

8 Cooperation with parents: building an understanding of Early Childhood

In kindergarten, children are apart from their family and spend their time among children of the same-age group, and teachers. However, the family is the base of each child's life and cooperation with parents is indispensable for effective early childhood education. If a child has an irregular life pattern, or even just has a cold at home, this condition also affects life at the kindergarten. It is also expected that any special events in a family (e.g. the birth of younger sister or brother, family members' admission to the hospital etc.) will affect children's behavior. Therefore, an awareness of each child's family background is essential for providing a quality education for children.

Equally, children's experiences at kindergarten also have an effect on their family lives. Children report their activities in kindergarten: "I made a sand castle with my friend" or "I fought with another boy today". However, this daily conversation only reflects part of their life in kindergarten. For that reason, teachers report the details of child's life at kindergarten to parents.

Mutual understanding and frequent communication will help to ensure cooperation between teachers and families. All kindergartens should make a great effort to establish good cooperation.

1 Parents' Day

In their daily lives, parents have very few opportunities to learn how children are doing at kindergarten. They see their children playing in kindergarten when they say goodbye to them in the morning, or they learn about some of their activities when a child gets home. But to fill the gap that is left between these two sources of information, kindergarten has a "Parents' Day" for them to see the children's lives in kindergarten.

Parents' Day is not only for the observation of activities but also for discovering different aspects of children's lives and sharing knowledge of their progress. It also provides the opportunity for parents to look through the kindergarten which they only glance at when they say goodbye to their children in the morning. Parents learn how facilities and amenities are arranged according to the levels of students, and receive insights about education principles and methods in the kindergarten.

Teachers announce the date and schedule of "Parents' Day" in advance. Ideally, all parents should have free access to the any place in the kindergarten, but "points of observation" can be clarified in advance. Observation through these special points helps to enhance the mutual understandings.

2 Participation in Education

From time to time, teachers ask parents to engage directly in childcare at kindergarten. Through this experience, they can learn how teachers prepare, plan and support children. Sharing the childcare role will also diminish the distance and formality between parents and teachers.

In some cases, parents not only support teachers but also initiate the childcare. At times, they read picture books, or perform plays or concerts at kindergarten. Parents can also initiate physical exercises, or cooking, and set an example by working together with children. Parents' participation in education and new activities excite the children. It also increases children's motivation to learn, since their mother or father becomes a "teacher".

Through planning, preparing, and practicing activities, parents can communicate with others and can share the challenges of childcare. This increases the mutual support among them.

3 Participation in Events

Parents often participate in the preparation of events such as a "Sports Festival", "Cultural Event", or "Picnic". They also participate in the planning and previous preparation for the events. Many hands are required to carry out these events smoothly.

Events are different from the daily activities in kindergarten. Children can be in high spirits or feel uneasy over the events. Unexpected things might happen as well. Besides the preparation of events, adults are required to guide children and prevent problems before they happen. Cooperation and mutual understanding with parents helps teachers to carry out events successfully.



Through activities, sports, and interaction, children and parents can deepen their ties by sharing new memorable experiences.

4 Picture Book Libraries

Many picture books in kindergarten can be better utilized through a library system. Children can borrow the picture books to read at home. This library helps the family to enjoy expensive picture books that they might not be able to afford. Parents can support this library service. In the presence of children, they check the name of books, the person who borrows the book and keep records in a notebook. They can also support by sorting the books or repairing old books. Through this process, parents discover and enjoy the same picture books they read in childhood, or look at the books from a new point of view.

5 Method of Communication

(1) Daily Interaction

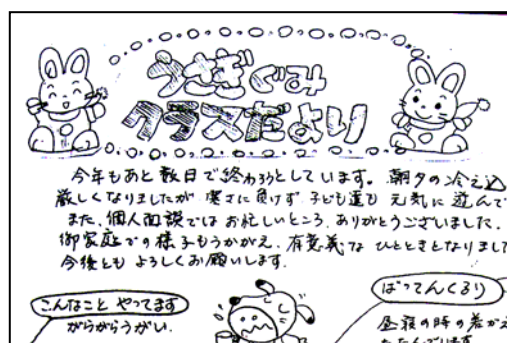
Parents briefly talk with teachers when they take a child to and from the kindergarten. This daily short interaction is very important. For example, a teacher can pay special attention to the child, if told by parents that s/he is not feeling well that day or has had a bad experience.

In the same way, when parents take their children from the kindergarten, the teacher should report any special things about children, good and bad, (injury, sickness, worries, achievements) in addition to talking about the daily activity. If they receive reports about a minor injury to a child, they can follow-up and check the condition at home. Parents can also motivate a child by telling how the teacher was pleased about his/her achievement at kindergarten. Daily interaction and reporting will help to bridge the children's two lives, at home and kindergarten.

(2) Class Letter/Report

Besides this daily interaction, the teacher also makes a class letter to inform parents about the activities and progress of children. This report serves to gain the trust and cooperation of parents at the kindergarten. Report should be thought out to illustrate each child's progress and process of development as well as the activities in kindergarten.

Initially, teacher should decide the following things:



Contents of Letter	principle of kindergarten, class activities, announcement, birthday boy/girl's announcement, event schedule, discipline which should be adopted at home etc.
Frequency of Letter	fortnightly, monthly etc.
Editor	rotation of teachers

To clarify the meaning of kindergarten policies, specific examples from real experience should be given within letters. Other useful information about early childhood education can also be included to support parents' better childcare at home.

6 Meetings with Parents

Teachers hold regular meetings with parents to discuss the principles of early childhood education, the kindergarten's management policies, and each child's progress. This meeting is also an occasion to listen to the needs of families and share their concerns. By exchanging ideas in the meetings, teachers can build a positive relationship with parents.

(1) General Meetings with Parents

General parents meetings usually take place after the child's admission to the kindergarten, at the end of each term and at the end of a school year. All parents are invited to this meeting. Prior to a child's admission kindergarten, teachers inform the parents of the education principles, required materials, and the expected manner or behavior in kindergarten. The brochure of a kindergarten also helps to convey the messages clearly to the parents. After the enrollment, teacher will again emphasize on the importance of early childhood education, elements of child development and age-group characteristics.

(2) Class Meetings with parents

A class teacher conducts the class meeting to discuss management issues and class activities. Teachers can exhibit each child's work or show videotaped activities of the children. Since this is a small meeting, parents' daily concerns and problems can also be shared with others. It is important to make this class meeting a platform for exchanging opinions and for providing mutually-supporting advice. From time to time, teachers can ask parents to facilitate the discussion.

(3) Individual Meetings with Parents

Teachers set up individual meetings with parents every term or every few months. These meetings are for discussing more personal issues or concerns that cannot be shared in general or class meetings. The teacher checks the records of each child beforehand, and explains in detail to parents about their child's activities, and relation to other children. It is important to ask parents about their concerns and about the child's behavior at home. This process helps the teacher to learn about new aspects of the child's home life, and to share their way of thinking. By talking to each other face-to-face, teachers can deepen the mutual understanding with parents.

All the time, teachers are required to explain children's activities by using real and simple examples. Teacher should not dominate this meeting, but try to speak with the parents as equals and in a relaxed way. To achieve that kind of equality and trust from parents, the teacher needs to establish a good relationship with them. It is also recommended to ask parents to submit the questions they would like to discuss, before the individual meeting.

Some parents might bring small children to the meeting. The teacher needs to take this into consideration and set up an appropriate time and frequency for meetings. Provision of childcare, such as a playroom or a parents' childcare rota, might also be required.

7 Counseling for Parents

When parents have significant problems looking after their children, the teacher, as a professional in early childhood education and a daily carer of a child, may offer advice. If the issue cannot be addressed through daily interaction, a teacher might make additional time after school to talk with the parents.

In counseling, the most important skill required is listening. A teacher should not criticize or judge parents during counseling, but should keep listening and sharing their concerns. The content discussed during counseling often concerns private issues, so the teacher must keep what is discussed confidential. If a teacher feels that the issue goes beyond his/her capacity, never try to offer easy simplistic advice, such as "I'm sure she will be happier next year". This often makes the situation worse. If a teacher cannot give appropriate advice, the teacher should immediately introduce the parents to professional help, such as a child psychologist.

This type of counseling works well when teacher has already established positive relationships with parents. It is important to provide a safe and secured environment for parents to be able to share problems, major and minor, with teachers.