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## DAILY COMMUNICATION

Keyser, J. (2017). *From parents to partners: Building a family-centered early childhood program* (2nd Ed.). St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

**D**aily communication can happen orally and in writing between families and teachers. Many teachers and families talk daily in person or on the phone to check in on the day-to-day life of the child at home and in the program. Face-to-face communication gives partners opportunities to read nonverbal cues, and it also offers children a chance to observe or be included in family-teacher communication. Phone and in-person communication provide immediate feedback and opportunities to clarify information when it is shared. However, some people are much more comfortable writing notes, journal entries, e-mails, chat, or text messages than they are talking in person or on the phone. Written communication also allows families and teachers who don't see each other or have enough time to talk (for example, because of transportation arrangements) another way to share information. Family-teacher partnerships are nurtured and maintained through all these kinds of daily communication.

Many programs see families face-to-face twice a day. This makes communication easier. For teachers who don't see families daily, regular communication takes more effort and planning.

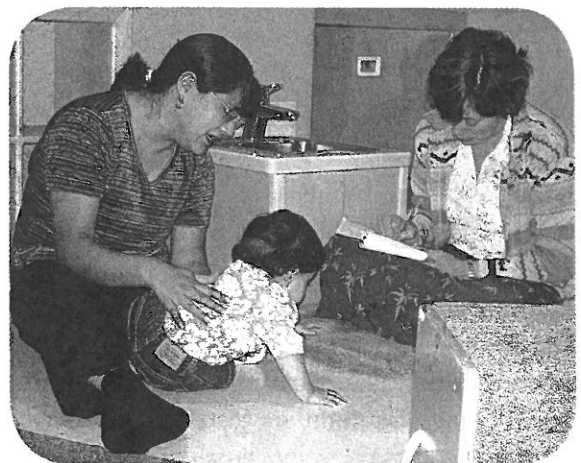
### DAILY CHECK-INS

Talking with families daily offers you a chance to stay apprised of children's moods, health, family events and experiences, and out-of-school con-

nections to friends and community. It gives you a link to children's experiences at home so that you can refer to them, acknowledge them, and respond to their conversation about them. Talking with you helps families stay abreast of their children's experiences, discoveries, development, challenges, health, moods, and friendships in school. For teachers and families, daily sharing helps build trust, relationships, teamwork, and support. Daily communication also helps children to integrate their experiences at home and at school. Rather than having two distinct lives, children can feel that the two parts of their day are connected and whole.

### Finding the Time

Seeing families every day begins to set the stage for good communication. It also helps when



both families and teachers have time and availability to talk. Check-ins can last between one and several minutes. This can be challenging for teachers who have several families and children to greet at the same time and also have the responsibility of supervising all the children who are present. Many teachers become skilled at talking to parents while keeping an eye on the children. Nevertheless, it is important that programs support teachers in these check-ins by ensuring there are enough staff during greeting and pickup times so that teachers have some time and space to talk with parents at the ends of day. Another idea is to close the outdoor space if necessary to minimize the area that teachers are responsible for supervising. A few programs have asked parents to take turns supervising children to free teachers up for greeting. Many programs welcome families to hang out and visit with each other while teachers greet each family and child personally.

Most parents have time limitations during drop-off and pickup times. They may be in a rush to get to work or school or to drop off another child. It is useful to talk to parents individually and as a group about the importance of daily check-ins and ways to make these work for busy families as well as for you. Individually, you can find out about each family's schedule and their other responsibilities at the beginning and end of the day. You can let all families know that they are welcome to arrive earlier than they intend to say good-bye, to help their children transition, to observe, and to talk with their children's teachers. Equally important, you can let families know how much time to allot for drop-off and pickup. Many parents arrive exactly at the designated drop-off or pickup time, not anticipating that the transition into and out of care will take some time. Staff can either designate a pickup time that allows time for children and families or suggest to families that they arrive ten to

twenty minutes before closing time if they want a check-in.

### **What about the Children?**

Another significant part of the daily check-in between educators and families is children's role. At the same time that adults are trying to share information, children are making their transition between home and school. It is important for teachers to greet children and adults individually. Also, if children are present while adults are talking about them, you must think about what they are hearing. If the conversation is about them, they should be included. For example, you might say something like "I'm telling your grandmother about how we changed your clothes after you were done playing with the water," or "Your brother is telling me about how you went sledding together." Some programs have a wonderful practice at pickup time: teachers and children together tell parents about the day. Much of the time, children are very interested in participating in the conversation; sometimes they just want to quietly watch or play.

When children are involved or are playing within earshot, consider if the conversation is appropriate for them to hear. Communications about confidential adult issues from home or school can be scary or confusing for children to overhear. In addition, extensive conversations about their challenging behavior can be hard for children to listen to. If necessary, teachers can set up a separate time to talk to parents, saying something like "This is an important conversation. Let's set up a time when you and I can talk alone about this."

### **DAILY NOTES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Daily written communication can be done individually, with the group, or both. Notes and e-mail also offer parents and teachers a chance

to communicate with each other, even if teachers are working later in the day, are not present at drop-off time, or are gone by pickup time. Notes between individual teachers and families might include anecdotal observations of children made by teachers or families, acknowledgments or appreciations, and requests or questions. Here are some examples:

- “Lori washed babies for most of the morning, wetting, soaping, rinsing, and drying them, and then starting all over again. What are you observing at home?”
- “Davin’s grandparents have been visiting all week—late nights and lots of cookies. Are you noticing any change of behavior at school?”
- “The kids have been trying to take apart everything. Do you have any small appliances in your shop you could bring for them to explore?”
- “Thank you for bringing your puppy the other morning. The kids have been playing puppy games all week.”

Notes to the whole family group might also include information about curriculum planning and updates, appreciations, reminders, information, requests from either teachers or parents, and reminders about upcoming events, such as family meetings, home visits, special curriculum activities, class photos, or vision screening. These notes to the parent group can be posted electronically on a blog, group e-mail, or social media site or on a bulletin board or big piece of paper on the door. Here are some examples:

- “Remember the potluck on Friday at 5:30.”
- “Thanks from the Alexanders to all the families who brought us dinners last week.”

- “Check out the new tree house in the yard.”
- “Thanks to all the families who participated in the all-center cleanup last Saturday.”
- “Remember to bring swimsuits for water play tomorrow.”
- “On Wednesday a child safety specialist will be here during pickup and drop-off to help with any questions you have about car seats.”

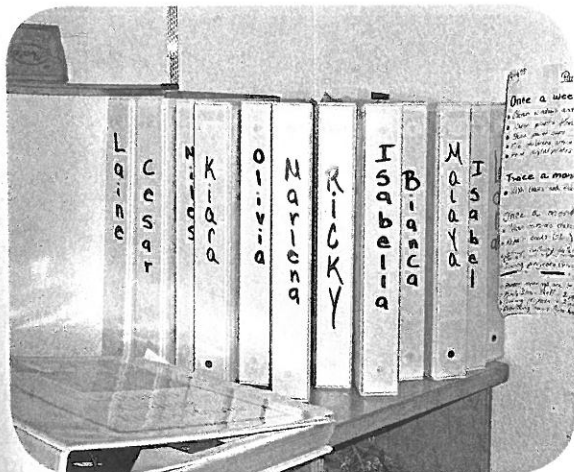
Some programs have a daily announcement board, either electronic or in the classroom. You can give parents online editing rights to contribute to this board, or you can provide extra pens and paper or a dry-erase board so families can add their own announcements—for example, “Jani’s new baby brother, Sterling, was born last night!” Making it easy for parents to communicate with teachers and with other parents is an important part of supporting two-way communication and building networks. In one classroom, the teacher posts written communication for all families every day. She puts two sheets of paper on the door. The top of one sheet says, “This is what we planned for today,” and the top of the other one says, “This is what happened today.” In the morning, the first one is filled out, and the second one is filled out in the afternoon. She usually writes four to eight lines about the day’s activities, experiences, and interests. This kind of communication could also be posted online. This is a wonderful way to give all the families information about the day and helps them talk to children about their experiences in the program. Rather than the typical parent-child interaction (“What did you do at school today?” “Nothing”), the discussion might go like this: “I heard that Josie’s dog visited today.” “Yeah! He licked me, and it was wet!”

### When You Don't See the Family Daily

Sharing information with families who don't come to school every day with their child or who have limited time requires creativity and flexibility. Phone calls, e-mails or texts, written notes, and interactive journals are all ways to communicate when face-to-face time is limited. You can talk with these families about the importance of regular communication and ask them what system would work best for them.

### Interactive Family Journals

Interactive journals, written daily or weekly by both teachers and families, provide a way to share information as well as to share power and decision making. Many programs use interactive journals to record observations, discuss development, and make daily notes and reminders for teachers and parents. In these programs, there are separate journals for each child. These can be actual blank books or can be shared electronic documents that both parents and teachers have editing rights for. Hard-copy journals usually stay at school, but they can also go home with the family and come back in the morning. Teachers can write in them a few times a day if they are tracking something



specific (children's eating or toileting) or once a week for more general updates. Families use them in a variety of ways. Some write copiously, and others never write. Some read daily; others read weekly or not at all. Some families keep them when they leave the program as a precious history of their children's young years. These interactive journals can be an important tool in two-way communication.

Zane, a toddler teacher, describes a decision he made with a family through their daily journal:

Yesenia's mom, Dora, wrote excitedly in the journal one day that she had gotten some number blocks for Yesenia to use at home. The next day she suggested that we should get some at the school, so that we could work with Yesenia on her numbers here also. I thanked her for her suggestion and wrote back describing a few of the number activities we already do with children in our program. Then, on the weekend, I saw some nice wooden number blocks at a garage sale and brought them in on Monday morning. Dora was so excited. When I showed them to other families that morning, I told them that Dora, Yesenia's mom, had suggested I get them. Dora is pretty quiet sometimes during our daily check-ins. I'm not sure she would have mentioned the blocks to me if we didn't have our written journal.

### MORNING DROP-OFF

During the drop-off conversation, parents can share information about their children's health, eating, sleeping, clothes, significant events that happen at home, and family changes. Parents can give any special care or pickup instructions and ask questions about things their children said about school. Teachers can share anything

about the children's day at school that didn't get shared the day before. They can ask parents for observation of the children at home and give parents updates about upcoming activities, curriculum, and school events. Teachers can offer child development information if parents have questions about certain behaviors.

One family home child care provider establishes trust with families by sharing a little about herself during these check-ins. She says, "I often give a little information about something my kids and I did or a short trip I took with my family. Sometimes I give an example of my child's behavior. I make it very short, like fifteen to twenty seconds, because I don't want to take up our time talking about my family, but I think it helps them get to know me and gives them an idea of the kinds of information we can share about our families." Check-ins during drop-off are important because they can affect everyone's day. For example, everyone has a better day if parents leave after sincere and friendly interactions with teachers: children start their days seeing their important adults in good communication, and teachers have a chance to share information with the family as well as receive information from them.

### GETTING READY TO GO HOME

Even before you consider what information to share with families at the end of every day, you should think about the atmosphere you create in the classroom that helps children and families slow down and reconnect when family members arrive. Helping families make successful transitions home with their children is an important part of this end-of-the-day routine. Parents and children generally have differing paces and rhythms during their days. Adults often operate at an accomplishment-oriented fast pace. Children tend to have a slower, more

process-oriented pace. In many instances, the child development program can help children and their parents get back into sync with each other and move smoothly into their evening. This approach will pay dividends not only in better evenings for families and children but in easier transitions out of the program for children and thus a much easier end to the day for staff. Educators can do a number of things to help children prepare to go home: having good-bye groups; collecting belongings; giving reminders that parents will be here soon; leading songs about pickup time; making sure the children are dressed and ready to go. For many parents, spending a few minutes observing their children, sharing a book together, talking with other parents, or checking in with teachers will help them get back on kid time. Remember that this is one of the times of the day when most parents are juggling many things. Sometimes they just need to have you listen to how tired or overwhelmed they feel. They are the ones who need a personal check-in. Ironically, you spend your days listening to children, and often no one is listening to their parents.

Here's an example of a teacher skillfully helping a parent get in sync with his son. Brett was sharing custody with Damian's mother.



He hadn't seen his son for a few days when he came to pick him up. Brett came into the classroom loud, excited, and fast: "Come on, Damian. Time to split." Teacher Tatiana came over to Brett and started talking about Damian's day. Brett repeated, "Come on, buddy." Tatiana came closer to Brett and sat down, giving him nonverbal clues that she was available to talk. Brett still kept his attention on moving Damian, who remained engrossed in the sandbox. At this point, Tatiana asked Brett, "How was your weekend?" Brett turned to her and talked for several minutes about his weekend, his body noticeably relaxing. When he came to a natural stopping place, Tatiana said to him, "I bet you are looking forward to spending some time with your son." Brett nodded, and Tatiana began to tell him about how Damian's last few days had gone. Brett then went over to Damian, crouched down low, and said, "Hey, buddy, I see you are digging in the sand." They talked a little bit and left together, hand in hand. Reflecting on her interaction with Brett, Tatiana said that sometimes parents need a little care when they come to pick up their children, before they are able to turn their attention to their children. Tatiana sees her role as helping both children and the parents get ready to be together again. She believes that if they can get in sync before they leave the program, they will have a much better evening together. Sometimes she leaves Damian's shoes off after the last diaper change of the day so that Brett can have the chance to slow down and help his son get his shoes on before they leave together. It's clear to Tatiana how much Brett loves his son—he has often told her that he wants to be a good dad.

Teachers can also structure activities that help parents and children reconnect at the end of the day. Years ago, when I was an afternoon child care teacher, the children and I almost always cooked a late snack together, and parents often joined us at the snack table for food and

talk about the day. For many parents who are on a hurried schedule all day long, pickup at the children's center can be a little oasis of relief in their day.

### **Sharing Information about the Day**

Many families who haven't seen their child all day will be eager for news. Some parents will be wondering if their children missed them. Some will want to know about naps, eating, and diapering/toileting. For teachers, this is a good opportunity to partner with families by giving them information that helps them feel connected to their children, offering child development information so they can better understand their children, acknowledging parenting skills already in place, and listening to any stories or concerns they want to share. The information you give parents will be determined by your program's policy and practices, what parents are interested in knowing, and the time you and they have available. Many programs use a combination of verbal and written communication. Some programs plan for staggered pickup times so that all parents don't arrive at the same time. This can help give teachers time to talk with each family.

It is important that you share with families at least one observation of each child from the day. Many families have an underlying worry that their children will be ignored once they leave. Offering observations of their children not only reassures them that someone was watching but also models the importance of observing. This observation should be something positive. Even if you need to share information about a struggle or a difficult behavior a child is having, it is essential to also share an observation about something that is going well for the child.

Along with information about children's play and learning, many parents are very interested in their children's routines. Many programs keep written records on children's food intake,

napping, and diapering. Generally, the younger children are, the more interested parents are in this information. Knowing the ins and outs of their children's day can help them anticipate the kinds of care their children will need once they return home. Even if all this information is written down, parents enjoy hearing one thing about the routines. For example, you might say, "Benji loved the oranges today," and then turn to Benji to say, "You must have eaten ten orange sections at snack."

Some teachers do a quick check in their mind at the end of the day to make sure they have something about each child to share. Others keep written notes in their pocket or on a clipboard in the classroom to remind them of what they want to say. Some educators use digital technology for this, sharing a photo or short video from their portable device as a discussion starter, or they may use their devices to make observational notes they can refer to or share with parents at the end of the day. Aside from information about their children's activities and routines, parents enjoy hearing that their children remembered or asked about them during the day. If you can catch or remember one of those moments when children visited their family pictures on the wall or looked up at you and said, "Dada?" parents usually appreciate your sharing it. This is also a good time for child development information. Parents may feel guilty that their children are asking about them during the day when they are away, and you can reassure them that this is children's way of remembering and keeping track of their important people. You can remind parents that just as they remember their children several times throughout the day, children also remember their families.

The end of the day is a busy time for teachers with cleanup, supporting tired kids, finding everyone's shoes and artwork, managing sib-

lings in the classroom, remembering what to tell parents, and preparing for your own transition to go home. Remember that you don't have to tell everyone everything every day. You might want to set general goals for parent communication over a week. Could you manage to really focus with each parent one day a week? On the other days, could you manage a quicker check-in? Once you have a comfortable relationship established and parents are accustomed to the pickup routine, they may be able to help and support one another. Many times in the late afternoon, once they are comfortable being in the program and used to slowing down when they arrive, parents stand around, chatting with each other about their days, while children finish up play and get ready to leave. While parents can't give each other information about their children's day at school, they can provide a listening ear to one another's stories and stresses. Some programs give "parent volunteer hours" to families for coming at the end of the day and helping with cleanup. This offers parents a way to be active contributors and also frees up teachers for check-ins with other parents.

### **Sharing Child Development Information**

When teachers think of parent education, their first thought is often about articles, books, websites, or parent meetings. While these are all good ways to share information with families, daily communication can provide wonderful opportunities to offer insights into children's behavior and to explore helpful responses. Parents are most interested in child development information when it directly relates to what is happening with their children. When Vicki showed up in the morning after a sleepless night with newly walking Kellan, it was helpful for her to learn from Kellan's teacher, Joniko, that children's sleep is often disrupted when they pass a devel-

### Reflecting on Daily Check-Ins

How are daily check-ins done in your program? Think about the environment, the staffing, the communication systems. What is your program doing well, and what needs improvement? What are your personal strengths in doing check-ins? What skills would you like to improve? Find a coworker or another student, and role-play the kind of check-in you would like to have with every family every day. What would be the first step you could take to implement this kind of check-in?

opmental milestone. When Luz told Pete about his four-year-old son Leny's new "poop" vocabulary at school and explained that four-year-olds are fascinated with body language and are testing how to impress people with it, Pete could understand his child's behavior. Teachers can also use journals, notes, or electronic communication to share developmental information with parents

about their children. (For more on talking to parents about difficult behavior, see "Challenges to Communication: Problems Affecting the Child at Home or at School" in chapter 7.)

Some teachers invite family members to observe with them in the classroom. A short observation of children building a spaceship out of blocks can offer families a chance to understand children's ability to learn many things simultaneously: teamwork, science, physics, and physical coordination. Short interactions like these can enable parents to learn important child development information. In some classrooms, notepads and pens and/or cameras are available for parents to write or record their observations.

Daily communication provides different kinds of opportunities for strengthening the partnership and keeps teachers and families up-to-date with each other. Both oral and written daily communication offer an ongoing way to learn about each other's knowledge and expertise, to engage in two-way communication, to explore ways to include the unique needs of the children and families in the program, and to share power and decision making.