

Involving Parents and Teachers in the Evaluation Process

by Suzanne Gellens

It hurts! Giving teachers and parents the opportunity to evaluate the director and the early childhood program opens up the avenue for criticism. It's like an inoculation; it stings at first, the area hurts for a few days, but it strengthens the immune system and protects against illness. The truth about you as an administrator and the school's curriculum and facility can bite. This is especially true with a director who has put in years to create an early childhood program. The critique bruises, but hopefully it will lead to positive change. The process empowers teachers and parents and helps them buy into the task of improving the atmosphere and providing quality education.

In the beginning, I relied on questionnaires from both teachers and parents that assessed the curriculum, facility, and me. After the first year, I asked parents to give recommendations and incorporated many of their ideas. This was easy. Asking the staff was more difficult.

I remember the first time I asked my teachers to evaluate me with specific questions about my abilities and techniques. I was afraid to read

them, and when I finally did, I put the papers aside for two months. I recognized the truth, but I was angry and wounded to see it spelled out.

Eventually, I could see that the changes proposed were necessary. Many points were accurate; the suggestions were genuine. Teachers objected to my reminding them to pass out notices in front of parents. They complained I was too quick to

step in when I saw aggressive behavior and didn't give them a chance to handle the situation.

Each time I ask for evaluations, I take it less personally. It still stings and sometimes makes me angry momentarily, but I try to look at each criticism as a suggestion and really listen.

Teachers who are involved in the assessment process are more willing to be a part of the solution. Many of the points of reference are things I have wanted to or unsuccessfully tried to implement. Interestingly,



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when the faculty members identify the problems and propose the solutions, they have buy in. They are willing to work to bring about the desired change.

Several teachers complained that the cleaning personnel were not washing dishes that were being left each day in the sink. I felt that this was each teacher's responsibility, not the janitorial staff. After the discussion, I saw no improvement. When I arbitrarily assigned a rotational schedule among the teachers to clean the dishes, they were dissatisfied. When I used problem solving techniques with the group, they arrived at the conclusion that each teacher should be responsible for their own snack and cooking dishes. With this decision came pressure and monitoring of each other to gain compliance.

Using an evaluation tool also allows the staff to share the director's frustrations. There are many aspects of the program and building I have no control over. Even though we discuss how impotent we are in making that kind of change, they can empathize with me. They understand that I cannot control the hours assigned to the janitorial staff to clean the classrooms or that we cannot use the building for fund raising events on Saturday.

Conducting Meetings on Evaluation

I have added a staff meeting twice a year that focuses on these evaluation issues. This meeting has to be planned well. The first time I tried it, it turned into an attack. I hadn't thought through the desired outcomes and the process of how to problem solve. I wanted democracy, but didn't know how to bring it about. Through using different group techniques, the sessions have now become productive and provide much useful information.

Meetings need to begin and end on a positive note.

Listing the positives and the things that the school can be proud of helps validate the teachers' hard work. We usually end with the items we don't want to change. This lets us have that group feeling as we leave.

Meeting rules that provide direction for everyone are necessary. They include statements that ensure that participants treat each other with respect, people are allowed to disagree amiably, and no one person dominates. Reminding everyone that they are working toward the same goal and that it is best if one person speaks at a time is helpful. Allowing everyone a time to talk is important. Add a reminder to keep humor in the meeting and keep the atmosphere light. Just like children, adults need expectations and limits.

Think through what you want from the meeting. Don't propose discussing how to improve the physical appearance of the school unless you have money to invest in improvements. Your discussion questions need to focus the group. Just opening to complaints may open up a Pandora's Box. Remind the group that they need to bring up things that can be changed, not just anything they don't like. We share a building with a religious school. We can't change that, but we can meet with their teachers to discuss space sharing. Make sure you have enough time to really complete your objective. Don't try to accomplish too much.

Try to keep your goal reasonable. You can't solve all problems in one meeting. It is better to complete one or two problems than to leave everything hanging. Discussing things the faculty finds frustrating and then generating multiple ideas for solutions brings into focus many areas of concern. Listing places where teachers perceive weakness (curriculum, supplies, scheduling, policies) and multiple ideas for suggested change is beneficial for the program and lets teachers feel empowered.

Allot a block of time to list everything teachers like about the school. Record perceptions on an experience chart, varying colors as you write each idea. Then focus the meeting on one subject. Listing everything that they would like to see changed is a good place to start. It is hard not to rebut and give answers for each negative, yet it is important that the director remain quiet. Inserting answers and justifications merely stops the communication process. Use active listening techniques to let the teachers know you hear and ask for clarification if necessary. Act as a meeting guide, not a participant.

Have teachers prioritize the list. Decide which complaints can be remedied quickly and which suggestions will take time to change. Some are very apparent. When teachers wanted input on the subjects presented at monthly meetings, a box for suggestions was put in the office. Their request for daily notification of music time, special events, and upcoming meetings led to a marker board in the sign-in area.

Long-term projects included such issues as remodeling classrooms, changing parent programs, or devising a policy for handling sexual play. We decided which project to begin working on, saving the rest of the list for the future.

It is imperative that as you finish one item on the list you continue onto the next problem. Some solutions were difficult to arrive at in the time allotted; teachers formed committees to come up with suggestions for keeping bathrooms cleaner during the school day, changing snack

Evaluation of Program by Parents

Please write your opinions both with things you like and suggestions for improvement:

Homerooms: _____

Learning Centers: _____

Playground: _____

Afternoon Enrichment: _____

Building and Grounds: _____

Teachers: _____

Newsletters: _____

Parent Meetings and Programs: _____

Place other comments on the back. Thank you!

*Evaluation forms in this article were developed by
Temple Emanu-El Early Learning Center, Sarasota, Florida.*

distribution, and a better way to share school equipment. They established a deadline to submit their findings. Their written input was distributed to all staff with the variety of suggestions. At later meetings, we ascertained if this was still a problem or had been resolved.

Varying the format of the meeting is important. Dividing into small groups and giving each of them a problem to solve is one variation. At our last evaluation meeting, three committees tackled the same problem, then shared their multiple solutions. Sometimes we work in pairs. After each meeting, the problems and solutions are written up exactly as recorded and distributed to each attendee.

Initially, when the problems are listed, the director can decide on a course of action. Some problems can be addressed with an explanation. When a supply fee was raised, the teachers complained that they didn't see an increase in the quantity of supplies. Only by supplying figures that showed that even the increased money did not truly cover purchases did the teachers understand.

The director can decide to ignore a listed problem or suggestion. Some problems are petty, not solvable, or not worthy of the time necessary to fix. Some are hurtful to specific staff members and do not belong in the group arena. Everything does not have to be a part of the democratic process. The director has the power to decide what is changeable and what is not and which problems will be offered to the staff for solving.

Sometimes, I have not been in favor of the majority decision. In the end, however, I was glad I allowed democratic voting. In a faculty meeting to decide how to spend

Evaluation of Director by Teachers

1. Do you feel I have encouraged your professional growth? Have I helped you develop or fine tune your teaching techniques in any way? How? _____

2. Do you feel I communicate effectively with the children? the parents? the staff? What suggestions do you have to improve the newsletter or other means of communication? _____

3. Are you comfortable with the chain of command in the center? Do you feel you can come to me for help at any time? Do you feel you get the help you need? _____

4. Do you feel I know what goes on here? Do I manage my administrative tasks effectively? _____

5. Are you comfortable with the amount of autonomy I give you? Would you prefer more or fewer directives from my office? _____

6. What do you like best about me as preschool director? _____

7. What would you like to see me change or improve? _____

proceeds from a rummage sale, the teachers suggested tearing out and rebuilding the playground. I didn't think it necessary or possible, yet they did the research and we compromised. With parents' help, we did redo our outdoor learning space with the available money, and the results are spectacular.

Summarizing parents' compliments and complaints from their evaluation sheets has merit. Everyone wants to read and reread the compliments. Again, some of the comments sting. Often, there is basic truth in the criticism.

Parent comments have great influence. When the staff sees parents' suggestions that all teachers should greet all parents no matter which

class the children are in, the comment has more meaning than when I chastise for the same omission. Parents' complaints that teachers sit and chat on the playground are powerful motivators. Certainly these items are addressed in the opening staff meeting every fall and in the teacher policy manual, yet parent comments mean a lot and support my admonitions.

Sometimes, the parents' comments show that we have not done a good enough job educating parents on our philosophy or addressing social concerns. Sometimes, just like choosing which teachers' complaints to address and which to ignore, the director must assess parents' complaints. Some are not justified. Also,

just because one parent wants something does not mean it is the best suggestion for the school. Some of these parent critiques become good topics for staff problem solving sessions.

Parents can affect the policies and rules of the institution that owns or houses our early childhood programs. I deal with a religious institution that has a governing board of directors. Vocal parents can address the board of directors. The board liaison is my conduit from my Early Learning Center Council to the officers of the institution. When the parents want to see change, they have a way to implement it. This is helpful to the entire school.

The House and Grounds chairman listened to a parent who took him on a tour of the grounds. Many of the same items I had complained about took on new meaning when a consumer complained. Parents listened to teachers' objections to proposed salaries and saw that the board of directors gave raises and increased benefits.

It is sometimes painful to really look at a director's job and the early childhood program. Yet, by using input from teachers and parents, the movement toward excellence gains momentum. Teachers' self-esteem is raised as they participate in the decision making process. The staff is more willing to establish change when they have been a part of the resolution of the problems. In the end, it really makes the director's job easier.

Program Evaluation by Teachers

1. Do you feel your job meets your expectations? If not, list how the director could change it. _____

2. Are the staff meetings valuable? How could they be improved? _____

3. Are the maintenance jobs evenly divided? _____

4. What could be done to improve the program? _____

5. What do you see is the preschool's greatest weakness? _____

6. What do you see is the preschool's greatest strength? _____

7. How could the curriculum be improved? _____
What needs to be added to the curriculum? _____
What needs to be eliminated from the curriculum? _____