

## Communicating with Families: *Building Relationships*

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Recommendations for improving communication and building positive relationships with the families of children in child care, preschool, or school; includes suggestions for increasing family involvement.

Successful child care providers, preschool teachers, and elementary teachers begin to establish positive relationships with the children in their care or classrooms as soon as possible. This NebGuide describes how to extend this beneficial relationship to children’s families by developing positive and closer ties.

### Building Bridges with Families

#### Show that you really care about each child.

An old Danish proverb states, “Who takes the child by the hand, takes the mother by the heart.” If early childhood professionals keep this proverb in mind, they will recognize that families want providers and teachers to pay attention to their child and treat their child in a special way. This can be demonstrated every day through kind words and deeds. Pay attention to the little details that show you truly care, such as sending an extra note home with parents, making sure children’s hands and faces are washed after a meal or that they have mittens on when they go out to play. If you do not pay attention to the little things, family members may think you are too busy or not motivated to really care for their child.

#### Make personal contact with the families through face-to-face communication.

Take advantage of the opportunity to greet families and have a friendly conversation about their day when they arrive to pick up their children. At school programs and community events visit with families rather than mingling only with your co-workers or friends.

#### Treat family members as individuals.

Communicate with families on a one-to-one basis, and be sure to allow time to visit with them privately. Connect with them as individuals, not just as Jake or Susan’s family member.

#### Listen and respond carefully to family members.

This will show you are really interested in what family members are thinking or feeling and value the knowledge

they have about their child’s growth and development. Take time to show families you care.

- Provide ways for family members to share their concerns. Ask, “What changes have you seen in Toby’s behavior?” Or, “What are Jack’s favorite foods to eat or activities to do at home?”
- Listen carefully when family members talk to you. Maintain appropriate eye contact and other nonverbal clues.
- Ask appropriate questions and invite them to elaborate on what they are saying by stating, “Tell me more.”
- Try to remain silent long enough for family members to gather their thoughts after you have asked a question. Avoid interrupting them or quickly responding with additional comments.
- Respond to family members’ questions and concerns honestly and directly. Share some ideas or resources to help them find the answers to their questions. If you do not know the answer to something, say so.
- Families today often feel isolated from the community. Therefore, become like an extended family for those who want this.

#### Treat family members with respect and consideration.

Greet family members when you see them and use their proper names. Pronounce and spell their names correctly.

Use terms that family members are familiar with such as “children playing together” rather than “cooperative learning.” When you address letters or notes, use “Dear Family Members” rather than “Dear Parents.” If possible, arrange to have relevant program materials translated to the home language of the families in your care or classroom. Use a translator if necessary. Learn a few words in the family’s home language.

#### Honor family confidentiality.

Families are busy and there are many things going on in their lives: deaths, illness, divorce, job challenges, financial worries, and more. These family concerns may have been shared with you by a family member who needed to talk and trusted you. Maintain that trust. Keep personal information confidential (unless it involves child neglect or abuse).

#### Focus on family strengths.

Look for ways to enhance building relationships by focusing on family strengths rather than faults.

- Identify one strength each family in your care has and build on that during the year.
- Avoid labeling families. Instead of thinking Sarah comes from a broken home, shift your thinking to, “Sarah comes from a family with a very supportive grandmother.”
- Listen respectfully when children share information about their families. Rather than saying judgmental things like, “Oh, how awful,” try saying something like, “That must worry you.”
- Make sure classroom materials reflect the cultural groups and family compositions of the families of those in your care. This is a very clear sign that you value each child’s family.
- Try to look at things from the family’s point of view. An example that can help you appreciate the family’s situation might be to think, “This is my only child’s first day of school.”
- Provide positive feedback to families about their child’s progress. Comments or short notes about things both you and the family are working on together go a long way toward helping families become partners in the educational process.

Share control with families by including them as partners in the care and education of their children. Interact with them in ways they feel most comfortable, whether it be a phone call, in person, or electronically. Learn from family members. What words do they use and what nonverbal behaviors are working? And finally, collaborate with family members on decisions regarding their child’s care and educational experience. Decide together on certain goals for the children and ways to achieve these goals.

### Promoting Family Involvement

Make frequent attempts to include families in their children’s early education. Use handouts at orientation, create a weekly newsletter (or e-newsletter), or give parents opportunities to volunteer in your classroom. Following are a few of the many practices you could use to promote family involvement.

#### Child Rearing

Provide families with ways to access credible, accurate information through Web sites, digital media, books, or publications on child development.

#### Communicating

Create opportunities for informal conversations between family members and you, such as an open house, coffee klatch, or breakfast with the children at the center. Encourage families to read their child’s daily activity sheet and discuss their child’s day with you.

#### Volunteering

Identify talents, interests, and available times of family members through a survey. Invite family members or extended

family to participate in your program on a one-time or ongoing basis. Activities could include helping with fund-raisers, securing donations, helping with parties, providing supplies for an activity or special program, helping to plan a classroom activity, or sharing a favorite hobby or family custom.

### Learning at Home

Provide calendars that describe simple daily or weekly learning activities that families can try at home with their children. Offer a workshop or include articles in newsletters on ways family members can teach specific early learning skills at home.

### Representing Other Families

Encourage family participation and leadership on center, school, or community advisory councils or committees. Support families as they become involved in advocating for children and families in your community.

### Be Open to Change

Finally, don’t be afraid of change. Avoid old habits that may not be practical for families today. If in the last several years it worked to have a breakfast for dads on the Father’s Day weekend, but this year the kids are really working on a classroom camp out, change to breakfast cooked over a campfire with the dads helping.

Strengthening relationships with families doesn’t need to be a time consuming or overwhelming challenge. The rewards can be great as you strengthen not only your child care setting but also the families with whom you work.

### Resource

“Strengthening Development Appropriate Programs Through Family Involvement” in *Guiding Children’s Social Development: Theory to Practice* by M. Kostelnik, A. Aliren, A. Soderman, K. Gregory, L. and Stein, L., 4th Edition. Albany, New York: Delmar, 2002.

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