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I want to thank Sara Holmboe for sharing her notes. They saved me hours of transcribing from newsprint onto paper. Her notes checked with the newsprint lists were basically the same, often better written. We all benefitted from her ability to take clear organized notes and her willingness to share them.

## **Working with Parents to Form an Educational Partnership for Their Children**

Harriet Heath, PhD

MNAFEE 04/13/18

In planning a workshop like this one, I list the ideas that I want to be sure are covered. They aren't always, but I can add them in the summary of the workshop. They are added here in the orange/tan colored font. The writing in black font is from Sara's notes checked against the work we did on newsprint. Hope your reading all this brings back our stimulating conversation and some exciting ideas you are implementing in your work.

As you remember the workshop centered around a series of questions. These questions are in bold print.

### **What is Partnership?**

- Working together / collaborative / learning from each other / teamwork / sharing / supporting
- Joint responsibilities of both parties
- a COMMON CAUSE

In our discussion the group emphasized the working together, collaborative part of the definition and I added the joint responsibilities and common cause component drawing from Webster's Standard Dictionary, which defines a partnership as –“a relationship usually involving close cooperation between parties having specific joint rights and responsibilities in.. a common enterprise.” Common enterprise is the development of the child.

### **What would make the perfect partnership between childcare providers and parents?**

- Trust (in the people, program, and process)
- Mutual respect
- Being able to relate
- Transparency (on both sides) - being open in communication, wishes, needs
  - Keeping an open mind
  - Looking through each others' lenses and seeing their perspective
  - Communication is fully RECIPROCAL
- Common understanding and a common goal

What matters to you might not matter to them (and vice versa)

- No assumptions (you might have to start at bare bones)
- Having parent buy-in, engagement
- Realization that “partnership” will look different depending on the family
- Needing more than the parent as a partner
- Commitment to making time and space (on both sides)
- Being CREATIVE with how you approach (the McDonalds analogy)  
Being able to meet people where they are at (and physical space too)
- Highly valued and abundantly funded!!  
How can you have partnerships with families if you don't have the support from your own district
- Multiple partnerships(outside of education and also within our own program)
- Parents (and others) knowing the importance of early education from the womb!
- Everyone is flexible and open to change
- Cultural/diversity sensitivity
- No boundaries or limitations

My notes also included having a common set of values and common beliefs about what children need to grow and develop.

#### **What is OUR responsibility? What do we bring?**

- Be a good listener
- Empathetic, nonjudgmental, patient, approachable
- Bring your best
- Be knowledgeable (but not a know-it-all)
- Don't make assumptions
- Programmatically: keep kids safe, be nurturing, provide research-based programming  
Stressing social, emotional, AND cognitive skills  
To advocate for what we know is best for kids!
- See the greatest potential in everyone (strengths-based approach)
- Creative approaches - how can we best serve families?
- To understand the issues that families are dealing with - WHY they aren't showing up, etc.  
Mental, physical health

#### **What is THEIR responsibility? What do we expect of parents?**

- Commitment - to show up, to do the work, to be engaged, responsible, reliable  
open communication
- To try things more than once
- To be there for the kids - be involved and engaged - be present
- Put down devices!

- Transparency and Vulnerability - but remember that not all parents themselves are even aware of what is going on
- Recognizing the “gray area” - there are never perfect answers

We did not have time to explore the parental role in great detail. I find it wise to remember that parents provide continuity for the child. They have a body of information that is vital to understanding the child because they have known the child since conception or when the child came under their care. Second the parent will continue on being involved with the child after the child has left early childhood programs.

Teachers and care givers expect children to come to school ready to learn and participate. That means parents have seen their children are well rested and well nourished, exercised and not stressed. It means they have been kept safe. It means that the children are ready to play, socialize and learn. They are curious and motivated to learn. The parental role is complex and long lasting. Trite as it is to say, having it done well makes the work of the early childhood educator easier and more easily successful.

**\*\*But it is OUR job to ask “Why” - to not judge, and to figure out their reasons WHY they are not following through**

**What are reasons families are NOT meeting our ideals?**

Societal issues - we all want “quick fixes” and something easy without the time and effort

- Lack of education/awareness about how their mental health is impacting themselves and their kids
- So much else going on in their lives

Our workshop time was running out and I wanted to get to the next question, there for we did not cover this topic at all well. Some other items giving more detail should have been:

- Lack time
- Lack of knowledge about their role (Some think their role is over once their children are in school)
- Lack of parenting skills
- Lack of time and energy
- Lazy
- On drugs
- Not involved
- Too busy
- Financial worries
- Fear of school environment

## What are ways of addressing these issues? How can we help them so they CAN do it?

- We can't do/fix it all! But we can look elsewhere for resources...
- Remember the McDonalds analogy (don't blame the customer!)
- Get OUT and go to THEM - physically meet them where they are at; their territory
  - “ECFE Bus” that can travel
    - St. Anthony/New Brighton has a van
    - Can serve as a “common area” when a physical site isn't available
      - PreK-3 Initiative to identify apartment complexes and doing on-site programming (Anoka Hennepin)
      - “ECFE at the Park” with activities (Farmington)
  - Use of Technology
    - Texting to Parents (Think Small has resources)
    - Parentopia (St. Paul) - approaching parents online
    - E-mail pictures of ongoing activities – send note if time explaining importance of activity
  - ABE/ESL partnerships
  - Using more personal touch (vs. handouts and flyers going home in backpacks)
    - Make that personal connection
    - Make the environment welcoming - simple ways to give parents a break
  - Involve parents in program decisions and planning - hear their voice and listen to needs
    - Parent Advisory Groups
    - Focus groups
  - VALIDATE - where parents are is ENOUGH - supporting parents where they are at
    - “I'm glad you're here!” / “I appreciate what you bring to the group”
  - Resources through Early Childhood Screening for both children and families (so you don't “lose” families after screening)
    - Make sure resources are ACCESSIBLE - in different languages, at appropriate literacy levels, not intimidating
      - Providing picture books vs. books with words for families who are not as literate
- Make conferences time for talking – provide examples of children's work out for parents to examine before conference to discuss, talk about and plan during conference.
- Share at sessions end something a child has done that day. Maybe choose one or two children to focus on one day, another couple another date
- Give parental tidbits of information
  - How you handle medications is teaching your child about good and bad drugs and how to deal with them
  - How your child drives her trike of big wheel is the first lesson in learning how to drive.

## Community Partnerships

- Libraries
- Mental Health providers (for both children and parents)
- Clinics and medical facilities WIC/SNAP
- Community Centers/Apartment Complexes
- Food Shelves
- Parent education programs
- Parent support centers
- Parent information on the internet  
How to assess the relevance and usefulness of information on the internet.

## What MORE can we do on a larger scale??

- Invite school board members to observe a class
- Encourage families to share their stories and speak up when needs are not being met through current programming
- ADVOCACY - get involved with policy, legislative happenings
- \*\*Can we make the assumption that we share the same needs? Not always - how do we maneuver that?
- Go to board meetings!
- Look to the district but also beyond
- Keep educating others - even those closest to us! - the more people you have “singing your song,” the more support you have and the more your voice will be heard!  
BUILD your song if you haven’t built it yet!

In looking over the answers to my questions my concern is that early childhood educators will take on more than they have time or energy for. One of you wrote about what to do next. I’d say take a deep breath and decide based on what is more important and still manageable.

We in early childhood have the opportunity to start parents on building their relationship with their children’s educational programs. It is a great opportunity and can only be done with thinking about and planning for. Best wishes to you as you continue fulfilling this part of your role as an educator of young children.

Resources:

Scientific American - “What Makes a Good Parent?”

Heather Forbes - Trauma-Informed Care

Heath, H. (2000). *Using your values to raise your child to be an adult you admire*. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press.

Several of you mentioned in your evaluation that you wondered how to deal with values either to help parents identify theirs or when parents had different values

from those of the educational institution. My book gives very specific directions of one way of helping parents identify and use their values. The chapter on how parenting partners can reconcile when their values are different can be used as a method for helping educators and parents deal with their differences. Values are a very potent way of helping parents face differences and deal with them and of giving parents direction as to what they want for their children.

McDermott, Dana (2008) *Developing Caring Relationships Among Parents, Children, Schools, and Communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Gives many ideas for how teachers and parents can work cooperatively for the good of the children involved.