Dawn and Carey are the parents of 15-month-old Ava. Ava has been in two child care centers already and is now entering home child care because, as Dawn says, “The relationship piece was not right in either place. In the first center, the teachers were warm and responsive, but Ava had three teachers by the time she was 14 months of age.” Carol was baby Ava’s first teacher. But when Ava learned to crawl she was moved to the next room . . . without Carol. Before Dawn and Ava had adjusted to the next teacher fully, it was time to move again. Dawn then chose another program, but there the teachers lacked the engaging interactions she had seen at the first center. Dawn and Carey clearly value a relationship-based approach, although perhaps they would not have been able to articulate that when they began their child care experiences.

Jessica and Bill are the parents of Louis, now age 4 months. They are selecting their first child care program and are looking for a caregiver who is experienced but also a great relater. They say there is an elusive quality of relating that they know they will recognize when they see it. They want someone who they can relate to comfortably but also who relates well to the baby. Some potential caregivers talk to them but not to Louis. Others turn right to Louis but seem to ignore the parents’ needs to connect. In addition to looking for someone who relates both to them and their child, Jessica and Bill also want someone who will talk with them about their parenting decisions. They wonder if they will find someone who relates to both them and their baby.

**What parents want and need to know**

Our opening vignettes illustrated some of the concerns that parents have about relationships in child care. It may be helpful for teachers, students, and directors to reflect on the feelings of parents about relationships in child care. It may also be helpful for parents to recognize the universality of common questions of parents. A parent may have a number of questions:

- How does my child’s teacher interact with me?
- Can I count on the teacher to relate to me as a partner?
- How will the teacher support me as a parent?
- How does the teacher relate to my child?
- Can I count on the teacher to be supportive and attentive to my child?
- Can the teacher–child relationship become so important to my child that it replaces my own in importance?
- What does it mean when a program says they follow a relationship model?
- How is that different from what other programs do?
- How do I stay informed and in tune with the practices being carried out in the program?
- How can I have input into the practices and values of the program?
- How do I ensure that practices and values of the program are consistent with the values of our family?

Helen H. Raikes, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Her work focuses on research and practices that optimize outcomes for infants and toddlers from low-income families, with particular interest in language and attachment and secure relationships for infants and toddlers.

Carolyn Pope Edwards, EdD, is Willa Cather Professor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, teaching in both the Psychology Department and the Department of Child, Youth, and Family Studies. Her research interests include early childhood education in international contexts and professional development for teachers.

This article is excerpted, with minor adaptations, from Chapter 8 (pp. 147–61) of *Extending the Dance in Infant and Toddler Caregiving: Enhancing Attachment and Relationships*, by Helen H. Raikes and Carolyn Pope Edwards. This material is reprinted by permission of Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. (Baltimore, MD).
Principles of relationship-based programs

To address a parent’s concerns, we identify eight principles of relationship-based approaches for including parents (see “Principles for Parent-Teacher Relationships”). The discussion of these principles is supplemented with suggested language for teachers and directors to use when interacting with parents. This will aid in the teacher’s discussion of each of these aspects of the program’s relationship-based approach with parents.

Be partners

What are parents looking for in a partnership? Our experience is that parents may differ in what they want in their relationship with their child’s teacher, but primarily they want a teacher who relates comfortably with them as well as with their child. They want a teacher who greets them as well as the child. Some teachers and parents become very good friends (or may even be good friends before the caregiving relationship begins), but it is not necessary to be close friends to have a good teacher-parent relationship. What is important is that information flows openly and comfortably—that there is a sense of trust.

Parents want a teacher who is open and forthcoming about the child’s experiences throughout the day, who volunteers information about the child, and who conveys this information thoroughly and consistently.

When teachers are partners with parents, each contributes to the partnership by sharing information the other needs from their respective portions of the child’s day. For example, if the child was up in the night, the
parent conveys this information because it might mean that the child is becoming ill. If the child took a shorter than usual nap at the center, this information is conveyed to the parent because the child may be ready for bed sooner than usual. Shared information extends to play and development. If the child was delighted in his or her image in the mirror, this is also shared—because perhaps the parents will want to have some mirror play as well.

Teachers should take the lead in this two-way communication. For example, teachers may say to parents, “I like it when you tell me about his breakfast. It helps me know what he might be ready for when he is here.” Teachers should also be responsive when the parent initiates because the teacher and parent are truly engaged in a partnership.

Provide support and information about parenting

Most parents are continuously seeking information about parenting. However, parents may not seek this information from the teacher until a strong relationship of trust is built. Some parents may be concerned that the teacher may judge their parenting skills. However, most parents worry less about this as the partnership grows. They then may welcome the opportunity to have a dialogue about the many decisions of parenting. Families often want a teacher who can offer suggestions but also affirm them in the parenting role. Some parents may not want dialogue about their parenting decisions—they may consider this their domain—but will welcome articles or speakers on topics relating to parenting (for example, how to support children’s emotional development or toilet learning).

When speaking with a parent, the teacher may say, “Several of the parents have been asking about language development. Of course, every child is unique and develops at his or her own pace, but we thought it might be interesting to have a parent meeting focused on language development. Would you like that?” A higher stage of development is necessary for teachers to convey a sense of partnership to parents when an aspect of the program is to enhance parenting. However, one way around this concern is to realize that all parents need information and support. It is not disrespectful to convey the types of information that parents may not have had access to.

Form a close relationship with the child

Families may worry that a teacher will pay less attention to their children than they do, or that the teacher may miss important cues their children are sending. On the other hand, a parent may be confused about how close the child’s relationship with the teacher should be. When parents understand that children benefit from a secure relationship with the teacher, they usually become free to embrace a strong teacher–child relationship. Sometimes a parent worries that the teacher may become more important to the child than the parent. The parent may see the child performing tasks for the teacher not seen at home or may not see the child misbehave in school. Thus, the parent may erroneously conclude that the child prefers the teacher; however, this is usually not the case. Sometimes teachers misread the meaning of these behaviors as well.

Most children readily form secondary attachments. However, studies have shown that secondary attachments do not detract from the primary attachment with parents. Regarding misbehavior, most children do misbehave from time to time and may misbehave more at home than in the center. This may be a good thing—demonstrating that the child feels safe enough to let down his or her guard—and should not be taken as a cue that the child loves the teacher more than the parent. Of course, parents and teachers are both always examining their own practices to ensure that their interactions and environments support children’s best responses. A director may say to a parent, “Sophie

Parents should always be welcome to visit—anytime and without announcement.
is forming a close relationship with her teacher. I can tell because she plays so well when the teacher is in the room. She has a great relationship with you, too. We feel really good when children have two sets of great relationships—at home and at school!"

Provide parents with information about the program

Because relationships with parents are so important, relationship-based programs take many steps to ensure that parents are well informed. Newsletters, bulletin boards, Web pages, photo-documented displays about activities (for example, the children’s trip to the hen house, child of the week, what the children did with the pumpkins donated by one of the families) are in abundance. Parents are informed about policies, but also, importantly, about the fun and learning occurring in the center. Parents should always be welcome to visit—anytime and without announcement. For example, parents may stay for lunch or go on a walk with the children. Parents know all the children in the group and the program’s routine so they can talk with their children about the day, environment, and friends and can model positive relationships with other children and teachers. A director may say to a parent, “Please feel free to drop in anytime. Our goal is for you to feel totally comfortable about James’s care, so come visit so you can see what happens during the day—and you can see how well he gets along here.”

Build community among the parents

Parent-parent relationships further extend the purposes of the relationship-based program. They are facilitated by such activities as programs and discussions about parenting, potluck suppers, family nights, come-to-lunch day, and story hour. It is a good thing when parents know each other and support one another out of school. For example, children may sometimes play together during vacations, parents may organize food for the parents of a new baby, or families may talk informally about toilet learning. By providing a space for more than one parent to sit, the program further facilitates interactions between the parents of children within the program. Often, parents in relationship-based programs express the view that the other parents are their main support community. This gives them a feeling of security and well-being as parents (that they are able to pass on to their children). A teacher may say to the parents, “We have a new baby coming into our program, so I would like to
have a get-together with all the parents in a couple of weeks to welcome his family.”

**Value the contributions of parents**

Relationship-based programs invite parents to be on advisory boards and are not reluctant to hear their opinions about practices and improvements. Such programs feature open communication and value the discourse and liveliness found in an open community. Mechanisms for parent input are well established. Parents may complete annual surveys about the program, there may be elected representatives on advisory boards or policy councils, or parents may represent the program in the larger community. Parents may then mobilize to make improvements or enlarge the program offerings; for example, parents in one relationship-based program organized to repaint the equipment on the playground. A director may say to the parents, “Thanks to our fabulous parents for the beautiful new playground! Thanks to Martin for the paint, thanks to Jessie and Marcia for donating the brushes, and thanks to everyone else for all their hard work!”

**Seek continuity between family values and program offerings**

Relationships are more readily formed when everyone feels comfortable and “at home” in the setting. Early childhood educators have consistently found that parents are most comfortable when there are teachers of their own nationality or who speak their language. Importantly, these parents are likely to believe that their children will be more comfortable and relate more easily if spoken to in their own language or cared for by someone who is of a similar nationality. There are many examples of more subtle ways that programs can promote cultural and values continuity. Programs can conduct a survey to learn more about parenting beliefs and practices. Parenting beliefs come up continuously in regard to the care of infants and toddlers. In fact, most aspects of infant and toddler caregiving are rooted in traditions—often strong and deeply held—about how children are to be tended. Thus, teachers in a relationship-based program provide information and reasons for the decisions they make. They continuously learn what parents prefer in practice and learn about how parents do things at home. When the relationship is good, much of this information is shared informally. Both parent and teacher learn from each other as they seek a balance on caregiving practices. Teachers also take steps to affirm the culture and values of families within their program. Food from a minority culture may be featured as refreshments for family night or with older toddlers. Books telling about the children’s cultures send a message to both parents and children that these cultures and their traditions are valued. To learn more about how parents feel about values, a director might say, “We are doing a semiannual survey so we can be sure we know how you feel about all the practices. This will help us be most responsive to your needs and provide the best environment for your baby. Thanks for taking time to fill out this survey!”

**Extending the Dance in Infant and Toddler Caregiving**

*Enhancing Attachment and Relationships*

_**Helen H. Raikes and Carolyn Pope Edwards**_

This warm and practical resource will help caregivers to develop nurturing relationships with young children and families while also strengthening parent-child attachment.

Item: #295

Non-members: $30

Members: $24

NAEYC Comprehensive Member Benefit

Order online at [www.naeyc.org/store](http://www.naeyc.org/store) or call 800-424-2460

**Articulate relationship-oriented principles and practices to parents**

Many program directors explain their emphasis on relationships to parents before the children enroll. Some directors talk to parents about the importance of attachments, telling them that secondary attachments to teachers are encouraged and that hav-
ing two sets of relationships strengthens the child’s early social, emotional, and other forms of development. They may tell parents that most infants consistently turn to parents for support when they are stressed; this reassures parents about the strong connections children have to them. These directors emphasize the subtle learning and emotional regulation that take place within the protection of relationships. Parents readily grasp that open communication and relationships with the teachers and other parents contributes in a natural way to this culture of relationships. A director may say at this time, “We want you to know how important our parents are, so please come to talk with me anytime about how you are feeling and what you think your baby needs.”

Summary

Good relationships between parents and teachers support the dances between teachers and children and between parents and their children. Infants and toddlers must rely on the important adults in their lives to communicate well with one another and develop a trusting, informative relationship. This allows the children to experience a sense of continuity from home to child care and from child care to home. In a program that emphasizes relationships, the teacher–parent relationship is one of partnership. Parents are viewed as partners rather than as customers or clients. Even when the program emphasizes teaching parents about parenting, the spirit remains one of respect and partnership. The partnership centers on the child and relies on mutual respect, information sharing, inclusiveness, and a sense of community. It requires that the purposes and principles of the overall relationship-oriented program be communicated clearly to parents so they understand the importance of relationships (with both parents and teachers) to infants and understand the many steps that the program takes to provide their children with these safe and secure relationships. However, the partnership also requires that the program understand the parents’ cultural and personal values. The teacher and parent should mutually engage in the very human task of sharing deeply felt views and daily information in a spirit of supporting the well-being of the child they both care about so much.