What Did You Do In School Today? Using the School Environment to Foster Communication Between Children and Parents

by Diane E. Levin and Amelia Klein

When parents enroll a child in an early childhood program they quickly learn that their child has begun living an independent life in which it can be hard to feel a part. By its very nature, nursery and day care can cause parents to feel cut-off and isolated from crucial aspects of their children's daily experience (Provence, Naylor & Patterson, 1977). After knowing every bit of food that was eaten, toy that was used, book that was "read," and person with whom an interaction occurred, parents are suddenly left with a mystery to solve — finding out about their child's life when they are apart.

Playing "detective" is not always easy! Parents' efforts to learn more about the interesting and important events in their child's life at school are often frustrating. Even when teachers plan their schedules so that they have time to greet and chat with parents at arrival and departure times, they rarely have the time to share with parents all but the most important details about a child's day. And, parents, who are generally sensitive to the fact that teachers are very busy, do not want to demand too much of the teacher's time in order to seek additional information unless there is a "serious" issue to discuss. Thus, a large part of what happens in the life of a given child at school cannot be communicated during these necessarily brief meetings between teachers and parents at arrival and departure times.

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Talking with Children

When parents attempt to ask their children about their day at school the clues are often few and far between! How many times have parents told a teacher that the response they most often get from their children when they ask about their school day is, "I played!" or, "Please pass the bread!" Perhaps several days later, with no prompting from the parent, an important school event is revealed by the child to the satisfaction of the parent, but regular "grilling" rarely meets with substantial success.

The difficulties parents often have in getting information from their children about their school day are not necessarily caused by obstinance. There are developmental reasons for young children's frequent lack of responsiveness (Piaget, 1974; Rubin & Everett, 1982). First, young children's egocentrism can lead them to assume that a parent knows what is in their head and therefore, a child might think, "If it happened to me, then you know it, Daddy." Second, their tendency to think about one thing at a time can cause young children to focus on what is happening in the here and now; therefore, as children head home from school at five o'clock, "What's for dinner?" is more likely on their mind than what happened at school. Third, even when a child shares something from school with a parent, young children's egocentrism and their limited ability to organize events into a logical sequence and to coordinate information into an organized whole, can make the information shared with parents confusing at best. Hearing that "We used the big red thing again," or that "Gerard took it and the teacher got mad!" can raise a parent's interest but does not contribute to a great deal of understanding on the parent's part. Finally, asked a general question like, "Tell me about your day," is so abstract and overwhelming that it is hard for the young child to zero-in on which important things to tell about and it can become quite tedious for both parent and child when asked in this way on a daily basis. Asking more interesting, concrete, and focused questions which might elicit

more meaningful responses (e.g., "Tell me how you made the play-do?") is difficult given the limited information about a particular day parents generally have. Thus, trying to construct a picture of a child's day away from home from the isolated clues that children provide is generally a real challenge for parents.

The Importance of Communication between Children and Parents

It is vitally important for parents to share in their child's life when they are apart. Even when parents trust the quality of the school experience their child is receiving, without a sense of connection with school there can be a real sense of isolation, loss, and even guilt, as a significant part of their child's experience, learning and growth is placed in the hands of other adults (Balaban, 1985). And, when a significant part of the experience-base from which a child's learning and development occur happens away from the parent and the parent is isolated from it, then the role of parents in fostering their child's social, emotional and cognitive development can be unnessarily reduced. Lacking sufficient information, parents may feel less effective at performing such roles as: sharing in the growth of their child's new interests, knowledge, and friendships; providing emotional support around pleasurable or difficult events; assisting with a difficult task or skill that is in the process of being mastered; or, helping their child build bridges between experiences at home and school and vice versa.

Early childhood educators have always recognized the importance of close communication between the home and school (Honig, 1979). It is a topic in most early childhood education text books (e.g., Gordon & Browne, 1985). To foster this communication, high quality programs for young children have generally initiated contact between parents and teachers before children enter school, held periodic parent-teacher conferences and parent nights at school, encouraged parent visits to the classroom, and distributed regular newsletters. Parent-teacher communication has often been stressed as a crucial vehicle for facilitating a smooth separation process between parent and child when the child enters school (Read, 1971). While these approaches can go a long way toward fostering trust and cooperation between parents and teachers, and reassuring parents about the general nature of their child's school experience, they do not adequately help parents keep in touch with their children's lives in school on a daily basis.

Using the Environment to Develop Channels of Communication

There are a variety of efficient and effective ways the school environment can be utilized by the teacher to provide parents with the kinds of information that will help them feel more in touch with and a part of their children's out of home experiences. Such approaches can help open-up dialogues between teachers and parents, and parents and children without placing undue demands on teachers' time. As an added benefit, they can also become a part of and contribute to the overall curriculum planning process within the program and the quality of the curriculum provided to children.

Message-Sharing Board. Teachers can utilize the classroom setting to communicate with parents and help them share in their child's day. For example, the parent-bulletin board might be expanded to provide a greater variety of information about the child's daily experiences. The bulletin-board can become a message center or "message-sharing board." The message-sharing board provides an ongoing source of information for parents. It is like a traditional bulletin board in that it contains general information about school or classroom needs, community affairs of interest to parents and children, and special messages about future events at the school. In addition, if a message-sharing board is conveniently located near the entrance to the classroom, parents can receive important information each time they come to school. The message-sharing board differs from a traditional bulletin board in the ways described below.

First of all, the message-sharing board can be designed to be a 3-way communication system which actively engages the child in sharing information about classroom activities. With pictorial clues, the child can provide information to the parent about the school day by "reading" the information on the board. Printed messages accompanying the illustrations on the message-sharing board provide relevant details so that parents can better understand the child's rendition of his/her daily experiences.

One example which has proven helpful is the Daily Schedule (see Figure 1). The daily schedule consists of a per-
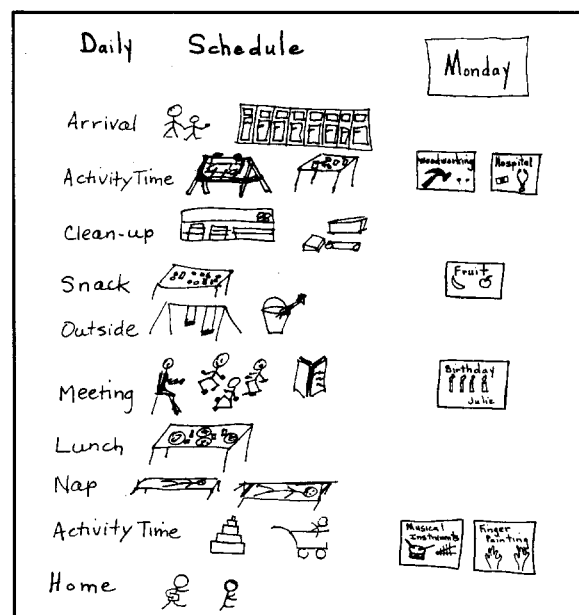

Figure 1.
Daily schedule with pictorial cues

manent chart which lists the sequence of classroom activities. Next to the chart, teachers can attach cards indicating the major events which will occur during each activity period (e.g., a card with a picture of the snack of the day next to snack time; a card with a bandage on it to symbolize hospital play during activity time). By using the pictorial clues, the child is able to share the activities which will take place or took place on a particular day at drop-off and arrival times with parents.

Children can also be encouraged to create messages of their own for their parents ("Dear Mommy: Please don't give me tuna fish any more.") To complete the triad, parents might contribute messages to the child ("Happy Birthday, Andy! Love, Dad") as well as to the teacher. The message-sharing board, therefore, includes a place for messages for teachers, parents, and children (see Figure 2). The message board also gives the child an opportunity to discover how print conveys meaning. In addition, in settings with non-English speaking families, dialogues between parents and children can be fostered through the pictorial symbols which bypass the need for reading English.

Second, the message-sharing board allows the teacher to share personal information about individual children. During the course of the day, teachers make many observations of children's behavior which would be of interest to the parents even though that information might not be unusual. Some examples of information-sharing which allow parents to feel "connected" to their children's school experiences are sleeping habits or favorite resting activities (Nap Highlights), or children's interest in particular foods such as snacks (Food Highlights). By receiving this type of personal information about their children, parents learn to develop a sense of trust as well as respect for their child's teacher (and caretaker).

Curriculum Displays. "Curriculum displays" (like message-sharing boards) provide an opportunity for children and teachers to share daily learning experiences with parents. A curriculum display communicates information about current classroom curriculum activities. These activities may be on going (e.g., water play or cooking experiments) or special topics of study (e.g., the family, "horses" or
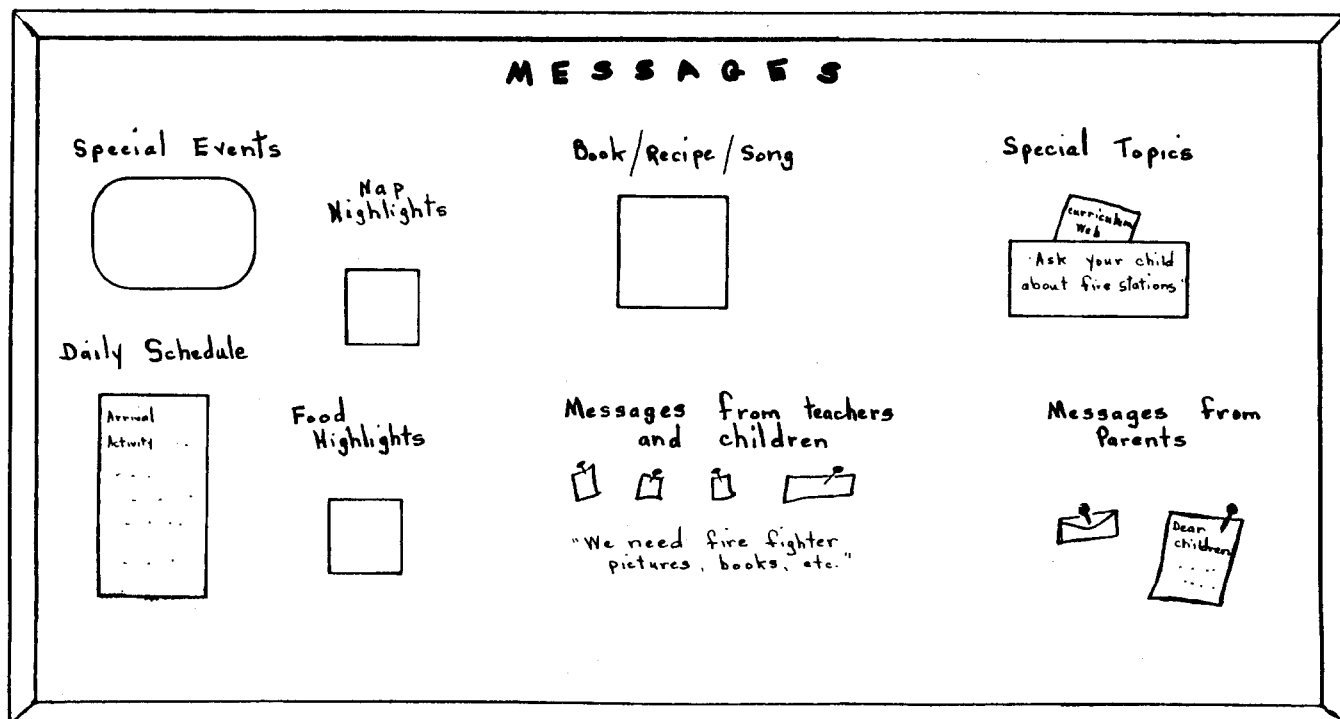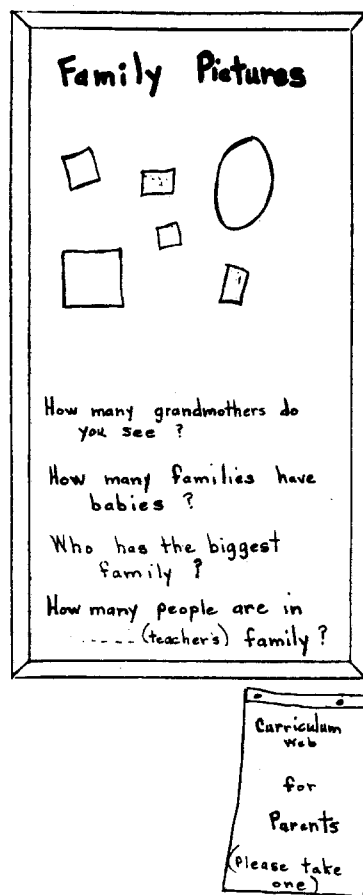

Figure 2.
Message-sharing board

Figure 3.
Bulletin board display

transportation). Displays may take the form of a bulletin board (see Figure 3), a learning center (see Figure 4), or a classroom "scrap book" containing photographs or illustrations and text created by the children (e.g., "Our favorite recipes", "A trip to the doughnut shop" or "Visitors").

As with the message-sharing board, curriculum displays include print and pictorial symbols which are meaningful to the child as well as the parent. A display such as the one entitled "Family Pictures" encourages participation as

parents and children engage in problem-solving discussions (see Figure 3). Displays in classroom activity centers allow parents to learn about how their children interact with classroom materials. For example, props used at a water play area are labeled to facilitate clean-up as well as to allow children an opportunity to categorize objects in some order (e.g., "sink or float," "tubes," "pumps"). Children can refer to these labels as they share their experiences with parents.

As parents and children interact with

classroom displays and with each other they develop a shared meaning. Parents are therefore in a position to ask more specific questions about what their children did in school as well as find opportunities to extend their children's learning experiences outside of the classroom.

Curriculum Webs. Besides their interest in children's school experiences, parents seek information about Early Childhood Education practices. This information can be effectively and efficiently shared by the teacher in the form
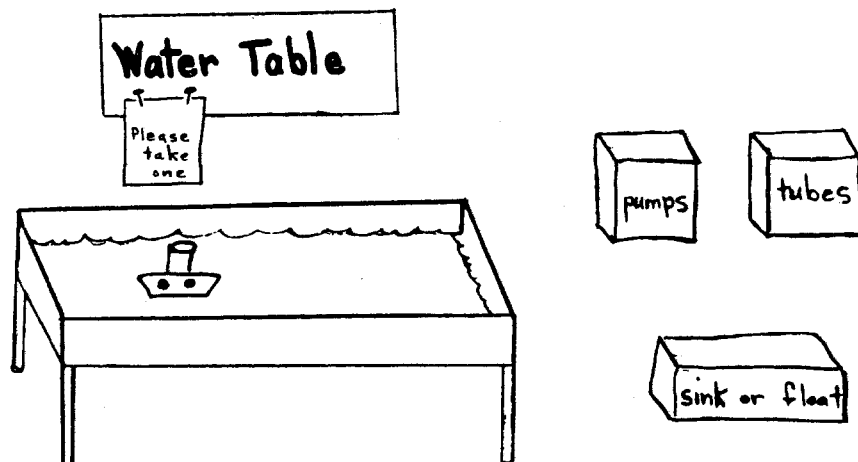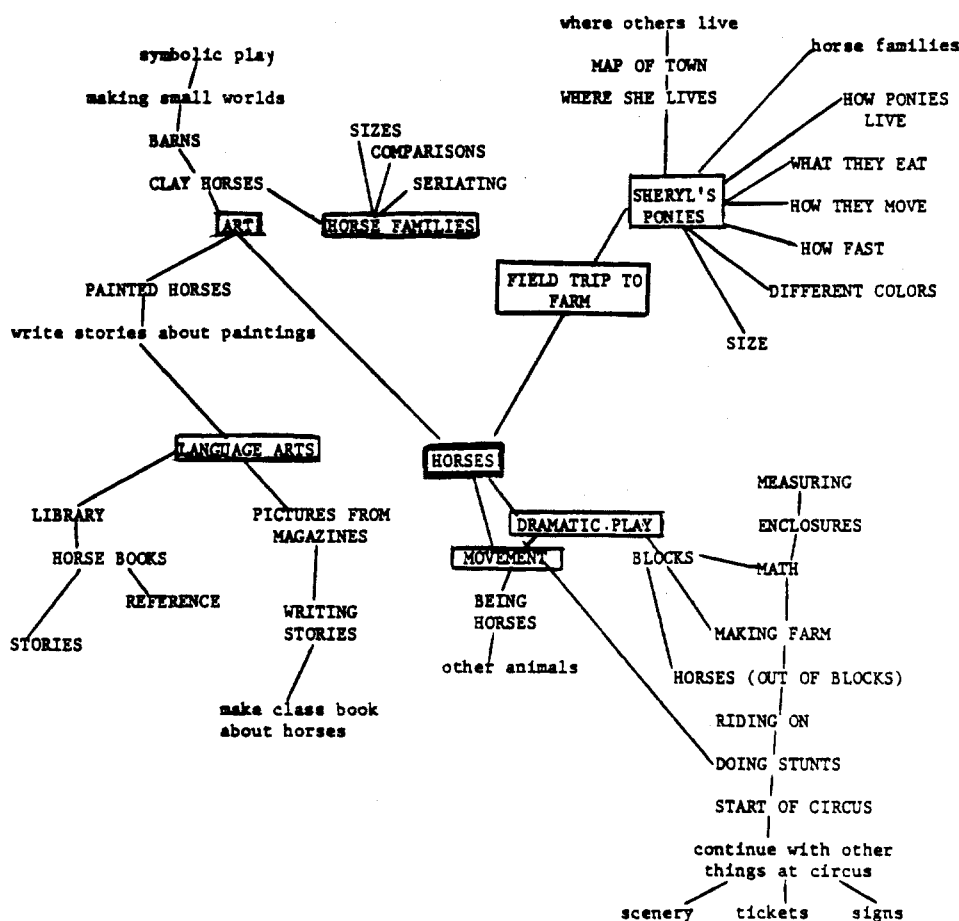

Figure 4.
Learning center display

Figure 5.
Curriculum web

of a "Curriculum Web" (see Figure 5). Curriculum webs provide information about a classroom environment in a visually clear, concise and easy-to-read fashion (Levin, 1986).

Curriculum webs may be duplicated for parents and placed on the message-sharing board or added to a curriculum bulletin-board display or a classroom learning center such as a water table area. A curriculum web, or flow chart, helps parents learn about the value of various curriculum activities. For example, a curriculum web placed near the water table could inform parents that during the course of experimenting with various materials in water, children learned about buoyancy and developed concepts about volume, air pressure and fluidity. As parents deepen their understanding of the value of play in their children's learning at school, their trust and respect for the teacher's knowledge about early childhood education can also be enhanced.

The communication process evolves as it becomes a part of the life of the classroom. The ideas presented here represent a few of the many possible ways to begin this process. Using the environment to communicate with parents has many benefits. The most important benefit is that the environment provides information which can help parents share in their children's day.

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