

The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections



Hector wonders why Lily's mother never says hello to him. As her family service worker, he goes out of his way to greet her and her child every day when they enter the Head Start program. And yet, Lily's mother doesn't even look at him when he greets her.

You may know the “right” answers when asked if parent engagement is important, but have you had the opportunity to discuss why? While early childhood professionals are expected to reach out to parents, few are specifically trained in how to do it or given the support to cultivate these skills. This gap between what staff feels competent doing and what the program requires can foster frustrations and tensions. Some parents are eager to connect while others seem uninterested or even avoidant. In addition to professional skills, many other factors such as temperament, communication style, and emotional health can play important roles in how a staff member and parent get along. Staff members need the opportunity to share their challenges and successes in engaging parents so they may reflect on how these experiences affect the goals of the program and their own professional growth.

When Making Connections with Parents is a Challenge

Parents, like all of us, have good days and bad days. Parents also come into everyday situations with preconceptions of others as well as styles of communicating that may be challenging to Head Start staff. For example, some parents may seem withdrawn or angry. Other parents may be quiet and uncomfortable or feel intimidated by the very nature of a Head Start Center. Still others may feel unsure or guarded about themselves or their children. It can be difficult to connect with parents who seem avoidant, withdrawn, defensive or hostile, yet these parents are likely the ones who most need our attention and resources.

Hector thinks the lack of response from Lily's mother is a sign that she does not want him to talk to her. He wonders what he could have done to offend her and worries that they have gotten off to a bad start.

Parent responses such as Lily's can be discouraging and intimidating, leaving one feeling frustrated, unsuccessful, and unsure of what to do next. It is important to imagine what might be affecting the parent's response.

CONSIDER:

The important elements of parent communication

- How a parent is given information
- Who is present when this information is given
- How much time the parent has been given to consider the information

Each one of these elements can have a strong effect on the parent's experience and the meaning of the message being delivered.

Putting yourself in the parent's shoes

- How might it feel to hear that a staff member has a concern about your child or you?
- What would help you feel more comfortable in that situation?
- How could the staff person inspire your trust?





Imagining the conversation with these questions in mind can give you new perspective and encourage you to be more supportive when a parent seems unsure.

The effects of stress and depression on parent behavior

Some parents suffering from depression may be quiet or withdrawn. Others may seem angry, distracted or completely avoidant. It is important to resist the temptation to judge a parent's reaction as a reflection of how much he/she cares for his/her child. There may be stressful family, health or emotional factors preventing them from opening up.

The ways personal reactions can affect your professional action

As an early childhood professional, you may claim that "nothing bothers you," and yet this is rarely true. Sometimes it is difficult to separate how a parent feels from how the parent feels about you.

Hector has begun to think that Lily's mother may be more uncomfortable with him than with other family service workers because he is a man. Hector believes his presence as a male role model is a positive influence on the children in the program, and at the very least is a factor he can't change to make the relationship go more smoothly. This leaves him confused about how he should approach Lily's mother.

Do not take parent or child behavior personally. In Hector's case, he does not have enough information to draw conclusions about Lily's mother. And yet, admitting his impressions about the mother and how they make him feel will help Hector think more clearly about the next steps he should take.

Acknowledging when a parent's behavior causes discouragement, anger, or fear can help you understand how your response to that parent may be affected by those feelings. Also remember that you are part of a team of professionals; share your impressions and questions with your supervisor.

Strategies for Engaging Parents

Each parent connection begins and is maintained through a positive framework of strategies designed to help parents build trust and feel welcomed. Consider these strategies:

- **Establish a friendly relationship with parents**, even if it only involves smiling and saying hello and goodbye. Remember, these small daily exchanges over time are powerful building blocks in making connections with a parent.

When you need to talk to a parent about concerns regarding their child, **start by mentioning some of the child's strengths, and the strengths of the parent.** Be authentic; mention examples of strengths and weaknesses that the parent can recognize. For example, "Sam loves to read. It is clear you have introduced him to books. Have you ever noticed that sometimes he has a hard time following directions?"

- **Try to find a common goal:** Common interest in the well-being of the child should underlie all communication. Remember, parents want to parent their children well. Everyone at Head Start, parents and teachers, truly want the best for each child, even if he/she is overwhelmed, exhausted and/or angry.

- **Plan Ahead:** Spend some time thinking about what you want to say to a parent, especially when sharing difficult or sensitive information. But remember that being prepared to listen is as important as planning what to say.

- **Carefully choose the place, time and manner** in which you share information and ask questions of a parent. If you are too angry, busy or scared, do not approach him/her; think about the best time and person to approach the parent. Another person at the Head Start can also speak to the parent. It may be worthwhile to set an example of how you can work with a collaborative team at the Head Start program on how to share information and ask questions of a parent.

- **Consider a parent's confidentiality** when planning to talk to him/her about concerns. Choose a time and location that is comfortable and private.

- **Try to really listen** to what they are saying and communicate back to them what you perceive without judging them. This is an opportunity to show your respect for what the parent has to say.





- **Avoid interpreting a parent’s difficulties as a personal affront to you:** Remember, their behavior is often about them, not you. Understanding why parents are angry at you or others is part of the process. Sometimes it means listening past the anger in order to understand what provoked it.
- **Remember you are not alone:** Reaching out to parents who might be depressed is a group effort. Do not forget to seek out support from your colleagues, including your supervisor, team members, and available program consultants.
- **Respect the parent’s needs and timing:** Do not give up hope or get discouraged or angry if your suggestions are not followed. We all have our own timing and sometimes your suggestions might be a seed that is planted one day, takes root, and blooms many months later. For example, if you are concerned that the parent is impatient or overly harsh while dropping off their child, you could say, “It can be frustrating to get little ones out the door and across town.” By identifying with the parent’s frustration, staff can open doors to communication. We have to be able to have a conversation with each other before we can work together to solve a problem.

- **Reflecting on your feelings about working with a parent can help you be more professionally productive.** By acknowledging the emotions that come up during parent interactions, you can focus on how to contribute positively to the engagement process.

After discussing his questions and concerns with some of his fellow family service workers, Lily’s teacher, and his supervisor, Hector decides to continue his strategy of making consistent friendly contact with Lily’s mother. One day, a couple of weeks later, Lily says hello to Hector. When he smiles in response, Lily’s mother smiles too and says, “Good Morning.” Knowing this provides an opportunity to connect, he adds, “It is good to see you and Lily. How are you both doing today?” Hector knows this is an important start he can build on in the weeks to come.

For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

Parenting, Depression, and Hope: Reaching Out to Families Facing Adversity

Understanding Depression Across Cultures

Fostering Resilience in Families Coping with Depression: Practical Ways Head Start Staff Can Help Families Build on Their Power to Cope

Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?

Trainings:

Module One: *The Benefits and Challenges of Engaging Parents*

Perspective Taking

“What Is Depression?” 1

Module Two: *The Program Climate and You*

“What Is Depression?” 2

Additional Resources:

Koralek, Derry, ed. *Children Spotlight on Young Children and Families*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2007.



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