

Creating and sustaining family-friendly programs through excellent customer service

BY LUIS HERNANDEZ

*Think back: What is your favorite restaurant? Why?
I assume you were welcomed with a smile and felt special.*

Back to reality:

As program leaders, we tend to shy away from the commercial notion of customer service, an activity often relegated - for better or worse – to restaurants, stores, dentists' offices, or car sales. While we can uphold that belief, the dynamics of customer service color our work. Interactive and interpersonal activities carry a strong dimension of service, communication, and positive outcomes. As leaders, we create impact through our mastery of the basics of customer service – providing a child-, family-, and team-friendly program.

Think again: When did you experience terrible customer service?

Most likely, it upset you immensely. Such experiences spur our emotional reactions. We encounter customer service interactions each day at supermarkets, gas stations, and nail salons. We observe, react to, and judge our experiences. Whether excellent or dismal, a variety of measures can capture our reactions – surveys, star ratings (Uber), and other satisfaction measures. We react, respond, and share our stories with others.

Take a moment to reflect: How would children, families, and staff rate our services?

As early childhood education (ECE) program leaders, regularly reflecting on our services is vital to our professional growth and development. Are we meeting the needs of our clients? How can we continue to improve our services? These questions challenge new and seasoned program directors and managers alike.

Getting started:

As a lifelong learner, do your homework. Research and review best practices for “family-friendly” ECE programs. Adapt, revise, and continually adjust potential ideas and strategies that best fit your needs. With your team, create a plan outlining small steps that can lead to success.

Keep your focus on the long view – where do you want your program to be? Acknowledge that hard work, compromises, and dedication will be required. Family- and customer-friendly practices are challenging and demand constant “quality assurance.” As a leader, instill these evolving disciplines into the all-embracing mission of your program. Your persistence will be a model for all around you!

Integrating family and customer-friendly strategies into program values and mission requires action. It means genuinely knowing the customer - appreciating individual circumstances and recognizing differences. Uplifting similarities and creating a sense of community is not an easy task! Particularly in communities that are ever-changing as new children and families join our programs. Nevertheless, we can harness such values to serve as a testing ground for what could be possible in our neighborhoods, cities, and nation.

Finally, keep your customer and family-friendly experiences in mind. Strive to replicate the pleasant interactions in your program and avoid the customer service horror stories. The simple gesture of welcoming every child, family member, and staff with a smile creates a gift of bonding and community. Great service! Five stars!

*Please join us at Leadership Connections 2023, where **Luis Hernandez**, ECE Specialist, will speak on the critical role of customer service in creating a joyful and rewarding environment for the children, families, and staff of ECE programs. As our Conference emcee, Luis will guide you through our wellspring of innovative sessions, eye-opening workshops, networking opportunities, and more!*

Be sure to register today to obtain our lowest rate. We look forward to exploring inspiring new ideas and practices with you in April!

***Luis A. Hernandez**, Early Childhood Education Specialist, brings solid expertise based on his work history in Head Start, Pre-K programs, colleges and universities, child care resource and referral agencies, and ECE management. His expertise includes early literacy, dual language learners, adult learning practices, changing demographics and diversity, and ECE management and leadership topics. As a regular presenter and keynote speaker at national, state, and local conferences, Luis is highly regarded for his motivational and energizing presentations. In addition, Luis is an author. His book, "Learning from Bumps on the Road," focused on leadership topics and is a compilation of presentations and conversations with three fantastic leaders in the field. Mr. Hernandez is active in a number of organizations that support children and family interests.*