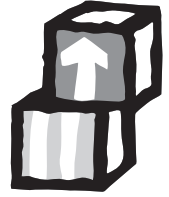


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HEAD START®



Communicating with Parents

Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Head Start Bureau

<i>Module 2</i>	23
Speaking and Listening Respectfully	23
<i>Outcomes</i>	
<i>Key Concepts</i>	
<i>Background Information</i>	
<i>Activity 2-1: Successful Conversations with Parents</i>	24
<i>Activity 2-2: Communication Helpers</i>	27
<i>Activity 2-3: Listening Well</i>	28
<i>Activity 2-4: Giving Feedback</i>	31
<i>Activity 2-5: Using “I” Messages</i>	32
<i>Next Steps: Ideas to Extend Practice</i>	33
Handout 3: Elements of Successful Communication	35
Handout 4: Communication Helpers and Blockers	38
Handout 5: Listening Well Cue Cards	41
Handout 6: Feedback	42
Handout 7: Giving Feedback	43
Handout 8: Using “I” Messages	44

Preface

Sometimes our communications with each other resemble the bumper car ride at a carnival — haphazard, fast-paced and a little chaotic... cars bumping and crashing into each other, some spinning, some jammed up in a corner, some careening wildly off on their own... most of us having a good time but a few of us picking up bruises.

Sometimes our communications work like a graceful dance — well-orchestrated and beautiful... each dancer moving in rhythm... everyone participating with purpose and focused on a common goal.

And sometimes our communications are as brief as a lightning burst — a jolt of electricity that connects two parts and changes each.

There are many metaphors for the many different kinds of interactions that people have with each other. However, all communications are alike in that they tend to have a purpose whether we are aware of it or not.

At Head Start, the purpose of most of our communications with parents is to build partnerships with families. Interactions with parents should therefore support that purpose. However, directing our communications purposefully takes skill. It is an art learned over a lifetime. This guide is designed to help staff who are in day-to-day contact with parents refine their communication skills. It will help staff reflect on the value of authentic, positive communications and provides activities for staff to practice and use in advancing their skills.

In this guide, communication is viewed as a dynamic process — two-way and mutually beneficial. Therefore, the guide focuses on the concrete communication skills of listening and observing as well as speaking and writing. Finally, it takes staff through the process of planning at the personal and program level to ensure that overall communications at Head Start work toward the purpose of furthering successful partnerships with parents. From the perspective of program management, this guide can improve the opportunities for parents and staff to work effectively together on program planning and participation.

Of course communications at Head Start are not limited to staff-parent interactions. Parents interact with each other, staff with each other, and everyone with children. While the focus here is on the partnership-building communications that develop between staff and parents, staff will be able to apply and model their skills in other contexts.

Communicating with Parents is a functional guide. It follows the groundwork established in the foundational guide, *Engaging Parents*. As parents participate in the program, it will be the quality of the ongoing communications that furthers their involvement and makes the most of the staff-parent partnership.

Preface

Overview

Purpose

*Seek first to understand and then to be understood.*¹

These words of wisdom are at the heart of staff and parent communication in Head Start. Whether working together to meet the developmental needs of children or towards realizing personal and family goals, staff and parents seek to understand and be understood. They seek to form a partnership based on mutual trust and respect.

This guide assists staff in meeting their communication goals and enhancing their relationships with parents. It is based on three central ideas about communication in Head Start programs:

1. Effective communication is the cornerstone of the parent/staff partnership.
2. Whether formal or informal, effective communication is respectful and clear.
3. To communicate well, one must consciously practice the skills involved. Plus, one must plan for it, at both the personal and program levels.

Organization of the Guide

Module 1: Communication in the Head Start Community helps participants focus on such keys to effective communication as using a positive approach, making sure to speak or write in a way that is clear and understandable, and appealing to the needs and interests of the listener. The module also emphasizes to staff that every communication with parents is an opportunity to reinforce the message that they are valued.

Module 2: Speaking and Listening Effectively builds on the first module by emphasizing another key to effective communication: respect. Participants will review the means by which one conveys respect to the other parties in a conversation. They also will practice techniques for moving conversations along successfully.

¹ *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, by Stephen R. Covey

Module 1

*Next Steps:
Ideas to
Extend Practice*



- Observe interpersonal communications between parents in a community setting (such as a community organization or support group). What are the similarities and differences between communication among parents in that setting and in the Head Start program?
- Work with a local civic group or cultural organization to find out more about cross-cultural communication practices for families in your community that your program would like to serve better.
- Make a plan to be more aware of your interactions with parents and staff, i.e., are they beginning with positive and affirming statements?
- Identify and observe what catches your attention during everyday communication with other staff members. How can you apply what you learn from these observations so that when *you* communicate with parents, you can be sure to catch *their* attention?
- Review the language used in everyday interactions — is it affirming?

Overhead 1

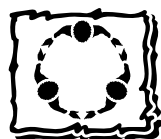
- **Every interaction is an opportunity to build partnerships.**
- **As we interact with families, we become better communicators.**
- **People are constantly acquiring new communication strategies.**

Module 2

Like tools on a toolbelt, these communication techniques are tools that a person can “pick up” and use as appropriate in various conversational settings. As with any tools, using these techniques skillfully takes practice. One must learn to recognize the appropriate moment for using each tool, and one must be able to apply them naturally and sincerely.

For some Head Start staff, the techniques covered in this module may be new concepts. For others who have been through communication skills workshops before, the techniques may be quite familiar. This module, however, gives all participants a chance to refine their use of these communication tools in the particular context of their communications with parents.

Activity 2-1: Successful Conversations with Parents



Purpose: In this activity, participants will have an opportunity to review some of the basic elements of successful communications and to practice applying them in a Head Start setting.

Materials

Chart paper, Handout 3, lined paper, pens

Process

Ask the group to share what they know about the basic elements of successful communications. To provide structure for the brainstorming, distribute Handout 3, *Elements of Successful Communication*. This handout poses four questions:

1. How do we show respect for the other person in a conversation?
2. How do we help keep a conversation open and moving forward?
3. What should we avoid doing so that we don't block the progress of conversation?
4. What cultural or personal factors do we need to take into account when we are having a conversation with someone?

Provide several minutes for participants to reflect on these questions. Then solicit responses for each question in turn. Write participants' responses on chart paper, and encourage participants to take notes on their handout.

Module 2

5. Lecturing or threatening (“Prompt medical attention is very important” or “This will be your child’s last week here unless you provide us with completed immunization forms”)
6. Avoiding or belittling another’s concern (“It’s not really so bad”)
7. Facial and body expressions that show lack of interest

■ **What cultural and personal factors do we need to take into account when we are having a conversation with someone?**

1. Each family may have its own ways of communicating. For example, in some families someone other than the parent (an elder, family member or community member) may be the key contact for family issues.
2. Body language varies among cultures. For example, different cultures make different use of eye contact, physical distance between speakers, and unspoken gestures.
3. Consider the physical arrangement between all of the people in your conversation so that everyone shares control. Be aware of how this factor can affect a conversation if, for example, one person is behind a desk, at the head of the table or standing above the other. Also be aware of the seating arrangements for group conversations. Are staff and parents seated separately or together? Would the parties to the conversation feel more comfortable sitting in a circle of chairs rather than in rows?
4. Remember that people have different learning styles. For some people, being told information is not the best way for them to receive information. Hands-on demonstrations, handouts or visuals may work better for them.
5. Everyone has a culture. Being aware of your own cultural lens through which you view the world is as important as trying to understand others.

Direct participants’ attention to page 3 of the handout, which presents a dialogue between a Head Start staff member and a parent. Ask for two volunteers to read the dialogue. Then ask participants how the staff member conveyed respect, used communications helpers, and took into account cultural and personal aspects of the parent. Also have them indicate the points in the dialogue where the staff member blocked the conversation. Have participants discuss whether either the parent or the staff member, or both, met their goals for the conversation.

Module 2

Then direct the participants to read the sample dialogue. Have them mark the communication helpers with an “H” and the blockers with a “B.”

After the communication helpers and blockers have been identified, ask the participants for suggestions on how they would rewrite the story to change the blockers to helpers.

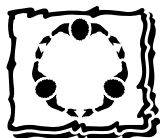
For added practice if there is time, have participants repeat the exercise using the Staff-Parent Conversation that appears on page 3 of Handout 3.

Debriefing

Summarize the session by noting that successful communication is an art that one acquires through practice. The first step is to be familiar with the tools that can help keep a conversation open and productive, and to consciously apply them. Successful communicators also learn to recognize when their statements or behavior could be blocking a conversation, and to replace these negative elements with communication helpers.

In closing, ask the participants to each choose one communication helper that they will try to use as much as possible in the next week.

Activity 2-3: Listening Well



Purpose: This activity introduces the importance of listening well in order to promote effective communication.

Materials

Handout 5, Handout 6

Process

Introduce the activity by telling participants that while they are, no doubt, good listeners, you’d like to share with them some techniques that will help them refine their listening abilities.

Recruit two volunteers for a role play. Give each the appropriate cue card from Handout 5, *Listening Well Cue Cards*. Have the two volunteers stand in front of the group and act out their parts.

Stop the role play after about three minutes and thank the volunteers. Lead a discussion using the following questions:

(To the speaker)

- Did you feel well listened to?

Module 2

- Factual feedback is best used when someone tells you something factual, without much emotion.
- Emotional feedback is best used when someone shows emotion as they tell you something.
- Solution-focused feedback is best used when someone is telling you about a problem and trying to find a solution. Note, however, that it is not your job to find solutions to other people's problems, but rather, to reflect back the speaker's own ideas. Also, solution-focused feedback only works after, or in combination with, plenty of factual and emotional feedback.

Tell participants that the group is going to practice these listening skills by doing some one-line role plays. Say that you will play the role of a parent and make a statement that requires feedback. Ask for a volunteer to join you at the front of the group. As you make each statement, the volunteer should respond using the appropriate form of feedback. Invite other members of the group to add their suggestions for appropriate feedback.

These role plays don't have to go any further than your statement and participants' suggested responses. However, if a conversation develops using effective feedback, keep the role play going.

Here are some possible conversation openers you could use:

(Statement needing factual feedback) My daughter is not acting like herself lately.

(Statement needing emotional feedback) She's driving me crazy.

(Statements needing solution-focused feedback) Maybe she should go live with her grandmother for awhile.

(Statement needing factual feedback) I don't think I passed my GED test.

(Statement needing emotional feedback) The thought of taking that test again makes me sick.

(Statements needing solution-focused feedback) I don't know if I should keep trying or not.

(Statement needing factual feedback) My landlord told me he's going to sell our house.

(Statement needing emotional feedback) I'm so tired of moving!

(Statements needing solution-focused feedback) I want to buy my own place.

Module 2

Distribute and review Handout 6, *Feedback*. Have them practice one-line role plays using the three forms of feedback (you may use the suggested conversation openers from Activity 3, page 30).

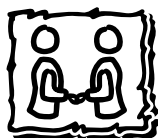
Give out Handout 7, *Giving Feedback*. Tell participants that their assignment is to look for opportunities in the next week to apply feedback skills in a conversation. Discuss with them what some of those opportunities might be (for example, with their children, at a conference with parents, with a supervisor). After they have had a conversation in which they used feedback, they should use the handout to make notes on the techniques that worked.

Debriefing

Ask participants to describe the situation in which they practiced giving feedback and how the feedback affected the conversation. Address any issues they raise concerning the use of feedback.

If participants are willing, reenact their conversations to give them an opportunity to try other types of feedback or to refine the feedback strategies they employed.

Activity 2-5: Using “I” Messages



Purpose: Participants will practice using “I” messages to help move a conversation in a positive and productive direction.

Materials

Handout 8

Process

Start out the activity by stating, “You really don’t like working with me, do you?” Wait for the participants’ response. Then ask them to describe how they felt when you said that. Explain that if they felt offended or put off, it is because you were using a kind of communication blocker called a “you” message. You were attributing a feeling to them rather than honestly stating your own feelings. “You” messages tend to turn people off because they feel they are being blamed, attacked or pigeonholed.

Module 2

Handout 3: Elements of Successful Communications (continued)

A Staff-Parent Conversation

Setting: The center during drop-off time

Staff member: Miss Pratt, the family service worker

Father: Mr. Bowen, the father of a child at Head Start

Miss Pratt's goal for the conversation: To enroll the father as a volunteer

Mr. Bowen's goal for the conversation: To voice concern about his son's ability to succeed in kindergarten.

Miss Pratt: Good morning, Mr. Bowen! You look so happy this morning.

Mr. Bowen: Oh, hi there, Miss Pratt. I'm just real pleased with how excited Jacob is when I bring him here.

Miss Pratt: He does love it. I know he's looking forward to kindergarten this fall.

Mr. Bowen: Yeah, so am I, pretty much.

Miss Pratt: Pretty much?

Mr. Bowen: To tell the truth, I am a little worried about something.

Miss Pratt: Can I help?

Mr. Bowen: I just don't know what to do to make sure he's ready for kindergarten. I'm not a trained teacher.

Miss Pratt: You know, in the parents' room we have take-home activities for you to do with your son. In fact, I'm looking for some volunteers to help me put together some new activities.

Mr. Bowen: See, one of my nieces is in kindergarten and her mother said she's not doing so well.

Miss Pratt: Oh?

Father: The teacher says she's not mature for her age or something.

Miss Pratt: Mature?

Mr. Bowen: (shaking his head): The teacher seemed to think she's going to have to repeat kindergarten.

Miss Pratt: Well, I stayed back in third grade and it didn't seem to hurt me. I wouldn't worry about it.

Mr. Bowen (looking away): I don't want Jacob to be held back!

Miss Pratt: Do you want me to show you those take-home activities now?

Mr. Bowen: Huh? No, that's okay — see you later, Miss Pratt.

Handout 4: Communication Helpers and Blockers (continued)

CONVEYING RESPECT

1. Giving people time to form thoughts, respond and complete their statements
2. Focusing on a concern that is expressed
3. Letting the others begin the conversation or do much of the talking

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT CULTURAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS

1. Each family may have its own ways of communicating. For example, in some families someone other than the parent (an elder, family member or community member) may be the key contact for family issues.
2. Body language varies among cultures. For example, different cultures make different use of eye contact, physical distance between speakers, and unspoken gestures.
3. Consider the physical arrangement between all of the people in your conversation so that everyone shares control. Be aware of how this factor can affect a conversation if, for example, one person is behind a desk, at the head of the table or standing above the other. Also be aware of the seating arrangements for group conversations. Are staff and parents seated separately or together? Would the parties to the conversation feel more comfortable sitting in a circle of chairs rather than in rows?
4. Remember that people have different learning styles. For some people, being told information is not the best way for them to receive information. Hands-on demonstrations, handouts or visuals may work better for them.
5. Everyone has a culture. Being aware of the own cultural lens through which you view the world is as important as trying to understand the culture of others.

Handout 5: Listening Well Cue Cards

Note for the Facilitator: Make only one copy. Cut apart before workshop and give each cue card to a volunteer for the role play.

Listener

For the first two minutes, do everything you can to convey that you are listening well. For example:

- Use body language that shows you are open to the speaker.
- Be attentive.
- Provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

After the first two minutes, stop paying attention. For example:

- Cross your arms.
- Tap your foot.
- Look away.
- Yawn.
- Look at your watch.
- Interrupt the speaker with a story about something similar that happened to you.

Speaker

Talk to the listener for three minutes about something happening at Head Start that you really care about (but not something confidential).

Handout 7: Giving Feedback

Situation: _____

How I gave feedback: _____

What worked: _____

The effect it had on the conversation: _____

Items I want to talk about with my coach: _____

Handout 8: Using “I” Messages (continued)

4. Don't you care that your son is missing breakfast?

5. I think you don't like the way I'm teaching.

6. I wonder why you've been avoiding me because you haven't returned my phone calls.

7. You must feel awful about not getting that job.

8. You're not reading stories to your daughter like you said you would.

9. You forgot to fill out the permission slip again, and now Julie didn't get to go on the field trip.

10. You didn't remember to bring cupcakes for the twins' birthday.

Handout 3: Elements of Successful Communications (continued)

A Staff-Parent Conversation

Setting: The center during drop-off time

Staff member: Miss Pratt, the family service worker

Father: Mr. Bowen, the father of a child at Head Start

Miss Pratt's goal for the conversation: To enroll the father as a volunteer

Mr. Bowen's goal for the conversation: To voice concern about his son's ability to succeed in kindergarten.

Miss Pratt: Good morning, Mr. Bowen! You look so happy this morning.

Mr. Bowen: Oh, hi there, Miss Pratt. I'm just real pleased with how excited Jacob is when I bring him here.

Miss Pratt: He does love it. I know he's looking forward to kindergarten this fall.

Mr. Bowen: Yeah, so am I, pretty much.

Miss Pratt: Pretty much?

Mr. Bowen: To tell the truth, I am a little worried about something.

Miss Pratt: Can I help?

Mr. Bowen: I just don't know what to do to make sure he's ready for kindergarten. I'm not a trained teacher.

Miss Pratt: You know, in the parents' room we have take-home activities for you to do with your son. In fact, I'm looking for some volunteers to help me put together some new activities.

Mr. Bowen: See, one of my nieces is in kindergarten and her mother said she's not doing so well.

Miss Pratt: Oh?

Father: The teacher says she's not mature for her age or something.

Miss Pratt: Mature?

Mr. Bowen: (shaking his head): The teacher seemed to think she's going to have to repeat kindergarten.

Miss Pratt: Well, I stayed back in third grade and it didn't seem to hurt me. I wouldn't worry about it.

Mr. Bowen (looking away): I don't want Jacob to be held back!

Miss Pratt: Do you want me to show you those take-home activities now?

Mr. Bowen: Huh? No, that's okay — see you later, Miss Pratt.

Handout 4: Communication Helpers and Blockers (continued)

CONVEYING RESPECT

1. Giving people time to form thoughts, respond and complete their statements
2. Focusing on a concern that is expressed
3. Letting the others begin the conversation or do much of the talking

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT CULTURAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS

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- Provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

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Speaker

Talk to the listener for three minutes about something happening at Head Start that you really care about (but not something confidential).

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Situation: _____

How I gave feedback: _____

What worked: _____

The effect it had on the conversation: _____

Items I want to talk about with my coach: _____

Handout 8: Using “I” Messages (continued)

4. Don't you care that your son is missing breakfast?

5. I think you don't like the way I'm teaching.

6. I wonder why you've been avoiding me because you haven't returned my phone calls.

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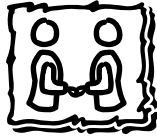
8. You're not reading stories to your daughter like you said you would.

9. You forgot to fill out the permission slip again, and now Julie didn't get to go on the field trip.

10. You didn't remember to bring cupcakes for the twins' birthday.

Module 3

Activity 3-3: Applying a Readability Formula



Purpose: This activity is designed to help participants evaluate whether a print sample is written at a level that will successfully communicate information to the intended readers.

Coach Preparation Notes:

This coaching activity should be used with staff who have reading skills at or above the high school level and who are comfortable with basic math computations such as division and averaging.

Materials

Handout 9 (page 3)

Head Start writing sample (selected by facilitator)

Process

Use the information on pages 49-50 to review the values and limitations of readability formulas.

Note that Head Start staff need to ensure that written materials they supply to parents match the reading abilities of those parents. To reach the broadest possible range of parents, staff may want to aim for a 6th-8th grade reading level.

Distribute page 3 of Handout 9, *Instructions for Using the FOG Index*. Using a sample from the Head Start program that you have collected yourself, walk participants through the steps of applying a readability formula.

Direct participants to collect a sample of writing that their Head Start program uses with parents. This sample should contain narrative writing of 500 words or more. Instruct them to apply the readability formula to at least two, and preferably three, different 100-word sections.

Coach Preparation Notes:

Encourage participants to do this exercise in pairs so that they can check each other's math work. Also, see that participants have access to a calculator and know how to use it to compute averages and do division.

Handout 12: Making Simpler Sentences (continued)

7. It is requested that you attend our orientation function which commences at 8 p.m. tonight on these premises. At this meeting, staff will explain Center procedures, disseminate critical materials, and solicit parent input on a variety of matters concerning curricula.

8. This is in reference to your child's excessive tardiness. Children derive optimum benefit from our program when they have full exposure to the curriculum. Henceforth, please endeavor to deliver your child to class in a timely manner. Should you require assistance, contact our Family Worker. She will be glad to collaborate with you to resolve the situation.

9. Disciplining children, based as it must be on the use of parental power, never influences; it only compels children to behave in prescribed ways for the present moment, usually leaving the child unpersuaded, unconvinced, and unmotivated. A more effective parenting process entices children into the desired behavior patterns.

10. Handicapped children are eligible to enroll in our Head Start program. Our services for special needs children involve recruitment, evaluation (including screening, assessment, and diagnosis), implementation of the Individual Education Plan process and facilitation of the child's transition to public school.

Planning the Communication Process

Outcomes

As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

- Analyze their program's structures for communicating with parents,
- Assess one's preferred communication style and identify strategies for communicating successfully with those who may or may not share that preference, and
- Create a plan for improving communication processes that build on program strengths.

Key Concepts

- Effective communication with parents is a two-way process that is positive and appealing.
- Effective communication with parents requires that staff listen, speak, and write in a way that is respectful of person and culture.
- Effective communication requires conscious planning at both a personal and program level.
- Both the climate and the structure of a Head Start program are key to effective communication with parents.

Background Information

Communication is something that can take place without conscious thought or planning. *Effective* communication, however, requires both. In the Head Start setting, staff and parents are constantly interacting with each other. Whether or not these interactions help to build partnerships depends on the degree to which the parties to the communication apply the listening, observation, speaking, and writing skills that communicate respect and create a positive space for sharing.

There are two ways that programs can support effective communication between staff and parents. The first is by developing a climate for effective communication, and the second is by creating the structures that support information sharing.

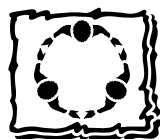
Module 4

“Climate” refers to the accepted ways of working and behaving that affect how communications are carried out. This can include such elements as the pace of the workday, the casualness or formality of the workplace, or the number of opportunities each day that staff and parents have for coming into contact with each other.

“Structures” include such things as bulletin boards, newsletters, calendars, phone trees, or logs — consistent and thoughtful methods of sharing basic information that enable both staff and parents to have access and give input.

Since family involvement is so crucial to all Head Start programs, it is to be expected that all programs will have some sort of climate and some structures in place that support staff-parent communication. However, all programs can benefit from occasional examination to determine whether any modifications or improvements to the overall communication environment can be made.

Activity 4-1: Communication Quilt



Purpose: Participants will analyze their program’s overall communication patterns by creating a visual representation in the form of a quilt.

Materials

Four-inch squares of construction paper in three colors (enough for at least 2-4 squares in each color per participant), chart paper, markers, tape. If you will be doing the optional extension to the workshop, you will need squares in three additional colors.

Process

Previous activities have examined how individuals interact or communicate with each other. This activity focuses on communication patterns at a program level. These questions will be considered: What are the types of messages that are conveyed within this Head Start program? Who are the intended receivers of these messages? What are the different ways that messages are sent?

Explain to participants that in this activity, they will have an opportunity to create a visual representation of their communication practices in the form of a communication quilt. This is a way of taking an inventory of current practices in order to identify what is working and what areas might need improvement or change.

Distribute the colored squares to participants. Give them instructions for each color of square, as follows:

1. For the first color: Write words or draw pictures that depict the messages that Head Start would like to send to every parent. For example: parents are their child's first teacher; Head Start supports the family's own agenda.
2. For the second color: Write words or draw pictures that depict characteristics of the parents who are the intended receivers of Head Start messages. For example: teen parents, fathers, working parents with little time, or families whose primary language is Spanish.
3. For the third color: Write words or draw pictures that depict the strategies used to convey messages. For example: body language, newsletters, home visits, modeling.

To demonstrate the instructions, you may wish to prepare a few quilt pieces in front of the group, using words or pictures that participants suggest. Allow 5 - 10 minutes for participants to complete this task. Participants may wish to work alone or in small groups.

Place several pieces of chart paper together on the wall. Have participants tape the quilt blocks in random order on the chart paper. When the quilt blocks have been taped up, suggest that participants take a few minutes to review the quilt and the ideas represented on the different squares of colored paper.

Debriefing

Once participants have had an opportunity to review the finished quilt, lead them in a discussion using the following questions:

- What impressions do you have about the type of messages that the program conveys?
- What impressions do you have about the range of characteristics that parents have?
- What impressions do you have about the range of strategies used to convey messages?

If through this discussion participants think of other messages, parent characteristics or communication strategies, write them on appropriately colored quilt blocks and add those squares to the quilt.

Module 4

Optional Extension

Hold up in front of the group the squares you have prepared in three additional colors. Note that these squares represent additional elements to Head Start communication that make it a two-way process:

- Messages parents send to staff (Color #4)
- Staff characteristics (Color #5)
- Strategies parents use to convey messages (Color #6)

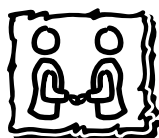
Tape the blank squares, in alternating colors, around the border of the communication quilt. Have participants suggest words or pictures that describe “messages parents send to staff” and write their suggestions on the appropriately colored squares. Fill in the other squares in the same manner for “staff characteristics” and “strategies parents use to convey messages.”

Ask these questions:

- How are some of the messages that parents send to staff similar to or different from the messages staff send to parents?
- How are staff characteristics similar to or different from parents?
- How are the strategies that parents use to communicate to staff the same as or different from the ones staff use to communicate to parents?

If Activity 4-1 is being followed by Activity 4-4, leave the quilt on the wall so participants can refer to it.

Activity 4-2: Communication Environment



Purpose: Participants will complete an observation task in order to reflect on how their program’s physical environment supports communication with parents.

Materials

Handout 14

Process

Ask participants to name the different parts of their program environment (i.e., the outside of the building, the entry way, the playground, etc.). Distribute Handout 14, *Communication Environment*, and ask participants to decide on two different parts of the environment that they would like to observe.

Talk briefly about how things in our environment communicate messages. For example, by placing magazines, books, and flyers in the entry area we may communicate that we have important information to share or that we value reading. Families sitting, laughing, and talking outside may communicate that this is a place to gather and feel at home.

Emphasize that the examples given are interpretations. In reality the messages from our environment will mean different things to different people. For example, a family may not choose to read or get information from the materials in the entry way. They may value having a lively discussion as a way of exchanging information and getting to know more about the program.

Explain that the task for the participants in this activity will be to interview a parent to find out how he or she interprets the Head Start environment.

Remind the participants that as staff persons, they already are aware of the information that the program wants noticed. Their goal in this activity is to find out how messages are being received by parents.

Have participants follow the instructions on the Handout for interviewing parents.

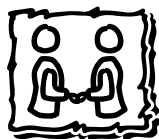
Debriefing

Ask participants the following questions:

- Which messages stood out to the parents you interviewed? Why do you think they picked up on that message so clearly?
- Are there messages in our program that are important that weren't being clearly understood by the parents?

Module 4

Activity 4-3: My Communications with Parents



Purpose: Participants will examine how they prefer to receive and give out information. They will use this information to reflect on how communication can best proceed between two people who may or may not share a preferred communication style.

Materials

Handout 15

Process

Assign participants into pairs. Give each participant a copy of Handout 15, *Communication Styles*. Direct the participants to complete page 1 by themselves. They should then work with their partners on page 2, which guides them in interpreting their responses and also presents discussion questions.

Debriefing

Begin by asking participants what the exercise taught them about their preferred communication style. Did it confirm something they already knew?

Some participants may say that the results were not conclusive (for example, if they circled items from two or more quadrants). It could be that they are equally comfortable with more than one style of communication. It also could be that this brief exercise simply doesn't work for them. Ask these participants if they have a sense of their preferred communication style despite having no "answer" from this activity.

In your discussion, cover the following points:

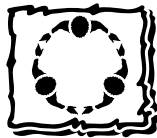
- Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are four of the different ways we communicate. None is "better" than the other. They are all useful, and they are all used by nearly everyone. Which style is most appropriate for a given situation depends on the preferences of the people involved and the circumstances.
- A person's preference for communicating is simply that — a preference. It is not tied to intelligence or ability. Some people may believe (or may have been taught in school) that communicating by speaking and listening is not as "smart" as communicating by writing and reading. That is not true. Intelligence is in the content of a message, not in the particular style that is used to communicate it.

- At Head Start, all four modes of communication are used. Staff need to be sensitive to the fact that just as they have communication preferences, so do individual parents. Staff can make their communications with parents more effective by being aware of both their own and others' preferences.

Finally, ask participants to consider the following scenarios:

- What if someone whose preferred style is writing needs to communicate with someone whose preferred style is listening?
- What if someone whose preferred style is speaking needs to communicate with someone whose preferred style is reading?

Activity 4-4: The Communication Climate



Purpose: Participants will work in teams to analyze how their program's overall environment supports strong staff-parent communication.

Materials

Handout 16, pens

Process

Begin by stating that Head Start staff and parents exchange a lot of information in a variety of ways — in brief chats and long conversations, in face-to-face meetings and over the telephone, in group meetings and in one-on-one conferences, to name a few. The program environment can contribute to the effectiveness of these exchanges. This activity looks at ways the program supports this ongoing process.

Break participants into groups of three. Give each group a copy of Handout 16, *Creating a Climate for Communication*. Have each group complete the handout together.

Debriefing

When all of the small groups have completed the handout, reconvene the large group. Ask one of the small groups to describe the idea it explored for promoting effective communication, as well as the options they brainstormed. Then encourage the other participants to contribute feedback.

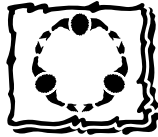
Repeat this process for each of the small groups.

Module 4

Trainer Preparation Notes:

Encourage participants to reflect on their list of ways that programs already are promoting effective communication (from Part 1 of this exercise). Some of these successes may be useful examples to share with other programs exploring similar strategies.

Activity 4-5: Systems for Sharing



Purpose: Participants will look at their program's formal structures for information sharing to determine how effectively they are reaching all parents.

Materials

Handout 17, pens

Process

Divide participants into groups of 5-8.

Trainer Preparation Notes:

If possible, include parents in this activity. Also, if participants come from different centers, group participants together by center.

Begin the workshop by stating that all Head Start programs have information-sharing systems in place. These systems may include logs, phone trees, calendars, bulletin boards, newsletters, or other ways that communications are centrally conveyed. These systems ensure that basic information is shared in a consistent and thoughtful way that enables both staff and parents to have access and give input.

The goal behind these systems is to ensure that all critical information reaches all affected parents and staff. But do they do this consistently? That is what will be examined in this activity.

Give each participant Handout 17, *Systems for Sharing*. Walk through the questions on page 1 of this handout so that the groups are comfortable with the process for filling out the form.

Direct each group to work together to complete a form for the information sharing systems in place at their programs. Let them know that each group will need to select a recorder and someone who will report out on their process.

After participants have had approximately 20 minutes to complete page 1 of the handout, reconvene the large group. Record the responses of each group on chart paper as they report on the following:

- Which system did your group examine?
- What are your recommendations for improving that information sharing system in your programs?
- Who was not being reached through that system and how will those improvements ensure that they receive information?
- Who will need to be involved if these improvements are to take hold?

Then direct participants to page 2 of their handout. Ask them to draw from the ideas presented in the large group discussion to develop a work plan to implement changes in their communication structures.

Debriefing

Note that there is nothing wrong with having overlapping, redundant ways of sharing information. The problem occurs when there are holes in the communication-sharing system — where some parents or staff are not involved in the information-sharing. This activity, which involved evaluating and planning for more effective information-sharing, is something that staff need to engage in periodically to ensure that essential information is shared with all families. This same process can be repeated with parents to gain their input into the communication planning process.

Module 4

Next Steps: Ideas to Extend Practice



- Establish a communication work group of staff and parents. This committee could discuss and examine communication issues from a variety of perspectives in order to make recommendations for improving communication within the program. The work group could use Handouts 15, 16, or 17 as a way to open discussion.
- Think about a persistent “hurdle” or concern in your program and the underlying communication issues that are a part of it. Seek out views from several different sources – staff, parents, and professionals in the community. Look to see the values behind the differing viewpoints. Plan how to address the concern more effectively the next time it comes up.

Handout 14: Communication Environment

Instructions: Select an area (physical space) in the Head Start program. Under “Message Senders,” list any objects and/or people in that area that send messages to parents. Approach one or more parents who are in that area and ask them if they would be willing to answer a few questions for a training exercise that you are doing. Then ask them the questions below. After the conversation, record notes on what they said in the space under “Parent Reactions.”

- When you are here (in this area), what do you notice first?
- What “messages” does this area send you?
- How would you describe the atmosphere here?
- Is this an area that you want to spend much time in?

EXAMPLE

Area: Entry Hall

Message Senders: Wall Posters, Receptionist, Chairs

Parent Reactions: I like how some posters are at eye-level for children. Receptionist is so friendly. Chairs are not comfortable, I never see anyone sitting in them.

Area:

Message Senders:

Parent Reactions:

Area:

Message Senders:

Parent Reactions:

Continuing Professional Development



Communicating effectively with parents requires continued personal and professional growth and a broad-based knowledge of the program and community. Below are some approaches to expand and build upon the communication skills developed in this guide:

- Meet with a local mental health agency to find out about effective communication approaches for parents and staff who are experiencing stress or other difficulties.
- Form a committee of staff and parents to review and recommend key program materials for revision.
- Community colleges and universities (through their continuing education programs) offer course work in effective communication practices such as:
 - **Interpersonal Communication:** Includes approaches such as empathic listening, boundary setting, and other skills of effective person-to-person communication.
 - **Public Speaking:** Covers topics such as developing credibility with an audience, speech delivery, and building personal confidence.
 - **Practical Writing Skills:** Provides an overview of grammar and sentence structure as well as planning messages for particular audiences.
- Business trainers offer a number of one-day courses to improve and maintain effective communication skills. These can be taken for Professional Continuing Education credit through local, state and national licensing boards. A few such organizations are:
 - **Skill Path Seminars.** *Assertive Communication Skills.* (1-800-875-7545).
 - **National Seminars Group.** *How to Communicate with Confidence and Clarity.* (1-800-258-7246).

Continuing Professional Development

Materials

Channing L. Bete Co., Inc. *How to Improve Your Listening Skills* (1995). Channing L. Bete, Co. Inc. 200 State Road, South Deerfield, MA 03173-0200. 16 pgs., \$1.00 (if you are ordering more than 100, the cost is \$.55 each and the covers can be personalized). This easy-to-read booklet impresses upon readers the effectiveness of good listening skills and their link to stronger relationships and the prevention of costly mistakes. It explains how to overcome barriers and use eyes and ears to “tune” into the speaker’s messages.

Dean, Christiann. *Parent-Caregiver Partnerships: Communication Workshops for Parents and Child Care Providers* (1992). Cornell University Media Services, Resource Center, #7 Business and Technical Park, Ithaca, NY 14850. Telephone (607) 255-2080. 131 pages, \$25.50. Developed for the Cornell University Parent-Caregiver Partnership, this publication lays out five, two-hour workshops designed to enhance communication between the child-care provider and the parent. The workshops titles are: Partnerships Between Parents and Caregivers, Listening Well, Saying What You Mean Clearly and Respectfully, Resolving Conflicts and Handling Blame and Criticism, and Panel Discussion and Work Session.

ERIC. *Communicating with Culturally Diverse Parents of Exceptional Children* (1991). ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22901-1589. Telephone 1-800-328-0272. 2 pages, \$1. This ERIC Digest explains the need to be culturally aware when dealing with parents of exceptional children. It discusses using language parents can understand, cultural sensitivity, and the need to provide parents with information. It also stresses the need to support parents as they are learning to participate in the system and to encourage parental participation at home.

PLAN, Inc. *Just Say It! How to Write for Readers Who Don’t Write Well* (1992). PLAN, Inc., 1528 Pennsylvania Ave., S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003. 132 pages, \$54. This manual describes the tools and techniques for creating easy-to-read print materials. It includes practice exercises and an annotated bibliography.

Resources

Robbins, Harvey A. *How to Speak and Listen Effectively* (1992).

American Management Association, 135 W. 50th St., New York, NY 10020. 80 pgs., \$10.95. This book is based upon the premise that individual and team success is influenced by quality relationships and quality communication. *How to Speak* uses a down-to-earth approach to the process of communication, as explained in its four chapters: “Why Don’t People Communicate Better?”, “Eliminate the Negatives,” “Accentuate the Positives,” and “Practice Makes Communication Easier.” The book will be useful for anyone involved in communication, including parents, educators, and administrators.

Scholastic, Inc. *Parent Communication TIPS* (1992). Early Childhood Division, 730 Broadway, New York, NY, 64 pages, \$9.95. This eclectic accumulation of sixty, one-page tips gives readers a jump start to involvement in their children’s development and education. All tips are reproducible send-homes. *Parent Communication TIPS* is split into four sections: “Learning through Play,” “Health and Safety,” “Cooking and Nutrition,” and “Special Situations.” The publication provides references to other organizations.

Slack, Jennifer. “Teaching Tips for Learning Centers: Welcoming Parents into the Classroom.” *NHSA Journal*, Summer 1993. Vol. 12, No. 1, pages 47-50. This article offers insights for Head Start teachers on involving parents as observers and volunteers in the classroom. It includes ideas on communication that enable staff and parents to keep in touch.

Resource Organization

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). 10801 Rockville Pike, Rockville, MD 20852. Consumer Help Line 1-800-638-8255. This organization has a wealth of information on delays and disabilities in language, speech, and hearing. It has print and video resources and also makes referrals to care providers as well as to community and state resources.