

CHAPTER 8

Speaking Out Supporting Families in Advocacy

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Ms. Lorena recently started a new position in the toddler room at her child care center. Right away, she notices that Mauricio, 22 months old, is a born comedian. Last week, for example, he accidentally walked into the room's soft chair. When a few of his classmates laughed, Mauricio repeated the action again and again until those children—and a few more, and then Ms. Lorena—were all laughing.

But today, when his mother, Joanna, brings him in, she seems worried. This past weekend, Mauricio's 18-month-old cousin was in town. Joanna watched her nephew playing with Mauricio's blocks and stacking them high. She watched him at dinner and noticed how easily he fed himself. "Mauricio never slows down to play with blocks," she says, "and meals are so messy!"

Ms. Lorena does not yet know Mauricio well, but she nods as Joanna talks. "I am just learning about Mauricio," she says. "You have so much to teach me! If you have concerns, there are some local programs I can connect you with. If you'd like, we can talk you through the steps involved in reaching out."

Ms. Lorena is new to her setting, but she is building an important relationship with both Mauricio and his family. She knows that Joanna is her child's first teacher and lifelong advocate. She also knows that as Mauricio's early childhood educator, she has an opportunity to support both him and his family in building skills they will use for the rest of their lives. These include advocacy. As Ms. Lorena partners with Joanna in advocating for her child—both in the classroom and the community—Joanna gains the confidence and skills necessary to effectively articulate the needs, desires, and wishes that she has for Mauricio (Baba et al. 2016). This outreach also strengthens Ms. Lorena's knowledge and practices related to responsive family collaborations and her own advocacy efforts.

In its simplest definition, advocacy means "speaking out." Early childhood educators have the familiarity, expertise, and skills that make them key advocates for the children, families, programs, and communities they serve. Teachers also have an ethical responsibility to advocate for the children in their care (NAEYC 2011), and advocating for young children and their families is one of the ways educators demonstrate their professionalism (NAEYC 2020b).

Educators can empower families to become effective advocates too. Over a child's life, families will need to speak out for them in a variety of ways. These include:

- › Talking with health care providers to address physical and/or mental health needs
- › Meeting with educators, administrators, and/or specialists about supports children may need in the classroom
- › Advocating for services or programs to help children grow and thrive
- › Speaking up to ensure communities are safe, healthy, and equitable

As Ms. Lorena works with Joanna to access a developmental screening for Mauricio, she is assisting Joanna in her beginning advocacy efforts. This will benefit Mauricio and his family as he moves through preschool and beyond (National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, n.d.).



Supporting and giving voice to diverse perspectives strengthens the network of resources available to all children and families. Teachers establish collaborative relationships and ensure equitable access to social service agencies and community resources that strengthen families.

Strategies for Supporting Families in Advocacy

Parenting a baby, especially a first child, can be overwhelming. By helping Joanna recognize why and how her knowledge, beliefs, and experiences as a parent matter, Ms. Lorena provides an important mirror for Joanna that reflects back the image of an articulate and powerful advocate. This type of relationship can help families see themselves as competent and as experts about their children and their lived experiences. It also offers a sense of support and safety in conversations about children (Henderson, Kressley, & Frankel 2016).

Teachers of infants and toddlers can use several strategies to encourage and help develop their families' advocacy skills. A discussion of each follows.

Honor Family Expertise

Families play the primary role in their children's development and learning. As such, educators should look for a variety of ways to learn about and from their knowledge and experiences (NAEYC 2019, 2020a). These can include the following:

- › Collecting information about family expertise and interests through enrollment forms, informal discussions, family conferences, and parent council meetings
- › Asking families what they need or want for their children and suggesting resources or programs that can help
- › Using a family's goals for their child as a source of information when planning the classroom curriculum and providing individualized, responsive care to each child

Through these efforts, families learn that their expertise can make a difference for their child—a realization that is often the first step to advocacy.

For example, as Ms. Lorena works with Joanna to access early intervention services, Joanna learns about available community resources that can answer her questions and potentially assist her child. She also learns that her knowledge of Mauricio both

matters and spurs her son's teacher to action. This realization enhances Joanna's sense of competence and confidence as an advocate over time.

Listen to Families' Concerns

A teacher's day is busy, but it is important to prioritize family partnerships. Research shows that when educators encourage families to engage with them and the program (e.g., by inviting them to volunteer and attend meetings or by sharing what their child is doing in the classroom and showing interest in what the family sees their child doing at home), families are more likely to participate in the program by spending time in the classroom (Barnett et al. 2020). This gives families a closer look at routines, materials, and learning experiences in the classroom. Benefits abound for the educator and program too. They gain vital information about a child and family, which can inform decision making and practices.

Listen to the information families share about their children and take note of any underlying emotions or observations. Families may find it easier to show they are excited or worried about something that is happening than to describe what they're feeling. Then restate their concern and suggest action; for example: "It sounds like your child care subsidies are being cut, and you aren't sure why. That sounds really aggravating. There is a community meeting on child care coming up. Would you be interested in attending?" Keep a notepad near the classroom entrance to write down next steps that arise from conversations with families.

Keep Abreast of Available Resources

Families report that they trust early childhood educators and look to them for information about child development and community resources (Zero to Three 2018). When educators connect families with services, those families get a sense of the range of programs, resources, and systems in the community. This information can eventually inform further advocacy work. For example, early intervention is publicly funded and regulated. As Joanna gets involved with this system, she can use her experiences with Mauricio to help others in her community access programs or to push for funding or legislation at the policy level.

Advance Equity

In some ways, the concepts and approaches used by programs for family engagement and advocacy may be rooted in a primarily White, English-speaking, educationally and economically privileged mindset (Borgh et al. 2022). Educators should be willing to challenge these mindsets. For example, disagreeing with educators and administrators can feel incredibly disrespectful to families from many communities, so teachers might consider how advocacy can take place in ways that do not pit family opinions against educators'. One avenue is to gather information from families in a way that lets families offer their thoughts and opinions about their children and the program before educators or administrators offer their ideas.

Examining programs and seeking information from families about their social and cultural beliefs and practices can help in this effort to advance equity (NAEYC 2019). Questions to ask yourself, colleagues, and leaders include these:

- › What do ideas like advocacy and leadership look like for the families a program serves?
- › What are the pressing issues, concerns, or topics for families in the program?
- › In what ways are families engaging in advocacy already? Are families comfortable advocating in ways that educators suggest, or are they looking for other ways to share their thoughts?
- › What beliefs and assumptions guide the strategies and approaches a program uses to nurture advocacy? Are those beliefs and assumptions grounded in or biased toward White, English-speaking, educationally and/or economically privileged experiences and perspectives?
- › Are there particular groups who are left out of or underrepresented in advocacy efforts?

Seeking answers to these questions and acting on the insights gained will help center equity in advocacy efforts—both in the early learning program and the community.

Strategies to Expand Advocacy Efforts

Partnering with families to advocate for their children's growth and development is essential. Policy advocacy is slightly different but also critical. It means speaking out to support (or oppose) specific policies being considered or enacted within the broader local or national community. Often, when early childhood educators are called to do policy advocacy, families can offer valuable insights by sharing stories that illustrate the impact or promise of proposed actions for infants, toddlers, families, educators, and programs. Joining diverse perspectives and voices can lead to a far more powerful impact than one voice alone.

One caveat: Some early childhood settings may have policies and procedures in place that restrict the ways teachers can talk with families about policy advocacy. For example, public funding may prohibit particular kinds of policy conversations. Talk with your program's leadership to identify if—and how—local, state, and national advocacy opportunities can be shared with enrolled families.

Joanna's ability to share her concerns and questions about Mauricio's development gives Joanna the confidence to begin broadening her voice. For example, in conversations with other families, Joanna learns they have some common questions about parenting and child development. While staff is responsive to these questions, Joanna looks for additional resources. She begins advocating for a family library at the center. She solicits donations, then manages the checkout process once the library is opened.

When Ms. Lorena mentions that many early childhood educators are tempted by openings and better pay offered at the local elementary school, Joanna begins to advocate for higher wages for the teachers at her center. Building on her experiences, she talks with the director to learn more about the center's budget and staffing issues. She talks with other families to generate enthusiasm for action. She then partners with Ms. Lorena and the center's director to bring a group of staff and families to the state capitol to talk with policymakers about increasing investments in child care.

With Ms. Lorena's support and encouragement, Joanna has learned that her voice matters—for her son and so many others.

Think About It

Consider these questions to help you think more deeply about ways to advocate for families and support their own advocacy efforts:

- › Consider how you encourage families to speak out. How do you gather or recognize their expertise about their children? How do you use the information they share? Can you support their advocacy efforts during your everyday interactions?
- › Think about a success story: When did you connect with a family in a way that supported their advocacy?
- › How familiar are you with the network of services your community offers young children? How well are you connecting families to these services?
- › What are some critical policy issues facing your community right now? In what ways could the families in your program advocate for these issues? What can you do to nurture their efforts?

Try It

Follow up your reflection with these action steps:

- › Consider all you know about the children in your setting (favorite toys, developmental milestones, social and cultural contexts, and more). Then consider what their families know that you might not (changes in family structure, nighttime routines, their children's relationships with family members and others outside the family, upcoming events). Brainstorm ways to build and expand your understanding of each family's context. Identify the regular times you connect with families. How do you use those times to learn about children and build a family's sense of expertise? Be intentional in the ways you nurture each family's confidence and sense of themselves as experts and advocates.
- › Work with others on your staff to reflect on your program's family partnership strategies and leadership opportunities. Do you notice any biases or gaps, including those related to race and culture? Look at data related to how these strategies are

being used and if they are effective for each and every family in your program. How can you bring more families into the conversation?

- › Learn about the early childhood resources in your community, particularly how families can connect to child care subsidies, nutrition services, health services, and early intervention services.
- › Learn more about how families are advocating for early education and care. Visit www.thinkbabies.org/policy-priorities-child-care for examples. How might these messages inform your own advocacy efforts?

When educators partner with families to best nurture young children, early education programs become learning environments for more than just the children. And with the skills and expertise they build together, educators and families become better able to educate other community members and even policymakers to make services and policies better supports for young children.

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