

Communicating with Families: *Communication Techniques*

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Communicating effectively with the families of children in child care can help the family, the caregiver and the child.

In the best child care settings, providers and families work as a team. Each brings a unique point of view, and each shows concern for the child's growth and development. As a child care professional, one of your roles in this partnership is to promote effective communication with families. It is important for child care providers to develop and practice effective communication skills and implement them when communicating with families about their children and their care.

Understanding Families

In most cases you will have a special bond with the families of the children in your care. This bond often can be difficult to describe or understand. If you understand why families act the way they do, however, this bond will be even stronger.

Most families admit to feeling guilty about leaving their children in someone else's care. These mixed feelings may cause families to be late in dropping off or picking up their children. They may talk immediately to the child and shut out the care provider, or they may talk nervously to the care provider about everything but their child.

What are some of the feelings that family members and care providers share? Probably the following:

- I'm tired.
- I want to be cared about as a valuable human being for my own sake, not just as a parent or a provider.
- I wonder if I am doing OK.
- I'm jealous of you.

Providers may feel jealous of families because they are the most important people in the child's life. Similarly, families are often jealous of providers, who see everything the parent

misses. Therefore, care providers must avoid competing with the family for the child's affection.

When today's families look for child care, myths and guilt often make the whole task very confusing. Families feel like something is missing. Where is the loyal family member who, in the past, would provide child care with love and without a charge?

When people feel guilty, they often withdraw or become angry. They may make unrealistic requests or break the rules and practices of the child care service. They may be late with payments or bring a sick child. They may demand special diets or activities. They may worry that you think they are "bad" parents. They also may be jealous that you see the tiny details of their child's daily world.

If you only talk with families about their child's problems or broken rules, the family's guilt can mount. Families who feel tired, guilty, and frustrated may need support. If they are approached and have support, they can do a better job of parenting.

Even though you often work for low pay and have high stress, you have to form bonds with families who need service, information, and caring. Reach out to the human needs of the families. Ask them how they handle situations in their family. Give them written policies and have them signed before a child enters your program. It is unfair for you or the family not to understand expectations. Say "thank you" often to children and their families. Tell them you appreciate them for smiling as they enter, for coming on time, or for really looking at their child's picture. Thank them for referring another family to you.

Thank families for trusting you to work with them and for sharing their precious children with you. What will you receive? The children and their families will surely thank you. Just as you reach out to meet the needs of families, they will reach out to meet your needs. Families who know what is expected of them and who feel that their provider approves of and values them will more likely respect policies and procedures.

Pro-activity in Family Relations

Child care providers should not wait for a family member to initiate conversation. Instead, speak first, inquire about the parent's day or comment on the great time the child experienced. When asked how a child's day was, avoid just saying "fine." Instead, be prepared with some adjectives to help describe experiences in a way that gives families a clear picture of the day's events.

Every day give each family a warm greeting, a smile, a question, and a fond farewell. Always remember to use the family members' names.

Communicating is an active process that involves both the speaker and the listener. The speaker must send a clear message and the listener must accurately decode that message. If either of these processes break down, communication fails. Communication requires a balance of listening and expression. People who are stronger at listening often feel drained and burned out and eventually become resentful because their own needs are not met. People who are better at expressing their needs often overwhelm other people who see them as controlling or overbearing. Listening is ineffective if you cannot express yourself clearly. Expression is ineffective without skilled listening. Here are some tips for communicating more effectively with families.

Be prepared. If you plan your message in advance, the ideas you want to communicate have a better chance of being understood. This is especially important when you must discuss a difficult topic. Before talking to the family, make a list of the points you want to discuss. Then, think about each from the family's point of view. To improve your communication techniques, practice out loud in front of a mirror.

Would different wording work better? How do you think the family will respond to your statements? How might you respond as a family member? By making a list of the points you want to make, you are more likely to send a clear message and help prevent the family from becoming defensive.

Be clear. Keep your message brief. Stick to the topic and avoid confusing details. You do not want an important message to disappear in a flood of words. Also, be sure your body language agrees with your oral message. Most of the message is conveyed through your eyes and gestures. Saying something like, "What do you want to discuss, Becky?" encourages dialogue. However, if you glance at your watch, tap your toe or fold your arms across your chest at the same time you say this, you contradict the positive message. If you don't have time to talk, simply tell the family and arrange another time. If you have time, stop what you're doing and show interest by looking at who is speaking.

Stay neutral. True communication is likely to occur during problem solving if you state facts. This is a fact: "Becky, you need to pay me on time because I use your money to pay my bills on time." In contrast, defensive or whiny statements are likely to close down communication. Avoid saying things like, "Why can't you pay on time?" or "I bet you pay your phone bill on time; why don't you pay us on time?"

Clarify confusing statements. Sometimes you will find that the family is not sending a clear message. Before responding to the content of the question, it is important to understand exactly what the family meant. For example, you might say, "Do you mean this...?" Active listening helps ensure you truly understand the family's message and questions.

Use "I messages" as a communication technique. The basic skill needed for mutually respectful communication is the "I message." Take, for example, the following situation: A family has been late picking up their children three times this last week and two times the week before. Today when they were late, it caused you to be late to a training session, reducing the in-service credit you are able to earn for recertification. "I messages" begin with a brief description of what is bothering you ("When _____ happens"), then you describe how you feel about it ("I feel _____") and why ("because _____"). If you know what you want to have happen, you can then describe that.

First, briefly describe the situation. In this case, it's the family being late to pick up their children. Then briefly tell how you feel about it. In this case you feel rushed and imposed upon, as well as somewhat angry about missing the training. Next, explain why you feel that way. In this example it's because you arrived at the training late, and as a result missed out on needed training credits. If you know clearly what you want to happen, you then state it. In this situation, you want the family to pick up their child by 5 p.m. If you are having trouble describing why or how this situation has an effect on you, this could be a clue to you that the situation really is not your business and the most helpful thing you can do is to stay out of it.

When people first begin practicing "I messages," they sometimes feel awkward. Soon, people begin to be able to express their feelings so that it seems more natural. It just takes practice. To strengthen "I messages" and reduce some of the resistance to them, use them in both positive and negative situations.

There are four typical responses to "I messages." The first, which may surprise you when it happens, is *compliance*. The person does what you ask. Another typical response is *resistance*. The person blames you or someone else for the problem, attacks your ideas, criticizes you, or gives excuses. A third response, which is hard for many people to handle, is *emotional* — when the person starts crying or gets mad. A fourth typical response is when *people respond with their own needs*, without acknowledging yours.

To support your efforts to use "I messages," the following is a list of possible ways to handle responses.

1. Respond to *compliance* with gracious acceptance. If the family meets your request, you simply say thank you.
2. Respond to *resistance* with feedback. If the other person resists your message through blame, attack or excuses, try not to let it sidetrack you. Use feedback, listen, and then give your message again.

3. Respond to *emotions* with feedback. They may respond to your feedback with a response designed to put you on the defensive, especially if they are upset.
4. Respond to an expression of their *needs/concerns* by showing respect for them and going for a “win/win” solution. You may have to restate your message several times, in slightly different ways, before others either comply or state needs of their own to form a “win/win” solution.

Communicate in Many Ways

Conversations during arrivals and departures are good times to establish family and provider communications. Be brief and friendly as you ease the child’s transition to and from your environment.

In the morning, find out how the child feels and if the family has any concerns. Also, be sure to share with the family the plans for the day. In the late afternoon, tell the family at least one good or interesting thing the child did or learned that day. This helps build a positive relationship. If the family is confident you know and feel good about their child, you won’t have much trouble discussing a problem. When a problem does arise, describe the behavior and arrange a time to talk without distractions.

For example, you might say, “Becky, I am a little worried. Several times today Andrew stopped what he was doing and started crying. Can we set up a time to talk about this?” Arrange a specific time when you and the family can talk without being interrupted. You can discuss the problem in person or on the telephone.

Families will want to talk with you when they are concerned with their child’s progress or readiness for school. Keeping observation notes on each child can help you supply this information. If you have established an open relationship with the family, it will be easier to share this information.

Newsletters, electronic newsletters, Web pages, bulletins, open houses or family meetings are more formal ways to stay in touch. These are good ways to provide information about upcoming activities, policy changes and even helpful hints for the parents. These methods, however, can’t give much information about individual children and will never replace the daily face-to-face conversations with families. By keeping communication lines open, you will help families stay involved in the lives of their children and also avoid many problems.

Resources

“Strengthening Developmentally-Appropriate Programs Through Family Involvement,” in *Guiding Children’s Social Development: Theory to Practice*, M. Kostelnik, A. Aliren, A. Soderman, K. Gregory, and L. Stein, 6th edition, Albany, New York: Delmar 2008.

Exchange Every Day, Child Care Exchange, <http://www.childcareexchange.com/eed/>.

National Network for Child Care’s *Connection* newsletter, <http://www.nncc.org>.

Nebraska’s Early Childhood Training Center, Nebraska Department of Education, <http://ectc.nde.ne.gov>.

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