

Using Social Media to Connect with Families

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As an early childhood educator and centre administrator, I have been interested in finding creative and innovative ways of promoting and maintaining two-way communication with families. One of the tools I have found to be very effective is social media: namely, using Facebook to connect with families. Since 2009, I have used Facebook professionally in a variety of ways, depending on the particular needs and interests of the families I have worked with. This includes using both a private Facebook group and a public Facebook page.

Using a Private Facebook Group

From 2007 to 2011, I operated a small multi-age family child care program in Shawnigan Lake. I worked with up to 12 families at a time, most of whom used Facebook regularly. I created a group and invited family members to join. This group was private (by design), so only immediate family members could view the content. Here, I posted information about upcoming activities, projects, and events (both at the centre and in the wider community). Eventually, family members also posted information of interest to everyone, such as community fairs, weekend meet-ups, and free children's items. Beneath each post, members could add comments or questions, which facilitated effective two-way communication. For family members with limited time or opportunities

for face-to-face interaction, this was particularly beneficial.

For example:

Me: "Hi everyone! We'll be baking muffins on Friday. Feel free to send seeds or dried fruit (no later than Friday morning) to add to the muffin mix."

Parent 1: "I'll send some dried cranberries."

Parent 2: "I can drop off some ground flaxseed at drop-off tomorrow."

Me: "Sounds great. Thank you!"

After baking, I posted a photo along with comments.

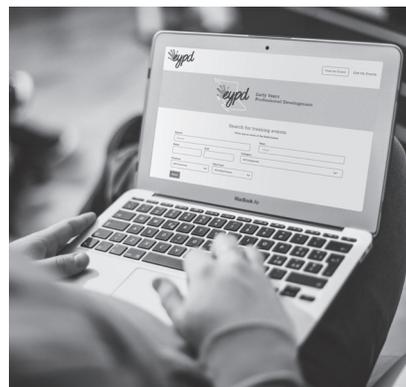
Me: "Here is a photo of our delicious muffins. DL [a child] said they were 'uberlicious.' AF said, 'I think we should add chocolate chips next time and make them bigger.' CH added, 'How could we make them bigger?'"

Me: "Do any of you have recipes to suggest? Hmm, I wonder what might help make them bigger? I'll bring this question up at circle time tomorrow."

And the conversation continued (or sometimes not) . . . Photos and pedagogical narrations were also posted at the centre, for all to see and contribute further.

Using a Public Facebook Page

When I was the administrator of a large campus-based child care centre, I created a public Facebook page for the purpose of connecting



with both existing and prospective families. Similar to the private Facebook group described above, I posted information related to upcoming activities, projects, and events with the goal of connecting with a much broader audience. For example, I shared information about our annual holiday basket fundraiser, which attracted many community folks who would otherwise not know about this event. I also posted information about available child care spaces, which was relevant to many folks who "Liked" our page as well as to those with whom they may have shared the post or those they tagged in the comments section beneath the post. Posting regularly on this Facebook page also helped the centre to maintain full enrolment (in other words, Facebook is free advertising). For most posts, I tried to include a relevant photo, with permission, as a picture does speak a thousand words, and this is particularly true on social media where wordiness is not effective. See Beaufort Children's Centre's Facebook page for more information.

Using Messenger to Communicate with Families

In my current role as the executive director at Growing Together Child and Parent Society, I work with up to 40 families, and most of them are young parents under the age of 25. The vast majority of them have smartphones and use Facebook daily. So sending a personal message on Facebook (using Messenger) is often the fastest and most effective way of reaching out to these families, particularly when poverty is an issue and a person's phone plan may not provide minutes for talking on the phone.

For example (using Messenger):

Me: "Hi Jen. How is Taia [Jen's daughter] doing? Is she still sick with the flu?"

Jen: "Yah, we're home. She still has a bad fever."

Me: "Sorry to hear. Were you able to connect with Karen [the public health nurse]?"

Jen: "I couldn't find her number."

Me: "Here it is: 123-456-7890."

Jen: "Thanks."

Me: "No problem. Hope she feels better soon."

Why Use Social Media?

According to *Maclean's* ("Facebook Releases Stats," 2013), approximately 14 million Canadians (or about 40% of the population) check Facebook daily, and almost 10 million of these users do so using a tablet or mobile phone. And this statistic is from over three years ago so we can assume the numbers have increased. Interestingly, users between the ages of 18 and 29 years are the most common age demo-

graphic (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Further, about 75% of parents online use Facebook, and of these, approximately 81% of mothers and 66% of fathers use the platform (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015). In other words, many of the families we work with are likely using Facebook regularly, either on a computer or a mobile device.

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In using social media tools for communication, it is important to develop a clear social media policy. This includes steps such as obtaining consent from families before posting any photos online, ensuring that appropriate privacy settings are in place, not using any identifying names, creating both a professional and personal profile page for yourself, using photos that focus on activities (not faces), and so on. Edutopia's "How to Create Social Media Guidelines for Your School" (Anderson, 2012) is one of many resources that can be accessed online for more information.

Finally, it is clear that face-to-face communication with families is preferable, as educators and administrators can read and respond to social cues in a much more holistic way. However, given the barriers and limitations to engaging in regular face-to-face communication with all families, social media can be an effective tool for increasing opportunities for connection, learning, and collaboration.

References

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