

Understanding Family Priorities and Stressors

Building Heartfelt Partnerships

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Research Question

Do early childhood teachers' perceptions of family priorities and stressors align with parents' actual statements of their priorities and stressors?



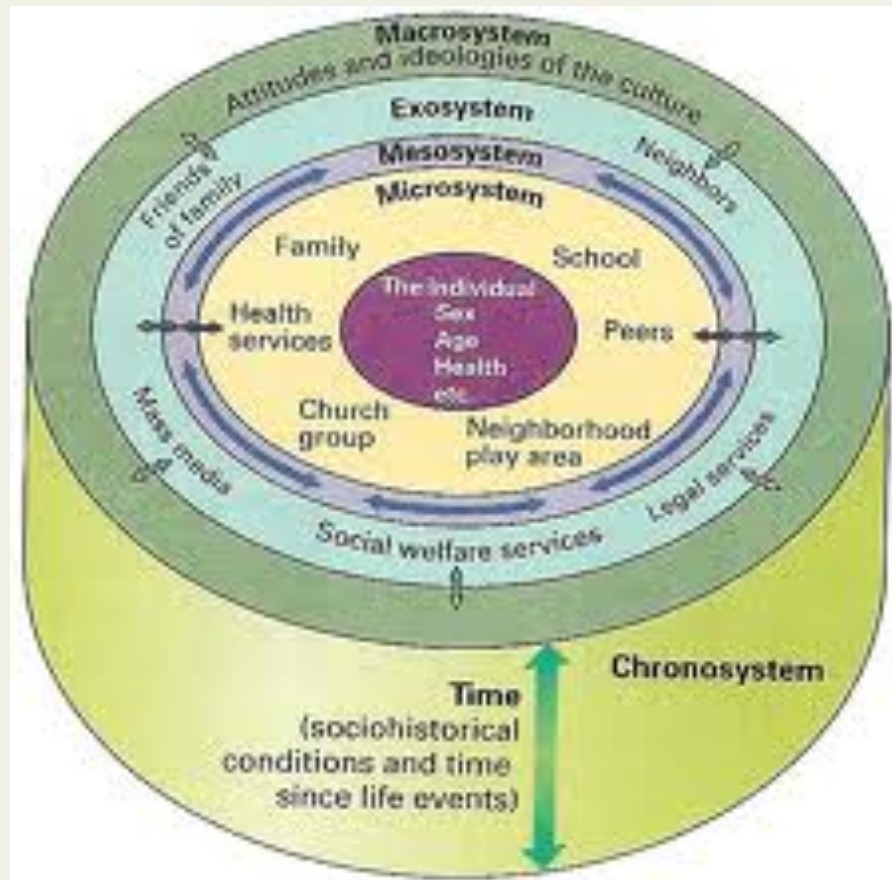
Current Research

- Teacher-family alliance is essential (NAEYC, 2010)
- Communication (both verbal and non-verbal) in early childhood centers can lead to misunderstandings regarding priorities (Reedy & McGrath, 2010)
- Stressors abound
 - financial hardships (Kochan, 2010)
 - guiding children's behaviors (Waldfogel, 2010)
 - cultural and linguistic diversity (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007)
 - family member difficulties (Boger et. al., 2008)
- Scant research on current family priorities

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner (1986): Ecological Theory

(Image: aifs.gov.au: Australian Institute of Family Studies)



Methods and Participants

- What: surveys and focus group discussion
 - Two 22 item parallel surveys: multiple choice, rank order, open response; on-line and hard copy
 - One focus group: 2 parents, 1 teacher, 1 administrator
- Who: La Crosse area early childhood teachers and families

	Non Head Start	Head Start	Total
Teachers	23	16	39
Family Members	26	42	68
Total	49	58	107

Key Survey Questions

Please rank order the following list of **families' priorities** for their young children.

1. learning to behave appropriately
2. making academic progress
3. making friends
4. learning to be kind
5. making sure children have adequate materials (toys, clothing, food, housing, etc.)
6. having opportunities to express individual creativity
7. learning to be respectful

Family Priorities

(Non-Head Start)

Teacher Predictions

top

1. Providing adequate materials
2. Learning to behave

bottom

6. Learning to be respectful
7. Creative expression

Actual Family Ratings

top

1. Learning to behave
2. Providing adequate materials (bi-modal)/learning to be kind
3. Creative expression (bi-modal)

bottom

6. Providing adequate materials (bi-modal)/ supporting academic progress
7. Creative expression (bi-modal)

Family Stressors

Please rank order the following list of family stressors.

1. economic challenges
2. academic performance expectations
3. behavioral expectations
4. not enough time
5. adjusting to a different culture and/or language
6. family challenges (for example, marital problems, extended family issues, etc)

Family Stressors

(Non-Head Start)

Teacher Predictions

Top

1. Economic challenges
2. Family challenges
3. Not enough time

Bottom

5. Academic performance expectations
6. Adjusting to a different culture

Actual Family Ratings

Top

1. Not enough time
2. Economic challenges
3. Behavioral expectations

Bottom

5. Family challenges
6. Adjusting to a different culture

Family Priorities

(Head Start)

Teacher Predictions

Top

1. Providing adequate materials
2. Guiding children's behaviors

Bottom

7. Nurturing creativity

Actual Family Ratings

Top

1. Assisting children to be respectful
2. Guiding children's behaviors

Bottom

6. Nurturing creativity
7. Providing adequate materials

Family Stressors

(Head Start)

Teacher Predictions

Top/most stressful

1. Economic challenges
2. Family challenges

Bottom/least stressful

5. Cultural adjustment
6. Helping children learn beginning concepts

Actual Family Ratings

Top/most stressful

1. Economic challenges
2. Guiding children's behaviors
3. Helping children learn beginning concepts

Bottom/least stressful

5. Finding quality time/family challenges
6. Cultural adjustment

Areas of Agreement

Non-Head Start

Priorities

- Providing adequate materials (top)
- Guiding children's behaviors (top)

Stressors

- Economic challenges (top)
- Adjusting to another culture (bottom)

Head Start

Priorities

- Guiding children's behaviors (top)
- Creative expression (bottom)

Stressors

- Economic challenges (top)
- Adjusting to another culture (bottom)

Areas of Non-Alignment

Non-Head Start

Head Start

Priorities

- Creative expression (bi-modal)
- Providing adequate resources (bi-modal)

Stressors

- Family challenges (top for teachers, bottom for families)
- Behavioral expectations (top for families, middle for teachers)

Priorities

- Providing adequate resources (bottom for families, top by teachers)
- Assisting children to be respectful (top for families, middle for teachers)

Stressors

- Helping children learn beginning concepts (top for families, bottom for teachers)
- Family challenges (top for teachers, bottom for families)

Using this information...

- In your school
 - List possible priorities and stressors
 - Consider school/center-wide surveys vs individual classroom surveys
- To broaden your own understanding
 - Increase awareness of your own beliefs, priorities, stressors, and possible biases

Focus Group Findings

- *Communication is essential*
- Families appreciate on-going notes, phone calls, texts, social events
- Families do not like to be told how to parent
 - “ “Parent education” gives the impression that there is something wrong with the way parents are already conducting themselves....perhaps rewording this to "parent support" would be a more suitable approach.”
(member check parent)



A quick communication exercise (volunteers or partners)

Goal: practice direct vs indirect communication

Steps

1. Decide who is talker and who is listener
2. Talker selects one fact, observation or question you would like to communicate to your partner
3. Share this in two ways
 - Directly: use eye contact (if appropriate), confirm that partner understood (ask, repeat, acknowledge)
 - Indirectly: deliver communication as a simple statement
4. Switch roles

Focus Group Findings

Communication is essential

(continued)

Advice to new teachers from
veteran administrator

“The other thing that’s really,
really, really important,
especially in my role (as
administrator) more than
anybody’s is, if I was to say
three things they need to do:
listen, listen, listen!”



Focus Group Findings

Respect, Communication, Trust

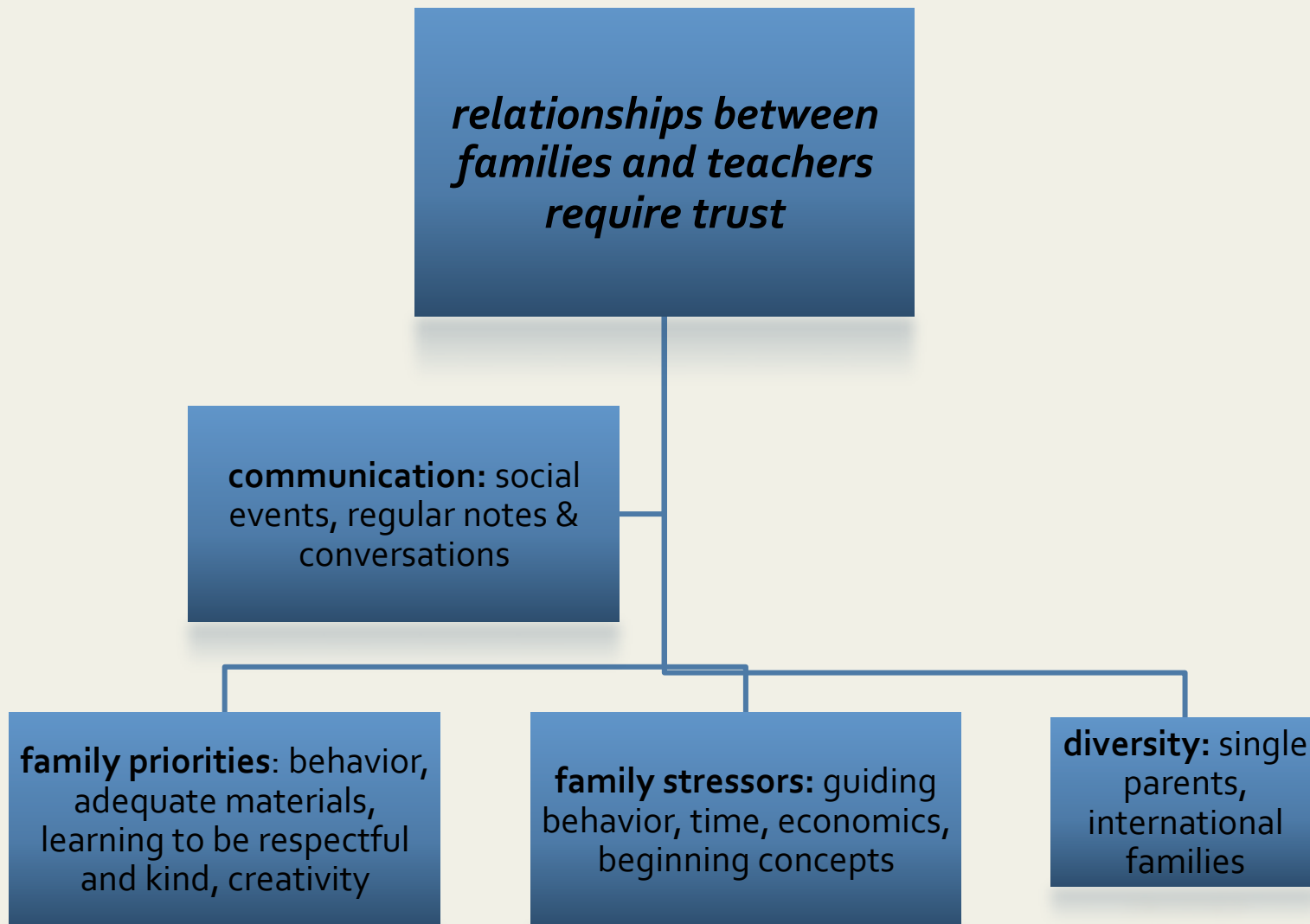
"I do believe that if problems develop with children, it is easier to meet and resolve the issue if there is a respect for the teacher (and I assume, respect for the parents).

For me, respect is gained from the relationship the teacher has with my children and how they interact together.... . If there is a strong effort made by the teacher, it is much easier for me as a parent to trust what the teacher has to say and be "fully on board" with whatever plan is in place to resolve the issue."

(member check parent)



Central and Supporting Themes



Implications for Early Childhood Professionals

- Communicate respectfully
 - Aim to build trusting partnerships
- Emphasize importance of partnering with all families to understand each set of individual priorities and stressors
 - *Be careful of making assumptions!*
- Connect families with community resources (when applicable)
- Be ready to provide respectful assistance
 - Guiding behaviors
 - Learning concepts

A few references

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