Family-Professional Partnerships:
Practice That Matches Philosophy

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Noticing that Robert's noncompliant behavior had increased recently, the teacher asked his mother, "Is there anything going on at home?" It seems a reasonable question—children's experiences are important. I'm sure that during my years as a teacher I posed it more than once.

But in telling me about this conversation, Robert's parents provided me with a new perspective. They asked, "We don't think anything is happening at home, but what does the teacher think? Why do we feel like we're on the hot seat? And if there is a problem at home, shouldn't it be our choice if and when to talk about it?"

This conversation stayed with me. How could the scenario more strongly reflect a partnership model? How do our traditional ways of operating fail to support partnerships? The incident prompted me to reflect on larger issues about our work with families.

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Family-professional partnerships

We use words such as *collaboration* and *partnership* to characterize our current approach to family-professional relationships, but they have not always been part of our working models. We are experiencing what has been described as a "new era in the early childhood field's approaches to families" (Powell 1998, 66). Our field is not alone in the use of these concepts. Collaborative and partnering approaches are advocated across society, from education to human services to business. However, as with all shifts in our way of doing business, change is often slow and difficult. Partnership and collaboration are much easier in theory than

Recent articles in *Young Children* have included well-thought-out recommendations for increasing collaboration between families and schools. McBride (1999) provides indicators for family-centered partnerships. Coleman (1997) and Workman and Gage (1997) describe program models and action steps designed to

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increase collaboration and partnership. Powell (1998) conceptualizes provisions aimed at increasing the connections between families and professionals.

What I want to add to these discussions are thoughts about why the formation of partnerships can prove to be more arduous and tenuous than we would hope. By continuing to explore the issues, including the barriers we face, we can ensure that our work reflects and promotes true collaboration—that our practice indeed matches up to the ideals of our philosophy.

Barriers to partnership

Partnerships come in all sizes and shapes. If we aim toward "full and equal" partnerships (Gordon & Williams-Browne 2000), we must strive for relationships marked by shared responsibility and a basic sense of equality. The road to this goal is not without pitfalls, however. In the following, I will examine some of the common obstacles to partnership.

The question of turf

We interact with families almost exclusively on our turf, within the classrooms we maintain. Yet what happens when our work with family members is in a setting where they likely feel much less secure and familiar than we do?

In my own role as a parent I have experienced the strength that turf imparts. One morning, not long after moving and beginning a new program, my then two-year-old daughter was having a difficult time separating from me at drop-off. She wailed and clung to me. I thought I could calm her by helping her become involved in something before leaving. The teacher, operating from a different perspective, said it would be better if I left, and she began to peel my daughter away.

This professional's perspective is not unusual. In one early childhood textbook the separation process is

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described as follows: "Together parents and teachers make a plan, going over the guidelines and ground rules. The teacher takes the lead, encouraging the child to move out from the parent. *The teacher is there to make the decisions regarding the time of actual separation*" (Gordon & Williams-Browne 2000, 281 [emphasis mine]).

Following the teacher's cue that day, I left feeling miserable. It was far too easy for me, even as an early childhood professional myself, to give up my parental expertise and acquiesce to another professional's request. How easy can it be for family members to feel a sense of basic equality and mutuality on the professional's turf?

> WE MUST ASK OURSELVES: *Knowing that we are in charge of our classrooms, what practices do we use that remove families from mutual decisionmaking?*

The nature of trust

The subject of trustworthiness often arises in terms of families trusting the early childhood program, thus validating their choice for their children. Good programs are committed to being trustworthy to families. To what extent, though, has there been a commitment from us to establish *our* sense of trust in families? Kontos, Raikes, and Woods (1983) have documented negativism on the part of professionals toward families. Our literature describes the nature of competitive feelings and the "savior complex" (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer 2001).

As we come to care deeply for the children in our programs, it can become harder to put aside our perceptions of what *should* be. How easy is it to look beyond the ideas we have worked so hard to develop as professionals about what is best for children? Do we find ourselves assuming that if families just knew better—knew what we know—that they would do things differently?

Trust involves time, effort, and, at times, setting aside our own deeply held convictions. Certainly, mistrust can emanate from families toward programs. But the pitfall of professional mistrust of families, the failure to regard trust as a two-way street, represents another barrier toward collaborative partnerships.

> WE MUST ASK OURSELVES: *Do judgment and second-guessing underlie our perceptions of families?*

Differences in expertise

As the early childhood field has built its identity as a profession, we've increased the distance between ourselves and families, because our society's professional models have been traditionally oriented toward the exercise of expert knowledge. However, partnership models call for a move away from previous conceptualizations that portray parents as people in need of our expertise and educational efforts (Powell & Diamond 1995).

The tensions surrounding expertise are created in numerous ways. As a society we've done little to help prepare and support parents for the tasks they face, reinforcing the idea that parents' expertise may be undeveloped or, at best, developing. As a field we have conceptualized our own knowledge base as *developmentally appropriate* or *best* practice, with parents having little input in our definitions of quality (Larner 1996). Finally, many professionals in the field devote innumerable hours to learning more about and reflecting on their work. How can we address these

tensions and utilize our expertise without assuming an expert-versus-novice stance toward families?

The tasks in surmounting this barrier are twofold. First, we must acknowledge that teachers' skills in relating to families, in forming partnerships, are unique and are not guaranteed by the attainment of skills in understanding child development or planning and implementing a program within the classroom. Thus, we need to develop our professional expertise in relating well to other adults. Second, we must consider ways to use our expertise in strengths-based approaches that acknowledge the role of families as more than novice (see Workman & Gage 1997). As a parent I can recall conversations with professionals in which it was clear that I was assumed to be less knowledgeable than I would consider myself (my professional background often wasn't known).

WE MUST ASK OURSELVES: Does our practice fail to distinguish strengths and expertise on the part of parents?

Scope of responsibility

Katz differentiates parenting from teaching by pointing out that the scope of functions under the parents' responsibility is "diffuse and limitless," while for teachers it is "specific and limited" (1995, 165). In other words, what parents do reflects on *everything* about their children. As a teacher I rarely was left feeling responsible for what happened in children's homes (one of the exceptions being, "My child is bringing home words from school that I don't like!"). On the other hand, directly or indirectly, *all* of our conversations with families reflect on them as people rearing children,

whether the behavior in question occurs in the classroom or at home.

What are the consequences of these differences in scope of responsibility? One is that it increases families' vulnerability. As for myself, all my feelings of competence fly out the

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window when I wonder how professionals perceive my adequacy as a parent. How must it be for others who don't have the benefit I do of also being able to relate to teachers as professional colleagues?

A second consequence follows from this vulnerability: family members can develop defensive reactions. Defensiveness is an equal-opportunity pitfall for both professionals and families; I mention it here only because families' increased vulnerability readily begins a cycle leading to defensiveness.

A third consequence is the fuzziness in how responsibility is assigned. A parent I know once received a letter from her child's program explaining that the children were not being particularly attentive to a volunteer music teacher. The letter writer requested that families talk with their children and let them know that more appropriate behavior was expected. This parent's reaction was, "Why am I responsible for this? Isn't it *her* job to manage the classroom? Maybe this is a boring activity, and *she* needs to change." This example vividly portrays the beginning of the cycle of defensiveness.

In the worst-case scenario, a consequence of the differences in responsibility can be blame and recrimination of the family, causing the relationship to further deteriorate.

WE MUST ASK OURSELVES: What is a realistic notion of our joint responsibilities, and how can we reduce the vulnerability families feel in the face of public display of their parenting?

Recommendations for practice

The hurdles just described are important to consider, but they do not inevitably doom the family-professional partnership. Real relationships are both complex and messy by nature and cannot be reduced to recipes, but there are issues we can consider and questions we can ask to guide our work in becoming more effective with families. Some suggestions follow for working to surmount the barriers to collaborative partnerships.

Discuss and practice communication and relationship-building skills. The importance of communication and relationship-building skills is emphasized in all instances of collaborative relationships. Family-professional partnerships require skills in relating to others. However, the attention given to this area through our professional preparation channels is weak (Powell 1998). Acquiring skills in communicating with others, developing empathy, conducting mutual problem solving, and understanding the perspectives of families are prime topics for pre-service and inservice training. Greater attention to these areas of skill and knowledge also can be given in annual staff evaluations and professional growth plans. Professionals from fields in which these skills have been traditionally highly emphasized, such as therapy and counseling, may be valuable consultants.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: How can I approach problems in mutual ways? How are families likely to feel in this situation?

Explore the hidden messages in our common language and ways of operating. In the opening example, the parent did not feel like a member of a collaborating team, although I imagine this was not the teacher's intent. Programs, as well as professionals, have typical ways of operating and traditional ways of talking that may not best serve their purposes. How might the scenario have changed if the teacher had said, "Can we compare notes? Maybe we can come up with some ideas about Robert's behavior changes."

To avoid being tripped up by hidden messages, we need to examine what we say from the family's perspective. We must spend time discussing the common language, the typical phrases, messages, and questions used in our programs. We should explore how families might perceive the language and then decide if it supports a partnership model.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: Are turf issues hidden in my language? Does my language acknowledge parents' expertise? Does it reflect an expert/novice orientation?

Ask more and assume less. The less well we know families, the more we are likely to treat them in ways that reflect an expert/novice divide. Of course, it takes more time to ask questions. But the more we ask, the less we assume, allowing families to reveal to us just what they do know and what is important to them. We have developed strong open-ended-question models for children. We need equally strong models, informed by work in the therapy and counseling fields, to ask effective, nonthreatening questions of families.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: What would be helpful for me to know here? What have I been assuming about this family? Have I checked to make sure my perceptions match the family's ideas?

Approach partnerships by considering what would be helpful from the family's perspective. Often family-professional relationships develop without our conscious and deliberate reflection on the process. In the worst case, our discussions with or about families focus only on complaints and negativism, or center on what we want from them. Instead, we should consciously raise ideas, concerns, and plans for working more effectively with family members. Professionals ask themselves, "How can I partner more effectively with this family?"

Traditional practices also need to be examined for their effectiveness.

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For example, as a parent I've found myself increasingly frustrated with the traditional 15 to 20 minutes allotted for parent-teacher conferences. Partnerships cannot be facilitated during such a brief time. Prioritizing partnerships may mean shifting our way of doing business.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: Have I tried to find out what families may find important or want in this situation? Have I made an effort to reflect upon and improve my work with families?

Remain as open as possible to family requests. Greenman and Stonehouse (1996) advocate a "why not" approach to parent requests. In this approach, brainstorming accompanies the question, "Why not do what the parent asks?" This does not result in an automatic yes to every request; indeed, that would abrogate our own power in the relationship. It does, however,

legitimize parents' viewpoints, support empowering relationships, and ensure thoughtful, rather than knee-jerk, reactions (Greenman & Stonehouse 1996). Because each early childhood professional works with a large number of families, requests can feel never-ending. This factor, in combination with the turf issues implicit in requests and the outlandish nature of some requests, can result in a pattern of reactive decisionmaking. However, the "why not" approach epitomizes a key aspect of partnership, for no one feels much like a partner when questions are always met with "Well, but . . ." or "Our policies are . . .".

QUESTIONS TO ASK: Is my decision-making reactive, or do I fully weigh the pros and cons?

Redefine the meaning of professional expertise. Having expertise is not necessarily synonymous with providing answers and advice to a novice. At times our expertise *is* best utilized by giving direct, expertlike answers. Families often welcome hearing, "Oh, that's typical behavior. Your child isn't doing anything that most children her age don't do." At other times, however, a more appropriate use of our expertise may involve helping families to find their own solutions or negotiating differences in the values and beliefs we and families hold. Again, rather than falling back on models that focus solely on our own telling, explaining, and directing, we can turn to the therapy and counseling fields to learn how to facilitate.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: Do I give families the license and help to find their own solutions? Or do I (wittingly or unwittingly) encourage a sense that I'm the expert and the parent is a novice?

Redefine the meaning of families' expertise. In common partnership models, the expertise of families typically involves knowing their own children best. But good professionals also know a child fairly well, at least in terms of how he behaves in a classroom setting. As a parent myself, I've looked for programs in which the teachers really seem to know my children as individuals. Given my own very limited time in my children's classrooms, my parental expertise quickly seems to become superfluous to their work. In other words, teachers who really know my children begin to trump my expertise about them. Are there additional ways then in which families can be defined as experts?

Families also know best what goals and values they prize most highly for their children, the kind of people they hope their children are growing to become. They know their own traditions. In many cases, they know their communities and cultural/ethnic values better than teachers who are newcomers or from different cultures. We need to use these areas of knowledge to build partnerships. We also need to let this knowledge have an impact on our programs and what we do in our classrooms.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: Do I allow the expertise parents bring about their goals for their children to shape my program?

Conclusion

Surmounting the obstacles to collaborative partnerships with families requires both new skills in relating to others and new conceptualizations of what families bring to the relationship and how that figures in our work. In closing I'll offer one more example, one noted by Powell in his suggestion that "Programs should actively acknowledge parents as persons" (1998, 66). A college student once asked me why parents in programs aren't called Mom or Dad, since that is indeed what they are. I replied that when conversations with me were initiated by "Mom, . . . ", I was always tempted to reply, "Yes, Teacher?" A doctor with a good bedside manner would never address us as "patient." Indeed, we hope the doctor sees more than an illness or injury to treat: a person with questions, fears, hopes, concerns, and strengths. We owe families the same consideration

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The words we choose are not merely a matter of semantics. Words are a reflection of the meaning we give to a situation. In the examples described in this article, the choice of different words and strategies more strongly reflects true partnerships with families. As we change our practice and ways of relating, we can find ways to achieve partnership as soundly in action as we do in our philosophy.

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Checklist for Professionals

Do I...

• use practices that involve families in mutual decisionmaking?

• work with families to build a sense of trust?

• distinguish families' strengths and expertise?

• work with families to determine how to share responsibilities?

• avoid causing families to feel vulnerable or inadequate?

• approach problems in a way that leads to mutual problem solving?

• use language that acknowledges families' expertise?

• try to find out what families think is important?

• fully weigh the pros and cons of situations?

• try to help families find their own solutions?

• allow families' goals for their children to shape my program?