

The Director's Link

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Add Impact to Your Messages About Children's Learning Through Strategic Communication

Judy Harris Helm, Ed.D

In addition to the challenges of supporting staff and keeping an early childhood center running smoothly, directors are routinely called upon to defend the value of the active, engaged learning experiences they provide in their programs. Many directors have experienced losing an enrolled family to a highly structured and academically-focused program because parents have a misunderstanding that "children are learning in that *other* program. All they do *here* is play." This is especially troublesome since we know that experiences such as looking at picture books, building elaborate block structures, and learning to work with others are the experiences that will have long term impact on their academic achievement.

Parents are aware of the emphasis on test scores in schools and the pressure surrounding "kindergarten readiness" so it is understandable that they would be impressed with the cute craft projects and daily worksheets that children bring home from some early childhood centers. Because play-based learning experiences rarely result in products to take home, it is more difficult for parents and community to see their value. While a source of frustration, this dilemma also presents a wonderful opportunity to think about communication as a way to open windows for parents, the community, and decision makers.

Effective communication does not happen by accident. Early childhood directors can learn from professional communicators—such as advertisers, public relations practitioners, journalists, and speechwriters—how to open windows for others into the world of learning that occurs in their program. Professional communicators develop plans for strategic communication. They study the needs of each audience they must reach and consciously design messages to address those needs and persuade the audience to respond. In a similar vein, directors can also develop the habit of thinking strategically about the communicating they are already doing and tapping the persuasive potential of those communication opportunities.

Think Strategically!

Begin by thinking carefully about who the parents of your children are, with a particular focus on how this might impact communications. Think of the observable facts about your parents: age, marital status, income, educational level, ethnic background, number of children in the family, ages of children in the family, family structure, and job status. Primary language spoken at home may also be part of this information. These simple facts can tell you a lot about what kind of messages are appropriate for this audience and what their concerns might be.

Then think about what you know about their values and attitudes. What issues are most important for the parents of your children? What do you know about their religion? How do they spend their leisure time? Do they have a strong identification with their ethnic background? Are they

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sports enthusiasts? Are they art aficionados? Anything you know about the families you work with and their culture can help you understand their values and concerns.

You will also want to think about the benefits the audience gets out of the school, educational program, or child care center. What do they see as the main purpose of sending their child to you? Think from the parents' point of view. What do they expect your program to do: Provide intellectual stimulation? Broaden horizons? Encourage social interaction? Teach life skills? Maintain discipline? If their main concern is safe child care at convenient times, then you will have to educate them about the other values of your program.

No doubt your parents will represent many diverse interests. Think about the different benefits your program can offer. This is not about classifying or treating them differently, it is about recognizing the different needs of different families and working to ensure that all communications meet the diverse needs of all your parent audiences.

Look at Your Communication Tools

As your understanding grows about the diverse needs of your parents, take a look at different forms of communication you use—parent newsletter, permission forms, bulletin board, brochures—and the way your parent conferences are conducted. For any audience, the key to reaching them is to step into their shoes. Consider who they are, what they need to know, how they could benefit from the information presented, and how the communication piece would look to them. Try to see your communication through their eyes. Imagine you are the parent. Does this piece of communication

...present information in a way they can understand?

...tell something that they care about?

...show the value of the learning experience?

...make them want to have their child in your program?

...engender respect for the teachers and support staff?

Look at the communication piece several times, each time through the lens of a different parent group.

Seize Every Opportunity

Are your communications on target or are there missed opportunities? For example, a note about a field trip can provide the basic information about where the children are going, when, and what they need to bring along. However, a strategically designed field trip note for parents who are concerned about academics would also include what the children will learn; what educational experiences led to the field trip, including new vocabulary children are mastering; and may even include state standards or goals that will be accomplished.

This type of note is “prime real estate” for communicators. Every parent needs to read it and often has to sign it. However, most teachers and directors miss this golden opportunity to communicate what children are learning and the value of their program. Remember that thinking strategically about communication is matching the values and needs of your audience. If your parents are more concerned about socialization or safety or enrichment, these may be more appropriately highlighted in the field trip note.

Evidence of what children have learned (documentation) can be strategically inserted into communication pieces. Instead of using clip-art in brochures, newsletters, and notes, use scans of children's work or insert digital photos of children engaged in learning experiences. Directors can focus parents on what children are learning by adding, in small print, the standard, goal, or developmental accomplishment resulting from the experience.

The early learning standards from your state board of education are especially helpful for documenting how engaged learning experiences result in knowledge and skills needed for school success. Using standards or benchmarks adds credibility to the experiences and opens windows for parents into the value of the experience. In addition, using standards makes staff more aware of what they should be incorporating in the experiences of children. In this way, documentation for communication oftentimes improves the effectiveness of instruction.

Reinforce Key Messages

Once you understand how to communicate strategically, make a plan for improving

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Our Mission

The McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership is dedicated to enhancing the management skills, professional orientation, and leadership capacity of early childhood administrators. The activities of the Center encompass four areas: training, technical assistance, research, and public awareness.

<http://cecl.nl.edu>



The Director's Toolbox

Newsletters can be effective components of a communications plan if you think strategically about their design and use, yet rarely do newsletters include documentation of student learning. Typically there are lots of photos of events or stories about what children did, but few attempts to share what was learned or evidence of that learning. Here is an example of the numerous ways that children's work can be effectively integrated into newsletters. Thanks to Northminster Learning Center for use of their children's work in this demonstration newsletter.

Banners and Taglines

The banner is the first thing a reader sees at the beginning of the communication process and includes the name of the organization, subtitles (called taglines), and other basic information about your newsletter. Strategic design of the banner should tell the reader the type of information contained, to whom the newsletter is addressed, and the purpose of the newsletter. The tagline of a newsletter addressed to parents or primary caregivers could emphasize partnership, teaming, or working together and how it benefits their child's learning. A tagline on a banner is "prime real estate" for focusing your message and should not be wasted on cute names or simple labeling.

Articles

Articles should focus on not only the experiences children are having but also on what they are learning. Including photos of children's work and samples of products from the learning experience captures the attention of the reader. Photos should add information to the article about the learning event and the caption should include even more information about what children are learning.

Quotes

Quotes of student writing or language are especially appealing.

Standards

Standards or goals can be included in the article giving more credibility to the learning experience.

Northminster Learning Center October, 2006

Promising Developments

News for Parent Partners about Children's Learning and Discovery

Learning About Insects Enlivens After School

The bee keeper who visited answered many of the children's questions about bees. We have been catching and studying other insects. The children have been drawing the insects they have caught and looking them up in our books.

Soccer continues to be the favorite after school activity for many of the children. With schools reducing outdoor time, we are happy to see children using our new play yard and getting needed exercise!



"The corn is tall. Look how many pieces!!"

New Words for Preschoolers



corn	ingredient
kernel	tall/short
Stalk	Harvest
Canned/frozen/fresh	

Use these words with your preschooler!

Preschoolers Investigate Corn

The preschoolers in Mrs. Johnson's class are studying corn. The children used their senses to learn about corn and how it is grown. So far we visited the field nearby, gathered data about corn, and have sketched corn. We will be visiting a farm next week. The children already have a list of questions about corn. The preschoolers are very interested in corn products. They are collecting food containers and labels which show corn as an ingredient.

The children's study of corn relates directly to the following section of the Illinois Early Learning Standards: *Collect, describe and record information. Identify words and signs in the environment.*

Spotlight on Curriculum

Literacy is introduced in meaningful ways at Discovery Preschool. We follow the guidelines of the International Reading Association. Children learn about letters by signing in each day

- learning to read each other's names on name cards
- participating in shared reading of books
- playing sound games
- seeing their words written down in dictation
- copying signs and labels.

Several articles on early literacy development are available for parent checkout.

The Parent Corner

Thanks to the following parents who attended the playground work night.

Ted Johnson
Maria Valdez
John Troziac
Martha Troziac
Phen Takoshima
Jason White

We will be having another work night on Tuesday, October 28 @ 7pm.

Columns

Columns can be reserved for a particular purpose. For example, the upper right corner of the first page could spotlight an area of the curriculum. The column could address a different curriculum area in each issue. Another column could be reserved to share what children are learning in projects or integrated units. Columns featuring children's work will be most interesting if they include actual products, and photos of children working, or pull quotes.

Planning Ahead

Professional Development Opportunities

Program Administration Scale Assessor Reliability Training

January 3-5, 2007

The *Program Administration Scale* (PAS) measures leadership and management practices of center-based early care and education programs. Assessor reliability training includes an overview of reliability of the instrument, interview protocol for collecting data, how to score indicators and items, and how to develop a computer-generated program profile. Individuals who successfully complete the training are eligible to become certified PAS assessors.

This three-day training is designed for technical assistance specialists, quality monitors, management consultants, researchers, and other professionals interested in using the PAS to reliably assess early childhood leadership and management practices and help center directors improve the quality of their programs.

Location: McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership,
NLU Wheeling Campus Annex

Fee: \$650, includes all texts, handouts, breakfast and lunch

For an additional fee, participants may take the training for 2 s.h. of graduate credit (ECE582C, Workshop/Early Childhood Program Evaluation).

Computer Training for Early Childhood Administrators – Beginner Course

January 16, 23 and February 6, 13, 20, 27, 2007

This six-session training experience provides basic instruction in computer technology as an administrative tool in the management of child care programs. Made possible by funding from the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), the course is designed to improve early childhood administrators' computer skills and increase their access to management resources via the Internet. Previous experience with computers is not required.

Location: National-Louis University, North Shore Campus Skokie, IL

Fee: \$75, includes text and all course materials.

Participants may receive 2 s.h. of graduate credit (ECE534, Technology in Child Care Administration I) by paying an additional fee.

Family Child Care Institute—Program Quality Evaluation

February 23-24 and May 12, 2007

This Family Child Care Institute provides an introduction to program evaluation, stressing the importance of ongoing assessment to improve program quality and practices. Participants will be introduced to the *Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (FCCERS-R) to assess the learning environment, as well as other measures to assess the quality of business practices, parent satisfaction, and community responsiveness. In addition, participants will learn about the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) Quality Standards for Accreditation and how to begin the self-study process for accreditation.

Institute presenters will be Ida Butler, President of the Illinois Association for Family Child Care and Barbara Sawyer, Director of Special Projects for the National Association for Family Child Care.

Locations: February 23-24, 2007
Heartland Community College
Community Commons Building
Room 2401
Normal, Illinois

Saturday, May 12, 2007
Chicago Marriott O'Hare Hotel
In conjunction with Leadership Connections

Fee: \$99, includes texts, materials, and meals (breakfasts and lunches).

Participants can earn two semester hours of graduate credit by paying an additional fee.

For more information, contact Debra Trude-Suter at debra.trudesuter@nl.edu or (800) 443-5522, ext. 5056.

NLU Courses for Directors

Winter term begins January 8, 2007

Online Courses for Early Childhood Administrators

ECE512: (2 sh)

Early Childhood Curriculum

ECE544: (2 sh)

Early Childhood Environments

For more information about the Early Childhood Administration degree program, contact Douglas Clark at douglas.clark@nl.edu or (800) 443-5522, ext. 5062

Next Early Childhood Administration Cohort Convenes in January 2007

Applications are now being accepted for National-Louis University's Early Childhood Administration (ECA) degree program offered in an online cohort format. The next cohort will convene from January 29-February 2 for a weeklong on-campus residency. Two follow-up residencies will take place, one in 2007 and another in the spring of 2008. Between on-campus meetings, ECA degree requirements will be delivered via online coursework, making this program accessible for early childhood administrators throughout the United States.

For more information about the ECA cohort, contact Mary Zerega at 800-443-5522, ext. 5619, or mzerega@nl.edu.



McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership

Join us at the NAEYC Annual Conference!

November 8-11, 2006
Atlanta, GA

Wednesday

Supporting Families and Their Relative, Friend, and Neighbor
Caregivers: Successful Approaches and Promising Practices

Douglas Clark and Dawn Ramsburg

1:00 - 4:00 p.m.

Expanding Your Outreach Efforts with eNewsletters

Tim Walker, Chip Donohue and Douglas Clark

8:30 - 9:20 a.m.

Thursday

Widening the Lens: Looking at Quality from a Program
Administration Perspective

Jill Bella, Teri Talan, and Linda Butkovich

2:30 - 4:00 p.m.

Administrators, Embrace Your Technology Leadership Role!

Tim Walker and Fran Simon

1:00 - 2:00 p.m.

Take Time Out to Chat with the Experts Online!

Once again, the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership will host a series of online discussions with nationally renowned early childhood experts. Join the discussion to chat with the people who have written the books and helped shape early childhood policy and practice.

To lead off 2007, Judy Harris Helm, president of Best Practices, Inc., will be the featured guest. In the months to follow, other experts will be online for week-long open discussion on issues of interest to early childhood center administrators



**Monday, February 12 –
Saturday, February 17, 2007**

Guest expert:

Judy Harris Helm

Author, trainer, and early
childhood consultant

*Professional portfolios for
early childhood educators*

Check out the Center's Web site
(<http://cecl.nl.edu>) for information about
how to log on and updates about future
online guests.

New this year! Half-Day Computer Workshops

Improve your computer skills and integrate technology into
the management of your child care program.

Introduction to Digital Photography

Friday, January 12, 2007

8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

National-Louis University, Chicago campus, Room 4038

Learn about pixels and image sizes; capturing, storing, and sharing images; and
displaying your images in marketing and promotional materials. Participants will receive
four hours instruction and have access to follow-up technical assistance online.

Fee is **\$35**. Participants will receive a certificate of attendance.



Space is limited – Sign up soon!

Highlights from the 2006 Leadership Connections Conference

Visionary Award

Recipients of the 2006 Visionary Award were Bonnie Neugebauer, editor-in-chief, and Roger Neugebauer, publisher of *Exchange* magazine. Their vision—that all children benefit if early childhood directors are connected and empowered to share resources and ideas—was the inspiration behind the publication of *Child Care Information Exchange*. Since its first issue to 1,500 charter subscribers in 1978, the magazine was later changed to *Exchange* and currently circulates to nearly 30,000 subscribers. The Neugebauers' original vision sparked the creation of a World Forum on Early Care and Education in 1999. The World Forum has established itself as a valuable meeting place for the worldwide early childhood community, having touched over 3,000 early childhood professionals from 92 nations.

Corporate Champions for Change

Two outstanding companies were honored at the conference as Corporate Champions for Change: Hewitt Associates and Abbott Laboratories. Hewitt Associates has been a leading example of outstanding corporate citizenship. As a family-friendly company, Hewitt promotes work-life practices that support the needs of working parents by providing



Corporate Champions for Change award recipients from Hewitt Associates with Richard Pappas, President of National-Louis University.

for directors and family child care home providers and scholarships for emerging leaders from under-represented groups. In addition, Abbott has supported efforts in Illinois to promote director credentialing, mentoring, and the use of professional development advisors to help ensure workforce stability. The Champions for Change award was accepted on behalf of Abbott by Mrs. Lesli Marasco, Human Resources Director of Child Care Solutions and William Lee, Director of Corporate Diversity, Inclusion, and Compliance.

the assurance their children are safe and well cared for. The company's commitment in providing scholarships to conferences like Leadership Connections has had a strong and positive impact on early childhood administrators' ability to achieve program excellence. The Champions for Change award was accepted by Ms. Kerry Astar, Work/Life Resource Manager, and Mr. Dave Wille, Director of Hewitt's Total Reward program.

Abbott Laboratories' partnership with the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership has funded training



Visionary Award recipients Roger and Bonnie Neugebauer with Lila Goldston of the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership.



Corporate Champions for Change award recipients from Abbott Laboratories with NLU Trustee Thomas Darden.

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your communication. Again, there are a number of lessons we can learn from professional communicators. Develop a list of several strategic messages that you want to accomplish this year such as: "Our children are learning about reading and writing;" "Children who come to our center are learning how to work with others;" or "Our teachers are knowledgeable and well trained." Then make a plan to weave those messages into your communications.

Develop a list of talking points on a topic of greatest interest to your audience. For example if your parents are concerned about skills needed for literacy, take the time to make a list of how this is accomplished in

this center. Provide copies to all staff. Ask them to incorporate these messages into their communications and conversations with parents.

Draft formal statements on the most important issues, such as "Our Position Statement on Reading and Writing in Preschool." Keep it short, no more than one page, explaining what you do and why you do it. Cite credible references. For example, the International Reading Association recommendations would be credible for this area.

Build a support system for good communication such as access to technology like digital cameras and scanners, training for

staff, and a budget for high-quality public relations materials. Provide training for staff on documentation and the use of a desktop publishing program. Communications which look professional are more easily understood and add to the image of a center.

Implementing these ideas will help you build the image of your center as a place where children ARE learning and a place where parents want their children to be.

This article is based on the book *Building Support for Your School: How to Use Children's Work to Show Learning* by Judy Harris Helm and Amanda Helm, Teachers College Press, 2006.