

Opening the Door to So Much More: The Impact When Your Doors are Wide Open to Families

BY IRIS CORRAL

“Welcome, come right in!” This is the message I needed to receive when my child was a preschooler. At that time, I was a preschool teacher working in an early care and education program, and my child was enrolled in the classroom next to mine. As a parent, I had comfort in knowing that she was close by, and when I felt the need to see her, I could just look through her classroom window. Yes, I was very lucky, and to this day, I am extremely grateful. However, the majority of families whose children are in care do not have that luxury. More than likely, they have to adjust their schedules to make time to visit their child’s program. A center’s open-door policy is supposed to allow families to visit at a time that is convenient to them and without restrictions. I’ve come across many open-door policies in my 25 years in the field, and some have given me the impression that families are not always welcomed into the program. Let me share some examples.

“Open the door and come in, but you can only stay for 20 minutes because your presence may disrupt our routine.” Statements like this one include mixed messages. *“Please call ahead of time to ask when it’s a good time to visit.”* Although this policy is not stopping families from entering the program, it is directing them to call and ask for a time that is convenient for the program. *“We ask that you refrain from visiting your child during nap time.”* I get it; a child who is awake during naptime may cry when it is time for the family member to leave. I understand that it may cause a disturbance and possibly wake the other children. Yet, for me, this was actually the time when I would go into my child’s classroom. I spent my lunch break every day next to my daughter’s cot, rubbing her back until she fell asleep. That was our routine, our quiet bonding time together. You see, I was attending evening undergraduate classes during these years, and her father would put her to bed every weeknight. I was not afforded this special time with my child in the evenings, so her naptime at the center was the only opportunity to make that important connection with her. The program had an open-door policy that allowed me to spend time with her without any restrictions. I needed that time as a parent to be with my daughter. I felt the program really valued me as a parent (not just as staff), and as a result, a true partnership was created.

An open-door policy without restrictions can make a difference between active engagement from families that form authentic family partnerships or a program where there is a lack of participation from families because they do not feel welcomed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted policies across programs. Programs have implemented temporary restrictions and guidance that changed their drop-in procedures and on-site family engagement efforts. It may be a challenge to offer opportunities where families can still be involved and feel part of your program during these times. Give some thought to how they can be safely involved (e.g., video conferencing) or contribute in ways that do not require them to be physically present.

Now think ahead into the future when families will once again be allowed to visit programs. Does your open-door policy make them feel like you value their presence? Take a moment to review your policy and

ask yourself; is your door closed, slightly open, or wide open? If your policy has any restrictions that send a message other than your door is wide open, then you may have some work to do.

The handout titled, [Mixed Messages: How Your “Open” Door Policy Might Really Sound Closed](#), includes examples of open-door policies. Take time to reflect on the policies, what message they send, whether or not there are mixed messages, what you like, and what you do not like about each. We also suggest that you gather feedback from families within your own program about your open-door policy, so you know if it reflects your program’s beliefs and values regarding family support and engagement.

If you are interested in learning more about open-door policies and other leadership topics, check out the upcoming [leadership academies](#) on the McCormick Center website.

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