

Chapter 2

Create Mutually Supportive Relationships with Families

Providing responsive care to infants and toddlers in centers and family child care homes requires close relationships between teachers and families. Families want to know that you understand and deeply care for their children, and their knowledge of their children is critical to your ability to provide a responsive program. Families should also know that you have great respect for them as children’s first teachers. All interactions should be reciprocal—there is much for you to learn from families, and much they can learn from you.

Young children thrive when families and teachers work closely together. Working with infants and toddlers requires a *co-caring framework* for family–teacher relationships (Lang et al. 2016). A co-caring framework is a way of thinking about how you relate to the families of the children in your program that recognizes the importance of teachers and families working closely together for the benefit of everyone involved. While family members have the primary responsibility for their own child, teachers are often with infants and toddlers many hours throughout the day. This requires open communication and the joint creation of strategies for the way programs and families support children’s development and handle routines such as feeding, toilet learning, and sleeping (Lang et al. 2016).

Create an Inclusive Environment for All Families

Each culture has its experiences, traditions, rhythms, values, habits, and beliefs. Each family has its own cultural practices and preferences and goals for children. Families should be able to see themselves and their cultures and communities represented and valued throughout the program in photographs, books, clothes and home items in the toddler dramatic play area, music, toys, written communications, and other materials. Create a welcome area (see more in Chapter 9) and greet everyone warmly when they arrive.



If you or your colleagues do not speak a family's home language, find other families or individuals from the community who may be able to assist, and learn some words in the home language to help families feel welcome. Provide written materials in families' home languages. Find out how each family would like to be involved in the program. Find other ways you can create an environment in which they feel welcome and appreciated.

Strategies for Communicating and Building Relationships with Families

It takes time to build trusting relationships with families. Reciprocal communication is critical from the very first time you meet a family and child. Following are ideas to build respectful and helpful relationships with families. Each strategy creates a stronger bridge to open, friendly, and beneficial communication.

- › Create a program handbook for families that includes clear information about the philosophy, mission, curriculum, and policies of the program. Ask current and prospective families what additional information they would find helpful.
- › Create a welcoming intake process that asks families about their goals for their children, sleeping and eating routines, their children's preferences and dislikes, guidance strategies used in the home, and cultural practices. Be sure to ask family members what they want and need from the program for their children.
- › Invite the parent and child for a transition day(s). Before the child begins the program, invite the parent *and* the child to spend several hours in the program. Some children will need family members to spend additional days visiting

the program to feel comfortable in the new setting. This time allows you to learn more about a child's routines and preferences and gives family members an opportunity to model how to effectively interact with their child.

- › Create a process for families and teachers to discuss questions and concerns. Parents often do not know to whom they should go with questions. Assign a “go-to” person(s) for each family (Banks 2018). Develop collaborative problem-solving strategies to use with families (see Chapter 13 for more detail).
- › Create a daily communication strategy that provides for two-way information to be shared with families. Many programs exchange information by text, email, or portfolios using family communication software (Koralek, Nemeth, & Ramsey 2019). Learn what works best for your families and what kind of information they find useful to exchange. Let families know that you value their input.
- › Get to know families. Beyond what you learn from their enrollment forms, find a little time whenever you see them to talk about activities they like to do as a family, their individual interests, who they consider an important part of their family, and knowledge and skills they might like to use in the program in some way.
- › Create documentation panels (see Chapter 11) with families that focus on what children are doing and learning at home and in the program.
- › Create newsletters and bulletin boards—ask families for ideas for topics. Include the schedule of the day and/or week; learning opportunities in each learning center; interesting websites, YouTube videos, and pamphlets; and information about community resources. Be careful not to overload families with information.
- › Develop family potluck nights or informative events that families and children attend together.
- › Encourage families to participate on advisory committees that have input on program policies and special events.

Challenges in Building Strong Relationships with Families

Both you and a child's family are invested in the child's well-being. When disagreements arise, it is helpful to keep this in mind. Conflicts may be rooted in cultural differences or practices that are different in the home and program. While a parent knows his child best, conflicts may arise when the teacher's knowledge of child development and guidelines for professional practice conflict with the parent's wishes. Total agreement may not always be possible, but understanding and respect can always grow (Isik-Ercan 2017). Sometimes a third party, such as a program director, may need to help brainstorm solutions that are acceptable to everyone involved.