

Building Relationships

Early childhood teachers and the community

by Diane Schulz

Early childhood education is first and foremost about establishing a base on which to build life-long learning. Early childhood educators dream about well-rounded adults in the distant future who

will be productive citizens as well as happy, healthy family members.

It is no surprise that these well-rounded adults are successful because:

- They have a strong sense of who they are. They utilize their strengths, yet are keenly aware of their opportunities for growth.
- They strive to live a healthy life to maintain the stamina to continue.

- They have a strong spiritual base and see themselves as part of a larger whole.
- They thirst for new opportunities to learn.
- They develop relationships with diverse groups.

- They actively participate to improve life in their community.

Our society hopes young children will grow into well-rounded adults. Yet, we struggle to make the connection between what we want them to be and *how* we expect they will become what we want them to be.

We know that children watch and model the behavior of the adults in their lives. Because we are becoming increasingly enlightened about the breadth of learning that occurs in the first five years of a child's life, it stands to reason that early childhood teachers play a significant role in the modeling of this behavior. To enhance their ability to develop well-rounded children, these teachers must draw upon resources outside of themselves to strengthen their own life experiences.


An effective early childhood educator is more than just someone who knows developmental stages, effectively manages behavior, and develops a plan of activity to help children grow. Exceptional teachers draw upon relationships outside of work to enhance their work with children. Relationships between teacher and the community are a great asset to the teacher's work, but are often overlooked in terms of value.

These relationships occur through many avenues. They may be developed through a church, professional, or civic organization, participation in a wellness activity, involvement in a cultural center, or by networking with others with a special skill or hobby. In a quest to find examples of the community relationships of teachers who are considered highly effective, I found the teachers themselves hadn't given much thought about how relationships developed through opportunities outside of work affect their work. Yet when encouraged to think about the impact of community relationships, they could cite many benefits for their classroom.

Teachers identified a variety of community relationships that enhance their teaching:

■ Parent support groups and educational offerings

As parents themselves, teachers actively seek to learn parenting techniques as their own children progress through various developmental stages. Opportunities for learning occur through formal and informal parent networks, educational offerings, and articles available in parenting journals and other media. Teachers who are also themselves parents, say they feel more connected to client parents



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because of their own parenting experiences. They also feel more empathy for those moving through various developmental challenges with their children.

■ Wellness programs and clubs

A number of teachers indicate they are active participants at a health club or in a weight reduction program. The lessons they learn about their own behavior translate into encouraging appropriate wellness activities and routines for the children in their classroom. Examples shared include even simple things like making sure children have adequate opportunity for water breaks and that they are provided water throughout the day as juice and milk are routinely provided at snacks and meals. Teachers who learn the value of a balance of active and quiet time better read negative behaviors that may be a result of too much sedentary activity.

■ Hobbies

Photography, gardening, craft clubs, and classes not only add to the teacher's feeling of enjoyment and self worth, but also create another opportunity to enhance their teaching. Two teachers at the BryanLGH Child Development Center were active in community plant exchanges and other related activities. They determined that a small, unused courtyard next to the center could be effectively turned into a nature study area for the children. They developed a list of plants that would attract birds and insects and display a variety of plant life for study.

To create the necessary funding to develop the area, they involved the families. By creating a "Nature Center Tree" placed in the entryway of the center from a tree branch and paper leaves, they attracted attention for the cause. Families pulled off leaves that noted items they could donate for the nature center. Making it a family event, the parents and

their children went to select and purchase the items. Many families offered to assist with the refurbishing of the area and volunteered hours of time to do so. Teachers and families together planted and mulched the area. The teachers then created a series of suggested activities and shared their ideas with the other teachers to encourage their use of the area.

■ Community cultural events

Experiences like the Farmer's Market, ethnic festivals, musical extravaganzas, and center for performing arts productions make a difference in what a teacher brings to the classroom. One teacher stated that she seeks out ways to meet people who are different from her. She feels it enhances her communication skills and her ability to understand and accept the different family cultures that are a part of her classroom. Various ethnic festivals provide avenues for better understanding the culture of the families in our community. This translates into opportunities to meet those from other cultures and invite them to participate in the program by sharing something from their culture.

Exposure to performing arts productions is a way one teacher uses her community connections to enhance her classroom. As an active member of Sweet Adelines International for many years, she enhances her teaching in the early childhood setting through music. This teacher encourages the use of different kinds of music and helps other teachers to provide their children with well-rounded musical experiences. She promotes music appreciation through listening, playing instruments, singing songs from different cultures, and music and movement exercises to enhance cognitive learning.

■ Volunteer activities

Many teachers volunteer in programs outside of work. Their volunteer activi-

ties impact their teaching in significant ways. One teacher shares how her work in the local Cystic Fibrosis organization and her church give her a more positive attitude in her work at the center. "I feel I gain insight into the various challenges of individuals and families. I am routinely enlightened by the courage of those who struggle with simple tasks each day and do so with a smile and an obvious joy for living." In addition to seeing the world in a different way, these relationships help her improve communication skills, making her more open to what families share about their needs for the children in her care. She also feels it helps to make her a more effective communicator with co-workers, in problem solving and dealing with conflict.

In addition, this teacher said these relationships help her to organize and prioritize her life, which translates into good organizational skills at work. As an infant provider, organization and prioritization are critical in accomplishing the basic care tasks of feeding and diaper changing. If done well, the end result is a wealth of time that can be dedicated to challenging children to grow by providing developmental experiences focused on a myriad of skills.

"No significant learning happens without a significant relationship."

Dr. James Comer

Great early childhood educators are not just happenstance. They are individuals who bring strengths from all facets of their lives into the classroom with them every day. As a director who is blessed with an abundance of high quality, dedicated, well-rounded individuals on staff, I know that it is the teacher, not the building, equipment, or supplies that are the main "Q" to quality here. Encouraging teachers to develop relationships with the community is enhanced if the program can find ways to utilize their special strengths and recognize them for their commitments to the community.