The Role of Child Care Providers in Child Abuse Prevention

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Twenty parents and staff of the Play and Learn Child Care Center gathered for a workshop on coping with challenging behaviors in young children. This issue had been coming up at the center recently. Both staff and parents had noticed an increase in difficulty handling the aggressive, angry, and defiant toddlers and 3-year-olds. Even the infant teachers found the babies were fussier than usual, crying more throughout the day, and having a hard time with transitions throughout the day.

As the discussion progressed and the sense of connection among the participants built, Dan, one of the fathers, spoke the truth. "I will admit I have been a lot more short-tempered than usual these past few months. Maybe I have been taking it out on my kids. They've cut back my hours at work and there just isn't enough money. The other day the pipes in my bathroom broke and I can't afford the plumber to come out and fix them. Now we can't even use the tub!"

Another father, Jeff, leaned over toward Dan. "Hey," he said, "I'm a plumber. I'll help you out with that."

For a minute, Dan couldn't even respond. He looked down for a minute, collecting himself, then looked up with a smile. "Man, that would be great. I'll catch you after this workshop and maybe we can figure out a time."

It would be easy to miss the quiet, yet profound importance of this moment. The apparently ordinary exchange of information and help was far more than a simple transaction. What happened here? This vignette is based upon an experience shared by a participant during a ZERO TO THREE training for trainers in Oklahoma on *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: Parent–Provider Partnerships in Child Care* (PCAN). By inviting parents and providers to attend a workshop together, this center director created a climate that encouraged providers and parents to see one another as helpful resources. Within that setting, Dan felt safe enough to reveal information, even though it made him somewhat vulnerable. In that vulnerability was his strength in taking the risk of openly describing his experiences. Another parent responded with both emotional and practical support. For along with the offer of a plumbing repair, this father offered compassion, care, and connection. Dan was able to accept Jeff's help. Imagine how his interactions with his children will be changed as he feels calmer and more able to cope because of Jeff's helping hand. Note that this exchange is meaningful for Jeff as well. He experiences himself as having the capacity to make a difference, and this sense of confidence will also have an impact on his interactions with his own family.

Bringing parents and staff together for a workshop is just one of many everyday examples of how child care programs are going beyond the traditional role of focusing on the care and education of young children. Many states and programs see enhanced parent–provider relationships as critical to supporting healthy child development. Such relationships also allow child care providers to offer supports to families that can play a role in the primary prevention of child abuse and neglect. This way of thinking about the importance of supporting families recognizes that babies and toddlers grow and thrive within their important relationships with parents and caregivers. When those relationships are supported, healthy infant and toddler development is enhanced.

It is well within the scope of child care programs, with their daily contact with families and children, to help build protective factors that can reduce the likelihood that a family will experience child maltreatment (Center for the Study of Social Policy, n.d.). Research demonstrates that reducing stress, providing information and developmental guidance, increasing social connections, and offering resources and practical assistance can help strengthen family functioning (Horton, 2003).

Families and children come to programs in their entirety, not in categories labeled "child care," "stress management," "social support," "resource and referral," and "parenting support." This awareness suggests that providers can have greater success when they recognize and respond to the range of family issues that impact young children's development. When child care programs partner with parents in order to address the multiple issues that affect young children's development, everyone benefits. Parents benefit from increased resources and information. Children benefit when their parents' capacity for nurturing, responsive care is strengthened. Providers benefit when

Abstract

Child care providers are likely to be the professionals who most frequently interact with families with young children. Thus, infant and toddler child care providers are uniquely positioned to recognize and respond to families' needs for information and support. This article describes knowledge, skills, and strategies that support child care providers in creating effective partnerships with parents that enhance program quality, build protective factors for families, and help to reduce the risk of child maltreatment.

Photo: Linda Gillespie

involved parents support them in their children's care and appreciate them in their professional roles.

What the Data Says

Demand for child care is high, with more than 70% of all mothers and 56% of mothers of children less than 1 year old participating in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Thirty-eight percent of children from birth to 3 years old, and 47% of 3–4-year-olds are in nonparental care for at least 35 hours per week (Capizzano & Main, 2005). This frequency of contact offers parents and child care professionals daily opportunities to exchange information and support.

Brain research continues to establish the rapidity, sensitivity, and importance of early development (Gilkerson & Klein, 2008). Experiences in the early years create the foundation for subsequent social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Early supports that promote healthy development are important for all children. Child care programs are well situated to help ensure healthy early experiences for all children, and child care providers are interested in doing their utmost to support families and help to reduce the risk of child maltreatment (Olson & Hyson, 2003). Parents recognize that child care providers can be a resource to them and hope to be supported, informed, and guided by those caring for their young children (Olson & Hyson, 2005). Parents and providers are interested in partnering to ensure the best possible outcomes for the young children in their care.

Imagining a beautiful young baby brings a smile to most of us, as we picture the exuberant exploration of life and the loving connection with caregivers that most infants experience. For some babies, though, the early years are more difficult. Overwhelming stresses in parents' lives can lead to neglect or abuse, and infants and toddlers are the age group most likely to be victims of maltreatment (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2008). Rather than "being too young to remember" very young children can experience both immediate and long-term harm from early abuse or neglect (Jones Harden, 2007). Parents and providers alike care about babies and want the best for them. In many child care programs, they are building relationships that enhance one anothers' abilities to provide babies with the nurturing, safety, and security that all children need.

What Child Care Programs Can Do

"People do not care what you know until they know that you care." Attributed to John Maxwell, author and motivational speaker.

The traditional goal of child care programs involves providing developmentally appropriate care and education for young children. Many child care programs, following the example of federally funded Early Head Start and Head Start Programs, see that supporting healthy child development calls for an expanded role, one that encompasses the entire family (Bromer & Henley, 2004; Horton, 2003). What does it mean, though, for a child care center or a family child care home to support families? Why should early care and educations providers see partnering with and supporting families as part of their role? What kinds of things do programs do when they are working to support both young children and their families?

Offering support to families entails creating effective working relationships. When provider–parent relationships are reciprocal, responsive, and respectful, parents and providers can learn from one another. Child care programs can do several things in order to create effective relationships with families. First, programs and providers may want to reflect on how partnerships with families can enhance the quality of their programs. Second, programs can look at a variety of strategies they can implement in order to respond to the range of family needs, strengths, and interests. Third, programs and providers can consider how to build the knowledge and skills that can help them feel comfortable in partnering effectively with families. Fourth, program directors and those who run family child care homes can consider how they create a climate that supports effective relationships and promotes careful thinking about the work, or, how they can implement relationship-based and reflective practice.

Partnering With Families Enhances Quality

"When my child's provider takes the opportunity to build a relationship with me, I know they are spending time providing quality care for my child." Andrea, mother of 15-month-old Christopher (ZERO TO THREE, 2001).

Interactions between staff and parents have an impact on the way parents respond to their children. When providers consciously and thoughtfully establish relationships with parents that are based on caring, trust, and support, the results can be powerful. It is within such relationships that learning and growth can take place. Several experimental evaluations have demonstrated that child care programs with family support components can have remarkable impacts on child and parent well-being, and studies of the impact of family support on program quality are continuing (Bromer & Henley, 2004).

As part of their efforts to improve the quality of child care, 14 states have developed Quality Rating Systems (QRS) to establish standards for child care programs, and many others are planning to develop their own QRS. Six of the existing 14 states have criteria and standards specific to infants and toddlers, and 4 of these 6 states address the importance of communication between staff and parents. ZERO TO THREE's National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative recommends that infant–toddler QRS criteria address the importance of engaging parents and families as a key standard of quality (National Infant

& Toddler Child Care Initiative at ZERO TO THREE, n.d.).

A recent National Association for the Education of Young Children survey provides insight on parents' views of the supports they hope to receive from their child care programs. Most parents reported satisfaction with their children's child care providers and the services they offer. Parents expressed an interest in a strengthened relationship with their children's child care providers. Parents seek help, not necessarily in the form of advice or admonitions, but rather in the form of coaching, sharing, guiding, and supporting to aid them in caring for their children (Olson & Hyson, 2005). Providers recognize this need and want to respond. They report a need for more information and support on how to open up potentially sensitive discussions with parents (Olson & Hyson, 2003).

After attending training on building collaborative relationships with families, a provider reported,

I have thought a lot about using the strategy of 'pointing out the positive' to build relationships with parents [*see section titled Knowledge and Skills for Child Care Providers, page 37, for further information*]. *I had really never thought about doing that before. I decided to start a conversation with a father by sharing what I saw as one of his child's strengths. I was honest and said something I truly meant. It seemed that helped the parent really open up and begin to relax with me. He began to ask me questions about child development and why 2-year-olds have tantrums. We had a really good discussion and came up with some ideas for reducing how many tantrums his son was having. We ended up with an agreement to talk at least once a week about how his son was doing. I felt good about how that went and the parent told me he did too.*

This story helps us see how building partnerships enhances the quality of care available to children. This provider reached out to a parent to build a connection, one that allowed them to share their knowledge to help one another in understanding and responding to the meaning of a child's behavior. The "good feeling" that the teacher described indicates that a safe and effective working relationship has been established, one that helps both the teacher and the parent feel confident and capable. The child benefited from the nurturing, consistent responses his adult caregivers developed. The concept of the parallel process in relationships suggests that the emotional process between this teacher and parent will be repeated in their other relationships. It will positively influence their interactions with the child in this example.

Building Successful Parent–Provider Partnerships

Effective relationship building begins the minute the parents first contact a child care program. A welcoming environment helps parents and children feel a sense of belonging. This might include an area where parents can gather for coffee or tea and look at books, pamphlets, and other resources. The center might be decorated with posters, photographs, and items that reflect family and community culture. Parents might be invited to contribute or lend such decorations to the center.

Parents can be welcomed and invited to spend some time helping their children transition into the child care setting. They can be informed of key practices and procedures, including drop off and pick up times, what to do in case of emergency, when to keep a child home due to illness, and what staff will do to maintain ongoing communication. This ongoing communication includes requesting that parents share their goals for the child as well as learning about parents' caregiving routines for the child. Any information the parent can share about the child's birth history and early development will help providers offer care attuned to the child's cues, preferences, and needs. Parents can learn at enrollment how staff will respond to illness or injury on site and what steps will be taken if a child care provider has any questions or concerns. Staff can let parents know how they can voice their ideas, questions, or concerns. Part of the initial communication can also include the child care provider's role as a mandated reporter of child maltreatment and of the center's policy on reporting suspected child abuse or neglect.

When relationship-building with parents is part of the program's culture, providers and parents have a context in which to share daily information, and a foundation that can support a conversation that may be somewhat hard to open up. A parent can raise questions or concerns about a program's practices. A provider can report on troubling behavior in a child and seek the parents' help in understanding what it might mean. When concerns such as these can be raised, parents and providers have the chance to draw on one another's knowledge and experience. Through their shared commitment to the children in their care, parents and providers can create a partnership that helps them and the child.

Working closely with parents can bring up challenges. During a PCAN training, a Fairfax County, Virginia, provider said, "When I am concerned about a child in my classroom, I want to talk about my concerns with the parents. But if they don't respond to me I feel stuck. Then I don't know what to do next." Establishing partnerships can be challenging

Photo: Janet Brown McCracken

both for parents and providers. Opportunities in training, in supervision, and in staff meetings to practice holding such discussions with parents can help build confidence and skill.

Challenging Parent–Provider Relationships

"That sounds so very ideal," a child care provider might think, "but what if a parent gets aggravated and takes a child out of my program when I bring up a concern?" Parents have similar fears. "If I complain about something, they might ask me to remove my child from their program! What would I do then?" By approaching each other with respect, and by keeping their focus on what is important for the child by considering how they may impact one another, providers and parents often find that their working relationship can be strengthened when worrisome topics are discussed. Here is how one center director handled a potentially difficult discussion with a parent.

Daniel, a 15-month-old in my high-school based child care program, had started biting. I knew that many toddlers bite when they're frustrated, but he seemed to be biting randomly and only bit the younger babies. He bit so hard he was breaking the skin and staff were stymied about what to do. Other parents were worried too, and starting to get angry. I was beginning to get kind of upset with Daniel myself, and I realized I needed to get his mother's help.

I thought about what to do and say. I realized that if I could calmly tell Tammy, Daniel's mother, of the concerns, and show some caring for her feelings, she might be able to help figure out what we ought to do. I scheduled a time to talk with her. I could tell by her tone of

Photo: Andrea Booher

voice that she felt a little defensive when I set up the appointment, so I knew she had a feeling I would be bringing up the biting thing. I tried to set her at ease.

"Tammy," I said, "You know we all think Daniel is just the greatest. We love having him here. You do a great job with him; we can tell because he is doing so well developmentally. We have noticed that he has been biting quite a lot lately, which is something different for him, and we are wondering what that might be about. I just wanted to get a chance to talk with you and see what ideas you have about how we all can help Daniel." She seemed glad that the reason for our appointment was out in the open, and she said she hoped we could come up with some ideas together.

When Tammy and I met, I asked her if she had any thoughts or questions to begin with. She said she had noticed Daniel's biting at home, too, and she had been feeling embarrassed, like this meant she must not be handling him too well. I could relate to that, remembering how embarrassed I was when my own children had tantrums out in public sometimes. We were even able to laugh a little about how that feels. I said that many children his age bite and the best thing we can do is to try to understand what the behavior might mean. From there we can try out some ideas to see what might help. I thanked her for making the time to come in after class to talk, and I let her know that meant a lot to me and to Daniel's teachers.

I asked her to talk about what she had noticed at home. Tammy told me that starting about a month ago she first saw Daniel bite Tammy's younger brother, who was 8 years old. She explained that her brother teased Daniel a lot. I asked her what her brother did when Daniel bit. She said he screamed and ran away. I wondered if her son got satisfaction and a maybe sense of control when he bit her brother. Tammy and I both agreed that was possible. Maybe there were times when the younger children in the center were doing something that frustrated Daniel, and he was getting the same satisfaction and feeling of control by biting them.

Another possibility was that maybe Daniel would benefit from some one-on-one attention for at least some part of each day. We came up with a plan. Tammy would explain to her brother that it was important not to tease Daniel because it hurt his feelings and made him mad. She agreed she would help the two of them play together at home. In the center, I suggested I have the student teacher work closely with Daniel and give him some undivided attention each day. I also told her I would talk with all the teachers about distracting him to another activity if it appeared he was about to bite. We agreed to touch base at least twice a week to see if our plan was working.

I was really happy that Tammy and I worked together that way. It was a help to me to get her insight. She told me it was a big help to her, too. I learned that if I approach parents with a supportive attitude, they can tell that I really want to work together with them. I am happy to say that it didn't take long before Daniel stopped biting. I even have asked Tammy to help me lead a parent group discussion on handling biting! I think she has a lot to share with the other parents. Now I feel confident that if any other questions or behavior problems come up, I can easily discuss them with Tammy.

This center director used a number of strategies and skills to connect with Tammy and to enlist her help in addressing Daniel's behavior. She used *self-awareness* to recognize her own feelings, as well as to imagine how she might affect Tammy. She used *careful observation* to notice the change in Daniel's behavior, the conditions under which he bit other children, and to gather further information from Tammy. The information she gathered through self-awareness and careful observation helped her to develop an educated guess or hypothesis about the meaning of Daniel's behavior. She used *flexible response* to develop, with Tammy, a way of handling Daniel's behavior that took his individual needs into account. Because she realized that this initial response may or may not work well, she and Tammy agreed they would meet to see if they later wanted to make any changes to their plan. The

Building Relationships From the Beginning

Orienting a New Family to Child Care:

- Create an intake form to gather information about a child and her family. Use it when interviewing families for your program or family child care home.
- Have written policies and procedures and review them at orientation; have parents sign a statement that they understand them.
- Have materials in the home language of the parent or have an interpreter present.
- Give parents a tour of the center and ask them to spend a part of a day with their child, when possible, before leaving him for the first time.
- Develop a transition routine with the parents when they are bringing in their child or taking her home.
- Ask for or take pictures of the immediate family and post them in the center for the child to see, if the family sees this as a good idea.

Ongoing Communication Strategies

- Learn how each parent prefers to be addressed.
- Greet each parent and child by name.
- Have a specific area for parents—a bulletin board with current events about the program or information for parents.
- Share positive observations with the parents on a daily basis.
- Keep a daily log on each child that the parent can read at the end of each day.
- Comment on positive actions you see a parent doing with a child.
- Smile.
- Listen.
- Show enjoyment of the child.
- Speak in the parent's home language if possible or have an interpreter present.
- Have a monthly newsletter that gives parents information about the center and the children.
- Invite parents to regular meetings with staff and directors so they can contribute their ideas, questions, and concerns.

Preparing to Address Sensitive Topics With Parents

Before the Meeting:

- Think about how you feel about this parent. Are some of those feelings positive? Have you expressed any of these positive feelings to the parent?
- Are some of these feelings negative? Where might those negative feelings come from?
- Can you think of a way to calmly and objectively discuss any negative feelings with the parent? For example: "I notice that it is difficult for me when. . ." or, "Sometimes I wonder if you are feeling frustrated with me, and I am not sure what that is about."
- Are you aware of any judgmental feelings toward this parent? Discussing these feelings in a private meeting with a supervisor or colleague might be helpful in exploring these feelings. See if you can acknowledge these judgments and then put them aside—you may be more open to learning from the parent about their experiences, beliefs, and concerns.
- Think about how the parent feels about you. Will this parent be receptive to having a discussion with you that may be sensitive or difficult? If not, can you establish a stronger connection with this parent? Can someone else in the program or the community provide some help?
- Talk with your director or a trusted person about your concerns.
- Role play to practice what you want to say.

Meeting With the Parent

- Schedule a specific time with that is convenient for both you and the parent.
- Arrange for an interpreter if you do not speak the parents' home language.
- Meet in a location with no or limited distractions.
- Thank the parent for responding to your request for the meeting.
- Provide feedback about the child's strengths and abilities.
- Express your concerns as questions that you are wondering about.
- Share any observations that may be helpful to the parent, and invite the parent to share his or her observations
- Describe your own thoughts, feelings, or experiences.
- If the relationship between you or the parent has become tense or strained, it may be helpful to acknowledge this and ask for help in resolving any conflicts.
- The presence of a trusted, neutral party during the meeting may be helpful in creating safety and helping to mediate any misunderstandings or conflicts.
- Listen to any information the parent may wish to share.
- Keep the conversation focused on your shared desire to do what is best for the child.
- Develop a specific plan and ask the parent to meet with you again at an agreed time to review how things are going.

After the Meeting

- Make some notes that you can review later.
- Meet with your supervisor or other colleague to review how the discussion.
- Think about how you feel and how the parent felt as a result of this discussion.
- Were your concerns addressed? Were your questions answered?
- Did the parent have the chance to raise questions and concerns, and to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas?
- Is there anything you would like to do as follow-up to this meeting?
- Would you do anything differently next time?
- If you planned to follow-up with the parent, remember to do so in a timely manner.

director also used a range of relationship-building strategies as she spoke with Tammy, which are discussed in the next section of this article. For additional information, see the box, Preparing to Address Sensitive Topics With Parents.

Knowledge and Skills for Child Care Providers?[1]

Providers often voice the concern that if they establish closer relationships with families, then parents will share with them things that they do not know how to handle. It is important for all professionals to work within the range of their knowledge and abilities. Child care providers do not need to become social workers or mental health professionals in order to work effectively with families. What they do need is confidence in their capacity to be in contact with parents in a way that communicates their caring and respect. In doing so they can form a true helping relationship, one that enables parents to feel calm, that allows parents to do their own best thinking, and assures parents that they are not alone. Each of us has the capacity to provide such support.

To date, more than 5,000 child care providers and center directors have participated in ZERO TO THREE's PCAN training. During this experience they have the opportunity to use their own experiences with helping relationships to understand how they can become sources of help and support to parents. Participants realize that establishing helping relationships with parents is something they can do and is an important way in which they can support families in ways that reduce the risk of child maltreatment. To further build confidence, training participants have the opportunity to explore and practice six relationship-building skills—asking questions and wondering, active listening, empathy, pointing out the positive, and not knowing.

Asking questions and wondering are two closely linked skills that help providers and parents to think carefully about their interactions and observations. Providers may ask questions of themselves or of families. Asking questions can help providers slow down and look for the meaning of a behavior.

For example, one teacher described how a parent of an infant in her class arrived quite late most nights of the week. She shared that her assumption was that this parent cared more about her job than her baby. The trainer encouraged this teacher to ask the parent about the late arrivals at the center. This parent explained, "Lately they are doing construction on my route from the office to the center. It has been driving me crazy and it often takes me over an hour to get here!" Once she explained that, the teacher said, "she and I were able to come up with a solution. Now she calls another parent in the classroom to help her out if she is going to be late."

When the teacher shared this story, the trainer encouraged the use of the concept of "turning judgments into questions" (a concept developed by the staff of the Portage Project, Portage, Wisconsin). When providers find themselves reacting judgmentally, they can turn the judgment into a question. In this example, the teacher could ask herself, "I wonder what is causing this parent to arrive late?" Brainstorming a list of answers to this question might reveal a range of possible causes of this behavior. This

[1] Content in this section is adapted from Seibel, Britt, Gillespie, & Parlakian (2006).

ZERO TO THREE's State Partnerships for Prevention Project

ZERO TO THREE's work to engage child care providers in the primary prevention of child maltreatment began in 2003 with a 3-year grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Additional funds from the Jesse V. and W. Clement Stone Foundation helped launch the Partnering With Parents Project. The work involved developing a 10-unit training curriculum focused on training child care providers in working with parents and children, understanding the causes and impact of abuse and neglect on infants and toddlers, and—for program leaders—creating workplaces that support parent–provider partnerships.

In 2006, ZERO TO THREE published a revised version of the curriculum entitled *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: Parent–Provider Partnerships in Child Care* (PCAN). PCAN is a curriculum designed to help infant–toddler child care professionals use their natural relationships with families to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. The PCAN *Training for Trainers* is a unique professional development opportunity for experienced trainers. Building on personal experience, creativity, and knowledge, trainers learn about relationship-based training and reflective strategies; understanding and preventing child abuse and neglect of infants and toddlers, and helping directors to support staff in establishing effective relationships with families. The State Partnerships for Prevention Project focuses on embedding the PCAN training within child abuse prevention initiatives in the states of Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Indiana, Maine, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. To date, we have trained more than 700 multidisciplinary trainers who have in turn trained more than 5,000 child care providers. Evaluation indicates statistically significant improvement in trainers' belief that they have the capacity to teach child care providers how they can play a role in the primary prevention of child abuse.

question-asking exercise can help the provider feel more accepting and open toward the parent. Sensing a nonjudgmental attitude, the parent is more likely to be able to report on the problem, rather than say something defensive that might create a sense of conflict. It might also help the parent approach this teacher the next time she is experiencing difficulty.

Active listening involves both (a) giving undivided and focused attention and (b) paying careful attention to the other person's verbal and nonverbal message. The goal is to understand the "what and the why" (or, the content and the meaning) of what is being said. When practicing active listening, training participants noted how good it feels to be listened to by someone who really cares. They also commented on how hard it can be to refrain from jumping in to fix the problem. Participants noticed it is the chance to continue to put their concern or question into words, and to clarify for their listener, that often helps them to find their own answers or solutions. A word of advice certainly can be helpful, and typically it helps most when it comes after the listener has paid close attention to what is being said.

Empathy involves imagining how another person might feel and what their emotions, thoughts, or circumstances might be. Providers can express empathy by sharing with a parent their understanding of the parents' experience. When parents receive an empathic response, such as "It can be tough when your toddler starts waking up several times a night. It sounds like this is taking a lot out of you," suddenly he feels he is not so alone, that someone else recognizes and understands his experience. The sense of being understood builds trust and allows the parent to accept the provider's support and information. But what if the provider is a bit off and the expressed empathy does not fully reflect the parent's feelings? That is no problem, and in fact can be helpful, so long as the provider has provided the empathic statement as a possibility rather than as a fact. That leaves room for the parent to offer a correction, if needed. That clarification may give insight both to the provider and to the parent. A provider might say, "It sounds like you are finding this totally exhausting." A parent might correct this empathic statement by responding, "I guess I am tired, but I really don't mind, because waking up with him at night gives us some special time together. But hearing myself say that makes me realize that maybe I should try to negotiate for a more flexible work schedule; I would really like some more time with him during the day."

Pointing out the positive involves systematically and deliberately recognizing the value of another human being or of that person's actions. A provider might express recognition of the value of a parent and child by warmly welcoming them when they come into her center or home. A provider could express his appreciation of an action by commenting on a child's generosity or a parent's patience. Even a brief comment can provide support and help reduce stress, building a foundation that supports and strengthens parent–child relationships.

Pointing out the positive allows providers to support strengths and to address any concerns in the context of those strengths. There are times when it can be hard to find a true, positive comment to make. Even when a parent or child is in crisis or showing behavior that is of great concern, a provider can point out the positive. "I am glad we have this chance to talk. It is good to discuss this and figure out together what we should do," points out the positive in the parent's willingness to meet with a provider.

Not knowing may not seem to make sense as a relationship-building. How can being unable to answer a question be a helpful skill? There are at least two ways in which "not knowing" can be useful. A parent may ask a question that a provider truly does not know how to answer. "My son is 18 months old and still is not talking at all. Should I be worried about that?" a father asks. The provider, if unsure, can say, "That's a good question. I'm not sure how to answer it. He seems to always understand what is said, and he has a way of communicating what he wants. Because I am not sure, I would like to do some checking and get back to you on that tomorrow." When the provider openly says she doesn't know, offers to get the needed information, and, very important, follows through, she builds trust, validates the parent's concern, and provides an important resource. Rather than feeling inadequate when unable to answer a question immediately, providers can recognize this as a relationship-strengthening opportunity.

The second use of "not knowing" is to slow down in order to encourage parents to reflect and to offer what they know. In response to the same question, a provider might indeed know that a good answer would be to suggest a medical check up, hearing test, and perhaps also a speech–language evaluation for this child. Before giving that answer, she might say, "I don't know. What are your thoughts about this?" or "Have you done anything so far in order to look into this?" This strengthens the provider–parent relationship by recognizing the parent's knowledge, interest, ideas, and efforts. After the parent responds, the provider could offer any additional information that could be useful.

Creating a Supportive Climate

In a recent workshop, we asked the 40 early childhood program directors who attended to stand up. Then we told them they could take their seats when they heard a statement they agreed with. The statements included the following:

- Working closely with infants, toddlers, and their families is easy.
- Staff members never have difficulty recognizing the professional boundaries in their relationships with families.
- Staff members never face dilemmas in their work with infants, toddlers, and their families.
- Staff serving very young children and their families are not subject to burnout.

Not one of the 40 program directors sat down. That exercise highlighted the importance of relationship-based and reflective practices in workplaces serving very young children and their families. Relationship-based practice uses the power of relationships to support staff whose work involves contact with young children and their families. Supportive relationships can help reduce burnout and resultant turnover. Staff members know that when a difficult moment arises, they have someone to turn to for help. Reflective workplaces deliberately structure opportunities for staff members to step back from the pressures of everyday practice in order to think carefully about and learn from the work. Staff members benefit from time to recognize the impact their work has on them, as well as the ways in which they affect others. These and other principles articulated by Judith Bertacchi characterize what ZERO TO THREE and colleagues describe as relationship-based and reflective work (Bertacchi, 1996).

Program leaders play a key role in influencing the culture and climate of their programs. When they make sure their interactions with staff members are thoughtful, respectful, supportive, and responsive, they build this way of handling relationships with parents into the staff members' experiences. Program leaders can help to create relationship-based and reflective workplaces through a variety of strategies, including the following:

- Engage staff members in discussing, shaping, and contributing to the programs' values, beliefs, goals, and mission.
- Emphasize the value of diverse perspectives.
- Encourage learning and change—based on experience.
- Provide learning opportunities for staff.
- Recognize and discuss the impact of events and of the surrounding physical, social, and emotional climate on individuals.
- Encourage staff to express ideas, thoughts, challenges, and disagreements, and understand that staff will do this in the context of a safe environment.
- Assure that every staff member has someone to turn to for assistance when a difficult situation arises.
- Create regular time for carefully thinking about the work, within staff meetings, and in one-on-one or group supervisory meetings.
- Celebrate staff growth and development by recognizing success.

Child Care Programs Make a Difference

One participant in a PCAN training commented

Many times, I focused on the child and did not understand that my relationship with the parent impacted how the child develops. I am seeing a difference in the children's responsiveness to my caregiving since I have taken the time to develop and maintain a relationship with their parents. It also seems that the parents are more open to sharing information with me about their children and they see me as someone who can help. They come to me not only about their children's development but also other family challenges that could well impact the overall functioning of their children.

Service providers and community members can unite to meet the multiple and varied needs that families bring. There is a tendency to divide up responsibility for meeting families' needs among a number of specialized service providers. The expertise of multidisciplinary professionals is very much needed in order to effectively respond to families' needs and interests. Some programs may house a variety of professionals who can address a range of family's needs. Others will respond to issues that fall outside the scope of their program's available services by referring to community partners. When programs can broaden their focus and build capacity to support families, services and program outcomes are strengthened. Child care programs are ideally suited to build partnerships with families to promote

Learn More

These Web sites describe some national initiatives, all funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which focus on engaging the unique capacity of the child care community to play a role in the primary prevention of child maltreatment.

Center for the Study of Social Policy – Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education
www.strengtheningfamilies.net

This Web site offers links about the five protective factors identified through the Center for the Study of Social Policy literature search. Other links connect to online resources, the Strengthening Families National Network, and an online self-assessment guide for early care and education programs.

National Association for the Education of Young Children–Supporting Teachers, Strengthening Families
www.naeyc.org/ece/supporting/default.asp

This page offers information on activities developed by NAEYC to promote and support family strengthening strategies for use in early childhood programs and by individual professionals. It also offers links to NAEYC's research, leadership project, evaluation, and partnerships with other organizations involved in similar work.

National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds–Early Childhood Initiative
www.msu.edu/user/millsda/members_new.htm

The Early Childhood Initiative involves state Childrens Trust Funds in providing training, technical assistance, and funding to engage the staff and parents involved in early care and education programs in primary prevention of child maltreatment.

ZERO TO THREE
www.zerotothree.org/pcan

Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: Parent–Provider Partnerships in Child Care (PCAN) is described here. This training and curriculum help trainers to teach child care providers the knowledge and skills that help them to play an active role in the primary prevention of child maltreatment.

www.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/SPP_description.pdf?docID=5321

This link provides information about the State Partnerships for Prevention project, an initiative that engages states in integrating the PCAN training into their ongoing efforts to prevent child maltreatment.

The Portage Project
www.portageproject.org

The Portage Project offers direct services, training, and resource materials for early childhood programs. The Family Service Credential of the Portage Project is a comprehensive, competency and credit based training experience, designed to support direct service staff in their work with children and families. The *New Portage Guide* is an assessment and curriculum guide covering children from birth to age 6 years. Training opportunities include a year-long seminar designed to support the implementation and use of reflective practices in programs serving young children and their families.

young children's healthy development and help reduce the risk of maltreatment. They are in the unique position of seeing families every workday. They are able to offer the daily encouragement and support that can start and end a day on a positive note. When families experience difficulties, child care providers may be among the first to notice. The offer of a listening ear, a helping hand, and, when needed, a referral for concrete aid or other services, can make all the difference in supporting parents' in their nurturing, sensitive interactions with their young children.

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