BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Why Partner with Families?

System of Care, Education and Support

Families are the primary system of care and education for children beginning at birth. They are present through teen years, adulthood and life's many transitions, and are the most consistent source of support in a child's life. Some families may be engaged and enthusiastic from the start, and easy and fun to work with. Others may seem uninterested and disengaged. They may come from a different background than you, act differently than you expect them to, and have different values and personalities. What you have in common is that you both care about the health and well-being of their child, and this gives you a great opportunity for partnership! Learning about and respecting both similarities and differences can help you understand and relate to each other.

If you're having a tough time engaging a parent, remember that they are under many pressures, the same way you are. Money, work, home life, relationships, caring for a family—these are not easy things to balance without feeling overwhelmed and pulled in too many directions. The interactions you have with families are likely to reflect how they're feeling about these challenges on any given day. When you're feeling frustrated, take a second to stop and remember:

- Parents do care about their children.
- They probably don't realize that their words or actions are frustrating you.
- Seek to understand; there may be something going on that you don't know about – ask.
- Like anyone else, when families feel "heard" and respected, they are likely to appreciate your support and be open to working more closely with you.

You're a resource for them

You work very hard to ensure the health and safety of the children in your care. You want families to see you and your staff as a resource for important information. Although parents are a child's first teacher, child care providers play a large role in supporting a child's development. Many times you will see a child hit a milestone before his/her family does. You are in a unique position in that a parent trusts you to care for their child and to communicate when special events or challenges occur. Parents who feel they are included in learning about their child's daily activities, and are able to come to you with any concerns they have, are more likely to accept any advice and information you share.

Supporting healthy habits

Partnering with families is important when trying to develop healthy habits. Children learn best through repetition and are more likely to make healthy choices if they have the opportunity to do so both at child care and at home. Newsletters, recipes, website links or face-to-face conversations will give parents the knowledge and resources to develop healthy habits at home. Providing parents with ideas on how to reinforce the activities learned in child care while at home will ensure the work you are doing will "stick" through early childhood and beyond.

It's good for business

Partnering with families is important in building and sustaining your child care business. Parents are the customers when it comes to child care. They are paying you for a service, and it's helpful to view them this way when you're thinking about your expectations of them and their expectations of you.

Families who are happy with their child care are more likely to remain customers for a long period of time. Because of this, they will support your business by providing financial resources and potentially recommend your services to family and friends. This exchange of care for money will allow your business to continue, perhaps even grow, based on the quality of care you provide. Having trusting and respectful relationships with families will help them be more open to changes in rates or rules because they will know that you have their best interests in mind.

Collaboration saves time and money

Allowing families opportunities to participate in decisions or changes at your center will create a feeling of partnership. When families feel they are part of your center's community, and see that their contributions are appreciated, they're more likely to become and remain engaged. Families can help you make improvements to your center that you may not have the time, money or skill to do otherwise.

Keeping families involved in their child's daily activities and the center community will lead to a happier and healthier environment for children, families and you. This improved environment will increase the likelihood of continued business through parent loyalty, referrals and a positive presence within the community.

Benefits of Partnering with Families:

What Families Want to Know

Introduction

In the spring of 2011, Nemours met with several groups of parents whose children attend child care centers in Delaware. These families represented Delaware's three counties and the City of Wilmington. The purpose of these meetings was to find out:

- What concerns parents have about their children's health
- Where parents search for information about their children's health
- How (if at all) parents are currently communicating with child care providers about their children's health
- What type(s) of information parents would like to receive from child care providers and how

Results

The parents in the discussion groups shared that they were most concerned about their young children's:

- Eating habits
- Physical activity
- Development

In particular, **picky eating**, **portion sizes** and **food allergies** were mentioned as major concerns. Parents reported struggling to motivate kids to eat healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, especially when these foods are "new" to them. The groups also voiced concerns about their children eating portions that are too big for their age — especially portions of unhealthy foods. When asked about physical activity concerns, family members mentioned needing more information about meaningful, structured physical activity, especially indoors. Finally, children's healthy development was a common concern. Parents shared how they have many questions and concerns regarding their child's physical, mental, emotional and intellectual development, particularly in the critical first five years.

Parents get health information from many different sources including:

- Physicians/pediatricians
- Internet
- Parenting magazines
- Family and friends

Families shared that they currently do not receive much information about children's health from child care providers. However, each group stated that they would like to receive more communication from this source. This research shows that **families are eager to receive information and form closer relationships with teachers, staff and administrators at their children's child care center**.

The types of health and wellness information and materials that families said they would like to receive from their child care provider are:

- Information on motivating picky eaters
- Recipes
- Children's books on healthy eating and being active
- Monthly menus
- Handouts
- Activity calendars
- Simple tips on incorporating healthy eating into their family's lifestyle

Parents suggested these materials should be:

- Simple
- To-the-point
- Action-oriented
- Realistic (i.e., taking into consideration time and money)
- Available in many different formats
  - Paper (handed to parents or posted in center/home)
  - E-mail
  - Posted on a website
  - Via text message
  - Shared through face-to-face communication or a phone call

Conclusion

Families are eager to receive information from child care providers related to the health and wellness of their children. They especially want information on motivating picky eaters, serving appropriately-sized portions, managing food allergies, engaging children in meaningful physical activity and supporting optimal child development. However, it is important to take into consideration families' communication preferences and access to information technology when sharing this information.

To help you communicate and engage with families, we have created a useful "Information Sharing" section beginning on page 28. This section features conversation starters, newsletter templates, letters to parents and information on referring families to simple and inexpensive resources about children's health. The topics families are interested in are covered in this guide and the *First Years in the First State Administrators' Guide* and *Menu Planning Guide*.

Best Practices in Family-Provider Partnerships

Below are the major principles of creating effective relationships and collaborations between child care centers staff and families. They range from things you can do yourself to things that require collaboration with families. All are important in maximizing the benefits of strong partnerships.

To think through what you're doing well now and what you could improve related to these best practices, use the Family Engagement Checklist on page 22. To find out how well families think you are doing related to these best practices, use the Family Survey on page 19. Use the results from both surveys to guide your action planning for improving your family engagement strategy (Action Plan template found on page 25).

1–Welcoming All Families into the Child Care Community

Families are active participants in the life of the child care center/home and feel welcomed, valued and connected to each other, to center staff (where applicable), and to what children are doing and learning in child care.

Goal 1: Create a welcoming climate for families

Goal 2: Build a respectful, inclusive child care community

2–Communicating Effectively

Families and child care staff engage in regular, two-way, meaningful communication about child learning and development.

Goal 1: Two-way information sharing between the center staff and families

3–Supporting Child Success

Families and child care staff continuously collaborate to support children's learning and healthy development both at home and at child care, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

Goal 1: Share information about children's progress

Goal 2: Support learning by engaging families

4–Speaking Up for Every Child

Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children; to ensure that children are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

Goal 1: Understand how the child care system works

Goal 2: Empower families to support their own and other children's success

5–Sharing Power

Families and child care staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence and create policies, practices and programs.

Goal 1: Strengthen the family's voice in shared decision-making

Goal 2: Build families' social and political connections

6–Connecting with Community

Families and child care staff collaborate with community members to connect children, families and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, civic participation, and needed services or resources.

Goal 1: Connect the center and families with community resources

7–Conducting Home Visits

Families and child care staff meet in the family's home environment to connect, discuss challenges and solutions, and expand understanding of the family's home life and cultural background.

Goal 1: Increase understanding of a family's home life and culture, and how these impact relationships, behavior and learning

Goal 2: Extend the child care learning environment into the home

8–Offering Parenting Classes or Adult Education

Families are offered educational opportunities to increase knowledge, skills and social connections related to parenting skills or personal growth.

Goal 1: Provide resources to help parents successfully cope with life and parenting challenges

Goal 2: Provide opportunities for parent-to-parent sharing

9–Reducing Barriers

Barriers to family participation in center or community events are addressed through provision of child care, meals and/or transportation services.

Goal 1: Engage families in discussions about how to best address barriers

Goal 2: Provide support, as needed, to enable their participation in child care center events

10–Home Educational Resources

Families and child care staff collaborate to extend center-based learning to the home environment.

Goal 1: Provide families with the skills and materials to continue early learning at home

Goal 2: Increase parent understanding of and engagement in child care learning standards

Adapted from: *PTA National Standards for Family-School Partnerships:* An Implementation Guide. Accessed July 11, 2011 at **http://www.pta.org/National_Standards_Implementation_Guide_2009.pdf**

Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature. Accessed July 18, 2011 at **http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/research/FamEngage.pdf**.

Effective Communication with Families

Forming positive partnerships with families can be challenging, but like any other relationship they take time to develop, and are an ongoing process. Good communication is at the heart of an effective partnership and involves multiple methods of information sharing related to a child's healthy behaviors, developmental milestones, and social and emotional well-being. Therefore, it is important to learn how to engage each family in communication. What works for one family may not work for the next, but remember—parents want to hear from you!

Listening and exchanging ideas in a respectful way can help families understand that you're working *together* to help their children grow up healthy. Below are general tips to help facilitate communication between you or your staff (if applicable) and the families you serve[1]:

- Provide information in your family handbook on the importance of a strong partnership, why you value their involvement and what you can do to work together.
- When families sign up at your center, ask them to indicate how they would like to receive information and when and how they would like to get involved. You may discover valuable resources and advocates in the family members of the children at your center.
- Share information with families through a variety of avenues such as daily sheets, newsletters, bulletin/white boards, electronic methods and face-to-face conversations.
- Schedule parent-teacher conferences at least twice a year.
- Ask families to update you on their child's behavior, preferences and health following holidays, vacations or other periods of time during which he/she has been away from child care.
- Encourage parents to interact with you via a variety of channels: face-to-face, over the phone or via e-mail.
- Create a Family Engagement plan for parents/guardians to sign that establishes expectations for parental involvement.
- Motivate staff (if applicable) to follow your lead and engage parents in conversation on a regular basis.
- Keep conversation light and ask open-ended questions – be curious, not judgmental.
- Assure parents that you are actively listening by reflecting, restating and validating their concerns.
- Use language that families will understand in documents and in conversations.
- Have information and resources available for parents (e.g., handouts, websites, videos, referrals for social services, etc.).
- Cultivate a culture of openness and respect that encourages frequent communication, input and feedback.
- Let parents know that you value and appreciate their input.
- Inform families about and invite them to participate in all center events.

1 Keyer, Janis (2006). *From Parents to Partners: Building Family-Centered Early Childhood Programs.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Ideas for Family Events

Family events are a great way to share information about lessons and healthy habits being taught in child care. Information sharing helps to keep messaging consistent from child care to home. In addition, family nights and other events give children the opportunity to build ownership of their work by proudly showing it off to family members. Families who attend events at child care will be able to stay up-to-date on daily activities and have the opportunity to network with other families. Be sure to consider parents' time and cost of materials when scheduling activities. Activities are more fun when they include all families. Use the ideas below to host events for the families in your child care center:

Host a family adventure walk: Plan a family walk event by mapping out a course around your center or home or by using a neighborhood trail or walking path. This can be anywhere from one to three miles. Encourage all family members to participate with strollers, wagons, pets, etc. Create a scavenger hunt and let families work together to find the items along the walk.

Invite families to a cooking class: Schedule a lunch or dinner where family members can learn to cook the healthy recipes that their children enjoy in child care. Walk families through the recipe from start to finish by showing them how to wash, measure and cook each ingredient. After cooking, allow family members to enjoy the meal with their children. Share a copy of the recipe with each family. Your local Cooperative Extension is a great resource for this type of activity.

Create a culture and hobby day: Invite families to come to your center to speak to children about their culture, religion or hobbies that involve food, physical activity or health. This can be done in the classroom to enhance learning or as a separate special event.

Have an adventure week: Make pick-up and/or drop-off times at various community locations like parks, museums or libraries to show families places they can visit that foster healthy habits.

Host family potluck nights: Invite families to bring their favorite healthy recipe for a potluck dinner. Create themes such as "recipes from around the world," "crock-pot meals," "no-bake recipes," etc., to help families try new foods together. Create a family cookbook that includes all of the recipes shared at the potluck. Hosting these events throughout the year will give parents a chance to talk to one another, visit the center and share ideas about trying new foods.

Hold a family fun night: This can be done in the center or by partnering with a local YMCA, neighborhood school, library or park. Create stations showing families how developmentally-appropriate games used in child care can be used at home (hula-hoops, bean bag tosses, jump ropes, tag games, etc.). Have the families move from station to station so they can try them all!

Have a TV turn-off week: Commit to a week of no screen time at your center and invite families to commit to no screen time at home. Align your week with the bi-annual national event. For dates and an Organizer's Kit, go to **www.screentimeinstitute.org**.

Success Stories from Delaware Child Care Providers

Many of Delaware's own child care providers have developed creative strategies for successfully engaging families and exchanging information. Read the success stories below for ideas to inform your child care center or home's family engagement strategies:

"When we started our physical activity program, we wrote a letter to our parents asking them to please make sure their child had a pair of sneakers (and socks) at school daily. In addition to the letter, we put a 'curiosity' sign by the front entrance. It's a piece of paper folded over. On the outside in big letters it says REMEMBER. When you lift it up, on the inside it says sneakers and socks. Most everyone reads a curiosity sign (smile), and most children come with their sneakers everyday."

– Glenna Kemp, *Director, Dover Early Learning Center*

"We have a large variety of communication methods — the intent being parental information. We have the standard weekly lesson plans posted in each classroom, daily notes for younger children and monthly updates for all rooms.

A few new initiatives include:

- A double-sided, legal-sized mini-newsletter called Chit Chat distributed to parents every two months. Included in this is a featured classroom or group of rooms discussing an activity, curriculum area or event; a healthy child-friendly recipe; and staff updates, etc.
- A new bulletin board by the front door, created monthly by a different classroom, focusing on nutrition. For example, "Marching into Health" had pictures of foods (children cut out from magazines) in different colors arranged in a rainbow pattern ending in a pot of gold. Children love showing their work to their parents.
- A daily wipe-off board of the day's menu. It's great to hear the parents and children chatting as they read it upon arrival and then talking about how they liked it as they leave.
- Monthly menus are posted in each classroom and are available to take home.
- Similar postings and verbal communication are frequent regarding children's physical activity. We also try to have visitors come into the center who provide additional opportunities for physical activity (African drumming and dancing, storytelling with animal moving and dancing, etc.).

"Most of our classroom events have a parental involvement invitation and the refreshments are nutritionally sound ('monster face pizzas' for Halloween with veggies for toppings)."

– Bobbi Budin, *Director, Newark Day Nursery and Children's Center*

Resources for Parent-Provider Partnerships

The following resources have a wealth of information to support child care providers in developing effective family partnerships.

Parent-Provider Partnerships by Purdue University: Information for child care providers on working with parents, and how they can talk to parents about a number of different issues including growth and development, guidance and discipline, and health and safety. Includes printable materials to share with parents. **http://www.extension.purdue.edu/providerparent/**

A Place of Our Own: Contains questions and comments from child development experts, child care providers and parents on topics including behavior management, parents' expectations, at-home activities and more. **http://www.aplaceofourown.org/topic.php?id=6#sub39**

National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention: Contains resources on meaningful parent leadership, parent education, successful strategies and models, stories of parent leadership and promising practices for engaging parents.
http://www.friendsnrc.org/cbcap-priority-areas/parent-leadership-and-involvement

Delaware Child Care Resource and Referral: A website that provides information, resources and referrals for parents looking for child care resources, child care providers looking for help with their work, and community organizations involved with children.
http://www.delawarechild.org/rrhome.html

Child Care Aware®: A program of the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, it helps families learn more about the elements of child care and how to locate programs in their communities, and provides child care providers with access to resources for their child care programs.
http://childcareaware.org/child-care-providers/program-planning/family-involvement

Books and Manuals:

Keyser, Janis. *From Parents to Partners: Building a Family Centered Early Childhood Program*. 2006.

Diffily, Deborah & Morrison, Kathy. *Family-Friendly Communication for Early Childhood Programs*. 1996.

Parent Services Project. *Stronger Together: Family Support and Early Childhood Education.*
http://www.parentservices.org/stronger.php