

How can I ensure that parents are getting the information that they need to feel successful?

Debbie Eberth E.C.E. C

Biography



Debbie Eberth is an Early Childhood Educator Certified with twenty-two years experience working with children zero to twelve years of age. Her past experiences range from working in daycare settings, working directly with teen moms and in supervisory positions. During the past three years she has shifted her direction to presenting and facilitating parenting programs. This is a passion as it incorporates her love in working with families and presenting information that will support them in their role of parenting. Three years ago, Debbie accepted a position at the Ontario Early Years Centre: Brant. The Ontario Early Years Centre serves as a gateway for parents and caregivers to get answers to questions they may have, as well as information

on available programs and services, including those for children with special needs. At the centre, Debbie offers workshops to parents, educators and caregivers, works in a resource/toy library, supports families by offering information and provides assistance to the general public who need early years supports. Debbie also spearheads the Ontario Early Years Launch Pad at Central School. It is for this reason that she has been asked to provide information to this action research project. This is her first action research project to date.

Abstract

Following her passion of helping parents become better at their role, the author describes various techniques utilized to improve information available for parents. Through frequent contacts at the Launch Pad, parents have been able to learn from the author and from other parents. The success of the project is evident in the collected quotes compiled at the end of the article.

Background

When I was first approached by my superior Melanie Graham, Supervisor, Ontario Early Years: Brant, to participate in an action research project, it became clear to me that my role in working at an Ontario Early Years Launch Pad had great significance to the families and children that we support. The data that will be collected from the various Launch Pads should demonstrate the importance of early intervention and support to the early years of a child's life. A direction to fund early years programs is a result of information derived from the Ontario Early Years Study of April 1999 co-chaired by Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain & J. Fraser Mustard. As an Early Childhood Educator, this validates what we do. It also demonstrates that our front-line work with families in parent/caregiver/child drop-in programs is of key significance. The study identified that parents are their child's first teacher; that parents do want the best for their children; and therefore, having programs that are accessible to every family will provide each child with opportunities to a "best start" towards their

lifelong learning. As an Early Childhood Educator, I wanted to be sure that I was giving the children and parents the tools and the information they need so that their children could achieve success in the future. Every parent wants their child to be “the best that they can be”. It is my role to provide the support to help them achieve their goals for their children.

This is how the question that I am suggesting as a focus for this paper was formed. “Are the parents getting the information they need?”

I remember sitting around the table of our Action Research group and expressing my concerns regarding how parents were often given information in the form of fact sheets or a brochure. The parents often left the paperwork behind, leaving me wondering if I was giving the parents the opportunities they needed to learn new skills and get the information that would help them. I also expressed my concern that it was not often that a parent did ask for information, therefore I was determined to find a way to achieve my goal in having the children and parents learn and grow while they were in the Ontario Early Years: Brant Launch Pad.

Data Collection: Ontario Early Years: Brant Central School Launch Pad

Written Observation for November 22, 2004

“As the parents, caregivers, children and I were sitting around the snack table on the date in question, we shared stories of the children when they were babies. We discussed how smart they are and the silly things we do with them. I used this opportunity to inform them of the training that I have taken. I explained that although we may have fun and do silly things that are enjoyable to our children, some parents do not. This time in a child’s life is very important for them to form the trust that they will need in their future relationships. We also talked about brain development and I drew a picture for them on how the brain absorbs information at different ages of a child’s development. The parents were very interested in this. It was a very good and interactive discussion. Jessica (mom) made the comment, “I guess I am doing good things when I act like a fool. I have to do that more often.”

Written Observation for November 30, 2004

“Emily (child) was having a disagreement with one of the other children and started to cry, (Emily goes to kindergarten). Just as she was telling her mother, Mrs. Ford, the kindergarten teacher, came in. She suggested that we use “KELSO the Frog”, a conflict management program that the school incorporates to help Emily problem-solve through her issues with the other child. Emily, her mother, and I went over and discussed the situation. It worked out really well. Later I brought the chart over to show all the mothers because they were interested as well. This showed how the school, our drop-in program and the parents can develop a partnership, united in our approach to education and teaching principles.”

KELSO

KELSO is a conflict management program used by students to solve problems. The program was devised by a California therapist and has spread across the continent. According to KELSO, there are three kinds of big problems. There are problems that are dangerous, some that are against the law

and scary problems. If a child is faced with a big problem, they should always go for help and tell an adult. If the problem isn't one of the above then the child know that they can use one, two or three of KELSO's Choices to help them work out the problem. They include: going to another game or activity; sharing and taking turns; talking it out; walking away; ignoring; apologizing; telling the person to stop; negotiating and/or waiting and cooling off.

"It became apparent to me that having information such as was shared in this instance can be incorporated into the early years drop-in program now, to act as a foundation of social understanding for our children. Introducing these problem-solving strategies now and utilizing and building upon the same principles during the school years, will assist in the shaping of well-adjusted adults who will be able to problem-solve more effectively."

Written Observation for December 1, 2004

"Today we made flour ornaments with the children to take home for their holiday trees. I asked which of the mothers liked to bake and the first one who responded with an "I do" got to do the activity with the children. All of the mothers sat around the table and helped the children with putting in the ingredients and rolling out the dough. I find it is always a challenge to encourage the mothers to allow the children to do their own artwork if it was something special. So, on this day I let the children make one and parents got to make their own. The parents really seemed to enjoy this opportunity. Afterwards, we put their "creations" on the cookie sheets. I commented on how beautiful the children's were. I explained that they were beautiful because the children did it themselves. While the children were working on their cookies I remarked on the time and fun that they had making them. The message that I was endeavouring to make to them was that the process is more important than the finished product.

JR (mother) said, "I enjoy making crafts too. Sometimes I just can't help myself." I told her I would offer extra materials so that the mothers could enjoy as well."

Written Observation for December 8, 2004

"During playtime today Pam (mother) asked if I thought "Chai was okay compared to other children her age." I told her that I thought she was doing great but suggested that we take a closer look. I brought her over to a bulletin board that I have set up featuring information on developmental milestones. As we were going through the materials there were some points that Pam did not know if Chai could do, (i.e. hopping on one foot). I explained that she may or may not have mastered these skills yet as they are dependant upon her life experiences. If she was never given the opportunity to try, then it would be really hard to learn. I also explained that when planning for my day I try to give the children as many experiences as I can, keeping in mind the milestones. I suggested that next time we play a game or are sitting at circle that we watch and see if Chai can do these things. I made sure that I stressed that children learn at different rates and that I only post this information on the bulletin board as a guideline. It did not seem that Chai had issues of great concern, only areas that could use improvement. Her mother seemed happy."

Written Observation for January 3, 2005

“We are back after a two-week break for the Christmas vacation. I really missed the children and families. A new mother came to the drop-in with her little girl. They appeared shy and spent a lot of time on their own playing with the toys. All of a sudden, Heather (mother) and Yelena (mother) went down into the doll-centre area. All of the parents started to talk. Before I knew it, they were talking about toilet training and speech issues. It was very interesting to hear Heather and Yelena repeat almost the exact same words that I have expressed to them in the past. They were explaining to the new mother (Michelle) that children need to demonstrate signs of readiness before toilet training should be considered. Heather and Yelena also suggested that having everyone who supports the child involved in the process is ideal as it adds to the understanding of the toilet training concept and does not confuse the child. It was also explained to Michelle that toilet training can be one of the most frustrating times for a parent and child, but it is with gentle persistence that everyone benefits. It was wonderful to hear these parents mentoring this new mother and expressing much of what I had said to them in months past. To provide extra support, I was able to give Michelle a package of information pertinent to toilet training that I took from our parent information area. All of the Ontario Early Years programs provide literature, leaflets and flyers as an added service to the families who attend our programs. At the OEYC Central School Launch Pad, I have a variety of resources that parents can access including two binders filled with a wide range of information on various topics. Parents can select and take home materials that are pertinent and useful to them. This is a core service of an OEYC Parenting Program.”

Written Observation for January 4, 2005

“Everyone is back today. They all had many stories about Christmas. They all had a good time. The best story I heard was from one of the children. He said the best part of Christmas was having dinner with his family. His mother was a little disappointed because she had bought so many fun toys for him. I was surprised to hear her response. A discussion with other parents then followed about the cost of toys and Christmas overall. And how sometimes we overdo it. We all thought it was really special for a child this young to have this special memory of his family. It kind of made her look at it in a different light. How important family time really is to children it is the time we spent with our children they treasure not the amount of toys or gifts received!”

Written Observation for January 11, 2005

“Had one of the parents call me at the OEYC: Brant to let me know that she would not be in. Her baby is sick. I thought it was great that she took the time to call me. She thought I would like to know and didn't want me to worry about her and the baby. I think I have made a friend. Another parent, Betty, who has a school-aged child is having a hard time with Cody's homework. He has a project due and the parents are to help with it. It's about trains. She was asking for help so everyone brainstormed together and gave her a hand. I think it opened everyone's eyes to the future and how they would have to deal with this same issue one day. I did take the opportunity to let the parents know that the children in school are required to do homework at an early age. I suggested a program called Family Math, which is offered at the Early Years Centre: Brant. The program allows the children and parents to experience a six-week math program with exciting and fun math activities After each session the family gets homework to do at home.”

Written Observation for January 13, 2005

"We have a Co-op student that started today and her name is Sharon. Watching her gave me time to reflect on what we do and why. She seemed really out of place and she didn't know what we do. The parents were engaged with their child(ren) and she didn't know where to go. She started to sit with a parent and child and played. At the end of the day she was worried about her day. She didn't think she did much. We talked about her day and shared what took place. Sharon said, "All I did was play" and I told her, "You showed the parents the importance of play. You were a positive role model for the parents and during play, think of all the things you talked about with the children and parents." Sharon said, "They asked a lot of questions about my schooling." I told Sharon that she educated the parents about the importance of the early years and what Early Childhood Education is all about. Sharon said, "I don't know when to step in and discipline." I told her there is a fine line and to lead by example, role model and think about health and safety, as this comes first."

Written Observation for January 16, 2005

"Today the children were busy in the block area. This is the first day that they really took their time and made a car. This was quite the learning experience for the children as well as the parents. The children were having a hard time sharing and cooperating. I was on the other end of the room and most of the mothers were sitting at a table near by. I stood by and watched to see how the mothers would handle the situation. They started quietly to tell them to share, it started to get a little louder and then the famous words came out, "If you don't stop fighting you will have to put them away." I walked over to the children and asked what they were making. I told them how cool it was and sat down to watch them play. By this time the mothers were watching. Kobe put a block down and Emily didn't like it there so Kobe yelled. Before his mother could say anything I showed them how to share. It went like this for a while. I then excused myself to make snack. The children started again but this time two of the mothers went over! During snack I commented to the children again on how cool the car was and how they had learned to work together. I also told the parents how sharing is a learned behavior and that children need to be taught how to do it. I let them know how to help their children and to continue to support their child with sharing."

Written Observation for January 18, 2005

"I tried something new today. Usually during circle the children want to play with the props for a long period of time. There is no time and to be honest I didn't want to lose anything so the answer was always, "Not right now." I have tried to set the tables up with props but again something always goes missing. So today I put the whole box on the table and had the mothers sit with their children. The mothers and children picked what they wanted to do. This was a great experience for both the mothers and the children. They all had a positive experience interacting with each other. We will certainly do this more often. It was interesting to see how surprised the mothers were on how much their child(ren) knew."

Written Observation for January 25, 2005

“We had many families today for a total of twenty-one. The children seemed to be busy but the parents were just sitting at the table. I wanted the parents to become more involved so I asked if we could use the gym. While in the gym I asked the parents to pair up with the children. We had two-legged races and later played with the balls. I am surprised that we didn’t disrupt the rest of the school, we were laughing so hard that I had to get Kleenex for the tears of joy. The children were quite happy to be in the gym and the parents quite enjoyed it as well. It was a wonderful opportunity to use and to show the parents how much fun it is to be silly with your children.”

Written Observation for February 2, 2005

“Today at the snack table one of the children ate something that they normally would not try, let alone eat. The mother was surprised. Before I could say anything one of the mothers explained that I bring new and different snacks all the time. She never thought Dylan would eat it, but he always tries. She then said, “Debbie says that children should be given the chance to try foods more than once. They may like it after they have tried it several times. She also explained that that peer pressure at such a young age is still there, and children are more likely to try if all their friends are eating it too. She then let them know that she now buys healthier food because she has seen how much Dylan enjoys it. When she was talking she sounded just like me! I guess they’re listening after all!”

Written Observation for February 2/05

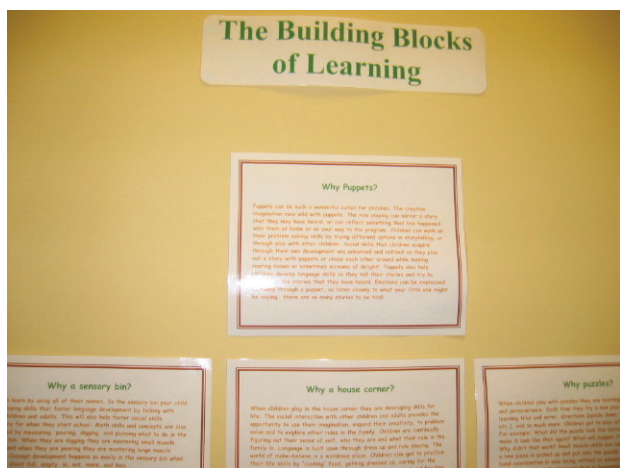
“One of the parents is involved with Children’s Aid Society (CAS). She told me that she goes to court in March, then, hopefully, she does not have them in her life.”

Conclusions

In conclusion I did discover that I am providing opportunities for the parents to get the information that they need in the following ways:



- Information bulletin boards
- Formal and informal conversation on a daily bases
- Information binders and brochures
- Networking with other parents and staff
- Displays and information on the walls
- Through positive role modeling
- Professional development opportunities
- Community partnerships



Parent Input (Written directly by the parent)

“On Valentines Day, it turned out that it was a snow day, so all school and OEYC: Brant Centres were closed. My sister, mother and I have been bringing our children to Central location since the summer of 2004. On the snow day they were disappointed that Debbie’s was closed so, all us got together at my sisters and had a party of our own. We made different pictures and colouring pages, Valentines with stamps and stickers. We had our own circle time. We sang songs and played games that we

had learned at Debbie’s. For snack we had Valentine cookies and veggies and dip. The children had so much fun and enjoyed another party the next day at Debbie’s.”

Kindergarten Teacher Input (Written directly by Alice Ford, Brantford Central School)

“Since the Ontario Early Years Centre: Brant launch Pad opened at Central School, I have observed how Debbie communicates with the parents. She has used obvious resources such as pamphlets, magazines and books, to help parents with necessary skills in raising children and helping them understand the natural progression of developmental stages in young children. She has a wealth of information at her fingertips for parents to take home and study. Although these are wonderful resources, one has to wonder how many of the parents actually read the information once they get home.

A far more effective means of communicating, in my opinion, is by engaging the parents in conversation during play or snack time. I have approached Debbie with concerns about certain children in my kindergarten class whose parents meet next door with her. I have heard her talking to the parents with suggestions how to handle certain situations. She approaches the subject in a non-threatening manner, often using hypothetical circumstances to make her point. When Debbie wants to discuss a particular issue, she will tell parents about a situation that she has experienced and how she handled it. By implying that she has first-hand knowledge of a predicament (whether

real or not), establishes a rapport with the parents and they seem more inclined to talk about their own problems, insecurities or uncertainties. This allows Debbie to direct the parents to the best resource for the families to deal with their problems.

I have noticed that the parents who come to the centre on a regular basis have certainly grown in confidence. From a group of rather quiet observers, I now hear them laughing and enjoying lively conversations when I pass through the room. Debbie has earned their trust and it seems that they see her as a mentor. I am very impressed with the success Debbie has had with this program. From a slow start, I am seeing a steady growth in the number of parents who are taking part. Word of mouth is spreading and more parents are enjoying the company and information being shared by all.”

Alice Ford
Kindergarten teacher
Brantford Central School

In Closing

As I reflect on the past months and read through my notes in my journal to get the required information needed for the action research, I am overwhelmed with the sense of community and the trust that has formed during my time at the Ontario Early Years: Brant Central Launch Pad. I am glad that I took part in this important research. I did not realize the amount of information that is given on a daily basis with out the parent or me realizing it. I truly believe that with the information that the parents are receiving and the activities that the children are engaging in will have a positive impact on the families we serve. I enjoy each and every day watching the children and the parents learn and grow into the best that they can be. It is with great enthusiasm that I look forward to the future and I am thrilled that I am part of such a great centre

Reference:

Mustard, J. F. & McCain, M.N. (1999) Early Years Study, Final Report. Toronto: Government of Ontario