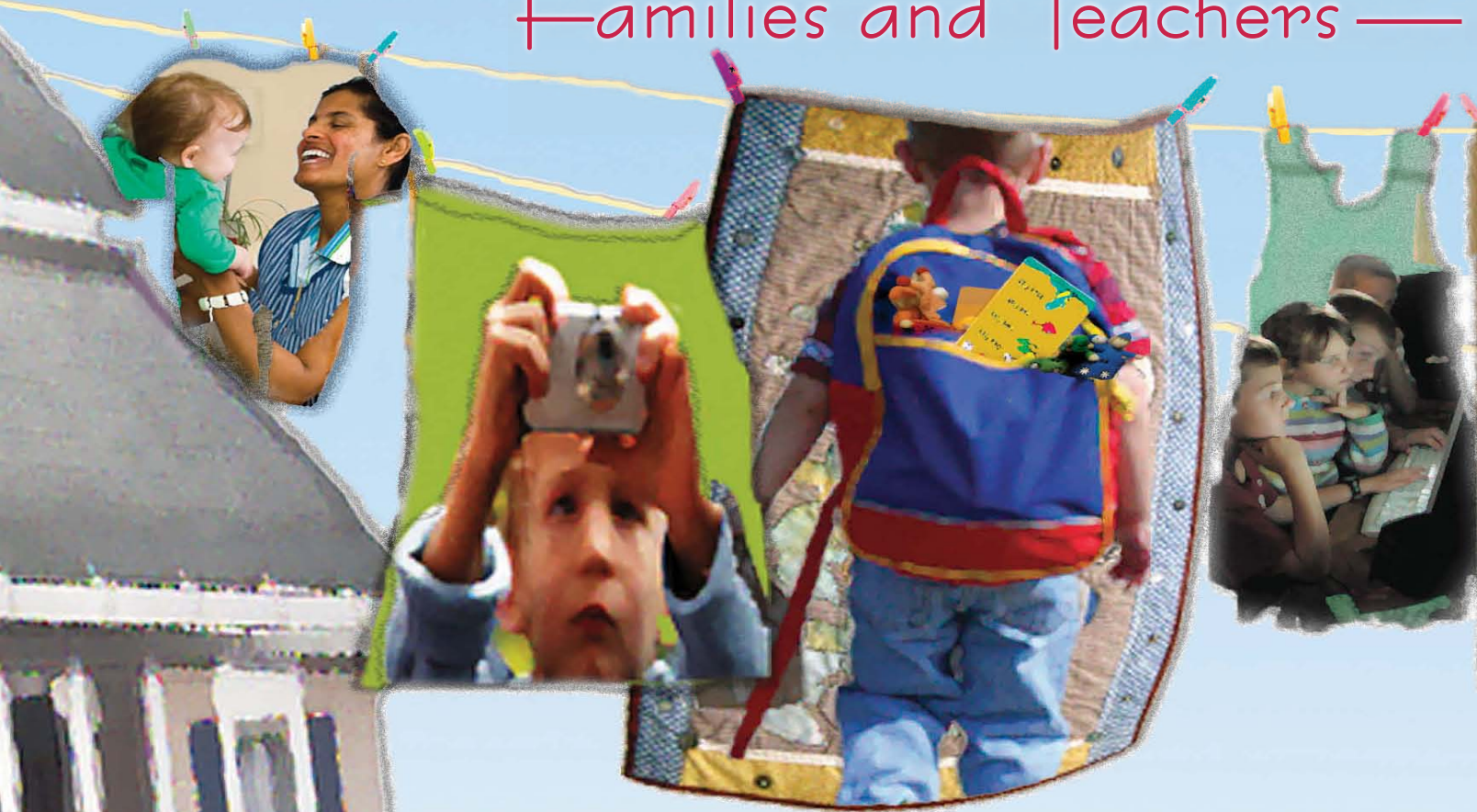


# Families and Teachers —



## Intentionally Thoughtful Family Engagement in Early Childhood Education

Jerlean Daniel

**MANY PEOPLE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)** often say, “Parents are a child’s first teachers.” However, when parents enroll their children in various forms of ECE (child care, preschool, pre-K, family child

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care, Head Start), teachers, providers, and administrators often struggle with how to effectively engage families in the activities of the program. Thus begins what can become a series of miscues in communication between what families want and what educators think is best for children. The relationships can become more tension filled when the race, ethnicity, nationality, or social class of the parents and program staff is different. ECE professionals must take intentional steps to blend their knowledge with parental knowledge in order for children to thrive.

Stephen Covey (1989) has said that we should “seek first to understand” if we wish to be effective leaders and relationship builders. By that he means that we should stop and listen carefully, asking questions

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# Essential Partnerships



using nonjudgmental language to make sure the essence of the other person's point of view is clear to us. Janis Keyser, author of *From Parents to Partners: Building a Family-Centered Early Childhood Program* (2007), encourages early childhood practitioners to look for the good idea behind a parent request or demand that may initially seem strange or inappropriate. Looking for the good idea is a way of building on a parent's strengths, of beginning to understand a person whose culture may be very different from your own, or of looking for the parent's good intentions. It is much easier to relate to parents in a positive, respectful way when (1) we engage in a two-way conversation (listening carefully as well as speaking) and (2) we try to recognize the potential for good ideas behind parental requests and behaviors.

In 2002 the National Parent and Teachers Association (PTA) revised the content and title of their family involvement standards. The standards became known as the Family-School Partnership Standards based on the clear research evidence that such partner-

ships are the bedrock of children's school success (PTA 2008). The PTA standards are written in language that reflects early childhood family engagement at its best. They clearly require that we advocate for the best interests of every child. The standards offer answers about how to proceed with children and families from diverse communities. The six Family-School Partnership Standards are as follows:

1. Welcome all families into the school community
2. Communicate effectively
3. Support student success
4. Speak up for every child
5. Share power
6. Collaborate with the community (PTA 2008)



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Opening a new infant room meant we needed to hire new staff. My dilemma was how to set up the new room. The choices were to open the new room with:

1. All new staff and new children
2. A teacher from one of the original infant rooms as the lead with other new staff and new children
3. A teacher from one of the original rooms as the lead taking her primary care group of four children with her to be joined by other new teachers and new children

The first choice meant that the new room had no immediate connections to the ongoing traditions of our program. It would be harder to sustain the

Ultimately, if different values, attitudes, and behaviors are automatically considered wrong, it will be impossible to form a collaborative partnership with the child's "first teacher." Home-school partnerships or family engagements are known to strengthen ECE programs in terms of the positive growth and development of children. Several research studies conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) further clarify the specific kinds of family engagement that are most effective for positive child outcomes (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006). HFRP has identified three areas of what it calls complementary learning opportunities that enhance the growth and development of young children: parenting, home-school relationships, and responsibility for learning outcomes.

There is a decision-making aspect of the home-school relationship as defined by HFRP. It requires in part that we in ECE make room to hear from parents about important programmatic decisions. Several years ago as a child care center director, I faced an important decision when we needed to add a new infant room to the center. A fundamental part of our program philosophy was that we wanted to build and sustain attachments, those trusting relationships between adults and children that allow children a strong social and emotional base from which to grow and learn. One of the ways we implemented that philosophy was through assigning primary caregivers in the infant room. When each infant was enrolled in the program, he or she was assigned a specific caregiver. This allowed the teacher to form an attachment relationship with each child in her small primary care group of children.

ongoing quality of our program without a daily continuous connection to our roots. The second choice would separate the teacher from her primary care group of children, severing that attachment but leaving the children with other children and adults they had known since their first day in the program—their program family. The third choice kept the primary group of children with their teacher but separated them from other children and adults they had known. Any of the three choices could have been considered viable.

We called a parent and staff meeting for those participating in the original infant rooms. We shared the exciting news that the center was expanding and explained that we needed to make some decisions, outlining the three choices as we staff saw them. We asked the families what they thought about each of the three options and invited them to offer other ideas that ought to be considered. After what turned out to be a very brief discussion, one of the fathers said that as far as he was concerned the third choice was the only choice. All of the other parents heartily agreed. They went one step further, however.

**Home-school partnerships or family engagements are known to strengthen ECE programs in terms of the positive growth and development of children.**

Their additional rationale for the third choice taught us as staff an important lesson.

The parents told us that attachment was not only about the relationships that their children had with the primary caregivers, but that they too as parents had attachments to the primary caregiver. The attachments we had worked to build and sustain were in fact a circle of relationships among the child, family, and teacher. She was the central reason they had grown to trust our program. They trusted her. The parents had formed a critical attachment adult to adult.

This was an incredible affirmation for the teaching staff in particular and our program philosophy in general. We and the parents together made an important decision that had a significant impact on how the center was organized.

Focusing on building and sustaining attachments can also inform the decisions an ECE program makes as it builds partnerships with families from populations they have not typically served. We at one point enrolled a 4-year-old child from China. Only the father spoke English, but we rarely encountered him initially. The child behaved developmentally more like a 2-year-old. He had just rejoined his parents after having stayed with his grandparents in the family's home country since he was a few months old.

The "good ideas" in this situation were several:

- (a) The father had an opportunity to earn an advanced degree that would allow him to better care for his family
- (b) A wife needed to be with her husband
- (c) The grandparents loved and cherished their grandchild and were afraid for him to be so far away
- (d) The parents did not want the grandparents to be alone
- (e) The parents were unsure what their circumstances would be in the new country
- (f) The parents missed their child and wanted him to be with them in the new country

All of these good ideas were bound by love and protection. Among the end results were that the parents and child had no attachment relationships, and the child was so cherished and protected by his grandparents that he did not have opportunities to develop social skills.

The parents needed from us a partnership that assisted them in building attachments with a child they loved but did not know. They wanted desperately to teach him about his new country and enjoy his company as he learned about his new surroundings. They were appalled by his behavior but had no idea how to manage it. The parents were worried that he had

serious mental health problems. The child was frightened. There was nothing familiar around him except the home language his parents spoke to him, but he had no basis for a trusting relationship with them. Everything about our program setting was even more alien to him.

Our first decision was to enroll him in the classroom for 3-year-olds. He was too large for the toddler room even though he was developmentally a 2-year-old. We did not want the size and strength difference to contribute to creating a bully. In addition, he was too socially immature to have had a good experience in the 4-year-old room with children his own size. After a day or two of observation, the teacher in the 3-year-olds room determined that he was bright and really wanted to engage with the other children and use the materials. However, he had no idea how to play with peers other than to charge through the room knocking things over and pushing children aside. The observation time gave the teacher a chance to see through his fear and disruptive behavior to find a strength that she could build upon.

The teacher talked to him with kindness in tone and words, knowing that he did not speak English but counting on her gentle affect to assure him that she would help him and that he was in a safe place. She used what she thought he could most readily understand—physical space and touch—to help him relax and learn. She kept him at her side for several weeks. If she sat at a table with a group of children, he sat beside her. If the class was outdoors, he was at her side. She modeled how to enter play with other children. She modeled sharing laughter with the other children and comforting them when they were sad. All the while the new little boy was at her side being spoken to softly and shown what to do with the materials



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**The partnership among adults grew as the parents realized the teacher believed that their child could learn and they saw the positive results of her work.**

and how to interact with the other children. She gently rubbed his back or touched his hands or arms to help focus his attention when she spoke to him.

The teacher built an attachment relationship over time with the child by loaning him her ego strength—her knowledge as a stable adult that impulses can be harnessed and difficult situations can be managed. He learned from her that he could trust her to help him and that, just as important, she

trusted him to learn to manage his impulses. He learned so well that months later when another child who spoke his home language enrolled in the 3-year-olds room, he immediately became that child's mentor in the new environment.

His parents were amazed and confused at first that they were not getting reports about his "unmanageable" behavior. The teacher made a point of showing his parents, initially his mother and eventually his father, what he had learned to do and to introduce them to the parents of children he had played with successfully that day for even a brief period of time. She suggested activities that they could do with him. We had increased interactions with the father as the boy settled into the classroom routines. The partnership among adults grew as the parents realized the teacher believed that their child could learn and they saw

the positive results of her work. The partnership also grew because the teacher believed in their ability to parent. She respected the good ideas behind the decision making that had created their current situation. They trusted her to help them be the parents they wanted to be to the child they loved and wanted to teach.

These two examples of family engagement illustrate what is possible when ECE programs thoughtfully and intentionally build partnerships with families. It is important to note that the ECE professionals embraced their child development knowledge as well as the good ideas or intentions of parents. Building and sustaining attachments are core aspects of child development. Intentionally setting up opportunities for two-way communication opened the possibility for new learning among both sets of adults, professionals and "first teachers." Effective family-school partnerships give all young children the best chance for optimal growth and development.

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## Resources to Share with Families

### Print publications from NAEYC

Brochures, posters, and tablets of hand-outs focus on milestones of child development, the importance of play, healthy eating, proper diapering, literacy, and other topics. [www.naeyc.org/store](http://www.naeyc.org/store)

Diffily, D., & K. Morrison, eds. 1996. *Family-friendly communication for early childhood programs*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Dodge, D.T. 2007. *Our program for infants, toddlers, and twos: A parent's guide*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies. Also available in Spanish.

Dodge, D.T., & J. Phinney. 2007. *A parent's guide to preschool*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies.

### Through the NAEYC Web site

Early Years Are Learning Years are short articles focused on themes such as starting school, play, child development,

problem-solving, and inclusion. [www.naeyc.org/families/early\\_years](http://www.naeyc.org/families/early_years)

Message in a Backpack notes and flyers from *Teaching Young Children* are pages teachers can share with parents on topics like toys, field trips, and books. [www.naeyc.org/tyc/backpack](http://www.naeyc.org/tyc/backpack)

Right Choice for Kids provides information on quality early childhood education and what NAEYC accreditation means. [www.rightchoiceforkids.org](http://www.rightchoiceforkids.org)

### On other Web sites

About Dads Radio offers podcasts about the impact fathers can have on children. Included are discussion questions, an accompanying blog, book recommendations, and links to other relevant Web sites. From the same author comes *Maybe Baby*, a simple but comprehensive discussion on becoming a father, and The

WonderWise Parent, a Web site for parents with programs, courses, storytime, opinions, and humor. [www.k-state.edu/wparent/aboutdads/Blog/Blog.html](http://www.k-state.edu/wparent/aboutdads/Blog/Blog.html)

The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NAC-CRRA) offers resources for families on parenting issues, child care, and learning activities for children. Back issues of "The Daily Parent," a topical newsletter for parents, are available online. [www.naccrra.org](http://www.naccrra.org)

National Fatherhood Initiative provides resources, research, support networks, events, and multimedia products to help fathers. [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)

ZERO TO THREE has online resources for families. Navigate to the Parents section from the home page and access the parenting series in the eStore. Several resources are available in Spanish. [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)