



The Director's Link

Published by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University

Summer 2012

Connecting with Families: Outreach that Works

Karen Stephens



You have worked hard to create a nurturing and supportive environment in your program. Your staff feel well supported and are motivated to create a quality program for the children you serve. Now, how do you form that important link in carrying out your work with the families you serve?

Quality early childhood programs not only care for the children they serve, but reach out to families to build on the lessons taught. Reaching out and engaging

parents and other family members is a way to support children for a lifetime. It not only provides the family with information about what their children do each day, but also involves them in those activities and guides them in ways to extend that education at home. By doing so, you'll continue supporting children long after they transition from your program to the expanding world of community life and education.

To build authentic family connections, offer a diverse array of meaningful participation options from which families can choose. When you set the stage for engagement based on their needs and interests, you'll find parents develop loyal ties with your program. That broad network of attachments leaves a lasting imprint of goodwill on the hearts of everyone. Above all, ensure that you include both mothers and fathers in your communications and outreach efforts.

Most directors invite parents to assist during classroom holiday celebrations, fundraisers, and field trips. They distribute monthly newsletters and conduct annual parent-teacher conferences. These parent outreach methods are a good starting point, but there are so many other ways to build on this foundation. Here are some other options to consider.

Provide opportunities for community building

Initial exchanges with families should focus on relationship building rather than community rules. Reading a litany of policies and procedures is boring (and often condescending). Focus on getting to know one another as individuals first.

Families and staff get to know each other better through loosely structured, casual events. Think of the concept of the neighborhood block party and apply it to your program. During the social activity, focus on fun with a purpose. Make the event productive and educational without being boring. Create a flexible agenda, and by all means include food. The main point of the event is for all to mingle and get to know one another. Family socials are great times for meaningful ice breaker activities, such as sharing bedtime routines or discussing how they chose their child's name.

Throughout the year, offer events that encourage social interaction.

- * Plan music events where families create home-made folk instruments and then sing together.
- * Host a cultural food fair, potluck, or family picnic.
- * Schedule program-wide or classroom "play dates" at local venues. Options could include a nature preserve, children's museum, park, aquarium, children's concert or theatre production, 4-H Fair, or even an athletic event.
- * Plant a vegetable garden or "steppable" plants in the play yard. Garden nurseries sell sturdy plants that can endure children's heavy foot traffic. If most of your families are apartment dwellers, or your play space is paved, create mini fairy gardens in terra cotta saucers.
- * Plan family "make-it and take-it" craft workshops.
- * Host celebration receptions honoring either staff or family achievements.

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- * Participate in local parades. Families can help make a float and ride along or join in the fun as a walking entry. Such outings build family pride as well as help with program marketing and public relations.
- * Hold a "Dads Only" panel where fathers field questions on how they have felt included or left out in parenting or educational experiences. This type of event can prove enlightening for staff and mothers.
- * Document childhood memories in various media. With paint, families can create artwork to hang at home. With clay, they can make family groupings. With family photos, they can create their own scrapbook. Parents and children can make 3-D table-top models of themselves holding hands. (Keepsake hands plaster kits can be ordered from (www.castingkeepsakes.com)

Deliver individualized or small-group orientation

Provide necessary orientation information, such as routines, policies, and procedures during introductory classroom tours, home visits, or transition visits at your program for newly enrolled families. Create a parent mentor system by pairing up a current parent with a newly enrolled family. The parent mentor helps the new family learn the ins and outs of your program. It helps them feel welcomed and provides an opportunity to ask questions they might be hesitant to ask staff.

Communicate with families in multiple ways

While face-to-face conversations are still the best way to communicate with parents, also reach out through technology. Your center's website, e-mail, or a secure chat room are effective and efficient ways to distribute notices, newsletters, and weekly menus. Communicate in the family's home or native language as often as possible.

Provide teachers with digital cameras so photos or short videos can be shown or e-mailed to families. A digital frame on the family sign-in table loaded with photos from the day's activities helps inform parents and sparks going-home conversa-

tions for families. Provide comfortable adult seating in your reception area where parents can chat with one another or with staff.

Weave family hobbies and special talents into your curriculum

Find ways to creatively integrate family uniqueness into your program. You never know of a family's hidden talents until you ask. Over the years I've seen a father sing with his guitar during music time, a pianist mother serenade children at lunch, a dad put on a concert with his tuba, and a duo of mother cellist and father violinist play a classroom's favorite songs. I've seen an older sister perform a genuine Thai dance in traditional costume, parent storytellers and magicians perform, and even an authorized Star Wars Storm Trooper in full costume.

The arts aren't the only family talents to tap. Perhaps a parent likes writing. Ask her/him to submit a relevant article to your monthly newsletter. Invite a web-savvy parent to help enhance your web site. While children in our program were studying bees, a father revealed that he was a beekeeper, a Lebanese family tradition. He made a visit in his beekeeper suit complete with tools, tasty samples of honey, and an observation beehive. A father skilled in physics brought in a huge ball that made children's hair stand on end as they learned about static electricity. Opportunities for including family uniqueness are delightfully limitless.

Organize monthly parent-teacher nights

Hold monthly parent education and support meetings. Whatever the topic, allow enough time for the process of reflection and discussion. Encourage camaraderie and casual networking between parents and staff. Find ways for parents to present their insights and experience. Plan for adult learning by varying activities to include all learning styles, and encourage peer learning and support rather than dependence on outside experts. Offer hands-on activities that address multiple intelligences. Provide short and jargon-free take-home materials or handouts.

The Director's Link is made possible by funding from the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and the McCormick Foundation.

Mccormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership

6200 Capitol Drive • Wheeling, Illinois 60090

Phone 800-443-5522, ext. 5056

Fax 847-465-5910

E-mail cecl@nl.edu

Web Site <http://cecl.nl.edu>

Michael W. Louis Endowed Chair

Paula Jorde Bloom
paula.bloom@nl.edu

Executive Director

Sue Offutt
sue.offutt@nl.edu

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Director's Link

Editor/Layout Donna Jonas
donna.jonas@nl.edu

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Our Mission

The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University is dedicated to building the leadership capacity of the early childhood workforce. The activities of the McCormick Center encompass four areas: professional development, evaluation, research, and public awareness.

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The Director's Toolbox

Parent Feedback Survey

Parents are an integral piece of the overall program quality equation in early childhood programs. How the parental role is understood and acknowledged by you and your staff has a strong bearing on how your center functions. Here is an easy-to-use survey to elicit parent feedback about center policies, procedures, and the overall quality of program services.

Dear Parents and Guardians,

This questionnaire is designed to find out how we are meeting the needs of families enrolled in our program. Your candid and honest responses will enable us to improve communication and services for you and your child. Please circle the number from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) that best represents your feelings about each of the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree			
		1	2	3	4
1. I have received adequate information about program policies and procedures.					
2. My child received a warm welcome into the program.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Teachers encourage me to be actively involved in my child's learning.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am regularly informed about my child's growth and development.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Classroom newsletters and teacher's written notes keep me well informed.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I have had sufficient opportunity for conversations with the teaching and administrative staff.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My parent-teacher conferences have provided me with useful insights about my child.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I have been invited to participate in classroom activities and field trips.	1	2	3	4	5

How has your child benefitted from his/her experience at this center?

In what ways could we improve the program to better meet your child's needs?

From Bloom, P.J. (2005) *Blueprint for action: Achieving center-based change through staff development*. Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons (www.newhorizonsbooks.net). Reprinted with permission.

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When helping families solve problems, lecture less and listen, facilitate, and ask reflective open-ended questions more. And yes, to increase participation, provide child care so parents and staff who have children can attend.

Seek parent input on child guidance issues

When trying to understand and guide a child's behavior, ask for parent or grandparent assistance as a valued, informed partner. For instance, ask parents how they think each of you can nurture developmental skills such as toilet training, independent dressing and grooming, or picking up play things. Work closely with parents of children with special needs. They should be asked to advise staff on how to meet their child's special needs. Parents can often identify community resources for needed equipment or specialized training.

Include families in program governance and oversight

Directors should ask parents to evaluate overall program quality annually. Parent representation on the center's advisory board can help address critical program issues such as accreditation, grant applications, new program initiatives, or personnel and staff selection.

Distribute a family directory

A directory for each classroom allows families to contact each other for children's play dates or community event attendance. For confidentiality, be sure you receive each family's signed permission before including them.

Create opportunities to share or trade family resources

Seasonally, host a family swap of "almost-good-as-new" children's clothing, toys, or books. A lending library for toys, children's books or parenting books and DVDs helps make learning about developmentally appropriate practices more accessible.

Consider sponsoring a book or toy fair. Especially good around gift-giving times, such fairs allow parents to mingle and give each other tips on what's been successful in their family. Consider distributing monthly children's book orders. Provide samples of books in each monthly selection so parents can preview books in a relaxed setting as they decide on purchases.

Provide community referrals

Maintain a family bulletin board with family services brochures, web links to referral services, and an updated referral

list addressing typical family needs such as health care, nutrition, insurance, family counseling, or subsidy options.

Include parents in staff training

When the content applies to both parents and teachers, invite parents to acquire training right along with your staff. For instance, parents can obtain CPR and first aid training with your teachers. Parents as well as teachers also benefit from workshops on children's developmental delays. Such "cross-training" topics are limitless and provide opportunities for teachers and parents to partner.

Remember, when you set the stage for engagement based on the family's needs and interests, you'll find parents develop loyal ties with your program, with other parents, and most importantly, with their children. That broad network of attachments leaves lasting imprints of goodwill on everyone's hearts.

Karen Stephens is the director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. www.childcarecenter.ilstu.edu.

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Resources

Resources for Family Engagement

Artsonia The "World's Largest Student Art Gallery" allows programs to engage families through their children's artwork. Programs set up an account and upload photographs of children's art work. Family members can access the artwork online, view, comment on, and print. A percentage of the purchase proceeds are sent back to your center. <http://www.artsonia.com>

Baby Talk Baby Talk is currently being used in 36 states to bring community resources together in a meaningful way for families with the goal of strengthening family and provider partnerships. A 3-day training provides Baby Talk certification for early care and education providers, administrators, and parent educators. The Baby Talk Curriculum includes parent handouts, parent newsletters, and family activity plans. <http://www.babytalk.org>

Life Cubby This interactive online portfolio system allows families and programs to securely store everything from photos and memories to a child's progress report and health history. <https://www.lifecubby.me>

Love and Logic This parenting curriculum is designed to provide continuity between discipline strategies at home and at school. The goal is to help families and educators raise responsible kids, have more fun in their adult role as teacher or parent, and help change a child's negative or disruptive behavior. Many early childhood programs have begun using this program to train teachers and parents alongside each other to create stronger family-school partnerships. <http://www.loveandlogic.com>

Music Together Music Together, an internationally recognized music and movement curriculum for children of all ages and their families, publishes a preschool curriculum for teachers to use in their classrooms. <http://www.musictogether.com>

Reach Out and Read Military deployment can be very difficult for young children and their families and affects a large number of families in the United States. This program helps deployed family members create DVDs of them reading a book out loud for their child so that a child can watch at home and follow along with their own copy of the book. It is available to families in all military units. <http://www.unitedthroughreading.org>

WATCH D.O.G.S. Dads of Great Students (DOGS) was created by the National Center for Fathering which provides training and resources specific to the issues surrounding fatherhood. The program has the goal of reversing the cultural trend towards fatherlessness by helping every dad learn how to be a father. <http://fathers.com>

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Kay M. Albrecht

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