

Communication Basics

Early childhood professionals talk with parents about all kinds of things. Most often, these interactions revolve around enhancing their child's participation in the early childhood program. To foster true partnerships, a conscious effort to promote open communication is key. When parents have a child with a disability, effective communication is especially critical. Whether it is a note, a parent conference, or an informal conversation at the end of the day, every interaction should be:

- **Timely** Whether it is good news, a regular update, or a bad situation getting worse, communicate with parents often and regularly. Share both exciting and difficult news at the first opportunity. When parents see you as open and approachable, they will more likely share information with you in a timely manner as well.
- **Reciprocal** Expect to learn as much as you share as you communicate with parents. This means listen at least as much as you speak (and maybe more). Avoid approaching parents about an issue with the solution already clearly defined in your mind. Leave room in your problem-solving for parent feedback and suggestions. Make certain that both your actions and words reflect your goal to form a partnership with them.
- **Constructive** The purpose of parent/provider partnerships is to provide one another with valuable information, insights, and knowledge about the child. This is best achieved by offering suggestions, asking for feedback, and joint decision-making. As a professional, you should avoid venting, criticizing, or patronizing parents.
- **Honest** Tell parents what you really mean because you want them to tell you what they really mean. If you do not know how to position their child so he can easily play with toys in the water table, be honest enough to say so. It may seem easier to talk around an issue, but a direct approach is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.
- **Respectful** Be slow to judge and quick to give parents the benefit of the doubt. Let families know you respect their privacy and their opinions. Be especially sensitive about cultural, language, and social differences. Let parents find in you an attentive partner in the care and education of their child.
- **Confidential** As you develop trusting relationships with parents, you may be told or given information that they do not share with everyone. A child's diagnosis, medications, therapies, educational goals, or what is happening at home right now are examples of information you should keep confidential. Whenever you describe a child to someone other than the child's parent(s), confidentiality is jeopardized. While it is natural to want to share events of the day, a child's progress, or concerns you have, being a professional requires you to maintain confidentiality and guard each family's right to privacy.



When you follow these guidelines in your interactions with parents, you strengthen the bonds of partnership: respect, appreciation, and trust. Strong parent partnerships is the cornerstone of quality care and education for all of the children in your program.

Continue on page 2 ➡

Communication Basics

TRY IT OUT

A small, spiral notebook of lined paper with space for the date and brief comments can be used to share important information. You can pass along observations about a child's experiences day-to-day in your program, and the child's parents can write about what happens at home, comment about child care activities, or answer/ask questions about what you have written. Either of you may tuck in a child's picture or drawing. The notebook travels from school to home and back with the child's belongings.

These notebooks can be used to alert each other to changes in the child or to follow up important discussions. After a conversation about toilet training, for example, a teacher might write a note that summarizes the discussion and attach an article or the name of a book on toilet learning. The child's progress towards independence in toileting at home and in the program could be recorded as each milestone is reached.



The notebook should never be a substitute for personal communication, but it is an excellent tool that promotes open and frequent communication between parents and providers. Keeping a notebook for children enrolled in your program can be a wonderful way for parents of children with disabilities to note their child's progress and a way for both of you to share mutual experiences. This record can quickly become a treasured part of a family's experience in your program.

RESOURCES

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/>
- Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards <http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php>
- Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices <http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices>

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- The Registry Training Calendar <https://www.the-registry.org>
- WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar <http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/>
- MECA Disability Support Program (DSP) <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/meca/disability>

This document was modified for use by the State of Wisconsin from the **Making Family Connections tip sheet** created by Montana Child Care plus+, <http://www.ccplus.org/Products.html>.

Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge is a cross-departmental grant that uses the talent, experience, and vision of three Wisconsin State Departments: Department of Children and Families, Department of Public Instruction, and Department Health Services. The contents of this document were developed under the RTTT-ELC grant. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Federal Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.