

# Family Partnerships: Building Trust and Respect in Relationships

By **Randi Albertsen**

Building relationships with families has always been a priority in early childhood education. We know that some families are grateful and welcome the opportunity to share their child with us. Some families are skeptical about engaging with early care providers. This happens for many reasons: guilt at not being able to stay home; financial burdens of the cost of care; distrust of “the system”, or not finding a good fit.

To help children trust us, we must first build trust with the family. When families trust us, their children are more likely to trust us. How do you build trust with someone that you might only see for a few moments at a time at morning drop off or evening pick up? How do you find time for connection with caregivers who might be rushed or distracted when they come into your program? How do you build trust with a family when a nanny or babysitter handles drop off and pick up, or the drop-off and pick up person changes daily, when multiple families arrive simultaneously, or when you are busy calming a child as other children are arriving?

Let’s start by looking at how we build trust in any relationship.

With most relationships in our personal lives, we have a say in how we communicate, how much time and effort we put in, and how we set boundaries in those relationships. If something is not to our liking, or does not meet our needs, we have options. We can put more effort into it, we can ignore it, or we can leave. In general, relationships are a give-and-take between two people, and we can choose how much we give and what we need in return.

The challenge we face with our families is that we cannot opt out of this relationship. We cannot ignore our families. We cannot walk away from them. We only have so much time and energy to build relationships with families, particularly when we might have 20 families in our classroom. Unlike other relationships in our lives, building relationships with families is required.

So where do we begin?

We start with respect. We start by accepting families for who they are. We must accept that every family has a different journey, a unique set of values and beliefs, and a variety of experiences. This may be very different than our own journey. Different does not mean wrong or bad. It is just different. There is no one right way to be a family. When we show our families that we see them and respect their choices, we begin to build trust. We must acknowledge that families are experts on their child, while we are experts on child development (Phillips et al., 2020).

We need to make time and find space to have brief conversations with families to share what we have learned about their child, and what joy we feel when we work with their child. A quick, positive comment shared at drop-off or pick up can start this dialogue. The conversation can start by putting a short, friendly note in the child’s cubby or backpack. A quick call to a

parent, guardian, or other family member just to say their child is having a great day is enough to start building trust. Sending a quick happy note through digital means is another way to start building trust.

One thing we must acknowledge is that the efforts we put into having brief conversations with our families, in any form, may go unanswered or ignored. Without judgement, we must accept families where they are. Our responsibility is to make the effort and be available to our families and allow them to respond on their terms, even if that means we get no response at all.

But what if they do not treat us with mutual respect?

Unfortunately, in today's political climate, educators at all levels have been scapegoats and punching bags for families and politicians. While this is frustrating and potentially demoralizing, we need to have a laser focus on what is important. Their child.



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without us realizing we are holding on to this stress. Using a trauma-informed lens can help us better connect with and relate to our families. We need to shift our thinking from “Why are you treating me this way?” to “What might be going on with this person or family that is influencing how they are acting?”

Sometimes it is more than stress.

Stress and trauma are not the only reasons building relationships with families can be challenging. Sometimes families come to our programs with values and beliefs that are not aligned with our program's mission and vision. Families may choose to enroll in our program because of our good reputation, our convenience, or our affordability. Families do not always read through our policies and procedures before enrolling. This is a good reminder that building relationships with families starts at the first phone call when a family inquires “Do you have any openings?”

To build a relationship that is required of us, we must remember that we can only control our actions and not the words and actions of others. To do this, we need a thick skin, and we need to remember not to take the actions of others personally. We must stay focused on our efforts to build trust and meet the needs of the children in our care. We must always consider that the words and actions of families might have an underlying cause, and that what we see on the surface might be coming from an underlying place of fear, frustration, trauma, or stress.

Collectively, we have all been through the trauma of a pandemic. We have all experienced financial pressures from supply shortages to inflation. These external forces don't always manifest in something we can see. Sometimes these pressures lurk beneath the surface



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Every step of the enrollment process is an opportunity to build a relationship. It starts with that first phone call and continues when the family comes in to tour our program. How we greet families, how our front lobby or office looks, and how our registration materials are presented create the first impression for a family.

Are there photos and images on the walls and in our welcome materials that reflect a respect for diversity? Is the language we use in conversation and in print reflective of the diversity of family compositions? Do we ask questions and show an interest in the wants and needs of the child and family beyond the basics of our registration materials?

One thing that is often overlooked is the importance of sharing our program's mission, vision, and philosophy during this initial phase of the enrollment process. This is an opportunity to highlight not only how wonderful our staff and our program are, but also how our program mission, vision, and philosophy are reflected in every aspect of our program. What does this look like in our curriculum? What does this look like in our room arrangement and materials? What does this look like in our ongoing communication with families? The more we can set expectations from the start, the easier it is to create mutual respect between families and staff.

Even when we do all the right things and take the time to educate families before they enroll with us, we may still encounter families who do not trust us or who do not support the work we do. Recently, there has been a rise in conflicts between parents and educators regarding program policies and curriculum decisions. This can be an opportunity, or it can be a point of conflict.

If we look at this from the perspective of an opportunity, it changes the way we talk with families and how we approach this challenge. When a family comes to us upset, whether it be something a teacher said, a book or materials or a classroom activity, or something else, we might want to start with a "fix" or a defense to what was said or done (Phillips et al., 2020). That is human nature. We want to avoid conflict. We want our families to be happy. This approach does not address the underlying cause of the conflict. However, if we pause before responding, it allows us time to reflect on what the family is trying to communicate to us. It gives us space to consider different perspectives. And it allows us time to formulate a response that is respectful of the family but also honors our staff and our program.

One strategy we can use to address a conflict is to start with a question. Asking a family to explain or describe what happened and then following up with questions about how this issue makes them feel can help to diffuse intense emotions. When we acknowledge anger or frustration, it helps the family feel seen and heard. This moment is not the time to talk about policy or philosophy. It is an opportunity to connect on an emotional level.

Sometimes, the best response is to allow time for you and the family to process emotions (Jennings, 2019). Asking the family for time to consider their concerns and scheduling a follow-up conversation gives both parties the opportunity to reflect and come back together to work towards a solution. When both parties are calmer and do come back together, rather than citing program policies, philosophy, or the research supporting what you do, begin by thanking the family for talking with you. Acknowledge and show respect for the emotions of the family. Focus on how their child is doing in your program, who they play with, and what materials or activities they enjoy. Ask questions about what the family is seeing the child do at home (Jennings, 2019). Then, you can calmly share the philosophy of your program, the research behind what you do, and

how this is supportive of their child’s development. If, during the time you spent reflecting on the issue, you decide to make a change to your policies or practices, you can share that.

Build in time to talk about the expertise the family has about their child while also sharing the expertise you and your staff have on developmentally appropriate practices. If emotions get heated, it is time to pause again and reconvene when everyone is calmer. By showing deep respect for the needs of the family, you will often be able to collaborate on a solution. However, there are times when you need to acknowledge that your program is not a good fit for the family. This is never easy, but when you keep the focus on how to best support the child and the family, parting ways is sometimes the best option.

Building relationships with families is a required component of early childhood programs. It takes time and effort, but it is always worth it.

## References

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