

## Communicating With Families

Good communication is essential to partnerships. Families want to know all the details about their children's experiences during the day, everything from what and how much they ate to what and with whom they played and how they reacted to experiences. Families often have information to share as well. Informal daily exchanges are just as valuable as the more formal methods you use to communicate with families. You may need to use several different forms of communication, especially if a child lives in more than one home or has a noncustodial adult who wants to be fully involved.

### Building Trust Through Daily Interactions

Every day that a child is in your care, you have opportunities to interact with family members and build the trust that is essential to a partnership. Trust develops only over time and is based on many positive and respectful experiences.



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Here are some of the positive messages you can convey to families through your daily interactions.

Message to Families	Daily Interaction
You are always welcome here.	Greet each family member and child by name and say something positive about the child, the family, or the program. Learn at least a few words in the family's home language to use when you talk with the child. (Be aware that some family members might not want you to address them in their home language if you only know a few words of greeting.)
We can learn from you.	Acknowledge the insights and information parents have about their child and how valuable these are to you and other staff members who care for the child.
You are entitled to know what is happening in the program.	Set up systems, such as journals or daily notes, to share what has happened each day. Use simple language and translate the information if necessary. Avoid the use of jargon in both written and spoken communication.
We will share the care of your child.	Complete the <i>Individual Care Plan—Family Information Form</i> with the family of each infant and update it regularly. Communicate daily with parents or other family members about their child. Use daily logs to share information about each child's day and hold daily conversations, either in person or by phone.
We can work together to resolve differences and conflicts.	View differences as opportunities to learn more about the family's views and work toward a better understanding. Use the steps for handling conflicts (discussed later in this chapter) to support your partnership.

Every positive interaction you have with a family member builds trust. If you do need to discuss a difficult issue at some time, it will be easier and more productive if you have already built a positive relationship with the family.

## Making the Most of Daily Exchanges

When you are caring for very young children, daily exchanges are the primary way to communicate with family members and keep everyone informed about what is happening at home and at the program. Respectful and sincere interactions between families and teachers show children that home and the program are connected. Here are some suggestions for daily exchanges with families.

**Greet each child and family personally.** Use their names; observe indications of how they are faring, and say something specific about the child, the family, or your plans for the day.

**Share information about something the child has accomplished or about an event that concerns the child.** News can be shared in the morning, but the end of the day is often a good time to talk with families about what their child has done and to explain its significance. “Let me tell you about the building Janelle made with our blocks yesterday. The way she solved the balancing problem was pretty amazing. She tried several ways of stacking the blocks so they wouldn’t fall down.” However, leave the announcement of important “firsts” to the parent and child.

**Solicit their insights and advice about their child.** “I can see that Parker doesn’t want to say good-bye to you today. Can you think of any particular reason?”

**Give support to families when needed.** “Perhaps Maya just needs an extra hug. I know she’ll be fine once she gets busy. We have lots planned for today.”

**Be a good listener.** Active listening skills convey that parents’ concerns and ideas are taken seriously. “I understand how upset you are about the biting incident. I can assure you that we are taking steps to prevent more biting.”

**Make sure you understand what is being said.** If there is uncertainty about a family member’s statement, clarify your understanding. “Tell me whether I understand what you are saying. I think I heard you say. . .”

In communicating with families, try to be specific and factual. Vague or subjective comments can leave family members uncertain about what you mean or make them defensive. Notice the difference between the subjective and objective comments in the two examples that follow. Think about how the parent might feel in each case.

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Subjective Comments	Parent's Thoughts
<p>When Julio's mother, Maria, comes to get him at the end of the day, Linda tells her, "Julio was very crabby today. He fussed with everyone who tried to comfort him."</p>	<p>What did he do? How did Linda try to comfort him? Why didn't they call me? He is not crabby at home. I'm not sure they know how to take care of my baby. Maybe something is wrong with him or with me as a parent.</p>
Objective Comments	Parent's Thoughts
<p>At lunchtime, Linda calls Maria to discuss Julio's fussiness. She tells her, "Julio cried when he drank his bottle this morning. I tried holding him the way you showed me, but it didn't help. Do you have any suggestions for me?"</p> <p>Then, when Maria picks him up at the end of the day, Linda tells her, "Julio was still a bit fussy this afternoon when he ate. I am wondering if his ears are bothering him, or if he is still just adjusting to me. What do you think?"</p>	<p>I wonder what's wrong. I appreciate Linda's asking me for my advice and ideas. I think that Linda is doing all she can to take care of him.</p> <p>Perhaps he is not used to Linda yet, but maybe he is getting sick. If this continues, I'll take him to the clinic for a checkup. I feel good about leaving Julio with Linda. I know she will call me if she has trouble with him.</p>

Subjective Comments	Parent's Thoughts
<p>When Matthew's father comes to pick him up at the end of the day, Mercedes tells him, "Matthew was such a good boy today. He just loves everyone."</p>	<p>That's a surprise. Matthew is a real challenge at home. He makes his sister cry, and he won't cooperate when we ask him to do things. If he is so good here but challenging at home, are we doing something wrong?</p>
Objective Comments	Parent's Thoughts
<p>When Matthew's father comes to pick him up, Mercedes tells him, "Today Matthew helped us clean up the blocks and trucks, and we only asked him one time! I handed him the basket and asked him to help put the blocks away, and he did. This afternoon, we had a volunteer in our room. Matthew sat on her lap while she read two books to him. She told us she really enjoyed him."</p>	<p>I have a pretty wonderful son. He is learning to clean up. I think we will encourage that at home. Also, the bedtime stories we read to him at night must be helping him listen to stories. I guess my wife was right about how important it is to read to him every day. I feel good about the way he is growing.</p>

## Communicating in More Formal Ways

In addition to informal daily exchanges, there are more formal ways to communicate with families. Some can be accomplished easily; others take more time and planning.

**Daily communication form**—Create a form for families to record information about their child when they arrive at the program each day. Request information that is basic to the child's daily care and explain that it helps you meet each child's current needs more effectively. You may need to encourage parents to take the time to complete this form when they bring their child. Request any information that you find necessary, such as when the child last ate, when her diaper was last changed, her general mood that day, how well she slept last night, when she will be picked up, and who will be picking her up.

**Electronic mail**—More and more families—and programs—have access to e-mail. Sending e-mail is an excellent way to stay in touch and to share specific information about a child.

**Internet**—Introduce families to CreativeCurriculum.net if you are using that system. They can participate in a parent-to-parent message board, view their child's portfolio, and add comments or upload pictures.

**Journals**—Provide each family with a journal that is sent between home and school. You can each write entries to share information. While the families may or may not provide you with objective, specific, and factual information, it is essential that you do so. From time to time, you can include specific questions for families.

**Newsletters**—Periodically provide families with newsletters about what the children in your group have been doing. When you tell them about experiences and discoveries that the whole group has engaged in, parents can better understand their child's life at the program.

**Letters to families**—At the end of each of chapters 6–18, you will find a letter to families. Each sample letter describes why a particular routine or experience is an important part of the program, how you support children's learning and development, and how you hope to work together with families. Adapt the letters for your own program and send them home over a period of time—perhaps one letter a week—so that families do not feel overwhelmed with too much information. Sometimes you will want to distribute the relevant letter at a meeting during which you are talking about a routine or experience, such as how you handle hellos and good-byes.

**Articles of interest, community resources, and relevant Web sites**—These are resources that you can share with parents. Invite families to share the resources that they have found helpful.

**Notices**—Written notices are a way to give every family the same information at the same time. You might want to explain a policy change, a special event, or the contagious disease of a child or staff member. Use the **mail/message boxes** for these notices.

### Holding Conferences With Families

A formal conference with each family is a time to sit down together, uninterrupted, and talk as partners about caring for their child. Conferences are opportunities to share information, observations, and questions. You can solve problems together when necessary and celebrate the uniqueness of each child. If a child has a diagnosed disability, a family conference will involve the team of people who develop goals for the Individual Family Service Plan. Preparation and the many positive interactions you have already had with the family help ensure a successful conference.

Here are steps to take as you prepare for a family conference:

- Arrange a time that is convenient for families and find out whom they would like to include in the conference.
- Let families know what to expect. When you set up the conference, explain that conferences are a time to focus entirely on their child. Find out what the family's goals are for the conference. Ask what they are interested in learning about and whether there are any special issues they want to discuss.
- Review your observation notes and ask co-workers whether they have any information and insights about the child to contribute. Sharing stories and observations will help families get clear ideas about their child's experiences at the program.
- Be prepared to share what children are learning. The information in chapter 3, *What Children Are Learning*, will help you explain the significance of what each child is able to do.
- If language differences may be a barrier, arrange for someone to interpret. Many families know someone who can serve as an interpreter. If they do not, try to make other arrangements.

The first family conference is usually a time to get to know each other, to share information you each have about the child, and to discuss your goals for the year. If you have not already explained how *The Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum for Infants, Toddlers & Twos* helps you get to know and plan for each child, this is a good time to do so. During future meetings, their familiarity with the *Developmental Continuum* will help you discuss their child's progress, what you are expecting next in terms of development, and how you can work together to support the child in taking his or her next steps.

Start the conference by sharing your observation of something new, interesting, or delightful that their child has done or said. You may also want to ask parents questions such as “What activities do you and your child enjoy doing together now?” or “What interests your child?” Questions of this sort show your appreciation of their child and encourage families to share some of their own observations.

Next, share the *Family Conference Form*, which is available in *The Creative Curriculum for Infants, Toddlers & Twos Developmental Continuum Assessment Toolkit*. Under the appropriate goal heading on the form, highlight the child’s new discoveries and the skills she has mastered. Offer specific examples from your observation notes. Instead of presenting a random list of the child’s recent accomplishments, this form helps you present examples in the context of the curriculum goals. This organization makes the examples meaningful for the family. For example, a parent may be upset that her son is still sucking his thumb. On the *Family Conference Form*, in the section “To Learn About Self and Others,” you would record the explanation that this is how their child is learning to comfort himself (Objective 3, “Manages own feelings”). It may help the parent think about the child’s thumbsucking in a new and helpful way.



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Throughout your discussion, encourage the family to share their observations, questions, challenges, and joys. Confirm that this is a time for an exchange of information and that combining what each of you knows will give both of you the clearest possible understanding of their child. In addition to recording your own ideas, ask the family for their ideas when you discuss the other sections of the form: “Favorite Activities and Special Interests,” “Situations or Experiences that Cause Distress,” “Special Circumstances,” and “Special Needs.” Any additional information that the family shares can be recorded in the “Family Comments and Observations” section. Family conferences are also good times to update the *Individual Care Plan* you have for each child.

Talk together about expectations for the child’s development and complete the “Next Steps” section of the *Family Conference Form* with the child’s family. This will become your blueprint for working with the child during the next 3 months or so until the next assessment checkpoint and conference. Keep it where you will have ready access to it, so you can remind yourself of areas you want to focus on during the next few months. At the next conference, the form can serve as a starting point for your discussion.

### Making Home Visits

Home visits are another way of communicating with families. They provide a unique opportunity to see a child and family in their most comfortable setting. Some programs require home visits, but others do not. In either case, families should be given some choice about whether they want a home visit. When a home visit is too stressful for a family, it will not achieve its purpose.

Talk with families about the purpose of the visit. Let them know ahead of time why you are coming. Arrange a time that is convenient for both of you. Families may be anxious or excited about your visit. Reassure them and help them feel comfortable about your presence in their home.

When you make home visits, follow your program's established policies and procedures. Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind.

- Decide ahead of time what you want to accomplish. Is it simply to introduce yourself and meet the family or do you have additional goals?
- Ask the family about their goals for the visit. Address as many of their requests as possible.
- Review the enrollment materials before going on the visit, so that you are familiar with the names of family members and information about the family.
- Develop and use a home visiting plan to help you prepare for the visit.
- Contact the family to set up a good time for the visit. Agree on a date and time and give them an idea of how long you will be staying.
- Get directions to the home. If you feel unsafe going alone, take a colleague from the program with you or arrange for the family to visit you at the program.
- Gather the materials and information you will need before making the visit.
- After the visit, record any information or observations that you want to remember.

These approaches to communicating with families will help you obtain the full benefits of a true partnership. You will have the information you need to care for the child, families will gain confidence in you, and children will be more likely to thrive in your care.

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