

Nurturing Children: Module 3

Module 3 - Nurturing Children through Families

Outcomes

As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

- ✘ Identify and build on family strengths in nurturing children

Key Concepts

- ✘ Parents are already involved and are the primary influence in the lives of children.
- ✘ Parents play a distinctly different role in the lives of children than do staff members.
- ✘ It is not possible to accurately generalize about parents.
- ✘ Parents have strengths.
- ✘ Parents have something to offer staff.
- ✘ Today's families experience demands.
- ✘ There are *many* ways for parents to be *involved*.

Background Information

The following **Seven Principles about Parents and Families** apply to many aspects of the Head Start program and should be used in the development of program materials, messages, and practices.

Parents are already involved and are the primary influence in the lives of children.

You have all heard that *the parent is the child's first teacher*. While this is certainly true, parents are much, much more. Families, not programs, are the center of children's lives; and your job is to take cues from families to create programs and environments that reflect cultures, strengths, and desires of families. All children identify with their families. Therefore, the attitudes that you have toward families and the degree of respect that you give them speaks volumes.

Parents play a distinctly different role in the lives of children than do staff members.

The saying that *the parent is the child's first teacher* is understood by some to mean that parents should be more like teachers in the program. The saying may even be stretched to include the suggestion that parents continue school-type activities (some inappropriate in themselves) at home. You need to remember that children coming to your program have learned quite a bit with the support of

their *first teachers*. The methods that these teachers use seem to work pretty well as evidenced by the language, social, and motor skills of the children. True, these teachers may lack complete objectivity when it comes to their children, and how very grateful you can be for that! Parents bring a special *irrational* caring for their child and intense emotional response. Staff members bring another kind of caring that is warm and affectionate but with more emotional distance. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner says that children need both rational and irrational caring and that they expect more of the first kind from early childhood programs and the second kind at home.

It is not possible to accurately generalize about parents.

Parents after all, are people - with all the complexities, physical and cultural differences, individual characteristics, and personal histories of any population. Parents are not a group, and it is dangerous to assume very much about them. They are hard-working, laid-back, silly, straight-laced, outgoing, reserved, liberal, conservative, tired, energized, humorous, serious, innocent, wise, artistic, and mechanical. Each family expresses cultural differently. As staff members, you need to take time to get to know family members as individuals so that you can support their goals for their children.

Parents have strengths

So many negative statements and attitudes about parents abound today that it seems necessary to point this out. Do parents also have shortcomings? Sure - they are people, but as staff members, you must be very cautious about assuming a *deficit perspective*, a view that families need to be *fixed*, especially if this view is based on income level or ethnicity. You also need to be cautious about looking everywhere but at yourself when seeking to improve the lives of children. It is too easy to blame families as the cause of children's problems instead of focusing on doing the very best as a staff member in your program. Mainly, it is just not useful to evaluate and judge the people you are working with as parents. Your job is to get to know families, noting and building upon their strengths. A continuing challenge is to check your biases at the door.

Parents have something to offer staff members.

Too often, staff-parent exchanges are viewed simply as a means of informing parents about their child. In reality, while staff members bring information about child development and their experience with many children of a particular age, family members bring information about the individual child across time and in a variety of settings. In an open, trusting relationship, families can also share the important events and occurrences that make up a child's daily life. Finally, in a multicultural community, families offer staff members the opportunity to broaden their personal horizons and experience the richness of cultural diversity.

Today's families experience many demands It is important to recognize the ordinary, routine demands that many families with young children face as they go about the business of meeting their practical and emotional needs. Adequate

employment, housing, health care, and transportation are often major issues for families. For recent arrivals to this country, language can make accessing even basic necessities a huge challenge. Employed parents simply add another job to the one they are already doing. They undertake hair-raising schedules in an effort to *do it all*. These schedules may not include time for leisure, for self, or for adequate sleep. Therefore, *it is a real mistake to interpret parents' lack of availability to a program as lack of concern for their child.*

There are *many* ways for parents to be involved. It is time to broaden the concept of what parent involvement really means. It is time to stop evaluating success in terms of how many parents attend a program event or their willingness to carry out a home assignment, such as *read two books to your child* or *give your child a hug today*. Your challenge is to be flexible and creative enough to provide a wide range of options so that families can participate in their children's lives and choose the level and type of involvement that is best for them.

Exercise

Demonstrate an Understanding of the Seven Principles about Parents and Families

Identify the principle that best identifies the statement.

1. A parent cannot get an apartment manager to fix the air conditioner in her apartment.

- a. Parents are already involved and are the primary influence in the lives of children.
- b. Parents play a distinctly different role in the lives of children than do staff members.
- c. Families experience many demands.
- d. There are many ways for parents to be involved.

2. A parent tells a teacher about her child's summer in Mexico with his grandparents.

- a. It is not possible to accurately generalize about parents.
- b. There are many ways for parents to be involved.
- c. Parents have strengths.
- d. Parents have something to offer staff members.

3. A child is excited telling you about what her family will do this weekend.

- a. Parents are already involved and are the primary influence in the lives of children.
- b. Parents play a distinctly different role in the lives of children than do staff members.
- c. Families experience many demands.
- d. There are many ways for parents to be involved.

4. A parent is telling you about his child's behavior and what he is saying is not what you observe in your classroom.

- a. It is not possible to accurately generalize about parents.
- b. There are many ways for parents to be involved.
- c. Parents have strengths.
- d. Parents have something to offer staff members.

5. You are concerned about the lack of discipline in a particular child. You find yourself blaming the parents.

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6. A parent tells you that they can bring you a box of old magazines for your classroom.

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