

Placemat Making: A Family Engagement Opportunity

By: Pamela Sawatzky, Pre-Kindergarten Teacher

Westberry School, Kindersley, SK

The start of a new school year is an exciting and anticipatory time for children, parents and teachers. Sara wonders, "What toys are there to play with? What will we do at school?" Jackie, Sara's mom wonders, "Who is Sara's teacher? Will she know how special she is to me? How can I get a hold of her? Can I talk with her safely and without judgment?" I, the educator, wonder, "Who are my new students? What will their parents expect of me?"

Pre-Kindergarten has many wonderful practices already embedded in the structure of the program to bridge the gap between such questions and meaningful conversations. Family engagement activities are valuable opportunities to build relationships. They create space to have authentic and meaningful conversations. One practice that I use regularly is Family Fun Evenings.

I typically plan a family engagement activity once a month. I alternate between an evening activity and Stay and Play, which is on Fridays during regular class time. I have found that I am able to engage some parents in the evening that I wouldn't be able to during the day due to work schedules. The reverse is true for parents who work evening shifts. By the time our first family evening is scheduled, it is late September. I have been to their homes on visits 1-2 times, to which I have brought a small gift. We have had an orientation day at the beginning of the month. The Welcome Back BBQ and Book Trade have already taken place for the whole school, to which Pre K families have been invited. It is in this context that we are then ready to get to know each other as a Pre K community of learners.

Two years ago year I did a placemat making activity at our first evening session. Parents were asked to bring 5-6 photographs of their family to use in making a placemat that would then be

laminated and used every day during class at snack time. The goal was to build oral language and have parents and children represented in the class in an authentic way. It was hugely successful!

I made a dessert to share. We had coffee and juice. It was held in the library that includes a story pit into which I placed some quiet toys and a selection of age appropriate books. My EA's and I supplied scrapbooking materials. One of my EA's was a professional photographer and volunteered to take pictures which we displayed in the hallway and classroom. I had about three quarters of the class represented in attendance. Those that were unable to attend, or were not comfortable yet, were told that their children would be able to make their placemat in class. Parents were free to stop by and make it with their child or we could make it with them.

The kids loved looking at their own placemats at snack time and they also asked each other lots of questions when looking at their classmate's placemats. Because the activity had been so well received, I wanted to do the same thing last fall.

During the summer of 2010, I was a participant in two classes on parent and family engagement that were taught by Dr. Debbie Pushor at the University of Saskatchewan. After reflecting on class discussions and readings, I wanted to change the placemat making evening slightly to have interested parents help prepare for the evening, do some personal sharing and show off the finished products. In addition, I realized that although I knew all the parents, they didn't know each other! I hoped the changes would further us towards the goal of building a community of learners and allow for conversations and relationships to develop and flourish.

Setting the Stage

I began to engage parents during informal discussions held at home visits at the end of August. I invited input from parents and offered them the opportunity to be part of planning the evening. Perhaps they would have liked to help with food preparation, gathering materials, greeting folks at the door or planning how we shared our stories. I was curious to see where the slight change in practices would take us. I felt comfortable doing so because I knew my families and, in some cases, I had been in relationship with them for years.

The Process

The evening began with putting on nametags parents made that included their name and who their child was. I wanted to begin to connect parents with parents. We sat at tables in the library that were equipped with scrapbooking supplies.

I welcomed everyone and made some introductions of the Educational Assistants that had attended voluntarily and our Speech and Language Pathologist who also wanted to be present to make connections with families. I had planned to share a selection of children's literature and do some personal sharing using my placemat that I created last year. Unfortunately, time was flying by and the preschoolers were getting antsy! I had also brought a selection of photos and artifacts from my own family to share in order to help develop a reciprocal relationship. I did not have time to share with the whole group but I was able to use the items in discussion with some parent's one on one. Perhaps this worked out for the best because the conversations were more relaxed.

I invited them to enjoy creating their placemats with their family and gave a gentle reminder to be aware of and value the process and, perhaps, not be as concerned with the final product.

My EA's and I circulated to provide support in whatever way was deemed necessary. Perhaps, holding a crying baby so Mom and preschooler could work together, or making sure supplies were replenished and the laminator was turned on. Photos were taken to chronicle our evening and put on display. Families got all their photos back at the end of the year as part of the students' portfolio of work.

The Sharing and Connecting

As families finished their placemats, I invited them to share their work with others as they were comfortable. The option to opt out was made known so no one felt obligated to share. We had coffee, juice, and goodies. We visited and the children played. Mothers and fathers chatted with each other and connected. A community of learners was beginning to form. We continued to nurture it as the year unfolded.

The evening ended with me re-inviting families to pop by the class, no announcement necessary, call me, e-mail me or chat at drop off or pick up times. I wanted to send the message that families are valued and welcome to be part of their children's school life in whatever way that makes sense to them.

The following is an excerpt from my professional journal after the placemat making evening:

Saturday, October 2, 2010

The placemat evening was a success! I had about half the kids (out of 32) there with families. Parents donated food. The SLP was there to make connections. The placemats turned out beautifully. I brought artifacts of my own to talk about myself but given the busyness of the kids, I wasn't feeling like it would be productive for me to talk too much. They dove right into the activity. My own kids came, held babies and read to kids in the story pit (we were in the library).

I introduced parents to each other. We all wore nametags saying names and whose parent they are. If a family couldn't come on Thursday, they can do it at home (we send supplies) or they can do it at school with their child.

The Why

In my past experience as Pre K teacher at Westberry School, I have recognized that everything flows from relationship. In order to teach the whole child, I need to build trust and relationship with families. There have been times when I have wondered why I am not able to connect with a family. I now believe that part of that reason may be because I haven't shared anything of myself with them. I also want to position myself as co-planner as much as possible. I know my families have capacity but I have not yet invited them to use it to reach the program's full potential. I have seen myself as planner, creator, hostess, and facilitator "in charge". This is limiting. It creates an "us and them" philosophy that excludes all from partaking in the community. Taking the risk to let go of some of the planning has produced trust, reciprocity and deeper, more authentic, relationships. In turn, these relationships have helped weather the bumps in the road during the school year and created a positive climate where children can grow.

I am looking forward to this new school year to once again put this re-worked plan into action. Hopefully, I will be able to connect with families on a personal level to develop relationships. I hope to answer those anxious questions that are common at the start of the year and set the stage for meaningful conversations about teaching and learning.



1 Macy's finished placemat



2 Macy and her Mom, Janelle, work together



3 Dorian proudly holds up his place mat.



4 Robin and Dorian work on his place mat.