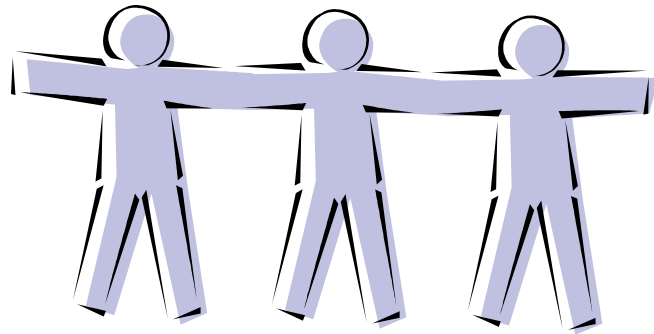


Implementing Family-Friendly Child Care: Benefits for Families and Centers



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While leaders in the early childhood field have long recognized the need for family involvement in child care centers to ensure successful outcomes for children, the fundamentals of family-centered care have not been clearly defined for practitioners. In 1996, the National Child Care Information Center and the Child Care Bureau brought together approximately 150 child care experts to agree on the basic features of a family-centered child care center. The experts agreed that the features should focus on the family as a true partner in providing care. Supporting and educating parents, as well as involving them in the care decisions about their children, are considered essential components for a family-centered or family-friendly child care center. Centers that add a family-friendly component to existing elements of high-quality care offer parents what they most want: a strong collaboration between families and staff with children as the focus.

Child care centers have an interest in providing high-quality, family-friendly care not only to ensure the well-being of the children in their care, but to attract families to use their services. In recent years, the child care industry has suffered economic challenges as parents* have been laid off from jobs, family finances have become less certain, and a significant number of women are opting to stay at home to rear their young children. This creates a greater urgency to provide the kind of child care that attracts and best serves families.

To learn more about the specific aspects of family-friendliness that are important to families and to child care center staff, IBM funded the *Family-Friendly Child Care Study*. The study was undertaken to identify the characteristics of family-friendly child care that help families meet the challenges of contemporary life. The goals of the project were to equip working parents with ways to identify high-quality centers and to equip child care centers with ways to provide care that best meets the needs of the families they serve.

Study Findings

WFD Consulting, Inc. studied 63 child care centers in Dallas, New York City, and Los Angeles. The participating centers, including both for-profit and non-profit centers, asked parents and staff to fill out a survey that asked them to rate their center on various elements of family friendliness. Using the data from these surveys, six key elements of family-friendly child care were identified. These elements are described below with example items from the survey.

1. Strong Relationships Between Teachers and Children

Family-friendly teachers respond readily to children's ideas and feelings, provide closeness, and establish ties of trust. Warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions help

* The term "parent" is used throughout to denote any primary caregiver who has full responsibility for a child.

children develop a secure, positive sense of self and encourage them to respect and cooperate with others.

- Staff respond quickly and sensitively to children's requests and non-verbal cues. For example, they offer affection and spend time answering and expanding on children's questions.
- Staff demonstrate that they know and appreciate each child in their room. For example, staff integrate individual children's interests, friendships, temperament, food preferences, and napping habits into all activities.
- The center has a relaxed and cheerful atmosphere. Children seem to be comfortable, engaged, and having fun.

2. *Meaningful Interactions Between Staff and Parents*

The connections between staff and parents are important to creating a positive, comfortable atmosphere in the center. In family-friendly centers, staff initiate meaningful discussions with families so that administrators and teachers can be tuned into the family environment. Staff take the time to listen when families share information and to be thoughtful, patient, and nonjudgmental supporters.

- Staff ask parents for information about their child and the child's interests to help plan daily activities.
- Staff and parents work together to solve problems such as finding a child's lost belongings, long naps that interfere with evening bedtime, or a child who bites.
- Staff take the time to help parents understand how the center's curriculum and activities contribute to their child's learning and development.

3. *Quality Relationships Between Staff and Families*

Staff at family-friendly centers actively build quality relationships with families. This means making families feel welcome and included at the center, both in their interactions with staff and in their interactions with other families. Families should feel a sense of partnership and mutual support.

- Staff encourage parents to express their own feelings of sadness or concern when a child is adjusting to the center.
- Parents feel welcome to suggest ways they can be involved in the life of the center and feel their opinions are welcome.
- The center values and appreciates parents' efforts to donate time, skills, and cultural experiences to their child's room and to the center.

4. *Respect for Diverse Families and Cultures*

Family-friendly programs embrace the diversity of the families they serve. Teachers ask families what goals and values they prize for their children, and the kind of people they hope their children will grow up to be. Staff also individualize their interactions with people in the center whether they are stepmothers, fathers, grandparents, children, or other staff.

- The staff respect and value the unique characteristics and circumstances of all families at the center.

- Staff are empathetic and understanding about parents' schedules and the demands on parents' time.
- The center respects the confidentiality of parents and children.

5. Responsiveness to Family Needs

Staff at family-friendly centers actively plan ahead for the needs of the families in their care. It's important for center administration and staff to ask about families in order to be responsive to their needs. They use the information they receive to plan programs that address the broad needs of all the working families in their care, and to keep resources on hand about community programs that may be helpful to specific families.

- Staff ask parents questions about their jobs and family circumstances so they can better understand the needs of the family.
- When a parent inquires about a service the center currently doesn't offer, the center responds positively, with a "why not?" attitude.
- Staff work with each family to create a personalized transition plan to help each new family adjust to the center.

6. Communication Between Staff and Families

Communication is an essential element of family-friendly care and extremely important to parents. Talking with administrators, staff, and other parents is the key to building relationships in centers. Staff should take the time to greet families at drop-off in the morning and spend a few minutes chatting at evening pick-up. Exchanging written notes, e-mails, or phone calls are other valuable ways to connect about issues, or just get to know each other better.

- Staff greet parents and children in the morning and say good-bye in the evening.
- Parents and staff share information about meaningful daily events related to the child. For infants and pre-verbal toddlers, there is daily written communication to parents about the child's daily activities. For older children, there is daily written communication about the group's activities.
- Parents have more than one way to communicate with the center (e.g., notes, phone calls, and e-mail).

Families and Staff Differ in Definition of Family Friendliness

While the study identified six key elements of family friendliness, parents and staff differ in the components that are important to them (see Table 1).

Table 1. Family-Friendly Factors of Importance to Parents and Staff

	Parents	Staff
Staff/Child Relationship Scale	X	
Staff/Parent Interaction Scale	X	
Quality of Staff/Family Relationships Scale	X	X
Respect for Diverse Families and Cultures Scale	X	X
Responsiveness to Family Needs Scale	X	X
Communication Scale	X	

For parents, all six elements of family friendliness are important when they are considering the quality of a center. Staff, however, tend to focus on three characteristics: a) the quality relationships between staff and families, b) respect for diverse families and cultures, and c) the responsiveness to family needs. This discrepancy means that the staff perspective on family-friendliness is more narrowly defined. Staff appear to have a more traditional perspective of family friendliness: including parents in governance, offering some set of programs or services to respond to parents' needs, and being respectful of the make-up of the family. Because parents have a broader definition of family friendliness, staff can better serve families by expanding the way they deliver care and services.

Family-Friendly Communication and Services

Communication is one of the hallmarks of a family-friendly center. Parents indicate that they highly value a wide range of communication methods. The methods receiving the highest ratings are those most likely to be in place at centers: written notices posted in places like cubbies or on doors to children's rooms, conversations at drop-off and pick-up times, individualized written notes, and individual parent conferences. Several other types of communication are highly valued and should be considered by centers not currently offering them: video or photos of activities at the center, packets of take-home information, and telephone communication with parents.

Interestingly, the study found a difference between staff and parents in their awareness of the various types of *communication* used in centers. For example, staff may indicate that there is a newsletter for families but some families are unaware of it. Similarly, the study found differences in awareness of center *services*, such as flexible payment plans and care for mildly ill children; staff indicate that specific services are available at centers but parents are unaware. Sometimes teachers are unaware of services that administrators say are offered! All of this speaks to the importance of effective channels of communications among administrators, teachers, and parents.

Families were asked what types of services not currently offered by their child care center they would value. The following emerged as the top choices:

- information on community activities for children and families;
- information on support services for families;
- computers with software for children;
- enrichment classes (for a fee) such as dance, martial arts, music or gymnastics;
- flexible payment plans;
- a food program with hot meals served at the center;
- backup child care for enrolled children on unscheduled days; and
- occasional social activities for center staff and parents (children included).

These services fell to the bottom of the list:

- fax and photocopy machines;
- take-home meals; and

- dry cleaning drop off/pick-up.

These findings help to dispel the notion that family friendliness means convenience services for parents. The study found instead that parents prefer programs that enhance the care experience for their child as well as services that address their more substantive needs as a family.

The Business Case for Family Friendliness

There are several business-related reasons for raising the family-friendly child care bar. Family-friendliness can provide a competitive edge. Because family-friendly child care centers have fewer gaps in expectations between staff and families, a family-friendly environment is likely to translate into greater “customer satisfaction.” This will help attract families and retain them from year-to-year, perhaps increasing the center’s market share.

High-quality/high family-friendly centers not only serve families better, but the study found that they tend to have more satisfied staff. Satisfied staff are more likely to remain with their current employers thus reducing staff turnover and reinforcing the quality of care at the center.

Increasing Family Friendliness in Your Center

Family-friendly elements are *enhancements* or *improvements* to quality care – child care centers must have a basic level of quality in place for family-friendly care to develop and thrive. The study findings strongly link family friendliness with these elements of quality care: teacher to child ratio, the quality of the educational program, and the level of training or experience of the staff.

Once high-quality care is in place, a center can go from good to great by embracing a family-friendly perspective. Although it may seem subtle, shifting the discussion from what constitutes a high-quality center to what constitutes a family-friendly center changes the focus from *what the center as an organization does to provide care for the children* to *how well the center works together with families to provide care for the children*. By focusing on the joint responsibilities of the center and the children’s families, the needs of both are addressed while the care of the children remains the focal point.

Efforts to improve family-friendliness can only be successful if two elements are in place. The first is the existence of high-quality care (defined in this study by ratio, quality of program, and level of training or experience of staff). The second element is a commitment from program administrators to set the tone, allocate appropriate resources, commit in-service training time, and modify the performance review system to ensure that family friendliness becomes integrated into the culture of the center and the behaviors of the staff.

While the value of high-quality, family-friendly care seems clear, the transformation of a center from good to great will depend on the unique culture and

circumstances of each center. There is no such thing as a “one size fits all” child care center. Financial or staffing constraints may prevent a center from offering certain services. Timing is also important – there may be other important center activities going on that should take precedence, like fundraising or capital improvements. On the positive side, however, many of the elements of a family-friendly center cost little or nothing to implement.

Focusing on family-friendly improvements is a winning strategy for child care centers with the potential for many positive outcomes including: assisting families in successfully rearing the next generation, increasing staff job satisfaction, and attracting and retaining more families.

The Family-Friendly Audit Tool is available to assist centers in assessing and improving the family-friendliness of their center. The audit tool, a scoring tool, instructions, and a full report of the study are available at www.abcdpendentcare.com. Click on “Tools and Assessments” to access these items.

Here are some tips to help centers increase family friendliness:

- Determine the level of overall quality that exists at the center. How would the center rate on standards such as staff:child ratio, the educational program, and the training/experience level of the staff? If center quality is only poor or good, the first conversations should focus on improvements in basic quality. Refer to the website for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org) for information on quality standards.
- Ask the administrative leadership of the center to engage in an effort to evaluate family friendliness and to allocate resources for the process. Consider the family-friendly elements and ideas presented here to clarify and expand the thinking about what is reasonable to expect from the center. Encourage the use of the Family-Friendly Audit Tool to stimulate conversation.
- Use the staff’s experiences to “bring family-friendly elements to life.” Tell stories about communication among staff or identify times when the staff learned of new cultures, customs, and traditions.
- Administer the Family-Friendly Audit Tool to parents and staff. Use the results to develop a training plan for staff and an improvement plan for the center.
- Encourage the administration to commit in-service training time and resources for professional development of staff.
- Modify the existing performance review system to ensure that family friendliness becomes integrated into the culture of the center.
- Ask administrative leadership to provide families with information on community activities and family support services.
- Ask administrative leadership to expand methods of communication between parents and staff, using the audit tool as a guide.