

# Sharing The Care: *What Every Provider and Parent Needs To Know*

by Amy Laura Dombro



As we celebrate the creation of the Child Care Bureau and its role in promoting good quality child care across the country, it is time to think together about how we can best promote partnerships between providers and parents. A key to good quality, these partnerships serve to build bridges for children between their worlds of home and child care, helping them feel safe, secure, and happy in both places.

By building a good working partnership, early childhood professionals and parents (or other primary adults in a family who care for a child) can help assure that child care is the best it can be for the children in their lives. Yet this is easier said than done. Sharing the care of young children evokes deep, often conflicting and painful feelings of the adults involved that can get in the way of their working together. And there is too little training available for professionals—and none for parents—about why such a partnership is critical and how to make it work.

We know that partnerships between early childhood staff and parents can and do work. Many early childhood programs have demonstrated this over the past several years. The challenge we face now is to foster good working partnerships between providers and parents in all child care settings.

A first step in meeting this challenge is to ask, What do both providers and parents need to know to get their relationship off to a good start and make it work? Though every provider-parent relationship is unique because every provider, parent, and child is unique, I suggest that there is a basic core of knowledge that can be useful in most situations and that this core should include the information that follows.

## **How a good working relationship benefits a child**

A good working relationship between providers and parents serves as the foundation of a child's experience in child care. Only by working together can a child's adults provide the continuity a child needs to feel safe and secure when she is away from home.

Providers and parents come to their relationship with different sets of information to share. As they share their stories, each will get a more complete picture of a child and thus be better able to respond to and meet a child's needs. Parents are specialists about their child. They know that their child likes apples better than oranges, that she falls asleep on her tummy, and that lately she is afraid of dogs. Professionals have an overview of children based on their experience of working with many unrelated children. They know patterns of child development.

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*Amy Laura Dombro is an infant/toddler specialist based in New York. Formerly Director of the Bank Street Infant and Family Center at Bank Street College of Education, she is currently conducting the evaluation of Dayton Hudson's Child Care Aware Project, a national initiative to improve the quality of family child care at Families and Work Institute. Ms. Dombro has extensive experience training Head Start and child care staff. This article is based on her book *Sharing the Caring: How to Find the Right Child Care and Make It Work for You and Your Child* (Fireside, 1991).*



For example, they know that it is hard for toddlers to share and that preschoolers sometimes get confused about what is real and what is fantasy. Parents' knowledge can help a provider tune into the special qualities of an individual child. Professionals' knowledge can help parents understand their child in terms of a broad spectrum of development.

In addition, providers and parents can be there for each other. They can share the excitement of such new accomplishments of the child as drinking from a cup or writing her name, and can support one another when facing the challenges of a child's temper tantrums or a child's illness. Raising a child can be a lonely, scary business. By reinforcing one another, providers and parents help assure they will each feel more strengthened and thus will be better able to support the children they each care for.

#### **Who is who in a child's life**

It is common for providers and parents to blur their roles because they both perform such caregiving activities as dressing, feeding, playing with and so forth. However, children know who is who. The adults who care for them need to know too.

Parents are a child's most important people. No one, no matter how well trained or skilled, can take their place in a child's life. Parents' relationships with a child are forever - across the years and miles. A child trusts her parents more deeply than her providers. She knows they are there for her no matter what she does or feels. She is her happiest, silliest, saddest, and most defiant with them.

This deep love and trust a child feels for her parents is the reason most parents have at one time or another arrived at



child care to be greeted by a crying child. Spending the day in a group setting can be hard work. A child may be tired from a skipped nap or upset about something that happened during the day. When her parents arrive at the end of the day, she feels safe. Her emotions may overwhelm her.

Though a provider's relationship is fleeting compared to that of a parent, the relationship a provider and child form is meaningful and can have a strong and lasting influence. When a provider is there for a child—to help her if she gets stuck rolling over, to help her flip pancakes being made for a snack—a provider develops a trusting relationship with the child that lets her know she can count on other people. And because a provider may be more objective, she can more easily give a child room to try out a new skill—such as buttoning her coat or walking along a balance beam—without displaying fear the child might fail or exerting undue pressure on the child to succeed.

### **How to keep feelings about sharing care from interfering with supporting a child**

If two parents of the same child have complicated feelings about sharing the care of their child—feelings of doubt and inadequacy, jealousy, guilt, and resentment—it is no wonder that providers and parents can have complex feelings too. These feelings are to be expected. They are normal and sometimes painful reactions that are rooted in the deep attachment both providers and parents have for a child—an attachment all children need.

Knowing that these feelings go hand-in-hand with sharing care means that providers and parents don't need to worry that something is wrong when they experience them. They don't have to feel embarrassed either. Rather than trying to conceal their feelings, which is a common response,

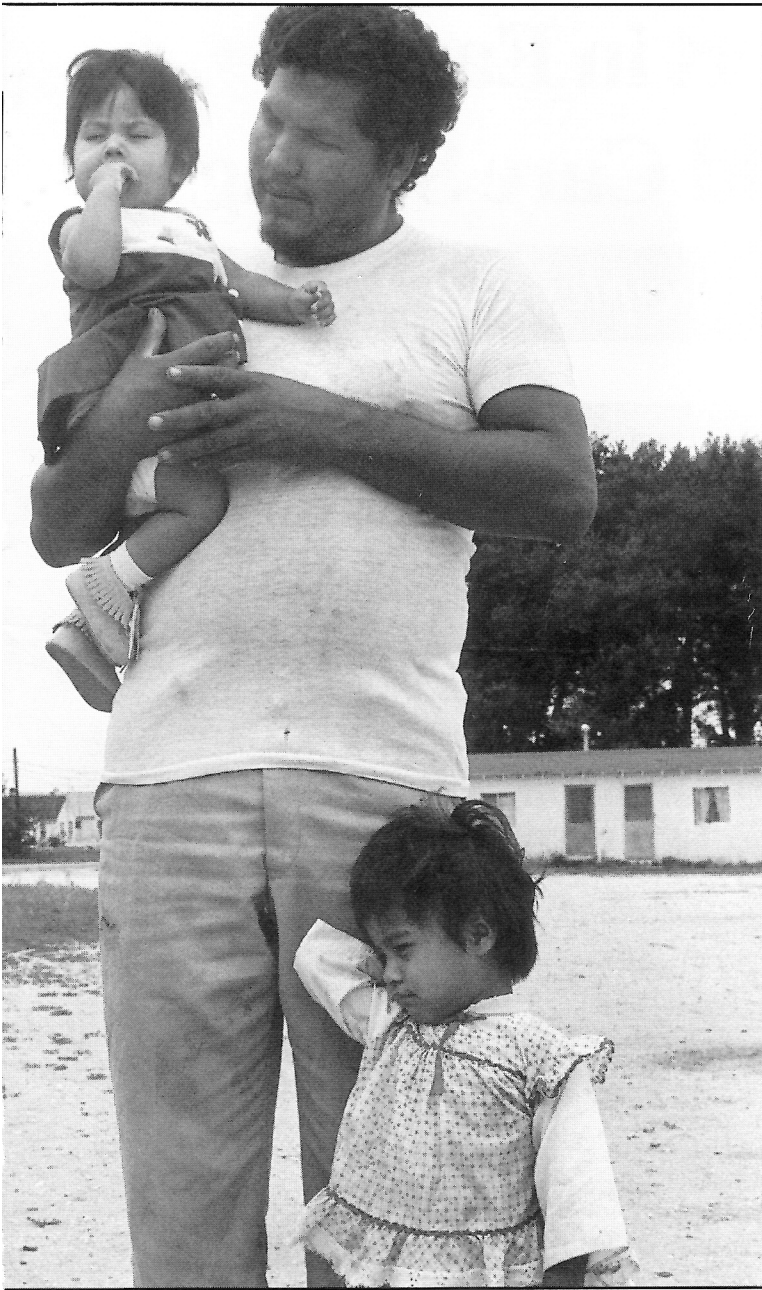


providers and parents can examine them. They may find it helpful to discuss what they are feeling with family members, friends, colleagues, or with each other. The challenge is not to change these emotions but to keep them in perspective. Recognizing these emotions for what they are will prevent them from being misplaced or misunderstood or interfering with the creation by parents and providers of a good working relationship that children need them to have.

### **How to communicate effectively**

Although sharing information can be difficult, the difficulty usually does not arise from the information itself. Some of the most troublesome situations can develop when information is overlaid with self-doubt and worry. For example, a parent may worry that she appears incompetent because her child





doesn't sleep through the night. A provider may worry that she will be perceived as an inadequate provider if she admits to being frustrated and not knowing how to help a child stop hitting.

It can be helpful for both providers and parents to acknowledge up front that no one knows all the answers when it comes to childrearing. Even in cases when there is a clear-cut answer, the question usually changes as a child moves on to another stage and a new answer is needed. It is okay for parents and providers to admit that they don't know all the answers. In fact, only by sharing their questions will providers and parents learn to pool their information, to brainstorm, to seek information and advice from other sources, and ultimately, to develop the solid problem-solving skills they will need as long as they share their lives with children.

### **And finally... how to resolve differences**

As they share the care of a child, providers and parents are sure to disagree. In and of themselves, these differences of opinion will not be harmful to children. Children don't need their adults to have friction-free relationships. But they don't need to be caught in the middle of conflicts either. Conflicts are a sign that provider and parent need to work together more closely. The primary responsibility of providers and parents is to not only find a resolution to their conflicts but to keep children's needs in the forefront and prevent a disruption in the partnerships they have developed.

When it comes to resolving conflicts, there are few absolutes. What works for one child, her parents, and providers may not be the solution in another situation. A conflict for one provider and parent may not be a conflict for another. It's a personal call. But providers and parents can gain helpful insights by examining how others handle their differences.

Here are three basic options that providers and parents often consider when faced with a conflict:

- Providers and parents may decide not to make an issue of a situation they don't like or about which they disagree. In such cases, providers and parents may conclude that an issue just isn't worth the fuss when they examine it in the context of a child's whole life. They find their own resolutions.

For example, though Karla's father may wish the television was on less at the provider's home, he is pleased that Karla is involved in many interesting and enjoyable activities and may ignore the issue of TV watching. When a provider feels that Roberto's parents are too overpowering, she may step back and notice how much love and confidence they give him and accept this as their style even though she may do things differently.

- Providers and parents may decide to confront an area of disagreement. Some disagreements can be resolved easily and immediately if one party takes some action or makes a change. For example, a mother may come in early one morning to help the teacher move a fish tank to a safer place. Or providers may agree to launder sheets weekly instead of laundering every other week.

Other disagreements are more complex. These will take more time and effort to resolve and may require the willingness of both provider and parent to compromise.

- Finally, there are times when a provider or parent realizes a situation cannot work out and ends their relationship. Though changing care arrangements is disruptive, there are instances when it is the only solution.

Young children in child care depend on their adults to help them feel safe by building bridges between child care and home. Yet providers and parents need information about how to work together. This article is one small step in identifying this information. Please take this information and make it yours. Feel free to agree, disagree, add and delete points. Then share it with an early childhood colleague or a parent. The more we talk together about how to build good working partnerships in child care, the more likely it is that there will be good working partnerships—and the better it will be for the children in our lives.