



# “I need your help”

## Teachers can win parents’ cooperation by approaching them as experts on their own children

BY CECELIA LEONG

**L**uke’s teachers at the Fairfax-San Anselmo Children’s Center could not figure out why the four-year-old cried every day—until his mother explained, through a translator, that Luke was frightened by Halloween stories and decorations—especially scary masks!

Then teachers and parents worked as a team. At school, teachers reassured Luke that the monsters were not real. At home, Luke’s mother encouraged him to draw when he was feeling scared, then helped him change the picture—to make the scary mask funny, for instance. Luke’s father took him to a costume store and showed him the masks were not real. Teachers and parents kept checking in with each other—and eventually Luke’s crying stopped.

Early childhood educators need cooperative relationships with parents to address behavior issues. But talking with parents about problem behavior takes skill and care, says Nataliya Gamburg, director of the Skyline College Child Development Center in Pacifica. When you start out, she advises, “Don’t say, ‘I have a concern,’ say, ‘I need your help.’”



JANET BROWN MCCracken

**“Deal with your discomfort, learn what’s normal for kids at this age, practice out loud—so you can talk frankly with parents.”**

Donna Rafanello, Long Beach City College

### TO PARTNER WITH PARENTS

- Establish a friendly relationship from the start.
- Invite parents to visit and observe their child.
- Describe the child’s behavior factually and without judgment, based on careful observation.
- If a parent reacts negatively, don’t take it personally.
- Ask for the parent’s perspective, advice, and help.
- Accept that differences are OK.
- Empathize with the parent’s goals (better behavior) even if you don’t agree with their methods.

### Reach out to parents

It’s important to resist the temptation to judge parents, says Director Louise Piper at the College of San Mateo’s Mary Meta Lazarus Child Development Center. Piper recalls the cultural differences between her staff and Joseph’s mother, a Chinese immigrant and single mother of five who worked and attended school.

Teachers heard her tell her children, “Your job is to go to school, for our family to be better in the future.” For Joseph, age four, that meant being at the center nine-and-a-half hours a day, five days a week—obviously unhappy. “He wouldn’t talk or join in,” Piper recalls. “Sometimes he even closed his eyes like he didn’t want to believe he was there!” Joseph’s mom just told him not to cry.

Rather than judge this mother, Piper decided that the first priority was for the staff to build a relationship with her—in her own language. Teacher Maggie Lam, who spoke fluent Cantonese, found opportunities to chat with Joseph’s mom. Lam understood the mother’s value of sacrifice for the family. And she could hear that in Cantonese, the mother’s words sounded comforting, not harsh: “Joseph, you don’t need to cry because people there care about you.”

Piper and Lam were aware that Joseph was watching as trust and respect between the adults grew. After four months, Lam says, one morning Joseph came in and started telling her what he did the evening before—“as if we had a conversation every day!”

## **Understand the child’s home situation**

Sometimes a child’s negative behavior stems from stresses at home. Donna Rafanello of Long Beach City College remembers five-year-old Christian, who routinely defied his teachers. He refused to come in when outdoor time was over. When teachers asked him to participate in activities he would run away and hide.

Finally they met with Christian’s mother and learned that his parents were going through a separation involving both financial stress and a lot of screaming. “He wasn’t defiant,” Rafanello realized. “He was scared. Christian’s behavior was his way of saying ‘I am overwhelmed. I need a safe place to hide.’”

With that understanding, Rafanello says, “We allowed him time and offered empathy: ‘It looks like you need to be alone now.’ After a week, after we changed tack, he looked at me like, ‘You see me. You know me. So now I don’t have to fight you.’”

## **Gather more information**

Sometimes it takes investigation to understand a child’s behavior. A teacher once consulted Rafanello about a three-year-old girl who was persistently masturbating. They worried: Could this be a case of sexual abuse? Rather than jumping to conclusions, Rafanello called a pediatrician who said there could be a variety of reasons including simple irritation of the area.

When Rafanello met with the girl’s parents, they figured out that the soap in the child’s bubble baths was irritating her. “Sometimes we are uncomfortable talking with parents, especially about sexual things,” Rafanello says. She advises teachers to “deal with your discomfort, learn what’s normal for kids at this age, practice out loud—so you can talk frankly with parents.”

## **Approach cultural differences respectfully**

Gamburg remembers an immigrant parent who was concerned about her son playing dress-up with girls’ clothes—“he really liked one particular pink dress in the dress-up area!”

## **TO LEARN MORE**

- **Parent Services Project**, 415-454-1870, [www.parentservices.org](http://www.parentservices.org), **Stronger Together curriculum**
- **NAEYC**, 202-232-8777, [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)
- **Parents as Partners in Children’s Learning**, [www.naeyc.org/ece/1996/17.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/ece/1996/17.asp)
- **Building Parent-Teacher Partnerships**, [www.naeyc.org/ece/1999/02.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/ece/1999/02.asp)
- **Resources for Supporting and Involving Families in Meaningful Ways** (bibliography), [www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200601/FamilyResourcesBTJ.asp](http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj/200601/FamilyResourcesBTJ.asp)
- **From Parents to Partners: Building a Family-centered Early Childhood Program**, Janis Keyser, Redleaf Press, \$29.95, [www.redleafpress.org](http://www.redleafpress.org), used copies available at [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)

Gamburg reassured the mom—“It’s normal”—but could tell that it still bothered her. “Developmentally it is normal,” says Gamburg, “but culturally it’s not normal.” Gamburg decided to respect the mom’s culture even though she disagreed. “I reminded the child, ‘your mom does not want you to wear that.’”

“Part of your responsibility,” comments Kathryn Ingram, director of the Grossmont College Child Development Center, “is not to alienate parents from children and produce conflict at home.”

## **Disagree with empathy**

Even when teachers can’t go along with parents’ views, respect and empathy are important, says Rafanello. She recalls that early in her career she had a three-year-old who seemed terrified when he had a toiletting accident. She discovered that his father was hitting the child with a belt when he had an accident.

Rafanello confronted the father—“You can’t do that!”—and lectured him about the damage it would do. The result? The father was so angry that he took his child out of the program and threatened Rafanello—she eventually had to get a court order to keep him away.

Rafanello now regrets that “I never stopped to say ‘I can see how frustrating it must be to bring an extra set of clothes every day’ or ‘It must be hard to see younger kids have success.’ I wish I had said, ‘Hitting doesn’t work but here are some things that might.’”

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