After reading an article about full-day kindergarten, an elementary school principal invites the local paper’s education reporter to visit the excellent kindergarten classrooms in her school. A preschool teacher explains to a parent how play with blocks connects to learning math concepts. A university professor presents a PowerPoint summary of the latest research on achievement and motivation to a school district superintendent.

Whether we are talking to parents, policy makers, or reporters, we can all better convey our message about early childhood education when we master effective communication strategies. For teachers and program administrators, communication is essential to building effective relationships with children, their families, and other stakeholders. College and university faculty need to clearly convey to their students information about numerous topics including child development, curriculum planning, documentation, and assessment. Researchers must explain new studies and connect them to efforts to improve programs for young children. As important, communication is a vital part of any effort to advocate for better public policies and greater investments in early childhood education.

Lessons from Working with the News Media

Linda Jacobson and Alan Simpson

The first step in communicating is recognizing that many audiences don’t know a great deal about child development or the latest research in early childhood education. They probably are unfamiliar with your specific organization or program and its hopes and goals for all young children. If the individuals in your audience are not familiar with your work or with the benefits young children get from quality early experiences, it will be much more difficult to convince them to support your efforts and for you to secure the investments that are needed to ensure quality in early childhood education.

Educating your audience

Journalists are one example of an audience that is often unfamiliar with early childhood education issues. With states expanding public pre-K programs, reporters who cover K–12 schools are learning to write about early childhood education as well. They are expected to do this without a lot of experience or background on the topic. It can be helpful to start a
You can contact reporters proactively to suggest issues and ideas they could consider in the future, and to let them know about upcoming projects, events, or research.

What is your message? Early childhood education is filled with many complex and interesting issues, and trying to communicate too many ideas at once can leave your audience confused. Before you communicate, plan what you want to say. Write down the two or three most important points about your program, your research, or your work. For example, if you are preparing to discuss the effects on young children of using computers, make sure your main point is clear. Do

What’s in a Name?

The early childhood profession, like any profession, uses specific terminology to refer to programs for young children and the people who work in those programs. This is understandable, because names and other terms communicate messages about the mission and goals of a program or organization, the experience of the teachers and administrators, and the benefits of quality early education. For example, a program may use the term teacher rather than caregiver because the former conveys that the staff member has relevant professional preparation and experience. Some educators use child care rather than day care, saying that the former better describes the service provided for children.

It is important, however, for educators to use language that families and other audiences will understand, and to recognize that just because parents— or reporters—ask about “day care,” this doesn’t mean they’re not interested in a great program that will support young children’s development and learning.

Names and terminology can be valuable elements of communication, but not if they are confusing to the audience. Educators should be careful about using jargon—including acronyms and shorthand terms. Terms such as invented spelling, family-style dining, and R & Rs are well known in the early childhood field but can be confusing for other audiences.

Three questions

These suggestions for working with reporters can also apply to communication with any audience that is not familiar with early childhood education. Keep your communication simple and clear. Start by carefully considering three questions:

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you think that young children should be engaged in using hands-on materials rather than technology? Or is your main point that computers and other technology can be useful in specific, appropriate ways? Keep your points short and direct. These main messages are an introduction for new audiences. Once you get them interested, you can offer more details.

**Who is your audience?** As you determine your messages, think about who will be receiving them and what aspects of your program or project will most interest them. Consider ways that your work relates to this audience, and use this information to tailor your messages more effectively. For example, families may be most interested in details about child development and how a program may be right for their child at each age and stage. On the other hand, policy makers or funders may be more interested in quality early education programs as an investment in the community. Connect the dots for policy makers—how does an investment in professional development for early childhood professionals increase the quality of programs for young children? How do meaningful literacy experiences for young children impact academic success later on?

**How will you reach your audience?** Who your audience is and where you work will determine which communication tools will prove most effective. For example, educational organizations and universities can write press releases and opinion articles directed at news organizations. Schools and child development programs can use brochures, flyers, newsletters, or Web sites to communicate with families and staff. Teachers, principals, and program directors can prepare information sheets on topics of concern and interest to families.

Everyone in the field can communicate through newspapers, magazines, and journals by writing letters to the editor. Whichever format you use, organize your materials so the primary messages appear at the beginning, followed by supporting data. Keep the text brief or summarize the key points.

For most early childhood educators, word-of-mouth communication to and from families, students, and other

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**Connect the dots for policy makers—how does an investment in professional development for early childhood professionals increase the quality of programs for young children?**
Tips on Communicating about New Research

• Embargoed copies are copies of a study that reporters are given in advance with the understanding that they will not report on the study prior to a specific date. They are an essential resource for reporters. Advance copies allow reporters enough time to digest the findings of a study and to reach enough sources to present a balanced report on the research findings. If a study is embargoed, provide a list of people who have reviewed it so reporters can begin getting some reactions.

• If full reports cannot be released to the media, executive summaries are effective tools for reporters, as long as they cover the key points of the research. Reporters often go after the summaries first, or go straight to the conclusions of a study and then use the full report or article to fill in some of the details. Note any important caveats about your research in the executive summary.

• Let reporters know if the research is part of a longitudinal study, and provide them with some history so they can present the findings in an accurate light.

• Be specific about what makes a particular study unique. What is significant about this finding? What does it say that hasn’t been said before? How does this study differentiate what’s important for early childhood programs? How does it relate to other studies that have been done on this topic?

• Talk about the implications this study has for early childhood policy and practice. But if more research is needed before conclusions can be drawn, make sure to say so.

• Provide announcements of new and ongoing research—even if the findings are a year or more away. This is a positive way to build rapport with reporters and to interest them in your work. If they can follow a study over time, they’ll be able to write about it in a more engaging way.

Spreading the news about early childhood education

Early childhood educators have many responsibilities, so it’s not surprising that communication isn’t that high on their priority lists. But communication is essential to achieving goals for your program and for the early childhood education field. If we want greater societal commitment to improving programs for young children and more support for early childhood educators and students preparing to become educators, we need to create greater public awareness of the benefits of high-quality early education and the challenges facing the profession. Today, too many of our stakeholders do not really know about our programs, research, or our work with young children. They do not understand how very different an early childhood classroom looks from a classroom for older children.

The public needs to learn about the value of early childhood education and the benefits of giving all children a great start. It needs concrete, real-life examples that demonstrate how young children learn

• by using all of their senses as they handle objects and materials (for example, children learn about the growth cycle by planting and tending a vegetable garden);

• while acting out familiar and imaginary experiences during play (for example, recreating a pizza parlor after a field trip); and

• from teachers who ask questions that can be answered in more than one way, lead small-group activities that focus on specific concepts, and provide materials and time for children to develop and practice new skills.

The public needs to learn these things from each of us.

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