

NAEYC Explores Parental Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

Maril Olson and Marilou Hyson

Since 2002, NAEYC has been leading early childhood educators in efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect, promote children's healthy social and emotional development, and build supportive partnerships with families through the Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families initiative funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. As part of this initiative, NAEYC conducted a national study of more than one thousand parents of young children ages birth to eight enrolled in early childhood education programs (see "How the Parental Perspectives Study Was Conducted"). The purpose of the research was to learn how parents perceive early childhood programs (both accredited and nonaccredited) and teachers (classroom teachers, family child care providers, and so on). Specifically, NAEYC wanted to know to what extent parents and families look to programs and teachers as sources of information, guidance, and support on a variety of early childhood issues.

What was learned

Here are some of the key findings:

- Parents are highly satisfied with their relationships with teachers as well as with the care and education that teachers provide.

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- Parents want patient, loving, and kind teachers, and most find that their child's teachers live up to this standard.
- Social and emotional development is a top priority for all parents during their child's early learning years.
- Parenting advice is not nearly as important to families as other forms of communication that pertain more directly to the child's social and emotional development and performance in school. Parents regard advice-giving as intrusive. They prefer cooperative, respectful communication within the context of reciprocal relationships. Without such relationships, parents can be reluctant to talk openly to teachers,

drawing boundaries between what is personal and what is professional.

- Although parents are highly satisfied with teachers, they rate parent-teacher communication among the lowest of the satisfaction measures and as the most common area in which relationships might be improved. Parents want regular communication with teachers, but they say they do not always receive it. They would like teachers to reach out more frequently—by asking parents about their experiences with their own child, what is most important to them as parents, and for their opinions and feedback.

- Some families appear to be more receptive to and in need of support: single parents, young or first-time parents, full-time working couples, and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Single parents—both mothers and fathers—are most likely to look to teachers for support with their children, while women in general are more likely than men to feel that teachers can offer parents support.

Young and/or first-time parents also frequently look to teachers for advice and guidance. Parents who both work full-time have limited

How the Parental Perspectives Study Was Conducted

NAEYC commissioned Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc., of Washington, D.C., to conduct this research, both qualitative and quantitative. A series of focus groups was held between September 22 and September 28, 2004, in Atlanta, Chicago, and Bethesda, Maryland, with parents who had children ages birth to eight.

Based on this preliminary research, the research team wrote and administered a survey of 1,014 parents of children between the ages of birth and eight who were in some type of early care and education program. The study was fielded between October 21 and October 28, 2004. It carries a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points.

This new study complements previous research conducted with early childhood educators in 2002 as part of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation-funded initiative Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families. The findings from the earlier research are available at www.naeyc.org/ece/pdf/ddreporta.pdf and www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200305/SupportingTeachers.pdf.

time and look for ways to engage with teachers outside of school hours. Finally, parents from diverse cultural backgrounds are very receptive to additional support that is offered, even though they may not actively seek it.

Implications

What do these findings mean for early childhood educators?

We should take the time to develop close, reciprocal relationships with families.

A reciprocal relationship is mutually respectful, cooperative, and collaborative, offering regular and frequent communication about the child. While effective parent-teacher relationships take time to develop, strong relationships are key to promoting children's healthy social and emotional development and minimizing the potential for child abuse and neglect. With such relationships in place, we can respond more effectively to signs of family stress and provide appropriate support, information, and referrals to community services. Communication between educators and families—especially on difficult topics—is much easier when a supportive, reciprocal relationship is in place. A top-down, advice-giving approach by teachers impedes effective parent-teacher relationships.

We should provide relationship-building opportunities.

Although different families seek different kinds of parent-teacher relationships, most parents acknowledge it is important to have reciprocal relationships with their child's teacher. And while some parents have time, financial, or other types of constraints that inhibit their ability to participate in their children's early childhood program, they all welcome opportunities to get involved, an important foundation for building relationships. We should continue to provide opportunities and reach out to all families.

We should do a better job communicating our role as reliable, credible sources of information and support.

Parents do not necessarily know what they can ask or expect from an early childhood program or teacher—

whether the topic is child development or community resources. More experienced parents have clearer ideas of what they do and do not need, are more active in the classroom, and are more likely to feel comfortable talking to teachers about any subject. But we should do

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more to communicate to all families what they can expect from early childhood programs and teachers.

What's next?

Over the next few years, NAEYC will use the findings from this research to develop additional materials and resources—for both educators and families—that support positive parent-teacher partnerships. NAEYC also is considering how it might further enhance the information and services it provides to families.

Coming January 2006

A *Young Children* cluster on Supporting and Involving Families in Meaningful Ways (submissions due September 1, 2005)

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Strengthening Relationships with Families: Selected NAEYC Resources

Books

Family-friendly communication for early childhood programs. 1996. K. Morrison & D. Diffily, eds.

Off to school: A parent's-eye view of the kindergarten year. 1998. I. Hannigan.

Relationships, the heart of quality care: Creating community among adults in early care settings. 2004. A. Baker and L. Manfredi/Pettit.

Secure relationships: Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings. 2002. A. Honig.

Videos

Cultivating roots: Home/school partnerships by NAEYC. 1996. From the Early Childhood Program series. 30 min.

Demonstrates ways to foster partnerships between families and schools, including through communication, support, learning, teaching one another, child advocacy, and decision making.

Partnerships with parents by NAEYC. 1989. Produced by South Carolina Educational Television. 28 min.

Shows teachers how to establish and maintain positive communication with families and how to handle common problems.

Young Children articles

Emotional development and school readiness. 2002. M. Hyson. 57 (6): 76–78.

Children's emotional competence is an essential ingredient of school readiness and must be given a high priority in professional development and public policies. The author argues that the choice is not to emphasize *either* emotions *or* cognitive development—they are inseparable.

Improving parent-teacher conferences through collaborative conversations. 1999. P. Koch & M. McDonough. 54 (2): 11–15.

Collaborative conversations between early childhood program staff, families, and others help resolve problems, such as disruptive behavior, and create sup-

portive relationships. The authors emphasize the importance of identifying and focusing on when solutions are working and building on existing assets.

Learning to read the heart: Nurturing emotional literacy. 2002. R. Novick. 57 (3): 84–89.

A narrow focus on academics does not ensure school success. The author argues that social and emotional school readiness is critical to successful kindergarten transition, early child success, and later adult accomplishment. She examines several program settings in which teachers nurture both emotional development and literacy.

Reweaving parents into the fabric of early childhood programs. 1998. D.R. Powell. 53 (5): 60–67.

The early childhood program has evolved into a family support system that functions as a modern-day version of the traditional extended family. The author identifies areas in which training enhances both staff and family ability to raise a child together.

Online

Early Years Are Learning Years (www.naeyc.org/ece/eyly/)

In an ongoing effort to focus attention on the importance of the early years in children's learning and all aspects of development, NAEYC's Web site offers short articles designed for parents and other adults involved with children on a daily basis. Early childhood programs frequently use the articles in newsletters to help families and others learn more about giving children a great start. Selected topics include

- building parent-teacher partnerships (www.naeyc.org/ece/1999/02.asp)
- building positive relationships through communication (www.naeyc.org/ece/1998/14.asp)
- parents as partners in children's learning (www.naeyc.org/ece/1996/17.asp)
- linguistic and cultural diversity (www.naeyc.org/ece/1996/03.asp)