

Connect families to community support organizations and staff. As illustrated below, teachers are in a position to offer much-needed services to family members by maintaining current contact information for individuals and agencies that provide services to families with young children.

Teacher to parents of 3-year-old Donna Lynn: I understand that you had to vacate your home because of the recent wildfires. I have a list of places offering free meals, supplies, and counseling services that might be helpful during the next few months until you can get resettled at home. Let's discuss what services you need, and I'll do my best to help you find a service provider. Our whole community is in this together. This disaster has certainly brought out the best in our neighbors."

Support families as lifelong educators of their children. In the following example, a teacher helps a parent see the special role he has in his daughter's life as both a teacher and a father.

To the father of 5-year-old Aviva, her teacher says: "You know that you are Aviva's first and best teacher, advocate, and nurturer. After Aviva goes to kindergarten, you can continue teaching her new things at home. For example, encourage her to cook with you. When you chop vegetables, she learns about size, shape, and measurement and develops muscle skills in her hands. When you make popcorn in the microwave, you can teach her about volume and how physical states change. We have several children's cookbooks you could look at and see if you'd like to borrow."

Support families in their own educational needs and aspirations. As illustrated below, teachers have a professional obligation to help families—not just their children—thrive and flourish.

The mother of 3-year-old Grayson, with whom she was recently reunited, to his teacher: "My social worker said it would be good for me to take some parenting classes. Is that something you can help me with?" Teacher: "Of course. I think it will help strengthen your relationship with Grayson to know how you should expect him to grow and develop as he gets older.

We have a consultant who teaches child development and parent education classes on Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings. Let me go get the fliers and we can discuss this right now."

Support families as child advocates. Advocacy enriches children, families, and the entire community. In the following example, a teacher encourages a parent to consider taking on this role.

Teacher to resource parent of 3-year-old Dallas: "Thanks to all of the work you've been doing with Dallas at home, we are seeing enormous positive changes in his behavior. Now, instead of us dealing with meltdowns and outbursts, we see him making up songs and dictating stories to us that he illustrates. I think it would be wonderful if you would share your experience and skills with others. Do you think you might be interested in doing a workshop sometime?"

Special Considerations in Working with Families of Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

It is critical for educators to partner with families of children who have experienced trauma, not just to ensure the quality of children's learning but also to enable children to heal. Recovery from trauma involves the support of both educators and family members working together.

Principles of Trauma-Informed Family Engagement

To allay family members' stress and anxiety about meeting and working with educators, educators should consider the following core values of TIC (Meeker 2015). You are likely using variations of this guidance already, as it applies to all populations.

Ensure that when families meet with you, they feel physically and emotionally safe. To do this, begin by greeting and talking with family members

in a calm, warm manner. If English is not their first language, try to say at least a few welcoming phrases in their home language. Consider serving snacks and having water or other beverages available. If a parent gets upset or agitated during a meeting, carefully think about what you can say to deflect the situation. Avoid telling someone to calm down, which often has the opposite effect. Instead say something like “Perhaps we should take a five-minute break. Can I get you some water or coffee?”

Be transparent and trustworthy. Let family members know ahead of time when and why you want to meet with them. Avoid scheduling meetings at the last minute. Make sure families understand that the purpose of all meetings is to work together to help their child heal and thrive. Most meetings should be check-ins where you focus on the whole child and review the child’s progress. This means looking at what is going well and then building on the child’s strengths to overcome any challenges.

To further instill trust, it’s vital to keep your promises. As with interactions with children, don’t make a promise unless you know you can honor it. If you make a commitment in good faith and for some reason you can’t keep what was promised, apologize and find a way to make the situation better. And then do it. Being able to depend on you is a starting point in forging a relationship that works.

Share decision-making responsibilities with family members. Family engagement is all about sharing power. Even though it may sometimes feel to you and the children’s families that you are in charge of sharing all the information and answers, this is not appropriate. If this is the case, you’ll need to reconsider your approach, because this shouldn’t be true in either practice or appearance. Family engagement works only when there is true collaboration and each partner respects what the other brings to the table.

Supporting Families in Supporting Their Children

Many of the same considerations that apply to working with children who have experienced trauma also apply to working with family members. Some parents will have experienced the same trauma their

children have. Traumatic events such as these could adversely affect both children and their parents: a death in the family; a family member with serious chronic illness or who has been hospitalized; one or more family members involved in a traffic collision; an incarcerated parent; a deployed parent; a family member with substance use disorder; domestic abuse; and divorce or a custody dispute.

Even when the child’s traumatic experience(s) are not shared, parents may have had their own adverse childhood experiences, which are often projected onto their children. As the research confirms, both recent traumatic experiences and the lingering effects of ACEs may trigger ongoing fight-flight-freeze responses that will influence the parents’ abilities to self-regulate and the way they parent their children (Meeker 2015).

What does this mean for educators trying to forge a relationship and partner with families? First, look inward and examine your own beliefs and comfort level in dealing with families whose backgrounds or experiences may be very different from your own. Preconceived beliefs should be challenged. In this regard, Zacarian and colleagues (2017a) write:

We have to be aware of the preconceptions, stereotypes, and myths that each of us can have about the families we work with. Some of these myths include such stereotypes as the beliefs that all poor families share the same way of being and acting, are “unmotivated and have weak work ethics,” are uninvolved in their children’s school because they do not value education, are linguistically deficient, and “tend to abuse drugs and alcohol” (Gorski 2008). Stereotypes such as these can and do greatly affect our capacity to work successfully with families. (105)

To combat these tendencies, educators can apply the same trauma-sensitive lenses to children’s family members that they use to help children heal. If a parent raises their voice and seems combative, it may be because stress hormones have kicked in and they are in a fight mode. A parent who misses meetings and doesn’t show up at an agreed-upon time may be in flight mode, not rude and uncooperative.

Likewise, a parent who sits silently and seemingly tunes you out may be in a freeze response and not indifferent. Even if the parents' reactions do not stem from trauma-related causes, as with children, a trauma-informed approach will benefit all.

In addition, some parents may be sensitive because of unhappy past interactions, leading them to believe that you and other authority figures are against them. Being asked to disclose personal information can feel threatening, especially if they feel ashamed or worry they're going to be criticized. Something as simple as making eye contact may be difficult or uncomfortable for some family members.

Remember that behaviors like these tend to be chronic, largely automatic responses to stressful situations. Family members of children with trauma histories have likely had at least one negative experience in their past with social services, the justice system, or other educators. And given their past experiences with institutions, they may have difficulty trusting you.

Regaining trust and easing parents' fears will take time and patience. Keep an open mind and understand that a parent's negativity is often a coping mechanism. Consider that family members who have had only negative experiences working with professionals involved in their child's care need great courage to try once again and agree to meet with you. What a breakthrough it would be to stop old patterns and form a true working relationship with families.

Adding to these trauma-related behaviors that may appear in unexpected ways, teachers need to remember that culture also influences how families will react to you both as an educator and as an individual and to the process of family engagement. Some families regard their child's educator as an expert to be treated with deference and respect, some will be wary of your intentions and may view you as an intruder in their lives, some will challenge your knowledge and ideas, some will react hesitantly or even negatively in response to some aspect of your own culture, and others will welcome your invitations to be equal partners in their children's education.

Culture also influences family members' feelings about how the program should operate and what

constitutes appropriate interactions between children and educators. If you find that a family's perspective differs from yours or your program's, your professional responsibility is to keep an open mind. Resist the temptation to jump in and set the record straight. Listen to everyone's perspective and consider why they think this way. Often viewpoints are not as far apart as they seem initially. Can adjustments be made so that everyone feels heard and respected? Cross-cultural communication requires critical listening, reflection, support, and practice.

Connecting with Families to Benefit Children

Teachers can partner with families to improve the education and lives of children by doing home visits; holding informal meetings, family-educator meetings, and workshops; volunteering in the classroom; doing special projects; and using electronic communication.

Home Visits

Ideally, an educator's initial contact with families is during a home visit before or at the start of the child's attendance in their program. The policy statement on family engagement (HHS & ED 2016, 15) states that "academic success is associated with trusting relationships between teachers and families that are established at the beginning of the school year through home visits." Home visits are a wonderful way to get to know children and families in their own familiar environment.

For many families, their home turf is their first choice of meeting settings. They don't need to devote time and money to travel to and from the program or find a babysitter. On the other hand, some families are nervous about bringing educators into their home. The chaos in one's life is often reflected in living arrangements, and families may feel they are being judged. In addition, some children may be temporarily living in a foster home, and some children are homeless. Be sensitive to parental concerns and wishes. If you sense reluctance or push-back from families, ask if they would prefer meeting in a neutral place such as a library or community center or even at the program instead of in the family home.