

## **Bringing Further Expertise to Effective Parent Communication**

By Ginny Cusack\*

Recently, I read a section in “Family Matters,” a column by Jeanne Jackson DeVoe in the Trenton Times. It struck me as a good description of parents and the challenge of effective parent communication.

“ ‘I want to have a baby but I don’t want the baby to affect my relationship.’ A friend confided recently. She told me how she had gone out with her finance for brunch and observed a couple with a 3 year-old bicker at the next table. ‘Promise me we’ll never be like that,’ she begged her fiancée. I didn’t want to rain on her parade but I knew in my heart that she and her new husband will bicker after they have children....We’re all familiar with the strains children place on a marriage...there is the financial difficulty ...strains over housework and childcare, issues over how to raise children.... potty training and endless piles of laundry.....” (Trenton Times, March 25, 2002)

The parents and the dynamics of their family unit come to school along with the child in so many ways when a school enrolls a child. An effective partnership between teachers and parents is critical to a child’s success in a Montessori setting. More knowledge and understanding of parents is the best way to continue improving these relationships.

Teachers know that generally parents coming into Montessori infant and toddler programs are new at the business of parenting. Their needs are very different from parental needs in the Early Childhood and Elementary years. Ellen Galinsky, in her book The Six Stages of Parenthood, identifies and describes characteristics of six stages of parenting that parallel their child’s stages of development. Every Montessori teacher has experienced at least some of these characteristics while working with parents.

The couple cited above, who are not yet married, are in the Image-Making Stage—imagining what they will be like as parents. When the couple marries, has a baby, and enrolls her in a Montessori infant and/or toddler program, they are in the next stage, the Nurturing Stage. Later, when the baby becomes a toddler, the parents move to the Authority Stage. (Galinsky, 1987)

Teachers bring a vast and extensive background and a capacity to facilitate discussion of parental issues that occur during these stages to the parents. Teachers are more objective if they are not only mature, empathic, understanding, but are knowledgeable of the developmental characteristics in these stages. This gives further insights on how to address parents’ issues and concerns that go beyond the teacher’s personal and classroom experience. I will offer a few examples on how this is done.

### **Nurturing Stage**

A primary parental task during the Nurturing Stage of Parenthood is for the parent to reconcile the identity confusion between me, as my own person, and me as a mother or father. Galinsky says that “Such a resolution comes when the parent has found a

workable balance between the self as an individual and the self as a parent.” (Galinsky, 1987)

Parents of infants often enter programs because they make a decision that both parents will return to the workforce. In her interviews with many parents Galinsky discovered, “When the mother of an infant or toddler returns to work, both parents initially feel a powerful surge of guilt, of questioning. Am I or are we doing the right things? Will the mothers not being at home hurt the child, now or later? Will the baby be safe? Will the baby be loved?” (Galinsky, 1987) What an important task for the infant caregiver—to be there to support the mother and father in their decision and assist them in easing these anxieties.

### **Authority Stage**

Parents enter into this stage around the time their child enters the toddler program. However, some parents may still be experiencing issues that are more characteristic in the Nurturing Stage. For example, they may be going back into the workforce for the first time with similar anxieties as described above.

“The Authority Stage sets in more gradually than either of the two preceding stages.....The parents know that they are parents –in fact their identity is so sure that they usually can’t imagine a time of not being parents. But their question becomes, what kind of parents?...In the Authority Stage, parents confront the issue of ‘power’ in a way that they have probably never experienced in their lives.....The parent has the major task of accepting this new dimension of responsibility, accepting his or her authority over the child.” Galinsky goes on to describe what occurs during this stage, a few of which are “The Image that Children are Always Nice,” “Establishing and Enforcing Limits,” “Changing as the Child Changes” and many sections that relate to “Images.”(Galinsky, 1987)

All of the areas that Galinsky presents are within the realm of a Montessori infant and toddler teacher’s expertise. The professional knowledge and experience of the Montessori teacher is invaluable to parents when she shares, dialogues and communicates with parents according to their individual needs. Parents want to know that their child’s teacher genuinely cares and will do whatever it takes to give their child a successful experience. We can provide much to parents in a positive way.

### **Some suggestions for teachers**

- Make yourself available to the parents. This can be done by calling them, writing notes or emailing them.
- Give parents as much information as they need. It may take several conversations to reach this goal. Remember this may be a first experience for the parents.
- Share stories about their child. They want to hear the anecdotes, the little conversations their child has with another – positive and unique things about their child.

- Keep a log when you initiate a positive contact with a parent. It is easy to give more anecdotes to some parents because of the way they respond to such information. All parents thrive on this information. They will be more open to work with you when a difficult issue arises because a trust and an understanding have been developed over time.
- Talk to parents on a regular basis, not only when you have concerns or when you think the child is not OK.
- Be comfortable with yourself. Learn and develop yourself both personally and professionally.
- Give feedback to parents. Give suggestions on issues such as toilet training, eating, sleeping, and other routines that are challenging to them. Parents want to learn what to do during both the Nurturing and the Authority Stage
- Be aware of the differences in parents. Some parents are more private than others. Some take in information through parent meetings, others through reading material.
- Connect and empathize with parents and above all refrain from those judgements which are so easy to make.
- Give the parents an opportunity to share. Listen to parents. Ask them how things are going at home. They will provide insights into working with their child.
- Let parents know you genuinely care and will do whatever it takes to give their child tools for learning

**Sources**

Galinsky, Ellen, The Six Stages of Parenthood, Addison Wesley Publishing Company, NY, 1987.

Trenton Times, “Family Matters” by Jeanne Jackson DeVoe, March 25, 2002.

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