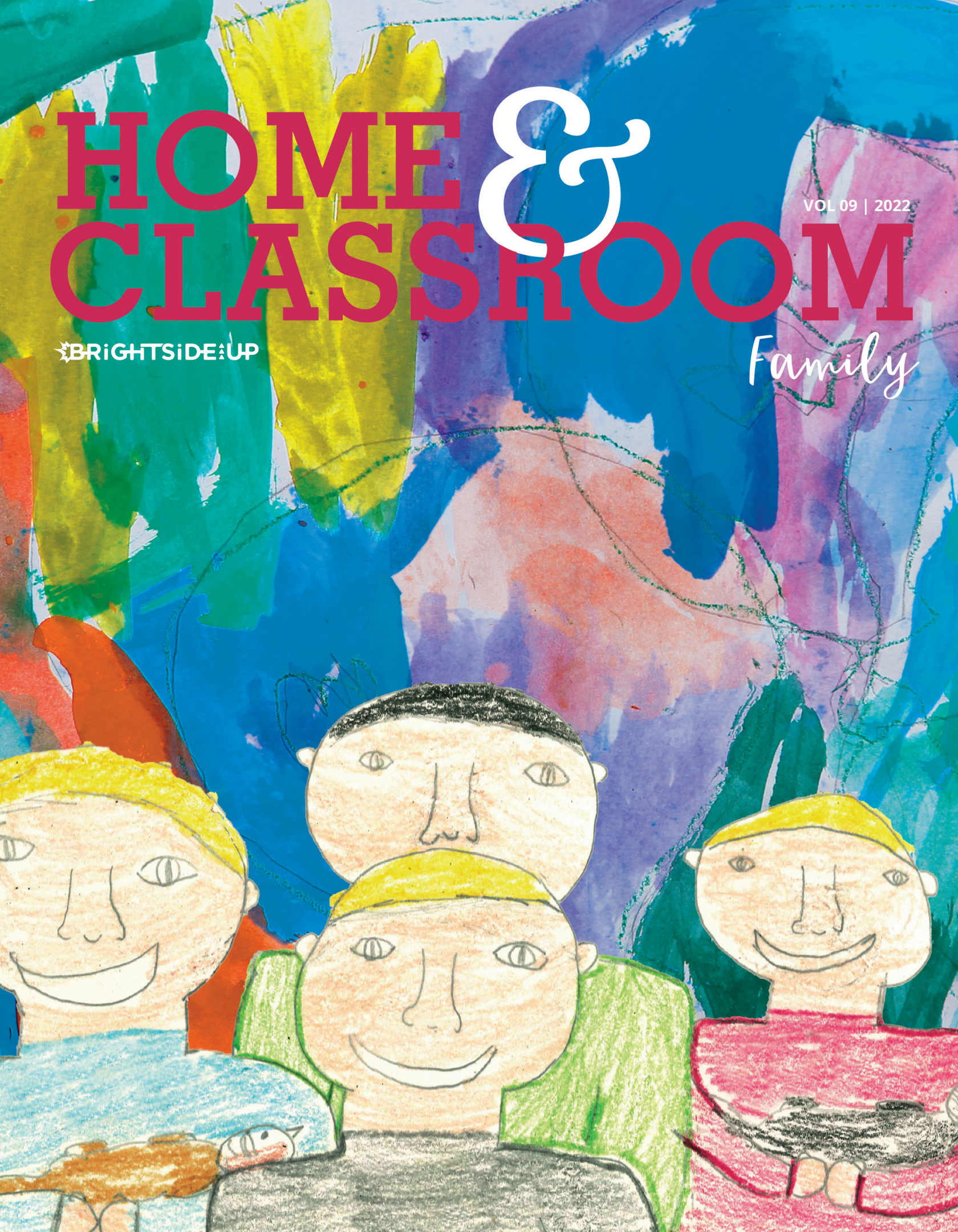


HOME & CLASSROOM

VOL 09 | 2022

BRIGHTSIDE:UP

Family



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HOME & CLASSROOM
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FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

the experience of a
mother & teacher

by Heather Sweet

As a teacher, I was passionate about connecting with families to better meet the needs of their children. When I became a mom, family engagement deeply changed for me. It was important to stay connected to our family child care provider to support my eight week old daughter's day while we were apart. To leave my eight week old for the first time was the hardest day of my life, but my family child care provider made me feel at ease. The relationship she built with me didn't just start on the first day of care. It was also the support she lent while I was expecting and searching for the right child care provider. She was warm and accepting of me on the phone and made time for me to come see her program. The experience of being on the receiving end of care opened my eyes and began to shape my perspective from the teacher side.

At every program and for each individual family, family engagement can look different. The main thing is that we, as the professional in the early care field, take the responsibility of initiating the connection with families and continuously offer them various opportunities for engagement. The NYAEYC code of ethical conduct states it best, "Families are of primary importance in the children's development. Because the family and the early childhood practitioner have a common interest in the child's well-being, we acknowledge a primary responsibility to bring about communication, cooperation, and collaboration between the home and the early childhood program in ways that enhance the child's development."

THREE IDEAS TO GROW FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN YOUR PROGRAM

1

VALUE AND NURTURE THE RELATIONSHIPS

- The child's family is their first teacher. Ask them about their dreams, hopes and traditions.
- Notice and validate family-child interactions. "Wow, did you see how they smiled as soon as they saw you walk into the room?"
- Each day, share positive developmental observations about their children.

2

RESPECT AND HOLD FAMILIES IN HIGH REGARD

- Take the time to get to know each family's culture and language. Seek their input to incorporate the home language into the program.
- Honor and respect all family structures.
- Support families' parenting styles. Engage in conversations about parenting choices and ways to support this in program.

3

SUPPORT AND PARTNER WITH FAMILIES

- Highlight children's developmental progress.
- Make connections to the child's learning process and ask about their observations at home.
- Create opportunities for families to share their culture at program events.

Resource: Encouraging Strong Parent-Child Relationships for Early Childhood Professionals, article developed by the Administration on Children and Families.

GROWING INCLUSION IN PLAYGROUNDS & PARKS

by Amelia Green

For many people, family looks less like a tree and more like a garden of people who love you unconditionally as you are. The uniqueness and beauty of family can be seen in a specific light in the lives of children with disabilities. Many diagnoses come with not only new vocabulary but also experts, doctors, therapists, case workers and other people entering the life of the family. These relationships can develop and last for years. These people often need to know intimate details, not only about the development of the child but also about the life of the family so they can best support the whole child. Disabilities and the limitations associated with them can leave families feeling isolated and with that understanding, compassionate and patient friends can often become closer than biological family. Being accepted as they are and being able to fully participate in life are the goals for all families but especially for those of people living with a disability. If disability has not affected you personally yet, it will as roughly 56.7 million

Americans are diagnosed with some form of disability – this means you must not just prepare for these potentially difficult conversations about differences but proactively promote inclusion in our everyday activities.

Inclusion can have a unique meaning to each family yet remain a consistent family value. For everyone, inclusion is a word with more than one meaning that can be modeled or shown in infinite ways. The Oxford dictionary defines inclusion as, “the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure; the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of other minority groups.” For people and their families living with a disability, the goal is for inclusion to look seamless and not be forced. We see inclusion every day in many ways – wheelchair

ramps, an American Sign Language or other language interpreter, buttons that open doors, Braille in public spaces, chirping traffic signals and many others you may see when you look for them. Environmental inclusion helps people to be included in more public or physical spaces but it does not mean that they are seen and respected for who they are. You may have seen this quote floating around, “Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard.” This shows the layers of inclusion as well as the importance of not just having a voice being represented but actually being heard and respected.

Given the number of children and adults living with disabilities, it is important that we actively teach inclusion to young children so that we as a society can evolve to hearing everyone and giving them a strong voice as an individual from a young age. Just like each individual is unique and beautiful, the ways of including others can be equally special.

For most children, inclusion starts with the representation of people of different abilities or appearances in the child’s environment. With a growing global emphasis on inclusion and representation, there are more books and materials available for children of all ages which highlight and include people with disabilities. We can see inclusion in story books with children in wheelchairs in the photos, the highlighting of sign language in board books for babies, characters with autism which positively highlight common behaviors such as difficulty with eye contact and repetitive

behaviors. It is also far more common to see children with all kinds of disabilities such as limb differences, Down syndrome or children using a variety of assistive devices in everything from books and puzzles to advertisements, film and television media and music.

Bringing young children to an accessible playground is a great way for them to see and socialize with children with different strengths and needs. In the Capital District, there are a number of accessible playgrounds. In **Schenectady County, Central Park** features a squishy surface rather than the traditional wood chips and ramps to access the jungle gym and slides. In **Colonie** there is **Cook Park** which features a number of inclusive play areas including swings a parent can ride with a child who may not have the physical ability to do so alone. In **Wilton**, parents worked to bring an inclusive playground to **Burgess Kimball Memorial Park**. Some of the features chosen by the parents are sensory elements like bongo drums, transitional steps, a modified teeter-totter, swings with extra support, and a chair that moves side to side and front to back with the force of other children. At **Maalwyck Park in Glenville** there are new inclusive swings and a merry-go-round to be enjoyed. **The Kids Creek Side Village playground in Ballston Spa** also features a squishy surface and all of the play area is fenced in. If you feel like traveling for an amazing and immersive nature experience be sure to check out the **Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park** about four hours west of Albany. It was inspired by a Capital District mother and her

young son who found that being in and connected to nature helped him in countless ways, including in his ability to relate to the world. The one mile, looped trail is completely handicap accessible and features eight stations which offer experiences that range from quiet engagement with nature to areas for active exploration and adventure. The trail was built through a public-private partnership and campaign which raised \$3.7 million to allow for maintenance, operations and programming for the existing future and hopefully forever. This shows the recognition on so many levels of the importance of places that promote inclusion and togetherness across New York State and the United States as well.

There are many other accessible and inclusive play areas throughout New York State so think about checking one out next time you go out to play. Not only will your child get to see what play and fun look like for children who may be different from them but those children get to experience your child as well. The ability to see a child's strengths first as well as how easy adaptation and accommodation is very clear in these environments. Everyone wins when we can all play together! When talking to children, validate their feelings about disability. Let them know it is okay to be afraid or unsure of differences but then show them all the similarities and ways that a person with disabilities is just like them or special in other ways. With a little encouragement and education, beautiful friendships bloom and everyone's garden can grow.

For families of children with special needs, it is equally important for them to feel included as well as have spaces that feel safe and comfortable for the entire family. For many families of children with disabilities it may not be possible or feel comfortable to venture out into many public spaces. There are many unknowns in new or busy places – not knowing safety precautions, children's reaction to things, the public perception and welcoming of the child and the disability and numerous other factors. For these families it may feel safer to start with public spaces that dedicate time and space to little ones with disabilities. In the Capital Region there are different options for families to enjoy.

On the first Saturday of every month, from 8-10am, the **Get Air Trampoline Park in Crossgates Mall**, the music volume is lowered and the atmosphere is calmer. A parent or guardian can jump for free and siblings are welcome. **Sensory Sensitive Sundays at Chuck E Cheese in Latham** feature reduced lighting and noise, as well as disability trained staff. This takes place on the first Sunday of the month and the facility opens two hours early for this special time. **Bring on the Spectrum in Albany** is a brand new sensory gym for children and adults and a community space offering social and recreational activities such as art, board games, music, yoga and Zumba. **The Capital District Miracle League** is located in **East Greenbush** and has adapted sports programs to fit all abilities. **Music Speaks** offers music therapy services throughout the Capital District in individual and small group settings as well as virtually. Check in with

your local library to see if they offer any sensory friendly or inclusive story times or play groups. If they don't, now is the perfect time for you to become part of the change to a more inclusive world! Ask them if you could help them to start such a group and start spreading the word to create more safe spaces for all families in your community.

While the precise definition is different for everyone- with family comes unending love and hope. With this foundation, we can build in the message of inclusion as an extension of our love and hope for a future where everyone can sit together at the table and be heard equally. By seeing, discussing and including disability as a family, we can ensure that future gardens can grow to be as beautiful and full as possible.



What is Infant Mental Health?

By Rebecca DelGiudice, LMSW, MS IMH-DP



When people hear “infant mental health,” they envision a baby sitting on a couch talking to a shrink. I often receive the question, “Babies have mental health?” when I tell others about my work. The answer is a resounding YES! They do – it just looks different than what we typically perceive as “mental health.” We often equate “mental health” with “mental illness,” when in fact we all have mental health, just like we have our physical health. Caregivers’ mental health can impact infants’ social and emotional development. To understand why it matters, it is important to understand development.

Zero to Three defines infant and early childhood mental health as “the developing capacity of a child from birth to five years to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn...all in the context of family, community, and culture.” We know that infants are born into the world with capacities to seek nurturance from caregivers.

Attachment refers to the biological predisposition infants have that drives them to seek proximity to a preferred caregiver in moments of distress (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment is conceptualized as a “tie that binds [mothers and infants] together in space and endures over time” (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Previously, young children were thought to be upset by other variables in their lives.

Research has helped us understand what secure attachment looks like. Infants with secure attachments may be interpreted as babies who felt that they could use their caregiver as a source of nurturance and comfort during a stressful situation.

Consistent with current theories of attachment, these babies can explore in the presence of their caregiver and cease to do so in their absence because their safe haven is no longer available. Without the

reassurance of safety, babies are unable to explore. The most telling behavior was the infant’s ability to calm down and be soothed by the return of the caregiver. Later replications of the strange situation exhibit children returning to explore and play, confirming that the primary caregiver is necessary for young children to explore their environment.

Think of it this way: infants come into this world with limited capacity to take care of themselves. Babies cry to communicate unmet needs, and caregivers respond to

“**Process your emotions and ask yourself, “What do I need?” It can feel counterintuitive to take care of yourself when you’re responsible for taking care of others ... It might mean calling your support system to let them know what you’re going through. And sometimes it could mean reaching out to professionals for help.**”

meet that need. To quote the late D.W. Winnicott (1960), “There is no such thing as an infant.” There is only a baby and “other.”

Historically, this meant “mother,” but as our understanding of caregiving evolves, so too does our language. “Primary caregiver” refers to the adult to whom the child has

formed an attachment with. This can include biological parents, grandparents, foster parents, and child care providers.

It is for that reason that when we think of infant mental health, we must consider caregiver mental health. Think of it like a tennis match. “Serve and return,” or back and forth interactions, build healthy brains and strong attachments. In infancy, caregivers are responsible for reading the infants’ cues and responding contingently. Babies are responsible for only a small part of the interaction in early infancy. Their contributions increase as they develop communication, motor, and social skills. Infants will offer a “serve” to communicate unmet needs, often through cooing, crying, and other nonverbal cues.

Caregivers “return” the serve by first accurately reading the infant’s cue, and then responding to meet those needs. The more often we can support secure attachment by responding in attunement to the child’s cues, the more we support secure attachment.

Primary caregivers can support young children in forming healthy attachments by being consistent, responsive, and predictable. For the child care provider, this may look like maintaining a consistent arrival routine. Having images of home caregivers in the child care environment is also supportive of healthy attachments. Infants develop “object permanence,”

or the ability to understand an object or “other” exists even if we do not presently see them. Transitional objects from home, such as a soft blanket or preferred plush toy, can also serve as a reminder that home exists even when the child is elsewhere. For mobile infants, consider having images of the child’s family taped (with clear tape or contact paper) to the ground to encourage exploration and social and emotional development.

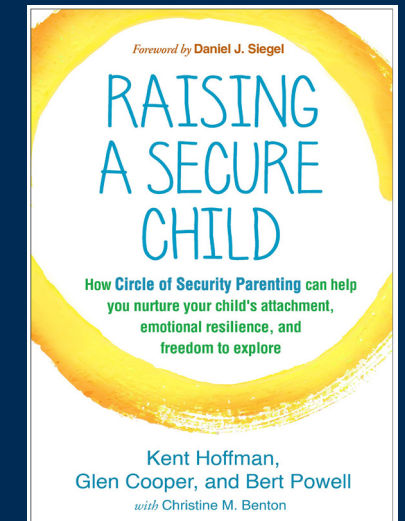
For the primary caregiver at home, you can ask yourself “How do I give my child consistency, responsiveness, and predictability?” What gets in the way of providing that responsive care? If you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, you are less likely to see your baby’s cues in the moment. Alternatively, you might respond with your needs in mind rather than your child’s. Caregivers can take care of their babies by taking care of themselves. The classic airplane emergency rule applies here: put your oxygen mask on before helping others. In overwhelming moments, you can start by slowing down. Pause. Recognize that it’s okay to feel what you’re feeling. Process your emotions and ask yourself, “What do I need?” It can feel counterintuitive to take care of yourself when you’re responsible for taking care of others. Proceed by taking action to meet your own needs. It might mean putting your baby down somewhere safe to take a few deep breaths. It might mean calling your support system to let them know

what you’re going through. And sometimes it could mean reaching out to professionals for help. By taking that moment to pause, process, and proceed, you are creating emotional space for you and your baby.

We all have mental health. The good news is, you’re not alone in figuring it out! Infant and early childhood mental health consultation is a capacity building intervention designed to support caregivers in building their social and emotional tool kit. Our Mental Health Services team offers on site and virtual consultation services to support you as you provide care for your children. Visit our website and contact our Mental Health Services team today for more information about how we can best support you.

Citations:
Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child development*, 49-67.
Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and loss: Attachment* (Vol. 1). Basic Books.
Winnicott, D. W. (1991). *Playing and reality*. Psychology Press.
Winnicott, D.W. (1960). The theory of the parent-infant relationship. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 41:585-595

Recommended Reading:
“Raising a Secure Child” by Bert Powell, Glen Cooper, and Kent Hoffman



INFANT & TODDLER MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTATION

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (IECMHC) is here to help you promote and support adult-child relationships, social and emotional health, and overall positive mental well-being by providing resources, coaching, and training. Mental health consultants partner with regional infant and toddler specialists, and early childhood education specialists to support children’s overall development in child care settings, at home, and in the community.

Visit brightsideup.org to book an appointment or call 518-426-7181.

• perfect •
picnic

by Bonnie Schultz, RD



M

*Moving a meal outside makes a difference.
What does the “perfect picnic” mean to you?
Who would you take along?
What would you pack?*

Picnics can be more affordable using foods already on hand. Sandwiches are my go-to, especially ones such as peanut butter and jelly that stay fresh at room temperature, so there’s

no need for a cooler to keep cold foods safe. Some yummy choices already come in nature’s perfect packaging. Perfectly packaged picnic pleasers might include hard-boiled eggs, washed fruit, veggies ready to break into pieces (peppers, cucumber, zucchini, broccoli, carrots, green beans, sugar snap peas.) All these colorful, crunchy options might be enhanced by protein-packed bean-salsa dip (see recipe below) or a tangy hummus.

When’s the best time to eat in the great outdoors?

Breakfast

Morning dew may be drying on the grass so picnic tables could be a great spot to sip and munch. Places such as libraries often have outdoor space to rest. What a way to start your library day!

Snack spots on the go

Keeping some whole grain, lower sugar cereal on-hand means a crunchy snack is always available. For older children, when choking is less of a risk, dried fruit and nuts keep well and provide nutrient-rich fuel. If we’re in the car, I like to stop, get out the snacks, take a break and chat. It feels so good to connect with each other versus mindlessly munching. Stopping eliminates the chance of unexpected braking and choking in the car. If it’s a safe area, we also feel better after moving a bit. Everyone’s mood seems to lift after a snack stop and chance to stretch.

Main meals

Lunch or dinner away from the usual spots in the house seem to shout, socialize! A change of scenery usually leads to spending quality moments together. Mindfully taking in the sights, sounds, smell and feel of the outdoors releases stress for many people. Away from our usual distractions, picnic places often inspire outdoor games, creatively using whatever materials are available.

Indoors

Why go anywhere? Sometimes a change of routine fuels the imagination. Maybe a book inspired the idea of an impromptu picnic. Is the floor newly washed, clean enough to eat off? I would still spread a cloth to define the space and together we could create a picnic experience inside. What memories would you and your picnic partners form from such a home-based adventure?

From living a half-century, I’ve discovered the perfect picnic is the picnic that happens. When things go wrong with the “perfect” picnic, we may grumble, perhaps suffer with gritty sand and ants. In my experience when we share troubles and keep our good humor, people bond more tightly together. Maybe it turns out to be joyous fun, perhaps calm relaxation, or reflective time. Chances are how we feel after sharing an outside meal will stay with us for a long while.

Picnic tickler – What would you include in your picnic-ready kit?

- Hand-sanitizer
- Sunscreen
- Water
- Plates/food containers, forks, knives, spoons, cups, napkins/towels
- Container for trash
- Blanket/towel/cloth
- Toys, soft flexible Frisbee, balls
- Other _____

Black bean corn salsa

- 1 can black beans, 15 oz
- 1 can corn, 15 oz
- 1 cup salsa
- 1-2 cucumber(s) cut into slices to dip or tortilla chips

Drain and rinse black beans, drain corn, combine with salsa.

Consider fresh add-ins such as ½ cup onion, 1 cup fresh diced tomato, 1-2 tablespoons lime juice, ¼ cup chopped cilantro, ½ cup shredded cheddar or crumbled feta.

Mix and serve with tortillas or on cucumber slices. I like to call them cucumber “chips” because of their crunch and shape. Enjoy!

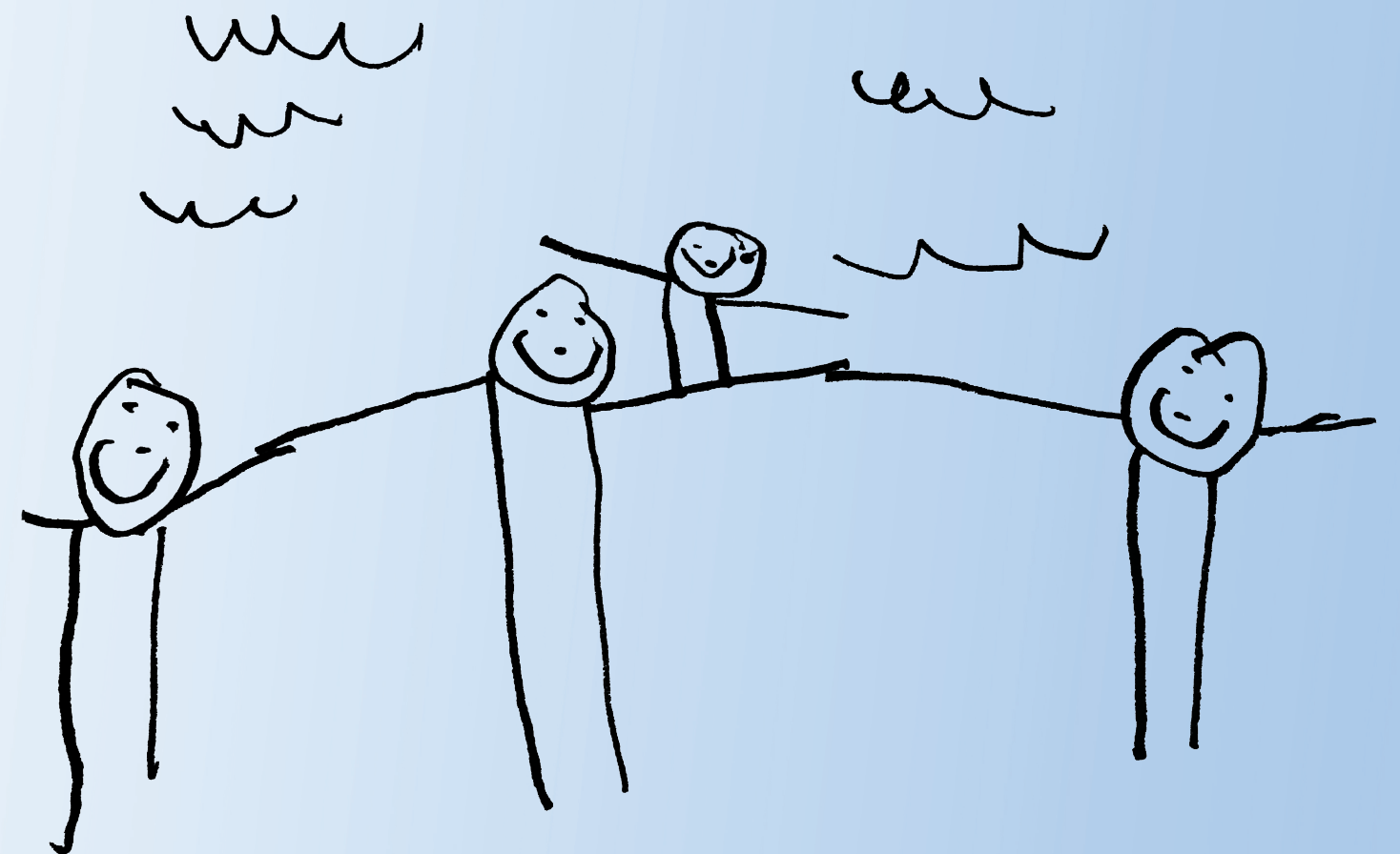


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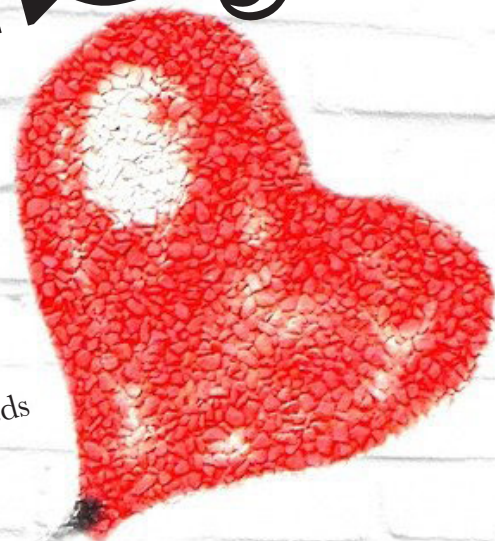
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You Had Me at Goodbye

by Deanna Clements

It's common for young children to exhibit anxiety when having to say goodbye to a family member. The morning drop off can be stressful for everyone. Children and families experience strong feelings during this time. Luckily, there are some strategies that can help ease the transition from home to childcare. Because every child is different, being flexible and responsive to what each child and family needs can make all the difference.



It is important to prepare for the first day by talking about it ahead of time. It is helpful to read books about separations and reunions or create one of your own. A welcome book with photos creates an opportunity to read about the program and answer any questions the child may have. Visiting the program prior to the first day will allow the child to see that it is a safe place. Children need time to get to know caregivers and to feel comfortable in their new setting. If possible, gradually increasing the child's time at the program will help to ease the transition as well.

When the big day arrives, there are some items to bring that may provide comfort. The first item is family photos. When a child is missing their family member, it can help to be able to look at photos on a family tree, in a family book, or to just carry around with them. Family photos connect children to family members, and they help to assure children that their families will return at the end of the day. Another thing a child may want with them is a comfort item from home, such as a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. Familiar objects help children feel secure. Every child is different and only the family will know what will work best to soothe their child. Therefore, it is crucial to create a partnership between caregivers and families and work together to provide consistent support.

One of the best ways to support young children is by providing predictability. Predictable routines promote a sense of security. Creating a goodbye ritual is a fun way to help children understand that it is time to say goodbye. It could be reading a book together, singing a song, or waving at the window. Involving children in creating the goodbye ritual will make it even more

meaningful. The most important thing is to be consistent, with the same goodbye ritual at the same time each day. Goodbye rituals help children feel more secure because they know what to expect.

Allowing sufficient time to say goodbye is key. Some children may need extra time to adjust. When it is time to go, it is important to always say goodbye so that children know that a family member will not disappear without warning. Telling a child when you are leaving and when you will be back helps strengthen the child's trust. When discussing a return, it is important to provide specifics that the child understands, such as stating that you will be back after snack.

It's difficult to leave a child who is crying. It's important for family members to be in tune with their emotions because children may feed off the feelings of adults. Ongoing communication between caregivers and families is essential. Knowing how the child is doing and how they were comforted and supported through the transition is reassuring and builds trust. It takes time for children to develop the emotional coping strategies

“With support and experience, children will learn to cope with separations, knowing that they can depend on their family member to always return.”

necessary to manage separations. A caregiver supports a child's emotional needs by providing nurturing care. When a child is overwhelmed, the first step is for caregivers to check their own emotional state and regulate if necessary, by taking a slow, deep breath and acknowledging their own feelings. Children can only be as calm as the adults around them are feeling.

A caregiver may need to remain close and hold the child before helping them connect with their peers or to an engaging activity. One activity that may be helpful is pretend play, which allows children to practice goodbyes and pretend to talk with their families on toy phones. Sometimes children may want to go to a special place, such as a cozy corner until they are ready to join the group. Creating a cozy corner can help children learn how to manage their big emotions. The area should feel cozy and inviting and be in a quiet place. It is used to support the social emotional needs of the children by providing a space where children want to go to regain control of their emotions. The cozy area may include items such as books about emotions, emotion dolls, a child safe mirror, visual supports, and calming sensory bottles. These items are important tools for developing self-regulation skills.

When a young child is displaying distress, caregivers should help provide words for what the child may be feeling and reassure them that they are there for support. Labeling emotions helps children learn to recognize and identify them. When a caregiver asks about and acknowledges feelings, they are communicating to

children that their feelings are valued and important. Over time, children learn to manage strong emotions in healthy ways.

Saying goodbye can be difficult for young children. Understanding what the child is going through and having a few coping strategies ready can help. Children need to know others understand what they are feeling, especially when those feelings are overwhelming. With support and experience, children will learn to cope with separations, knowing that they can depend on their family member to always return. Goodbyes provide opportunities to build positive, trusting relationships with children and families. When you help children learn to manage separations with their loved ones, they feel understood and gain self-confidence. Through consistency, children will learn that they are safe, cared for, and free to explore their world. With help, children learn to manage the strong feelings brought on by separations. As they develop empathy, they even learn to comfort other children.



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by Dr. Phyl Brazee

Mirrors & Windows

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Seeing Ourselves and Others in Diverse Family Structures

So, what constitutes the definition of a family in 2022? Statistics tell us that the structure of families has changed immensely over the last 50 years. Families can include two moms, two dads, a single mom or dad, adopted children, grandparents as the main caregivers, bi and multiracial families, blended families, etc.

Today, as David Willis says: “Family isn’t defined only by last names or by blood; it’s defined by commitment and by love.”

With the reality of such diversity of family structures, how are families depicted in current children’s picture books? Do they reflect these changes, and should

they? Research has shown the immense importance of children being able to see themselves reflected in their environment, including in literature. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop states: *Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.*

She goes on to say:
When children can’t find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors.

According to Sims Bishop, the reverse is also true: *Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need books as windows onto reality....They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans.*

As Renee Runge says, “If you never read books about different experiences, you have a harder time developing empathy for what others go through. If there were more books available that mirror an actual sample of the world’s population, children would learn respect for other identities.” We need children’s picture books that represent the full spectrum of family structures. Today, in 2022, there are more and more great children’s picture books

about the wide variety of family structures that make up American society. Here is a brief sampling of these books.

1. **Heather Has Two Mommies** by Leslea Newman
This book is a classic, originally published in 1989. It tells the story of a young girl, Heather, who has a seemingly happy childhood with her two mommies, but when she enters school, she encounters a question from another student, “What does your daddy do?” that makes her confront how different her family structure is from other children’s. The resolution of this dilemma is heartwarming.

2. **Emily’s Blue Period** by Cathleen Daly
In this heartfelt story, Emily confronts the teacher’s art project assignment that asks her to make a collage of her house. Emily now has two houses - her mom’s and her dad’s. She solves this problem, drawing on what she has learned about her favorite artist, Picasso.

3. **Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family’s Journey** by Margriet Ruurs
This universal tale of a refugee family starts with their happy early life that is disrupted by civil war, and continues through their journey to a new, welcoming country. It is accompanied by amazing artwork made out of stones collected by the artist, Nizar Ali Badr, from the beach near the port city of Ugarit, Syria. The text is in both English and Arabic.

4. **A Family is a Family is a Family** by Sara O’Leary
The teacher opens a conversation about what makes each child’s family special. Through wonderful drawings, we learn about a diverse array of family structures, revealing at the end that the narrator’s

family is a foster family. In the end, “a family is a family is a family.”

5. ***Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*** by Jamie Lee Curtis

Another classic, this is the story of a child who was adopted, and the journey her parents took the night she was born, to bring her back to their home.

6. ***We Belong Together*** by Todd Parr

This very accessible little book gives a heartwarming explanation of the benefits of adoption. It starts with: “We belong together because...” and goes on to describe many ways to belong together.

7. ***One Family*** by George Shannon

This beautiful counting book quietly shares a wide variety of family structures, ending with: “One earth. One world. One family.”

8. ***Families, Families, Families!*** by Suzanne and Max Lang

Using a wide variety of silly animals, the author and illustrator demonstrate many different family structures, ending with the beautiful message: “...If you love each other, then you are a family.”

Offering our young children the opportunity to hear books that reflect their own lives (mirrors) and the lives of others (windows), opens the possibility of increased understanding and empathy for themselves and others. As it is written so powerfully in her poem entitled “Human Family,” Maya Angelou writes, “I note the obvious differences between each sort and type, but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.”

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MAMA

mindful moment

with Kim Polstein, LMSW

WHAT DOES SUPPORT MEAN TO YOU?

sup·port

/sə 'pôrt/

to bear all or part of the weight of; to hold up.

I recently had an experience in my personal life where I was offered total support by my partner when my grandfather passed away. Literally and figuratively he bore all the weight of my grief both emotionally and physically, for an entire week, while I worked to support my family. It was a humbling experience for this typically in control social worker, who is often called upon for support from others, to give over to the support of another person so completely. It caused me to pause and wonder, what does support mean to me? How do I value this gift from others?

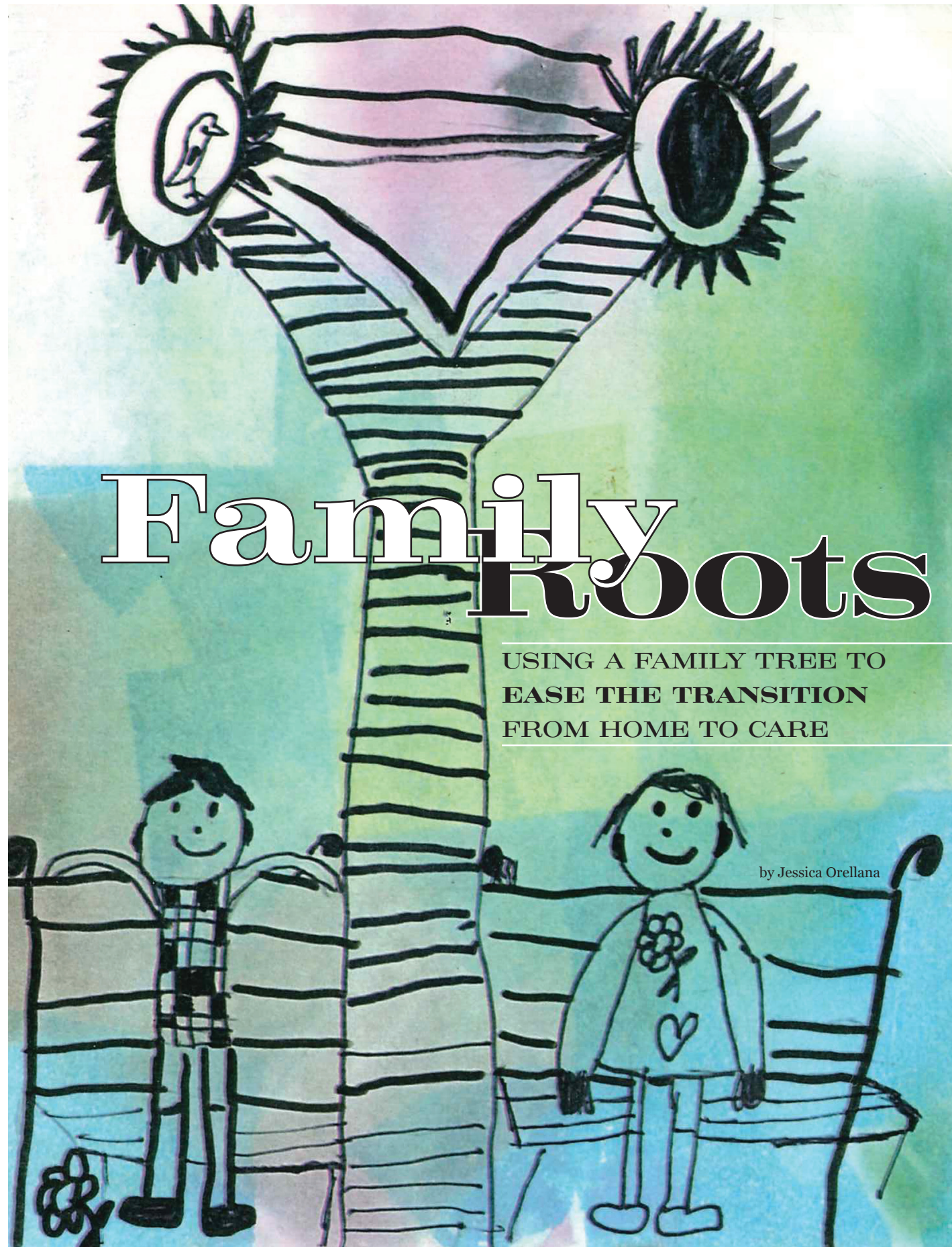
For some of us, support comes from our families, for some from our chosen families and friends. For others support comes from communities in which we cultivate vulnerable relationships. For some of us still support comes solely from within ourselves.

So... what does support mean to you?

I invite you this month to ponder this idea, concept, and word. How does it feel in your emotional being to be offered and to receive support? How does it feel in your physical body? Accepting support may be hard for you, it is for me. So, notice, what does that look like, feel like, sound like?

You may consider journaling a bit on this word and concept, or processing through some of your thoughts with a trusted person. You might explore not only how it feels and what it looks like for you, but how to ask for it, and how to allow yourself to accept this assistance.

Life is often heavy, sometimes what we carry is too much weight for us alone. Offering and receiving support not only lightens our load but expands our vulnerable selves and connects us more deeply with those we care about and who care about us. ⚡



Family Roots

USING A FAMILY TREE TO
EASE THE TRANSITION
FROM HOME TO CARE

by Jessica Orellana

Early childhood educators have the privilege of getting to know children and the people who care for them. These caregivers may be relative or nonrelative adults, permanent, temporary or fluid. There are many versions of a family and each have value and a unique history to offer the classroom community. In Early Childhood Education, a family tree is a common family engagement practice used to highlight each family and ease the transition from home to school. How it is introduced and used can support a child's sense of self and strengthen the home-school connection.

Our first exposure to family structures are our own. It is usually not until children enter group programs outside of their homes that they are exposed to different family structures. It is the responsibility of educators to create an environment where commonalities and differences are recognized and appreciated. Regardless of the structure, all families have things in common that make them a family. For example, when there is love, there is family. When there is tradition, there is family. Before introducing this topic to children, it is useful to familiarize oneself to the many structures and spend some time reflecting on your own upbringing.

What makes your family unique? What types of family structures were you exposed to and what words come to mind when you think of family?

Adoptive Family: *One or more of the children are adopted.*

Conditionally Separated Family: *A member of the family is separated from the rest of the family due to employment, military service, incarceration or hospitalization.*

Foster Family: *One or more of the children are temporarily placed to live with a relative or nonrelative adult.*

Grandparent Family: *One or more children raised by grandparents.*

Single Parent Family: *One parent raising one or more children on their own.*

Step/Blended Family: *Two separate families combine to form a new family unit.*

As the definition of family becomes more varied, we must examine common family engagement practices to complement our ever-evolving society. Addressing diversity, equity and inclusion requires self-reflection and often re-evaluation of our practices. Perhaps more than one type of tree will be needed to meet the needs of your community or you might focus on the roots to highlight the many ways a family is formed. After displaying the family tree, consider creating opportunities to extend the project by inviting families in to share their family story or bring in elements of their culture. Children learn how to treat themselves and others with kindness when given opportunities to practice with the caring adults in their lives.

Below are suggested steps for creating a family tree in your program:

Design a family tree with the children that will be displayed at eye level. Avoid a “one fits all” template to allow for flexibility and creativity. Tell children they are going to each have a space for their family.

Prepare a letter for families explaining the objective of this activity and the photos needed for the project. Photos can be drawn, taken at school or sent in from home. Photos should be displayed in an authentic and respectful manner that is unique to each family. Some children may choose to display their adoptive and biological family while others may choose to include deceased family members, step or half-siblings, a pet or a neighbor. Let each child identify who is in their family. Read stories about different family structures, explore ideas of what family means and talk about the many ways family members show love and care. Familiarize children with some of the terms used to define a family structure and introduce structures they may not be exposed to directly.

**See Mirror and Windows article for book suggestions*

Refer to the family tree when needed or inspired! It is natural and expected for children to notice differences. Use this as an opportunity to learn about diversity and strengthen the classroom community.



BUILDING BABY'S BRAIN - VROOM!

By Mary Miranda, Family Educator

When my son Vinny was eight months old, my mother-in-law sent me a baby flash card program. She was convinced this type of stimulation was necessary to ensure that he had a good head start on learning and would be successful in school. Besides, her sister's grandchild was in a flashcard learning program. Heaven forbid Vinny be left behind! While I was intrigued by the concept of maximizing Vinny's opportunities for learning, I was also extremely skeptical. The program required you to have a five-minute session with your child four times a day. It seemed like an excessively structured program for an infant and Vinny was only eight months old, he didn't do anything for five minutes straight! I was also terribly busy, working part-time and taking college classes, and I was concerned about the time investment.

My husband, Pete, was busy working full-time to earn his PhD in chemistry; however, he liked the idea of being proactive about brain development and felt there was no harm in trying the flash cards. I agreed to try for a couple of days to see if Vinny enjoyed the activity and also if it would be too difficult to manage from a time perspective. We decided I would do the morning sessions, Pete would take the evening sessions, and we would only do the middle sessions on weekends because Vinny was in child care during the week.

The first morning session went ... okay. Vinny wasn't pleased that I cut short our normal morning routine of singing about his

amazing body parts while I changed his diaper and dressed him for the day. He looked perplexed when I strapped him into the indoor baby seat on the floor instead of taking him out to the car to drive to child care. The program's instructions emphasized using the seat in order to help the baby concentrate and avoid distractions. He did not enjoy the confinement and started whining and kicking his feet. I felt strapping him into a seat amounted to forced participation, but since I had agreed to try the program, I gave Vinny a card to hold to distract him. He calmed

“ THAT MEANS THAT EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY IS A POTENTIAL BRAIN BUILDING MOMENT - EVEN ORDINARY DAILY ROUTINES SUCH AS DIAPER CHANGING, MEALTIMES, BATHING, AND PREPARING FOR BEDTIME.

down and chewed on it as he watched me show him the cards. I cheerfully identified the pictures “with great excitement” as per the program instructions. I had decided to only use five cards per session, and we made it through the stack three times before he showed signs of boredom. Three cycles came out to be about forty-five seconds. That seemed more reasonable to me considering Vinny's age than the five minutes dictated by the program.

Pete was not going to be home in time for Vinny's evening session because he had an experiment running that needed to finish. I did the session, and it went as it had in the morning. I sacrificed another flashcard, and we completed three cycles. He didn't seem to particularly like the session, but neither did he complain. After flashcards came bath time. Vinny LOVED bath time. We always played all kinds of games - peekaboo with the squeaky toys, 'what's that body part?' followed by loads of tickles, bath water fill and dump, and we took turns blowing raspberries. Pete unexpectedly came home in the middle of bath time and immediately wanted to take his turn at doing a flashcard session. He scooped Vinny up and Vinny screamed because he had not finished enjoying the bath. Pete dressed him, played with him for a bit to distract him from his annoyance, and then brought him out for the session. As soon as Vinny saw the chair, he started arching his body backwards and making cranky noises. I put the chair away and let Vinny sit in my lap while Pete read the cards. We sacrificed another flashcard for Vinny to chew, but still only made it through two cycles before Vinny wanted to get down. I set him free and we all read a bedtime story before placing him in his crib for the night.

The next morning Pete was going to the lab late since he had worked late the night before. He wanted to try the cards again. He had set his alarm for 15 minutes earlier so that none of Vinny's fun routines would be short changed, thinking that this had been the problem the night before. Vinny was his usual cheerful self through all his morning activities; however, as soon as he saw the seat and the cards he started to yell. I put him down and he crawled away from us very, very quickly. Pete and I just looked at each other and laughed. So much for the great flash card experiment. Pete took the cards and flicked

them around the room one by one so that Vinny could enjoy crawling after them.

Vinny quite clearly felt that the flash card program was developmentally inappropriate!



But our hearts were in the right place. My mother-in-law, Pete, and I all shared the same common goal that most parents and caregivers of children share - to provide our children with the opportunities necessary to maximize their development and reach their full potential. Yet it's not unusual for parents to worry that they are not doing enough to help build their young children's brains. "The early years are the learning years" is a mantra they may have heard many times, making them aware of the critical nature of a child's early experiences in determining successful future outcomes; however, a parent may not feel they know enough about brain science or have the 'teaching skills' necessary to effectively build their child's brain power. This is why flash card

programs and other similar products can be very appealing to parents and caregivers.

Parents may feel these types of programs are the best answer because they are developed by 'experts' who make 'scientific' promises about maximizing a child's development. A quick search on the internet reveals dozens of programs for parents to purchase that claim to boost brain development in young children. These programs tend to be expensive, time consuming, and are often not based on what brain science tells us are the best ways for infants and young children to learn. So, what's a parent to do?

Fortunately, there is a global program funded and supported by the Bezos Family Foundation for parents of young children (birth through age 5) called Vroom. Its goal is to help parents and caregivers of young children understand the science of early brain development and to empower and support them in their critical role as children's first teachers. The Bezos Family Foundation wants parents to appreciate themselves as their child's teacher, and to understand that they already have all the skills they need to build their babies' brains, because a young child's brain develops best within the context of the type of loving reciprocal relationship that their parents are already providing for them.

Through the Vroom program, parents will become aware of the massive amounts of brain building activities they engage in with their young children naturally throughout the day. If you recall, Vinny loved all the activities that my husband and I did with him each day during normal life routines: kissing and naming body parts during diaper changing, reading books at bedtime, playing peekaboo at bath time. Parents often discount these activities as not being 'real learning'. In actuality, it is the best kind of learning because it takes

place during meaningful life experiences. Vroom helps parents understand the value and importance of these wonderful daily interactions between themselves and their children and helps parents build on them to increase the brain boosting value.

The Vroom.org website provides resources and materials to parents and caregivers that give clear and easily understood explanations about the science of early brain development. Children's brains are hard-wired from birth to take in every piece of information from every interaction and every instance of sensory stimulation in their environment. This information is processed and used to begin the formation of connections between the nerve cells in their brain. That means that every moment of every day is a potential brain building moment - even ordinary daily routines such as diaper changing, mealtimes, bathing, and preparing for bedtime.

Daily household chores are also ripe with opportunities for brain building according to Vroom. Involving children in activities like sorting laundry, tidying up clutter, and gardening outside form brain connections that lead to the development of the social, physi-



cal, cognitive, and emotional skills that will be so important for children's future success in school and in life. Even running around town taking care of errands and appointments like doctor visits and grocery shopping provide so many opportunities for engaging in brain building experiences.

The beauty of the Vroom system is that it recognizes the extremely busy nature of the lives of today's parents and caregivers of young children and takes into consideration the fact that many families must live within the constraints of a sensible budget. Vroom developed an amazing free app that parents can install on their phones. It provides a free daily activity via text for a parent and child to enjoy together. These activities are called Vroom Tips, and have no significant time investment for parents because they take advantage of the learning opportunities that exist in everyday routines and events. They also are budget conscious because the activities either require no materials, or require materials that are easily available in the average home. Vroom tips are not a game to play on the phone with the child. The tip consists of directions to the parent for engaging with their child in a fun, hands-on activity.

There are also hundreds more that a parent can access, divided into topics, to help them take advantage of the brain building opportunities in every moment of every day. Washing the laundry? Download an activity. Going to the doctor's office? Download an activity. Getting ready for bed? Download another activity. After completing the activity, parents can read a simple "Brainy Background" description that clearly explains all the amazing skill and brain building development that happened in their child's brain during this fun activity.

My son Vinny is almost 40 years old now, yet I can recall his peals of laughter during bath

time as if it were yesterday. Flashcard and DVD brain booster programs may be aesthetically pleasing and impress parents with their claims to create baby geniuses, but Vinny never squealed with excitement when we were flash-carding. He hated it, and the last thing we want is to teach our children to hate learning. Vroom provides parents with the tools and encouragement they need to develop their children's brains while simultaneously having fun and strengthening the parent-child relationship. Now THAT's real learning!

Think Vroom sounds great? To learn more about Vroom and its resources for parents and caregivers, visit their website at <https://www.vroom.org>.

To install their app on your phone, just visit your favorite app store and search for Daily Vroom. Remember, it's free!

You can also check out our Home and Classroom Podcast with Brightsiders Rachel and Hannah, as they chat with Kandy Novak and Patience Hill of Child Care Aware of America about Vroom:

<https://homeandclassroom.buzzsprout.com/247091/9727022-vroom>

POWERED *By the* HEART



By Desiree Myers,
CCHC, RN

As the parents of a two year old, my spouse and I are guides in much of her learning. When it comes to learning about her body, we sometimes wonder if we're doing it right. Are we giving her the correct information? Are the things we're teaching her age appropriate? There are so many questions that parents ask themselves when their little ones are growing and learning about their bodies. Well, you may be as surprised as I was at just how many ways we can teach our little ones about their bodies. From music and dance to books to Play-Doh and more. Just about anything can be turned into a fun learning activity for the entire family to discover how our bodies work. Below, I have listed a few examples from the long list of ways to teach our children about their amazing bodies.

#1 - Song & Dance

We all love music, right? Children especially. So why not teach them about their bodies through song and dance. Below are some great songs for learning parts of the body. Take note of some adjustment recommendations for children as they get older and learn more complex body parts.

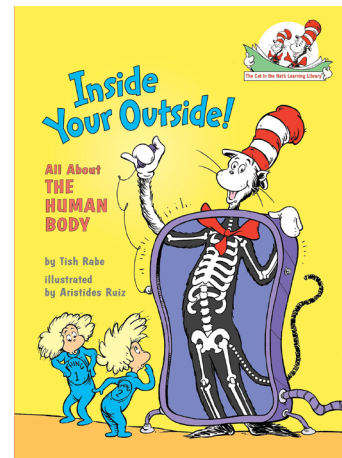
Head, Shoulders, Knees & Toes – Adjustment recommendation: Substitute with names of bones, e.g.- "Skull, scapula, patella and phalanges".

If You're Happy and You Know It
– Adjustment recommendation: Substitute with names of bones, organs, muscles, etc., e.g.- “If you’re happy and you know it, point to your liver”.

One Little Finger – Adjustment recommendation: replace finger with knuckle, toe, rib, phalange, etc.

#2 - Books & Reading

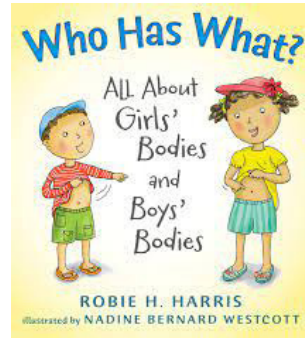
Like music, what’s not to love about books? And the best part is that, not only are there hundreds of books about the body, but there are books for all age ranges. You can find these books in many places, my personal favorite being Usborne books, where you can search by age, grade level and more. Below are just a few of the many books to choose from to teach children about their bodies.



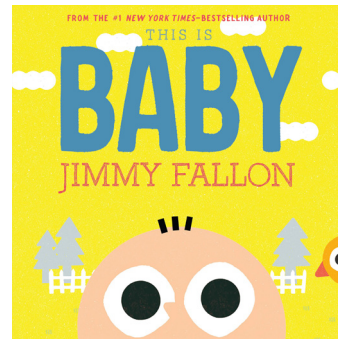
Inside Your Outside
by Dr. Seuss
(Ages 4-8)



The Human Body (A Shine-A-Light-Book)
by C. Brown & R. Saunders
(Ages 4-8)



Who Has What? by
Robie H. Harris
(Ages 3-8)



This is Baby by
Jimmy Fallon
(Ages 1-3)

#3 - Activities

If music and reading isn't your child's favorite or they are just having one of those days when they need to move and use their hands. There are activities to help children learn about their bodies. Below are some of my favorites.

Simon Says – Try using the names of bones, muscles or organs for older children, such as “Simon says flex your bicep” or “Simon says point to your esophagus”.

Body Tracing – Use sidewalk chalk or a large piece of paper with marker and trace your child's body. Then, pick the name of a bone, organ, etc. out of a hat and help them draw it on the tracing. Use this time to discuss the function of the body part.

Building Fun – Play-Doh, clay, pasta, candy, balloons and more. Get creative and build organs, muscles, bones, body systems or even full bodies! Have a discussion about the function of these different body parts. If you have enough Play-Doh, you can even bring the 22 foot small intestine to life to show your little one just how amazing their organs are.

Wow! Look at all of those options and I only listed a few of them. A quick Google search or discussion with a friend can give you even more ideas. You can never get too creative or have too much fun when learning is involved. But before you stop reading and run to go teach your children, I have an activity for just the parents. It's a simple activity. Take a look at the question below and think about what your answer.

What did your parents refer to your genitals as when you were growing up? This may be an awkward question for you. Not to worry, some questions are as important as creativity is when finding ways to teach children about their bodies. It is also important that we don't become too creative. Certain things like body terminology shouldn't be created. As tough as it is for some of us, it is important to use the correct terminology for body parts when discussing them with children. Try to remember this when in discussion and when choosing songs, books and activities. Using the correct terminology (e.g.- penis instead of “pee pee”) teaches children that these words and body parts are not something to be embarrassed of.

Using correct terminology improves parent-child-family communication, and promotes trust, self-confidence, positive body image, and healthy sexual development and bodily autonomy. This is an opportunity to not only educate our children about their bodies, but also an opportunity to discuss what parts of their bodies are personal and private. Openly discussing their bodies gives children the opportunity to ask the important questions and recognize potentially harmful situations; and it promotes open and honest communication as they get older. Also take time to discuss with your child's other caregivers that you would like them to utilize correct terminology when caring for your child, as to not create confusion for anyone.

Remind family, friends and teachers that just because you're utilizing the correct terminology, this doesn't mean that you can't still have fun. Cherish this time with your children as they learn and grow. Teach them about their body and so much more. Encourage questions and promote learning. They are growing and developing so quickly. It is truly an amazing thing to witness and be a part of.

Spotlight JOYFUL BEGINNINGS

Joyful Beginnings opened its doors in January of 2017 in the historic Northside district of Waterford, NY. Its founder, Winifred Joy Wellington, was passionate about teaching and had worked for over 20 years at Montessori schools in New York City and Brooklyn. Winifred's dream was to own a child care program. When her children moved upstate, she began to formulate a plan. She decided to follow her family to the Capital Region and started her very own non-profit child care program, Joyful Beginnings.

Her vision for Joyful Beginnings was to create a program committed to seeing and supporting each child as a unique and interesting individual. Each child's questions and ideas are an essential part of curriculum planning and the classroom environments encourage exploration for all types of learners.

Sadly, in 2020, Winifred passed away, leaving the child care business in the hands of her son Jason.

Jason took on the challenging role of running a child care program with great care and attention, knowing that his mom would want the business to continue serving the children and families she had grown to love. In his new role, one of the biggest surprises he faced was keeping track of the regulations involved in operating a child care business. While it was a big learning curve and challenge to overcome, he understood the crucial part regulations play in running a safe, productive, and stimulating learning environment.

That wasn't the first obstacle he faced. Continuing to keep the family business running brought an enormous amount of responsibility along with it. With two programs in operation, almost 30 staff members, and just under 100 children, Jason soon realized he had many more important people to worry about than he had before.

We asked Jason if there was a particular moment or memory that stood out in his mind. He recalled the story of a father's first day dropping off his infant at the program. "I had a dad cry like a baby dropping his first born off to us as an infant. They have since trusted us with their second born child.



I had chills that day. It was at that moment I realized we had people's prized possessions in our care," Jason shared.

He is inspired to keep the program running and to stay in the child care field in honor of his late mom. His desire is to keep her vision alive; and his advice for anyone thinking of opening a child care business, "...buckle up for the wonderful ride and stay focused on your goals no matter what!"



MAPLE LEAF

Maple Leaf started as a family child care program in 1990. Linda Moran started the business because she needed a place to bring her two children, Katie and John. She enjoyed creating experiences for children so much that she expanded her home child care to become the first Maple Leaf Child Care Center on Carmen Road in Guilderland. As the center became successful, her husband, John, joined her and they continued to expand by building

the Malta and Glenville centers. Their vision for each center continued to grow and two more centers were built. These child care centers embody the spirit of, "a home away from home," for the children they serve and even include indoor gyms, libraries, gardens and lots of outdoor play spaces. After years of growth and expansion, Linda and John's four little grandchildren are now clients of the program!

As the founders of Maple Leaf, Linda and John are still involved in a supporting role to the new program leadership, Katie and John, who inspired the creation of the child care program in the first place. John Jr. serves as Vice President of Operations, handling finances and human resources while Katie serves as Regional Director, overseeing all 6 locations, providing support for the director of each program and ensuring the safest environment possible for the children. In her role as regional director, Katie loves visiting each location and seeing the fun activities they have created. Each center has something different to offer based on space and the teachers and directors love the creative freedom to develop exciting opportunities for children. Katie strives to share with the other locations all the ideas each site generates so they can continue to do exciting and engaging things for the

kids. We asked Katie if there was a particular moment or memory that stood out in her mind and she shared, "I am always surprised by the new and creative ideas the staff keep coming up with! My favorite part of the job is in the morning when I see the children coming in with their families, with their smiling little faces, excited to see their teacher and what activities are planned for the day. Then, as the parents leave knowing that they are in good hands and won't have to worry while they are at work."

Like so many programs over the past two years, Maple Leaf has faced the challenges presented by operating during a pandemic. Katie says she's inspired to continue in the child care field by the teachers at each location that worked during the height of the pandemic and continue to come to work for the love of the children. "The fact that these



educators can overcome the toughest of challenges and still show up to work because they love children is what it's all about!" Katie shared. "That is true dedication to keep pushing, even in the face of adversity."

Katie says if there is one thing to remember about Maple Leaf, it is that they truly care. They are not a large corporation making decisions based on the bottom line. They make decisions based on the love they have for their staff, teachers, children, and families.



a **WORLD**

where all

CHILDREN

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