

# In Search of The Ideal Parent

By Crystal Dahlmeier

During a summer workshop for teachers on communication skills, I asked the participants to create the ideal parent. We had no difficulty filling the chalkboard with a plethora of adjectives. Then I suggested we describe an ideal teacher. Many of the descriptors we chose were identical to those used to describe the parent! As we again filled the chalkboard, we began to realize that we were no closer to being ideal teachers than parents were to being perfect parents. We concluded that, just as we were trying to be the best teachers we could be (after all, we were all giving up a week of vacation to learn more about communication), it perhaps follows that the parents with whom we work (and about whom we sometimes complain) were trying to be the best parents they could be.

The exercise helped create a state of mind and attitude that supports and nurtures parent-teacher collaboration. It then remains necessary for teachers to create opportunities to include parents into the daily operations and activities of the school. In that way, the strengths of both parents and teachers merge to form a whole that is indeed greater than the sum of the parts.

During the 20+ years that I taught young children, I tried many different activities designed to include parents. Scheduling regular parent visiting days was one of the most successful. Initially fearful of constant disruptions, the teaching team planned carefully. We basically wrote a lesson plan, listing aims, procedures, control of error. We then described the procedures to parents, both verbally and in writing (Table 1). Finally, we informed the children, again describing what would occur and our expectations.

Most Thursdays and Fridays were set aside for one parent to visit. If both parents wanted to visit, they were required to sign up for separate days. The aim was for the parent to spend an entire morning with his/her child, following the child's activities. If the child had a lesson, the parent joined the lesson. Parents and teachers did not converse during the visit except for brief directions and questions. Other children were directed to their own work unless the parent read a story or engaged in a small-group activity.

Parent visiting days proved to be much more successful than I had hoped. Some outcomes we had planned and anticipated; others were surprises. Because we had "pre-



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pared the environment," both children and parents followed the procedures, so disruptions were minimal. Parents' feedback to me was both positive and insightful. Some hadn't realized how intensely their children worked. Some were impressed at the children's independence, order, responsibility, respect, and cooperation. (Different parents identified different concepts.) Most were exhausted by the end of the morning. All felt they knew their children in a new way and had a new respect for both the child and the teachers.

The children reveled in having a parent's total attention for 3 hours, in an environment where the child was the leader. They respected other children's time with their parents and, with rare exceptions, didn't intrude on the parent-child activities. The children, by articulating the rules, procedures, names of materials, and descriptions of their activities, reinforced their understanding of and appreciation for the materials and routines of the class.

As the teacher in that class, I learned more than I had ever learned at parent-teacher conferences. I had 3 hours to observe parent-child interactions. Many questions I had about a child were answered, and the observation helped me plan and prepare for conferences, in order to guide them in a way that could address a problem or issue I had noticed.

There were, of course, humorous observations, as well. Few of the boys wanted their mothers to join in their running/climbing games outside. Fathers were included in those activities, while mothers were directed to sit on the bench and watch—to most of them a relief! One child, in his excitement, knocked over the bead cabinet. His mother, who looked horrified, was assured by her

child that it was OK, this happened all the time (in fact, it had never happened before), and now they just had to start picking up the beads, which they did together.

On occasion I would "feel" a parent's eyes on me, especially as I dealt with a difficult behavioral issue. I finally realized that the parents were observing and learning as much from me as I was observing and learning from them. A few parents called me after their visit with specific questions, which provided another opportunity to continue what grew to be ongoing dialog and sharing of ideas.

I am not teaching young children this year. If and when I resume, Parent Visiting Days will continue to be included in our schedule. Parents, teachers, and children were all transformed by the experience.

Inclusion of parents in the educational process of their children was recognized by Montessori as an essential aspect of our work.

For a man is not only a biological but a social product, and the social environment of individuals in the process of education is the home. Scientific pedagogy will seek in vain to better the new generation if it does not succeed in influencing also the environment within which this new generation grows! I believe, therefore, that in opening the house to the light of new truths, and to the progress of civilization, we have solved the problem of being able to modify directly the environment of the new generation, and have thus made it possible to apply, in a practical way, the fundamental principles of scientific pedagogy. (Montessori, 1964, p. 64)

The "Create the Ideal Parent" exercise has had a significant effect on my professional development. Now, whenever I be-



Table 1

### Guidelines for Parent Visits

- Plan to spend the entire morning with your child.
- Follow your child's interests and suggestions. This is his/her classroom, and s/he knows all the rules and can help you follow them.
- Feel free to join your child for snack. Please follow the established routines.
- Avoid interrupting any child's work. Save conversations with other children until outdoor time.
- Use a quiet voice.
- If another child is seeking your attention, explain to that child that you are at school to spend time with your child. Seek a teacher's assistance if needed.
- If you have any questions, please ask one of the teachers.
- Sometimes children are confused by the unclear roles when both their teacher and parent are in the same room. If you are uncomfortable about the way your child is behaving, feel free to go to the kitchen for a coffee break to remove yourself from the situation.
- Any events that you observe are confidential. If something happens that you don't understand or wish to have clarified, please call the teacher or make an appointment to meet with the staff. Enjoy your child and delight in his/her independence and responsibility.

Please sign up for one of the dates listed [our schedule ran from the last week in January through May]. If both parents wish to visit, please select different days. To sign up, please call our voice mail and leave a message requesting a date to visit. Someone on the staff will call you back if there is another parent already scheduled for that day. If you don't receive a return phone call, plan to arrive on your day at 9 a.m. We look forward to seeing you.

gin to dwell on the shortcomings or imperfections of a student, a parent, a friend, I get paper and pencil and begin listing the qualities I need to develop to become an "ideal" teacher, mentor, friend. . . .

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#### Reference

Montessori, M. (1964). *The Montessori method*. New York: Schocken.

*"Being a child is to feel the joys of living.  
Teaching a child is to know the delights of life.  
Educating an adult to teach  
is to generate the promise of humanity."*

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