

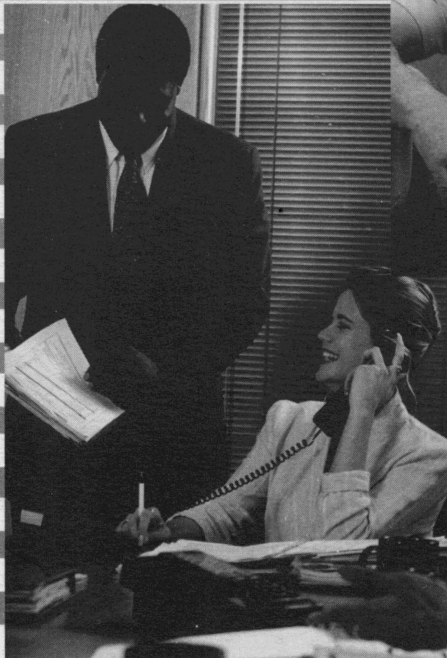
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Virginia Cooperative Extension

*Training Guide for the
Child Development Program*

Communicating and Maintaining Professional Relationships with Co-Workers and Families

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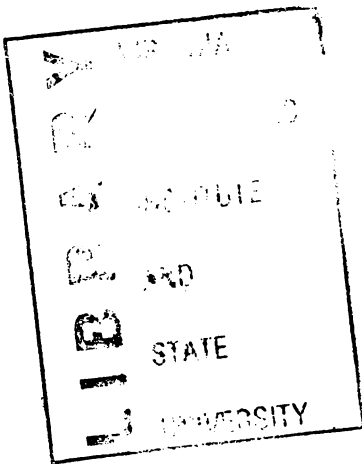
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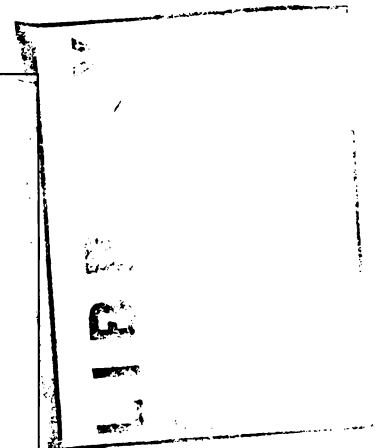


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COMMUNICATING AND MAINTAINING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH CO-WORKERS AND FAMILIES

Introduction

This guide will provide you with information and practical strategies for communicating and maintaining positive, supportive relationships with co-workers and families. In any work situation, the ability of co-workers to get along and support each other is critical to job performance and satisfaction. In child care/education settings, this also includes the ability of staff to maintain positive relationships with families.

Good communication skills are essential. Maintaining positive, professional relationships does not just “happen,” but must be conscientiously worked on and fostered. This requires commitment on the part of everyone, including all staff, to work together, but the rewards are great for you personally, other staff, families, the child and the program. The ability to work cooperatively and supportively with other teachers, staff, administrators and families leads to a positive working atmosphere and a successful, high quality program.

This guide will provide activities that help you develop a sense of your role as an important team player in the child care/education setting. The information and activities will help you clarify your beliefs about quality care and to develop strategies for communicating and maintaining professional relationships with co-workers and families.

Outcomes

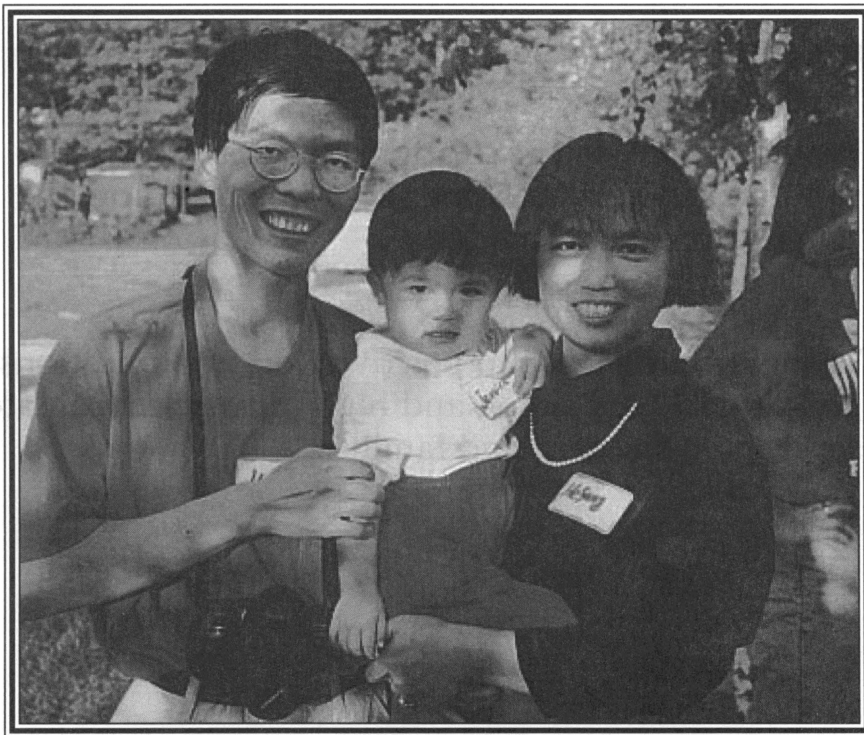
This guide will assist you in developing and/or refining skills in:

- Understanding the importance of positive, supportive relationships with co-workers and families.
- Using communication strategies that foster positive, professional relationships.
- Implementing strategies that foster family/professional partnerships and encourage family input in the education and care of their children.
- Using strategies that result in positive conflict resolution.
- Displaying professional behaviors that reflect the code of ethical conduct set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).



Topics Covered In This Guide

- I. Understanding the Importance of Supportive Professional Relationships
- II. Clarifying Common Goals, Roles and Responsibilities and Valuing Each Team Member's Expertise
- III. Developing Positive Communication Skills
- IV. Communicating with Families
- V. Resolving Conflicts
- VI. Making Ethical Decisions



**TOPIC I:
UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE
OF SUPPORTIVE PROFESSIONAL
RELATIONSHIPS**

Outcomes

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Understand the benefits of supportive teams in the workplace.

Key Concepts

- Professional working relationships and family-professional relationships should be based on a “supportive team” model.
- Team building leads to positive working conditions, greater job satisfaction and high quality, coordinated services to children and families.

Pre-Assessment

List five ways that co-workers can support each other in the workplace:

Background Information

The dynamics of group interactions are essential components of most working situations. The more co-workers feel that they get along with each other, support and trust each other and enjoy working together, the more likely there is a high level of job satisfaction. People who work in settings that do not have a well-developed sense of “teamwork” or “team spirit” often comment on the unsatisfying nature of their jobs. William Dyer (1987), who has done much research in the area of team building, compiled the following sample of comments people have made about work situations in which there is a poor sense of professional cooperation and teamwork:

“It’s no fun working with those people. They just seem to be so involved in their own work that they don’t want to do anything for anyone else.”

“Our meetings are chaos. When we get together and try to get work accomplished, nobody listens. We fight and argue and nobody supports anyone else.”

“We never do anything that is teamlike. We don’t set goals, we don’t plan, we don’t do work together.”

“There are some people I work with whom I really like and enjoy working with, but there are others who bother me and we don’t get along. I find it easier to avoid them or get things done with as little interaction as possible.”

“I don’t trust anyone in that bunch I work with... At times they can act so friendly, but when the crunch comes it is each person for himself.”

(Dyer, 1987, p. viii-ix).

On the other hand, work settings that have a sense of “team” or “everyone working together” provide a supportive and enjoyable workplace. The atmosphere in these work settings is usually comfortable and relaxed with little tension among staff. Everyone feels that their work and ideas are valued and respected. Co-workers listen to each other, share ideas, freely compliment each other and support each other’s work. Staff who work in these settings are more likely to comment on how much they enjoy their jobs and the people with whom they work. There is a great sense of trust among staff.

Training in group dynamics and team building can impact this sense of togetherness. Susan Glaser (1994) studied a group of workers who participated in team-building training and provided the following samples of team members’ comments after the training:

“Everyone shares a sense of accomplishment when someone succeeds.”

“We’re working together, we’re closer, so we’re much more likely to pitch in and help.”

“Everyone jumps in—without direction or being told what to do.”

“Before, each person only cared for themselves. Now, everyone is excited about each other’s victories.”

“There aren’t many conflicts now. When there are we usually go to the other person and work it out.”

“Our team praises each other for things we appreciate and respect about each other.”

These comments reflect the benefits of team spirit and a cooperative atmosphere in the workplace. In addition to greater job satisfaction, good professional relationships in the workplace lead to better job performance and promote quality programs.

Within the fields of child care and education, you will find that teamwork is especially important. The needs of children are diverse and complex and best served using the expertise of more than one professional. Child care and education settings benefit from shared expertise and good communication skills. All members of the child's team must see their importance to the group. All members should be encouraged to participate equally and should feel actively involved in the overall program. New staff members should feel welcomed. To accomplish this, the team should plan activities and interactions that bring all team members together as a group. Regular team meetings and occasional social activities help to establish a sense of group identity and cohesion. Decision making should include a system for encouraging input from all involved team members, staff and families. It is your responsibility to participate in team meetings and activities, offer assistance to new team members and respond to co-workers and families in a warm, friendly and supportive manner.

Families are essential members of the team. Families are an important resource concerning not only their children, but also in making recommendations on how to provide quality services. Formal and informal methods of communicating with families and seeking their participation in a variety of ways will strengthen the overall team and quality of the program. This topic will be further discussed under "TOPIC IV, Communicating with Families."



**STOP HERE AND COMPLETE
LEARNING ACTIVITY**

Activity 1.0 Team Approach

Use your own work experiences to construct a table listing the benefits and disadvantages to you from working in a setting that uses the philosophy of a “team approach.”

Benefits of a “Team Approach” to me	Disadvantages of a “Team Approach” to me

Review and discuss your table with one co-worker.

Post-Assessment

List five advantages of a teamwork philosophy in the workplace.

**TOPIC II:
CLARIFYING COMMON GOALS,
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
AND VALUING EACH TEAM
MEMBER'S EXPERTISE**

Outcomes

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Articulate the common goals of your child care/ education setting.
- Describe personal job roles and responsibilities.
- Identify and respect the expertise of co-workers and families.

Key Concepts

- Teams function most effectively when they share common goals and purposes.
- Understanding job roles and responsibilities is essential to good team functioning.
- Co-workers, children and families benefit from the expertise and skills of all team members.

Pre-Assessment

List 5 statements that describe your center/program's overall goals.

Background Information

Professional relationships with co-workers and families benefit from a shared understanding of common goals and a willingness to work together to accomplish these goals. This philosophy recognizes that the “whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” That is, you, your co-workers and the families of the children you serve can achieve better results working together than by each person operating on his/her own (Morsink, Thomas, & Correa, 1991). This section will guide you to reflect on the common goals of your child care/education setting and will help you recognize your own expertise as well as the expertise of co-workers and families.



**STOP HERE AND COMPLETE
LEARNING ACTIVITIES**



Activity 2.0 Understanding the Common Goals of Your Child Care/Education Setting

A number of researchers have compiled characteristics of successful team functioning. One of the most commonly cited aspects is clarity of purpose. This means that there are clearly defined goals and a common understanding of the purposes of the jobs being done. In the case of child care and education settings, clarity of purpose is achieved by establishing priorities for how the program will provide high quality services to children and families. These priorities include guidelines about the things teachers are to emphasize in their teaching. It is especially helpful if these goals are developed as a team and are clearly articulated. They may read something like these examples.

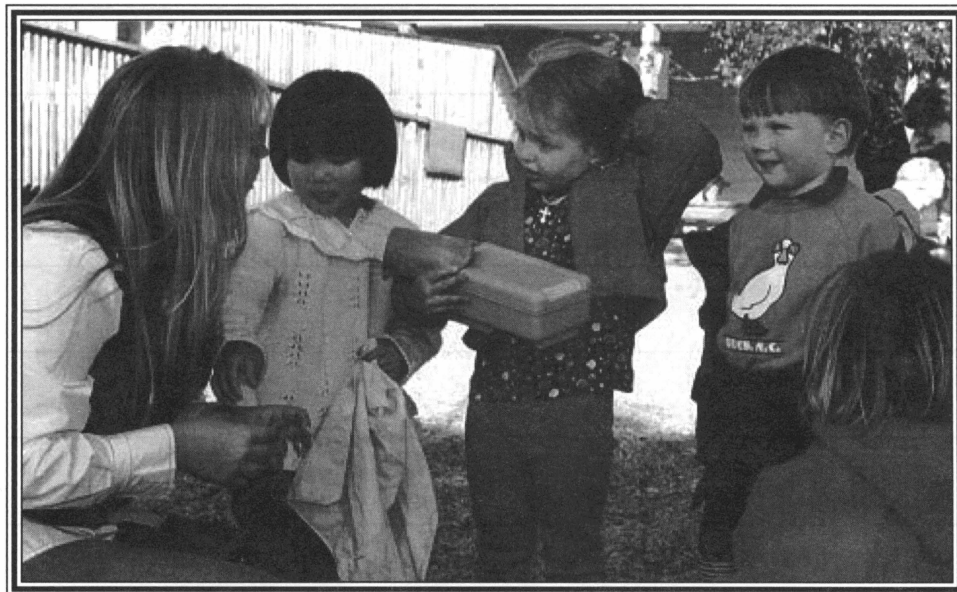
The goals of our center are to :

- (1) provide a program which is appropriate for the age and interest of each child;
- (2) provide a program which emphasizes the positive in each child;
- (3) accept children for what and who they are regardless of age, sex, nationality, ability, race or religion;
- (4) use the “center approach” to learning in the areas of math, language arts, music, arts, drama, science and social studies;
- (5) allow opportunities for children to make choices, accept responsibilities, solve problems, share and explore new ideas and concepts;
- (6) provide a family grouping of children when appropriate—mixed ages where children can learn from each other;
- (7) provide materials which are multi-level and inclusive;

-
- (8) provide activities beyond the classroom which involve a variety of outdoor learning experiences on the playground and on field trips;
 - (9) work closely with families through open and frequent communication;
 - (10) provide links to other community resources.

(Used with Permission, Virginia Commonwealth University Child Care Center, 1996.)

It is important for you to understand the overall goals of your program, how they can be translated into your classroom practice and how your individual job responsibilities can help support and accomplish them. Staff that work together and get along well are able to develop shared goals and, together, decide how to accomplish those goals. Individual staff members are not simply concerned about their assigned jobs, but are interested in how their job meshes with other staff member's responsibilities and how expertise and resources can be shared to build a total, high quality program.



Ask your administrator or supervisor if there are written goals statements for your center/program. If one is available, review it and summarize the goals below. If not, suggest that this would be a valuable task for an upcoming staff meeting and generate 5 or 6 goals you think are important in providing quality care.

Summary of **Goals Statement** (if available) or your **Personal Professional Goals** for children and families in your program:

Activity 2.1 Understanding Your Job Roles And Responsibilities

To accomplish the shared goals, individual roles and responsibilities must be clear. Each person should have a clear understanding of her/his own job responsibilities as well as those of other staff. It is always easier to do a good job when you are certain what others are counting on you to do and what you can expect others to do.

You should ask yourself:

- What am I expected to do on a daily basis?
- What responsibilities do I have in and outside the classroom?
- What do I need to know about other people's jobs and responsibilities?
- What should others know about my job that would help them do their work?

It is helpful to discuss with a co-worker and supervisor your understanding of your major job responsibilities and how your job and responsibilities contribute to the overall goals.

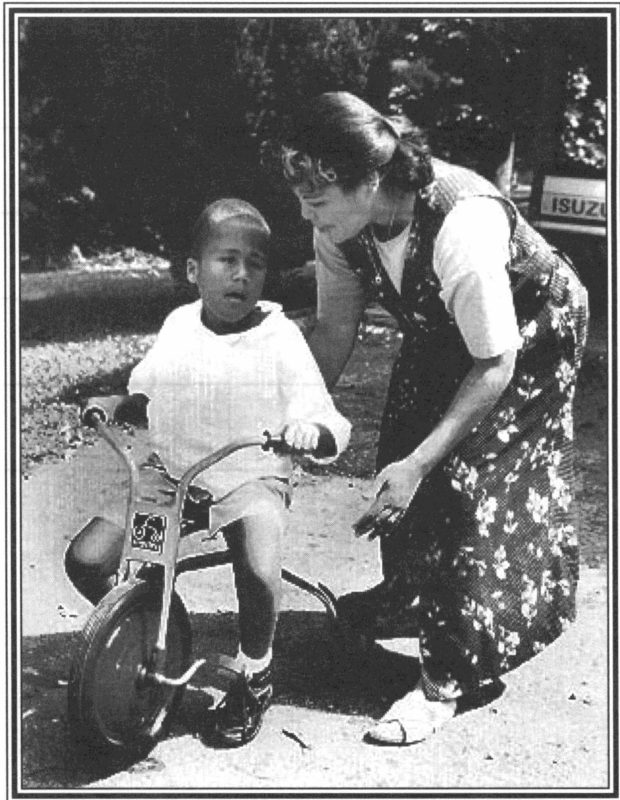
Complete the following Roles and Responsibilities Worksheet. Review first with one co-worker and then with your administrator/supervisor. Modify based on their feedback.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WORKSHEET

My roles and responsibilities are:	Coworker's comments:	Supervisor's comments

Activity 2.2 Valuing the Expertise of Co-Workers and Families

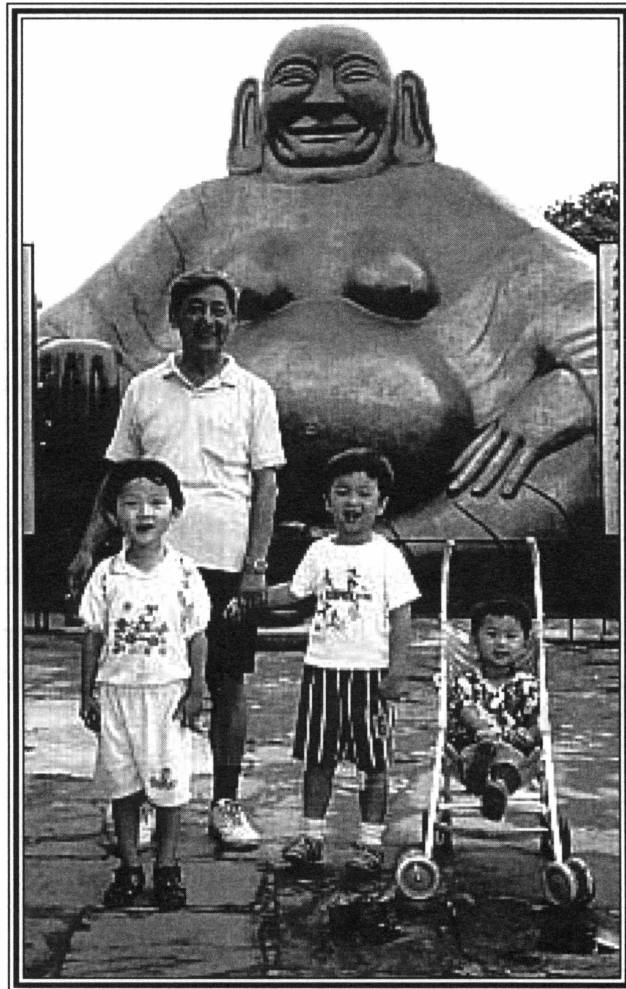
In addition to understanding the goals of your center and your roles and responsibilities, it is important to be familiar with the skills and expertise of those with whom you work. This facilitates a true team approach in which each person knows to whom to turn for assistance. Team members also have the opportunity to learn new skills from each other. This approach demonstrates a value for each person and encourages each member to feel a sense of pride in his/her abilities. Learning about and maximizing the strengths of co-workers and the families you serve takes a willingness and effort on the part of each staff member. But, the effort is well worth it. Everyone enjoys the feeling of being asked to share their skills, and you can forge some very strong bonds of professional friendship by seeking out the assistance of others.



Interview one co-worker. Ask about his/her training, work experiences and areas in which he/she feels especially skilled. Determine areas of expertise that you may be able to call upon for help. Write these down:

Post-Assessment

How do your job responsibilities relate to the common goals of your center/program?



TOPIC III: USING POSITIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Outcomes

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Use active listening
- Use positive communication strategies to share ideas and concerns.
- Support co-workers by providing positive feedback for their ideas and work contributions.

Key Concepts

- Openness and clarity of communication among co-workers is essential for maintaining a positive working atmosphere and an effective team approach to providing services to young children and their families.
- Certain communication strategies lead to more positive interactions and more effective team functioning.
- All staff benefit from a supportive atmosphere where co-workers are encouraged to provide both positive and constructive feedback to each other.

Pre-Assessment

Respond to this scenario:

Taylor, a child in your class, is very bossy with the other children. You are especially concerned because you have overheard the other children say things like, "I don't like Taylor." You want to share this concern with Taylor's family. Briefly summarize what you would want to bring up in a conversation with the parent(s).

Background Information

Communication is the process by which people share information, ideas and feelings. How you communicate within your work settings can have tremendous impact on how you are perceived by co-workers and how willing others are to work cooperatively with you. It takes commitment, patience, attention, persistence and caring to maintain open and honest communication with co-workers and families. Researchers who have studied the communication process offer suggestions for interpersonal communication skills that lead to positive relationships and effective communication. The following section describes some of these practical strategies.

Active Listening

Relationships among co-workers are enhanced when each person truly listens to others. By listening actively to others you demonstrate that you are interested and concerned about their ideas and what they have to say. No ideas or thoughts should be considered unimportant. This attitude creates an atmosphere where no one is afraid to put forth a creative thought because they know that other team members are committed to open discussion of all ideas. In this type of setting, no one is afraid that he/she will be considered foolish for speaking out. It is your responsibility to maintain respect for the point of view of other staff and family members and to be a good listener.

Strategies for Active Listening:

- **Be attentive.** Show attention by maintaining eye contact, nodding, sitting toward the speaker and maintaining facial expressions that indicate interest. Make brief responses that encourage the speaker to continue, such as “uh huh,” “I see,” etc.

-
- **Check your understanding of what the speaker has said** by asking questions or restating what you understood the speaker to be saying. For example:
“Am I right in thinking that what you are saying is...”
 - **Listen for “feelings” and respond empathetically to what the listener is saying.** For example:
Co-worker: “I get so upset when Marcus calls the other children names.”
Empathetic Response: “Yes, it can be frustrating sometimes.”
 - **Ask for clarification.** If you are not sure of what the speaker is trying to say, don’t hesitate to ask for further clarification. Example:
“What do you mean by that?”
“Tell me more, help me understand.”
 - **Convey appreciation to the communicator.** Let the other person know that you appreciate his/her thoughts. This does not mean that you must agree with everything the other person is saying, only that you are willing to listen and accept another person’s viewpoint.



**STOP HERE AND COMPLETE
LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

Activity 3.0 Active Listening

Ask a friend or co-worker to assist you with this activity. Explain that this activity is designed to provide practical experience in developing active listening skills. Ask your friend or co-worker to share a real-life problem he or she is having right now. Explain that as he/she talks, you will model active listening strategies as previously described. Practice leaning slightly toward him/her, looking at him/her, nodding or giving other “minimal encouragers,” asking clarifying questions and restating what you think was said.

What was it like to just listen?

Ask your co-worker what it was like to be listened to.

Activity 3.1 Supporting Co-Workers with Positive Feedback and Recognition of Professional Accomplishments

Everyone likes to know that they are valued for their contributions at work. It's amazing, though, how often we each get caught up in our own concerns that we forget to support our colleagues on a regular basis. Positive, supporting comments to our co-workers can go a long way toward creating a working atmosphere that is both enjoyable and professionally motivating. Noticing and commenting on a colleague's good work and ideas can be a source of great team morale and an inspiration to do the best job possible. When co-workers support each other an "esprit de corps" develops. This leads to greater job satisfaction and a more positive work climate. Research evidence also shows that this kind of interaction is characteristic of effective, high achieving school programs (Bloom, 1988). To support co-workers, each person must make a commitment to be friendly, honest and trusting.



For one week, focus on providing positive feedback to co-workers for their ideas and work contributions. Record several of your actions, the responses you receive and how you feel the actions affected the working climate and team function.

Your action	Co-worker's response	How do you feel this feedback affected the working climate and team function?

Activity 3.1 Giving Constructive Feedback

Sometimes you may find it necessary to provide some constructive feedback to a co-worker or family member. This can be difficult for both you and the other person. The following strategies adapted from O'Malley and Davis (1994) can make constructive feedback less threatening and more helpful.

- **First, try to give a cue that feedback is coming, rather than simply “letting loose” your thoughts without warning.** For example:

“I’d like to talk with you about some thoughts I had concerning some possible ways to respond to Krista’s temper tantrums. When would be a good time?”
- **Keep your tone of voice soft and kind. Carefully choose your words trying to describe specific observations and not making personal judgments of character or ability.**
- **Give your feedback in a “Feedback Sandwich” format.** A “Feedback Sandwich” is:
 1. The top slice of bread: what you found effective.
 2. The meat or cheese: the specific event or behavior on which you are giving feedback.
 3. The bottom slice of bread: what might have been more effective.

Example:

- (1) You have such creative ideas for your circle times.
- (2) I was watching Krista when she began her temper tantrum
- (3) and was wondering if it might have been more effective to limit the amount of time she is required to sit during circle time.

-
- **Remember, this is just your perception and may or may not be the best or only approach in any given situation.**

You have observed one of the other staff use what you consider harsh yelling to control the behavior of the children on the playground. It appears to you that she is always telling the children what not to do. You think a more positive approach would be more effective and more appropriate. Write what you might say to your colleague to provide constructive feedback. Have a co-worker read what you would say, and discuss it with him/her.

Raising Issues When There is a Problem

Good interpersonal relationships and good teamwork require the ability to communicate honestly. However, this does not imply that you should say whatever is on your mind without regard to the feelings of others. It is important to be aware of how words can unintentionally spark hurt feelings. How, then, is it possible to maintain honest and open communication and avoid hurting others' feelings? It is inevitable that some misunderstandings and problems will arise. The following strategies of positive communication can limit these misunderstandings and help you communicate while demonstrating a genuine concern for the feelings of coworkers and families.

- Think before speaking. Determine what it is you really want to communicate.
- Visualize what you might say and how the other person might feel in response. How would you feel? How, when and where would you want someone else to share a concern about your work with you?
- Is there a kinder way to say what you are thinking?
- Give the situation some time before responding. Would the situation benefit from a little more time and thought before you say what is on your mind? When you are ready to communicate your thoughts ask the other person, "Is this a good time for us to talk about...?"
- Let the other person know that you have a concern, but also that you are hoping to find a mutual solution to the problem. Be honest in letting the other person know that you are trying to talk about it in way that will help resolve the concern without hurt feelings. This shows that you are genuinely concerned about the other person's feelings.

-
- Choose your words carefully. Avoid using vague words. Try to give specific examples to illustrate what you want to say (Jorde, 1982). For example:

Instead of “I am so upset with you,” it is more helpful to say, “I’m feeling that I have too much of the responsibility for the children’s behavior on the playground and I would like to find a way to ask for some help.”

- Check your tone of voice. It is often not so much what you say as how you say it. Other people may misinterpret your true intent if your tone of voice sounds disapproving or blaming. Try to maintain a tone of voice that shows genuine caring for the other person’s feelings.
- Offer suggestions, but leave an opening for the other person to offer alternative solutions. Example:

“One idea I had was to station the teachers and assistants at various locations on the playground where they would be responsible for watching the children in that area. But, this is only one idea. I’d be open to others.”

- Be willing to compromise.
- If possible, offer to be the one to make some of the changes. For example:

“Do you have any suggestions for how I might do this differently?”

-
- Let the other person share his/her views regarding this concern. Give him/her time to think about it and get back to you if necessary . For example:

“I’d like to know how you feel about this...”

- Thank the other person for listening to your concern.
- Ask the other person if you have hurt his or her feelings. If so, ask if there is anything you can do to make her/him feel better about the situation.
- End by suggesting that you talk about this again later if necessary.



STOP HERE AND COMPLETE LEARNING ACTIVITIES



Activity 3.3 Sensitive Communication

For several weeks, Sasha promised to create a new bulletin board display in the classroom. It was April and there were still snowflakes on the bulletin board. Tamara, the co-teacher in the classroom, was becoming frustrated that this hadn't been done yet. One week Sasha said she forgot to do it. A week later she said she didn't have the necessary supplies. Tamara got so fed up that she went to the center director and exploded with angry comments about how Sasha had not followed through on her responsibilities.

How could this situation have been handled using the clear, honest communication strategies discussed in this section? Below, indicate to whom you would talk and write out what you might say in addressing this problem. Share and discuss with a co-worker.

Activity 3.4 Responding to Feedback or Criticism

Many of us have difficulty responding to feedback in a constructive manner. This may be partly because many of our past experiences with feedback have been negative, in the form of grades or criticism from adults. Feedback, however, can be helpful and provide information that can support constructive changes. Hopefully, the staff in your child care/education setting has established a commitment to open, kind and honest communication. Ideally, they go directly to the person involved to talk out a problem rather than criticizing co-workers behind their backs. If a co-worker comes to you with what you perceive as negative feedback, remember that misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts are inevitable, but can lead to positive growth. Respect your co-worker for coming directly to you. Realize that this is probably difficult for him/her, too. The following strategies may help you accept feedback from a more constructive viewpoint.

- Remember, no one is perfect. We all make mistakes and have room for improvement.
- Listen. Listening does not mean you have to agree with the feedback.
- Clarify anything you don't understand by asking questions.
- Restate what you perceive the other person was trying to say to be sure you are not misunderstanding the intent.
- Let the other person know that you heard his/her concerns/ideas and that you would like some time to think about what he/she has said before responding.
- You may want to express your feelings by saying something like, "I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed right now. I need some time to think about this."
- Avoid denying or discounting any concerns. Even if you feel you are right, a problem exists if the other person is expressing concern.

-
- Reflect privately on the feedback you received. Could any of the comments be helpful? Is any aspect of the feedback justified or necessary for the success of your class or the program? How does it make you feel? Are there aspects of the feedback that you do not agree with?
 - Carefully consider your response. Is it necessary to verbally respond to this feedback or are there things you can do or change as a response?
 - Respond either verbally or through actions. Again, let the person know that you heard what was said. Summarize what you perceived as being said and express your feelings and any actions you are planning to take. Finally, let the person know if their feedback was helpful. Make suggestions for how future feedback could be most helpful to you.

Find a co-worker who is willing to observe your classroom for 15 minutes. Ask him/her to provide you with both constructive criticism and positive feedback. Complete the following chart.

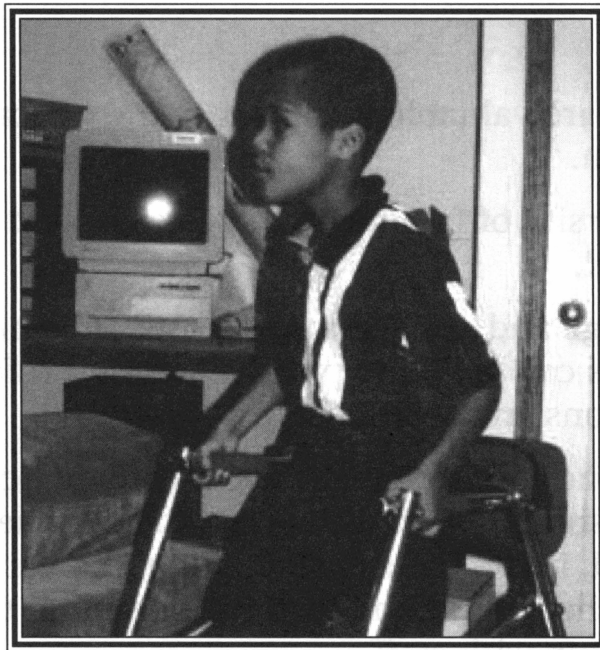
Re-state your co-worker's suggestions and feedback	How did this make you feel?	Could this feedback have been stated in terms that would have made you feel better or been more helpful?

What did you learn from this activity that you can use when you provide feedback to your co-workers? What characteristics of feedback would make it most useful to you?

Post-Assessment

Respond to this scenario:

Craig works in a child care program. Ron is a child with a physical disability in his class who uses a walker to get around. On the playground, Ron is often left out and no one plays with him. Craig would like to make some suggestions to the other staff about how they can encourage the children in their classes to play with Ron. How might Craig best approach this issue?



TOPIC IV: COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES

Outcomes

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Formulate strategies for communicating with families on a regular basis.
- Formulate strategies for communicating concerns to families.
- Formulate strategies for encouraging family input.
- Demonstrate sensitivity and respect for diversity in families.
- Demonstrate respect for families' childrearing values and the right to make decisions for their children

Key Concepts

- Families are valuable members of the education/child care team.
- The diversity of families is to be celebrated and respected.
- Knowledge and application of positive communication strategies can facilitate positive family-professional interactions and relationships.
- Formal and informal methods of communicating with families should be implemented to keep them well informed, invite their participation in a variety of ways, request their input and foster a warm and trusting relationship with staff.

Pre-Assessment

Share 5 ways that you regularly communicate with families.



Background Information

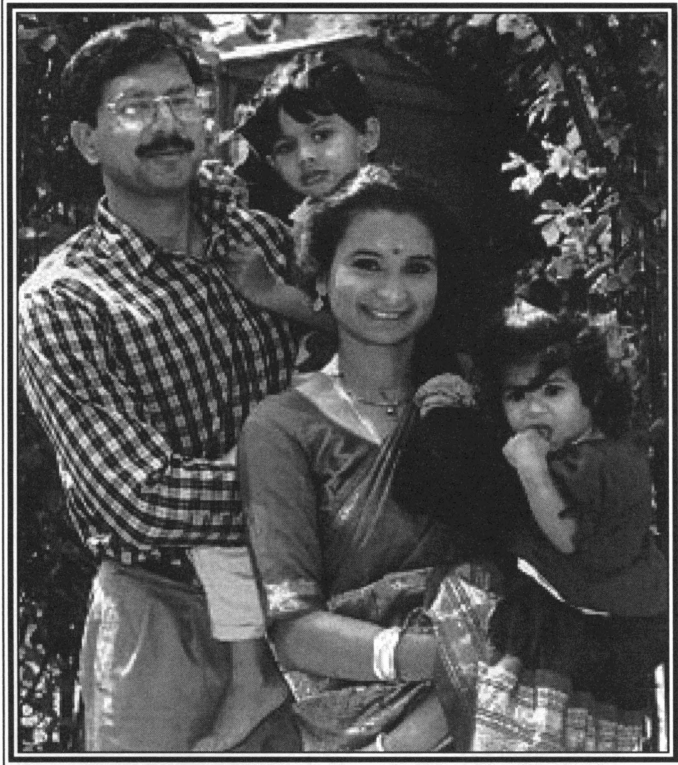
This section of the training guide stresses the importance of regular communication with families. The term family is used here to describe those persons who are responsibly involved with the child and those whom the child defines as part of his/her family. This use of the term “family” encompasses a wide possibility of family groupings and support systems. These may include, but are not limited to, children living with two parents, a single parent, grandparents, foster parents, an aunt, uncle or close friends.

Research studies consistently confirm the great benefit of parent/professional partnerships in the child care/education field.

Increased parent involvement is associated with more positive parental attitudes toward teachers and schools, more positive student attitudes and behaviors, improvements in student performance, improved teacher morale, and enriched school climates (Sussell, Carr, & Hartman, 1996, p. 53).

Developing positive and professional relationships with families require the same commitment, patience and nurturing as do relationships among co-workers. Many of the strategies and skills you have already considered while working through previous topics in this guide are applicable to building and maintaining positive relationships with families. The effective, positive communication strategies described under “Topic III, Positive Communication Skills,” are equally important in relationships with families. In addition, it is helpful to establish specific methods for communicating with families on a regular basis and to have established ways for encouraging families to feel they are a part of the child care/education team.

Staff are responsible for initiating and maintaining a positive, interactive and facilitative relationship with families (Morsink, Thomas, & Correa, 1991). This role of communication facilitator includes sharing information about the child, encouraging and welcoming information from the family, conducting parent training



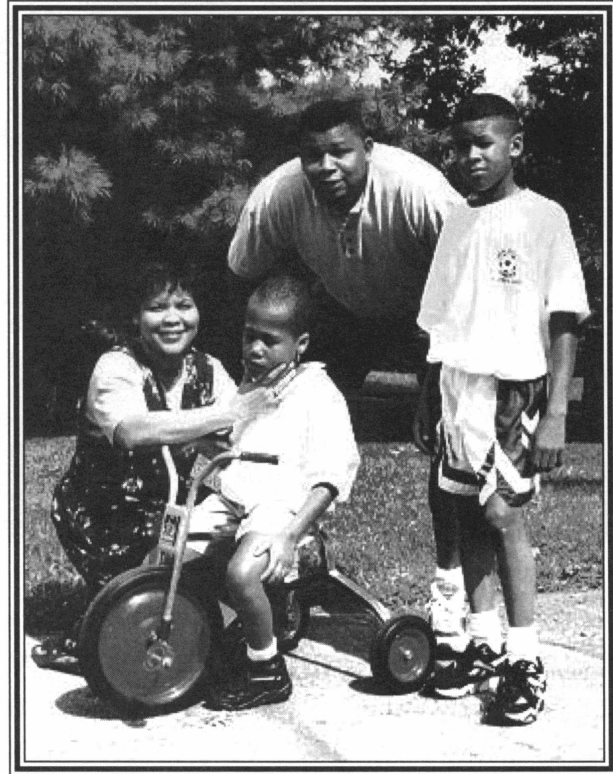
and maintaining an open and honest line of communication with families. Families should feel comfortable speaking with staff about concerns as well as sharing their opinions about what is best for their child. Families should feel confident that they are being kept informed of daily activities in which their child is involved and of any problems or accomplishments of their child. Families should also know that the staff respects and values their

family's culture and trust that staff will handle matters related to their child and family confidentially. Staff should communicate to families that they are valuable partners on the education/child care team. Just as staff need positive feedback, families benefit from feeling valued and receiving positive feedback about their children and their own ideas and skills.

The information and activities contained in this section of the training guide will help you formulate regular, planned methods for communicating with families and help you establish your own strategies for involving families in the care and education of their children. Your attitude toward working with families can set the emotional climate for the family/professional relationship. As you work through these activities let the term "partnership" guide your thoughts on how you will establish positive relationships with the families of the children you serve.

First Impressions Count

A very important consideration in developing professional relationships with families is how you will initially introduce yourself to families and let them know you welcome their involvement in the care and education of their child. We are all influenced by our first impressions. A warm and inviting introduction can go a long way toward developing a mutually trusting and open relationship with families. Little things can make a difference. A warm smile, a kind remark and an attitude of genuine caring let families know that you share their desire for a happy, positive learning environment for their child.



**STOP HERE AND COMPLETE
LEARNING ACTIVITY**

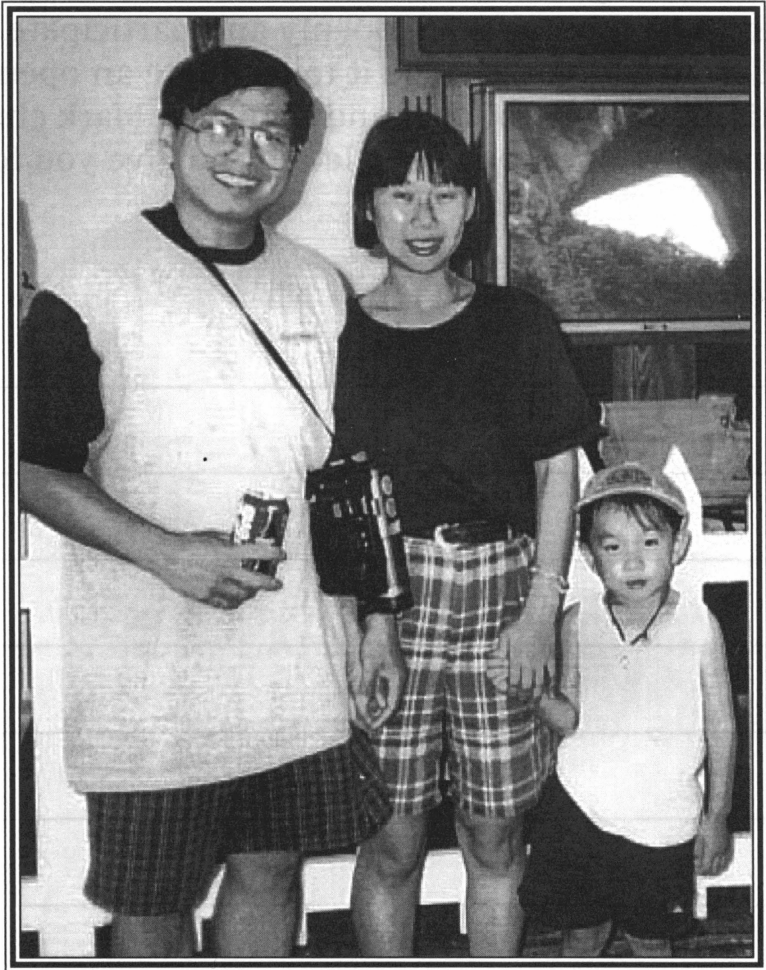
Activity 4.0 Family Letter

Write a letter introducing yourself to each family of the children in your class/program. Complete this activity even if you have been working in this program for awhile. It is simply an exercise, and may not be something you actually use.

In your letter, share some interesting facts about yourself that might be fun for families to know. Share your major goals for working with their child. Wait two days and re-read your letter as if you were a family member reading it for the first time. Does it sound warm and friendly? Does it make them feel secure about having their child in your classroom? Does it invite and welcome family members to communicate openly and participate in program activities? How would you change it to facilitate an open line of communication between yourself and families? Mark changes in red ink. Have one co-worker read your letter and give you feedback.

Dear Family of _____,

Co-workers Feedback:



Staying in Touch

Regular contact with families is essential in the child care/ education setting. Families want to know how their child is doing, what progress he/she is making and if there are concerns. There are many ways to communicate regularly with families. A few examples are described below. You may also want to ask co-workers what methods they have found to be most successful. Ask family members as well. These ideas may spark creative ideas of your own that you may want to use and share with others.

Examples of Methods for Regular Communication Between Home and School/Center

- A monthly calendar of events

This is sent home the first day of every month and can include descriptions of special units or themes, field trips, birthdays and scheduled meetings. It could also include a schedule for classroom volunteers, lunch menus, etc. This method is nice for communicating “whole classroom” or “whole program” activities rather than individual student progress or concerns.
- Newsletters

A program or classroom newsletter can provide a brief summary of special class accomplishments or activities. It can also help alert parents to group concerns, special fund raising projects and special events such as a bookfairs.
- Recorded phone messages

Depending on the financial resources of your school/ program, many options are now available for voice mail which can be accessed by families. Some programs have phone mail boxes for each teacher. Family members may call the number and hear a recorded message about daily activities. Staff must be careful to maintain confidentiality

when using such methods to communicate with families. Therefore, this method of communicating should be used to describe overall class activities and not individual accomplishments or concerns.

- Telephone calls

A telephone call to share individual accomplishments is always a welcome call. Some teachers establish a regular schedule of rotating calls to families of the children in their classrooms. Telephone calls are a good method of communicating information or concerns on an individual basis.

- Video recordings/photo album

A picture can be worth a thousand words. A video recording or photo album of special school activities may be a fun way to share special class events. Great care should be taken to:

- 1) ask parental permission for any video recording or photography,
- 2) ask parental permission to share classroom video taping or pictures with other families,
- 3) select video clips or photos which portray all children/staff in a positive light,
- 4) establish methods for rotating the video or album among class members.

Video recordings can also be used to provide training or information to families. For example, you may produce a monthly video that describes the “themes” that you will be using in your classroom during the upcoming month, describes activities that could be accomplished at home or shares songs or fingerplays that the children are learning. On an individual basis, videotape recordings may be useful in explaining progress or concerns to a family.

- Bulletin Board

A class or program bulletin board can be conveniently located so that family members can check for special activities/information as they drop off or pick up children.

- Display Panels

Boards or panels which display children's experiences through their work or photographs can enhance children's learning, demonstrate that their ideas and work are taken seriously, involve them in planning and evaluation, and foster parent participation. Parents and children can see the children's work, changes that have occurred over time, and pictures of the learning process. The panels can be used to discuss the experience with parents and children. (from Katz, L. & Chard, S. The contribution of documentation to the quality of early childhood programs. ERIC Digest. April, 1996.)

- Communication Notebooks

Each child can keep a notebook in his/her bookbag in which the family and teacher/child care provider writes notes back and forth. Checking the children's notebooks should be part of every morning's routine and the teacher should try to include notes home as often as possible.

- Home Visits

Meeting with families in their home environment can provide opportunities for sharing information on an individual child's progress, learning styles, learning needs or concerns on a more personal level. Home visits allow the teacher to better understand the whole child and his/her family supports and influences. Home visits can provide the opportunity for the teacher to learn more about family customs, beliefs, values and priorities. They can also provide opportunities for sharing teaching strategies with family members and demonstrating specific teaching or behavior management methods. It is very important to

remember that some families may not feel comfortable with home visits. Scheduling convenient times can also be challenging. Open discussion with each family is essential in determining each family's preferences.

- Family visits or observations in the classroom

Whether formally scheduled or part of an "open door" policy, there are many benefits derived from welcoming families into the classroom. Family members are able to see their child as he/she relates to other children and adults. Parents can learn effective teaching strategies from their experiences in the classroom. Observing the class gives families a better perspective on behaviors and developmental/social levels that are typical of that particular age level. Family members may have suggestions for activities or effective ways to work with their child. Parents and teachers are more likely to formulate solutions to child concerns that include carryover from school/center to home. Family visits to the classroom can be for scheduled volunteer activities which assist the teacher or can be less structured opportunities for the parent to simply observe. Some teachers offer special invitations to the family of a different child each week asking them to visit as "family of the week." Throughout the year, each child in the class has an opportunity to invite his/her family. One creative way to involve families whose work schedules preclude visits during the typical school day is to invite parents to stop for breakfast on their way to work.

- Conferences

Scheduled conferences can be useful in providing regular opportunities to discuss the child's progress or concerns. Parent-teacher conferences provide personal two-way communication and can be used to share information, set goals, exchange feelings and beliefs, develop strategies and build cooperative and trusting relationships with families. Parent-teacher conferences may feel threatening to some parents, and much care must be

taken on your part to set a positive climate for the conference. Using the positive communication skills previously discussed is essential for successful parent-teacher conferences.

- Suggestion Box

Placing a suggestion box and feedback forms in a convenient location is one way to solicit family input. Encourage family members to offer constructive feedback as well as comment on anything they particularly like.

- Workshops

Families often appreciate opportunities to learn new skills and receive pertinent information. Families may even be involved in planning and coordinating training opportunities.

- Special Activities

Special activities such as carnivals, book fairs, plays, book exchanges and pot luck dinners can offer families opportunities to participate in the child care/education setting, develop closer relationships with the staff and meet other families. When planning special activities, consider offering opportunities at various times of day to accommodate different family schedules.

- Information Resources

Information folders containing articles and other helpful information can be a valuable way to communicate and offer support to families. Topics for sharing may include child development, behavior management, community resources, special needs, toy selection and activity ideas.



**STOP HERE AND COMPLETE
LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

Activity 4.1 Communication with Families

A number of strategies for regularly communicating with families were discussed in this guide. From the discussed methods and your own ideas, list 3 methods of communicating regularly with families that you will or you would like to establish in your class/program. Implement at least one of these ideas in the next month. Make a plan to phase the others in over the next several months.

1.

2.

3.

Activity 4.2 Strategies for Communicating Respectfully

Along with the positive communication strategies already discussed, there are several family-centered issues which deserve special thought when considering how to build positive partnerships with families. These include:

- Honoring the racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic diversity of families.
- Recognizing that every family has its strengths and individuality.
- Respecting the rights of families to make a decision that is different from one that a professional may recommend.
- Recognizing that each family may have a different way of handling situations.
- Recognizing that there is no one best way of providing services for all families.
- Recognizing that families' egos should be protected. Families should not be blamed for their child's deficiencies or behavior difficulties. Families need to feel that they are viewed as competent, good parents.
- Recognizing the wealth of information families have to share regarding their child and successful strategies for helping their child learn and develop.

Scenario adapted from: Mikus, K., Benn, R. & Weatherston, D. (Eds.). (1994). *On behalf of families: A sourcebook of training activities for early intervention*. Wayne State University: Merrill Palmer Institute:

Melissa is a teacher in a preschool classroom of 2-year-old children. One of the children in her class, Samantha, has multiple disabilities and is not yet able to feed herself. Melissa is very proud that she has been working hard during each snack and meal time to teach Samantha to feed herself. She has encouraged Samantha's mother to "make Samantha feed herself at home." One day when Melissa made a home visit to Samantha's home, several other families from this family's country were gathered for a celebration. Melissa was invited to stay for the meal. Melissa watched with interest as all of the young children, including 3 and 4 year olds, were waited upon and spoon-fed by their mothers. At this point, Samantha's mother smiled gently and said to Melissa, "You see, all of the mothers feed their children. This is what a mother does."

What might Melissa do to begin to understand the mother's beliefs and values relating to self-feeding?

How might Melissa address this mother the next time they meet?

Would your answer be different if Samantha did not have a disability? If so, how?

TOPIC V: RESOLVING CONFLICTS

Outcomes

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Understand that conflict is normal in the workplace and is an opportunity for professional growth.
- Employ positive conflict resolution strategies to resolve disagreements.
- Employ positive communication strategies to express ideas clearly, disagree without rejecting co-workers' ideas and express feelings.

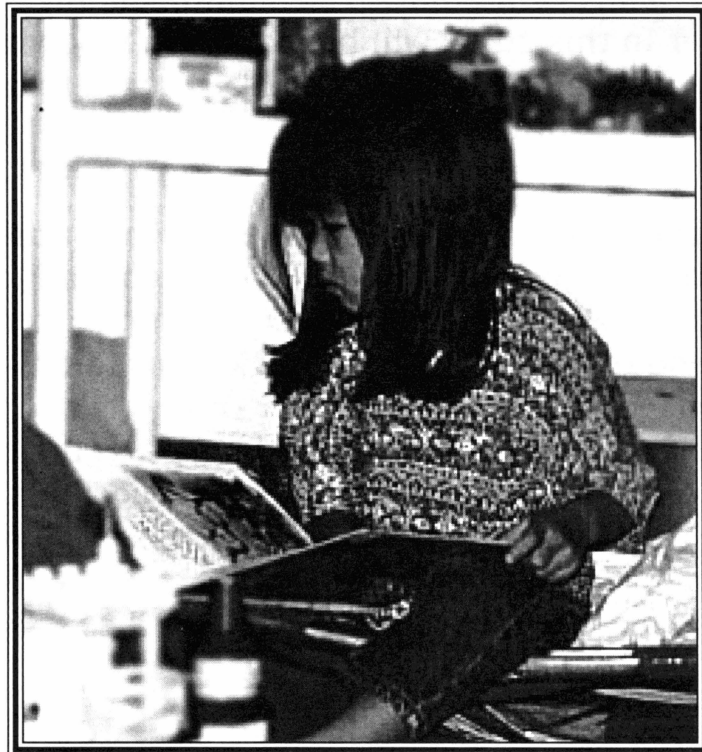
Key Concepts

- Differences and disagreements in the workplace are to be expected.
- Differing opinions should be welcomed and valued.
- Positive communication strategies including active listening, asking clarifying questions, brainstorming, asserting positively, recognizing and expressing feelings and affirming others' viewpoints can be helpful in resolving conflict.

Pre-Assessment

Respond to the following scenario:

You disagree with one of your co-workers about whether children should be allowed to look at books quietly during naptime. Choose one side of this argument, either in favor of letting children look at books or not in favor of this. What main points would you raise? List strategies for resolving this conflict.



Background Information

Even in the best of teams, conflicts and disagreements arise. Conflict is a naturally occurring phenomenon in groups and organizations (Morsink, Thomas & Correa, 1991). Conflict can also be the impetus for new solutions to methods of improving the program. Staff members have diverse backgrounds, experiences, values, beliefs and expectations. Differing opinions should be welcomed and valued. Establishing a process which allows staff to debate issues and reason through problems together reinforces the philosophy that the mutual exchange of ideas is the best way to solve difficult problems and improve services (Bloom, Sheerer, & Britz, 1991).

Differences and disagreements in the workplace are to be expected. Conflicts may arise, not because someone or something is wrong, but simply because two people have differing perspectives or responses to the same issue. It is helpful to view conflict as a “problem to be solved” rather than a situation in which someone is “wrong.” Therefore, learning to disagree without rejecting is an important skill. Many of the positive communication skills described earlier in this guide will be helpful in resolving inevitable conflicts. The following strategies can also be used to more successfully resolve conflicts.

- **Be respectful of differing viewpoints and opinions.** Differing opinions can often lead to new, creative ideas. Just as you want others to listen to your ideas and opinions, other co-workers or family members want to feel free to express their thoughts and viewpoints. Allowing everyone to express their views and ideas will inevitably lead to disagreements. However, if everyone is equally committed to respectful, professional behaviors, these conflicts can lead to improved services to children and families.

-
- **Temporarily suspend your own strong feelings and ideas and listen to the differing viewpoint.** Use your active listening skills. Sometimes your first reaction to a differing opinion may not be your best (O'Malley & Davis, 1994).
 - **Ask clarifying questions that will help you better understand the other person's perspective.** Be careful that your tone of voice does not sound defensive or aggressive. Ask questions because you really want to know and understand what the other person is trying to say.
 - **Brainstorm solutions with the other person(s).** Brainstorming involves getting out all ideas on a particular topic quickly and accepting all ideas without criticism. No idea should be labeled "right" or "wrong," "too crazy" or "idealistic." Brainstorming brings out creative solutions and gives everyone a chance to be heard (O'Malley & Davis, 1994).
 - **Analyze the ideas put forth during the brainstorming session.** Are some ideas more viable than others? Try to come to consensus about several ideas which appear to be the most promising. Explore the specifics of these ideas.
 - **Assert positively.** Positive assertion includes clearly thinking about your own viewpoints, articulating your points clearly and providing rationale for your ideas. In a calm and thoughtful manner, let others know what you think and feel, while at the same time, welcoming their thoughts and feelings.
 - **Try to find some aspect of the conflict and proposed solutions that you can agree on and build from there.**

-
- **Allow everyone involved in the conflict the chance to talk, but also allow a person to “pass” if they do not feel ready to talk about their viewpoint.**
 - **Remember that there is always more than one way to solve a problem, and rarely just one “right way.”**
 - **Conflict resolutions may involve one or more of the following:**

Collaborating: Negotiating and working with someone by exploring the areas of your disagreements, generating alternatives and finding solutions that mutually satisfy the needs and interests of both parties.

Compromising: “Splitting the difference” by seeking a middle ground so that the solutions partially satisfy both parties.

Accommodating: Yielding to another person’s point of view. Sometimes this is the best solution and can successfully work when each person is aware and appreciates that one person has “given in” for the benefit of peaceful working relations.

(adapted from: O’Malley & Davis, 1994)



**STOP HERE AND COMPLETE
LEARNING ACTIVITY**

B. Ask a co-worker to role play the scenario with you. Ask your co-worker how the solutions you suggested would be received.

C. Now, use a conflict from your own personal experience and answer questions 1-3 again to formulate possible actions you might use to resolve the conflict.

Post-Assessment

Respond to the following scenario:

One of your co-workers has confided in you that she does not agree with another staff member's disciplinary methods. What advice do you have for this co-worker about how to approach this issue and resolve the conflict?



TOPIC VI: MAKING ETHICAL DECISIONS

Outcomes

After completing this section, you should be able to:

- Understand the meaning and uses of a professional code of ethics.
- Apply the NAEYC professional code of ethics to daily classroom and professional activities and interactions.
- Make ethical decisions in solving dilemmas in the workplace.

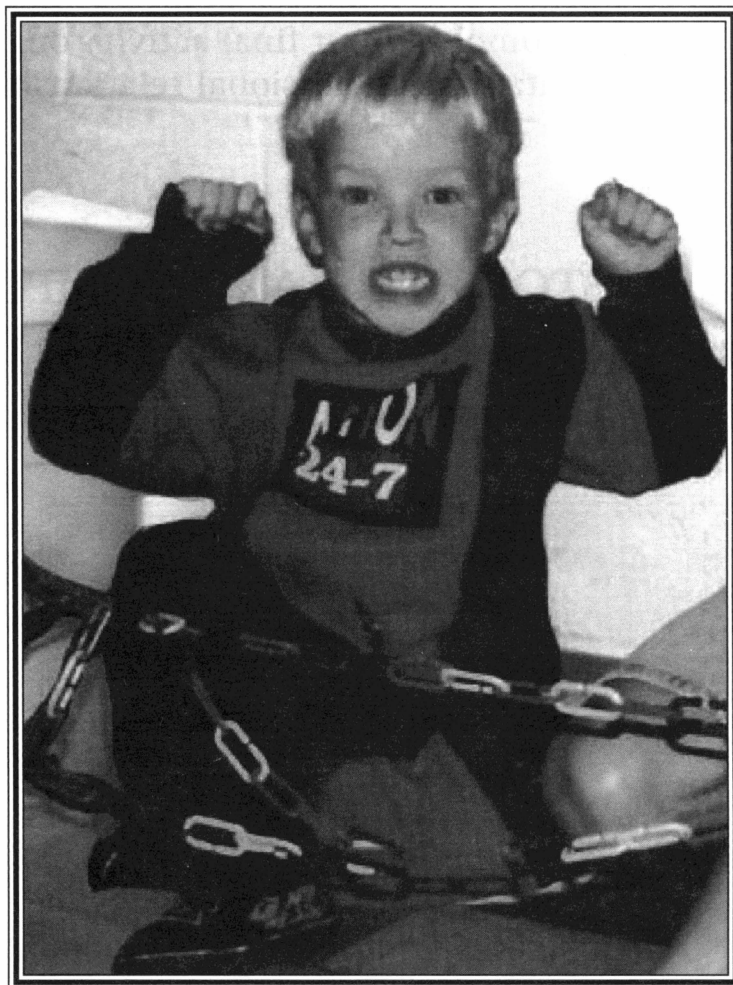
Key Concepts

- Child care and education professionals can be guided by a professional code of ethics.
- Ethical behavior is crucial to providing quality services to children and families.

Pre-Assessment

Describe an ethical dilemma which could arise in an early childhood education/child care setting, your personal solution to that dilemma and your reasons for making that decision.

Example: Should an aggressive child be removed from the program?



Background Information

Maintaining relationships with co-workers and families also requires a commitment to a high standard of professional ethics. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) set forth a standard of behavior that delineates professional responsibilities to children, families, colleagues, community and society. We recommend reading the “Code of Ethical Conduct” published by NAEYC, and reflecting back on what you have learned through this guide about your program’s common goals, your roles and responsibilities and your communication strategies with colleagues and families. Information on where you can get this publication is located on page 73. The knowledge you have constructed while working through this guide should form a practical basis for applying the code of ethics to your daily interactions with co-workers and families. NAEYC’s “Code of Ethical Conduct” may help you complete your final activity on communicating and maintaining professional relationships with co-workers and families.



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LEARNING ACTIVITY**



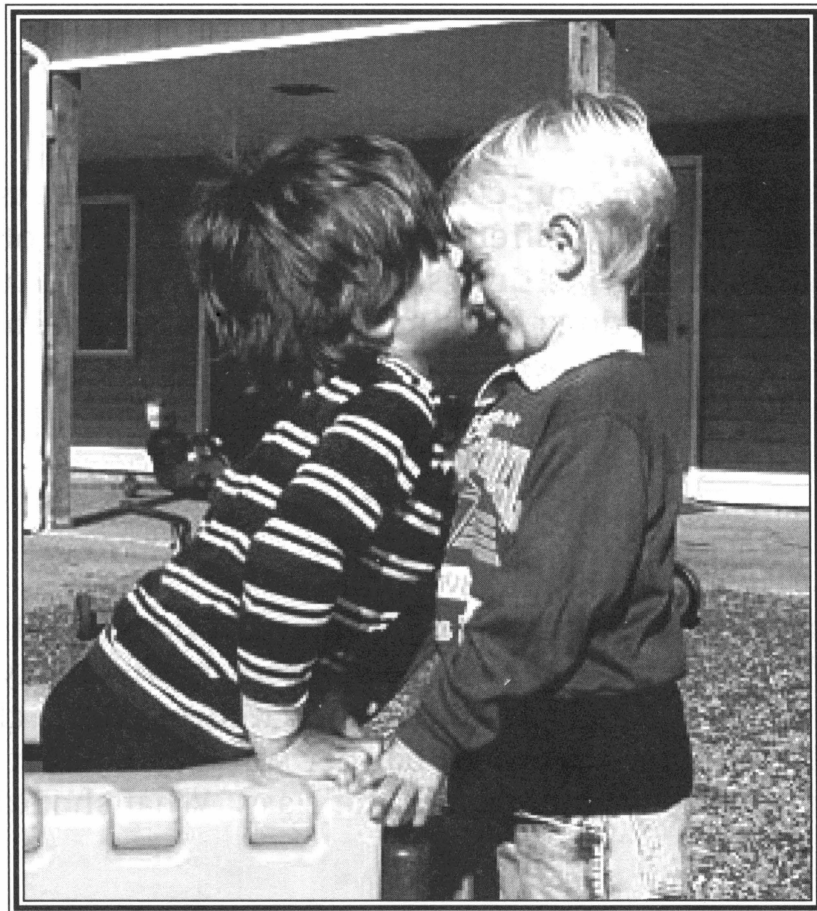
Activity 6.0 Classroom Dilemmas

Either on your own or with a small group of co-workers or family members, suggest a response to the following dilemmas based on the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Code of Ethics:

1. Martha is a child in your class. Her developmental skills are well below those of the other children in your class. She is having great difficulty accomplishing many of the activities you are introducing and you are finding it necessary to give her quite a bit of individualized attention. It is time to make suggestions for next year's groupings of children in your center/program. What suggestions do you have for how Martha might best be served?
2. The children in your class are teasing Trina because she brings some very different foods for lunch. The other children are saying things like, "Trina has gross stuff in her lunch," and "I don't want to sit by Trina because her lunch smells." What can you do?
3. A parent has expressed to you that she doesn't think her son's teacher, one of your co-workers, is effectively managing the behavior of several children in the classroom. This parent is concerned that her son may be hurt by the more aggressive children in the class. What should you do?

Post-Assessment

Based on the National Association for the Education of Young Children's code of ethical conduct, respond to the same ethical dilemma you described in your pre-assessment activity.



FINAL THOUGHTS

As you worked through this guide, you have been asked to think about your relationships with co-workers and with the families of the children with whom you work. Throughout the guide, you have assimilated information about building professional relationships. You have completed activities that have helped you construct your own knowledge about the importance of positive communication strategies and working within a team model. You have demonstrated practical application of these strategies in response to activities. The knowledge and skills you have developed can greatly influence your continued job satisfaction, your friendships and camaraderie on the job, your pride in individual job performance and the overall success of the child care/education program. A beautiful example of team work and collaboration can be found in this illustration retold by Voorhees, Aveno, and Landon (1993) (original author unknown).

COLLABORATIVE TEAMING AMONG GEESE

Fact One: As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird following it. By flying in a “V” formation, the whole flock adds 71% greater flying range than if it flew alone.

Lesson: People who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are traveling in the thrust of one another.

Fact Two: Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone

and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front.

Lesson: If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are headed where we want to go and be willing to accept their help, as well as to give ours to others.

Fact Three: When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back into the formation and another goose flies the point position.

Lesson: It pays to take turns doing the hard tasks and sharing leadership. With people, as with geese, we are interdependent on each other's skills and capabilities and unique gifts, talents, and resources.

Fact Four: The geese in the formation honk from behind to encourage those in front to keep up their speed.

Lesson: We need to make sure our honking from behind is encouraging and not something else. In groups where there is great encouragement against great odds, the production is much greater.

Fact Five: When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it either is able to fly again or dies, then they launch out on their own with another formation or catch up with the flock.

Lesson: If we have as much sense as geese, we too will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong.

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WHERE TO FIND NAEYC'S "CODE OF ETHICAL CONDUCT"

The "Code of Ethical Conduct & Statement of Commitment: Guidelines for Responsible Behavior in Early Childhood Education" by Stephanie Feeney and Kenneth Kipnis can be purchased directly from the National Association for the Education of Young Children by ordering item NAEYC #503 from them at:

The National Association for the Education of
Young Children
(NAEYC)
1509 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036-1426

(202)232-8777 (800)424-2460 Fax: (202)328-1846

This publication has also been reprinted in the 1989 article by S. Feeney and K. Kipnis called "A New Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators! Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment" which appeared in the journal *Young Children*, Vol. 44 (1), on pages 24-29.

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