

IMPEDIMENTS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

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The structure of modern family life is almost unrecognizable when compared with that of families a century ago. Many of the support structures once used in the rearing of children have all but disintegrated in our contemporary world. Perhaps most harmful is the crumbling of the extended family. Nuclear and single-parent families are left more and more to raise children on their own, without the help of extended family networks. Extended family members often are too far away, or too busy with their own hectic schedules, to be significant contributors in children's upbringing. Moreover, this breakdown of child-rearing structures is not limited to families. American communities are fragmented and disassociated in the 21st century. Neighbors don't associate with each other on a regular basis and are rarely available to assist in child rearing.

Although some cultures (e.g., in Latin America and Asia) have maintained interdependent, extended family networks and communities, mainstream American culture is experiencing an extreme case of family fragmentation. The more fragmented our families and communities become, the more parents must turn to strangers to raise their children. The problems of our youth reflect the impact of these daycare practices.

Nowadays, many working parents rely on early childhood development (ECD) centers to care for their children. Although these centers often are equipped to handle large numbers of children and their formal educational needs, crucial components of childrearing have been lost with the dissolution of the extended family. These losses center on the relationships between caregivers, parents, children, and all those involved in the childrearing process. Experts in early childhood education have recognized the importance of establishing close relationships between the home and preschool settings. Yet at present, the relationships between parents and both caregivers and administrators often are minimal or nonexistent.

The roles played by ECD caregivers and administrators are a far cry from those once played by aunts, uncles, grandparents, neighbors, and family friends—not only in terms of relationships with the children, but in terms of relationships with the parents. Moreover, anyone who has carefully observed Head Start or other ECD programs knows that staff and administrators can have feelings that inhibit parents' successful involvement. These feelings include frustration, anger, fear, and anxiety. Usually these feelings are not conscious. Many administrators fear they will lose program control if they allow parents to assume a major role in decision making. They are not aware of the intensity of their fears and other emotions related to parent involvement.

Our understanding about all the crucial roles involved in childrearing must undergo significant reevaluation if we are to create a healthier, more nurturing environment for today's children and families. ECD caregivers, teachers, aides, health care workers, and administrators must begin to view their roles as similar to those once played by extended family members; they must become what we can think of as *non-biologic extended family members*. It is important for those in early childhood education not only to know that the parent is the primary educator of the child, but to reach out to the parents of children attending programs and involve them, both individually and collectively.

Let me share my own experience with Head Start, going back more than forty years, as an example of how administrative impediments in the ECD setting can be overcome, and how the current deficit in early childhood education can be corrected.

Building a Head Start Program

In 1965, I was director and head teacher of a summer Head Start program in Cleveland, Ohio. Still in its infancy, only one year old, Head Start was a program with promise, but also with serious shortcomings. When I suggested to Jules Sugarman, associate director of the national office, that the program should intervene earlier in a child's life and should actively involve the parents, he replied, "Peter, that's all the money Congress will give to the program now."

Although this response was frustrating, I saw an opportunity, as well. To complete my doctoral program at Case Western Reserve University, I decided to obtain private funds and open a Parent and Child Center (PCC)—now known as Early Head Start—and evaluate its effectiveness.

This center operated from 1966 to 1968 and focused on enriching the verbal styles used by mothers when talking with their children. Children who have been consistently exposed to restricted language patterns at home have more trouble understanding school teachers and learning to read than do similar children who have been exposed to more complex language structures. We studied whether role playing the teacher could be instrumental in altering restricted maternal language patterns and in helping mothers acquire more complex verbal interaction patterns when speaking with their preschool children.

Although the initial design of the PCC focused on parent involvement, specifically on enriching the verbal skills of the mothers, the nature of that involvement was determined in a top-down manner, based on the research objectives of my doctoral thesis.

In 1967, we received a request from the national Office of Child Development (OCD) to plan a federally funded PCC, using our program as a model. I assembled a group of faculty from Case Western Reserve University to begin planning. I opened by sharing with them feedback from the parents and teacher at the PCC, who felt the top-down way our center operated had undermined the program's purpose. Although parents were encouraged to participate, they were not involved in determining the focus of the program and the services it would provide.

It was incumbent on us not to repeat this mistake. Therefore, I suggested that each committee member meet with a group of parents and create an ongoing dialogue with them. No group would have more than one or two faculty, so parents would clearly outnumber academics. This would encourage and strengthen the voice of the parents. We would dress casually and encourage parents to talk by asking how the program should be set up to meet both the parents' interests and needs and the needs of their young children, as well as the broad federal program goals.

Each committee member met with a parent group and with the faculty-only group for nine months. After the center opened, the staff and I (in my role as program director) worked together to encourage parents to meet and discuss issues. We held frequent parent committee meetings. An ongoing dialogue took place between parents and staff. These efforts paid off, in both direct and indirect ways.

Many of the early projects resulting from parent input were intended purely to meet the parents' needs. A sewing room was established in the center so parents could make and mend clothing for themselves and their children. Dances and card parties were held for the parents, with child care provided for the children. When parents discovered they were experiencing frustrations with their landlord, strategies were developed for addressing these issues as a group, rather than individually.

It may appear at first glance that the program's response to these parents' initiatives had little to do with early childhood education. But, in fact, it had everything to do with it. The expression of initiative and the drive for autonomy are central forces in the pursuit of learning, both for children and adults. When they were young, many parents in the program were given little opportunity to express their own intrinsic interests, initiative, or autonomy. Therefore, they subsequently discouraged the development of these characteristics in their children.

By listening to and addressing parents' needs, PCC staff empowered them to express their own initiative and autonomy, and enabled them to model these qualities for their children. In addition, the parents developed skills that enabled them to advocate effectively for their children's education. Parents learned their voices could be heard, individually and collectively. They found they could trust in each other, and they learned they could trust staff to respond to the needs they voiced. They developed a sense of their collective power and used it not only in the PCC, but also in their community with landlords and schools.

Standards for Parent Involvement

The national Head Start Bureau drew on the results of our program when developing standards for parent involvement. The so-called I-30 was published by the OCD in 1970 and sent to all federally funded Head Start programs. When I first read it, I was pleased to see that the parent involvement strategies we had employed had become part of the Federal Register and would be applied as standards for Head Start programs throughout the country.

Why the Standards Are Not Carried Out

From 1969 to 2002, I had the opportunity to provide parent involvement training to Head Start program administrators, staff, and parents across the country. From this experience, it was clear that few administrators were advocates for the I-30 standards. Few actively encouraged parent participation in decision making. From observing and talking with these administrators and others, I concluded that program directors were afraid of losing administrative control to low-income parents. Head Start program directors are supervised by a local education and/or social service agency. These directors feared parents might make bad decisions that would jeopardize the smooth and effective operation of the program. Administrative directors believed their supervisor might criticize them for poor decisions made by parents, and some feared they might lose their job as a result. I concluded, further, that these fears were not completely conscious.

In fact, as a program administrator, I had been afflicted with some of the same fears I found in other directors. I felt threatened by engagement with the parents and feared I would not receive my doctorate if they did not comply with the faculty-approved design for my research. In retrospect, I know I was not fully open to input from parents. I was not conscious of this at the time and only became aware of it after I observed and provided training for other administrators.

The fear with which many administrators regard parent involvement has been compounded by the increasing ethnic and racial diversity in our schools and early childhood programs. A director may feel uncomfortable involving parents from different cultural economic backgrounds, but may not be fully conscious of these feelings. Rather than face their uncomfortable feelings, administrators and staff may deny them altogether. As a result, no meaningful parent involvement is undertaken. Parents, too, can bring attitudes that do not facilitate their participation with ECD program administrators, teachers, and other staff members.

Despite national standards mandating that a majority of the policy-making group be parents, administrative directors have used a number of strategies to avoid parent participation in decision making. Some directors invited other professionals, whom the director knew, to make

up the rest of the policy group. These professionals and the administrative director usually had academic degrees and years of experience running education and social services programs. They typically were well dressed and from the middle class. The low-income parents were, for the most part, not college educated, not well dressed, and unfamiliar with the vocabulary used by program administrators. Also, these parents did not have experience voicing their concerns. The parents often felt overwhelmed by the professionals—even though the policy group’s purpose was to be a vehicle for parents’ self-advocacy. Feeling out of place and intimidated, these parents frequently failed to develop, both individually and as a group, strong, cohesive initiatives on behalf of themselves, their children, and their families.

Whereas some Head Start directors chose administrative professionals to be on the policy group, other directors chose members of their program staff. The director was also the supervisor of these staff members. The administrative director could be sure these staff members would support and/or follow the director’s suggested policy if a difference arose between the parents and the director. This strategy weakened the parents’ collective initiative and undercut their feelings of group competence.

Because of their own fears, some directors failed to tell enrolled parents about the many nationally mandated powers they had within the program. These directors had a powerful need to hoard administrative authority of the program for themselves. Other administrators only involved parents in making decisions in program areas that did not threaten the administrative director. Many directors used a combination of these strategies to weaken and undermine parental decision making and ensure that they, the directors, had final say over the Head Start program’s content and process.

My observations led me to conclude that few administrative directors implement the specific mandates of the national parent involvement program’s performance standards. From the national office down to the local program, there has been no systematic parent involvement training for Head Start staff and administrators. There has been no evaluation of the short- or long-term effectiveness of the parent involvement component of the national Head Start program. This major weakness is, to a great extent, the reason most Americans today—even those involved in early childhood education and Early Head Start—believe Head Start is a compensatory program only for children.

Strengthening Parent Involvement in Early Child Development Programs

The effort made to involve parents in ECD programs should be no less than the effort to involve children. To accomplish this, ECD administrators and staff require well organized and carefully designed training.

Standards guiding all ECD programs should be written to include sufficient training and consultation to ensure that parent involvement is achieved from the outset. At the local level, consultants and/or trainers can provide structured opportunities for administrators and staff to talk about their feelings and attitudes toward parents, and also about the parents’ feelings toward them. Most administrators are not aware of their fear of losing program control to parents, of the intensity of this fear, or of how it influences their behavior. This lack of awareness cripples implementation of parent involvement. Training must begin with the assumption that program administrators and staff, at the conscious and/or unconscious level, have fears about individual and collective parent participation and power. Training should address how these feelings are handled, and focus on encouraging administrators to become aware of, acknowledge, and talk about their feelings.

Administrators and staff of all ECD programs need to become aware of the complex socio-emotional dynamics that come into play when they work with parents. These dynamics need to be brought into the open and addressed. They should not stay hidden by a smoke screen of complacency and bureaucratic avoidance. Consultants and/or trainers must work collaboratively with program administrators in this effort.

As administrators become comfortable discussing their fears and resistance to group policy decision making, they can work with a consultant to plan an initial program decision-making meeting with the policy group. For example, the consultant and administrator can role play the meeting, including the specific concerns voiced by parents. The administrator can play the role of the parent policy group, and the consultant can be the director. Then they can reverse roles. After the role playing, thoughts and feelings experienced by each can be discussed. To enhance role playing, if the administrator is comfortable, a group of parents enrolled in previous programs can be used. Other techniques, such as simulations, cooperative learning groups, team building, and brainstorming may also be useful.

Conclusion

I have focused here on the importance of addressing the feelings of administrators in early child development and education programs, using my experience in the Head Start program. Training and consultation should be used to strengthen and harmonize the voices of parents and of parent policy groups. Parents may have poor self-concepts as a result of their background. They can be passive in the face of authority figures, including teachers and administrators. They may not have effective individual or group self-advocacy skills. Training that uses such methods as role playing and team building should be given to policy groups and parent committees and should be available on an ongoing basis, conducted by an appropriately qualified individual.

If we truly want parents to create educational experiences and environments that nurture their child's curiosity, exploratory skills, and personal initiative—the fundamental building blocks of the motivation to learn—then those of us in early childhood education must become non-biologic extended family members and must reach out to and involve parents. We must listen to parents in very much the way a good early childhood educator listens to the needs and interests of a child or group of children. We need the help of parents as much as parents need our help, if children are to develop constructively. In the modern world, parents and early childhood educators must become members of the same team.