

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

More and more research is being conducted every day that gives us a clearer picture of how young children learn. We now know more about what children need in order to grow emotionally and intellectually. For example, research shows that active, physical, and cognitively stimulating play is necessary for optimal brain growth and development.

Research has also proven what common sense tells us: children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships. These relationships must provide love and nurturance, security, responsive interaction, and encouragement for exploration. A child's first experience with this kind of relationship is at home with a loving family.

When you entrust your child to the care of early childhood professionals, you not only want your child to be safe and to learn, you also want your child to be accepted and valued, to feel she belongs in the school community. This is important, of course, but what families often do not understand is how important it is for you to be a part of the school community. Children feel more confident and comfortable at school when they feel their families are a part of the community as well.

What are some ways that your family can be members of your child's school community?

- Listen. Work with your child's teacher and other staff to build and maintain a trusting, open and honest relationship. Keep the lines of communication open and listen to each other's perspectives and expertise.
- Participate in your child's classroom activities. Go on a class field trip, share a special interest or talent, make a batch of playdough, or help out in your child's class for an hour or two whenever you can. When you come into the classroom you might read stories with children, sing songs, play games, or help with special projects.
- Contribute objects from home to your child's classroom. "One person's trash is another person's treasure." Talk with your child's teacher to find out which items might be useful.
- Help in the creation of classroom materials. You could help make pretend play items, block ramps, planting boxes, etc.
- Offer to share what you do professionally and share your "tools of the trade" with your child's class. Even though you may think that your job is not very interesting, children will be fascinated. Whether you are an assistant, a nurse, a postal worker or a mechanic, children will be very interested in what you do and in the tools and equipment you use to do your job.
- Get to know your child's teachers as well as the other children and families around you. Network with other parents to form carpooling groups or to swap recipes. Share your childrearing experiences and advice with each other. Another parent may be able to empathize with you and offer support.

Remember that however you can be involved, whatever you can do, your child will benefit if you are an active member of the school community.