

How do you communicate?

At a June staff meeting, the director begins a discussion of the family fun fair that her early childhood program holds in early August every year. “We can use the same format as last year, and I will contact sponsors for funding,” she says. “Who would like to chair the planning committee?”

No one responds. She knows everyone is busy with work and families, and some even feel overextended. But the board requires the event because it engages both the large community and program parents while sharing information about the program’s philosophy and activities.

“Jan and Phil chaired the committee last year,” the director reminds the group. “They did a great job, and I know we can do it well again this year. (Pause) What about you, Sarah?”

“No,” says Sarah, making a quick pop with her fist on the table. “Somebody else needs to do it,” she says loudly, glaring at the group.

“How about you, Liz?” the director asks.

Liz, looking down, sighs and bites her lip. “Well, it’s a lot of work. But if you insist...”



What do we observe about the communication styles of the two staff in this scenario? Sarah’s response could be called *aggressive*. Her loud voice, physical gesture, and self-righteous language seem controlling, even threatening. Liz, on the other hand, might be called a *passive* communicator. She avoids eye contact, finds it hard to say “No,” and seems to want to keep the peace.

Is there a better way to communicate?

Learning an assertive style

An *assertive* communicator would express feelings honestly and directly, without demanding or giving

in. This person would speak and act respectfully while staying true to self. Sarah and Liz could be assertive by staying calm, making eye contact with the director, and saying something like “I’m feeling overwhelmed right now and don’t think I could do the job as well as I would like. How about asking someone else?”

ASSERTIVENESS WILL GIVE RISE TO MORE DISCUSSION.

An assertive response does not necessarily solve the problem—in this case, finding a chair for the event. But it does allow Sarah and Liz to express themselves, and the director knows where they stand. The floor is now open for another solution or continued discussion.

To communicate assertively, one can do the following:

- a) Make eye contact, be as honest as possible, and say, “I feel... (angry, disappointed, ignored, scared).” This statement can be extended by describing the situation, such as: “when you... (ask me to work overtime, come in late, leave the laptop open on the table).”
- b) Tell the person what you want or need: “I need for you to ... (stop asking me to volunteer so often, come to work on time, close and put away the laptop).” In some cases, you may simply want to be heard: “I need you to listen.”

Sometimes these two steps, known as “making an ‘I’ statement,” are enough. If the person repeats the unwanted behavior, however, you may try a third step.

c) Say what you will do as a result: “I will... (stop volunteering entirely, record your lack of punctuality in your personnel file, set up a check-out system for using the laptop”). Choose carefully because you must be able and willing to follow through on what you say you will do. Avoid rash statements, such as “I’ll quit.”

Communicating assertively may feel selfish and awkward at first, but with practice it gets easier. Assertiveness allows you to be who you truly are and move toward more respectful relationships with others.

In many cases, assertiveness will give rise to more discussion. Sarah and Liz, for example, may agree to assist the eventually chosen chair, ask for more advance notice the next time, or suggest a simpler, shorter event.

In some cases unfortunately, the issue may escalate. The other person may reply in an inconsiderate or even aggressive way. Remember that the person’s feelings, words, and actions are not in your control, and you can choose whether to try to continue building a relationship or ask for help from a mutual friend.

Assertive communication is useful in all relationships—not just with co-workers, but also with family and friends. Training in assertive communication is available in many communities and can be a worthwhile investment. ■

Re-examining parents as partners

In early childhood education, a guiding principle is to treat parents as *partners*. As educators and caregivers, we are their partners in caring for their children and helping their children grow and learn.

Partners is a suitable way to describe people who are engaged together in the same activity. The word has long been used to legally define a particular kind of business entity and to refer to people playing card games. More recently, some businesses have started referring to their employees as partners, and the word is also being used to represent marriage and romantic relationships.

In the summer, as we maintain relationships with current families and look ahead to enrolling new ones in the fall, we can take time to re-examine our role as partners with the parents of the children in our care.

Nuestra casa es su casa

As partners, we inform parents that they are welcome to visit anytime. They may come to have lunch with their children, drop in to breastfeed a baby, read a book during story time, or just hang out for a few minutes. A useful motto: “Our house is their house.”

We need to strive for regular communication. We greet parents as they drop off their children in the morning and share information as they pick up in the afternoon. Some parents will be in a hurry because they’re running late or are eager to get home after a long day. Even so, they will appreciate a bit of news—what their child said or did, the latest progress in toilet learning, or a new friendship, for example.

If we are concerned about a child’s problematic behavior or suspect a red flag in development, it’s wise to schedule that conversation at a special time. Parents may act defensively at first, but eventually they will appreciate knowing about our sincere

interest in their children.

By the same token, if parents express a concern, we can schedule a time to talk about their issue—but not in front of children. We listen attentively, ask clarifying questions, and stay as calm as possible. We cannot always change things to accommodate parents, but we can consider their input. The goal is a win-win solution. Perhaps parents need more education about our educational philosophy and the evidence revealed in research.

When parents call and leave a message, we owe them a prompt response (within 24 hours).

WE CAN EDUCATE PARENTS AND DISPEL MISINFORMATION.

With children’s safety and well-being as a priority on both sides, we can educate parents and dispel misinformation. A prime example is immunization against communicable diseases like measles and pertussis (whooping cough). We can refer them to the facts on vaccine safety and schedules, such as presented by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/caregivers/index.html.

In addition, we respect the privacy of families and their lives at home. If a child tells us something that they might find embarrassing, we keep it confidential. Talking about a family’s struggles behind their backs is gossip, and it can shatter trust. Of course, if a child mentions (or shows signs) of abuse or neglect, we are required by law to report it to a child protection agency or law enforcement.

It's important to find ways to involve parents, such as volunteering in the classroom, accompanying children on field trips, creating events such as a celebration of Grandparents Day (Sunday, Sept. 8), and donating used or recyclable items for learning activities.

Parents also have responsibilities to us, such as paying on time, keeping children home when they are sick, and complying with other agreements stated in the parents' handbook.

The key is finding a balance. We appreciate parents playing an active role in their children's learning at school and at home, and we value them as clients and customers.



For a look at parents as *customers*, see "Parents as partners—and customers" by Cathy Abraham in the Summer 2010 issue of *Texas Child Care Quarterly*, http://childcarequarterly.com/pdf/summer10_parents.pdf. ■