

SCHOOL-TO-HOME CONNECTIONS

Simple Strategies for
Early Childhood Educators



Cathryn O'Sullivan, EdM



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Childhood Educators**

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Table of Contents

Dedication and Acknowledgments	v
Welcome	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1:	
Put Your Oxygen Mask on First: The Importance of Self-Care	3
Chapter 2:	
Partnering with Parents.....	9
Chapter 3:	
Understanding the Power of Play.....	13
Chapter 4:	
Intentional Interactions and the Power of Yet	21
Chapter 5:	
Involving Infants	27
Chapter 6:	
Terrific Toddlers	35
Chapter 7:	
Creating a Child-Centered Environment Where Children Thrive	41
Chapter 8:	
Setting up Child-Friendly Spaces.....	48
Chapter 9:	
Building Child-Friendly Schedules.....	56
Chapter 10:	
Encouraging Children’s Individuality and Uniqueness	61
Chapter 11:	
Embracing and Celebrating Our Diverse and Beautiful World	66

Chapter 12:	
Supporting Social-Emotional Development	72
Chapter 13:	
Language and Literacy	80
Chapter 14:	
Fine-Motor Development and Writing	88
Chapter 15:	
Physical Development.....	96
Chapter 16:	
STEM for Young Children	102
Chapter 17:	
Nurturing in Nature.....	107
Chapter 18:	
Behavior Is Communication	112
Chapter 19:	
How Can I Tell If They're Learning?.....	122
Chapter 20:	
Handling Difficult Situations and Topics with Care.....	129
Chapter 21:	
Transitioning to a New Class or School.....	136
Appendix: Children's Books Related to Different Topics	140
References and Recommended Reading	150
Index	159

Dedication

Lovingly dedicated to Dr. Rose Davies. Thank you for all you did for early childhood development in Jamaica, and for me.

Acknowledgments

I have been blessed with so much love and support throughout my life, and I am truly grateful. Thank you to my family and to my friends, who are the family I've been lucky enough to choose. Thank you to all of the educational and inspirational voices in my head and in my heart. I'll always try to keep listening to and learning from you.

Thank you to the children, families, teachers, and colleagues who have welcomed me and shared moments with me that have influenced and impacted me deeply.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this amazing opportunity. I hope I've made you proud.

Finally, thank you, readers, for choosing this book. I hope I can provide you with some support and encouragement, just as others have done for me.

Welcome

Dear Teacher,

As a harried principal trying to get a brand-new preschool off the ground in my home country, Jamaica, I had become so inundated in daily chores, emergencies, and necessities that I'd lost the magic of the everyday, the magic of why we do what we do. You know that feeling—the one you get when you see a child smile as you approach, when they reach for your hand to help them toddle away from their parents. It's the joy you feel when you help a child practice walking around and around as their confidence grows, the magic of hearing a nonverbal child with autism repeat something you said or start singing when that child thinks no one is watching.

Jamaica—like many places—is a country that espouses the term *play based* while still trying to fully understand and embrace the concept. I was trying to introduce my teachers, who have decades of experience and a real and deep love for children, to a new, play-based, child-centered approach to seeing children and their roles in children's lives. I have scrambled to find the right training material: one that isn't too pedantic, that has just the right amount and type of tangible information teachers can digest and apply while on the job, that goes back to the basics while helping them to see that the foundation of a play-based teaching and learning process is magic. I hoped my teachers would understand that their role is to be intentional facilitators of magic for the children, which can only come from teachers enjoying and embracing each moment themselves. To do this, teachers need the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to infuse every moment with intentional, playful foundational gems for children.

Our needs and roles as teachers have become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. We must not only consider our relationship with young children and how we maintain that connection (even when we can't see them in person) but also examine our relationship with the parents and help them to parent more effectively. We have to help them to manage full-day, well-rounded experiences with their children, and we have to figure out how to translate our knowledge and approach in a manner that they can digest and apply

without feeling overwhelmed. Just a few little tweaks here and there can make a world of difference for us and for parents. This can only happen if we go back to the basics of what, how, and why we do what we do, so we can distill and condense this information to help us to keep going and to encourage and share with the parents.

Before the days got mired in deliverables and deadlines, what were your magical moments? What makes you smile and say, "This is why I'm here. This is why I keep going"? I hope this book not only helps you to hold on to those moments but also helps you to share easy suggestions so that parents, too, can have those magical moments with their children, so you all can help children to thrive.

Thank you for all that you do and all that you are.

With much love,

Aunty Cathryn



Introduction

This book covers a range of subjects and areas relevant to your work with young children and their families. Each chapter addresses the challenges we educators face and offers suggestions for handling those challenges and communicating clearly with families. This book isn't meant to cover each topic exhaustively but to spark your interest, provide a few reminders and thought-provoking questions, or introduce new areas and ideas. At the core is my desire to remind you and the parents to let the children lead you; if you do, you won't go wrong. If you stay true to children's unique personalities, needs, abilities, and interests, then you'll always be on the right path.

How to Use This Book

These (very short, I promise) chapters can be read straight through or in any order. You can choose the chapters you're most interested in, as each can stand alone, to provide you with quick tips for your environment. This book can also form the foundation for teacher professional development and conversation starters for professional-learning circles or informal conversations with your peers. A note about terminology: I know that many of us use different terms to describe ourselves and our profession, such as *practitioners*, *educators*, *caregivers*, *facilitators*, *teachers*, or *aunts/uncles*. For simplicity's sake, I will use the term *teacher*. I will also use the term *parent* to refer to children's main caregivers, guardians, or parents.

Use this book as a resource not only for you but also for parents, as you share the information with them so they can have guidance and suggestions for deepening their understanding of their children and supporting their learning and development. With each chapter, I've included a sample letter for parents addressing the topic of that chapter. The letters include information, resources, and ideas for connecting with parents, engaging them with the school community, and supporting them in their very important task of raising a family. You can incorporate the text into your regular family communications or photocopy the letters and hand them out, sharing information on the topics of your choice.

If you'd like to dive deeper and learn more about a particular subject area, suggestions for additional reading are included at the end of most chapters. Websites such as Virtual Lab School (<https://www.virtuallabschool.org/>), Cox Campus (<https://www.coxcampus.org/>), Reading Rockets (<https://www.readingrockets.org/>), and the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/index.html>) also offer resources and free, short online courses on a range of different topics for early childhood educators. The book also includes an appendix on pages 140-149 with a list of children's books related to the topics covered.

Go ahead, put your feet up, sip something soothing, and choose a topic that speaks to you. I hope that these pages will remind you that you are a superhero with the most awesome job in the world!



Chapter 1:

Put Your Oxygen Mask on First: The Importance of Self-Care

As teachers, we naturally give so much of ourselves to the children, their parents, and our colleagues that it's all too common for us to forget to take care of ourselves. We tend to forget the most important lesson: If we don't take care of ourselves, then we can't take care of anyone else. If we are depleting our tanks, then there will be nothing left to give, not only at school but also at home. We can't keep saying, "If I push on for just one more week/semester/year, I can _____ (insert goal or wish here). I just need to get through this _____ (insert far-fetched excuse here)."

Teacher burnout is a very real thing, and it's hard to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again once you fall off the wall. I worked so hard and squeezed myself through every tight space to get our preschool open. I was at the school for eleven hours every day for more than a year. The teachers and I learned to patch and paint walls. We used our own money to purchase supplies, sometimes without asking for reimbursement. (Does any of this sound familiar?) But then, I just couldn't do it anymore. I was too burned out. There was no more steam for the little engine who just couldn't.

In many ways, we teachers are actors. No matter what is happening inside, we do our best to always show and give children only our best. We hold everything in and keep going. But we have to find ways to care for ourselves every day, so that we can keep giving children our best. If you're honest with yourself, you'll recognize that when you're tired, sad, preoccupied, or worried, you aren't able to give your all. You're not able to be as consistent as you'd like with routines, encouragement, play, smiles, and behavior management strategies. That's completely understandable and human. The COVID-19 pandemic made it even more obvious how important personal interactions and relationships are, and those can't be forged if you're not caring for yourself.

Addressing burnout is particularly important because research has shown that teachers who experience a great deal of stress and feel

burned out are not as likely to consistently create positive classroom climates and utilize effective classroom management strategies (Jeon et al. 2019; Shaack, Le, and Stedron 2020). They are also less emotionally connected and sensitive to children's needs and spend less time instructing children and communicating with families. Unsurprisingly, children in classrooms with burned-out teachers display more behavioral challenges and perform worse academically. This can then lead to teachers leaving the profession. In the United States, about 30 percent of early childhood teachers leave their jobs annually, which is four times higher than their counterparts in elementary school (Jeon et al. 2019; Shaack, Le, and Stedron 2020). Research tells us that self-care that addresses fatigue and stress may help to alleviate their effects (Cooklin, Giallo, and Rose 2011).

Self-care isn't selfish. It doesn't mean ignoring others or putting a wall up between yourself and those in your care. It does mean finding ways to take minibreaks, even just taking three deep belly breaths. It means getting the rest you need, seeking support from colleagues or mental health professionals before you are at a breaking point, asking for help, finding ways to disconnect from work and reconnect with yourself, and doing what you need to do to have a life you love to live.

Breathe Deeply and Get Moving

When you need to center yourself and regroup, take at least three deep belly breaths where your belly gets bigger as you breathe in and deflates as you exhale. Try to make your exhale longer than your inhale. Practice this with the children in your class too! The earlier they start, the more of a lifelong habit deep breathing will become.

Even if you don't like regular exercise, you can find other ways to get moving. Movement is guaranteed to help you feel better. Go ahead! Make silly sounds, dance, move, shake, scream, and shake those negative emotions right out! You can even have movement and dance breaks in your learning environment. Are the children fidgeting and finding it hard to focus during story time? Stretch, dance, move, and breathe together, and then shift to calmer, slower movements as you settle back down.

Laugh!

Laughter gives us so many benefits! It has been shown to positively affect our health and help us to live longer. It helps us to burn calories and tone muscles. Laughter helps the memory, helps prevent heart disease, and lowers the levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Laughter improves the mood. Even when nothing's funny, just choosing to laugh can have the same physical and emotional benefits as spontaneous laughter (Beasley 2020). Go ahead—try it alone and with the children.

Find Gratitude and Support

Even when everything seems to be going wrong, pause, smile, and think about what you're grateful for. You can start a list together with the children in your class. You can make a gratitude corner where you and the children can place sticky notes of what you're grateful for. Keep a notebook of things that made you smile and feel grateful for during your day: the funny thing a child said, the a-ha moment a child had—you name it. Then, pick a random page and relive a moment whenever you need to!

Have a mini-support group you can talk with when you need a little help. You can take turns babysitting each other's children at home or supervising the children at school for a few minutes so you can take a longer break. You can just send each other words of encouragement and random memes that make you laugh! Don't be afraid to talk with a counselor or therapist if you need additional support for your mental health.

Support Parents

Parents also get lost in their role, particularly parents with young children who require so much care, attention, and supervision. They too can forget to take care of themselves. As teachers, our role is to support parents in all aspects of parenting, not just the side we see when the children are with us. Sharing suggestions for their own self-care and reassuring them that taking time for themselves will help them

to be better parents will not only be a welcome relief for them but also make your job easier as well.

Even a few tidbits here and there can brighten a parent's day. In the parent newsletter or email updates, include some of the funny things children say and do. Share funny or uplifting memes about parenting. Post encouraging signs. Provide opportunities for parents to get to know each other and talk together. At my old preschool, Sports Day, which was held outside, was the first school event that families were able to attend during the pandemic. After a year and a half of not getting to interact and share with each other, parents were so happy to mingle safely. It reminded us of how much fun they had had at the post-school concert parent potluck that was held before the pandemic.

No matter how you find time for yourself, just make sure to find the time. You simply can't take care of others if you aren't taking care of yourself!

If you'd like to explore more ideas, here's some additional reading about self-care:

Bethune, Adrian, and Emma Kell. 2021. *A Little Guide for Teachers: Teacher Wellbeing and Self-Care*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Boogren, Tina H. 2019. *180 Days of Self-Care for Busy Educators (A 36-Week Plan of Low-Cost Self-Care for Teachers and Educators)*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Forst, Sarah. 2020. *The Teacher's Guide to Self-Care: Build Resilience, Avoid Burnout, and Bring a Happier and Healthier You to the Classroom*. Evanston, IL: The Designer Teacher.

Dear Family,

It's okay to admit that you sometimes feel overwhelmed and exhausted. Every parent does—it means you're doing your job. It's also crucial that you admit that self-care isn't selfish. Feel free to say it out loud to yourself as many times and as boldly as you need to. **Self-care isn't selfish.** There's a reason you're told to put your oxygen mask on first before assisting others on a plane. You can't help anyone if you're struggling to breathe; you can only help when you are breathing freely. Tiredness and fatigue can negatively affect your physical and cognitive functioning and your interactions with your children, making you less patient and more frustrated and irritable. Research tells us that self-care that addresses this fatigue and stress may help to alleviate these effects.

Don't wait until you need a full-on escape (and won't want to come back). Instead, create a life you don't need to escape from. Try these quick and easy tips to slip some ease and "me time" into your packed days.

- ▶ **Breathe.** Take at least three deep belly breaths, where your belly gets bigger as you breathe in and deflates as you exhale. Try to make your exhale longer than your inhale. When your children see you breathing, they will also learn to try this too. The earlier they start, the more of a lifelong habit it will become. Rolling your eyes right now? Give it a try! What have you got to lose? Three deep breaths can make more of a difference than you think!
- ▶ **Take minibreaks.** Find little ways to take minibreaks throughout the day. If you struggle to supervise your little ones and need to take a break, use simple, tangible ways for them to understand. Sit nearby and give them something to play with independently. Then set a timer they can see for 5–15 minutes. Tell them that you're going to sit quietly, sip your tea, read a book, or look out the window and then you'll come play with them, they can come talk with you, and so on when the timer goes off. You can also say you'll join them after you finish playing two songs or you've finished eating or drinking something.
- ▶ **Get moving!** Even if you don't like regular exercise, you can find other ways to get moving. Movement is guaranteed to help you feel better. Go ahead! Make silly sounds, dance, move, shake, and scream those negative emotions right out!
- ▶ **Use routines as breaks too.** Turn routines and errands into more pleasurable experiences with simple swaps and shifts in thinking. During your child's bathtime, use soothing scents such as lavender to calm both you and your child. A whiff of some lavender-scented bubbles when you're

washing the dishes wouldn't hurt either. Turn on your favorite songs or podcasts, and pause to notice how the warm water feels on your hands while you breathe in the scent.

- ▶ **Laugh!** Laughter has been shown to positively affect your health and help you to live longer. It helps you to burn calories, tones muscles, helps your memory, helps prevent heart disease, lowers levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and improves your mood, just to name a few benefits. Research tells us that even when nothing's funny, just choosing to laugh can have the same physical and emotional benefits as spontaneous laughter. Go ahead! Try it! What have you got to lose?
- ▶ **Think of things you're grateful for.** Even when everything seems to be going wrong, pause, smile, and think about what you're grateful for. You and your child can even list these things together. Keep a notebook of what has made you smile. What lovely, funny, spontaneous moment happened today? Collect these memories, and then pick a random page and relive a moment whenever you need to!
- ▶ **Get support.** Have a mini-support group you can talk with when you need a little help, or join a parenting group. You can take turns watching each other's children so you can take a longer break, or just send each other random memes that make you laugh!

Here are some books you can check out if you'd like to learn more ideas about self-care and parenting:

Costello, Judith, and Jurgen Haven. 2004. *Zen Parenting: The Art of Learning What You Already Know*. Silver Spring, MD: Gryphon House.

Dowling, Daisy, et al. 2021. *Taking Care of Yourself*. HBR Working Parents Series. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Pollak, Susan M. 2019. *Self-Compassion for Parents: Nurture Your Child by Caring for Yourself*. New York: Guilford Press.

Thank you for being our partner as we work together to nurture your incredible family. We're here to help and support you along the way. But don't worry—you've got this!

With warm and bright thoughts,

Chapter 2:

Partnering with Parents

The need to develop strong relationships with parents, caregivers, and families has never been more obvious than it was in 2020, as everyone struggled to support most young children who were suddenly told they could not come to school. Parents scrambled to figure out how to work from home and become instant teachers. Young children in particular are a challenging group to teach because they find online learning very difficult, if not impossible. They need hands-on experiences to meet their need for personal connection and exploration.

One of the most important messages you can share with parents at any time is to play with their children and allow their children to play. Everything comes from play, and parents need that reassurance and guidance now more than ever. Many parents will recall their own schooling experiences, which might have been very academic in nature. In Jamaica, most parents expect children to be able to write from a very early age. Parents use writing and homework assignments as a gauge for what children do all day and whether they are learning. Often, they do not understand that play is the best way to lay the foundation for later academic and personal success.

Home learning activities have a strong impact on children's readiness for kindergarten, regardless of children's socioeconomic background. The way early childhood teachers engage parents can have an indirect effect on children's school readiness through parents' home-based behavior and activities (Barnett et al. 2020; Kingston et al. 2013). A home-school partnership, therefore, is important in helping young children thrive.

If we start with the assumption that everyone is doing the best they can, then we can be more empathetic, even when we sometimes want to scream in frustration. In addition to the book's handouts and activity suggestions, you can support parents in understanding their role in helping their children to thrive.

Parent Night

Inviting parents to participate at school by volunteering to read stories or share their skills, hobbies, cultures, and interests is, of course, a great way to encourage involvement. However, not all parents can take time during the school day to volunteer. You can go further by scheduling parent-night activities (virtual or in person) to encourage their connections with the school community and with each other. Don't have a big budget? Have a potluck so parents can also share a little bit of themselves and their culture with others.

Play-Based Learning

To help parents understand the need for play-based, developmentally appropriate learning, plan a parent night. Offer play-based activities for the parents, such as the following:

- ▶ Have them create with playdough, so they can feel their fingers working and getting strong like their children's as the children prepare for writing.
- ▶ Invite them to play games, such as board games or hopscotch, so they can practice turn-taking and encouraging their peers.
- ▶ Provide animals, such as fish, frogs, turtles, or insects in tanks, for them to observe, so they can talk with their children about the different animals they see in their habitats. (Be sure to put the animals back where you found them, if you're not planning on keeping them in the classroom.)
- ▶ Provide art materials for open-ended exploration.

You can even do the same activity twice, once using hands-on, participant-centered methods and the other using more traditional, teacher-directed methods. Encourage parents to reflect on these experiences and discuss how they feel when they engage in each approach. They can even draw and color about their feelings before sharing. Open up a discussion about the ways they enjoy learning as adults, and compare that with the ways children learn. (They're probably quite similar.) They can also share their favorite memories of preschool and early learning experiences, which will probably involve

Children are the **heart** of meaningful family engagement.

Children are the inspiration for positive family-provider relationships that are essential for promoting healthy child development and learning.

School-to-Home Connections is bursting with ideas for early childhood educators. Inside, you'll find simple ways to explain developmentally appropriate practice to parents, ideas on partnering with them on their child's journey to school readiness, and tips for nurturing families' active involvement in the school community. Along the way, you discover information on:

- Understanding the power of play
- Encouraging children's individuality and uniqueness
- Celebrating diversity
- Supporting children's development across key domains
- Nurturing in nature
- Addressing challenging behaviors
- Transitioning to a new class or school

Each chapter includes suggestions for connecting parents with the classroom, the program, and the wider school community.

When parents and teachers partner, children thrive!



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