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Child and Family Tip Sheet: Communicating with Families

University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities

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Communicating with Families



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Working with families is an important part of working with children. Ideally, child care providers, teachers and families learn from and support each other. Here are some ideas to keep in mind as you communicate with families.

Approach each partnership as a new beginning

Some parents have had bad experiences in the past. They may worry that they and their child will have a hard time fitting in. New beginnings allow teachers and families to identify strategies that meet everyone's needs.

View each family as unique

Every family's needs, interests, and concerns vary. Recognize each unique family and communication style. The impact a child with a disability may have on a family is difficult to predict. Each child and family will need different supports and resources, so listen to each family's story.

Be respectful

Be slow to judge and quick to give parents the benefit of the doubt. Be especially sensitive about cultural, language, and social differences.

Ask questions

Parents may not know what information you need. Asking respectful questions can give you information about the child and the family. Open-ended questions (Tell me about John's favorite toys) provide more information than yes / no questions (Does John like to build with blocks?). Encourage families to share successes and challenges.

Listen as much as you speak (maybe more)

Avoid approaching parents about an issue with the solution already decided. Leave room in problem-solving for parent feedback and suggestions. Make certain your actions and words reflect your goal to partner with families.

Be honest

Tell parents what you really mean because you want them to tell you what they really mean. If you do not know how to position their child so they can play with toys in the water table, say so. It may seem easier to talk around an issue, but a direct approach is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Maintain confidence

Families may share information with you that is not shared with everyone. Examples of confidential information include a child's diagnosis, medications, or family life. Guard and respect each family's right to privacy.

Use several strategies for regular communication

It helps to have several communication options. Families and providers can write in a shared notebook, or schedule phone or video calls. Some information is not easily shared in a note and requires personal contact. Create opportunities for families to share sensitive information privately.

Commit to timely communication

Whether it is good news, a regular update, or a bad situation getting worse, communicate with parents often.

Share achievements as well as challenges

Parents need to know their child's positive and negative experiences. Establish solid communication so the relationship is strong enough to support honest communication.

Include the entire family

Each individual plays an important function in the life of the child. Children benefit when caregivers and all family members work together.

Strong family partnerships are the cornerstone of quality childhood care and education. Keeping respect, appreciation and trust in mind will help build and maintain good relationships.

The Child Care Plus Center was based at the Rural Institute from 1987 to 2012. The nationally-focused Center supported and promoted inclusive early childhood environments. Child Care Plus is no longer an active project. However, the materials are still relevant. To address the needs of a broad audience, Rural Institute staff updated several Child Care Plus resources in 2021.

The updated views expressed in this document may not reflect the original Child Care Plus purpose, or the official position of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities or University of Montana.

MonTECH

IMPROVING LIVES WITH TECHNOLOGY

Communication with families and guardians can be hampered by invisible disabilities like hearing impairment, dyslexia, and other challenges. Ensure families understand your messaging by being sensitive to the possibility of a disability and addressing those issues with assistive technology.

MonTECH is a free state program able to provide you with apps and tools to enhance communication. Borrow a personal amplification device for conferences with a parent who is hard of hearing.

Contact MonTECH for a free consult on devices and apps that can read a document aloud for a family member who is dyslexic. If you have parents or guardians with vision impairment, borrow magnification devices or get free help to learn how to make your electronic documents more accessible. If you have a parent who has a brain injury or developmental disability and struggles to keep track of appointments and deadlines, MonTECH can help with organizational supports.

MonTECH's help is free. Call or write for more information:

montech@mso.umt.edu

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