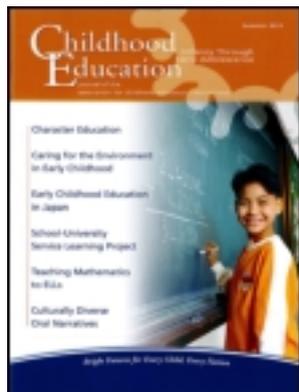


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Childhood Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uced20>

Early Childhood School Success: Recognizing Families as Integral Partners

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Version of record first published: 25 Jul 2012.

To cite this article: Janet S. Arndt & Mary Ellen McGuire-Schwartz (2008): Early Childhood School Success: Recognizing Families as Integral Partners, *Childhood Education*, 84:5, 281-285

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2008.10523025>

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Early Childhood School Success

Recognizing Families as Integral Partners

Much thought must go into preparing children for the transition from home or a child care environment to school. Transition experiences need to consider the whole child, including children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical readiness for learning. It is equally vital to explore ways to involve families, who are children's first and most important teachers.

Research highlights the importance of family involvement in children's school success (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Saunders, & Simon, 1997; Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Most people would agree that families have the greatest knowledge of their children's strengths and challenges. When teachers are able to converse with families, they can collect detailed information about their incoming students so that they are better able to meet the children's needs.

A number of theories can influence the manner in which we work with families. For example, early childhood theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that children should be viewed within the complex systems of their changing environments. Children's development, as well as family development, is shaped by the extended family, religious community, school, friends, organizations, government, and culture. The interaction of these various systems influences family identity. Thus, focusing on how to involve families in the transition to school and school readiness is crucial. And determining the best ways to involve families in the educational process from the beginning is vital. Because of the complexity of families, a comprehensive approach is needed.

Who Are the Families?

Communicating regularly with families helps teachers recognize the variety of backgrounds and experiences that shape families' perceptions of their children's development. As we focus on families, we must remember to listen and appreciate them as they are, not how we think they are or should be. Our intent should be to understand differences in people and improve communication in order to be heard. "To serve children well, we must work with their families. To be effective in this work, we must

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understand families who are diverse in ways such as culture, sexual orientation, economic status, work, religious beliefs, and composition" (Christian, 2007, p. 4). Family systems theory focuses on family behavior and includes interconnected members and their influences on one another (Christian, 2007). Family systems theory can help us to recognize and understand different parenting styles and family boundaries. It enables us to avoid stereotypes, recognize the different ways that families handle situations, and balance children's activities and curriculum. Family systems theory incorporates individual and group identity, and respects a family's need for control (Christian, 2007).

To build better relationships, both preservice and inservice educators need to understand the values espoused by each child's family. A variety of factors determine the way we approach and interact with families. First, one must consider the culture from which families come. People are often shaped by the times in which they live. Thus, families with adults in their 20s will most likely differ from those with adults in their 30s or 40s. Generational differences influence thinking about family life, balance of work and family, responsibilities, gender roles, lifestyle, culture, and outlook for the future (Rutherford, 2005). Rutherford provides some guidance about several recent generations that may prove useful in helping teachers understand families. Knowing the values and characteristics of the adults parenting the children can provide insight on how to engage them in their children's early school experience.

According to Rutherford, the younger end of the "Baby Boomers," who are in their 40s, may be first-time parents or may be acting as parents to their grandchildren. "Boomers" are often thought of as "workaholics," seeking to move up the career ladder. They value change, hard work, and success, and they often overcommit. Being process-oriented rather than product-oriented, "Boomers" may need reminders to keep them focused on desired outcomes. The Gen-Xers, born between 1965-1982, broadly speaking, value relationships over organizations. For them, the personal touch and immediate feedback are very important. This characteristic complements their spirit of informality, creativity, and desire for a balance of personal and professional lives. "Millennials," or parents who were born beginning in the 1980s, appreciate time spent with family (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They value involvement, have a positive outlook, and embrace technology. E-mail is their preferred way to communicate.

Families from all ethnic and racial groups benefit from early childhood educators who have an understanding of culturally appropriate practice. Cultural

competence involves the ability to think, feel, and act in ways that acknowledge, respect, and build on ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic diversity (Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Early childhood educators should take the time to thoroughly understand the hidden curriculum of each culture in order to connect with families.

As educators, we must understand how culture shapes children's development by recognizing cultural identities and differences in families that are shaped by everything from broad sociocultural influences to unique family influences (Hyun, 2007). Honing cross-cultural communication skills may support teachers' understanding of what each family wants for its children (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). These communication skills include language, personal space, smiling, eye contact, touch, silence, and time concepts (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005).

Children may be members of homeless families; families headed by a single parent or by gay or lesbian parents; or blended families, adoptive families, foster families, or intergenerational families. Each family unit has issues unique to it. In order to engage families in participation, educators must willingly discern the families' strengths and needs, then communicate in ways that families are able to embrace. For example, findings from one survey done by a preschool director found that lesbian/gay parents "want the same as other parents—that [their] child be nurtured and stimulated to learn" (Clay, 2007, p. 24). These parents deemed important a school environment that supported emotional safety and diversity (e.g., regarding family structure, race and ethnicity, adopted children, and transracial families). Teachers who had experience working with gay- and lesbian-headed households thus were important to this family group (Clay, 2007). Important issues to some other families included adoption issues and ways of relating to other families.

Socioeconomic status is sometimes an overlooked issue when understanding families. Having an awareness of how socioeconomic status affects families can help educators be more responsive. Educators with such awareness will be better able to create and develop appropriate ways to engage these families. As educators teach growing numbers of children who live in poverty, they are challenged to think beyond traditional lines of race and ethnicity (Cuthrell, Ledford, & Stapleton, 2007). It is important to focus on the strengths of children and families, not the deficits, and to develop strategies around such strengths (Cuthrell et al., 2007).

Professionals must examine and determine the influences of their own backgrounds, cultures, attitudes, and experiences before they can understand

the needs, experiences, and cultures of individual families. Educators must reflect on how cultural diversity or working with children who have special needs affects the teacher's roles and relationships. Early childhood educators need to ponder these questions thoughtfully to consider and overcome biases in all of these relationships. It is important for families and professionals to form equitable and collaborative partnerships that support and involve families in meaningful ways.

Why should educators invest the time and effort necessary to understand families? Alma Flor Ada (2003) shares the following rationale for why educators and families should work together: "Students live in two worlds: home and school. If these two worlds do not recognize, understand, and respect each other, students are put in a difficult predicament and very little learning can take place" (p. 11).

What Early Childhood Educators Do Best

Early childhood educators have strengths from which to draw when it comes to helping children enter school. Teachers can make connections with children by exploring their interests and engaging them in the classroom, using that information. Relationships based on trust and attachment help build warmth, understanding, and reflective listening. Appropriate nonverbal language, such as teachers communicating at eye level, is also important. Early childhood teachers should foster and encourage children's initiative, and work to extend children's cognitive, social-emotional, and language skills. Early childhood teachers generally handle with ease issues of social adjustment—the concern most parents have about a transition (Dockett & Perry, 2003). We also must recognize that "one size" does not "fit all" and so we must work to promote a variety of high-quality programs, such as Head Start, cooperative preschools, family child care, employer-supported child care, and center-based programs to meet the needs of all families.

What Early Childhood Educators Need To Learn

As Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot writes, "There is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools" (2003, p. xi). Developing a working relationship with families is key for the early childhood educator. It is a skill that comes naturally for some teachers but is a struggle for others. Some teachers enjoy working with children, but lack confidence in building relationships with adults. Such relationship-building with parents is an area in which preservice teachers receive little training (Nieto, 2004).

The role of supporting and involving families and

children is crucial for the early childhood educator. It is important that professionals welcome all families into programs by building mutual understanding and trust through daily communication, listening carefully to parents to understand their goals and preferences for their children, and being respectful of cultural and family differences in order to develop partnerships with parents (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). We must continue to learn about the cultures in our classrooms by observing, asking questions, and being aware of any discomfort that we or our families may have, in order to develop awareness, tolerance, respect, and appreciation of differences and cultural diversity (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005).

A transition into school is a new beginning, and an opportune time for beginning a partnership, so make sure you have carefully thought out your approach. A partnership calls for teachers and families sharing information about children in order to provide consistency of early education and care. Educators need to reach out to children's prior schools or child care providers to learn about the children's experiences. Often, schools accept children while almost ignoring their prior experiences. Bronfenbrenner (1979) encourages a more global approach. A good example of this global approach may be found in a project undertaken in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Department of Education, through a federal grant administered by Early Learning Services Program Unit and the Community Partnership for Children Program, provided grants for a summer initiative titled "Increasing the Capacity To Serve Young Children," which gathered child care providers, private and public preschool teachers, and administrators (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003). The initiative focused on giving all individuals who work with children the same information on preschool standards and on ways to help children with special needs access the curriculum. Teachers from all types of programs learned from each other as well as from special educators. Sharing the preschool standards and ways to teach those standards gave all individuals who cared for and taught the community's children a better understanding of expectations and an opportunity for more equal educational experiences. Consequently, relationships between providers and public schools were strengthened. As the transition time neared, more communication occurred.

Families, children, and teachers are equal participants and must learn from one another during the process of separation and children's entry into early care and education (Balaban, 2006). Some specific activities may pave the way for transition into school for the families, children, and teachers, such as: inviting the family and child to the school, holding a meeting

before school opens, providing families with a written description of what to expect as school begins, making home visits, and sending a letter to the child before school starts (Balaban, 2006). These steps may lead to a better understanding of the children and their families.

Teachers may provide support and information to families and children by discussing the entry process. It is important to listen to families and reflect on what is heard so that families know they are understood. Teachers should assure families that they will partner with them in their child's learning process. Supporting and communicating with families daily during the entry process is an effective way to begin that partnership (Balaban, 2006).

To develop a partnership with families, educators need to explore families' cultural backgrounds. One way to discover the information is to define the family and each family member's role. Identifying family traditions, child-rearing practices, and what is most important to them is also important. Recognize that different levels of family participation may be due to their backgrounds rather than their desire. Lack of participation also may be due to families' reduced understanding of how the education system works. Other issues, such as the inability to thoroughly understand the primary language being spoken in the classroom setting, may sometimes prevent involvement. Other factors that may thwart involvement include struggling with such concerns as providing food for their children, working two to three jobs, or managing all of the children's needs. Cultural differences may affect beliefs that influence the concept of teachers and parents being equal partners. In some cultures, educators are revered and families believe that whatever they say or do should be respected. For example, in some Asian cultures, making recommendations to educators seems disrespectful (Hyun & Fowler, 1995). By knowing families' needs and understanding their behaviors, educators can respond appropriately.

A Common Thread

It is interesting to note that research compiled by Henderson and Mapp (2002) shows certain commonalities among families, regardless of their race, ethnicity, income level, or educational background. All of the families surveyed want their children to do well academically. They aspire for their children to achieve a post-secondary degree, for example, and they want their children to regularly attend school. They also desire lower rates of high-risk behavior and increased social competence.

The goals for families are usually the same, but how families interpret those goals and act on them may look different. All families want their children

to be successful. Research (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) supports this belief, which gives us the impetus to help families realize their goals. Because research (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Tayler, 2006) also shows the importance of family involvement in that success, early childhood educators must move forward with ways of increasing that participation.

Keys to Engagement

It is important to begin early to make families feel welcome. Provide directions to classrooms or special event areas so that families will be able to navigate the school building. Having a "live person" answer the phone is more welcoming than a series of voice mail prompts requiring the caller to press numerous buttons in the hopes of getting a human being. Schools should invite families for pre-visits about a year before their children make the transition to the school. The visit could be for a brief story time (provide interpreters if necessary). Hold this event two or three times during the year. Remember that some parents are intimidated just by going into the school building. Have a community group sponsor a bus ride for the children, if this is how they will travel to school. Conducting home visits is another option. When parents understand that the purpose of these visits is for their children to meet their future teachers and help them feel more comfortable about their new school placement, parents will see the value of these efforts. Providing a welcome meal at the school and offering child care while adults talk is an alternative way to get parents into school before making that transition. Outreach is important. Schools must shed the notion that families will come simply because the school asks.

When families feel cared for unconditionally, they will be responsive. When families are responsive, professionals have the opportunity to work with them and provide support. When families feel supported, they become involved and work with professionals for the success of their children.

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