

# Parents as partners— and customers

by Cathy Abraham

**P**arents as partners” is a guiding principle of early care and education. But what about parents as *customers*?

It’s logical to think of parents as customers because they pay us for our services. What’s more, if at any time they become dissatisfied, they can take their business elsewhere.

Certainly children are our main focus, and our goal is to provide them with high quality care and education. But we will have trouble fulfilling that goal if we spend large chunks of the day dealing with parents’ complaints, calling about past-due fees, and trying to attract new enrollees to replace those who have left.

## **Why is customer service important?**

Consider: A family enrolling one child in our program spends approximately \$10,000 a year with us. A family with two children can spend twice that much. As a result, every family enrolled represents a significant economic resource, and every withdrawal can have significant adverse consequences.

Studies have shown, for example, that it costs more to attract a new customer than to keep a current one. Do the math: Calculate the revenue lost

while a slot is vacant, the expense of advertising to attract a new family, and the cost of interviewing and enrolling a new family.

Studies also show that the longer a customer stays with a company, the higher the profit (Reichheld and Sasser 1990). One reason is more efficient service. If our experience with the Smith family indicates a lactose intolerance, for example, we can ensure that modified menus and teacher information follow the Smith child’s throughout the year and to subsequent classes, without the risk of child illness, parent complaint, and teacher frustration.

In addition, we know from experience that parents tell others about our service, and it’s only human nature that customers will talk more if an experience is negative. This is especially true with the rise of the Internet and electronic communication. In fact, interactive marketing consultant Pete Blackshaw has titled his book on the subject, *Satisfied Customers Tell Three Friends, Angry Customers Tell 3,000*.

At the same time, it’s unreasonable to try to keep all customers at any cost. Some families, for example, have education and guidance philosophies that conflict with ours, they continually pay late or write hot checks, or they quarrel with immunization or sick child policies. These customers may not be worth the cost of keeping them.

In general, however, it makes sense to retain customers and earn their loyalty. We want them to tell their friends about us, which in turn brings us new customers.



*At its core, effective customer service is about relationships.*

## How do parents evaluate our service?

Let's assume that we provide high quality care and education according to industry and professional standards. Those standards include health and safety, child growth and development, curriculum and classroom practice, materials and equipment, professional staff development, and family and community partnerships.

Customer service is part of all those components, but especially family and community partnerships. In this context, customer service means fulfilling a family's needs and expectations before they enroll their children and during the entire enrollment period.

Expectations are critical, according to salesmanship expert Og Mandino. Gaining success "is to render more and better services than is expected of you, no matter what your task may be."

What is expected of us? Here's how parents evaluate the quality of our service:

**Credibility:** our ability to consistently provide what we promised, as we promised it. In other words, do we do what we say we're going to do?

**Responsiveness:** our ability to address the needs of parents promptly and sincerely. Are we listening to the needs parents convey?

**Empathy:** the degree to which we show that we care about children and families. Do we give children and parents our individual and undivided attention?

### The customer is...

- the most important person in any business.
- not a cold enrollment statistic, but a flesh-and-blood human being with feelings and emotions like our own.
- not someone to be tolerated so that we can do our thing. They *are* our thing.
- not an interruption of our work, but the purpose of it.
- doing us a favor when they bring their concerns to us.
- not completely dependent on us. Rather we are dependent on them.
- the reason we can collect a paycheck and keep our doors open.

**Competency:** our ability to do our jobs effectively and handle any types of problems that arise. Do we convey a calm and knowledgeable professional demeanor?

**Tangibles:** the concrete things that parents can see, hear, smell, and touch. Are we providing the best possible environment for young children? Do parents receive daily confirmation that this is a good place for their children?

## How do we handle customer service?

Ideally, high quality customer service is embedded in our program's culture. It applies to all program personnel, it's included in the staff handbook, and it's emphasized in orientation and training. It deserves periodic attention, especially with regard to ourselves, parents, and the children.

### Director and staff: It's about attitude.

- Are you happy? Friendly?
- Do you smile often?
- Do you go the extra mile without being asked?
- Do you warmly greet anyone with whom you come into contact?
- Do you care about what you're doing?
- Do you leave your personal problems at the door?
- Do you share your enthusiasm?
- Do you have a positive attitude?
- Are you somebody who is an asset to the program?
- Are you somebody *you* would like to work with?

### Parents: They pay our salaries

- Do you greet them warmly every time you see them, no matter how busy you are?
- Do you share at least one positive experience about their child with them every day?
- Do you listen to their concerns and feelings?
- Do they get pertinent information from you about their child's day and upcoming activities?
- Do you respect their role and the parenting choices they make for their child?
- Can they look at you and regard you as a professional based on how you present and conduct yourself?
- Do they see their children happily engaged in fun, stimulating activities?
- Do their children look well cared for when they are picked up?



*Do you leave your personal problems at the door?*



*Are the children loved and well cared for?*

- Would you put *your* child in this program for 10 hours a day?
- Would you be happy with the quality of care at this program?

### **The children: They are why we're here.**

- Are the children loved and well cared for?
- Are the children talked to and treated with respect?
- Are they adequately supervised and kept safe?
- Do they have many choices of interesting things to do?
- Is your classroom organized, thereby modeling and teaching children this skill?
- Is the building relatively free of crying and screaming and chaos in general?
- Are the children's individual needs taken into account?
- Is the goal of classroom discipline the development of self-control?
- Do you interact with the children and really listen to what they feel and have to say?
- Do you take the time to prepare the environment for the children?
- Are your expectations age appropriate?
- Is your classroom a safe and clean environment?
- Do children have many opportunities to explore and try new things?
- Is your primary focus the children?
- Do you share appropriate affection with each child?
- Do all children receive attention and have positive interactions with you on a daily basis?
- Are all children acknowledged as being special and sacred?
- Are you constantly aware of the child's self-esteem?
- Are opportunities provided for children to develop self-help skills?
- Would *I* want to be a child here in this program?
- Would *I* feel loved and safe if I were a child here?

### **How can we improve customer service?**

Customer service is built over time. At a minimum, it requires examining our attitudes and strengthening staff-to-parent communication. We can begin by practicing 10 golden rules.

1. **Smile.** A genuine, sincere smile goes a long way.
2. **Call parents by name.** This conveys a sincere interest in a person.

3. **Take an interest.** Give parents and children individual and undivided attention. Follow up on things they tell or ask you.
4. **Be a good listener.** If you listen, you can learn a great deal about people. Listen to parents.
5. **Be polite.** "Please" and "Thank you" convey a message of respect and set the tone.
6. **Empathize.** Try to understand what parents may be going through.
7. **Show respect.** Be careful not to ignore, slight, or judge parents.
8. **Recognize the role parents play.** Parenting is a difficult job, a fact that often is not acknowledged.
9. **Have a positive outlook.** No one wants to be around someone with a negative attitude.
10. **Treat people the way you would like to be treated.**

At its core, effective customer service is about relationships. It is listening to parents and hearing what they say—and don't say. That means we pay attention to nonverbal as well as verbal communication. Nonverbal communication involves the following:

- proximity or personal space
- eye contact
- silence
- facial expressions
- hand gestures
- physical contact or touch
- overall appearance
- posture and stance
- physical cues such as sweating or a red face

### **How do we handle problems?**

Parents don't expect us to be perfect. What really defines us is how we handle problems and situations that come up. If a problem arises, what do parents want?

**Honesty.** Parents want to deal with us as genuine human beings, not as know-it-all educators. If we cannot answer a question, we say, "I don't know." If we make a mistake, we own up to it. Denial and self-righteousness only deepen the problem.

**Concern.** Parents want empathy. We demonstrate that we care and have compassion for their role in the situation.

**A proposed solution.** Parents want to know how we plan to repair the situation or prevent it from occurring again. We may need to clarify confusion, redefine responsibility, or change procedures.

## Customer service quiz

**1. Your director is giving a tour to a prospective family. When she comes into your room, do you:**

- a) Tell her you have cramps and want to go home.
- b) Tell her if Billy and Sally both come in today you'll "be over."
- c) Smile and warmly greet the parent and the child, bending down to the child's eye level.
- d) Ask her, if, while she's standing there, you can run to the kitchen real quick and get a soft drink?

**2. You are right in the middle of a messy art project when your director comes in with a prospective family. Do you:**

- a) Invite the child to participate.
- b) Tell the parents that this is a bad time and ask if they could come back later.
- c) Tell the parents, "Oh, this is nothing. You should see how bad it is on a day when Billy is here!"
- d) Say that you don't understand why you have to do all of this NAEYC kind of stuff anyway and that you've ruined four shirts since May with this so-called "open-ended art."

**3. A prospective parent asks you a question about the classroom you are in and you don't quite know how to answer it. Do you say:**

- a) "How would I know? I just go where they tell me to go. Last week I was the cook."
- b) "I'm not usually in this room. Miss Suzy is, but she got fired."
- c) Reply with the standard "I don't know."
- d) "I'm not really sure about that. Why don't I find that out for you?"

**4. Prospective parents on a tour say that they think their child is gifted. Do you respond:**

- a) "Yeah, whatever. When is little Einstein starting?"
- b) "Yeah, all parents think that."
- c) "He sure doesn't look gifted. His shoes are on the wrong feet."
- d) "Great! We work hard at making sure all the children are stimulated at whatever level they are. These are some of the things we do..."

**5. A mother is upset because this is the second set of swimwear her enrolled child has lost at the program. Do you:**

- a) Tell her the swimwear is on sale at Goodwill for \$1.99.
- b) Tell her one of the children has a problem with stealing and she probably has the swimwear.
- c) Help the mother look for the missing item.
- d) Give the mother a swimsuit from the lost-and-found box.

**6. A father never takes home his child's artwork. Do you:**

- a) Say to him: "Oh, don't forget the painting Jimmy made today. He worked really hard on it, and I wrote down the story he told me about it for you."
- b) Tape the child's artwork to his back at around 5 p.m.
- c) Take away the artwork when the child is not looking and throw it under the diapers in the garbage so that he won't see it.
- d) Tell the father, "I know it really doesn't look like much, but you should at least act like it's really good, as I do."

**7. A prospective parent on a tour wants to know why we don't heat up bottles in the microwave for our infants. Do you:**

- a) Tell her about a recent lawsuit.
- b) Tell her it's better because if she's out late at a party her kid will be used to not having a heated bottle.
- c) Explain that the safety of the children is our main concern, and we do not want to take any risks in this area.
- d) Say to the parent: "This must be your first kid, right? People are always picky when it's their first kid. That's OK."

**Scoring:** 0 - 4 correct: Find a new line of work. 5 - 6 correct: You need training. 7 correct: You get it!

**Answers:** 1. c; 2. a; 3. d; 4. d; 5. c; 6. a; 7. c

**Follow through.** Parents want to be kept informed of how we're dealing with the situation. We communicate regularly and provide closure when the problem is resolved.

**Acknowledgement.** Parents want to have their feelings acknowledged, not minimized or ignored.

**Listening.** Parents want to be heard. We stop what we're doing and give direct eye contact. We don't interrupt or argue. We rephrase what they say to be sure we understand.

Realistically, we know that resolving problems and working toward customer satisfaction do not guarantee customer loyalty. As consumers ourselves, we have all had occasion to switch service providers not because we were dissatisfied but rather because we found someone in a more convenient location, with a lower price, or with a more interesting experience.

Despite the uncertainty, we all recognize that poor or indifferent customer service tends to drive customers away. If we don't take care of our customers, a competitor will.

## Use the six R's of customer service

Parents are indeed our partners in the care and education of children. They are also our customers, and we owe them customer service of the highest quality.

By providing superior customer service, we are more likely to retain parents as customers, get referrals for more customers, and resolve problems promptly. Such results free us to provide the best possible care and education of children and serve the community.

Customer service can be summed up by six R's:

**Recognize.** Accept parents as partners in children's care and education.

**Respect.** Value parents as people and actively listen to what they say.

**Respond.** Act promptly and sincerely to answer their questions and resolve problems.

**Research.** Study child and family issues in the community and support professional development.

**Resolve.** Work together with parents to resolve any concerns and problems.

**Re-establish trust.** If trust falters, communicate often, keep promises, and demonstrate integrity.

## About the author

Cathy Abraham has worked in the early care and education field as a teacher, director, college instructor, and advisor. Currently, she writes curriculum and consults with programs serving children and families.

## References

- Bell, Chip R. 1994. *Customers as Partners: Building Relationships That Last*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Blackshaw, Pete. 2008. *Satisfied Customers Tell Three Friends, Angry Customers Tell 3,000*. New York: Doubleday.
- Reichheld, F.E. and W. Earl Sasser, Jr. 1990. Zero Defections: Quality Comes to Services, *Harvard Business Review*, 68 (5) 105-111.

## Two sculptors

I dreamed I stood in a studio  
and watched two sculptors there.  
The clay they used was a young child's mind,  
and they fashioned it with care.

One was a teacher.  
The tools he used were books, music, and art;  
One was a parent,  
who worked with a guiding hand, and a gentle,  
loving heart.

Day after day the teacher toiled,  
with a touch that was deft and sure.  
While the parent labored by her side  
and polished and smoothed it o'er.

And then at last their task was done.  
They were proud of what they had wrought.  
For the things they had molded into the child  
could never be sold or bought.

And each agreed they would have failed  
if he had worked alone.  
For behind the teacher stood the school  
and behind the parent, the home.