

Practice Guideline on Communication and Collaboration – Section 2

See this section's applicable Code and Standards

This section promotes your knowledge of the following [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) (Code and Standards).

RECEs:

- build and maintain responsive and collaborative relationships with families, which are based on mutual trust, openness and respect for confidentiality (Ethic B).
- use appropriate and effective communication strategies and methods to share relevant information with families (Standard II: C.7).
- make a conscious effort to engage families to collaboratively plan meaningful learning experiences and support problem-solving and decision-making (Standard II: C.9).
- communicate with families by being equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity (Standard I: C.5).
- review and access current research and transfer this knowledge into evidence-informed practice (Standard IV: C.1).
- respect the confidentiality of information related to children and families, and obey all laws pertaining to privacy and the sharing of information (Standard VI: A).
- must be aware of the inherent power imbalance in relationships between a professional and a family (Standard V: B.3).

Overview

“Families are the first and most powerful influence on children’s learning, development, health and well-being. Families bring diverse social, cultural and linguistic perspectives. Families should feel that they belong, are valuable contributors to their children’s learning, and deserve to be engaged in a meaningful way.” (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Communicating with families is critical to meeting the needs and best interests of children. The [Early Childhood Educators Act](#) (2007) states that the practice of an RECE includes “communication with parents or persons with legal custody of the children in the program in order to improve the development of the children.” Maintaining clear and effective communication is crucial to building a strong, trusting partnership with families. This partnership is the foundation for supporting and promoting the well-being and holistic development of their child(ren).

As an RECE, you use various communication strategies with families to share:

- the purpose and foundations of your practice;
- the early learning that takes place; and
- what they can expect to see in their children’s learning and development (e.g., play- and inquiry-based learning).

Some families, compared to others, may have a better understanding of the RECE's role. For example, some families may not understand the significance of the rock or feather their child brought home that day. To the family, these are simply inanimate objects their child brings home. To the child, however, one is a fossil from a rare dinosaur and the other is a writing tool with imaginary ink. As the educator, you take the time to communicate the meaning behind your pedagogy, documentation and materials to families so they develop a common understanding of the learning taking place.

Listening to others and understanding their perspectives are key to being an effective communicator.

When you listen to families, you:

- Collect and understand relevant information about the child(ren) and their family to support the children in the learning environment.
- Demonstrate that you respect and value their thoughts, ideas and experiences to support the highest outcomes for children.
- Take their concerns seriously which promotes the profession's core set of beliefs and values (care, respect, trust and integrity).
- Role-model effective communication to the children in the learning environment.

Be mindful to:

- Communicate early and often, while letting families set the communication pace. Forming relationships takes time; some families may take longer than others to feel safe or comfortable.
- Remain open-minded, honest and respectful, while paying attention to the intentions behind your communication. Are you acting on your personal values or your professional values and standards?
- Carefully consider the language you use. Words can convey respect or disrespect, inclusion or exclusion, judgment or acceptance.
- Pay attention to communication aspects such as body language, tone, rhythm and the volume of your voice. Observe reactions. When in doubt, ask for confirmation that the communication was understood.
- Critically reflect on conscious and unconscious beliefs and biases.
- Recognize that communication can be complicated. Have you ever been surprised that someone misunderstood you when you thought your communication was clear?
- Acknowledge that you won't have all the answers. If there is something you're unsure of or have questions about, let the family know you will look into it and get back to them.
- Maintain and manage professional boundaries. Blurring the boundaries between professional and personal relationships may influence your professional judgment. Collect and understand relevant information about the child(ren) and their family to support the children in the learning environment.

Although other communication forms are becoming more popular, we shouldn't forget about the benefits of written communication. For example, if a family is on a tight schedule and doesn't have much time to talk at drop-off or pick-up, sending a note home can be a good way to share information. If you're working with a family with whom you have yet to build a trusting relationship, written communication can help to build positive relationships with families, while also providing another method of maintaining open communication. Wilson (2014) has useful reminders for written communication:

- Use communication methods that reflect the needs and interests of the families. For example, if a family tells you they prefer an email or phone call, don't continue to send handwritten notes.
- Pay attention to the type of material you're using. For example, official letterhead can intimidate some families or make them feel anxious. Consider using it only for formal communication.
- Consider the writing style. Bullet points may be more appropriate than long paragraphs.
- Be as concise and clear as possible.

- If you send handwritten notes, ensure the writing is legible. For example, if you're writing in cursive, be sure the family will be able to read it.
- Review your written communication carefully, whether it's paper-based or electronic, before distributing it.
- Keep a copy of all written communication for documentation purposes, as needed.

Engagement and partnerships with families

“The Canadian Child Care Federation’s National Statement on Quality Early Learning and Child Care describes a collaborative partnership as one that “honours the family’s role as the child’s primary caregivers, respects its child-rearing beliefs and values, and provides meaningful opportunities for families to determine their children’s early learning and care experiences” (Wilson, 2014)

There are several terms used in the early years to describe the process of collaborating and engaging with families. Examples include: family participation, family involvement, family engagement and family partnerships. The chart below highlights the differences between these similar terms noted in research:

Family participation or involvement:

- Suggests families are passive;
- Implies one-way flow of information between educators and families;
- Sees educators as the “experts;” and
- Takes a one-size-fits-all approach to involving families.

Family engagement or partnerships:

- Invites families to be active participants and contributors in all program areas;
- Demonstrates two-way exchange of information between educators and families;
- Sees educators and families as co-creators of knowledge and experiences; and
- Takes a family-centred approach to involving families.

Family engagement recognizes the diversity in families, takes it into account and gives families more power to act (Ministry of Education, 2013). Engaging with families is not about “how can we *get* families to ...”, but rather, “how can we *invite* families to”

Collaborating with families means:

- supporting the well-being and holistic development of children;
- respecting professional boundaries while you get to know them;
- learning about and taking into account what they consider important for their child;
- working together toward the goals and hopes for their child;
- sharing relevant knowledge, resources and research;
- maintaining equitable practices and promoting a sense of belonging in the learning environment by including them; and
- being aware of the power imbalance(s) between families and educators.

It's crucial to reflect continuously on your intentions, actions and communications. Practise asking yourself: “Am I trying to be the expert, or am I trying to engage collaboratively with a family?”

Opportunities for family engagement vary depending on the practice setting. However, it's important to invite families to play an active role, so take the time to critically reflect on your engagement efforts.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020), provides the following practices for positive family engagement in ECE programs:

- Collaborating means working together, so make every effort to invite families to be involved in decision-making and goal-setting processes. Families have unique knowledge about their child that can be integrated into the learning environment.
- Foster open, two-way communication with families. Develop strategies so families and educators can connect easily, in a timely manner and with regular frequency. Communication appears in various forms (e.g., email, in person, notes or text messaging) and should be sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences.
- Provide opportunities for learning outside of the learning environment. For example, share resources with families that can be used at home or in the larger community.
- Invite families to be involved in policy review and development processes, as well as advocating for the sector. Encouraging families to play an active role in policy development and decision-making processes reflects collaboration in supporting children's well-being, learning and development.
- Reflect family engagement in policies and procedures, especially if you're a leader in an early learning program. Leaders ensure that all RECEs and staff are aware of these policies and help set the tone for family engagement across the organization.

Each family in your learning environment is unique, capable and competent in different ways. You respect and become aware of each family's circumstance, while critically reflecting on ways to provide various opportunities for collaboration.

RECEs understand the importance of reflective practice, which the College defines as thinking critically about your professional approach. The intent for RECEs is to better understand and improve their practice by analyzing their thoughts, actions, beliefs and biases. Reflective practice is action-oriented, often collaborative and is used to plan, evaluate strengths and challenges, make decisions and create change where necessary. ([CPL Resource: Reflective Practice and Self-Directed Learning](#), 2017)

Adopting an anti-bias approach

RECEs have the professional responsibility to be equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity in their practice. This responsibility includes engaging with families to develop relationships informed by an anti-bias lens. Taking an anti-bias approach to communicating and collaborating with families is a team effort involving all staff, supervisors and directors. Derman-Sparks, Lee Keenan and Nimmo (2014) explain that this approach enables families to see themselves and their child reflected in the environment and curriculum. An anti-bias partnership, like building any relationship or partnership with families, will take trust, comfort and time to develop.

Anti-bias views may be a new concept and educational approach for families. When you build a learning community where all members feel seen, heard, understood and that they belong, you begin to create a safe and supportive space for individuals to either begin or continue their journey of anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan and Nimmo, 2014).

One way to grow your anti-bias partnership with families is to view them as allies of anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan and Nimmo, 2014). RECEs understand that families have knowledge and expertise central to understanding the children in their care, so encourage families to use their expertise to advocate for anti-bias education. For example:

- Be open to listening to and collaborating with families who want to share their individual experiences to support diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Provide support to or collaborate with families who want to advocate for program and policy change.
- Encourage and promote anti-bias leadership by inviting families to contribute to the program, or serve on an advisory, fundraising or hiring committee. This ensures diverse perspectives on programming decisions that will affect children and families.

Providing meaningful opportunities to families to engage in and contribute to the learning environment will take time and commitment. As well, take the time to reflect on your current practice. Seek resources, research and information, and generate constructive dialogue that can result in ways to strengthen family engagement.

Technology use with families

RECEs use technology to support their relationships with families, as it can offer rich and meaningful ways to communicate, help them feel connected to the program and inform them about their child's experiences. Standard I reminds us that RECEs communicate with families by being equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity (C.5), while recognizing that not all families have equal access to, comfort or knowledge with technology or the internet.

With colleagues, consider the following suggestions on engaging with families through technology (NAEYC, 2020):

- **Gather information instead of making assumptions:** conduct a short survey or engage in a conversation to fully understand families' access to, comfort or knowledge with technology or the internet. Be prepared to provide different levels of support or resources with others.
- **Research, ask questions and share your knowledge:** look into different platforms and engage in critical inquiry with other educators. Ask about the platforms or apps they might use in their programs.
- **Focus on the learning and engagement that can result from technology use:** think about creating a learning community where families and educators can learn with and from each other. Together, ask questions, share strengths and support one another. These learning communities will also support family engagement in your program.

Communicating with families about challenging situations

Your communication and collaboration with families sets the tone and feel of the learning environment. You understand the importance of program policies that are accessible and support families' awareness and understanding of reporting procedures and having challenging conversations.

In addition to the regular, daily engagements with families, such as conversations at drop-off and pick-up, there will be occasions when RECEs have to engage in difficult conversations, such as:

- Addressing concerns related to a child's health, behaviour, learning or development. For example, a child in your program bit several children.
- Explaining your practice decisions. For example, a boy in your program chose to dress up in what may be perceived by some as feminine clothes. His parent sees this at pick-up time and expresses their discomfort to you, but your workplace has a policy stating that children are supported and encouraged to make their own choices on the materials they choose to play with.
- Adhering to policies. For example, a centre has a policy stating that children who are ill must stay home. This could result in the loss of a day's wage for some families which could worsen their financial concerns. Therefore, some families may choose to send their sick child to the centre.

The trusting and open-communication pathways you establish with families create a foundation that can support you during difficult conversations. In addition to using your professional judgment, consider the following practical approaches when having difficult conversations with families:

- Address issues as soon as possible. This supports the standards of the profession by ensuring the needs and best interests of the children are the highest priority.
- Consider the appropriate time and setting. Be intentional in your efforts to schedule a meeting time that works best for the family and at a location where conversations can be held privately (e.g., not in front of other children or caregivers). Be mindful that other children in the learning environment can overhear the conversation if it's not held privately. They can hear names, labelling or understand through tone that it's not a typical conversation.
- Remind the family that your intent of scheduling a conversation is to support and partner with them throughout the process in supporting the overall well-being and holistic development of their child.
- Carefully consider your communication methods, whether it's in-person, email, telephone or teleconference. Use your knowledge and experience with the family when deciding.
- Ensure you're maintaining equitable and inclusive practices, and respecting diversity. Consider the family's spoken language, comfort level regarding communication, their availability, as well as their access to technology.
- Prepare for the meeting. Plan what you're going to say and any documentation you may require.
- Be aware of your tone and body language. For example, tone is important in both verbal and email communications. Consider how your tone and body language will be perceived, and how to make the family feel comfortable and safe.
- Be specific about the issue(s) at hand and consider the language being used. Do not share your assumptions. Instead, provide examples of what you've observed or documented. Consider your word choices and the language you're using. For example, use terms the family will understand instead of sector or program jargon and acronyms.
- Listen to what the family says. Ask appropriate and respectful questions that will provide you a thorough understanding of their point of view.
- Be respectful of the family's response or reaction. This can be a new or unfamiliar situation for families, so reactions may vary. Be mindful of this and empathetic when responding.
- End the conversation with a plan. Ensure you and the family have collaboratively discussed the issue at hand and agree on next steps.
- Follow up with the family after the conversation. This demonstrates respect, care and integrity, and that you're truly working in partnership with the family to best support their child.
- Remember your professional responsibilities around confidentiality. Respect the confidentiality of information related to children and families, and obey all laws pertaining to privacy and the sharing of information (Standard VI: A).
- Be aware of the inherent power imbalance in relationships between a professional and a family (Standard V: B.3). If not taken into consideration and reflected on, this power imbalance can hinder your communication with families.
- If you don't feel comfortable addressing a family on your own, ask for support or guidance from a colleague or supervisor.

As a professional, it's your responsibility to ensure you're supporting each child and family within the context of their unique needs. For some families whose first language is not English, or who may have a hearing, speech or language impairment, an interpreter or a support person may be required. In these instances, Wilson (2014) suggests the following tips:

- Ensure the interpreter or support person is oriented to the situation. Clearly communicate the purpose, their role and the process.

- Prepare written information for the family and have it translated or adjusted, as required.
- Maintain focus with the family, rather than the interpreter or support person.
- Use visuals, such as props, pictures or gestures.
- Keep the conversation focused and succinct.
- Discuss one idea at a time.
- Provide opportunities for questions and discussion.
- Verify or clarify the information gathered from the interpreter or support person.
- Remain patient. Provide enough pauses for the interpreter or support person to organize the information. Allow time for the interpreter or support person to communicate without interruption.
- Be attentive and maintain interest when the interpreter or support person is communicating with the family.

RECEs understand that strengthening their communication and collaboration with families is an ongoing process. It requires commitment, intention, critical reflection and continuous professional learning. Take the time to engage in self- or collaborative reflection to assess your current practices, policies and procedures. RECEs are part of a collective that supports the accountability of others in the profession by, for example, providing support to a colleague new to the profession, or supporting an RECE who feels less confident in having difficult conversations with families. Supporting other RECEs in this practice area is also a way to build and strengthen your relationships with colleagues while also demonstrating leadership.

Additional resources to support your learning

- The Ontario Ministry of Education’s [Think, Feel, Act: Lessons from Research about Young Children](#) includes a section focused on family engagement. For more information, take a look at their videos.
- Changes in a child’s behaviour could be a result of changes at home (e.g., a separation between parents). Remember that not all families will be comfortable with sharing this type of information. Review the [Practice Guideline on Supporting Positive Interactions with Children](#) for ideas on rethinking behaviour guidance and responsive relationships with families.

Pause and Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on your communication with families in your practice setting.

- What pre-existing beliefs and biases do you have about families or a particular family that could impact your communication with them (e.g., feedback from previous educators)?
- How do you effectively communicate your practice foundations, play-based pedagogy and decision-making processes in a way that all families understand?
- Are you able to adjust your interactions based on your understanding of each family member’s communication style?
- How do you try to understand the family’s perspective when communicating with them?
- What do you consider your strengths in communicating with families?
- Are there areas of communicating with families that challenge you?
- How can you continue to grow in these areas?

[Pause and reflect on your communication with families in your practice setting](#) (Word version)

[Pause and reflect on your communication with families in your practice setting](#) (PDF version)

Pause and Reflect

Consider the following scenario on communication about Sanjay's winter clothes:

Jones, an RECE, works in an after-school program with six-year-old Sanjay. It's the middle of winter, and Jones notices that Sanjay frequently doesn't have a hat, gloves or indoor shoes. Jones asks Sanjay's mother on two separate occasions to remember to pack his winter wear. The following day Jones notices that Sanjay still doesn't have the proper clothing to be able to play outside and asks to speak to Sanjay's mother privately when she arrives to pick him up. Jones expresses his concerns, and Sanjay's mother apologizes that she didn't have time to help Sanjay pack his clothes. Jones is frustrated and explains that it's a distraction and difficult to find spare winter clothing when Sanjay doesn't bring his own. Jones is unaware that Sanjay's mother is going through a separation while also caring for her elderly parents at home.

- What are your initial thoughts on this scenario?
- How did Jones uphold or not uphold the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*?
- What could Jones have done differently?
- What role does communication play in this scenario?
- How do Jones' preconceived beliefs and biases affect Sanjay? How do they affect the relationship he's building with the family?
- How would you approach this situation?

[Pause and reflect on communication about Sanjay's winter clothes](#) (Word version)

[Pause and reflect on communication about Sanjay's winter clothes](#) (PDF version)

Pause and Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on how these scenarios may be similar or different to the families you interact with in your practice setting. While using technology can be beneficial, access is not equal among all families. Reflect with colleagues or independently about how to use technology equitably and inclusively to engage families. In your reflection, consider options for, and/or alternatives to, interacting with families who have barriers to technology.

A family in your practice setting may: consider the following scenario on communication about Sanjay's winter clothes:

- Have access to the internet only on weekends;
- Have access to the internet and technological devices at home but lack confidence in using them;
- Not have access to the internet or technology for undetermined lengths of time;
- Be fully competent using technology and have full internet access in their home;
- Have one computer the entire family shares; and/or
- Not have a computer in their home but have a smartphone with internet capability.

[Pause and reflect on families and access to technology](#) (Word version)

[Pause and reflect on families and access to technology](#) (PDF version)

Pause and Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on your current efforts, practices and policies on family engagement. Consider the following questions, either independently or with colleagues:

- What does family engagement mean to you? What's your role in the family engagement process?
- What is the family's role? In what ways are families invited to engage in your practice setting?
- What strategies do you or your colleagues use to invite families to engage?
- Are there any barriers, real or perceived, to family engagement in your practice setting? If so, what are they? How do you know? How might you break them down?
- How is family engagement reflected in your program statement?
- How can you invite families to be involved in program policy development and review?
- Do you take the time to critically reflect on your assumptions, beliefs and biases around a family's engagement level?
- Think about a family who might have had a bad experience with engagement (e.g., they felt judged by others on their parenting). How can you continue to try and invite these families to become engaged in a way that's on their terms?

[Pause and reflect on family engagement](#) (Word version)

[Pause and reflect on family engagement](#) (PDF version)