

# From Parents to Partners

## Reflections

By Kate Longacre

The purpose of this paper is to describe my reaction to the book, *From Parents to Partners: building a family-centered early childhood program* (Keyser). The whole concept of involving parents in a child care program as partners, would be the ideal for creating a real community. From the perspective of a Christian program, this would bring families together in unity, in a way that is described in the New Testament. The apostle Paul said the early church shared with one another, each looking after the needs of the other. I like the way it's translated in "The Message". "They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers...And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met" (Acts 2:42-45). For that reason, I think the principles behind this idea are wonderful for accomplishing that.

The empowerment of parents as the primary educators of their children also agrees with the Biblical principle that parents are responsible for the education of their children and should continue to be the primary educators in their everyday development. The Biblical reference speaks to the whole child, not just formal training, and states that Godly principles should be taught all the time. Although the Bible does not state directly that academics should be a part of a child's training, the implication is that teaching these things is being a good steward of the gift of knowledge we receive from the Lord, and he certainly encourages people to gain knowledge and understanding.

Building on that idea, relationships are the key to development, because a trusting relationship between the child and adult, allows the child to be open to instruction, and thus to learning. In like manner, God values a personal relationship with each of us. He does not force his will on us, nor does he beat us into submission. Instead, through showing us how much he loves us, even when we are disobedient, we learn to trust him. In time, we choose to obey and find that the principles of living, described in the Bible, are for our betterment. Through them we learn self-discipline and gain confidence to express, in an appropriate way, our need for his guidance. In similar ways, we need to build a trusting relationship with each child, and that begins with building a relationship with the child's primary caregivers.

Before a child enters the program for the first day, taking a look at the New Child Orientation Checklist can be a very helpful tool to help alleviate anxieties that both child and parent may have on the first day (Reno, 217).

On that first day, the room is full of strangers, including the care giver. Knowing that their family member accepts and trust this stranger, helps them to find a safe person to retreat to when they are feeling insecure. One of the ways to accomplish this is providing a warm and inviting place for parents and teachers to talk about the program when they first come to the center. This place should be close enough to a play area that a child can enter into play while the adults get to know each other. When the family sees there is additional space provided for them to come in and observe, or be a part of the daily activities, with adult size chairs or benches and cubbies or lockers for their personal belongings, a message is presented that you have thought about them. This helps them feel welcome and needed.

The next step is keeping distractions to a minimum, voices low and making an arrangement for a home visit. A home visit helps the child see the new care provider in his own environment, where the family welcomes this new

adult. During this first meeting, the provider can offer information about the home visit that will ease any tensions they may be feeling about having someone in their home. This first meeting should end with some “getting to know you” conversation with open ended questions about their interests, special skills and what they would like to see happen for their child while at the center. All of these build that sense of community and trust that is vital to the child’s ability to transition into the program and for his/her ongoing development.

The provider should have a plan for continued education and empowerment of parents to participate in the development of the program, from curriculum planning to planning the environment, meals, ways of communication and fun activities. Shortly after the home visit, some kind of newsletter should be sent home that explains about parent meetings for ideas, brainstorming and planning. This should express how important their input is and encourage them to come so that their unique experiences, skills and passion can be identified with a place and purpose in the program.

To help parents identify their area of skill and how it can be used in the program, two resources can be used, a parent interest survey, and a honey-do list (Reno, 223, 224). The parent interest survey invites parents to consider their skills and provides a check list to help them identify the areas to consider, such as, in the classroom, on a weekend, or a special event. The honey-do list is also a check list, but identifies specific jobs needing to be done under each category, such as, family game night, reading a story, maintenance, sewing dress-up clothes, landscaping, and things that can be done from home or work, such as, distributing center promotional materials.

Next, without “early childhood” jargon, the five principles of family-centered-care should be expressed and explained in a way that brings understanding and clarity. These are: recognize and respect one another’s knowledge and expertise; share information through two-way communication; share power and decision making; acknowledge and respect diversity; create new networks of support.

Once the program is underway, maintaining the relationships, and helping children to connect their families with the program and their friends, can be done by creating bulletin boards with photos of families and pets. Have families come and help their child create a map or diagram of their home, with their address and phone number displayed, (or send home as a connecting activity). Families can be featured once a month with their job or some kind of hobby or vacation.

Helping families build relationships with one another can also help to spur them into participation. Pairing them up with another family that can act as a mentor and resource for questions will help them both. The mentor finds a meaningful role, while the new family has someone they may feel more comfortable with for answers to their questions. Families can then be invited to help develop a curriculum around these featured displays. For example: A picture of Grandmother, who lives far away, can turn into a theme project of letter writing, and how mail travels. A mock post office could be created with large cardboard boxes, painted and then used to display letters received back from Grandparents or other family members. A visit to the local post office could be included. Many ideas for an ongoing integrated curriculum could come from this, ending with an invitation sent out for a family centered party day displaying all they've learned with this theme.

Of course, asking parents to get involved in all areas of a program does not come without conflict, disagreements and the inevitable power struggles. Teachers may not want to “hand” over the program to nonprofessionals. They may be concerned that their ideas will supersede the programs objectives for academics, developmentally appropriate practices and inappropriate content. This is where the skills developed in problem solving and conflict resolution are invaluable. Being a good listener, being able to identify, clarify and repeat back what you hear a person saying, helps immensely in developing a trusting relationship so that families feel safe in talking with you about any issue. Recognizing in advance your own sensitivities, cultural beliefs and prejudices will help you identify why you are resistant to such a “novel” idea. Designing guidelines for family members and volunteers and giving them out ahead of time will curb 90% of these conflicts from occurring. Identifying what problems are program problems and which are family problems will also help to work through any issues that come up. Helping families discover their own cultural issues, and being open to discuss them, can ease tensions also.

One way to accomplish this is for the Center director to provide staff training on how to handle families, so that everyone understands the importance of cooperation, respect and the power of a good relationship with families. Another way is through daily communications. Since it's very difficult to find time before school starts, or when families are picking children up, to talk with each family, a daily journal, that can go home every day, is a very useful tool. In this journal daily observations can be jotted down. Keeping these observations positive is a way to encourage parents and let them know their child is growing and you accept their individual needs. Parents

can also keep the center informed of any unusual issues that come up at home, such as a rushed morning, in which the favorite teddy could not ride to school.

Keeping good records and making a point to talk with at least one family member at least once a week, will help to build those relationships. In addition, other documentation and observation tools, such as a portfolio should be used to make sure no child falls through the cracks. Sometimes the quiet, undemanding child gets forgotten in the overwhelming needs of the challenging children. Keeping a check list of all children and families can help you see, at a glance, if you are neglecting someone.

Making regular conferences a part of the program will also help build and maintain trust and confidence in your ability to provide for the whole development of, not only the child, but the family. Conferences should be explained ahead of time and information give that will deflate any fears or apprehension. Positive reports about their child can be given as examples of the kinds of things you will be discussing. Some examples of children's developmental milestones from their portfolios given in advance will also help them become interested in knowing the "rest of the story." Setting up a specific time that will work for them, making snacks and drinks available, and even child care, will help to allow both parents or extended family members to come. Talking to parents to ease their concerns, when you sense them giving off nervous body language at the mention of conferences, will also help. Finally, during the conference make sure you provide a warm environment, free of distractions and keep to the scheduled time. Be prepared. Having your materials gathered and having practiced what you will say ahead of time will help you be prepared for questions that may come up. Be ready to schedule another meeting if there are more complicated issues that cannot be dealt with in the time allotted. Always remember to thank them for coming, for allowing you to be a part of their lives and trusting you with their most precious children.

Make sure, if they have concerns about how their child is acting at home, or they want to support their learning by doing activities at home, to provide information and resources they can use. If you can, provide activity kits, or information pamphlets, videos and books they can check out from a center library.

Finally, making fun and cooperative parent teacher meetings will help connect families with the program and each other throughout the year.

Some ideas for making this a success include:

- sending out a notice a head of time that welcomes parents' participation in planning the event;
- organizing some child friendly games that they don't normally play;
- providing child care during the meeting.

To give families time to think about what they might need to discuss, the notice should include an invitation to discuss any concerns they may have and what is on the agenda. In addition, providing ideas to those parents who want to take part in the planning process, of what has worked in the past for a successful meeting, will help in the brainstorming process. Some ideas could include having an ice breaker game for parents to get to know each other better; providing food, (everyone's favorite), If you can have it catered so there's no extra "thing" working parents have to do; displaying children's work around the room; having some hands-on activity samples for parents to do; include information about what and how children are learning. This will also help families get a feel for the kind of learning children are doing. A continuous running slide show playing in the background during the meal, and a door prize are small "feel good" things that help families want to come. Put together a special display of photos of activities parents have participated in at the center to give parents the added sense that they belong. If time permits, a dramatic play could be presented by the children, using props from the class, or puppets, or having them read a story that the class wrote together will also entice families to come and see what creative things their child has been doing and learning. Keep in mind the time frame and don't plan too many things at one meeting. Start slow, keep it simple and build from there.

#### Works Cited

Keyser, Janis, From Parents to Partners: building a family-centered early childhood program, Redleaf Press, 2006.

Reno, Hilde, with Janet Stutzman and Judy Zimmerman, Handbook for Early Childhood Administrators: directing with a mission, Pearson Education, Inc., 2008.