



by Karen Stephens

Parent-Child Care Partnerships: Team Building Steps to Take

Child care providers support the important roles working parents play in business and in family life. When done well, good child care looks easy. But don't let that deceive you. A full time job of caring for groups of kids is emotionally draining, and backbreaking work. Good child care doesn't happen by accident; it flourishes by design. It involves a lot of wise *behind-the-scenes* teamwork. Busy parents sometimes take that teamwork for granted. Worse, they don't realize they should be part of the team! Children are never nurtured in isolation. A bridge between home and child care must be built if children are to be sensitively and appropriately supported.

When parents take active steps to become cooperative partners with staff, children benefit the most. Child care providers can take better care of children when parents regularly share information. For instance, good providers always appreciate it when parents offer advice on how to respond to a child's individual temperament and behavior.

Below are steps you can take toward building a team with your child care provider. May it be a long-lived respectful partnership.

- Take time to read your parent handbook and enrollment contract. Abide by policies and procedures. Ask for exceptions rarely. If forming policies interests you, offer to serve on an advisory board.
- Before your child's first day in a new classroom or program, take time to write to or speak with the staff about your child's personality and general development. Staff loved reading letters parents have written about goals for their children.
- Follow a predictable routine for morning arrival. Establish personalized communication by calling program staff by name. Allow time for communicating with staff about your child's night and morning. At day's end, greet staff warmly and ask how their day went as well as your child's.
- Send children to child care well-rested, clean, and well-fed. It helps a child's mood and energy level, which in turn helps your provider's day go smoother.
- Alert the provider to your child's special needs, such as food allergies. Providers want to do right by your child; details help — surprises don't.
- At home, reinforce developmental skills child care staff are nurturing, such as toilet training, helping your child dress herself, or picking up toys after play.
- Plan with program staff so discipline strategies are consistent. It will help your child meet expectations more easily, too.
- Participate in the classroom by sharing a special skill, such as carpentry or music.
- Lend an extra hand by attending class field trips.
- Participate in special child care events, such as potlucks or parenting workshops. Getting to know staff in casual settings builds friendship and camaraderie.
- Attend meetings if parent-teacher nights are offered.
- Sign up for a parent conference. Be prepared with questions and comments.
- If your child has a disability, share training opportunities and resources to help your provider become skilled in meeting your child's unique needs.
- Share caregiving techniques favored by your child, for instance, favorite songs or naptime books.

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- If you have concerns or complaints about your child's care, address them early when they are still small. Schedule a time when you and your provider can talk without distraction, such as during naptime. Speak to the provider respectfully and privately to ensure confidentiality.
- Relay unusual circumstances that are affecting your child's behavior. The insight will enable providers to give more individualized support. Such events may include parent separation or divorce, sibling birth, impending move, illness, eating problems, sleep disturbances, or a family or pet death.
- When family life is very rocky, such as during divorce or abuse allegations, keep your provider updated as to custody, visitation, or foster care arrangements. Alert them to situations that could get out of hand.
- Inform your provider of medications your child is using, as well as possible side effects.
- Respect your provider's closing time. Child care providers are working parents just like you. They, too, must meet family responsibilities and time commitments.

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- If an emergency forces you to be late, call to notify your provider so she and your child won't worry that you're injured. When you arrive, thank them for working extra time on your behalf. Most providers won't expect more, but a token of appreciation for "above and beyond" service would be thoughtful and respectful.
- Keep ill children home. Let them recuperate before sending them back to child care. Notify staff immediately of contagious illness. This protects other children's health as well as that of staff. Have a back-up child care provider arranged in case your child is ill or your family child care home provider is ill.
- Send children to child care in playable clothes that can be easily washed. Keep an extra set of seasonal clothes at child care in case of toileting or play accidents. Label personal items. Keeping track of 20 pairs of mittens, socks, and look-alike tennis shoes and jackets can be hard.
- Send children to child care dressed for the weather. During seasonal changes, this may include sending a warm coat for morning arrival, but a lighter windbreaker for afternoon outdoor play.
- Help the provider keep the area free of safety hazards. For instance, keep purses or briefcases away from children if they hold a cigarette lighter or medication.
- Return forms in a timely manner, such as health examinations or permission slips.
- Keep infant diapers and pumped breast milk or formula well stocked.
- Help reduce incidents at child care by abiding by "toys from home" policies. Books or CDs are most easily shared. Valuable, fragile toys or those that are violent or potentially dangerous are not.
- Notify your provider in writing if someone else will pick up your child. Let the person know they must show a photo ID before your child can be released to them. That way they won't be offended or taken off guard when your provider asks for ID.
- If you travel to a conference or your work location changes, notify the provider of new emergency numbers so you can be located quickly and easily.
- Regularly thank your provider in word and deed, so they know the patience, love, and hard work they extend on your child's behalf is appreciated and valued beyond measure. Most likely, when you do that, they'll give you the same respect in return. It's the stuff teams are made of.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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