

Pats on the back and food for thought – parents, teachers and expectations of early childhood education

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As teachers in early childhood settings, we are constantly faced with a variety of decisions to make, relating to every aspect of our role. Some of the most essential decisions we will make will be in regard to how we communicate with and develop meaningful relationships with parents.

Parents arrive at our centres with their own beliefs and expectations about what early childhood education should look like and what it should offer their child. These expectations are based on their own experiences, societal messages, experiences of other parents with whom they have contact and advice from any number of family members.

What happens, though, when the expectations that parents hold are in marked contrast with the educator's philosophy and expectations of how they can best support the development of young children? Or when educators make assumptions, perhaps erroneously, about what they think parents' expectations of early education are?

We all know, and adhere to, the mantra that children's learning and development are supported when home and school work together but just how easy is this to achieve? And how can we begin to tackle it when there are discrepancies between perceptions of expectations on both sides of the relationship.

Unfortunately, I am going to begin this workshop with more questions than I necessarily have answers for – except to say that decision making remains one of our key priorities.

In approaching the task of developing relationships and communication with parents, I believe that teachers are faced with a range of issues to consider and to revisit continuously. Some issues we will make decisions about quickly and easily, with seemingly little need to ponder on. Others will see us ruminate on and

revisit often with decisions wavering as our experience grows, our knowledge of children changes and the needs of individual groups of children, and parents, are assessed.

ISSUES TEACHERS FACE:

- When we make curriculum decisions (e.g. what our play-based learning will look like) whose reaction do we consider first? Children's, parents, other teachers?
- Who are we planning for? Whose needs are we trying to meet?
- How do we advocate for children and play when parents' expectations differ from our philosophy?
- How do we maintain the "child's agenda" while addressing concerns and expectations that parents have? Or that we think they have?
- In wanting to keep parents "on side" do we compromise what we know about how young children learn? Whose needs are we meeting then?
- How do we include parents in curriculum decision making while preserving our philosophical approach?
- How do we create a sense of community rather than an "Us and Them" attitude?
- How do we maintain our confidence in ourselves as decision makers and in children as learners?
- When we send information home how do we judge how it is interpreted? Can this information be misinterpreted or add to misunderstanding?
- How do we ensure that static displays or written information that is sent home is interpreted in terms of the meaningful activity of children rather than trivialized as

being “cute”, or over-analyzed to provide proof of learning?

- What are parents’ REAL needs? Is it proof of their child’s learning or is it reassurance, acceptance of themselves and understanding?
- When and how do we recharge our own batteries? When do we “switch off” from the families at work?
- When do we say “I’ve done as much as I can. This is no longer my problem”?
- How often do our efforts to attend to the needs of communicating with parents, or others, distract us from our primary focus of interacting with children? Where should our priorities lie?

In considering these issues I would like to share the principles for communicating with parents, that guide myself and my colleagues at our centre:

1. As Early Childhood Educators, we believe we have a vital role to play in building community knowledge about the importance, and the authenticity, of young children’s play and thinking.
2. We acknowledge that we have professional knowledge and experience to share and we

are prepared to take on the responsibility to do that.

3. We believe that all members of our community – children, parents and staff – should feel valued and accepted.
4. We consider that it is our responsibility to build meaningful relationships with all members of our community.
5. We believe that the most effective way to build these relationships with parents is through face-to-face communication.

As we work to build a relationship with each of the families at our centre our emphasis lies on giving both children and adults a sense of being appreciated and valued – pats on the back. This is so important for parents as it tells them that we value their efforts as parents, their concern for their child, their human need to feel appreciated for who they are.

At the same time we do not shy away from introducing food for thought even if this places us in the position of having to account for our decisions as educators, or realizing that others may initially feel disappointed with what they see as being quite different from what they expected of an early childhood centre. Great relationships are often built through the ensuing conversations.

Principles for communicating with parents

BELIEVE IN WHAT YOU DO

BEGIN COMMUNICATING FROM FIRST MEETING

BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH PARENT

SHOW YOU ARE GENUINELY INTERESTED IN AND VALUE THEIR CHILD

LISTEN TO PARENTS

AVOID JUDGING PARENTS

HELP PARENTS MAKE THE MATCH

EXPLAIN CURRICULUM DECISIONS TO PARENTS

COMMUNICATE IN A VARIETY OF WAYS

DON’T BE DEFENSIVE

BE FAIR TO YOURSELF

Practical ideas for communicating face-to-face with parents

Person-to-person communication as much as possible - open, reassuring, non-defensive, friendly

Open afternoon for children and parents

Orientation night for parents - what to expect - use slides or videos

Daily Greetings for each Parent - all staff members have a role here. We all include a positive comment about their child's day

One-to-one interviews - times must be scheduled for these. Evenings allow time to talk to dads

To clarify parents' expectations/beliefs:

1. *Questionnaires for parents* - observations of, and goals for, children - a good way to stimulate discussion

2. *Group discussions regarding expectations*

- Fairy Godmother (Marketing Play by R. Milne)
- Characteristics of preschooler/school starter (or pre-prep/prep starter)

Social evenings:

Parent Dinners
Coffee Evenings
Movie Nights
Wine Nights
Book Fairs

Evenings of conversation

- building support networks for parents
- parents setting agenda/addressing their issues of concern

Information evenings -

Play nights

School Readiness

Aspects of Curriculum e.g. Literacy in the play-based program

Guest speakers

- who support your philosophy and can address parents' concerns e.g. Behaviour Management, Relaxation

Responses to use to clarify parents' ideas:

- Tell me why you feel/think that
- How are you feeling about ...
- What do you think you'd like to see
- Why do you feel that is important

Responses to use to support curriculum decisions:

- I know many people think ... but in fact ...
- As ECEs we believe ...
- Research shows ...
- I know some places do ... but we don't because we believe ...
- It may not be what you expected but ...

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