



*Young Children* and ZERO TO THREE are pleased to introduce a new column, **Rocking and Rolling: Supporting Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families**. This column, authored by infant/toddler specialists, will appear in January, May, and September issues of the journal. Thank you, ZERO TO THREE, for helping to bring practical information to our readers.

— Derry Koralek, Editor

## Cultivating Good Relationships with Families Can Make Hard Times Easier!

**Linda Groves Gillespie**

**Those parents!** This phrase echoes in many workshops and classes for infant/toddler professionals. Supporting parents of infants and toddlers can be especially challenging because they may feel guilty about leaving their child, and many parents are new to child care. Many caregivers and teachers struggle with how to talk with parents, especially about difficult topics.

ZERO TO THREE has focused on helping professionals build strong relationships with families for more than 25 years. From its work, here are some strategies that teachers find useful in creating respectful and productive partnerships with families.

### Asking questions and wondering

Asking questions to get additional information and wondering aloud are two of the easiest ways to give ourselves a moment to stop before reacting or responding. Wondering encourages an attitude of genuine interest and curiosity, opening us up to learning from families. Asking questions acknowledges that the parents are the experts on their own children, which communicates respect. More important,

Judith knew today would be a hard day. Jason is 20 months old and has bitten three children in the last week. Today Judith will meet with his parents. When they arrive, Judith greets them, offers something to drink, and asks about their day. She starts the meeting by saying, “Jason has been biting quite a bit lately, and we need to figure out what we can do to help him stop.” Immediately Jason’s father reacts: “Well, he doesn’t ever bite at home, so something must be wrong here!” Judith is taken aback and doesn’t know how to respond.

Sonya, a family child care provider, has cared for two-month-old Gina for two weeks. Every day when Gina’s mother, Pilar, picks Gina up, she seems to find something wrong with the care. Today she complains about Gina not finishing her afternoon bottle. Sonya tries to explain, but Pilar is so upset she starts crying.

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.

asking questions acknowledges that the responsibility for finding a solution is shared by both the parents and the early childhood professional.

In the first scenario, instead of saying that they need to figure out how to stop the biting, Judith could have asked, “I wonder what could be causing this change in his behavior?” or “Could you help me figure out what might be causing this behavior?”

### Active listening

Active listening means giving our undivided attention when someone seeks us out for conversation. Rather than using only our hearing, active listening requires the use of our intellect, feelings, and physical responses to attain information about an interaction. The four steps in active listening follow:

**Stop**—Stop what you are doing and pay attention. This lets parents know you are focused on them and you consider what they have to say to be important.

**Look**—Face parents and make eye contact. Look for nonverbal cues (facial expressions and body language) that may tell you something about their thoughts and feelings.

**Listen**—Listen to what parents are saying, and pay special attention to their words and tone of voice. Realize that they may be communicating several messages (some unspoken).

**Respond**—Throughout the conversation, use eye contact, nods, “mmm-hmms,” smiles, or even a touch to confirm your attentiveness. After parents finish speaking, reflect on what has been shared in order to reinforce your understanding of the situation. Let the family know that not only have you been listening, but also you have understood them as well (Parlakian 2001).

In the first scenario, Judith could have responded to Jason’s father, “It sounds like you believe the problem could be related to something going on at the center.”

### Empathy

Empathy is a relationship-building strategy that early childhood professionals can use in their everyday interactions to help parents feel understood, valued, and cared for. Empathizing means imagining how the other person might be feeling and what the person’s emotions, thoughts, or circumstances might be—all without trying to fix the problem.

Sonya, in the second scenario could empathize with Pilar by saying, “It’s so hard leaving such a young baby with someone you don’t know well. I remember the first time I left my daughter, and I wasn’t sure the child care provider would take care of her as well as I do.”

### Pointing out the positive

To strengthen relationships and build trust, focus on the things that are going well. These may be small or major, but often they are the things that are taken for granted. Offer positive remarks to parents for *being* (show acceptance of them as human beings) as well as for *doing* (note parents’ actions or statements).

In the second scenario, Sonya could say, “It’s clear you are an attentive mother by the way you make sure that Gina is getting the nourishment she needs.”

The strategies listed in this article are adapted from ZERO TO THREE’s curriculum, *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: Parent/Provider Partnerships*, forthcoming from Zero to Three Press.

## Not knowing

Sometimes we do not know the answer to a parent's question. Acknowledging this is a sign of self-awareness and skill, showing that we recognize our own professional limits. Say, "I don't know. I'll have to find out and get back to you"; then be sure to do so.

"Not knowing" can also be a self-calming strategy, a way of giving yourself time to consider how to respond. For example, when a parent shares a situation that you find overwhelming or upsetting, saying, "I don't know what to say. This sounds really difficult," communicates how tough the situation is and gives the parent feedback that genuinely reflects your thoughts and feelings.

Effective communication with families is a skill worth cultivating. Conflicts that arise out of caring for other people's children are inevitable. "Parents are irrational lovers. How do we communicate with an irrational person?" (Jim Greenman, pers. comm.) Child care professionals need to be the rational side of that conflict, because parents cannot be.

Clearly, communication isn't easy, but it is necessary. If, as early childhood professionals, we can strengthen the parent-child relationship by strengthening our relationship with the parent, we will have influenced that child's future for much longer than the time he or she is in our care.

Using these strategies won't alleviate every issue with families. However, communication strategies can help you build positive relationships with parents, and provide them with confidence in themselves as parents and in your role as a partner in their child's caregiving.

### THINK FIRST:

Think about a family with whom you may be struggling. As you review the above strategies, is there one that you could try that might help you connect better with this family?

Now think about a family with whom you have a good relationship. Can you identify strategies you are already using that contribute to that strong relationship?

### TRY IT:

Communication is like any other skill; it takes practice. Select a strategy you haven't used before and practice it with a colleague. Trying a new way of communicating can feel uncomfortable at first, but with practice you can make any of these strategies work for you.

Explore the different resources offered on page 55. The more knowledge you have, the more confident you will feel, and when you feel confident, parents are more likely to have confidence in you.

Reflect—take time to talk about strong feelings you may have about families. Find a trusted person in your program, and set up regular times to discuss difficult issues as they arise. Sometimes just talking through a situation will help you see it in a new light.

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