

PARENTS AS PARTNERS: CREATING A CULTURE OF RESPECT AND COLLABORATION WITH PARENTS

by Sarah Werner Andrews

Parents as partners is a slight digression in title from the grace and courtesy theme of the journal, but it builds its argument around the concept of cooperative relations between the parents and the school. Sarah speaks of the perception of the teacher and parents as each being unique and particular to the life and personality of each child. The teacher must see the positive in the child and have a natural respect and dignity so both want to act for the greater good and, likewise, must treat the parents as wanting to make their own contribution to their child as part of the whole-child community. Sarah goes on to suggest that diverse views of the same child are one of the most valuable offerings of a school. These varying perspectives override the linear view that assumes one perspective, which can be one-dimensional, reductionist, and can lead to labeling.

The principles of grace and courtesy are based in respect. During our Montessori training, we become conscious of what it means to “respect the child” and we begin the process of inculcating this respect so that it may infuse all of our interactions with children. As time passes, this becomes second nature, at least with the children in our community. As we grow and develop as Montessori teachers, these “habits of mind” necessarily extend to frame our work with parents and other professionals so that we can create a culture of respect and collaboration that surrounds the child with love and support.

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A fellow Montessori teacher once said that if there were ever a job teaching at the Montessori School for Orphans, she would be the first to apply! She was mostly joking, but I think we have all, from time to time, had similar feelings; working with the children is enough, without also taking on cultivating and supporting the parents as well.

However, we also recognize that as long as there are children, there will be parents! If we can free ourselves from regarding parents as burdens or obstacles, and learn instead to think about parents and families as inspiring resources and partners, we can all better support the child. After all, it is the child that makes us who we are: teachers and parents.

I began thinking about “parents as partners” about twenty-five years ago, when I met Dr. James and Mary Andrews, who were working on a book describing how to use a family-based approach to helping children with special needs. They blended their own areas of professional expertise—Jim, communication disorders, and Mary, family therapy—to create a model for supporting children while also supporting the family. They received grants for their project, trained

graduate students, finished their book, *Family-Based Treatment In Communicative Disorders: A Systemic Approach*, and traveled all around the US and Canada working with students, teachers, and other professionals. They came to Portland in the mid 1990s when I was working with the Oregon Montessori Association and gave a workshop to Montessori teachers.

We’ve learned to dig a little deeper and to look at each child individually in order to determine how “good behavior” manifests for each child at different stages in development. We learn how to support each child so that “good behavior” doesn’t simply mean doing what one is told, but instead comes from a place of respect and dignity within the child and a desire to act in a way that supports the good of everyone.

At first glance, this may not seem like a good match for Montessori teachers, but what I found was that every time I opened their book and read a section, if I just substituted “Montessori teacher” for “speech-language professional,” it was a perfect fit! This became the

model that I used successfully for most of my Montessori career. By the way, the *reason* I met Jim and Mary Andrews was because I was dating their oldest son—we decided we were also a perfect fit, and we ended up getting married!

The family-based model that Andrews and Andrews developed involves a systemic perspective; the child is part of a greater system, and that system operates most successfully when all parts are involved and supported. The systemic perspective recognizes that change in any one part affects all of the other parts, and that family involvement benefits the child's experience.

Montessori teachers are no strangers to the systemic perspective. Our understanding of the prepared environment is systemic; we use an equilateral triangle to represent the child, the materials and activities, and the trained adult. We like to use an equilateral triangle to remind ourselves that we are no more important than the children, or the materials; we all are of equal significance, and if any one section is out of balance, it has an effect on the whole.

The systemic perspective also recognizes that family involvement benefits the child's experience in school. Most Montessori schools agree that family involvement benefits the child, but I'll bet that many of us in this room are also thinking, "As long as the family does what I tell them to do!" This way of thinking is more linear than systemic. The linear model also encourages parent involvement, but parents are typically asked to carry out tasks or instructions given by the school or the teacher:

"You can have your child pack his own lunch in the morning."

"You can arrange your child's toys in baskets on shelves."

"You can help by shoveling bark chips at the next work party."

For most of us, these are very familiar statements. They sound positive, and using our trusty "positive phrasing," tell the family exactly what they can do. This is better than telling parents what *not* to do, but why is it that we often don't get the results we want? A linear approach to parent involvement subtly places the school in a higher position of authority. The parents' role and perspective is

often devalued, sometimes to the point of conflict or parents being labeled “uncooperative.”

One of the realizations we make as teachers is that the conventional understanding of “cooperation,” or “good behavior,” means that children do what they are told. However, with the children, we’ve learned to move beyond those conventional, linear understandings. We’ve learned to dig a little deeper and to look at each child individually in order to determine how “good behavior” manifests for each child at different stages in development. We learn how to support each child so that “good behavior” doesn’t simply mean doing what one is told, but instead comes from a place of respect and dignity within the child and a desire to act in a way that supports the good of everyone.

Isn’t this what we want for our parent community as well? Wouldn’t we like parent involvement to come from a place of respect, dignity, and a desire to participate in a way that supports the good of everyone? Perhaps it just doesn’t work for a family to come in and shovel bark chips on a Saturday, but how else can they help? Instead of requiring that every child pack his own lunch, what if we helped each family come with their own ways to support independence at home? What if we met each family where they are at, and with respect and dignity, and supported their strengths while providing opportunities for development?

A systems model values each member’s perspective, expertise, and authority. There is no hierarchy, and no one is asked to give up their expertise. It is understood that each part of the system has something valuable to contribute. In order for the systems model to work, we have to change how we think about the family’s perspective and to listen as they share what is important to them. These shifts in thinking will create new “habits of mind” so that any and all of our interactions with parents are based in respect and collaboration.

From One Truth to Many Truths

The four shifts in thinking described here are from Andrews and Andrews (1990). The first shift in thinking is to move from “one truth,” to “many truths.” This is known as a *polyocular view*: many eyes. With a polyocular view, different interpretations of the same



event are accepted as true. The phrase *polyocular view* has been used by Steve deShazer (1985) and many others (Andrews and Andrews). In our work with children, this means that each person who interacts with the child has their own perspective of that child:

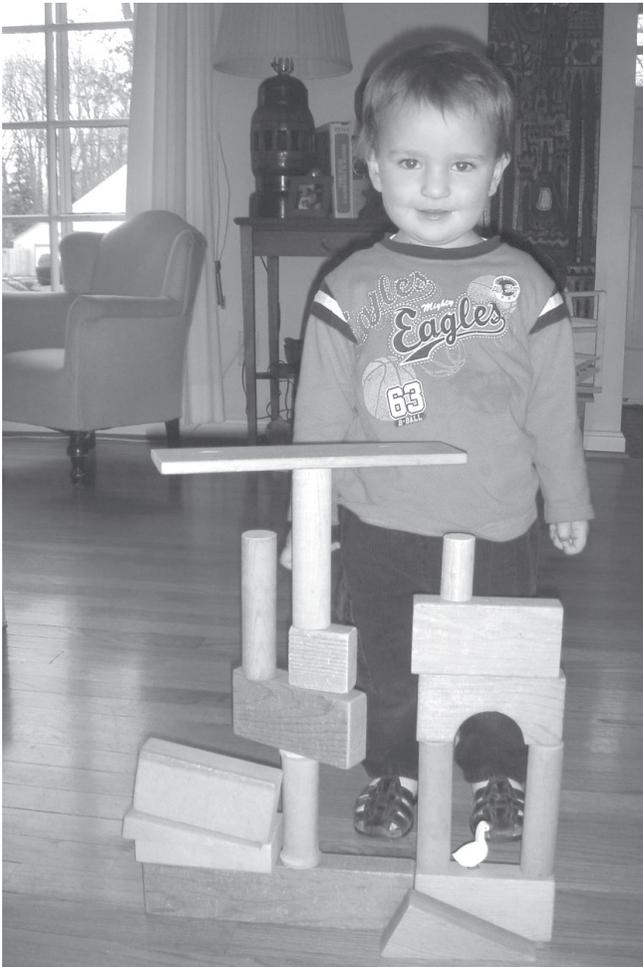
- In school—the teacher, assistant, before or after care leaders, administrator, school secretary
- At home—the mother, father, siblings, cousins, grandparents
- Each member of the community has their own perspective of the child, and each perspective is accepted as true.

Here's another example of the polyocular view:

- Dr. Montessori gives us a view of the *universal* child—the universal principles of child development that guide our work

- Parents give us a view of the *individual* child—their unique, very special child, who is different than every other child in the universe
- Teachers offer a view of the *social* child—this child in relation to all of the other children in the classroom or school community

Each of these points of view is accepted as true. Recognizing each perspective as true, instead of right or wrong offers more ideas to consider and more options for change.



From “Either/Or” to “Both/And”

Related to the shift from one truth to many truths is the shift from “either/or” to “both/and.” This means that more than one observation, interpretation, or opinion can be accurate and helpful, even if they are very different from one another. This perspective leads to acceptance and cooperation rather than conflict over who is “right” or “better.” It releases more resources (ideas, suggestions, and solutions), since one perspective isn’t valued over another.

However, it is important to accept the responsibility of managing or organizing the different perspectives so that there is a good match between situations and approaches. For example, as in our family, if mom is more responsibilities oriented, and dad is more fun oriented, we have to acknowledge that both perspectives are appropriate, but at different times. My children are teenagers now, and the other day we were talking about who plays more with children, moms or dads. My elder son remarked, “Mom, you played with us a lot when we were little, but your games always involved learning cursive or something!” That was fun for us, and it was also fun when the boys and my husband watched the NBA playoffs and forgot to clean the kitchen, but more importantly, both styles enrich our children’s lives.

From Labeling Behaviors to Identifying Patterns

The third shift in thinking that will enable us to partner more effectively with parents is to move from labeling behaviors to identifying patterns of interactions. Labeling words like “stubborn,” “willful,” or even “creative,” or “smart” are roadblocks to effective communication. How can anyone respond to a label? “No, I don’t think your child is as smart as you think.” “Late? Me? I’m a ‘Late Parent’?”

Instead of labeling, ask questions to begin to identify the interaction patterns. For example:

- “You’ve mentioned that Janey is stubborn.”
- “How does Janey show her stubbornness?”
- “And how do you respond?”

- “Is there anyone else that has noticed similar behaviors?”
- “And how does this person respond when Janey does that?”
- “Is Janey’s response the same?” “What does she do?”

Instead of just labeling a behavior, we are looking for a possible pattern to the interactions. What are the circumstances surrounding the action? How often and with whom does the action occur? Once we have established a clear view of the patterns of interactions and circumstances surrounding the behavior, we can move on to the fourth shift in thinking necessary for systemic, collaborative approach.

From Problem-Focused to Solution-Focused

Here, we shift from focusing on the problem, to focusing on the solution. Instead of focusing on what is going wrong, focus on when it is going right! As Sanford Jones said at a conference many years ago, “Water what you want to grow.” Put your energy on when it is going well. “You’ve said that Janey is really cooperative when it’s her own idea. Let’s talk about what that looks like.” What are the circumstances surrounding the positive outcome? What are the interactive patterns that support the positive outcomes? How can we get more of that? How can we water what we want to grow?

This is a perfect match for how we approach grace and courtesy in the classroom. First, we observe something we’d like to change, for example, the chairs aren’t getting pushed in when children leave the table. Then, we figure out what we want to have happen: I want children to push in their chairs. Next, we observe to find out if it ever happens spontaneously. “Hmm, I see that children seem to push in their chairs more often when their hands aren’t already full.” How can I get more of that? We decide to give a grace and courtesy lesson emphasizing pushing in the chair, and then picking up the material on the table.

Focusing on the solution, or that the positive action does happen, at least sometimes, means that all we have to do is figure out how to access this positive action more often. How do we get more of that?

For example, let's apply this idea to the family always late. First, we observe that the child is often late. We'd like the family to arrive on time. Our old habits might include talking to the family about why it is so important that they bring their child to school on time. Instead, with the solution-focused approach, we begin to notice when the family *does* arrive on time.

Instead of admonishing the family about the negative consequences of late arrival, we talk about the circumstances that contribute to when the family does arrive to school on time. What might they be? How do we get more of that? Instead of blaming or shaming the family into compliance, we work with their unique situation by focusing on what is working to the child's benefit and brainstorm ideas for how we can make that happen more often.

The change from linear thinking to systems thinking creates a fundamental shift that is necessary for truly effective collaboration with parents. With this shift comes humility: We don't always have to have the answer and neither do the parents. What a relief for everyone! We can bring in our expertise and knowledge without reducing the family's expertise and knowledge. We can generate more solutions to challenges because we have more people working on the solutions.

We create openness, approachability, mutual respect, and a team approach. This creates a paradigm shift that can frame all of our interactions with parents and families. It affects how we might conduct our initial meetings with parents, how we structure parent/teacher conferences, our hospitality and social events, and our approach to parent volunteerism. In the end, it comes right back to the child and uses our fundamental understandings of grace and courtesy to surround the child in love and support.

REFERENCE

- Andrews, James R. and Mary A. Andrews. *Family Based Treatment in Communicative Disorders: A Systemic Approach*. Sandwich, Illinois: Janelle Publications, 1990.

