Infants & Toddlers

Family Engagement

Promoting Family Engagement: Communicating With Families

Infant and toddler development occurs so quickly. When families and caregivers communicate and share what is observed and experienced, it creates opportunities to better understand and support this rapid developmental growth. Asking questions, communicating and listening with families helps support continuity of care between home and the care setting. This lesson will highlight ways to collect and share information with families in caring, supportive and easy-to-understand ways.

Objectives

- Recognize the importance of communicating with families.
- Identify different ways of communicating with families and learn the benefits of effective communication.
- Acknowledge and embrace different communication styles.

Learn

Know

Communicating with others can be both simple and complex at the same time. Have you ever been surprised that someone misunderstood a message you thought you had communicated quite clearly?

Communication between caregivers and families occurs during daily hellos and goodbyes, as well as in more formal activities such as a planned home visit or a family meeting. All of these opportunities require you to be aware and courteous of the family's characteristics, including tone, choice of words, and nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and body language. When you are aware of these characteristics, you communicate in ways that are more supportive and respectful of families while keeping in mind this may be the family's first experience with an early care and learning program. Families will be eager to know how their infant or toddler is doing, and you can support comfortable and effective communication by offering encouraging responses and asking for clarification if something is not understood.

Importance of Communicating with Families

Communication is the basis for any strong relationship and it is especially important with respect to family engagement in early childhood education programs (Baker & Manfredi-Petitt, 2004). Communicating with families is about listening, sharing information and working toward a common understanding.

When families communicate with you openly and effectively, you can better understand what is happening at home, as well as what goals, hopes and dreams families have for their infants and toddlers. When you communicate effectively, families are better able to understand what is happening during their infant's or toddler's day and how they are developing and learning. Make a point of communicating with parents both when they drop off and pick up their infant or toddler. If you speak with a family in the morning but are not in the room during pick up, communicate to another caregiver what you were told by the family and what should be relayed to them about their child's day. When you and families communicate and share information, you can become even more aware of the infant or toddler's strengths and possible areas of need in an effort to work together and support ongoing development.

Ways of Communicating with Families

It is crucial that programs use communication practices that are sensitive to the diverse language and cultural backgrounds of the families they serve. Each family is teaching their young children how to be successful within their own culture, beliefs, and traditions.

Communication preferences may be related to cultural or community values, priorities and commitments. For example, Sohn and Wang (2006) found that Korean-born mothers, even those who spoke English well, had difficulty communicating with teachers face-to-face. Their preference was to communicate with teachers through email or program letters. When communicating with families, it is also important to understand and consider:

- Different forms of greetings and use of titles that may be preferred
- Male and female roles defined within various cultures
- Non-verbal communication and body language (e.g. eye contact, use of touching, use of physical space)

You can ask questions to learn how families would like to communicate about their infant's or toddler's day. Some families may prefer face-to-face conversations while others prefer telephone or regular (daily) notes. Other ways of communicating with families include:

- Program website
- Email
- Family meetings or conferences
- Newsletters
- Articles of interest

Families will also help set the pace and expectations for their communication with you. It is important to acknowledge it can take time for families to feel safe, comfortable and friendly. Different forms of communication can play an important role in easing the process. Using a combination of communication styles with families might work best for their needs to be met. Other ideas may be to translate written communication into the home languages of the families supported in the program and consider having translators that are regularly available for face-to-face or phone communication.

Having Difficult Conversations with Families

Conversations with families can be difficult for a number of reasons. Sometimes, you might worry that families will be upset by something you share and even decide to withdrawal their child from your program. You may also worry the family will stop communicating with you altogether. While conversations with families about concerns may be difficult, they can provide you an opportunity to express your care and support for a family, as well as the infant's or toddler's development and learning, in a thoughtful way.

Misunderstandings can also occur as your views and understanding of a situation may differ from that of a family member. In these instances, it is helpful to consider the multiple perspectives to a situation. For example:

Example Situation

Mother picks up her toddler at the end of the day. It's the third day in a row her daughter has come home messy and with dirty clothes (grass stains and finger paint).

Your Perspective

It's important to offer toddlers multiple sensory experiences throughout the day. Sensory experiences support early learning, growth and development.

Family Perspective

We spend money on her clothes and we need to keep them looking nice. We do not go right home after I pick her up and I do not want people thinking I do not keep my daughter clean.

The caregiver takes time to ask the parent questions and finds out the importance of keeping her toddler clean. The caregiver learns that the family believes clothing is directly related to the quality of care given by their family. By sending their child to this early care and learning program, they believed this was like sending their child to "school" and children are to go to school clean and well dressed. This is in part how the family shows their respect for education. The caregiver also talks with the family about how sensory experiences are part of learning experiences and often involve messes. Through discussion, the caregiver and family decide that the caregiver will change the toddler's clothes during messy sensory play and/or ensure she is covered up.

As a caregiver, you want to provide the best possible care for the infants and toddlers in your program and you have an opportunity to consistently observe and learn about their earliest development. Your observations, notes, screenings and assessments are helpful for identifying strengths and possible areas of need that might arise during the early years. Sharing these concerns with families is the first step to a supportive planning process.

See the handout, *Sharing Concerns with Families*, for additional ideas and resources.

Communication Benefits for Infants and Toddlers

Communication with families is critical to the process of creating supportive interactions and experiences for infants and toddlers. Infants and toddlers can benefit from effective communication between families and caregivers in the following ways:

- It helps both families and caregivers to be aware of the infant's and toddler's needs on a particular day.
- When positive, healthy communication is being modeled, infants and toddlers learn skills that will help them in their own social development.
- Infants and toddlers can establish healthy relationships with their caregivers when they see that their families trust and communicate with them.
- The caregiver can build more effectively on the infants' and toddlers' interests and developmental needs.
- Connection between families and caregivers is an important part of developing a high-quality early care and learning environment.

See

Watch the video below to learn about having difficult conversations with families. Refer to the content two sections above for more ideas on how to communicate about difficult situations.

Do

There are multiple ways to communicate with families and share information. Try an idea below to communicate:

- Use a back-and-forth notebook to share highlights from the infant or toddler's day; the family, in turn, can refer to observations and any particular needs of the infant or toddler for that day.
- Create a folder for each family — provide a space and way to send daily notes home and collect information from the family.
- Schedule home visits or conferences with families several times a year.

- Offer walk-in conference times outside the normal workday hours to allow all parents or caregivers to attend and participate.
- Create a lending library to include books on parenting, ways to support infant and toddler development, ways to play with infants and toddlers, etc.
- Create and offer home story bags that include notebooks for the family to add photos, record comments or write messages for their infant or toddler.
- Arrange for a guest speaker to share information and present on topics based on families' interests.
- Ask families to share a "Me Book" starring their infant or toddler that includes pictures and activities the infant or toddler enjoys doing.
- Take photos of infants and toddlers engaged in play activities and learning. Write captions for the pictures and give them to their families.

Watch this video to learn more about the ways you can communicate with families. You can also download the attachment, *Family Conferences*, to learn more about holding a conference with a family as an opportunity to share information, observations and questions.

Sharing Concerns With Families

Use these best practices when communicating with families about topics of concern

Family Conferences

Refer to these ways to make your family conferences even more effective

Explore

The *Things I Would Like to Know* activity outlines questions you can ask yourself when considering the care you would provide an infant or toddler. After making the list of questions, consider creating a form that you could use with families in an effort to learn from them and help answer the questions. Share your thoughts or responses with a trainer, coach, or administrator.

Things I Would Like to Know

Develop questions about a child or their family to better understand their needs

Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator

Apply

In the *Conversation Starters* activity, think about different ways to communicate and start conversations with the families you support. Share your thoughts or responses with a trainer, coach, or administrator.

Conversation Starters

Build relationships with families as you develop ways to engage them in conversation about their child

Demonstrate

Q1 True or false? Communication preferences may be related to cultural or community values, priorities and commitments. *

- ○ True
- ○ False

Q2 A caregiver notices that Jeremy cries when it's time to change his diaper. To help support this daily routine for Jeremy, the caregiver might: *

- ○ Ask another caregiver to change his diaper
- ○ Ask the family questions about the diapering routine at home
- ○ Read Jeremy a book about rabbits

Q3 True or false? Infants and toddlers learn social skills by watching caregivers and their families communicate. *

- ○ False
- ○ True

References & Resources

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