



Principle #1 Build Trusting Relationships that Lead to Reciprocal Partnerships

Things are not always as they seem if we only look at the surface. Our brain tends to react with simple summaries such as “this child has that behavior because of their parenting skills.” When we stop at “it is your fault” we miss the layers and layers of possibilities and solutions. Family engagement means that “we are in this together” not “I need you to change in this way.” Family engagement is, as you will see in the vignette below with Muriel, is about finding genuine points of connection with families.

“Where do you find that genuine connection to them as a human being?” Muriel Johnson, Teacher

*“We never know somebody's story. We can always find something to connect with when we are working with a parent or family. **I always ask myself, where can I find that genuine connection to them as a human being?** If we are always thinking that we are so different from them, “There is no way I can relate to these people,” well, this type of thinking will disable us from being able to make a connection. I may think that there's nothing that I can relate to but it's not true. For example, I think a lot of times for white people, they have such discomfort around people of color because it's as if we're alien. And what they know about us, or they think they know us from the movies, media, whatever. But they don't know me. “I'm a classical pianist, why are you talking to me about rap music?” Why? Because people can be stuck in a stereotype of what they think they know about me. But they should be thinking, “This is a human being, what do I notice about her as an individual? Wow, this woman wears beautiful shoes, just like me”. If we look at a person as a whole human being, we can always find a place to bridge—to create a connection so we can communicate with them. And as a teacher, you're with their kid. What better point to be able to build a relationship around? We might say, “Your son was singing all day, did he learn that from you? It seems like he loves to sing.” “Oh, his grandma sings to him? Thank you for sharing that with me.” The goal is that we find a place to relate to the parent and family. And to make sure that we aren't only connecting with them when there has been a difficult day or to report “He needs more diapers.” What is critical is that we are always asking ourselves, what is the content of my communication with this parent? How do I make them feel like I'm invested in their child and that I respect them as a parent and as another human being? A lot of parents bring their kids to centers but they don't feel a connection with the center or the people there. It's a place for their child to get fed and get cleaned up and take a nap, somewhere relatively safe while they can go to work, but they're not feeling like they're embraced. And yet, every family needs to feel valued and embraced.*

Our limbic brain (responsible for relational connections and emotions) is always scanning the environment to answer the question, “Do I belong here? Am I accepted and do I feel safe?” If/when the answer feels like “no,” our brain perceives threat and activates our stress response system. Muriel reinforces how important it is that early childhood professionals are always asking ourselves, “how do I make sure that every family feels valued and embraced and my language and actions are sending messages that they belong here and are valued in this program?”

Reflection/Discussion Question: When you are communicating with a parent or family, what are the small ways (nonverbally or verbally) you show them you are invested in their child, you care about them, they belong and are valued in your program?