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Parents’ Perspectives on Conferencing

by Roslyn Duffy

Children are awake 12 or more hours each day existing in, exploring, and experiencing this world. They snooze away most of the remainder of each 24 hour span. Many spend more than half of their waking hours with people other than their parents. When parents and children separate for long periods each day, there is a tremendous need to hear stories about each other. What did you eat today; did you learn a new song; or were you sad, mad, glad over something? Parent conferences are a formal time for parents and teachers to share stories.

Three Concerns

Parents come to conferences with three basic concerns:

- Do you know and like my child?
- Can I trust you?
- Is my child normal?

These concerns are the bottom line.

Three Messages

Parents want to convey three main messages.

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I want to be a good parent.
I love my child and she is very special to me.
I want specific things for my child: (PIES) physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially.

Do you know and like my child?
Can I trust you?

Her teacher notices Mary, enjoys her, and takes note of her activities. That information translates into the message: this teacher knows and likes Mary. When parents receive such a message, they think: Mary is safe here and we can trust this adult. Trust builds from tiny bits and pieces of experience.

Part Two

The second part of the conference addresses the child’s performance at school. This responds to the third parental concern:

Is my child normal?

A variation of this question is more basic. Is my child in “trouble”? Trouble includes many aspects of development. Use the acronym PIES. PIES stands for four areas of development: physical, intellectual, emotional, and social. Remember to give parents a serving of PIES.

Parents live with only one or at most a few children. Often there are no other nearby relatives. When four year old Sammy tells a lie, his dad panics. Have I raised a liar? What should I do? Does Sammy lie at school, too? Mr. Silla, Sammy’s teacher, has been around hundreds of four and five year olds. His perspective and knowledge of child development enable him to reassure Sammy’s dad that lying is fairly typical for children Sammy’s age. Children learn to establish boundaries between fantasy and reality in their late preschool years. Mr. Silla can help Sammy’s parents plan effective responses when Sammy tells falsehoods.

Alerted to this concern, Mr. Silla pays closer attention at school to see if Sammy’s statements are truthful. If he observes Sammy claiming that another child’s toy is his, he responds clearly, “Sammy, I saw Mary bring this ball into school this morning. I bet you wish it was yours, don’t you?” Sammy nods and learns to express himself honestly without being shamed. “Let’s give the ball back to Mary together.” Both the family and school work together as a team to support Sammy as he learns needed skills.

Developing social competence takes time. Parents feel less defensive about their child’s struggle with new skills once a solid basis of trust exists.

Sylvia, Matt’s teacher, expresses a concern about Matt getting rebuffed by the older children when he attempts to play with them.

Part One

The first part of a conference is listening. Give parents a chance to talk about their child. Ask how they think Mary is doing in the program. Allow their concern, love, and pride a place of honor at this meeting. A parent’s biggest worry is that her child might get lost in the crowd. A conference is not just for teachers to recount Mary’s progress. It is not a verbal report card.

Listening allows parents to communicate two of their messages:

- I want to be a good parent.
- I love my child and she is very special to me.

Mary’s parents appreciate the opportunity to talk about Mary. “We love Mary. She is very special to us.” In the process of expressing their love for Mary, her parents also demonstrate their commitment to being good parents. When parents feel listened to, they are much more open to listening.

Sharing comes next. Conferences give a special opportunity to exchange specific as well as anecdotal information. Mary’s mom glows with pride when Mr. Franks tells her about a dress-up game Mary initiated with her friends Juan and Sally yesterday. She laughs with him over Mary’s originality. She feels pleased that this adult took the time to notice her child. Her child is the most special person in her world and she loves it when others respond in kind to Mary’s antics.

The conference begins by giving Mary’s parents time to talk about their child. The teacher joins in by relating special stories about Mary, the children she chooses as playmates, and some of her recent experiences at school. Within ten minutes, Mary’s parents feel reassured about two of their three concerns:

Structure

Structure a conference to meet parents’ needs. Addressing all three concerns and messages leads to successful parent conferences. Imagine three parts to each meeting:

- **Part One** — Listen and share stories
- **Part Two** — Address the child’s school performance
- **Part Three** — Prepare for the future

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The conference begins by giving Mary’s parents time to talk about their child. The teacher joins in by relating special stories about Mary, the children she chooses as playmates, and some of her recent experiences at school. Within ten minutes, Mary’s parents feel reassured about two of their three concerns:
Matt’s mom recalls that he looked sad last week when she saw him standing at the side of the playground. Sylvia and Matt’s mom discuss ways to help Matt with this problem. Matt’s mom offers to encourage Matt to invite other friends over to play with him at home. Sylvia supplies a list of names of possible playmates and says she will work with the older children to teach them gentler ways of responding to younger children’s requests. She will also bring up the problem of excluding others from games at the next class meeting.

Sometimes a teacher has concerns about a child’s development. Betty worries about Justin’s difficulty communicating. Justin is over three and uses very few words. The other children cannot understand what he says, and Justin’s frustration frequently leads to biting. Betty knows that Justin’s speech is much less developed than most of the other three year olds with whom she has worked. Justin’s chronic ear infections add to her concern.

Betty has spoken with Justin’s parents on several occasions and knows that his speech at home remains unintelligible. They also know about the biting problem and it worries them. Betty had her assistant spend one hour last week recording everything Justin said. At their conference, Betty provides Justin’s parents with a copy of the assistant’s notes on Justin’s speech. She also has copies of several notes that went home previously when biting occurred.

Serious concerns need careful documentation. Ongoing communication alerts parents to problems in advance. Do not use a conference as a surprise tactic. Without preparation, parents easily respond with shock, resentment, and defensiveness to information that may be at best frightening.

Be ready with helpful ideas when airing concerns. Betty has several suggestions for helping Justin. She urges his parents to have Justin’s language development evaluated by a speech therapist. She offers to ask the public health nurse to come to the center, observe Justin, and offer other possible recommendations. Justin’s parents trust Betty, know she cares about their son, and willingly agree to arrange an evaluation.

Sometimes parents do not agree to a proposed course of action. They might feel frightened, insulted, or choose to deny possible problems with their child. This response does not mean the teacher did a poor job of considering, documenting, and communicating her concern. It is important to understand such information may just be too painful for a parent to acknowledge. Sometimes it will take two or more teachers down the road before a parent accepts the possibility of her child being less than perfect. Nonetheless, teachers provide a valuable service to families when willing to initiate seeking special help or support for a child. Someone needs to take that first step.

Part Three

The third and final part of the conference prepares for the future. This involves planning ahead, setting goals, and agreeing on joint objectives. This part of the conference addresses the final remaining parental expectation. It also underscores the second parental message.

A conference is a time for Mary’s teacher to understand Mary through the context of her family.

- I want specific things for my child: physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially (PIES).
- I love my child and she is very special to me.
of the program. Sharing home and school experiences links the different parts of a child’s life together.

At conference time, Tommy’s mom told about a visit from her mother-in-law. Tommy’s grandmother had run a bakery for many years. During her visit, Tommy spent many hours helping in the kitchen. It was easy for his teacher to ask Tommy to bring in one of his grandmother’s recipes to share. Tommy proudly did so and led the class in making crusty bread sticks. Tommy’s mother appreciates having her value — the importance of extended family members — reinforced at school. Tommy’s self-esteem, emotional growth, and social development benefit from this experience.

Jennifer’s mom is very anxious for Jennifer to learn to read. Her older sister had a very hard time learning to read and she frets about Jennifer having similar problems. Jennifer turns five in a few weeks. Lori, Jennifer’s teacher, explains the activities offered at the school and how they prepare Jennifer for learning to read. Jennifer’s mom feels relieved to hear about the value of play for five year olds. Lori shows her some of the activities Jennifer does daily and explains their developmental role. By the end of the conference, Jennifer’s mom feels confident in her daughter’s progress. She relaxes her vigilance over Jennifer’s reading skills. Once again, trust is being strengthened. Now Jennifer’s intellectual development is being addressed in a way supported by her mom, her teacher, and the program’s theories.

At Malia’s conference, her parents discovered Malia’s fascination with whales. Although her parents knew that the class went to the aquarium for this month’s field trip, they did not know about Malia’s special interest. They managed to adjust their vacation plans to include a side trip to the aquarium to see Orca whales. Involvement in Malia’s school experiences is very important to her parents. Malia’s intellectual and emotional growth thrives. Conferences give parents a valuable tool to maintain their involvement with school programs. In real life, such details often get skipped.

Parents miss their children. Working parents long to share the little hugs, wipe away the occasional tear, and beam with pride at each new accomplishment. Parent conferences provide a way to enter into the richness of their child’s school world. To each parent everywhere, her child is special. This is one mother’s summation: “My child is my most precious jewel.” Conferences provide a setting for both parents and teachers to display those jewels, even the rough cut ones.
Three Way Conferences

by Ginny Zeller

“When did you learn how to do that?”
“I didn’t know you knew how to count that high!”
“Look, you put hair on the picture of you!”
“Wow, what a great idea!”

Imagine how encouraged and proud a child feels when she hears so many positive statements. Good teaching? You are right. These comments were made by parents who were participating in a conference that included their child.

Including children in conferences is an exciting and valuable part of teaching. I would like to share with you some observations and ideas to get you started.

What is a student, parent, teacher conference?

It is a meeting of the child and his family and his teacher. The child is an active participant. The teacher is the facilitator and supports the child. This conference is a gift of time for a child to share his school world with his family.

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I find that most of these conferences take about 30 minutes.

**Why should I have one?**

Three way conferences have *positive results* for all of the participants — child, parent, and teacher.

The **child** can share what she likes and does not like in school. She can *explain* in her own words what she *has learned* and where she is having problems. She can *take responsibility* for her own actions and has time to *solve* problems with the help of her family and teacher.

**Parents** feel *less anxiety* in attending conferences because their child is doing so much of the sharing. They can become *active participants* in their child’s learning. They can observe their child’s pride in what he can do and *offer support* in areas that are more difficult. They can observe how their child approaches problem solving and if this is an area of concern.

The **teacher** learns much more about the family as a whole. She can observe how they interact and *help explain* appropriate developmental levels and goals, and she can *model* how to accept this child where he is and how to move forward. “Zak, we can see how much you’ve learned since school began. Let’s see how we can plan together on what you can work on next.”

**When should I have three way conferences?**

There are many opportunities when you can include a child in a conference.

Often we call for conferences when there is a *discipline problem*. We all know how difficult it is for some children to accept responsibility for their actions. When the child is present, he can help explain the problem. The child can tell what happened from his point of view and the teacher can add any other input. Together, with all participants involved, they can brainstorm a solution. Parents can observe how their child chooses to follow or break rules and why. Problems sometimes lessen when the child has input into the solution.

Many times there is an *information gathering* conference within the first few months of school. When the child is included, she can share any fears or concerns. She can tell about her interests, providing information that can be used to help create an appropriate curriculum. This is a wonderful opportunity to go over rules and to show how problems are handled within your classroom. It can clarify any misunderstandings about rules because both the child and her family are hearing the same words from the teacher.

One of the most powerful ways to hold a three way conference is to have the child *share*, in her own words, what she *has learned*.

**How do I get ready for this conference?**

Begin with a few things to include at conference time. *Save examples* of the child’s work. This can be started very easily in a student file. Include some of the very *first things* a child did. Most of us have our children draw themselves within the first few weeks of school. Date the pictures and then use them whenever the child and you are conferencing. “This is the first picture you drew of yourself. What do you think?” Often the child cannot believe he did it!

I have a student now who is so amazed that this was how she drew herself that she asks to see her first attempt — often. Her usual statement is, “No, I didn’t do that! Who did?” After she sees her name on it, she agrees it must be hers, but she still has a difficult time understanding how she could have drawn like that. Her delight in her own accomplishment is contagious.

For children who do not see their own progress, offer some assistance. “Do you know that now when you draw yourself you put on a body?”

You can include a *first attempt at writing* (journals, names, labels) and any other areas that you want (math, art, science). Take newer examples (with the child’s input) and add as conference time approaches. These samples can develop into portfolios.

You may want to include any *screening* done on a child. Again, to help the child see her own growth, offer a statement like “Do you know that when we started school you could count to 10 and now you count to 20?” This helps a child see her own gains and to hear language to help her explain it to her family.

Children can do a *self-evaluation*. In my class, these are done four times a year. The students draw a self-portrait and then draw who their friends are. They draw and write about something they have learned, and they draw and write about something in which they need to improve. The last item is a beginning step to goal setting.

Children are very aware of where they are having difficulties. This year a child drew herself with her hand over her mouth and a thinking bubble that said, “Stop talking, Emma!” At the bottom was a picture of me saying, “Thank you!” This was an area in which she knew she needed to...
improve. At conference time, the child and her family can brainstorm ideas to reach this goal.

**Before the Conference -**

**Give yourself enough time to get ready!**

Tell the children about the conferences and how they will get a chance to show their families how much they have learned. Even children who are struggling can show growth in some areas! *Practice with each child.*

Go over what he is going to show his parents and help him to point out how much he has learned. This is the area where you can offer the most support at the conference by guiding the child to show progress.

**At the Conference**

Allow the child to take charge of explaining what she has accomplished. It’s fun to listen to a child, bursting with pride, lead his family through several months of work. Offer support only when needed. You will be amazed at how little you say!

Sometimes you might want to share some information that you don’t want the child to hear. Perhaps you need to speak with the family about some very big delays that you observe. You can ask the child to go to another area, such as the rug, where Legos can be used. “I’m going to talk to your mom now and we’ll call you back to finish up our conference.”

**At the Conclusion of the Conference**

Help the child and her family set one or two realistic goals in any area. Brainstorm ideas to reach these goals together. Write them down and have the child and his family sign the paper.

It can be as simple as:

John needs to listen better.

1. He will sit closer to the front at rug time.
2. He will look at the teacher when she is talking.

In one month we will discuss how we are doing. Make a copy of the goal setting and send it home the next day.

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**What do parents think of three way conferences?**

Most of the comments that families shared with me after attending three way conferences have been positive.

“I was very proud of the way my daughter showed me all her hard work.”

“My son showed such leadership. I didn’t know that about him.”

“She didn’t miss a thing!”

Some parents still wished that I had participated more. For those families, I offered another conference.

Sound like a lot of work? It is. It’s also one of the most rewarding moments you will spend with your students. You will get to participate in teaching at its best — teaching and learning that is exciting, positive, and that highlights all of the learning that has taken place for each individual child in your class.

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For their help in sharing the Perspectives on Parent Conferences Beginnings Workshop project, our special thanks to: Betty Jones and Hedy Nai-Lin Chang.
Conferencing with Parents of Infants

by Kay Albrecht

Parent conferences are an accepted part of a high quality care and early education program. Conferences form the foundation of the communication system between parents and the programs in which children spend their day. The length of the day and the busy schedules of working parents often leave teachers wondering how to make this crucial part of the program a viable one.

**Conferences Are Parent Education**

Conferences are a component of parent education. There are five goals of parent education.
- to help parents develop self-confidence in their own parenting style;
- to increase their understanding of child development;
- to enhance parenting skills so that parents are able to support their child’s increasing developmental competence;
- to empower parents to make good parenting decisions and choices; and
- to connect parents to resources.

To address each of these goals for parents of infants, re-conceptualize parent conferences into a broader system of conferencing.

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Assumptions about Conferencing with Parents of Infants Are Different

Parent conferences are actually part of a broader communication system. The system is based on five assumptions:

- All communication needs to take place more often.
- Family systems have many adjustments to make as they transition to parenthood. Parenting in the U.S. is a lonely endeavor. Close relatives, neighborhoods as community, and same-age and stage friends have gone the way of the dinosaurs for many families.
- Parents of infants are different than parents of older children. There is little argument that this is true, particularly for first time parents. The question is what to do about it without wearing out teachers and their directors.
- A wider variety of formats is required for conferencing with parents of infants. One type of conferencing is not enough.
- Parents of infants want and need more resources and information.

Re-conceptualizing Conferencing

Pamela, director of a large church-sponsored program, is exploring whether she should drop her infant program altogether. “Parents of infants take so much hand holding and support. They are upset about every change in their baby or in the program. They view even normal changes as indicators that something is wrong. We are spending hours a week with these parents and wonder if it is worth it.”

Re-conceptualizing conferencing into a more multidimensional approach lessens the feeling of being overwhelmed by infant parents. Parent communication is viewed as an ongoing two way communication system between parents, the school, and the teacher. The foundation of the relationship is a reciprocal one that benefits both participants. Four types of conferencing facilitate a reciprocal relationship:

- formal, face to face conferences with written documentation;
- informal conferences with written documentation;
- formal, oral conferences that occur at checkpoints in the care and early education schedule; and
- informal, oral conferences that occur as a part of the regular interface between the parent and the teacher.

Let’s look at each of these types of communicating and conferencing.

Formal Conferences with Written Documentation

This is the traditional conference. Parents and the teacher sit down together to review some sort of written evaluation of the child’s developmental skill repertoire. Formal conferences with written documentation are an important part of the parent education process because they validate the importance of understanding the child’s age and stage.

What is often missing from the formal conference is an opportunity for the parents to let teachers know about their feelings, issues, or concerns. Formal conferences are usually directed by the teacher, who shares information she has collected with the parents.

Parents can become a part of the formal conference process by identifying topics they would like to include or discuss. A series of open ended questions to consider before the conference might stimulate parents’ thinking about what they might want to discuss.

Informal Conferences with Written Documentation

It seemed like it started all at once for Ying Chu. One day, she began to cry loudly when her mother or father dropped her off at school or came in the door to pick her up. The teacher reports similar behavior from Ying Chu during the day. She says that every time she moves away, Ying Chu starts to scream and cry, particularly when the teacher is helping another baby.

Ying Chu’s mother is beside herself with this change. Until now, everything had been going fine. She wonders where this behavior is coming from and is considering looking for another program for her child.

Every infant teacher worth her salt knows that Ying Chu is experiencing separation anxiety — the normal separation behavior that accompanies the attachment process. Why, then, doesn’t Ying Chu’s mother know what is going on?

Infants change so dramatically during the first three years. They go from helpless, dependent, puzzling newborns to walking, talking, and interacting toddlers. This is a dramatic and rapid process. Parents, particularly first time parents, need opportunities to understand and support this rapid developmental growth.

Because infant development takes place so quickly, it must be shared as it happens. Parents of infants benefit from seeing and sharing the little changes that indicate growth, not just the easily observable milestones like pulling to a stand or walking. Informal, written communication can fill this role.

We used to call them anecdotal notes — observations of what happened, when it happened, where it happened, and with whom it happened written down to consider later for implications or conclusions.
Seizing the opportunity to share this type of developmental data on a regular basis creates a wonderful dialogue between parents and teachers. Try using an inexpensive spiral-bound notebook for each infant. Start by writing one anecdotal note a week on each child. Then send the notebook home and ask the parents to write one anecdotal note about what happens at home.

This back and forth of observations — not opinions or judgments — hones skills for both parties. Teachers learn to really observe babies’ behavior as a source for notes. Parents become good observers of their child’s developmental growth at home and better at sharing it with their child’s teacher.

Something else beneficial happens. Parents get a glimpse of what teachers do all day besides diaper, feed, and hold infants. Informal, written communication reinforces that observation is a crucial part of the teacher’s role. It communicates that parents are important sources of information about their child’s development. It also gives teachers the perfect opportunity to share other resources with parents. Written materials, videotapes, reference books, helping professionals, and support from other parents with similar experiences can all be offered to enhance the parent education process.

Ying Chu’s parents needed opportunities to note her increasing discomfort with arrival and departure, discuss separation anxiety and how normal it is, read about separation anxiety, and talk to another parent whose child is through this stage. Her family would be more knowledgeable and less worried about this emerging emotional developmental milestone if these types of conferences had occurred.

Formal, Oral Conferences

Madeline and Tab, parents of Amanda, have been enrolled since their baby was six weeks old. At about six months, they requested a conference with the infant coordinator to discuss concerns they were unable to work out with their teacher.

Conversation during the conference revealed that the family was satisfied with the routine care their daughter was getting and happy with the teacher’s relationship with Amanda. They had no concerns about their child’s safety or health and felt the teacher did a good job of communicating with them about Amanda’s daily patterns like eating, sleeping, and diaper changes.

What then was the problem? It turns out Madeline had seen another teacher reading a story to one of the babies and was extremely concerned that Amanda was never read to at school. Because she had never seen it, it wasn’t happening. In spite of notes to the contrary on the daily communication sheet and posted curriculum plans indicating which books were being read this week, Madeline and Tab were concerned about their child’s cognitive and language development.

As this vignette illustrates so vividly, points of view can be very different. For this family, all of the usual concerns were absent.
Health and safety, attention, written information about the child’s daily schedule, etc. were of no concern. One observation during arrival or departure led them to conclude that their child was in some way left out of an important developmental experience.

What we share with parents is as important as what we don’t share. Every teacher of infants knows that early exposure to books is an important curriculum activity that fosters a love of reading in later life. Books are read to infants in programs every day. How often do we share with parents that we read to their child every day?

Building in checkpoints for regular exchanges between parents and their teachers is an important part of the conferencing system. T. Berry Brazelton identified Touchpoints of development that offer pediatricians an opportunity to discuss upcoming developmental changes and progress. Perhaps we need a Touchpoints-like approach to formal, oral conferencing!

Consider formal, oral conferences at the end of the first full week of care, one month later, and at least quarterly thereafter. In addition, formal, oral conferences might be helpful any time something is going to change — like a teacher’s schedule or a change in staffing.

Although this seems like a lot of conferences, they can take place fairly simply by telephone. The scheduling problems of face-to-face conferences are almost completely avoided.

Frequent connections like these confirm that everyone is on the same page and that nothing is going on that needs attention. Structure the topics to cover so similar topics are covered each time. Make a list of questions to ask each time you talk. (For example, what are your observations about your child’s experience at the center? Has anything changed in your family?) Keep the notes from the conversation each time to analyze for trends, continued concerns, or even compliments to share with your director or other teachers.

**Informal, Oral Conferences**

Informal, oral conferences that occur as a part of the regular interface between parents and their child’s teacher is the last type of conference. These take place daily during the arrival or departure time of the family at the center. Don’t overlook them as conferences. Parents get to view their child’s experience from these verbal exchanges. The amount and accuracy of these conversations can either build confidence or concern.

So what is the conference, anyway? We may not have a sit down appointment or a score sheet. Hopefully, however, each day (or certainly each week) we will be able to give parents some insight into how their child is doing. Parents may gain this insight through a letter, a conversation, a picture, a culminating event of a project, a video, samples of art, brief narratives, a letter written by another school-ager, or even a phone call. One very big part of the picture, the school-ager’s social development, is all but ignored in traditional school. What a wonderful gift we have to give — to let parents know (in many different ways) that their child is learning to negotiate, to empathize, to facilitate another individual’s goal. Take great notes and lots of pictures because school-agers change so fast!

In a sense, we are in the best position possible to let parents know how their school-ager is developing physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially because we are able to say what the school-ager can do and that the school-ager is becoming.

Concern builds if opening and closing staff aren’t reliable reporters of the child’s experience or can’t share information with parents when asked.

Operational supports help. Written communication systems like pattern sheets, telephone calls from the child’s primary teacher who arrives after the parent drops off the child or before the child leaves, and varying schedules so parents see their child’s teacher either upon arrival or departure all help. And this is an ongoing staff development issue. Helping early and late teachers see the importance of arrival and departure interactions as crucial parent conferences is a topic worth discussing often.

Teachers and parents must invest in building a relationship. The outcome of the investment is parents whose parenting skills grow as their baby matures and develops. Taking the time to set up and implement a multidimensional conferencing system makes conferences become parent education.
Imagine you’re waiting to meet with a parent who is of a culture that is different from yours. You know that there may be some cultural barriers to overcome, but you aren’t sure what they are. The purpose of this article is to walk you through a parent conference pointing out where differences might lie.

There you are waiting. You wait and wait. The parent doesn’t show up. Finally she arrives, but she doesn’t even apologize for being late. Is this a misunderstanding, rudeness, lack of organization, or what?

It’s quite possible that the two of you have a very different idea of what “late” means. There is enormous cultural variation in time concepts, and what may be “late” in one is “on time” in another. Some cultures tick off minutes, and each tick past the appointed time makes a person even tardier. Other folks may arrive several hours or even days after the appointed time and still consider themselves within the bounds of courtesy.

Then there’s the greeting ritual. Do you shake hands or not? If yes, how? A firm handshake may mean you’re a straightforward, confident, honest person — kind of like looking a person straight in the eye when you talk to her. A person who comes from that point of view may

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view a bare touching of the hands as a sign that the person is insecure, weak, or shady. However, in some cultures, a firm grip is rude and insensitive. And then there are the people who never look you in the eye or touch during a greeting.

In many cultures, there are differences between how men greet each other, how women greet each other, and how greetings are conducted across the genders. How are you to know? You can’t. You have to play it by ear and be sensitive to clues.

Are you a person who always wants to be on a first name basis to be warm and friendly while you’re promoting equality? Oops. That may be a mistake. First names may feel uncomfortable or disrespectful to some parents. It’s best to ask if you don’t know. Asking “What do you want me to call you?” puts the ball in the parent’s court.

Are you ready to close the magazine or turn the page and move on? Am I scaring you? There’s so much to know — how can a person ever relate to someone of another culture and not make a million mistakes? That’s an easy question to answer. You can’t. You will make mistakes. So will the other person. You can’t be expected to know everything there is to know about every other culture. Communicating across cultures is a learning experience. You have to approach it like that.

The best preparation for cross cultural encounters is to tune up your sensitivity. There’s always more happening than there appears to be even in a simple encounter between two people of the same culture. The meaning of behavior and words is different for each person. Some of those differences are cultural and can be learned. Some are individual and can also be learned. Think of yourself as a lifetime learner and it won’t be so overwhelming.

Finally, you’ve gotten through the greetings and are ready to deal with the business of the conference. But are you? Perhaps the parent is used to some casual chitchat before getting down to business. Have you planned time for this? For a person who operates on a tight schedule and wants to get down to business right away, idle conversation can be frustrating. But if you perceive that a little socializing is in order, it might be worth it to devote a few minutes anyway just to set the tone for the conference.

Okay, you’re finally ready to talk about whatever the subject of this conference is. Don’t use jargon. Prepare ahead of time by translating all the professional terms into plain English. Otherwise you will more than likely lose the parent. Even worse, you’ll create a power imbalance. When professionals explain things in ways that aren’t easy to understand, they put themselves in a lofty position. This use of jargon can even be perceived as “peacocking” by some parents — that is, spreading out a glorious tail to wow or perhaps woo the onlooker.

Power stances in exchanges between parents and professionals is a big issue and one you should sort out for yourself. When you’re personally involved in a game of one-up-manship with parents, who usually wins? How dedicated are you to sharing power? How knowledgeable are you about how to do it? Power plays get in the way of true communication, and, after all, you’re aiming for an honest exchange, aren’t you?

Then there is the issue of cultural perspectives. How closely do the parent’s ideas about what’s good for children match yours? The image the parent has of a child may be diametrically opposed to the program’s image. It’s easy to criticize a parent who “babies” her child, or overprotects him, for example. But do you really understand her priorities? The program goals may be independence and individuality, while the parent sees those goals as getting in the way of keeping the child firmly connected to his family. Another example: you may be promoting self-esteem, while the parent sees pride in one’s accomplishments as the greatest sin of all.

Whew! You may be about to close the magazine again. Don’t give up. The solution is to put yourself in the parent’s shoes and try to feel what it would be like to walk in them. Use your best listening skills — the ones you use for children who try to communicate with you but have problems.

As soon as you discover that instead of listening you are trying to form your own response, stop yourself. This isn’t easy to do. If you listen to an average conversation between two people, you will discover that the talk often moves back and forth between one speaker’s agenda and the other’s with only a thread of connection between the two.

Give up your concern with your agenda and really listen to the parent — not only the words, but the feelings behind them. Listen until the person stops talking. Don’t interrupt. When it’s your turn, instead of arguing, educating, or responding from your own perspective, try to state the perspective of the other
know you’ve opened up communication because the ball slides through the hoop and the conversation continues.

Communicating in a cross cultural situation can be rewarding. Mistakes are usually forgiven once the parent sees that you are trying hard to meet her on a level playing field.

Imagine that you are watching the door close after a successful conference. Imagine that after the last good-bye you sit back satisfied that you and the parent have experienced good communication. It was worth the struggle; it was worth risking mistakes. You both learned something. Can you ask more than that?

person. Put the gist or spirit of what you heard into words by making a statement about the other person’s feelings, experience, perceptions, beliefs, or concepts. See if you can get at the deeper message.

Most people do little of this kind of listening and responding. In a conversation where there is disagreement, most people constantly push forward their own point of view.

Listening skills can be learned. And best of all is the feedback you get when you’ve received the message someone was trying to send. It’s like practicing with a basketball; you know when you’ve made a basket. You know you’ve opened up communication because the ball slides through the hoop and the conversation continues.

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Most child care programs, like all human service delivery systems in the United States, makes English their primary language. The use of English makes perfect sense. Communication between parent and family, though sometimes challenging, generally works. However, when parents are new to this country and the second language they are learning is English, communication is another story, one that doesn’t always work.

In fact, a child care center can be a strange and uncertain environment to parents whose primary language is other than English. Though unable to bridge language barriers, parents feel the need to be part of a system which socializes their children. For many, education is viewed as their family’s path to success. Like parents everywhere, they want their children to do well, yet many feel uncertain about a language and culture that is different than their own.

Difficulties in communicating, while also creating challenges for providers, are felt more intimately by parents. Parents who can speak English have much to hear about their child’s day and experiences.

Working with Non-English-Speaking Families
by Lisa Lee

Lisa Lee is the associate director of the Parent Services Project, Inc., a national organization which provides family support training and technical assistance to early childhood and education programs. Ms. Lee has 20 years experience working in early childhood programs, including 10 years in the Asian community as the director of bilingual and intergenerational child development programs for Wu Yee Children’s Services in San Francisco.

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Non-English-speaking parents hunger for information about their child. When parents attend meetings, they often endure long stretches of English before the translation comes . . . if it comes.

Power and knowledge go hand in hand with the ability to communicate. When language barriers exist, it is common to feel frustrated, powerless, or alienated. Some parents equate lack of recognition for their language as a lack of respect for their culture. Although unintended by providers, parents may feel rejected and may isolate themselves further. Parents who don’t speak English often feel bad about not being able to understand. Out of respect for the teacher, they may nod affirmatively to comments without truly understanding what is being said. Others may apologize that their English is “not good” and decline to participate in school functions or to take leadership roles.

For the child care provider, crossing language and cultural barriers has much to do with recognizing one’s own biases and attitudes toward people. One must consistently evaluate feelings and levels of trust and power in day-to-day interactions. It requires shifting from the expert role to one of collaborator and facilitator. It means understanding how communication, or the lack of it, affects feelings of power and the ability of individuals to be involved.

Parents and providers are more alike than different in our need to communicate. When a parent speaks another language, it is important to establish a relationship which is one of equality and respect from the start, setting the tone for the future. If parents feel embarrassed about their English skills, it is sometimes helpful for providers to share how frustrated they feel at not being able to communicate in the parents’ language. This helps to break down any tinge of superior/inferior perceptions from the relationship, and keeps both on the same level as human beings.

Providers can also link parents who speak the same language with one another, encouraging informal support networks. Having someone who has shared similar experiences of being outside of the mainstream helps to create a sense of belonging. Parents count on one another, translating and problem-solving, or just commiserating about how difficult maneuvering through the system is.

Providers and parents can share a special bond. Both want to communicate and have to work very hard to do so. Unfortunately, many programs see communication as a one-way street. They place the responsibility on the parents to understand, to bring in the translators, and to be the ones who lose out when the barrier is too formidable. It’s an attitude that exists on an institutional level which is difficult to detect at times.

For providers who build true partnerships with parents, communication is a two-way street. Agencies work hard to reflect diversity of culture and language in staffing their centers. They translate notices in pertinent languages, finding resources to do so from staff, community agencies, colleagues, and the parents themselves. Programs recognize the importance of the parents’ presence and that ultimately both have a need and responsibility to keep the lines of communication open.