

Parent Perspective: Bridging the Jargon Gap

By Lindsey Engelhardt

Ten months ago, I put on a new pair of shoes. I had been in the early childhood education field for about a year and, thanks to my job as the McCormick Center's marketing coordinator, I had absorbed loads of insights about early care and education. But then I became a parent.

Luckily, with insights from the new field I had joined, I knew how and where to start looking for care for my baby. I carefully selected three programs to visit, and eagerly told my husband and friends all about them. Their reactions surprised me. Blank looks complemented weak smiles and fake head nods of understanding. **Why weren't they as excited about these programs as I was?**

One friend shared my enthusiasm. As I wondered why, I had an "ah-ha." She taught 3-year-olds. We were speaking the same jargon! Aside from her, my husband and friends didn't understand the benefits of each programs' features.

I began to act as a translator for some of the jargon my husband and I encountered during our search.

The **feature** of accreditation holds the **benefit** of objective evaluation. The program meets the criteria set by a national early childhood education association. That's a good sign of a quality program!

Another **feature** we encountered was long-term staff. The **benefit** of a long-term staff is that children thrive on routines and benefit from being cared for by the same people, who will develop a deeper connection with and understanding of the children as opposed to having care provided by people coming through a revolving door. Long-term staff is also a sign of commitment to the program and a healthy organizational climate.

The **feature** of extended hours has the **benefit** of the program opening early and staying open late so parents can drop their children off before work and pick them up afterward without any care scheduling concerns.

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is another **feature**. The **benefit** with DAP is that the children's learning will be on an individual basis. They will be encouraged and challenged, but not pushed or forced.

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My personal favorite **feature** we frequently encountered was an educational environment. The **benefit** of educational environments is that the children get an education through interactions and play, before they even attend “school.” These programs have a curriculum; there is learning intentionality with everything the children do throughout the day. Many parents are unaware of just how much children can learn, beginning at the moment they are born!

By changing how I talked, the reactions of my husband and friends changed. The blank stares turned into full conversations. **I realized that as I shared more about the programs, I was actually educating those closest to me and advocating for the field as a whole.**

Have you been left with blank stares when talking to parents inquiring about your program? Try the following steps to bridge the communication gap:

1. **Write down the features of your program.** Include all of your program features and highlight the ones that set you apart from other programs.
 - Is your program located in a central area?
 - Are your staff highly qualified? Do they hold early childhood credentials?
 - Do you have low staff turnover?
 - Are the program hours extended for working families?
 - Do you offer various programming options?
 - Are you nationally accredited?
 - Do you participate in a Quality Rating and Improvement System?
 - Do you implement a curriculum to support children’s learning and development?
 - Are your adult-child ratios low?
 - Do you offer convenience services for families?
2. **Poll your current families.** There’s at least one reason why they choose your program over the many other early childhood options. Find out why! You may be surprised to see what they say.
3. **Consider the “so what?”** There’s a reason why you’ve opted to have these features as a part of your program. Are you sharing those reasons with your current and prospective families? By asking yourself “so what,” you’ll begin to look at your program from a family’s perspective.
4. **Be intentional about speaking in this new language when talking to prospective families.** Be sure to make the connection between your program features and the benefit to families when families inquire about your program.

By using language that’s understood outside of early childhood education, you can build a bridge of understanding with your families and others outside of the field. Not only does this create an awareness of the strengths of your program, but it also educates people on the importance of our field as a whole. Turn your parents into advocates by changing your language and educating them on what the jargon truly means.

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