A Muddied Journey:
An Early Childhood Educator's Path Into Building Successful Family Partnerships

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter will examine the pitfalls an early childhood educator faces while learning to develop strategies to build successful relationships with diverse families. The chapter will provide several key strategies that will allow early childhood educators to build confidence in themselves and families to secure the foundation needed for successful school-family partnerships. This chapter focuses on supporting social-emotional development, family structure, and seeing families as partners in providing high-quality experiences for their child.

INTRODUCTION

Building positive family partnerships is a critical component of helping ensure that children have appropriate experiences to help them be successful throughout their childhood years. Historically, teachers and administrators of early childhood programs have engaged in practices that have helped build family partnerships in an attempt to keep children safe and improve their overall health and educational outcomes (Pennell, Burford, Connolly, & Morris, 2011). In addition, human service organizations have routinely made establishing partnerships with families a priority. In times of crisis, this often means that the partnerships have extended to extended family members as well (Pennell, Burford, Connolly, & Morris, 2011). At times,

both teachers and administrators can feel that their efforts to build partnerships are not working; but they continue to take a strength-based approach to building family partnerships. When we use a strength-based approach, we understand that all families want what is best for their child; the question is whether or not early childhood programs effectively build partnerships that are meaningful to all who are involved (Halgunseth, 2009).

In this chapter, we will explore my personal journey as both a teacher and an administrator who struggled early on to find the best way to build positive relationships and partnerships with the families with which I served in order to ensure that the children I cared for had the best environment for success.

Humble Beginnings

The first introduction to building family partnerships began during my formative childhood years when I lived in San Jose, California. As a child of parents who both worked at the time, I attended two family-child care programs during the late 1970s and early 1980s. When I reflect on the experiences of how my family childcare providers handled working with families, I find both experiences to be quite different. The first provider, whom I will identify as "Florence," indeed adopted both my brother and I into her own home. We would often eat breakfast and sometimes dinner in her home. Florence would speak with my parents about helping me when I was sick, as well as helping me overcome my inability to pronounce many words. I remembered working with Florence on improving my pronunciation of words as well as on decreasing my stuttering. Florence also invited my family to attend events outside of the regular hours of care; and my family often would attend her church or bible study from time to time.

For me, as a future early childhood educator, Florence modeled what a family childcare program might look like. She influenced me to want to become an early childhood educator.

The second provider is someone whom we will call "Mrs. Sweet." Mrs. Sweet's program was somewhere between a family childcare program and a center-based program. Her program was housed in her home; and she cared for multiple children while Florence only cared for my brother and me. On Mrs. Sweet's property was a massive junk playground where children liked to play. She often took the children on trips, including a memorable trip to Southern California, where they visited Disneyland, Knott's Berry Farm, and Universal Studios. Many children in Mrs. Sweet's care would stay overnight from time to time; and I remember Mrs. Sweet cared for many children who most likely would be characterized as needing CCIS to pay for care if her program were to have been around today. Mrs. Sweet had an unconventional approach to discipline. Because of the time period, many parents

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