- We started a parent support group: monthly meetings where parents can connect with other parents with similar concerns.
- We invite local specialists to speak to our families about their parenting challenges and provide current research and behavior techniques that the parents can try with their children.
- We offer a resource library where parents can check out books on a variety of topics.
- Staff regularly attend workshops and conferences to ensure that they have the necessary skills to work with families.

In closing

By welcoming parents onto our team, we help eliminate barriers and gain allies who have valuable information about the child and the motivation to do what is necessary to help their child succeed. With continued practice, communicating in difficult situations becomes easier. You will gain the confidence to address any situation and your desire to communicate openly with parents will encourage parents to do the same. As parents grow to appreciate that your goal is to help their child be successful, they will become more open and willing to work with you on your focal point, the child.

Resources

Beaty, J. (1988). *Skills for preschool teachers*. New York: Macmillan.

Brault, L., & Brault, T. (2005). *Children with challenging behaviors. Strategies for reflective thinking*. Phoenix: CPG Publishing Company.

Committee for Children. (2003). *Second Step: A violence prevention curriculum*. Seattle WA.[Online] Available: www.challengingbehavior.org. The Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior at the University of South Florida, Tampa.

Fialka, J., & Mikus, K. (1999). *Do you hear what I hear? Parents and professionals working together for children with special needs*. Ann Arbor, MI: Proctor Publications, LLC.

Greenspan, S., & Wieder, S. (1998). *The child with special needs. Encouraging intellectual and emotional growth*. New York: Perseus Books.

Visit us online:

www.ChildCareExchange.com