


# PARENT HANDBOOKS THAT HELP SELL YOUR PROGRAM



**U**pdating your program's parent handbook is a too-often neglected project but one that has impact on the health of your child care business. Parents are your paying clients. They need and deserve up-to-date information on how your program uses the money they pay.

A comprehensive, readable, and attractive parent handbook is a reassuring tool for parents who are learning to trust you with their children. It's also your protection and defense when questions and grievances arise.

## **Tone and format**

Whether you are starting from scratch or just revising an existing handbook, make sure your final product is reader friendly, accurate, and comprehensive.

Use simple words and short sentences. Avoid educational and government jargon. If your handbook reads like a law school textbook, your only readers will be attorneys. Lighten pages with digital photos of children's art, classroom areas, and playground projects. Make the handbook simple to navigate by including a table of contents. Separate sections with tabbed dividers or use colored paper to code content areas.

Be careful to use inclusive language. Not all children have a mom and a dad, some have grandparent guardians, and some have foster parents. Strive to make your document work for every kind of family.

If the families you serve speak languages other than English, get your handbook translated. To find a competent translator, talk to your local public school administrative office. Many public schools routinely translate material they send home to parents. They can often suggest a person familiar with education issues who will charge a reasonable fee.

Accuracy is essential—the handbook is as much your policy guide as it is a parent resource. If you change fees, build a swimming pool, or offer occasional night care, your handbook informs parents about what to expect and how the change affects them. Information like this reassures them that their children are well cared for.

Maintaining accuracy while keeping costs low requires some creativity. Information that constantly changes, such as menus, lesson plans, and illness alerts, can be printed separately on an as-needed basis. Post these sheets on your parents' bulletin board.

Some programs bind the parent handbook in a loose-leaf notebook. When information is updated, you print only the updated pages. The downside is that parents may not take the time to replace the outdated pages. Consider reprinting a whole section to make the task easier.

## NOT ALL CHILDREN HAVE A MOM AND A DAD.

Smaller programs might save money by using their office computer printer or photocopier. Printers, including color printers, are relatively inexpensive. Print only as many copies of the handbook as you need. Ask volunteers to assemble the handbooks, or have a collating party at a staff meeting.

Consider developing a program Web site for maximum flexibility and ease of updating. Posting your parent handbook on your program's Web site is efficient and easy to update. Before abandoning a printed handbook, however, make sure all parents have easy access to a computer with an Internet connection. Posting to the Web shouldn't discriminate against some families! Printing a legible, advertising-free copy of the handbook should be an easy option.

While making your Web site accessible, beware of violating confidences and sharing personal information. For example, you may want to post a map, phone number, and e-mail address for your program but not the names and phone numbers of your teachers.

### **Introduce your program**

Usually you will share your parent handbook at the time a family enrolls in your program. Often the



#### **New services?**

If you are updating or expanding your services, consider developing and distributing a brochure or folder as a marketing tool. In clear, easy-to-read text, describe the ages and number of children your program can serve, the days and hours of operation, and the services you offer.

Be sure to get someone with a keen eye to proofread the text for spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. Add line art or photographs for aesthetic appeal.

## Sample policy statements

**Birthday treats.** Birthdays are a special time for children. It is their day, a day they receive special recognition. Your child's class would like to help your child celebrate. There are many ways this can be done: Mom/Dad can spend part of their day in the classroom, a special song or game may be introduced or snacks from home can be shared. In order to be consistent with our nutritional goals, we ask you to consider school celebrations that do not include concentrated sugary snacks (cake, cupcakes, ice cream, etc.). Fruit, cheese, muffins or stickers are healthier choices for celebrating a special day. Please talk to your child's teacher in advance about any plans you wish to make to help celebrate your child's special day at school.

—Crafton Hills College Child Care Center,  
Yucaipa, Calif.

**Safety protocol for planned field trips and spontaneous walks.** Whenever a child or a group of children leave the center grounds, information about the excursion will be entered into the center's location log prior to departure. For all outings off the center grounds, there will be two staff with the children, and one of them must have infant/child first aid/CPR training. The following items will accompany the group: a copy of each child's medical release form, a first aid kit, and a cell phone. A list including all the children participating in the excursion will be left at the sign-in table in the classroom, as well as notification of date, time of departure and return, route and destination.

—Vivian Olum Child Development Center,  
University of Oregon, Eugene, Ore.

**Diversity statement.** The Center strives to honor, support, and celebrate the diversity of its children, families, and staff. Diversity is interpreted in the broadest sense and includes race, language, faith background, family structure, sexual orientation, and economic status.

—College of St. Catherine Early Childhood Center,  
St. Paul, Minn.

handbook gives a page-by-page description of your program that you can highlight as you talk with parents. Add a line to your enrollment agreement, asking parents to acknowledge the receipt of the handbook—a first line of defense when a parent pleads "I didn't know."

The first few pages of the handbook describe the framework of your program—educational philosophy, program history, and mission. Describe the type of program—Head Start, church-based preschool, Montessori school, or public education pre-K, for example—and any unique features.

As you tell your program's story, include information on curriculum. Name the printed curriculum guide, if any, that you use. If you are committed to emergent curriculum, explain how teachers guide children in their learning. The objective is to help parents understand that children build skills as they interact with people and objects in the rich environment you provide.

The introduction is also the place to note successes and achievements. Parents want the best for their children. Your management skills and the quality of your program are reflected by professional associations, accreditations, or community honors your program has earned.

## Program-wide policies

Use this section of your handbook to describe the features that make your business run smoothly day-to-day. Business policies cover all possible eventualities and ensure parents equal treatment for their children and families. For example, having one tuition policy for your friends and another for children whose care is subsidized will destroy your credibility. Remember, consistency is as important to running a successful business as it is in guiding young children.

There are no absolutes—beyond licensing rules—in program policy. But some areas must be addressed. Make sure you develop clear, enforceable program policies that cover the following topics.

- Confidentiality and privacy of families
- Nondiscrimination statement
- Operating hours
- Attendance requirements
- Holidays and unplanned, emergency closings for extreme weather, for example
- Sign-in and sign-out procedures

- Arrival and departure routines including parking lot protocol
- Release of children to someone other than a parent
- Fees and fee adjustments including special activity fees (like piano lessons), late payments, checks returned because of insufficient funds, and late pick-up charges
- Program liability insurance coverage
- Safety and health requirements including
  - immunization and well-child documentation
  - accident and incident reporting procedures
  - emergency medical care provisions
  - procedures for children who get sick while in your care
  - support for mildly and chronically ill children
  - rules for dispensing medication
- Required medical screenings
- Food program including subsidized meals, food from home, and typical menus
- Photographing children
- Water play
- Religious practices, if any
- Guidance and discipline techniques
- Transportation of children for program activities
- Requirements related to reporting suspected child abuse or neglect
- Tips for classroom visitors, including an invitation to parents to visit any time
- Disaster preparedness including contact information
- Causes for termination of services
- Grievance procedures
- A map of your building and playground

## Children's care and education

In addition to program-wide policies, include information on goals and activities by age level. A section on infants would describe holding a baby while feeding, for example, while a section on the 3-year-old class would discuss learning to use fork and spoon.

Outline a typical day. Explain how activities are based on how children of a particular age grow, learn, and build social and emotional skills. Many programs include a chart of developmental characteristics to reassure parents and to identify developmental red flags. This information educates parents about the importance of your role, and can be an important part of marketing.

Consider introducing this section with information on staff: teachers, assistants, and floaters. Provide each

## Sample policy statements

**What to bring to school.** Backpacks—Children should have a backpack to carry material and information to and from school. It should be large enough to hold school projects and notices, yet small enough for them to carry independently. Please label the backpack with your child's name and check it daily for school information.

Clothes—Please dress your child in play clothes. Even though we wear smocks for messy activities, it is difficult to keep paint, etc., off clothing. Additionally, dress your child according to the weather. We try to go outside on a daily basis, weather permitting. Flip flops or shoes that could be potentially dangerous while outdoors or on the stairs should not be worn to school. Please label all clothing items.

Diaper wipes—If your child is still wearing diapers, please provide a box of diaper wipes.

Diapers—Please keep several diapers in your child's backpack. When they have been used, please replace them

—O'Regan Early Childhood Development Center, Franklin Schools, Mass.

**Rest.** Periodic quiet times and activities are interspersed throughout the day to provide adequate rest for the children. Each classroom has a quiet place, which will always be available when a child needs rest or quiet.

In addition, a two-hour rest period will be scheduled in the early afternoon. All children will be placed on cots during this time. Although children are not required to sleep, the environment will be conducive to rest.

Children may bring a blanket, pillow, and stuffed animal from home. These items must be small.

—Oklahoma City Community College Child Development Center, Oklahoma City, Okla.

**Open door policy.** The Early Childhood Ministries has an Open Door Policy. Parents are welcome to visit the program at any time during the ECM's hours of operation to observe their child, the program's operation, and program activities, without having to secure prior approval. Parents are asked to be sympathetic to any transitions a child may be experiencing and to delay a visit if it may be more upsetting to the child.

—Gloria Dei Lutheran Church Early Childhood Ministries, Houston Texas

## Sample policy statements

**Medication.** When your child needs to take medicine at the center, the following procedures are required:

Sign medicine in daily or leave permission for “as needed” medication to be left at the center.

All medication belongs in the cabinet marked “medications.” For medication that needs to be refrigerated, there is a container marked “medication” in the kitchen.

All medication brought to the center must be in the original container with child’s name and date. The medication label dosages will be followed unless a doctor’s note states other instructions.

—The University of Texas at Austin Child Development Center

**Ill and mildly ill children.** Children who are unable to fully participate in the day’s activities should not be in attendance. We understand this can be a hardship on working families, but for the health and safety of the other children in care, the program will be very strict on the admittance of ill or mildly ill children. If a child is sent home ill from the center, time limits and other instructions will be given to the parents as to the return of the children to our care.

We would like to strongly suggest you consider finding an emergency backup care provider. This will enable you to attend work even though your child requires home care while ill. Mildly ill care is also available through the Family Child Care Program. Your center can provide you with information.

—Child Development Program, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio

**Schedule.** A typical daily schedule for school age care is as follows:

6:30 a.m. Open, free choice activity centers  
8:00 a.m. Breakfast, group time  
9:00 a.m. Circle, story and music, work time  
10:00 a.m. Outdoor play, large motor activities  
11:00 a.m. Lunch  
12:00 p.m. Nap, quiet time  
2:30 p.m. Snack, outdoor play  
3:30 p.m. Circle and story time  
4:00 p.m. Planned and free choice activity centers  
4:30 p.m. Late afternoon snack  
6:30 p.m. Close

—YMCA of Snohomish County, Everett, Wash.

person’s name, photo, and short biographical notes, especially their training and experience.

Be sure to include information on the following topics.

- Classroom environment including descriptions of interest centers, materials, and equipment
- Inclusion of children with disabilities
- Supervision of children
- Children’s belongings including
  - cubbies
  - extra clothes
  - handling soiled clothing
  - diapering routines
- Toilet learning
- Classroom schedules
- Nutrition and meal service including information on how you handle allergies and food restrictions
- Naps and bedding
- Field trips
- Outdoor play
- Supplies including contributions of classroom materials and providing diapers and food
- Media use
- Communication and assessment, including periodic parent-teacher conferences, daily reports for infants, and casual check-in conversations

## Family resources

Use this final section of your handbook to help assure parents that you understand that teachers and parents are partners in children’s education. Offer support tools that help families feel welcomed and essential to the well-being of children.

Parents often need reassurance about transitions from home to school. Be sure to include information on what to expect from their child and from teachers. Children, for example, may resist coming, display fear, or shed tears. Teachers respond with welcoming comfort and reassurance.

Invite parents to take advantage of both general and program-specific opportunities by including information on the following resources.

- Community resources including public libraries, clinics, and parks
- Parenting education classes offered by local groups
- Parent lending library
- School-wide celebrations like your fall festival and spring parents’ party, for example
- Parent involvement opportunities

- Parent-program communication including newsletters, Web site information, and family mailboxes
- Annual program evaluation

These opportunities add value to the child care services you provide. They can enrich the childrearing experience and save parents time and money.

A readable, informative parent handbook helps you avoid conflict, build loyalty, and recruit new parents as customers.

## Resources

Billman, Jean. 1993. *Starting and Operating a Child Care Center*. Madison, Wis.: Brown and Benchmark.

Decker, Celia A. and John R. Decker. 2005. *Planning and Administering Early Childhood Programs*, Eighth Ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Rafanello, Donna. Does your parent handbook need a makeover? *Child Care Information Exchange* 167: January / February 2006 (66-67).

**Editor's note:** In Texas, sample forms related to program administration are available to download from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, [www.dfps.state.tx.us](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us). Click on the link to Child Care Licensing and scroll down the page to Forms. Click on Day Care and choose the forms you want to download.

Many other states have similar information on their Web sites.

## How to interview parents

As a child care manager, it's a good idea to have a plan for interviewing parents who call about enrolling their children in your facility.

The initial call may serve as a screen to filter out whether enrollment is at all likely. Parents may want to know: Do you care for infants? Do you have openings for 3-year-olds? Are you located on a bus line? Do you open as early as 6 a.m.?

Once past that screen, you invite parents to come for a personal interview and tour of your facility. An on-site visit provides an opportunity to determine whether the family is a good fit for your facility, and vice versa.

Schedule the visit at a time when both the parent and child can come, if possible. Choose a time when you will be able to give your full attention to the interview. Be sure to have a translator on hand if parents have difficulty speaking English.

Greet the parent and child when they arrive. Start with small talk that helps them feel comfortable: "How did you hear about us?" "Are you new to the neighborhood?"

Invite the child to participate in an activity, such as solving a puzzle. Be aware that the child may want to stay in the parent's lap and not venture far away.

Briefly describe your facility. State that your facility is licensed and add information about accreditation and awards. Give basic information about ages of children you serve, the number of teachers, and operating hours.

Encourage the parent to talk about the child and the family: the child's age, other children, and previous early education experiences.

Ask the parent to talk about needs and expectations. Listen reflectively to both spoken words and body language. Do the parent's needs match the services you provide? Are the parent's expectations realistic? Remember that you are forming a partnership, and indicate that you respect the parent as the child's first teacher.

If both of you seem interested in continuing the discussion, give a tour. Show as much of your facility as possible, including the playground and kitchen. Pay special attention to the classroom or group where the child will likely be placed and the teacher. This is a good time to observe how parent and child interact with each other.

After the tour, bring out your parent handbook. The handbook can guide the discussion of your program in greater detail. Show the contract and forms parents will need to sign. Answer parent's questions as you go along.

Ideally you and parents will take a few days for reflection. Encourage parents to call with any questions they may think of, or arrange for a second visit.

Some facilities enroll children on a trial basis for a month or a longer period. If the enrollment is not a good fit for the family or for you, it's easier to end it early. You can end the trial period with a brief meeting with parents to again review needs and expectations. This might also be a good time for the first parent-teacher conference.