Mary, an early childhood special education teacher, was well prepared for her next parent-teacher conference. She laid out a portfolio about Grace, a 20-month-old girl with developmental delays, which included pictures and projects from throughout the school year. As Grace’s mother, Ms. Jackson, arrived, Mary greeted her with a smile and invited her to sit at the table. After a bit of small talk, Mary provided Ms. Jackson with a conference agenda and began talking about Grace while sharing artifacts from Grace’s portfolio. Next, they discussed goals for Grace and how the goals would be implemented in the coming school year. Mary frequently asked Ms. Jackson if she had any questions. Although Ms. Jackson sometimes talked about Grace’s home life, she largely listened to Mary. Next, Mary updated school forms, such as emergency contact information. At the end of the conference, Mary asked if Ms. Jackson had any questions, to which Ms. Jackson replied that she did not. With a smile, Mary indicated that she had discussed all of the needed information. Ms. Jackson thanked Mary and exited the room. Afterward, as Mary reflected on the conference, she realized that Ms. Jackson had hardly spoken. When Ms. Jackson arrived home, she told her aunt that Grace’s parent-teacher conference was terribly frustrating: The teacher gave her few chances to talk and seemed uninterested in what she had to say.

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Many researchers have investigated early childhood educators’ and service providers’ communication with families and have documented difficulties in early educator-family communication and collaboration. For example, teachers often control and dominate parent-teacher conversations (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Minke & Scott, 1993), which can result in families’ perspectives being silenced (Harry, 1992), parent frustration (Hess, Molina & Kozelski, 2006; Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998), strained educator-family relationships, and parent withdrawal from interactions with educators (Bennett, 1998; Rao, 2000). However, studies also illustrate that educators can foster positive communication with families, particularly in the communication choices they make (Blue Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Brady, Peters, Gamel-McCormick, & Venuto, 2004; Minke & Scott, 1993; Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

In this article, we present parent-educator conversations, which were selected to illustrate common communication patterns and provide links to some of the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children’s recommended practices for communicating and collaborating with parents (Trivette & Dunst, 2005). Using conversation analysis, researchers (e.g., Heritage, 2005; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) have identified many details of talk (e.g., pauses, overlapping talk, word choices) in conversations between teachers and parents (e.g., Maclure & Walker, 2000; Silverman, Baker, & Keogh, 1998). Positive communication plays a significant role in the initiation and development of parent-professional partnerships as do other help-giving practices (e.g., empathy, compassion, active listening, supporting parent decision making and participation; Dunst, 2007). When early childhood educators listen for details in their talk with families, they can make purposeful improvements in parent-professional communication, collaboration, and relationships.

Background to Conference Excerpts

The following transcript excerpts were taken from several parent-teacher conferences from early childhood special education and Head Start programs. The parents were European American and African American, from low income backgrounds, and native-English speakers. Their children’s ages ranged from 2 to 5 years old. These conferences appear representative of parent-professional talk in other programs (e.g., early intervention, childcare, prekindergarten programs) and in other venues (e.g., informal parent-professional conversations, Individualized Family Service Plan [IFSP] and Individualized Education Program [IEP] meetings). The conversation excerpts cannot be understood without recognizing that they occurred within a context in which teachers had limited conference time and a mandate to share classroom-based information with parents. On the basis of interview data, these teachers had the best of intentions; yet communication patterns are almost always beneath speakers’ and listeners’
levels of awareness. Thus, the communication barriers presented here were most likely not intentional.

The conference communication characteristics are presented in the following sections: wait time, overlapping talk, topic changes, and technical terms. These four communication techniques were chosen to highlight early childhood educators’ and service providers’ ability to facilitate interactions with families. Transcription notations are provided in Table 1 to assist readers in understanding the parent-teacher conference transcript excerpts presented. Importantly, communication characteristics are related to individuals’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Cheatham & Santos, in press; Lynch, 2004). Conversational turn taking, overlapping talk, use of silence, the means by which speakers change topics, and other communication characteristics are influenced by individuals’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Early childhood educators are encouraged to learn about not only their own individual and culture-based communication styles but also those of the families they serve.

**Wait Time**

Many educator-training materials (e.g., Correa, Jones, Thomas, & Morsink, 2005; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006) indicate that solicitations for parent input (e.g., questions) followed by time for families to respond can lead to more meaningful parent participation. In these situations, teachers select parents as the next speaker (Sacks et al., 1974) to gather greater input and interaction. Readers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how questioning techniques paired with wait time sound in the following transcript excerpts. In the first excerpt, after some small talk at the beginning of a conference, a teacher deliberately provided time for the father to respond after her question. Note that 6 seconds during a conversation is an unusually long amount of time, but this clearly illustrates that the teacher attempted to solicit input from the father. Providing parents, including parents who may not speak English proficiently, with wait time can be critical to garnering parent participation (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Transcription Notation Key</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>((coughs))</td>
<td>Communication facilitator or barrier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>//yeah//</td>
<td>A note within the transcript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;I can make&lt;</td>
<td>Overlapping talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>italics</em></td>
<td>Words spoken quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>Word or words spoken with emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s</td>
<td>Seconds</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Teacher: uhm before we get started do you have any questions ((short pause)) concerns? ((6-s pause))
Father: no I don’t think I have any concerns everything pretty good
Teacher: okay any questions? ((1-s pause))
Father: uhm ((3-s pause)) me think here I di— I didn’t quite come up with any questions before //I came in//
Teacher: //that’s okay// that’s okay ((3-s pause)) you got a lot on your plate you’ve got a lot to do
Father: uhm ((2-s pause)) uh how she been doin’ with other children?

On the other hand, when teacher questions are followed by little or no time for parents to respond, conference communication is hindered, as seen in the next transcript excerpt. After asking the (grammatically incorrect) question, “Is there any other questions or anything else that we can do for you?” the teacher immediately began speaking about a behavior chart, which was mentioned earlier in the conference. Consequently, the parents did not have an opportunity to ask a question; instead, they had to respond to the teacher’s question about the behavior chart, which was a teacher rather than a parent priority.

Teacher: is there any any other questions or anything else that we can do for you? >uhm I can make that little< chart if you want or I can just make some pictures and you can make your own chart
Mother: yeah
Teacher: I don’t you know want to force you into
Mother: //yeah//
Teacher: >/the// responsibility chart but< ((1-s pause)) Steven enjoys it
Father: that’s an’ might be a good idea

Teachers can also inadvertently use questioning and silence as communication barriers. To illustrate, in the transcript excerpt that follows, talk centered on a child’s challenging behavior at the end of the school day. After the father offered an explanation for the child’s behavior—that his daughter felt anxious—the teacher used silence and questioning to obtain more information about the reasons for the child’s anxiety. The three long pauses and the question, “Any insight into that?” illustrate increasing pressure from the teacher for the parent to provide an explanation for the child’s anxiety. Clearly, this father was uncomfortable and felt compelled to respond in face of the teacher’s silences.
Teacher: it went down and then the last three weeks we’ve been seeing it again and it seems like we’re seeing it with uhm toward the end of the day
Father: //guess she’s anxious// towards the end
Teacher://when its time to get ready to go//
Father: to go home I guess //((laughs))//
Teacher: I//think so.
((1-s pause))
Teacher: any any insight in that?
((1-s pause))
Father: n— no ‘cause sh— at home when I have ask her to do anything or whatever I have no problem with that.
Teacher: okay
((1-s pause))
Father: I have none I don’t know about her c— when I’m at work her mom says doesn’t //you//
Teacher: //right//
Father: know tell me a lot of times when I’m at when I’m at work they usually gone to church a lot of //time//
Teacher: //okay//

Wait time may also be used even without explicit questions, as in the following transcript excerpt. A teacher was talking with a mother about ways to encourage her young daughter’s literacy skills. The teacher proposed the use of literacy kits to the mother using a statement with rising intonation followed by a long pause. Initially, the mother did not respond. Then the teacher asked more directly if the mother would like to use a literacy kit. When the mother did not respond, the teacher provided several details about the literacy kits as well as intermittent pauses for the mother to respond. As illustrated by the mother’s eventual response, “Well yeah! Bring it on!” the teacher provided details about the literacy kits and provided wait time, which helped the mother understand and respond.

Teacher: we have (short pause) literacy kits ((said with rising intonation))
((1-s pause))
Mother: (clears throat)
Teacher: would you be interested in one of those? ((short pause))
uhm and it will be uh ((short pause)) boo-three books
((1-s pause)) and the tapes to go with them
((1-s pause)) and ((1-s pause)) the flashcards to go with ‘em and some props to go with ‘em.
Mother: well yeah! ((short pause)) bring it on!
Teacher: alright!
Mother: ((laughs))

Therefore, wait time and silence are important elements of successful communication. Early educators and service providers can purposefully
employ these communication techniques to facilitate communication with families of young children with special needs.

Overlapping Talk

Overlapping talk (i.e., in which more than one speaker talks at the same time; Schegloff, 2000) is an important part of conversation (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008) and may foster communication between early childhood educators and families during parent-teacher conferences. Often, conversations can be viewed as a competition to talk (Schegloff, 2000). Typically, teachers’ social status as educators means that they have more control of parent-teacher talk. To facilitate communication, when parents attempt to talk, early childhood educators can give conversational control to parents, particularly to parents who rarely talk. In the next transcript excerpt, a teacher and a father were discussing how program staff would better integrate a child into classroom activities. After saying “... gonna b—,” the teacher stopped talking and allowed the father to talk. The father then provided important information: His daughter did not like feeling left out.

Teacher: we can help her you know so that we don’t forget. hey because if you put her on the outside chair and the teacher’s down here down here she’s just //gonna b—//
Father: //maybe// she thinks she’s being left out if she’s on the //outside//
Teacher: //uh huh//
Father: ((laughs))
Teacher: uh huh no she does not like to be left out ((laughs))

However, as speakers’ talk overlaps, teachers tend to prevail, resulting in lost opportunities for family-professional collaboration. As illustrated next, educators sometimes actively resist parent attempts to talk, which can act as a barrier to communication. Here, a teacher and a mother were talking about their difficulty getting notes home in the child’s backpack. The teacher indicated that the child liked to show peers the contents of the backpack. The mother attempted to talk, but the teacher continued talking. Finally, on the mother’s third attempt to talk, the teacher allowed the persistent parent to add information.

Teacher: and she likes to show //her things on the bus///
Mother: //we— I I tried to get to to uhm//
Teacher: she likes to show the kids //things//
Mother: //I//
Teacher: she’s got in her //backpack.//
Mother: //I figured// you’d get into her book bag and put papers in there
Similarly, in the next excerpt, the teacher’s interruption prevented a parent from sharing a concern about her son Jon’s bus behavior. Jon’s friend Steve had recently pushed Jon because Jon sat next to a girl he had a crush on, Mary. At the beginning of the excerpt, the mother explained the situation to the teacher. However, the teacher abruptly interrupted, “Did I give you Jon’s folder?” Clearly, the teacher did not attend to the mother’s concern. After responding to the teacher’s question, the mother attempted again to talk about the bus problem. The teacher responded not to the mother’s concern but referenced the conference agenda.

Mother: he’s upset because he sat with a little girl so //Mary//
Teacher: //Mary//
Mother: we’re having an issue with that
Teacher: so well //Mary//
Mother: //Jon’s// got a crush ((laughs)) so cute //you know that so cute//
Teacher: //did I give you// Jon’s folder
Mother: no huh-uh
Teacher: okay I want to give you Jon’s folder
Mother: well I’m trying to talk to someone maybe the uh the lady on the bus uhm Monday if maybe she can set somebody next to Steve after school instead of having him sit by himself
Teacher: here’s all this from me and here’s just here’s what he’s doing now let’s see okay. we went through having here’s now that didn’t quite get in the right order.

Although overlapping talk can be problematic and a communication barrier, it may again be seen as a communication facilitator. Rather than interruptions, overlapping talk of speaker and listener can indicate attentive agreement, understanding, and affiliation (Lerner, 2002). As an illustration, in the following transcript excerpt, a parent tells the teacher how he helped his daughter improve her ability to color with crayons. The teacher overlapped the father’s talk with agreement and encouragement—“Excellent” and “Well, great”—as the father gestured how he helped his daughter.

Father: so I showed her puttin’ her hand down and then we’ll practice this we’ll we’ll //practice goin’/
Teacher: //excellent//
Father: this way we’ll //practice goin’//
Teacher: //well great//
Father: up and down holdin’ her hand still with her fingers
Teacher: excellent
Father: and so she’s doin’ pretty good

Likewise, overlapping talk can indicate excitement at a speaker’s words. The teacher in the following parent-teacher conference transcript excerpt
demonstrated, using overlapping talk, her excitement about a mother’s pictures of her new baby. When the mother said “pictures of the baby,” the teacher enthusiastically expressed interest in the baby pictures.

Mother: I wanted to bring ’em both in I wanted to show you—er
Teacher: //oh! I’d love to// see ’er!

Additionally, speakers in tune with each other often complete sentences together in what can be called synchronous talk (Tannen, 2007), which can help form and illustrate empathy and understanding between speakers. In this conference transcript segment, a mother told the teacher that she bought her daughter new mittens that matched her purple coat. The teacher anticipated the color of the young girl’s mittens, thereby simultaneously ending the mother’s sentence with her by saying “purple.”

Mother: I just now bought her a pair of new uh purple ones
Teacher: okay
Mother: the purplish color because her co- coat’s //purple//
Teacher: //purple// and
that’s just her coat I remember
Mother: so that I— I bought her pair of those

Thus, at times overlapping talk can be a communication resource for facilitating relationships and can promote valuable parent input and opportunities to discuss children’s education and development.

**Topic Changes**

Equally important, maintaining, responding to, and changing topics are powerful means by which teachers can facilitate communication with families. More than 30 years ago, researchers illustrated ways in which speaking turns and topic changes occur (e.g., Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). For instance, teachers can attend to the delicate give-and-take involved in cooperative topic closure to ensure that parents have finished sharing their thoughts, as illustrated in the next conference transcript excerpt.

In this episode, the mother was talking about an interactive book that her daughter read at home. The mother’s pauses and use of the open-ended “so . . .” signaled that she had completed her talk about the book. These pauses were opportunities for teacher comment or continued talk about the book. Subsequently, the teacher added information illustrating that the reading activity was important to the child’s learning. Next, the teacher began talking about some pictures that could help the child learn more.

Mother: I’ll ask her you know what sound or find me this sound and then she’ll hit the button because she can see the pictures right //there//
Teacher: //right//
Mother: in front of her
Teacher: right
((1-s pause))
Teacher: yeah
((short pause))
Mother: so
Teacher: and that that helps them to understand it helps them to build their confidence uhm and it helps them to follow the directions that way you know he knows what he’s supposed to be doing because it’s right there
Mother: //yeah//
Teacher: //and he/ you know i—it holds him to it. so you know if you want if you want pictures

This teacher waited for the mother’s subtle cues, which indicated that she had nothing more to say on that topic, before moving to a new topic. Surely, this parent felt that the teacher was listening to her.

Another means to provide parents with more opportunities to talk during conferences is for early childhood educators to subtly indicate that they will change the topic soon. Summary statements and vague statements can act to signal that a speaker wishes to change the topic (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In the next transcript excerpt, a mother had talked about how easily her oldest son, Tyler, learned. She then talked about a drawback of his emerging karate skills: that Tyler was using karate on her younger son, Mike. Next, the teacher signaled that she intended to change the topic by providing summary statements, “He is so teachable” and “You’ve identified all those great things,” followed by a brief opportunity for the mother to accept or decline the coming topic change. After a vague comment about the mother’s talk, “That is so wonderful,” the teacher changed the topic to talk about classroom snacks.

Mother: I said you can’t do that because Mike is small. and Mike does it too he gets him down and Tyler can’t get up and he starts cryin’ ’cause Mike’s got him down on the ground ((laughs))
Teacher: he he is so teachable and you’ve identified all those great things about him that are gonna help him and help you help him when
Mother: right
Teacher: as he’s going on in school
Mother: right
Teacher: and so that’s you know that is so wonderful uhm he and I have a thing going with the snack

In this example, the teacher provided the parent with a warning that a topic change would come as well as an opportunity to indicate agreement to the change.
Technical Terms

A related area of parent-professional communication is the use of technical terms. Researchers have discussed jargon and technical language as barriers to communication with families (e.g., Correa et al., 2005; Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Turnbull et al., 2006). Acronyms, such as IEP, OT, and IDEA, as well as other terms and jargon (e.g., cube chair, motor skills) abound during conversations within early childhood contexts. The next series of examples illustrates ways in which early childhood educators’ choice of words can facilitate communication. For instance, in the next transcript excerpt, a teacher simply provided a definition for the common acronym TA (i.e., the teaching assistant) as she talked. As such, she was not only making herself clear but potentially teaching the parent the meaning of TA so that she could recognize it in future discussions.

Teacher: what we see is she will she'll tell us no or for example the other day she really liked Betty our the TA the teacher’s assistant to open her snack for her. she doesn’t want me to do it she wants Betty to help her.

A second example of an early childhood educator assisting parents’ understanding of potentially difficult terms is found in the next excerpt, in which the teacher defined the term gross motor and reported on the child’s motor skills.

Teacher: and she’ll do that uhm I don’t I haven’t seen any problems like with her gross motor kind of how she moves in the classroom and outside I don’t see any problems there.

However, parents’ understanding of technical terms can also be hindered by teachers’ word choices. In the next example, a teacher talked about a child’s motor skills using the phrase fine motor but did not provide an explanation of the term for the parent. This parent may not have understood the relationship between dressing skills (i.e., coat buttoning) and the teacher’s comments about the child’s fine motor skills.

Teacher: his fine motor skills are starting to progress he uh you know he still asks for help with his coat and I try to make sure the arms are pulled on the right way.

Finally, an interesting way in which teachers can improve communication with families is by making technical terms seem less complicated. Health care providers frequently use easily understandable terms when talking to patients, such as sore throat rather than tonsillitis (Gwyn & Elwyn, 1999). Another technique is to make technical terms seem less intimidating by using more general terms (Jucker, Smith, & Lüdge, 2003). For example, during health care interactions, a doctor may say...
“brain scan thing,” meaning MRI, or “stuff in the IV” to denote a particular medicine given intravenously to a patient. Teachers may use this technique as a starting point to discuss some ideas in greater detail or to refer to ideas that parents already understand. For instance, a teacher referred to PECS (Picture Exchange System; Bondy & Frost, 1994) saying “picture exchange thing” when talking with a parent and explained PECS in more detail during subsequent talk.

Teacher: so I just went got back from a conference that was all about this picture exchange thing. oh we could really you know use this with him now he knows what all these things are he knows milk, spoon, straw, its not like I have to teach him what that is

In summary, like the teachers and parents illustrated in the previous parent-teacher conference transcript excerpts, early childhood educators and service providers can add communication choices (e.g., wait time, overlapping talk, topic changes, and technical terms) to their professional toolbox and implement these techniques as appropriate with families from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Parent-teacher conferences are just one context in which these communication facilitators can prove beneficial.

Conclusion

Research has illustrated that increased communication and collaboration can occur when teachers learn about communication
techniques. (e.g., Brinckerhoff & Vincent, 1986; Minke & Anderson, 2003). With a bit of extra effort and time, family participation in parent-teacher conferences and other family-professional interactions can be increased. Early childhood educators’ and service providers’ active use of communication strategies can play a critical role in engaging families. To this end, further readings on this important topic are presented in Table 2. When early childhood educators critically reflect on and work to improve their use of communication facilitators, mothers such as Ms. Jackson can walk away from interactions feeling that early childhood educators listened to them, which is of benefit to young children with special needs.

Note

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References


Table 2

<table>
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<th>Resources to Support Professionals’ Effective Communication With Families</th>
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<td><strong>Articles</strong></td>
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