

WORKING WITH CHALLENGING PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

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PRESENTER INFORMATION

- ▶ Infant-Parent Psychotherapist
- ▶ I try to simultaneously pay attention to the child's experience (or my experience) and the parents' experience.
- ▶ Even when they seem at odds.

WORKING WITH CHALLENGING PARENTS IS...

- ▶ Well, challenging!
- ▶ We may never see the benefits of our work with a challenging parent
- ▶ But it's still worth it!
- ▶ Have you had the experience of a challenging parent coming back to you and telling you what you meant to them?
- ▶ My example

WHY HANG IN THERE WITH CHALLENGING PARENTS?

- ▶ When we **weather the storm** with parents
- ▶ It helps parents **weather the storm** with their young children
- ▶ In the **short term**, it may make your job harder, but in the **long run**, it will make your job easier.

IT CAN HELP TO UNDERSTAND WHY PARENTS CAN BE CHALLENGING

- ▶ They may be ready for their child to be in your care
- ▶ But not yet ready to think about something an early care and education professional might say to them.

PARENTS' CHALLENGES MAY TAKE THE FORM OF

- ▶ Avoiding you
- ▶ Seeming to deny there's a problem
- ▶ Frustration
- ▶ Anger
- ▶ Being overly worried
- ▶ Not seeming worried enough
- ▶ Not following policies

IT'S HUMAN NATURE TO SPECULATE, BUT

- ▶ We can't really know about what makes a particular parent challenging to work with.
- ▶ It's human nature to judge, especially when a young child's involved, but
- ▶ In the long run, we help children and ourselves, when we try to suspend judgment.

PUTTING PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AT THE HEART OF THE CONVERSATION

- ▶ Utility:
- ▶ When parents feel acknowledged and respected in a consistent, on-going way, they are more open to collaboration.

(Johnston & Brinamen, 2006)

IT'S HARD TO RESPECT PARENTS IF YOU AREN'T FEELING RESPECTED BY THEM

- ▶ Try returning to where parents' challenging behavior can come from.
- ▶ Try remembering a time someone helped you even though you were impatient.
- ▶ I remember the many times I've been impatient, frustrated, and even downright rude with a customer service representative on the phone.

CUSTOMER SERVICE ANALOGY

- ▶ Utility:
- ▶ I think of the times I was anxious, impatient, and frustrated, although my frustration really had nothing to do with the customer service representative.
- ▶ Especially when that representative kept her cool, acknowledged my frustration, and kept trying to help me.
- ▶ Even though I didn't get the answer I wanted, I felt grateful because I was heard and I felt that she tried to help.

HOW WE SAY THINGS TO PARENTS MATTERS

- ▶ How you are is as important as what you say.

▶ (St. John & Pawl, 1998)

AND IT MATTERS THAT YOU GET SUPPORT!

- ▶ Find a trusted colleague to help you get to get into a constructive frame of mind before talking to the parent.
- ▶ Debrief with that same colleague

TRY USING COMMENTS THAT HAVE TWO PARTS

- ▶ One part acknowledges the parent:
- ▶ "I can really hear what you're saying..."
- ▶ "I really get how mad you are..."
- ▶ "I can only imagine how difficult this must be..."

TRY USING COMMENTS THAT HAVE TWO PARTS

- ▶ The other part gives you a chance to say what you need to say:
- ▶ "...and I'm hoping we can think this through.
- ▶ "...and we do have policies. Tell me what makes _____ difficult for your family."

TRY USING COMMENTS THAT HAVE TWO PARTS

- ▶ Utility
- ▶ We can simultaneously speak to the parents' experience
- ▶ And what we're hoping to accomplish together

GIVE YOUR SELF PERMISSION

- ▶ That these interactions might feel messy.
- ▶ That they may not go perfectly.
- ▶ That's okay!
- ▶ Would it help you to think that you may be the only person in that parent's life trying to help him or her?

REFERENCES

- ▶ Johnston, K. & Brinamen, C. (2006). Mental Health Consultation in Child Care: Transforming Relationships with Directors, Staff, and Families. Zero to Three Press.

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