

How can I, as an Early Years' coordinator, build relationships and a sense of community for families when at the Ontario Early Years Centre?

By Tamara Pedley, B.A., E.C.E.

Biography



For over 15 years, Tamara has worked with children and their families in many different roles. Presently, Tamara is the Early Years Program Co-coordinator for The Ontario Early Years Centre – Haldimand & Norfolk (OEYC). The OEYC-H&N presently supports 1210 different parents/caregivers, 1830 different young children and operates 11 different sites in H&N. Tamara graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and a Certificate in the Prevention of Early School Failure from the University of Western Ontario, and has her Early Childhood Education Equivalency Letter. She volunteers her time on School Council at her children's school and is a Girl Guide Leader for Sparks. Tamara and her husband are the parents of three beautiful and active children. She participates in many family activities, which include; biking, hiking, camping and swimming.

Abstract

This paper looks at how the staff's interactions and programs of the OEYC promote opportunities for the development of family relationships and community involvement. The OEYC is the hub of the community and offers a one stop shopping experience.

In October 2004, when I first found out about this Action Research Project I was very excited. My excitement for the project has continued to grow. This project has given me the opportunity to share my passion for working with families. Research by Dr. Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain has proven that parents are the first and best teacher for their child(ren) and that it all happens in the early years.

During the research project, I changed positions from supporting rural drop-in Play and Learn Programs to the OEYC Program Coordinator. The changes presented some challenges in the flow of my research. When I shared this with Diane Morgan and the Action Research Group (Journal Entry, February 25, 2005), she had mentioned that I had the advantage of taking on a global question and rolling up my experience of both positions. I started to wonder what impact I had on the OEYC sites. I felt that I had a positive influence and was successful in supporting families in their relationship and community building. I just do what I do but what was that? So after a lot of self-reflection, I determined that it is the way I develop relationships with families, professionals and other members of the community. I kept returning to the same question 'How can I make the OEYC a hub for families and one stop shopping for all their needs, questions or concerns?' (Journal Entry, February 28, 2005)

When a family comes into a program, I am positive, respectful, welcoming and enthusiastic. I am attentive to the family; get down to the child's level and treat the children with the highest regard. I

welcome the families as if they were visiting my home. I offer mothers, fathers or caregivers a warm cup of coffee or tea and make sure that they know that there is a snack available any time throughout the program. I provide the family with a tour of the OEYC and share information about our services. OEYC services include:

- Play and Learn drop-in programs,
- Workshops,
- Toy lending
- Resource library,
- Quality child care information,
- Informal child care registry,
- Early literacy workshops,
- Parent Info Line,
- Car seat clinics
- Much more.

I address the family members by name and make sure I introduce them to other families in the group. When I introduce a new member to the group I try to match the new members with families that share similarities. For instance, if a new mother comes in with her baby I would make sure that I would introduce her to another mother with a baby. In this instance, a new baby always sparks conversation. The grandmothers at the OEYC are eager to hold and chat with the mothers – just doing their grandmother duty (Marcelle, Anna Melick, Grandmas, Waterford).

So when they talk they can share what is happening in the children's lives and it will be similar. It is great for families to share stories and realize that their terrific toddler is just normal and not doing things to drive one crazy!

Also, I introduce the children to the other children. In our society today where the families live great distances from each other, there is that intergenerational loss of role modeling, support and guidance. Also, church is less attended so some families have lost the sense of community. Even though there is more connection by telephones, computers, television and travel there is less interaction with one another. (Kammen, 1998, page 12). Humans are social and need connection to others.

How can the OEYC provide this connection and sense of community?

Once the families feel comfortable I start to establish a positive rapport with them. Based on our Parent Survey in 2004, and 2005, 40% of the families say that their first reason for attending the OEYC was because of the great staff.

Once a parent feels comfortable they often offer to utilize their talents to support the program. Mothers sing songs, read stories, bring in activities, facilitate workshops (Michelle, Anna Melick) or co-facilitate programs at the OEYC (Patti R., Simcoe). Grandmothers bring special Christmas goodies to share, show other members of the group crafts. Another grandmother invited all the families to her house to see her seven tables and hundreds of Christmas village ornaments and share in a Christmas Potluck (Ruth, Houghton).

Sometimes a father will come in and talk about his career or volunteer position. Some fathers offer their time to help repair items or build new toys (Dana, Jeff, Simcoe). This is the important part to make the families who attend the OEYC feel like it is 'their' centre and community. They take ownership, feel pride, are welcomed, can share their strengths and feel great about themselves. When parents feel great then they parent positively.

Remember back to when your child(ren) were small. Wasn't it a great relief when someone ogled over your new baby, or someone held your baby so you could actually sit down, have a cup of tea and talk with another adult? Or remember when your toddler was busy playing and not tugging at your pant leg to play or climbing on the table? Or remember when other families went through the same issue or behaviour challenge that your child was going through? When a loved one is sick or passed away people would know, share prayers and bring items. What a relief to know that you are not the only one or that you are missed when you are not there! It is all about belonging, being cared for, sharing and being a part of a community.

Remember your first day of school? Remember your child's first day of school? The fear of what is it like, where do I go, what are teachers? Is my child safe, do they care; are they going to get lost, will they be okay without me? The uncertainty of not knowing the answers can be nerve-wracking.

Now, imagine that you have been going to the school since you were small to play at the OEYC with your mom, dad, caregiver or other family members. You are familiar with going through the doors, saying hi to the secretary as your parent signs in. You walk down the big, long hall and into a classroom or library filled with toys, activities and FUN! There is a consistent, friendly face that welcomes you, that brings wonderful items for you to experience and remembers to ask you about your pet dog. You even see your mother smile, laugh and play with you. At first you were very frightened of that loud piercing bell but now, you know that it means it is time for the big kids to go outside and play. You see hundreds of these big kids rush in the hall and rush outside. You also know that your big brother or sister will come to visit and play with you. WOW! You get to see them in the middle of the school day and get a little cuddle and tickle. Also during this time many other adults called teachers come in and say nice things about what you are doing and chat to your mother. It's great to have your school of fun, see your siblings, teacher visits and one day you will be able to stay in the big kid's class when you go to school in two more years. You have already met the teacher, visited the school classroom that you will be in and even know how to get there because you have been going to the big school forever.



Grandma Joan, Rose and Carson

In Haldimand & Norfolk Counties we have eight OEYC sites in schools either in the Grand Erie District School Board or the Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic School Board. Having the OEYCs at the schools is valuable for the above reasons but also provides a place and opportunity for families to meet. *A hub of the Community, the one stop shopping experience.*

There are many wonderful relationships formed while at the OEYC programs, but the one that I would like to focus on is quite unique—the intergenerational relationship. At the OEYC program at Anna Melick Memorial School there is a grandmother, Joan who has sole custody of her 2-year-old granddaughter, Rose, and 7-year-old grandson, Carson.



Grandma Linda, Dad Grant, Grandmere Marcelle, Owen and Alexa

When Joan comes with Rose she can have a coffee, relax and talk with other adults and grandmothers. Rose gets to play, sing songs, meet friends to learn to socialize and even see her big brother at recess. At Christmas, Joan brought in baked goodies to share and her carefully crocheted craft items to sell. Some mothers asked if Joan could teach them how to crochet and commented on how delicious the treats were and asked for the recipes. When Joan’s husband suddenly passed away, the group and school shared in her loss and gave her support. Joan said, “The OEYC was my lifeline when my husband passed away suddenly.” (Journal Entry May 16, 2005)

At the same program a grandmother, Marcelle, brings her two grandchildren Alexa and Owen. During recess, the father, who is a teacher there, and their other grandmother, Linda, who is an educational assistant at the school, come in and play with the kids. The father, Grant McDonnell, shares his thoughts:

“I have been blessed to have a very wonderful and unique opportunity. I can regularly witness the thriving atmosphere of Anna Melick’s OEYC, where my two preschool children excitingly attend. How lucky am I as I get to work in this environment as a Grade 7/8 teacher and see and partake, at recess, in the enriching activities my children and others I may one day teach at the OEYC. It is a true family affair as both grandmas get to also share in this nurturing atmosphere. The combination of family and education builds a great sense of community at such a crucial age for our children and students of tomorrow!’ (April 11, 2005)

Linda Gray adds, “I doubt that Alexa and Owen think of it as unusual that their father and two grandmothers are at the school whenever they attend the OEYC. It is unique to us, though; having three generations all attending the same school to do what each of us is stationed to do at this particular time in our lives. Each of us has a different reason for being there, each fulfilling a role.” (April 11, 2005). Marcelle adds, “It’s great here, they love it, the kids play and

look forward to coming each week!"
(April 18, 2005).

At another one of the OEYC sites at St. Mary Catholic School, there is a similar unique relationship. The mother, Carmen, brings her children Grace and Evan, and during the program, the father, who is a teacher at the school and the grandmother, Nancy, who is the secretary at the school, come in to visit the children. Their grandmother dotes on them, walks the baby and shows off her beautiful children to her coworkers. Many times I have heard, 'Nancy, it must be great that you can see your grandchildren during the day!' (April 12, 2005). Carmen says, 'Grace looks forward to seeing dad' and Nancy says, 'Grace looks forward to coming, she thinks that it is school' (April 18, 2005). Jennifer Schooley, the Mobile Coordinator for the OEYC mentioned on April 22 at Action Research Training that, "Nancy holds her grandson or feeds him so Mom can play with her older child'.



*Grace, Grandma Nancy Mom Carmen, Evan
and Dad Greg*

Robyn at our Action Research Training, April 22, 2005, shared that a grandmother from Woodstock who takes care of her granddaughter every day comes to the Brantford OEYC to play each day the program runs.

Also at St Mary's OEYC location the custodian, Pat, comes in to visit her beautiful granddaughter, and sometimes brings in her guitar at recess and plays and sings for the children.

A survey question was handed out with the annual OEYC Parent Survey in March 2005, the question was 'How well does the OEYC support grandparent/child relationships?'

Responses were as follows:

'The program encourages grandparents to be involved with their grand children which in turn helps parents.'

'I believe that the program is helping me as a grandmother to keep my grandchildren and it is very helpful, coming to the OEYC.'

'OEYC provides excellent program opportunities for grandparents to get involved with children.'

'OEYC has no boundaries between grandparent/parent/child care giver they are a treated equal and any info pertaining to a certain relationship is readily available.'

'I find that the OEYC is very supportive in the interaction of grandparent/child relationships by supplying many opportunities not only in hand on, educational toys/supplies, but also being very supportive of an individuals needs.'

'I think the OEYC does well with promoting these relationships. Storytime and crafts are good bonding activities.'

At our OEYC sites one of our many services that we provide is guest speakers. Many of our guests are our community partners (Public Health Unit, Speech and Language Department, Haldimand & Norfolk REACH and many more.) This provides an opportunity for families to meet the professionals in a less-threatening way, ask questions they may be concerned with, without having to make that intimidating call. Once again it is the introduction and starting the rapport, adding more to the community. One of the most important things a staff person can do is get the information that the family requests and follow through when they say they will do something.

One of the rewards of working in an OEYC is seeing the growth and development of not only the children but of the adults. One instance that really stands out for me happened at the Simcoe Site, on Thursday, May 5, 2005. A mother who has been visiting the OEYC had asked me to watch her toddler so she could offer her assistance to another mother in distress with a toddler and new baby. Why did this instance make me teary-eyed, swell with pride and confirm my passion for my career? This single mother who offered her assistance came to the OEYC the year before in the similar situation; a toddler and new baby. We at the OEYC provided that support, now she is stronger and is sharing her newly-learned skills with someone else, a sense of empathy and compassion. This is what it is all about, providing opportunities for children and adults TO PLAY – TO LEARN – TO GROW?

Another instance when I felt overwhelming emotion is when driving the OEYC van in the Mudcat Parade in Dunnville (Journal Entry, June 11, 2005). In front of me there were mothers, fathers, grandmothers, children walking, toddlers being pulled in wagons and infants being pushed in strollers all from different communities, but had the common bond of the OEYC. It was an absolutely breathtaking sight, everyone standing united wearing the OEYC t-shirts, waving to the crowd, smiling, and talking to the parade watchers. Staff were interacting with the crowd and handing out information and talking with the families. As I was driving I could hear comments as “I love the OEYC!”, “We go there!” “Excellent programs!”. What a sense of pride to know that the work of the OEYC staff and the programming is appreciated by the families. The families who come to the programs sell the program by showing their commitment to community by being in a parade, talking with other families and sharing their positive experiences. As Margaret Mead, anthropologist, once said, “I must admit that I personally measure success in terms of the contributions an individual makes to her or his fellow human beings”.

Throughout this process I have realized the importance of the work that I do. The program provides the opportunity but I provide the environment and the facilitating the relationship building. Through my personality, respectful demeanor, role modeling, I support these families in building relationships and a sense of community. This experience has been a wonderful opportunity to focus on my career role, self-reflection and growth in the families and program, (Journal Entry, January 3, 2005). I would recommend everyone to participate in Action Research if they had an opportunity to do so. It was very rewarding for me to take note of the growth in the families and myself.

What are the next steps?

To continue to provide a warm and welcoming place for everyone in the community who wants to give their children an early start to their health, well-being, and learning.

To provide a place to access free information and programs.
To provide a place to have fun with your children.
To provide a place To Play, To Learn, To Grow

References

Kammen, C. & Gold, J. (1998) Call to Connection, Bringing Sacred Tribal Values into Modern Life. Salt Lake City: Commune-A-Key Publishing.

Pedley, T. (2004-2005) Personal Journal.