

# Sometimes the Customer Isn't Always Right

## Problem solving with parents

by Karen Stephens

Today, most children participate in a program designed and operated by early childhood professionals. Along with parents, the program staff give children

love, support, and daily guidance.

It's an intensely personal and individualized service, even within a group setting.

Relationships become so close in early childhood programs that many parents describe early

childhood staff as their children's "extended family." It's one of the highest compliments providers receive.

And yet, no matter how genuine attachments are, there still remains the fact that we provide what is called a "human service" and parents are, in fact, our paying customers. Whether our fee comes directly from parents, corporations, or government subsidizes, we still offer a service with a price tag.

When money is exchanged in the US, the typical rule of thumb for business

culture is "The Customer is Always Right." Managers tell service staff that keeping paying customers satisfied reigns supreme. It's their attempt to survive in a service that competes for an often fickle consumer.

I've been a manager of an early care and education program for almost 24 years. And hearing "The Customer is Always Right" still sends shivers up my spine. More often than I'd like, I've served parents who weren't very informed about childrearing and child development, or very accountable when it came to using and paying for child care services.

Please, don't get me wrong. Most parents I've met do a great job of parenting. And *most* parent requests are very reasonable and their requests are well intended. When communication is good, staff can *usually* be flexible and accommodate parent requests with a smile and a "can do" attitude.

But there are also some customers who ask staff for services that aren't in children's best interests. And in some cases, program policy or practice is directly at odds with parents' requests. In other words, conflict occurs.

Serving the public in an early childhood program just isn't as easy as "The Customer is Always Right" makes it seem. Here are some "real life" examples I, or my peer directors, have experienced:

- An intoxicated, but authorized and custodial parent arrives to pick up his child at day's end. Staff smell alcohol on his breath and feel he is unsafe to drive and tell him so. The parent disagrees vehemently and says he just took a cough drop. That's not an easy customer relations dilemma to cope with, much less solve.
- A parent asks me to put her four-year-old son on a diet. He's actually on target for age, height, and weight, but she insists he's growing out of his pants too fast and has to stop gaining weight. Ethically, I couldn't comply with her solution and personally she wasn't pleased about that.
- A parent habitually arrives after center closing time to pick up her child. She says she's tired of paying late fees and asks if the director would please "call her" at home when it's near closing time. In other words, she requested a wake-up call service.
- A parent asked me to "spank" her child as discipline. When I explained

In 1980, Karen Stephens



became director of Illinois State University Child Care

Center and instructor in child development for ISU Family and Consumer Sciences. She is author of the electronic parent newsletter, "Parenting Exchange" located at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).

why I wouldn't and then explained how we would handle discipline, she countered with: "But I've read it's best for children to have consistent discipline. He'll be confused if you don't spank like I do at home."

- A parent refuses to leave work to pick up an ill child. He tells the director, who has 20 years of experience working with children, that she isn't "qualified" to determine if his child had contagious flu since she wasn't a certified medical doctor.

Well, you've got the idea. Conflict opportunities abound in a service industry as sensitive as child care. To best serve children, early childhood professionals must be realistic about our *particular* human service. In our field, the customer *isn't* always right.

Of course, the customer isn't always wrong, either. As in most human interactions, life is a constant flux between the two extremes. And so, clear communication, compromise, and finding common ground with parents are skills we must nurture in staff.

How do we prepare staff for conflict situations with parents? As with any other challenge, implementing strategies and systems to *prevent* conflict, or limit its magnitude, is the best *first* strategy.

Training staff to respond to children's needs within the context of their family circle is critical. Building staff communication skills — such as reflective listening and sending blame-free messages — is vital, too. Training staff on options to foster meaningful parent-partnerships also comes into play. To adequately support staff, we must coach them on ways to address and resolve parent-program conflict. We must help them do so with the respect and grace that defines a true professional. Training staff to document incidents non-judgmentally and to back-up

their point of view with sound knowledge is part of that process. Reminding staff of everyone's confidentiality rights — parents, children, and staff — must be part of coaching, too.

### Strategy: Create a family relations philosophy

Every program will have a slightly different goal and philosophy regarding parent relations. What's important is that you have one. Develop it as a team project, with both staff and parents involved in the process. Your philosophy statement should guide decision-making in all areas of parent relations. In outlining your beliefs, envision what you want parent partnerships to "look like." Envision parents and staff creating compatible childrearing practices. Dream about collaboration in which children are consistently supported rather than confused by vastly different approaches.

As you explore the topic, remind staff that children need parents and staff to be on the same "team" not on separate sides like adversaries. Discuss why it doesn't help children if parents and staff run to their respective corners without ever confronting or resolving differences. Such avoidance merely leaves children abandoned and emotionally conflicted amidst people who are ALL very important to them.

To guide development of your family relations philosophy, below are fundamental parent needs that your staff should tailor services toward:

- Parent partnerships require mutual respect, trust, and daily courtesies
- Parents, and other parent-authorized family members such as grandparents, may enter the child care facility at any time
- Parents' input will be sought whenever setting goals for children's development

- Staff assume all parents care about and love their children as top priority
- Staff will be sensitive and responsive to family's cultural values and traditions
- Parents will be informed of, and if necessary, graciously reminded, of program policies and procedures
- Parent questions, comments, and suggestions will be responded to in a timely manner
- Staff will notify parents in a timely, non-judgmental manner about concerns
- Families will be treated fairly with confidentiality and professionalism
- Parent and program disagreements will generate mutual problem solving through consistently followed procedures
- Parents will receive special help with children whenever possible, including parent referrals to community services

### Strategy: Share parenting information

Sometimes parents make inappropriate requests or demands because they just don't have a lot of experience with young children. Understanding developmentally appropriate practices may be especially challenging for parents who endured abuse or excessive pressure to achieve during childhood.

Prepare staff to be responsive, rather than defensive, when parents voice a concern. For instance, parents who object to children "playing with blocks all day" will benefit from a short article on the learning benefits of block play. Sometimes parents "hear" more clearly when a credible professional from outside your program supports the same message you do.

A parent lending library, including books, magazines, and videos give staff

opportunities to connect parents with helpful resources. Offering a parent lounge with Internet access helps parents find information quickly.

### Strategy: Let children's work speak for itself

If a parent is concerned you aren't teaching the ABCs, find ways to illustrate how literacy is included in your program. Create displays of children's actual constructions with dictated stories to make learning "visible" to parents. Near children's posted artwork, or in newsletters, list learning benefits of children's activities, from finger painting to clay sculpturing.

### Strategy: Make helpful referrals

Train staff to go the "extra mile" in reassuring or helping parents. For instance, when the parent asked me to put her healthy-weight child on a diet, I instead referred her to our local Goodwill and suggested she post a note for a family trade for children's outgrown, but still in good condition, clothing. (By the way, those suggestions were offered after I shared growth/weight charts and explained why a restricted childhood diet can be harmful.)

To make accurate and timely referrals, obtain a Human Service Directory for your community. Such directories list many agencies that help families, from speech and hearing clinics to sliding-fee family counseling.

### Strategy: Anticipate potential touchy topics

I've encountered recurring "themes of conflict" that occur between parents

and staff. Do any of the topics below sound familiar? If they do, work with staff to plan, and even rehearse, ways to respond when the issues arise.

- *Operation Hours:* Poor match between service hours and parent's service needs so a parent consistently arrives after closing time.
- *Custodial issues.* Frequent changes in authorizations for child release or failure to submit documentation as to legal custody.
- *Fee Payment:* Poor match between fee rates and parents' ability (or willingness) to pay.
- *Differences in child-rearing beliefs or cultural and family values and opinions:* Independence vs. interdependence values; timing for teaching self-help skills; separation issues; role of men in child care; feeding practices; timing of toilet training; and whether boys can play dress up.
- *Attitudes toward childhood learning:* How and when to teach "academics"; what's wrong with competition; role of play in early childhood education; value of outdoor play; worth of "messy" play; value of superhero or gun play, etc.
- *Typical developmental challenges:* How to respond to children's hitting, temper tantrums, biting, name-calling, teasing, sharing, etc.
- *Wellness and illness:* Determinations of symptoms that require child absence. How child is deemed well enough to return.
- *Nap and sleep needs:* Does every child need a nap, and if so, how long at what ages?
- *Judgmental comments:* Such as perceived (or real) disrespect toward

family situation or culture OR parents undervaluing professionalism of child care staff.

### Help staff manage stress responses to conflict

Sometimes, in even the best of programs, prevention strategies don't do the trick. We all run into a parent that has a complaint; sometimes it's valid, sometimes not.

Unfortunately, some staff avoid, gloss over, or rush through complaints. Facing conflict is just too uncomfortable for them.

But if staff fails to fully discuss parents' concerns, we also miss out on opportunities to improve our programs. Or worse yet, staff misses out on opportunities to help the parent so they regain peace of mind and confidence in the program.

It's usually the symptoms of stress that make it hard for staff to mediate conflict. Depending on the severity of the problem, *emotional responses* to stress may include: fear of failure; reduced sense of physical or emotional safety; feeling pressured and overwhelmed; feeling attacked and becoming defensive; and engaging in negative internal self-talk, such as: "What now?" "Not again." "Oh, give me a break."

*Physical* stress symptoms staff may endure during conflict can include: flushed-face; being tongue-tied; dry mouth; unintended facial expressions, such as eye rolling, frowning, headache or stomach pains, etc.

Once staff learns to recognize their personal stress responses, they can learn to manage them. Following are a variety of techniques for staff to explore: Get a cool drink of water for self and parent; practice breathing fully and rhythmically; develop wise wellness habits in eating,

sleeping, relaxation, and exercise; talk regularly to a confidante; maintain a personal journal; check out stress management and conflict resolution books at the library; or take a stress management class or course.

## Identify positive responses to conflict

In orientation manuals, staff meetings, and trainings, take time to discuss ways for communicating with concerned, dissatisfied, or angry parents. Strategies may include:

- Recognize parent's right to voice a concern.
- Remain calm.
- Invite parent to discuss issue in privacy away from children's play space.
- Determine if another person needs to be present to discuss the issue. If tensions are extremely high requiring a witness, choose someone who is as impartial as possible.
- Listen to parents fully; use reflective listening (sometimes called active listening) to make sure you understand their points. Use open-ended questions to clarify parents' concerns. State a parent's concern, as you understand it and ask if you are correct.
- Model respectful ways of speaking. Focus on behavior rather than personalities.
- Use I-messages, rather than YOU-messages, to limit defensiveness.
- Ask the parent what they hope will change.
- Give the parents an idea of how you will attempt to explore the issue and when you will get back to them about what you've learned.

## Avoid making "snap" decisions or responses

Early childhood professionals are feelings-sensitive and often impulsive

"fixers." We want to maintain stability and harmony. Our urge to remedy conflict and tension too quickly can result in taking actions or making comments that are unwise in the long run. There are methods skilled directors use to slow the pace of conflict so the "heat of the moment" passes before hurtful words are said. For instance, rather than talking while standing in a hallway, take time to find a confidential and *comfortable* adult space to sit in. Take time to arrange chairs so they are angled toward each other. If possible, avoid having a desk between staff and the parent.

Find a symbolic "circle" table to sit around to help set the tone of the talk. Offer the parent a cup of coffee/tea to promote a sense of ease.

If either staff or the parent is too upset to speak, ask them each to write down their concern. That way each will get it off their chests and there's initial documentation for records.

Once a parent explains his point of conflict, more information may be required. If so, staff should ask for time to gather information. Then agree on a specific time that you'll get back to the parent about what you learned.

## Initiate problem solving steps

No matter what the issue, there are basic steps that promote productive problem solving. They include:

- Identify the problem or prioritize how to address multiple concerns
- Gather information from all concerned parties
- Brainstorm — generate solutions from all parties involved; use questions to move brainstorming along: "What might happen if we \_\_\_\_\_." "Is there another way we can try?" "Have we tried \_\_\_\_\_ before?"
- Cooperatively decide on a specific plan

— seek consensus rather than majority rule; put the plan in writing if it would reassure involved parties

- Implement the plan
- Evaluate effectiveness of the plan, including all parties in the evaluation
- Revise plan as warranted

After a conflict mediation meeting, a response is needed. Tell the parent and staff when to expect a response from you. Get back to them in a timely manner.

## When in doubt, err on the side of the child

Earlier in this article I mentioned the dilemma of an intoxicated, but authorized and custodial parent arriving to take a child home from child care. Yet he insisted he was sober enough to drive.

In such situations, staff are fearful of offending a parent, and afraid of unfairly accusing a mom or dad of being unfit to care for their child. But in such a case, an early childhood professional can't comply with a parent's wish to take their child. It's allowing child endangerment to take place.

So what could staff do? They can call the other parent to come get the child if possible. Or they can call others on the child's authorized emergency list. Some might consider calling a cab for the parent, but it's not sound reasoning to release a child to an intoxicated parent and an unknown cab driver. Other options are to call the police or child welfare services. It's all up to the professional judgment of the staff. And at all times, our professional judgment must fall in favor of the child's well-being first and foremost.

No wonder our jobs seem so hard sometimes. But luckily, such extreme cases are few and far between for most of us.

## Ethics of conduct with families

You'll never be able to predict every topic of disagreement or misunderstanding that can arise between program staff and parents. But if you're in doubt on how to respond to a new challenge, consider reflecting upon the Code of Ethics set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). It can guide your decision-making as you formulate an action plan that is respectful to all concerned.

Below is an excerpt of NAEYC's Code of Ethics as it relates to working with families. (Source: [www.naeyc.org/resources/position\\_statements/pseth98.htm](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/pseth98.htm))

### Section II: Ethical responsibilities to families

Families are of primary importance in children's development. (The term family may include others, besides parents, who are responsibly involved with the child.) Because the family and the early childhood practitioner have a common interest in the child's welfare, we acknowledge a primary responsibility to bring about collaboration between the home and school in ways that enhance the child's development.

#### Ideals

- **I-2.1.** To develop relationships of mutual trust with families we serve.
- **I-2.2.** To acknowledge and build upon strengths and competencies as we support families in their task of nurturing children.
- **I-2.3.** To respect the dignity of each family and its culture, language, customs, and beliefs.

- **I-2.4.** To respect families' childrearing values and their right to make decisions for their children.

- **I-2.5.** To interpret each child's progress to parents within the framework of a developmental perspective and to help families understand and appreciate the value of developmentally appropriate early childhood practices.

- **I-2.6.** To help family members improve their understanding of their children and to enhance their skills as parents.

- **I-2.7.** To participate in building support networks for families by providing them with opportunities to interact with program staff, other families, community resources, and professional services.

#### Principles

- **P-2.1.** We shall not deny family members access to their child's classroom or program setting.

- **P-2.2.** We shall inform families of program philosophy, policies, and personnel qualifications, and explain why we teach as we do.

- **P-2.3.** We shall inform families of and when appropriate, involve them in policy decisions.

- **P-2.4.** We shall involve families in significant decisions affecting their child.

- **P-2.5.** We shall inform the family of accidents involving their child, of risks such as exposures to contagious disease that may result in infection, and of occurrences that might result in emotional stress.

- **P-2.6.** To improve the quality of early childhood care and education, we shall cooperate with qualified child develop-

ment researchers. Families shall be fully informed of any proposed research projects involving their children and shall have the opportunity to give or withhold consent without penalty. We shall not permit or participate in research that could in any way hinder the education, development, or well-being of children.

- **P-2.7.** We shall not engage in or support exploitation of families. We shall not use our relationship with a family for private advantage or personal gain, or enter into relationships with family members that might impair our effectiveness in working with children.

- **P-2.8.** We shall develop written policies for the protection of confidentiality and the disclosure of children's records. These policy documents shall be made available to all program personnel and families. Disclosure of children's records beyond family members, program personnel, and consultants having an obligation of confidentiality shall require familial consent (except in cases of abuse or neglect).

- **P-2.9.** We shall maintain confidentiality and shall respect the family's right to privacy, refraining from disclosure of confidential information and intrusion into family life. However, when we have reason to believe that a child's welfare is at risk, it is permissible to share confidential information with agencies and individuals who may be able to intervene in the child's interest.

- **P-2.10.** In cases where family members are in conflict, we shall work openly, sharing our observations of the child, to help all parties involved make informed decisions. We shall refrain from becoming an advocate for one party.

- **P-2.11.** We shall be familiar with and appropriately use community resources and professional services that

support families. After a referral has been made, we shall follow up to ensure that services have been appropriately provided.

## Resources to tap

### Web Sites for Parenting Information

Sometimes parents “trust” information you share with them when it is “backed up” by a credible source independent of your program. Below are web sites that can help you communicate with parents on a wide array of topics.

- I Am Your Child — [www.iamyourchild.org](http://www.iamyourchild.org)
- Parenting Exchange Library — [www.parentingexchange.com](http://www.parentingexchange.com)
- National Parent Information Network — <http://npin.org/>
- Parent 2 Parent at U of I — <http://p2p.uiuc.edu/index.asp>
- KidsHealth — [www.kidshealth.org/](http://www.kidshealth.org/)

## Resource books

Albrecht, K., & Miller, L. (2000). *The Comprehensive Infant Curriculum*, Chapter 2 “Separating from Parents.” Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Baldwin, S. (1996). *Lifesavers: Tips for Success and Sanity for Early Childhood Managers*. Chapters 8 and 9. Stillwater, MN: INSIGHTS Training & Consulting.

Greenman, J., & Storehouse, A. (1996). *Prime Times: A handbook for excellence in infant and toddler programs*. Chapter 14, “Partnerships with Parents.” St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Hewitt, D. (1995). *So This Is Normal Too?: Teachers and Parents Working Out Developmental Issues in Young Children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Lee, K. (2003). *Solutions for Early Childhood Directors: Real Answers to Everyday Challenges*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*. New York: Random House.

Newman, R. L. (2000). *Building Relationships with Parents*. Nashville, TN: School-Age NOTES.

Stonehouse, A. (1995). *How Does It Feel?* *Child Care from a Parent's Perspective*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.

## Resource articles online from Exchange

Boutee, G., Keepler, D., Tyler, V., & Terry, B. (March 1992). “Effective Techniques for Involving ‘Difficult’ Parents.” *Young Children*.

Duffy, R. (July/August 1997). “Parents’ Perspectives on Conferencing.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Duncan, S. (November/December [year unknown]). “Ten Tips for Handling Angry Parents.” *Early Childhood News*.

Gillan, C. (May 2003). “Putting Out the Fires of Conflict.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Gonzalez-Mena, J. (July/August 1997). “Cross Cultural Conferences.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Gonzalez-Mena, J. (July/August 2000). “High-Maintenance Parent or Cultural Differences?” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Gonzalez-Mena, J., & Stonehouse, A. (July/August 2003). “High Maintenance Parent or Parent Partner — Working with a parent’s concern.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Greenman, J. (May 1995). “No Surprises: Reducing Staff-Parent Tension.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Harris, J. (September 1994). “The Bad News Blues: When Messages Aren’t Easy to Deliver.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Keyser, J. (March 2001). “Creating Partnerships with Families: Problem-Solving Through Communication.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Lee, L. (July/August 1997). “Working with Non-English-Speaking Families.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Morgan, E. (January 1989). “Talking with Parents When Concerns Come Up.” *Young Children*.

Stanley, D. (March 1996). “How to Defuse an Angry Parent.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.

Stonehouse, A., & Gonzalez-Mena, J. (November/December 2001). “Working with a High Maintenance Parent — Building Trust and Respect Through Communication.” *Child Care Information Exchange*.