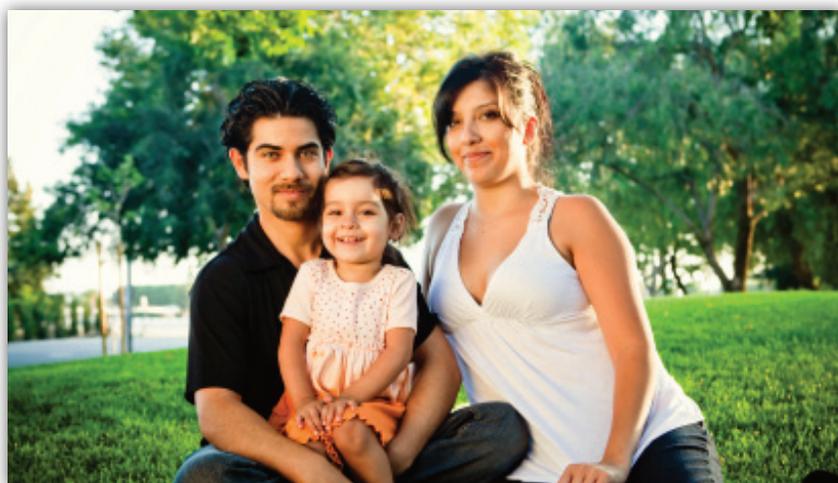




FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

The Power of Partnerships: How to Create Meaningful Connections with Parents

by Dr. Susan Sheridan
University of Nebraska



QUESTIONS FROM MARCH 26TH FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALL

Q: How can we gauge the reliability of parent observations when using them in planning for the child?

A: When interacting with parents as partners, a helpful rule of thumb is to consider the parents' observations as accurate from their perspective. Thus, it is important not to question a parent's honesty or reliability, but rather to reinforce them for the time they spend with their child and invite them to tell you what they notice as they interact in various settings and situations. Rather than taking what they say at face value, it is often helpful to ask them to describe what they observe in their child and provide examples to glean objective information. Remember that their vantage point is their own child and they do not have the luxury of knowing what is "typical" or "normal." As they explain situations with stories and examples, the provider will be able to help interpret the accuracy of parents' reports and provide information that will help them learn about their child's development.

Q: How does this fit and integrate with home visitors supporting parents in their own goals and outcomes (i.e., literacy, career orientation)?

A: In a family-centered approach, it is important that the early childhood professional help families identify their own goals and determine supports and methods for achieving them. Whereas the emphasis of the 5 A's is on a child's learning and healthy development, it is sometimes the case that parents' attaining their own goals improves their ability to provide an optimal environment for children. In this way, helping parents identify resources for themselves is a useful strategy that will ultimately help their child. At the same time, it will be important to focus back on the child; that is, do not lose sight of the fact that the child's learning and achievement is the main objective of early childhood education services. To the greatest extent possible, it is always important to identify and pursue individualized goals and strategies that are appropriate within each family's unique life circumstances. This conveys the message to all parents that regardless of challenges, they have strengths, and these strengths can be used to support their child at any time.

Q: Do you suggest that the teacher accompany the Family Advocate on home visits?

A: In a word, yes! It is always helpful for teachers to get to know the families of students in their classrooms, and there is no better way to understand families' unique cultures, values, practices and vantage points than to interact with them in their own personal space. In their own home, family members will likely be more comfortable and relaxed than they will be in a formal educational setting. In home visits, teachers will have a unique opportunity to observe parents interacting with their child in their natural environment, and teachers will be in a position to brainstorm with parents regarding goals they have for their child's learning, and ways their own home can be an important environment to accomplish those goals.

Q: I have so much to do already within the brief amount of time I have with children. How can I fit in activities aimed at partnering with parents?

A: It is true that teachers and other early education professionals have a lot expected of them, and not a lot of time to accomplish all they wish to accomplish. Providing a high-quality learning experience for students with a range of abilities and backgrounds, and ensuring that they leave your program ready for school, is a daunting task. Rather than thinking about parent engagement as another “thing” that teachers need to fit into an already over-scheduled day, it is helpful to consider parents as partners in the overarching task of educating children. It is a way of thinking about educational practice and going about business, not an event or activity. As a framework for educational practice, parents as partners can actually help teachers more fully and easily achieve the goals they share for children. As partners, parents and teachers both have responsibilities for children’s education. They each adopt important roles, and work together toward the same end. Consistent and positive connections with parents provide opportunities to gain important insights and help over time, and not just in response to one issue or need. As just a few examples, parents as partners provides increased opportunities for children to practice new skills, generalize skills to new settings, and solidify knowledge of new concepts through repetition in distinct contexts. All of these and other benefits of partnering with parents as part of a teacher’s typical practice actually make the job of teaching easier, not more difficult!

Q: How can I engage parents who do not show an interest in becoming involved? How do I reach the “hard to reach” parent?

A: It is often assumed that if parents do not participate in school-based events or complete activities sent home that they are not interested in being involved in their child’s education. Parents may be involved in many ways that are not always visible, such as modeling learning activities at home (e.g., reading the newspaper or singing songs) talking to children about their day, expressing beliefs or values in the importance of learning/education. This is what we refer to as the “curriculum of the home.” Gathering information from families about the many ways that they are engaged in their child’s learning can be enlightening.

It is important to reflect on the opportunities and invitations for involvement that have been extended to families, and how they may or may not fit with the style of engagement for all families. Expanding our view or definition of parent engagement often changes our perspectives of “hard to reach” parents. It is also important to think about the means of communication that have been established with families and whether or not these methods are the best way of translating information to all families. For some, a personal contact expressing a desire for their involvement is more inviting than a note sent home.

Q: How do I communicate with parents whose children are having problems in the classroom?

A: An important prerequisite to addressing concerns with families is to establish effective, positive means of communication prior to bringing up problems. Doing so lays a foundation for trusting, respectful relationships, which are needed for partnering to address concerns.

Tips for communicating with families and solving problems are provided in the webinar handouts. These recommendations highlight the importance of using effective communication practices with families that demonstrate a respect for their values and perspectives and treat concerns with a shared sense of responsibility for creating a successful learning environment (both at home and school), rather than a deficit within the child that needs to be addressed.

Q: How do I address parents who are using ineffective parenting strategies, which contributes to problems experienced by the child?

A: Establishing open communication upfront is key to addressing concerns with families. In the event that there are concerns about parenting strategies, it is important to refrain from using statements that place blame or are value-laden that may put parents in a position of defensiveness. Tips in the handouts refer to how to problem-solve with families and manage conflict. Developing a shared sense of ownership or responsibility for the issue and discussing various options based on objective information (e.g., research, developmental information, classroom experience with other children) may help to identify more effective strategies that parents can use to address the concern.

Q: How do I convey to parents that I want and value their participation as a partner in their child's education?

A: The 5 A's present a framework for thinking about how to engage families in their child's education. Establishing warm, inviting classrooms, demonstrating genuine beliefs in the importance of families to their child's success, and treating families as partners that are essential to their child's learning—these convey a message to families that they are not just wanted, they are needed to ensure that their child reaches his/her full potential. The self-reflection tool provided in the handouts from the webinar provides a means for evaluating current practices for engaging families. This tool can be used to identify areas of strength and those in need of improvement.

Q: How can I engage parents who don't show an interest in becoming involved?

A: Part of the answer comes back to thinking about where the question comes from. One of the things presented was a self-reflection tool and a guide for thinking about the way that you evaluate yourself or your program, going back to those five A's. What kind of an atmosphere and approach has been taken with families to this point? And how has that led to actions that staff and educators have used to engage families?

Some families will be very willing and easy to engage, because they see that as their goal. Others will be less engaged, for a variety of reasons—whether because of time constraints or a sense that “This is a role for a teacher, and I will respect that and allow them to be the teacher of my child.” Reflecting on how you've engaged with families, you might find that what works for most may not work for all. Take some time to reflect about what might be unique about the families that are more difficult to reach. Consider the approaches that you've taken thus far, to see if those approaches are best-fitting for those families.

One size does not fit all—traditional efforts will work for many, but not all, parents. Thinking about ways to individualize our invitations, to convey the importance of their commitment and engagement and their unique ways is really the best way to reach an individual family member.

Q: What suggestions do you have for a teacher who feels like they can't be very effective because they're not a parent themselves?

A: It's really important that we emphasize the expertise that parents bring to the table, especially as we're encouraging teachers to connect with families. We emphasize the knowledge that only parents have, and that we need to do our job more effectively. But don't lose sight of the fact that teachers have unique expertise that also must be brought to the table. It is a collaborative team with co-equal roles and co-equal responsibilities. Not identical roles and not identical responsibilities, but co-equal. So both new and seasoned teachers have unique perspectives, observations, information, and expertise that are critically important to promoting the child's learning and development in optimal ways.

Not limiting oneself to parent-only perspectives will allow a teacher to enter into the discussion bringing their own perspectives, observations, and information. The teacher is an expert on the classroom, individual students, and the observations that occur there—and that's equally important to any information that a parent might bring in.

We also encourage young and developing teachers to engage in some professional development, some mentorship, and really identify ways to get the support you need within a program. There's a whole skill set—not only around teaching and instruction, but also around family engagement, and how to communicate with parents, and how to really optimally bring them in ways that are going to be most helpful for the student.

We all can use help in that regard, but for individuals who haven't had a lot of experience either in the parenting role or even in the teaching role — today it's really important that we support those folks, and help them do the job that they want to do, to fulfill the reason they're there to begin with: to really help children.

Q: Have you had success in engaging and involving a non-custodial parent who has visitation rights and wants to be involved? How can we utilize the school relationship successfully as a common and inviting meeting place for both parents?

A: It comes back to remembering who the key players are in the life of a child, and remembering that our purpose here is always for the benefit of the child. Who needs to be involved to make the biggest difference in the life of this child, whether it's a grandparent, a daycare provider, a stepfather, a non-custodial parent? Having each person engaged in a way that's meaningful and helpful for the desired outcome is necessary. The same rules apply to all of those forms of communication; you would engage the non-custodial figure in the same ways that you would engage a custodial parent. Certainly, there are other issues that have to be discussed, and the ways that we engage with families might appear different in terms of what they are doing, but all of the usual principles would apply. We simply keep in mind mutual respect, trust, and the value of what that person would bring to the life of this child.

Q: Does research on engaging parents in group activities have as much or different benefit for child outcomes as the partnerships with individual parents focusing on their own child?

A: I love that question, because it really leads to a discussion about some current developments in the field of early childhood around tiered intervention approaches. It also brings up the fact that at the universal level, there are things that we can do with all families that are important: outreach, efforts of communication, invitations to engage, etc. But, certainly, as we work to identify the intensive or targeted needs that some students have, we don't necessarily have to jump to an individualized, intensive approach. There might be ways to engage at a group level that would be slightly more targeted, and we're doing work in that area to really identify at the universal level what is effective. We're looking at a more group, and small-group, level for shared needs among students and families, to see what we can do to promote literacy or other skills toward school readiness. When the broad efforts don't work, we can do this at a more individualized, intensive level.

At each of these tiers, the efforts are very intentional. They're very focused, thoughtful and planful — but they're different, because children have different needs and families present different realities. So it's a flexible, responsive orientation that lends to important outcomes, connected to students' needs. One size doesn't fit all—so, however we shape relationships with families, we need to be responsive to the individual, the group, or the entire classroom level.



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