



· children’s development, and by research demonstrating the formative quality  
· of the early years. It has led to program efforts to encourage parental  
· understanding and appreciation of program goals and curriculum, and to  
· initiatives aimed at supporting family capacity to promote the healthy devel-  
· opment of children, often through parenting education strategies.

· A second powerful idea is that parents should contribute to decisions about  
· the nature of their child’s early education and care experiences. This idea  
· emanates from our country’s long-standing tradition of endorsing religious,  
· ideological, and cultural diversity in child-rearing matters and the rights of  
· parents in decisions affecting the child. The U.S. propensity for child care  
· policies to emphasize parental choice in an open market of early childhood  
· options reflects this orientation. Also connected to this idea is concern that  
· early childhood programs, especially full-day child care, may be disruptive to  
· parents’ child-rearing values and interests. Provisions for helping parents in  
· this decision-making role include informational supports for selecting a  
· program, ongoing communication with program staff about goals for a child  
· and the child’s experiences, classroom volunteering for the purpose of  
· monitoring and reinforcing program operations, and voice or vote regarding  
· program governance decisions.

· Two other important ideas are gaining influence in the early childhood field  
· and are contributing to a rethinking of relations between programs and  
· families. One is that children’s development is embedded in an intercon-  
· nected system of families and communities. This idea reflects growing  
· interest in how children’s development interacts with different social contexts  
· and is enriched by the work of developmental scientists examining the  
· ecology of human development and parenting. The influence of this idea has  
· been advanced by societal interest in a rapidly changing social landscape  
· characterized by increases in single-parent households; mothers working  
· outside the home; and the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of families.

· The other idea gaining influence is that family strengths should be marshaled  
· toward the optimal development of children and parents. This concept is  
· supported by scholarly work on the flow of social support in natural helping  
· systems, the resilience of families in difficult circumstances, and the benefits  
· of building on strengths in efforts to promote individual and family well-being.

· The latter two ideas are a basis of an emerging set of expectations of early  
· childhood programs: to be culturally and socially relevant to the families they  
· serve, to foster mutually respectful and reciprocal relations between staff  
· and families, to empower parents with information and social support that  
· promotes optimal engagement of the child-rearing role, and to function as a  
· bridge between families and other services in the community (Larner, 1997).

## · Images of Connectedness: Key Dimensions

· The concept of family-centered early education calls for early childhood  
· programs to broaden the boundaries of their work to be more inclusive of

families and their social contexts as a basis of supporting children’s learning and development. The program lens widens considerably. Consider the following description from a *Wall Street Journal* article on how some child care centers are now taking care of stressed parents as well as children (Shellenbarger, 2000):

Marley Couchon, director of a ... child care center, was greeting parents arriving for their children when one parent’s demeanor touched off an alarm in her mind. The mother, her eyes downcast and her step unusually rushed, was hurrying past when Ms. Couchon caught her eye. “Would you like to talk?” the director asked. As they stepped into Ms. Couchon’s office, the mother, a nurse, burst into tears. Her husband, a software engineer, had just lost his job, she explained, leaving the family strapped. “I gave her a hug and let her cry,” Ms. Couchon says. (This director) also refused the mother’s request to drop her two preschoolers from the center’s roster, telling her she would cut their tuition until her husband got a new job.

The article goes on to report that at the center where Ms. Couchon is director, “soothing classical music greets parents in the reception area, where they are encouraged to take a moment to relax. Ms. Couchon also takes up to 25 calls during lunch hour from parents checking on their kids. And teachers avoid talking to parents about their kids’ problems when they arrive, tired and rushed, to pick them up, saving discussions for meetings at parents’ convenience.”

Family-centered approaches to early education and care also emphasize assessments of family and program resourcefulness: How resourceful are families in meeting their children’s developmental needs? Do programs have sufficient resources to support families in this task? What resources might families contribute to the support of programs?

Responses to these types of questions generally suggest that resources for appropriately supporting child and family development are in short supply. Urie Bronfenbrenner and colleagues concluded from an analysis of demographic trends in the United States that there is

growing chaos in the lives of families, in child care settings, schools, peer groups, youth programs, neighborhoods, workplaces, and other everyday environments in which human beings live their lives. Such chaos, in turn, interrupts and undermines the formation and stability of relationships and activities that are essential for psychological growth. Moreover, many of the conditions leading to that chaos are the often unforeseen products of policy decisions made both in the private and the public sector. Today, in both of these arenas, we are considering profound economic and social changes, some of which threaten to raise the degree of chaos to even higher and less psychologically (and biologically) tolerable levels. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1999, p. 1022)

Findings from the Commonwealth Fund’s national survey of parents with young children highlight parents’ views of their child-rearing situations. For instance, the survey found that only 37% of parents felt that they were spending about the right amount of time with their children; 57% reported that

they would like to spend more time with their children. Thirty-nine percent reported reading or looking at a book with their child on a daily basis (Halfon & McLearn, 2002).

Early childhood program policies and practices regarding parents have historically focused on family resourcefulness, reflecting the assumption that programs can help families meet their needs. However, the attention to reciprocity in family-centered principles implies that families have resources that can benefit the early childhood program. The flow of influence in the family-program connection, then, is two-way.

## Practice Standards

Family-centered principles are well articulated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC's) revised statement of developmentally appropriate practice. The revised statement, issued in 1997 (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), offers greater clarity than its earlier 1986 version (Bredekamp, 1986) on the importance of viewing children in the context of family, culture, and society, and the need for programs to support close ties between child and family (Powell, 2001). The clearer language in NAEYC's descriptions of recommended program relations with families contrasts with the field's long-standing use of fuzzy terminology (e.g., parent involvement) and represents a major conceptual shift from the conventional approach to parent-teacher relationships as a task of parents serving as helpmates in implementing program-determined agendas (Powell, 2001; Powell & Diamond, 1995).

The current NAEYC statement calls for program goals to be developed in collaboration with families and for program staff to learn about each child through relationships with the child's family. The practice guidelines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) promote

- the development of reciprocal and collaborative relationships between teachers and families;
- parents participating in decisions about their child's care and education, including involvement in assessing and planning for individual children;
- teacher sensitivity to and respect for parents' preferences and concerns without abdicating professional responsibility to children;
- teachers and parents frequently sharing their knowledge of the child and understanding of children's development and learning;
- programs facilitating family linkages with a range of appropriate services; and
- teachers, parents, and other professionals with educational responsibility for a child sharing developmental information about children as they move to a new program or setting.

In similar fashion, the NAEYC position paper on responding to linguistic and cultural diversity recommends that teachers become familiar with the child's community (NAEYC, 1996a), and the NAEYC code of ethical conduct emphasizes ideals and principles that focus on mutual trust as well as respect

for family child-rearing values and decision-making rights (NAEYC, 1996b). Clear language also is found in the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children practice standards, which specify that families are to be equal to professionals in formulating decisions about a child's program of care and education (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000).

Head Start's performance standards on program relations with families have long emphasized responsiveness to families. Scholars often point to Head Start's approach to parent involvement as a cornerstone of the program's success (e.g., Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Other early proponents of family-centered principles include the National Black Child Development Institute's safeguards for public school involvement in early childhood education (National Black Child Development Institute, 1987), and the anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989).

The early childhood field's current expectations of program relations with families are consistent with standards for parent/family involvement programs issued by the National PTA in 1997. These standards specify that (1) communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful; (2) parenting skills are promoted and supported; (3) parents play an integral role in assisting student learning; (4) parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance are sought; (5) parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families; and (6) community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning (National PTA, 1997).

The NAEYC standards also are compatible with guidelines for family support practice issued by Family Support America (formerly Family Resource Coalition). The latter guidelines embrace relationships between staff and families that are based on equality and respect, and call for programs to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development, among other guidelines (Family Resource Coalition, 1996).

The expectations of reciprocal and collaborative parent-staff relationships, and for program responsiveness to family interests and circumstances, have major implications for the two main domains of early childhood program relations with parents: parent-staff communication and supports for parenting. What do we know about current status of these two areas?

## Parent-Staff Communication

Recommendations for close communication between parents and early childhood staff are on strong theoretical grounds. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986) has offered the most detailed set of propositions about the developmental benefits of frequent and personal communication between teachers and parents. Surprisingly little research has been conducted on this topic. However, one recent study found that more communication between mother and child care provider was significantly related to more sensitive and supportive interactions between the caregiver and child, and between mother

and child, even after controlling for child-rearing beliefs. The more frequent communication involved mother and child care provider seeking and sharing information about the child and the child's experiences. The study did not involve attempts to alter the frequency or content of communication between mother and child care provider (Owen, Ware, & Barfoot, 2000).

Communication between parent and child care provider was identified as a key feature of high-quality care by both parents and providers in a major study of family child care (Kontos, Howes, Shinn, & Galinsky, 1995) and in a smaller study of centers (Ghazvini & Readdick, 1994). Parents have been found to express higher levels of satisfaction than program staff with the quantity and quality of communication (for a review, see Powell, 1989).

Studies indicate that most communication between parent and staff occurs at child drop-off and pick-up points. This transition time typically is not conducive to meaningful exchanges; parents can be rushed, staff are understandably focused on children's transitions, and in the case of full-day programs, staff members who spend the largest amount of time with a child may not be on duty at the point parents are present. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some centers seeking to be more family centered are accommodating these circumstances by arranging for staff to participate in lunch-hour telephone calls with parents checking on their child's day and to talk about children's problems only at meetings scheduled at parents' convenience rather than at the point parents arrive, reportedly tired and rushed, to retrieve their child at the end of the day (Shellenbarger, 2000).

Teacher judgmentalness about parents' child-rearing abilities is an obvious barrier to establishing and maintaining respectful relations between parents and program staff. Findings of a recent descriptive study of 11 family-focused early childhood programs indicate that, in some cases, staff believed parents were not giving their children proper attention and care, and staff found it difficult to avoid being judgmental and to identify family strengths (Lopez & Dorros, 1999). Other studies point to a pattern of negative teacher attitudes regarding parents' child-rearing abilities (Kontos, Raikes, & Woods, 1983; Galinsky, Shinn, Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook, 1990). In one study, mothers held in low esteem by center staff had significantly fewer daily communications with staff than parents held in high esteem (Kontos & Dunn, 1989). Another consequence of negative teacher views of parents' child-rearing abilities may be staff adoption of a "child savior" orientation wherein staff view themselves as surrogate parents and try to assume more responsibility for the child than is appropriate or desired by the parent. A lack of clarity in the roles of parents and program staff has been found to be associated with tensions in the parent-staff relationship (Lopez & Dorros, 1999).

A primary purpose of frequent communication between parent and program staff is to establish and implement shared goals for a child. Research on the nature and consequences of this process is nonexistent. This issue is particularly salient for the growing number of children from linguistic and cultural backgrounds that are not represented in their early childhood program. Early

education is likely to be most beneficial if program activities are made meaningful for children through the incorporation of activities that parents value and in which the children engage at home (Fitzgerald & Goncu, 1993).

## Supporting Family Child Rearing

The evidence is mixed on whether children's outcomes are significantly improved when early childhood programs provide information and other types of supports to families aimed at enhancing their child-rearing functions. Methodologically, this area is complicated to investigate. A recent analysis of studies of parent involvement programs in K-12 education, for example, identified numerous flaws in evaluation design and methods that seriously limit conclusions about the effects of parent involvement initiatives on children's learning (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002).

Some research findings point to improved benefits for children when programs provide focused educational supports for parents. For example, a recent investigation of an interactive shared-reading program with 3- to 4-year-old children from low-income families who attended a child care center found that effects of the reading program were largest for children in program conditions involving home reading. In this study, children were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 conditions: (1) a no treatment control group, (2) an early childhood program condition in which children were read to by their teachers in small groups, (3) a home condition in which children were read to by their parents, and (4) a combined early childhood program plus home condition. Parents and teachers received videotaped instruction on how to read interactively with young children. Children in the third and fourth conditions demonstrated the largest gains in language outcomes (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998).

The above findings are consistent with results of earlier investigations of the effects of early childhood intervention programs, typically aimed at low-income populations. Previous studies indicate that programs are more effective if they involve parents (for reviews, see Benasich, Brooks-Gunn, & Clewell, 1992; Gray & Wandersman, 1980; Seitz, 1990). This general pattern of findings does not hold across all early intervention programs, however (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, & Fuligni, 2000; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992), and some studies of early childhood intervention programs have not found that increased educational work with parents boosts child outcomes (e.g., Wasik, Ramey, Bryant, & Sparling, 1990). Most likely the quality and quantity of work with parents are key determinants here. Factors that appear necessary for early intervention programs to have an impact on parenting effectiveness and the home environment include sufficient intensity and duration; appropriate timing; direct engagement of parents, children, and the larger family context; diverse supports and services; and responsive and individualized programming (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Family support of children's learning during the school years also has been found to be an important contributor to sustained positive effects of early childhood programs for children from low-income families (Reynolds, 2000; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001).

The dominant approach to providing information and support to parents is for professionals to determine the content and method of work with parents. An alternative approach is for parents to take control of decisions about the topics and resources they would like to explore. Discussion groups, outings, and other activities that foster mutually supportive linkages among parents in an early childhood program, with or without involvement of professionals, are examples of strategies aimed at enhancing family life without professional direction. More research is needed on the processes and effects of these approaches.

Similarly, research is needed on early childhood program provisions aimed at reducing stress and increasing the quality of family time. Some full-day programs, for example, seek to provide meals-to-go, pick/up and drop/off for dry cleaning, and even calm music in the center's waiting room, in the hope of reducing stress and increasing efficiency in parents' efforts to balance work and family (Shellenbarger, 2000). These provisions may be viewed as creative program adaptations to a growing population of stressed, single- or dual-worker families with young children. Programs serving low-income parents affected by welfare reform also need research attention. There is some indication that Head Start parents are increasingly less available for traditional program participation opportunities because of participation in job training or work (Parker et al., 1997).

## Needed Directions

The mixed picture offered at the outset of this paper emphasized the considerable variation across early childhood programs in engaging families. Steps to improve this situation require significant investments in staff through personnel preparation and the development of effective tools for staff to form and sustain supportive ties with families. Advances in family-centered early education also require additional program resources and additional research knowledge on effective practices.

Probably few early childhood professionals enter the field with a strong interest in working with families, and their professional preparation is unlikely to have included much, if any, serious attention to the knowledge and skills necessary for effective work with families. This domain is not central to licensing or certification standards and professional preparation programs in higher education, although early childhood teacher preparation programs have been found to require more courses on this topic than programs preparing teachers to work with older children (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Some of the more interesting personnel preparation models are in the field of early childhood special education where, for example, parents have served as co-instructors of college-level courses on working with families (McBride, Sharp, Hains, & Whitehead, 1995). Inservice training resources also are available (e.g., Cornell Empowerment Project). Areas to emphasize in training and in the development of tools for staff to use in engaging families are identified below.



- **Understanding Relationship Development.** A view of relations with parents as a series of discrete events (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, open houses) is unlikely to yield shared goals for a child or mutual exchange of information. Staff and program policies need to approach parent-teacher relationships as relationship systems that evolve over time.

Research suggests that parents and teachers are likely to approach their connection with one another through different relationship emphases. For example, confidence has been found to be a strong factor in both parent and child care staff views of what is important in the parent-staff relationship, but confidence meant somewhat different things to each party. Parents emphasized staff competence, while staff emphasized open communication and agreement about caregiving issues. Parents and staff also emphasized slightly different matters regarding the concept of collaboration, and parents valued affiliative ties with staff while staff valued the caring capacities of the parent as important qualities of the parent-staff relationship (Elicker, Noppe, Noppe, & Fortner-Wood, 1997).

- **Developing Shared Goals for Child.** Early childhood teachers need strategies for developing shared goals with parents. Parental responsiveness to a parenting education program has been found to be more positive when the parent and program worker share similar goals for the child (Segal, 1985). More generally, children’s academic performance has been found to be positively associated with mother-teacher congruence regarding perceptions of child competence (Peet, Powell, & O’Donnel, 1997). For many parents, it appears that a useful point for initial engagement may be parents’ concerns about their preschool child’s readiness for school success. National survey data suggest that a majority of parents of young children want specific information on how to encourage their child’s learning (Young, Davis, Schoen, & Parker, 1998) and generally feel less able to positively impact their child’s intellectual development than any other area of childhood development (Melmed, 1997). These patterns may partly explain the positive parental response to programs like Parents As Teachers and the Early Childhood Family Education program in Minnesota that focus on parents’ educational roles.

- **Working with Children in Family Contexts.** The field needs more work in the development of strategies for helping early childhood professionals build on children’s home cultures. One of the key features of culturally responsive education is continuity between the child’s experiences in the home and in the early childhood program (Neuman & Roskos, 1994). Although tools and activities for facilitating the flow of information from home to program have been developed in areas such children’s literacy experiences (Neuman, 1999), much more programmatic effort is needed to deal with potential conflicts when parents and teachers do not share the same template for ideal educational practices (Okagaki & Diamond, 2000).

- **Integrating Work with Parents and Children.** There is a tendency for efforts to support parents to be disconnected from work with young children, particularly when the work with parents is viewed as a separate program component staffed by professionals who have minimal contact with classroom teachers (Powell & D'Angelo, 2000). Because the ultimate goal is to support parent-child relationships and the child's continuity between program and home, family-centered programs strive toward a coherent, integrated entity, not separate spheres of activities.
- **Working with High-Stress Circumstances.** Even in early childhood programs deemed to be family centered, staff members express major concerns about working with highly stressed families, especially families characterized by poverty, substance abuse, or child neglect, and also adolescent parents and parents having extreme difficulty balancing work and family commitments (Lopez & Dorros, 1999). Clearly, this area is in need of training attention as well as program resources for careful referral work with community agencies.

This paper notes a number of key questions and issues about which we have a paucity of research. For more than three decades, the pressing research questions in the early childhood field have pertained to program quality and outcomes and, to a lesser extent, family access to early childhood programs. More generally, relations with families have not been viewed as a component of quality in studies of early childhood programs. For example, the instruments most commonly used to assess program quality give minimal attention to family support practices (Raab & Dunst, 1997). Advances in program efforts to form truly responsive connections with families require a systematic understanding of what works, including the conditions under which family-centered practices enable programs and families to jointly support the development of successful children.

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