



What do staff know about children? What do parents know about children?¹

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A 'RESPECT' BACKGROUND PAPER

Introduction

Throughout the international field of early childhood education, good communication between parents and staff is seen as essential to high-quality care and education of young children because it can:

- improve children's cognitive and social development, increase their educational success and improve their relationships with staff and with their peers (See Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000)
- benefit children's development by improving parents' understanding of appropriate educational practices in the home and in centers, thus increasing their ability to support their children's development (Gelfer, 1991)
- improve children's educational outcomes, especially literacy (Cone, 1993; Hannon, 1995; Cairney, 1997.)

However, the international research literature has reported consistently that staff-parent relationships are often strained and not always meaningful (Kasting, 1994), with staff struggling to know how best to communicate with parents (Wright-Sexton, 1996), often anxious about it (Studer, 1993/94) and reluctant to do it (Huiira, 1996). Some researchers see problems in staff-parent communication as the result of inadequate staff training in communication (Laloumi-Vidalas, 1997) or of cultural differences between staff and parents (Gonzalez-Mean, 1992; Espinosa, 1995; Coleman & Churchill, 1997). Other researchers trace the problems to conflict between staff and parents about what constitutes appropriate education for young children (Hyson, 1991; Rescoria, 1991). For example, some researchers have found that parents valued early academic work more than teachers did, questioning the value of the self-directed, play-based programs that teachers advocated (Stipek et al, 1994; Unteregger-Mattenberger, 1995). Other research has shown that staff believe that parents need to know more about children to improve their capacity to help children's learning (Gelfer, 1991; Stipek et al, 1994; Laloumi-Vidali, 1996).

Our own research has found that many of the problems in staff-parent relationships arise because many early childhood staff see their developmental knowledge of the child as more important than parents' knowledge of the child. Staff regard their expert knowledge of the child as scientific (based on developmental psychology), objective and applicable to all children; whereas parents' knowledge is anecdotal, subjective and applicable only to specific children. When staff think that parents are ignorant about what and how to teach

their children, they often devise 'parent involvement' programs to rectify this.

More specifically, our research in Australian has found that:

- Involving parents in program design and delivery is often problematic and complex, *irrespective* of its form or content, because it requires staff to equate parents' personal beliefs and understandings with their own professional and expert knowledge of the child. This equation conflicts with staff's self-image as experts in child development – a self-image created and reinforced by pre-service and in-service training. The more that staff proclaim their professional expertise, the more likely they are to dismiss or ignore parents' untrained and unprofessional knowledge of their children as inadequate, misguided, or just plain wrong (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000).
- From that perspective, good staff-parent relations means staff imparting the truth about children to people who lack it and good parent involvement requires parents to admit their ignorance. However, several staff experienced conflict between their professional identities as experts and their desire to create equitable relations with parents.
- Staff prefer and rely on informal, verbal channels of communication with parents, because they believe that formal communication is misinterpreted more easily, with misinterpretations being hard to correct.
- Staff recognize that good communication with parents is essential, but also that it is highly complex and problematic – and that the problems are worsened by the consistent lack of time in which to practice it.

Against this background, building relationships between early childhood staff and families can be tricky sometimes. Building partnerships with parents doesn't just happen, it needs to be actively worked on over time.

Building positive and respectful partnerships: some broad principles

Staff who seek to create positive and respectful partnerships with families can draw on the principles of anti-bias education (e.g. Dermon-Sparks et al, 1989) to help them to communicate equitably with parents. These principles suggest that staff need to work hard to:

- offer all parents equal access to them and time with them; check their own reactions to parents for possible stereotypes; avoid discriminatory language at all times; and use inclusive terms for family members such as 'parent' or 'guardian' rather than 'father' or 'mother'.
- provide all parents with the same basic information about the centre and encourage them to share information with staff, while being aware that parents from a culture different from one's own may not feel comfortable about disclosing personal family information. Sometimes this may require staff to provide information in languages other than English.
- ensure that all parents know about any current and planned opportunities to become involved in the centre and that they can all participate in meetings (this includes ensuring that the meeting space is accessible to people with disabilities).

(adapted from Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2003)

We have argued elsewhere (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002, 1999a & b) that substantive parent involvement implies that parents' knowledge of their specific child is at least as valuable as staff's professional and expert knowledge of children in general. If parents are to be really involved in their children's lives at a centre, parents' understandings of the child and their views about what should happen to her/him must carry equal weight with and challenge staff's status as professionals and experts, who have the 'facts' of child development to guide their work, which is why staff-parent relationships are often strained and stressful. Early childhood staff claim to be professionals on the basis that they use systematic and theory-based models to create 'the truth' about the child. Parents claim that their anecdotal knowledge of their specific child is 'the truth' because they witnessed the actions and events on which that knowledge is based.

Towards respectful and equitable knowledge-power relations and partnership-building

When early childhood staff talk about parent involvement (often interpreted as building partnerships with parents), they can mean one or more of the following:

- fundraising
- helping with snack times or special occasions at the centre
- contributing to the management committee
- assisting with centre excursions and outings
- writing and/or distributing newsletters
- sharing a special skill or interest with the children.

Whilst these forms of parent involvement can help services to work, they do not involve families in

decisions about how their child will be cared for and educated. They are not creating equitable relationships between partners. Partnerships imply shared decision-making and equitable knowledge-power relationships. The more that parents and staff share decision-making, the more their relationship is a partnership. Partnerships are relationships formed to achieve a common goal and each partner makes an equal but distinct contribution to achieving the common goal. For example, each partner contributes their equal but distinct knowledge to decisions about what happens to a child.

Our research suggests that an early childhood program is most likely to create substantive parent involvement if the staff learn to:

- Give parents a real voice without feeling that this directly threatens staff's professional identity and expertise
- Negotiate with parents shared meanings and understandings about who their child is and how s/he should be treated. These negotiations should 'work' equally well for both sides and eschew exclusive claims to 'truth'.
- Allocate sufficient time to negotiate with parents face-to-face and in ways that rest on and continually re-create shared understandings of the child

We can use our knowledge to exercise our power in inequitable ways that silence other people or in equitable ways that give everybody a say. We can reflect on the knowledge-power relationships that we are creating by asking questions such as:

- Who benefits from how I use my knowledge in my relationships with families?
- Whose voice is privileged in my relationships with families – parents', children's or staff's?
- Which parents, children and staff benefit from relationships as they are at present? Which ones don't?

Good family-staff partnerships require and imply a commitment to regular face-to-face communication in which each partner seeks to understand the other's perspectives or 'truths'. This requires staff to:

- reserve judgement about parenting styles and about parents' hopes for their children until they understand why families do things the ways that they do
- maintain contact and create dialogue that helps them to understand why families do what they do
- resolve conflicts through negotiation and compromise
- offer bilingual support to parents with languages that differ to those that the staff use
- learn about the ways in which different cultural beliefs and values affect how we relate to children

- support families in their efforts to feel pride in their particular ethnic and 'racial' heritage and in their parenting efforts
- encourage families to share stories with you about their culture, its development and its struggles
- work with families in small groups on specific projects, such as cultural celebrations in the centre, developing anti-bias policies and advocating equity within the wider community, so that shared understandings can be built over time.

(Adapted from Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000 and drawing on Espinosa, 1995; Swick 1992; Gonzalez-Mena, 1992)

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