

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care  
**How Environments Affect Behavior of Children and Staff**

Environments have the power to affect behavior of children and staff in both positive and negative ways. When environments are attractive, comfortable, and inviting, both children and staff feel welcome, valued, and interested in what the program offers. Environments that are well organized, clean, and free of clutter make it possible for children and staff to become engaged in program activities with ease and to function with competence, confidence, and independence. Well planned environments provide well defined, comfortable spaces that encourage children and staff to work together in productive ways throughout the program day. They promote a spirit of community that fosters positive relationships.

Environments that are disorganized, messy, unattractive, dirty, barren, uncomfortable, and have no accommodations for personal belongings also send powerful messages to children and staff. These poor conditions are like billboards that announce: “No one cares whether you enjoy being here.” “No one cares if you are comfortable here.” “No one cares about your health or well being while you are here.” “No one cares about your personal needs or belongings.” When these are the messages sent by the environment, it is not surprising when children fail to engage in activities or show a lack of respect for program equipment, materials, facilities and others in the program. When staff receive these environmental messages it is unlikely they will be motivated to plan and implement exciting activities or to perform as professionals who are positive role models for children and families. In these environments, neither children nor staff experience a feeling of community where needs of both individuals and the group are valued.

There is no doubt that a well designed, attractive environment can provide the foundation for quality programming. As discussed in Technical Assistance Paper 2, quality environments are varied, interesting, and provide different levels of challenge to children with different needs and personal styles. Quality environments also provide appropriate space for personal and professional needs of staff. Environments in quality programs provide staff with what they need to function as resourceful, creative professionals who communicate, plan, cooperate, collaborate, solve problems, work independently, and work well together as a team.

### **Creating the Right Social Context in School-Age Programs**

*Defining Social Context.* The social context has a powerful affect on how children, staff, and parents feel about participating in school age programs and impacts the quality of all relationships. In their book, *Challenging Behavior in Young Children*, Kaiser and Rasminsky define social context as follows:

“What is the social context? Although you can’t see or touch it, the social context is everywhere, affecting everything you do, whether you’re in a supermarket, an

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

elevator, or a classroom. In the classroom, the program and physical space play a role in creating and reinforcing the social context, but in the end, it depends much more on the people. The social context is a framework that tells us what kinds of attitudes and behaviors are expected, accepted, and valued in a setting or group, and it has amazing power to influence what happens there. The social context creates the social climate – the spirit of the group and the ambience of the classroom.”<sup>1</sup>

*Strategies for Creating the Right Social Climate and Building an Inclusive Community.* Creating what Kaiser and Rasminsky call the “right social climate” requires thoughtful reflection and intentional planning. Other educators such as Alfie Kohn<sup>2</sup> and Jane Nelsen, Ed.D.<sup>3</sup> have also stressed the importance of creating a positive social climate and spirit of community. Their books offer many suggestions for building a spirit of community in programs serving school age children. The following strategies are examples of things school age staff can do to foster positive relationships and create a positive social climate and inclusive program community:

- Act as a positive role model for respectful communication and behavior.
- Set boundaries for acceptable behavior and communication.
- Promote involvement in cooperative, team-building activities.
- Promote involvement in open-ended activities, projects, and games.
- Provide children with opportunities to shape the program. Involve children in program planning.
- Teach children social skills, social graces, problem-solving skills and conflict management skills.
- Help children see mistakes as opportunities to learn.
- Acknowledge, interact with, and exhibit genuine caring for each individual child. Inquire about children’s interests and concerns. Look for opportunities to have informal conversations with children.
- Engage staff and children in opportunities to participate in respectful interactions and group meetings where they have opportunities “to learn self-discipline, cooperation, responsibility, resilience, resourcefulness, problem-solving skills, and other social and life skills.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kaiser, B. and Rasminsky, J. S. *Challenging Behavior in Young Children*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007. Page 123.

<sup>2</sup> Kohn, A. *Beyond Discipline, From Compliance to Community (Chapter 7, The Classroom as Community)*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> J. Nelsen, Ed.D. *Positive Discipline*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Nelsen, J. *Positive Discipline*. Page 172.

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care  
**Building Positive Relationships with Host Facilities**

Across the nation, most school age programs are “guests” in someone else’s facility. The majority of school age programs across the country use space in facilities that belong to another organization (E.g. gymnasiums, multi-purpose rooms, cafeterias, and classrooms located in public and private schools, churches and synagogues, municipal buildings, and other community agencies and organizations). Many other school age programs are housed in facilities owned by their program that also house many other programs and services.

Identifying and Respecting Concerns of Program Hosts. Program hosts often have concerns about the impact a school age program may have on their facilities and on other programs operated by the host organization. School age leaders and staff can take the initiative in building positive relationships with program hosts and managers by identifying potential host concerns and providing assurances that the school age program will respect those concerns. Examples of assurances commonly requested by program hosts are:

- Staff are qualified and competent to work with school age children.
- Staff will maintain effective control of children’s behavior.
- Facilities will not be damaged or misused.
- Host materials or equipment will not be used without permission.
- Children’s varying needs will be met appropriately. Appropriate activities and guidance will be provided. In school settings, the host may want assurances that children will have opportunities to get homework finished.
- The environment will be maintained to ensure children’s health and safety. Policies and procedures will be established and implemented to ensure children’s health and to keep children safe in emergency situations.
- Food service will adhere to proper nutrition, health, and safety standards. Food will be stored appropriately and food service area will be thoroughly cleaned after each serving.
- Host facility will not be liable for what happens in the school age program.
- Host facility staff will not be called upon to solve program problems.

Facility hosts and managers in your program may request additional assurances. Before implementing a program in a host facility, be sure to communicate with program hosts to identify and address their concerns.

Creating a Spirit of Partnership with Program Hosts. It is critical for school age leaders and staff to build positive relationships and partnerships with program hosts such as school personnel and other facility managers. There are two basic characteristics of successful partnerships.

1. The members of the partnership each have a need, goal, interest, or concern that can be met through the partnership. In successful partnerships, the people or groups involved have shared concerns and goals that unite them and keep them going when things get difficult. At the outset, the participants in the partnership explore and identify areas of mutual concern and acknowledge the “common ground” that brings them together. When the host is a school, the common ground usually revolves around shared concerns

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care

about children's needs for a safe, nurturing, enriching place to go during out-of-school hours.

2. Individual people or groups involved feel that they can get something from the partnership that they could not get on their own. Members of successful partnerships believe that their own unique goals, needs, interests, or concerns are respected by the other partner and that the partnership can be a vehicle for achieving their own growth and development. This belief allows partners to work together collaboratively so that everyone can achieve their goals. Successful partnerships value different perspectives and styles and work together to develop programs that can encompass varying needs and viewpoints. Their members know a powerful relationship-building secret – you are more likely to get what YOU want if you ASK what others want and TRULY LISTEN to what they tell you.

Creating Partnership Agreements with Hosts. To promote cooperation and collaboration between program hosts and school age program staff, it is advisable to develop written guidelines and contracts that clarify the roles and responsibilities of each organization. In all collaborative efforts, the key to success is the clear delineation of responsibilities of the hosts and the organization sponsoring the school age program.

When responsibilities are not spelled out, conflicts often arise around operational issues. Written agreements provide a helpful reference for staff who implement the program and for the host facility staff. Partnership agreements energize people to think in new ways, to stretch their imaginations and come up with new ideas and solutions that might never have emerged without the partnership in place. See chart: Typical Elements of Written Partnership Agreements Between School Age Programs and Program Hosts.

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care

**Typical Elements of Written Partnership Agreements  
Between School Age Programs and Program Hosts\***

**The School Age Program Will Assume Responsibility for.....**

- Operation and management of the school age program, including budget, personnel, payroll, accounts payable, program development and evaluation, marketing
- Recruitment, training, and supervision of qualified school age staff
- Maintenance of liability insurance to cover all school age program activities
- Reimbursement to the host for janitorial services and supplies, if required
- Reimbursement to the host for bus transportation if host buses are used by the school age program
- Reimbursement to the host for any damage to host facilities or equipment, and reimbursement for unauthorized use of host materials and supplies
- Purchase of additional furniture and equipment required for the school age program over and above furniture and equipment provided by the host
- Purchase of all school age program materials, supplies, and food
- Arrangement for telephone installation and payment of telephone bills
- Collection of parent fees for services
- Participation in ongoing meetings with host representatives to foster communication, cooperation, collaboration, and problem solving.

**The Host Will Assume Responsibility for.....**

- Providing indoor space near bathrooms and convenient entrances and exits for the school age program where it is not needed by the host, including access to telephone lines. Providing daily use of classroom space, media center, and gymnasium or multi-purpose room.
- Providing access to food storage and service areas for program snacks and meals
- Providing outdoor space for the school age program where it is not needed by the host/school, including daily use of playgrounds and playing fields
- Making space available three to five days before scheduled operation to allow for the school age staff to set up the central area the program will use
- Providing normal maintenance and custodial services for the school age program
- Providing utilities for normal use of the school age program
- When host is a school: Providing information about children's mental and physical health and special needs to school age staff upon written request from a parent
- Loaning furnishings and equipment to the school age program when available and not needed elsewhere by the host
- Participating in ongoing meetings with the school age program staff to foster communication, cooperation, collaboration, and problem solving.

**NOTE:** Identify additional responsibilities for both the school age program and program hosts that may be unique to your situation.

\* Excerpted and adapted from Newman, Roberta L. and SD Department of Social Services, Office of Child Care Services. School-Age Certificate Module: *Building Relationships with School Personnel*. Pierre SD, 2004.

Though front-line staff may not be responsible for negotiating written partnership agreements with hosts, it is important for staff to be knowledgeable about these

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

agreements. If staff become aware of problems related to agreements, it is essential for them to discuss these problems with program managers. It is also important for front-line staff to provide suggestions when improvements to agreements are needed.

*Promoting Communication with Hosts.* Providing written guidelines and information to program hosts promotes mutual understanding of the school age program goals and operation and can help prevent problems and conflicts. A handbook can serve as a useful reference that can be used to clarify policies and procedures as well as roles and responsibilities of both the host and the school age program. It provides a tool for ensuring continuity when individual program or host staff move on to other responsibilities.

When developing a handbook for program hosts in school settings, it is advisable to get input from school principals. When the handbook is a joint project, strengthens the partnership because it reflects the goals, needs, interests, and concerns of everyone involved. See chart: Examples of Items to Include in a School Age Program Handbook for Hosts.

#### **Examples of Items to Include in a School Age Program Handbook for Hosts (Add other items that are unique to your program)**

- Introduction to the handbook (purpose, overall contents, how it was developed)
- Copy of the Partnership Agreement Between the School Age Program and Host
- Contact Information for the School Age Program
- History of the School Age Program and Its Relationship to the Host
- Statement of the School Age Program's Vision, Philosophy, Mission, and Goals
- Summary of School Age Program Services (Including Calendar and Hours)
- Description of School Age Program Staff Qualifications
- Description of Parent Involvement Opportunities in the School Age Program
- Guidelines for Minimum Facilities Requirements for the School Age Program (size and location of base room, use of other space such as gyms, cafeterias, multi-purpose rooms, media centers, etc.)
- Guidelines for Routine Maintenance of Host Facilities by the School Age Program
- Description of Required Host Support Services (custodial, plowing, etc.)
- Tips for Hosts to Promote Ongoing Communication with the School Age Program
  - meeting regularly to talk about program operation, review host regulations and policies, identify and solve problems
  - providing information about host facilities: how to arrange for use of auxiliary services, facilities or equipment
  - inviting school age program staff to present an overview of the program to school or other host personnel and to participate in meetings or other Host facility programs and events
  - providing school age staff with school publications, memos, notices, and newsletters and asking for school age program publications in return
- Description of Joint Program Advisory Group (if one has been established)

*Developing a System for Reaching Out to Key Stakeholders of the Host Facility.* Building positive relationships with school personnel or other shared space host partners requires school age staff to initiate and maintain channels of

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

communication that fosters understanding, cooperation, and collaboration. Even if host personnel are not receptive to close communication at first, it is important for school age staff to continue making an effort to promote communication and cooperation. Trust and relationships take time to develop.

In addition to the building manager, there are usually many other key people at Host sites that can have an impact on the operation of a school age program. It is valuable for lead school age staff to arrange meetings to introduce themselves and the program to key Host facility stakeholders (E.g. school principal, building manager, administrative assistants, classroom teacher(s), custodians, librarian/media specialist, cafeteria manager, school nurse, school counselor, physical education teacher, etc.). It is helpful to develop home-grown host relations checklists to document the results of meetings with various host personnel. See chart: Sample Host Relations Checklists.

# SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

## Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

### **Sample Host Relations Checklists\***

(Add Checklist Items That Are Unique to Your Program. Devised Host Relations Checklists for other Host Staff as needed.)

#### **School Principal Checklist**

**Set up an appointment to meet with the principal to discuss your plans and needs for the year and to learn about the principal's needs, interests, and concerns related to your program. Discuss the following items and document the results.**

- ✓ Introduce yourself and share your educational background and experience.
- ✓ Provide the names and professional background of addition school age staff.
- ✓ Re-confirm the program hours of operation and calendar.
- ✓ Share your Handbook for Hosts if one exists.
- ✓ Request a copy of school regulations and review them together. Clarify any regulations you do not understand.
- ✓ Discuss any regulations that appear to conflict with established school age program policies and procedures. Resolve any related problems.
- ✓ Discuss the transition children will make between school sessions and school age care.
- ✓ Develop a procedure that ensures children will be safe and accounted for during transition.
- ✓ Request permission to use the copying machine, if needed. (Indicate that the school age program will provide its own paper.)
- ✓ Request a mailbox for school age staff to receive school memoranda, etc.
- ✓ Request permission to place school age newsletters and memoranda in school personnel mailboxes to keep school staff informed about the program.
- ✓ Request use of auxiliary space and services as needed. Discuss procedures for reserving these facilities and equipment.
- ✓ Ask the principal how you can be helpful.
- ✓ Discuss any concerns the principal has regarding the school age program. Discuss ways to address and monitor these concerns.
- ✓ Request a time to meet with teachers to give a brief presentation about your program.

#### **Administrative Assistants**

**Set up a meeting with administrative staff and discuss the following items:**

- ✓ Introduce yourself and your role in the school age program
- ✓ Provide a list of children enrolled in the program.
- ✓ Provide the hours of operation and calendar for the program.
- ✓ Verify you have completed all forms required by the school/host.
- ✓ If permitted to use the copier, ask for a demonstration of how to use it properly. Ask for a place to store paper, if possible.
- ✓ Ask how you and your staff can be helpful.
- ✓ Discuss any concerns and work out solutions to any problems.

#### **Custodians**

**Set up a meeting with the head custodian and discuss the following items:**

- ✓ Introduce yourself and your role in the school age program.
- ✓ Ask for instructions on disposing of trash and maintaining an environment that will be easy for custodians to clean (E.g. put chairs up on tables at the end of the day?).
- ✓ Ask if there are additional storage spaces that may be available to the program.
- ✓ Discuss any concerns and work out solutions to any problems.

\*Excerpted and adapted from Newman, Roberta L. and SD Department of Social Services, Office of Child Care Services. School-Age Certificate Module: *Building Relationships with School Personnel*. Pierre, SD, 2004.

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

Whenever communicating with host personnel, be sure they understand the following:

- ✓ Who you are
- ✓ What the school age program is all about
- ✓ You are interested in their goals, needs, interests, and concerns
- ✓ You are willing to help in any way you can
- ✓ You need their help and support to provide a quality program

Consider inviting all school personnel (or other host personnel) to attend a School Age Program Open House at least once a year. Serve refreshments, display materials that illustrate program activities, and let them know what a great program they have in their facility!

### **Engaging Families in School Age Programs<sup>5</sup>**

Strong, positive, cooperative relationships with parents and families are at the heart of quality school age programs. Quality programs strive to work with parents as active partners who communicate regularly to share important ideas, news, feelings, and concerns. The ways in which parents connect with programs may vary widely because of individual differences among parents and the ages of their children. But one thing is certain: When programs connect with parents in positive ways, school age children are more likely to grow and thrive through their out-of-school experiences.

Reaching Out to Families. Like children, parents have widely varying personalities; some are easier to reach and connect with than others. Parents come from diverse backgrounds and have different ideas, values, concerns, knowledge, pressures, lifestyles, plans, dreams, resources and constraints. Staff who are successful in building positive relationships begin by recognizing the importance of accepting parents as the most important people in children's lives, regardless of differences among them. In quality programs, accepting, supportive staff members help parents feel welcome and valued as partners. These programs recognize that in order to succeed with children, they must constantly reach out to parents. In successful programs, staff take the initiative in relationship building. If things do not go well or there is no response from parents, staff assume that there are things they can do to alter the situation. If one thing is not working, staff vary their approach and try something else. Listed below are examples of ways school age staff can reach out effectively to parents:

- Help parents identify and get to know program staff. (Post staff photos and biographies; wear name tags or badges; wear staff shirts with program logo).
- Provide parents with a place to gather. Create a parent welcome or comfort center near the entrance. Provide one or two comfortable chairs (or folding

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted and excerpted from R. Newman. *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Revised. New Albany, OH: School-Age NOTES, 2008. Page 7, 8

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

chairs in shared space), a parent bulletin board, a table with helpful brochures and community information, a place to share business cards with other parents, occasional treats prepared by the children, parent mailboxes, coffee or tea, etc.

- Encourage parents to participate in program activities and events. For example, invite parents to share talents and skills, volunteer for field trips, recruit special visitors, attend children's performances and events sponsored by the program, gather recyclable resources.
- Assess the unique needs and wants of parents in your program. Develop parent information forms and conduct interview to collect important information from parents.
- Host family social events. (E.g. Pot Lucks, Pizza Parties, Taste of the Program with kid prepared treats, Talent Shows, Kids' Performances, Picnic and Game Festivals, Roller or Ice Skating Parties, Kids' Art Show, White Elephant Auction Night, Mini Mall Night with "products" made by the kids, etc.
- Post notices that Invite parents to let you know about their needs, interests, ideas, and concerns. See box: Text for a "Family Friendly Poster."

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care

**Text for a “Family Friendly” Poster\***  
**(Design Your Own Visual Theme and Motifs)**

***Help Us Stay in Tune with Your Needs and Interests!***

**We Have a Commitment to Family-Friendly Service...**

**To Keep Our Commitment, We Need Your Help Throughout the Year!**

*Tell us about your day when you pick up your child.*

*Help us learn about your child’s special talents and strengths.*

*Tell us when your child needs extra help or support.*

*Keep us informed about any important changes we need to know.*

*Let us know about your family and cultural traditions.*

*Ask us questions if you don’t understand our policies or procedures.*

*Tell us how you would like to connect with your child’s experience here.*

**Visit Whenever You Can – You Are Always Welcome!**

**We want to build positive relationships with all of our families...  
Help us achieve this goal!**

\*Excerpted from R. Newman, *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Revised. New Albany, OH: School-Age NOTES, 2008. Page 82.

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

Learn About the Unique Challenges of Parents of School Age Children. In her book *The Six Stages of Parenthood*, researcher Ellen Galinsky describes the roles parents play at each stage of a child's development. She identifies the school age years at the *Interpretive Stage* of parenthood which "requires parents to decide how they will interpret their children's existence to them. Throughout the *Interpretive Stage*, parents respond to children's easy and not-so-easy questions and concerns. This causes parents to review what they think, believe and value. It causes them to pull together their own beliefs so they can translate them to their children. This is a demanding, challenging process for all parents in this stage."<sup>6</sup> Galinsky identified the following decisions to be made by parents in the *Interpretive Stage*:

- Deciding what kind of life they want to and can afford to provide. Parents have to decide when to say "yes" and when to say "no" to children's requests for clothes, toys, sporting equipment, etc.
- Deciding how to interpret facts, skills and experiences to their children (E.g. bad dreams, a bank robbery down the street, a teacher the child thinks is not fair, a neighbor who is not kind to his pets, the meaning or words such as "incest" or "rape" in response to the child's questions. In addition to interpreting or telling, parents are listening as children share their experiences.
- Deciding how they want their children to behave (manners, household chores, etc.).
- Deciding how involved to be in children's lives, at home and away from home.
- Deciding when and how much to step in, to do things with one's children. Deciding when to let go, to encourage the child to do things independently.
- Deciding how involved to become with the other significant people in their children's lives (teachers, counselors, other children, child-care staff, social workers, parents of the child's friends, etc.).
- Deciding how to define the changing relationship between parent and child.

School age staff that are knowledgeable about the tasks and decisions faced by parents of school age children are much more likely to succeed in building relationships with parents as resourceful partners.

Provide Parents with Opportunities to Keep Informed About School Age Program Activities, Events, Policies, and Procedures. Develop a variety of vehicles for sharing information with parents with varying needs, interests, and lifestyles:

- Newsletters and Memoranda
- Bulletin Boards
- Email

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<sup>6</sup> E. Galinsky, *The Six Stages of Parenthood*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1987. Reprinted with permission in R. Newman *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Revised. New Albany, OH: School-Age NOTES, Pages 57 – 58.

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care

- Web sites
- Parent Meetings
- Parent Education Workshops

*Provide Opportunities for Parents to Offer Feedback and Suggestions.*

Develop strategies for soliciting ideas and feedback from parents:

- Daily Conversations. Be systematic; ensure that at least one staff member is available to interact with parents when they arrive to pick up children. At the very least, make it a practice to greet parents by name with a friendly “hello.”
- Special Meetings. Set aside special time to talk with individual parents about ideas and concerns.
- Parent Conferences. Schedule conferences with parents to share highlights of children’s development and experiences in the program and to solicit ideas and insights about each child.
- Telephone Surveys. Conduct brief phone surveys to solicit feedback from parents about their level of satisfaction with the program.
- Suggestion Boxes. Encourage parents to contribute ideas in a Suggestion Box. Be sure to acknowledge and respond to any shared ideas, even if you cannot implement the ideas.
- Annual and Ongoing Formal Surveys. Develop surveys to solicit parents’ views. Sample basic questions:
  - “What Do You Like Best About the Program?”
  - “What Do You Like Least About the Program?”
  - “What Would You Change About the Program, If Anything?”
  - “What Do You Hope Never Changes in the Program?”
- Parent Forums or Focus Groups. Set up meetings where parents are invited to express their views on important policy issues, program improvement initiatives or proposed changes.
- Ongoing Parent Feedback Forms. Design forms targeting specific feedback from parents. For each form, provide a place for parents to describe the issue or idea, make a comment or suggestion, provide their name and contact information so that you can follow up on their feedback. Consider forms such as:
  - “I’ve Got a Compliment Form”
  - “I’ve Got a Complaint Form”
  - “I’ve Got a Problem Form”

*Provide Opportunities for Parents to Help Shape the Program.* School age programs may offer a variety of opportunities for parents to take an active, positive role in shaping the program. Here are a few examples:

- Form a Parent Advisory Group.
- Involve Parents as Members of a Community-Wide Steering Committee or Advisory Panel.

## SACERS Technical Assistance Papers

### Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships in School Age Care

- Encourage Parents to Speak Up on Behalf of the Program. Parents may testify on behalf of the program at budget hearings or policy meetings; write letters to support the program to local newspapers or politicians.

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care  
**Using Effective Communication to Work Through Problems and Conflicts.**

*“Effective communication is the basis for all relationship building. Without effective communication, we cannot initiate or sustain positive relationships. And we certainly cannot work through problems when the going gets tough.....Good communication involves give and take – constant feedback among the participants.”<sup>7</sup>*

Even when systems are in place to promote positive relationships and partnerships with children, colleagues, program hosts, and parents, difficulties and problems often arise in school age programs. Effective communication is the key to building positive relationships and to managing and minimizing problems and conflicts when they do occur. Refer to the chart: Tips for Being an Effective Communicator as a resource for talking about important issues and working through difficult problems and conflicts.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Newman. *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Revised. New Albany, OH, 2008. Page 25.

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care

**Tips for Being an Effective Communicator\***

- **Communicate in Person Whenever Possible.** Person-to-person communication allows participants in a conversation to see facial expressions or sense body language that helps them tune in to what the other person thinks and feels.
- **Create a Positive Listening Environment.** Eliminate distractions and barriers. For example, go to a quiet place and avoid placing desks or tables between you and the other person unless you want to maintain a distant feeling or a power stance. Welcome your partner in conversation by exchanging pleasant greetings before the conversation begins.
- **Maintain Eye Contact When Appropriate.** In Western culture, people often equate trustworthiness with looking someone in the eye. However, there are cultures around the world, including Native American, that view looking someone in the eye as a sign of disrespect. There are also individuals who are shy or withdrawn and find it uncomfortable to maintain eye contact. Learn about those with whom you are communicating so that you can tune in to their preferred communication styles and customs.
- **Avoid Negative Body Language or Facial Expressions Unless You Think They Truly Promote Understanding.** Folded arms can communicate that you are unapproachable, unwilling to listen or unwilling to yield power or position. Finger tapping can communicate impatience or nervousness. Frowning can communicate displeasure or confusion. Smirking can communicate contempt, ridicule or arrogance.
- **Use Simple, Direct Language.** Avoid the use of professional jargon that may be confusing or unfamiliar to people.
- **Motivate Yourself to Listen.** Remember the following: 1) It is impossible to talk and listen at the same time; 2) You cannot plan what to say next AND listen at the same time. Use self talk to help you use good communication techniques: "Let her finish; don't interrupt." "Stay calm." "Listen for his main message." "Be kind."
- **Motivate Yourself to Participate Appropriately.** Take an active role in exploring ideas and promoting understanding. Take turns talking. Avoid monopolizing the conversation. Avoid interrupting. Stay on the topic.
- **Be Sensitive to Emotions.** Hear emotions out; avoid cutting them off. Tune in and politely acknowledge the emotions behind the other person's words. Stay objective. React to the message, not the person. Withhold judgment and criticism. Try not to escalate the other person's anger by responding with anger yourself.
- **Take Notes If Important Data Is Too Confusing, Complicated or Lengthy to Remember.** When people are angry or upset, communication often becomes muddled with accusations or disjointed comments. It can be very helpful to slow down the pace of the conversation by taking notes. Politely tell the person you want to remember the important things they are saying. Ask them to repeat what they've said so that you can write it down accurately. This helps people think before they speak and focus on important points. It lets people know their ideas and feelings are being heard and taken seriously. It encourages people to state their points respectfully because they know their words are being written down.
- **Do Not Talk When You Are Too Busy or Distracted.** Set up a special time to talk instead.

\*Excerpted and adapted from R. Newman, *Building Relationships with Parents and Families in School-Age Programs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Revised. New Albany OH: School-Age NOTES, 2008.

SACERS Technical Assistance Papers  
Paper #3: Building Community and Effective Relationships  
in School Age Care

**Suggested Resources**

- Galinsky, Ellen. *The Six Stages of Parenthood*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1987.
- Kaiser, Barbara and Rasminsky, Judy S. *Challenging Behavior in Young Children*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.
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