

# Parent Aware Tip Sheets

## Getting to Know Families

### Why is it important to build relationships with the families you work with?

Building a positive relationship starts with the first contact family members have with the program or provider and continues at least until the children leave the program and sometimes beyond. Unlike most elementary school situations, parents choose their child's early caregivers. Most parents visit at least a few programs or providers before selecting a program.

### What are some benefits to building relationships with families?

When caregivers and family members build open, positive relationships everyone benefits.

- Parents benefit when they know they can trust and count on the caregivers they have selected for their child's care. Parents feel less guilt, are more at ease, and have confidence in the caregiver's ability to meet the child's needs, even when difficult situations arise.
- Caregivers benefit from the information parents share about the child. Caregivers also get satisfaction from parents who see and appreciate the job that the caregiver does in supporting the child's development.
- Children benefit when parents and caregivers share information and agree about child care/early education practices and goals. Children get better care, they do better developmentally, and are more likely to have smooth transitions when parents and caregivers communicate, share information, solve problems together, and model trusting relationships.

### How should you approach a first meeting with a family?

Family members often visit a program or a provider before they enroll their child. Whenever possible, caregivers should encourage a visit before enrollment. This visit is a chance for the family members to decide if the program meets their needs and matches with their beliefs, values, and goals for the child. When families visit it gives them a chance to see the program in action. Family members can make the best decision about a program or provider when the first meeting includes:

- A conversation about the program's mission or philosophy. Caregivers can explain the goals of the program, how it operates, and what the caregiver is most proud of. This information gives the parents a sense of how well the program matches the family's values and beliefs.
- A description of the program's policies. Parents should be given a written copy of the program's policies in the form of a Family Handbook or Policy Manual. A written document is helpful for families who may want to reflect on the information or share the information with other family members who will help in the decision-making process. Whenever possible, translate written materials into the home languages of families served by the program.
- Plan for the home language spoken by family members. Provide interpreters for family members who do not speak the same language as the caregiver. Explain what languages are spoken in the program and provide a written policy explaining the language or languages used in the program. For example,

*At Busy Bee Child Care Center our caregivers speak English and Spanish. English is the primary language of instruction. This means that most activities, including group times, are conducted in English. Caregivers will also explain concepts, vocabulary and new ideas in Spanish to support children's emerging English language skills and to expose children to a language other than English. Caregivers will respond to children when they use either English or Spanish.*

- A conversation about the family's needs, interests, values, and goals for the child. Parents want to get to know their child's caregivers during a visit to the program. The first visit is also a chance to hear from the family and to begin developing a relationship. Caregivers should get the conversation started by asking a few open-ended questions, such as:
  - How would you describe your child?
  - What are some of your favorite activities to do with your child?
  - What goals would you like us to work on this year?
  - How would you describe your child's eating habits? What foods does your child like?
  - How does your child go to sleep?
  - How would you describe your parenting style?
  - What celebrations are important to your family?
  - What language or languages do you speak at home?
  - How does your child usually respond to new situations?
  - What experiences has your child had in groups of children?
  - What are you looking forward to from the program?
  - What worries you about enrolling your child in a program like this one?

## What should you do to build an ongoing relationship with a family?

Once a family has enrolled their child, the relationship continues. Caregivers and families have ongoing opportunities to get to know one another and to interact for the child's benefit. The following suggestions can help caregivers make the most of their communications with families and build trusting relationships:

- Seek out conversations with families. Take advantage of times when family members visit the program each day to drop off or pick up the child. Make a point to engage in informal conversations. These informal conversations build familiarity and trust.
- Schedule regular meetings to discuss the child's development. Informal conversations are helpful for sharing information about the child's day. Caregivers and parents also need regular opportunities to have more formal, in-depth conversations about the child's development and the ways in which the program is meeting the child's needs.
- Ask parents for their feedback. On a regular basis ask parents about how well the program is meeting their needs and the needs of the child. Caregivers can conduct formal, written surveys; gather information through suggestion boxes; organize parent advisory groups; or schedule meetings with families to discuss their feedback.
- Listen. One of the best ways to show families that you care and are committed to an ongoing, positive relationship is to truly listen to their feedback, concerns or suggestions. Truly listening will also provide caregivers with the best information about families, their needs, their stresses, and their hopes for their child.

- Remember that parenting is not easy. Most parents work very hard to do a good job in parenting despite the fact that few have had any formal parenting education or training in child development. Being a parent is a challenging role that most parents fulfill while they are also employees, spouses, community members and more. The many stresses of daily life can impact any parent at nearly any time. Combining these stresses with the guilt many parents feel at leaving their child in the care of others can produce a very emotional climate. Caregivers who exhibit empathy, understanding and patience are most successful in getting to know family members and in building and maintaining positive relationships.