

43 - Putting the Reality in Relationships

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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We are so excited to have our colleague, supervisor, friend, Dr. Allison Rief here with us today. Dr. Rief oversees three early childhood education programs at the University of Arizona Global Campus and has been in higher education for eight years.

She's previously taught in the pre-K setting in the second and third grade for 12 years prior to that. So, Dr. Rief, welcome.

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: Thank you.

I'm excited to be here.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Hi Allison, so excited to have you here too. Today we're going to talk about putting the reality into relationships.

And I love this because it's very relevant and something that we all do every day, no matter if we're in the classroom or not. So, tell us about this and how you did this in your classroom.

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: Well, I'd like to say I was stellar at this from day one first teaching, but that would be an absolute lie.

It's something I learned by a little bit of process with error because it's so overwhelming when you're a first-year teacher, and you're trying to just focus on those 25 little bodies in your classroom and do everything you can for them. And it's hard to think about things outside that realm, but it's really, really important. So, obviously, you have to foster relationships with your students, but you also have to foster relationships with their parents, their guardians, their grandparents, and those people that pick them up daily and that you see daily and connect with.

And that's really important. And so, when I started teaching, I realized that it can be a really difficult thing to do. And so, you can't just rely on those two minutes that you have at the gate when you're letting the kids go to build relationships.

So, I try to be very intentional about it. Something I did, I always sent home a questionnaire about the students at the beginning of the year. And I'm sure many of you do this.

I'm sure if you have children, you and you wish that you had saved your answers so that you wouldn't have to take the time to write out their favorite things are Legos or whatever it is that that year.

But I started sending home parent surveys as well as a way to really get to know the parents. Sometimes people will just won't respond at all, but sometimes you'll get novels about people, and it really helps as a way to connect.

If I know that both parents are working and that they have four children, I'll know that the best way to communicate with them might not be through a lengthy email. They might not have time, but maybe mom can hop on the phone with me while she's driving to work, and I can have a good conversation with her that way. So really taking the time to get to know the parents so that you can be a better advocate for their child.

You'll have a better way to communicate, and they'll be more likely to speak to you about things if you're open and willing to build those relationships.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Dr. Rief, I love the fact that you mentioned that we are truly creating relationships with the kiddos in school, but we also need to do what we can to meet the needs of our families outside. You had mentioned earlier on the word process, and I love that because it's not a product.

It's not a be all end all. It truly is a process. So, thinking about August, you're opening the doors to your classroom, your environment, wherever you may be.

What is something you can do right from the start besides the parent survey to really show parents that you want that open door partnership and communication?

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: You just said it, Dr. Heald. Having an open door makes a huge difference. It's also what they find when they walk in that door.

I believe the smile on my face is the signature to my personality. I always greet my parents with a huge smile. I'm happy to see them and that really matters to them, especially if you're teaching children who are coming to school for the first time, whether it's Pre-K like I was working with, whether it's an infant classroom where you're going to be taking someone's baby from their arms for the first time.

It's a scary thing for a parent. So, you have to have that body language that shows that they're welcome. Another thing I would do with my Pre-K kids, which I loved, was we had an element where parents had to volunteer.

They had to be part of the classroom, and they had to take some parenting classes. So, I got the chance to interview them. They didn't realize that everyone was going to get accepted no matter what the interview situation was.

And it was more of a chance for me to really get to know them. And during that time, I always took a picture of them with their child. So, when they came to school on that very first day, they walked into my classroom, and they saw a wall full of pictures of kids with their families.

And not only does that ease the transition for the students, which we know is hard, but it also eases that transition for parents. They know that they're dropping their child off with a person that truly cares, not just about their child, but about them as well. And that's something you can't ever make up that moment of the initial drop-off of a child.

That's going to be what they remember. So, if you're flustered and trying to sharpen pencils and check names on cubbies and do all those things and you're not present with the parents, you've already missed a huge opportunity to build relationships. So, I would just say to make sure you're present.

That may mean running through a list of all the things you can take care of before day one, so everything is ready so that it can just be you that's at that door greeting them. And I also worked in a Title I school where many of our families were not English language speakers. That wasn't their native language.

They all could communicate in English in their own ways, whether that was with an older sibling or if it was, you know, using technology devices or whatever. But I always made sure that I could greet them in their language. And I have a horrible ear for language.

Anyone will tell you that I butcher things all the time, and they would laugh and find it amazing that I might not have said it right. But I greeted them in their own language, and I found they were much more willing to speak to me in their best version of English when they knew I was willing to communicate in my best version of whatever they spoke. Now, it was harder in certain languages, I can tell you that.

But just showing them that I accept who they are and where they are in their life and in their culture and what they bring to the table really made a difference to parents. And I think that is something that we can all do, especially with today's technology.

I mean, Google Translate is right there at your fingertips, and you can hear them say it over and over and over, and practice it until you get somewhere near saying "hello" in that home language. And that's really important as well.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: OK, Ali, so those are amazing ideas.

I love the language thing. I love the interviewing. Those are things that our listeners today can take with them and use.

The language thing is such a huge barrier for many of us. There's so many obstacles out there that teachers today are facing. What are some obstacles that you also dealt with besides language? Because you did talk about that.

And how did you overcome those obstacles to begin building those relationships? Because it's tough. It really is.

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: It is tough.

And there's so much going on. And I don't mean to I didn't mean to make it sound silly. You're scrambling to sharpen pencils.

But I mean, teachers do it all, you know, hands down. I've never seen a profession where you're expected to do every last detail and wear so many hats. You're not just the teacher.

You're the psychologist. You're the PE teacher. You're the health tech.

You're everything. You're this surrogate mommy or daddy, you know, when you're when you have those little ones in your classroom. So, I think part of it, too, requires that you can tune out some of the extra noise around you.

As I mentioned, I taught Pre-K, and it was a specially funded program for our students in the district I worked in. They kept talking about doing away with the funding and doing away with the program and all this. And it would just stress me out because obviously, I was so worried about, you know, students having access to this program.

And I found I would take it out on those around me. So, I might not have been as kind to the parents as I could have been because I was stressed about it or, you know, I had some other worry on my mind. So really being able to focus on what is in front of you.

When you have those students in your room, there is nothing more important than those students. When you are meeting families at the door, there's nothing more important than those families. And yes, that means sometimes your own personal life takes a seat and you have to ignore things that are going on.

But that comes with the territory. So really just focusing on what is present and what you can actually impact at that moment. I wasn't going to save my program by doing it when I had 36 kids in front of me who were looking for attention.

That wasn't the time or place for it. So being able to prioritize what's coming in at you, whether it's turning off notifications on your phone, shutting down your email so you don't hear that ding any of those things so that you can really focus on being present with the people who are in front of you at that moment.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Dr. Rief, I love the fact that you brought up that the concept that we are truly creating these comfortable and supportive and inclusive learning environments for our students, our families, our staff and our communities.

But at the same time, we're being very intentional of having that balance for our own personal wellness. And I think that's really important for our listeners to hear because many do grapple with, just like you said, having to ignore the noise, having to overcome the adversities that they might face. So, thank you for bringing that to the forefront.

As we wind down, can you leave our listeners with three takeaways that you might have?

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: Absolutely. One thing I think I hit on already is that you really have to invest the time and energy into the people at the beginning of the year, or else you will spend the rest of the year trying to make up for that. It's kind of like when you teach children procedures at the beginning of the year.

This is how we line up. This is how do we go to lunch. This is how we do that.

You have to invest that time in people at the beginning, whether it's your co-workers, your boss, the parents, the students. You really have to take the time. And it's important because you will scramble to make up for it later in the year.

It'll end up taking more time than it would have if you just focused on the beginning. My second thing about relationships, and this one makes me giggle as a parent and as an educator, little kids just love to tell stories. There's no way around it.

It doesn't matter what language you're speaking; what culture they're from. Kids love stories. That's why we read to them so much, right? But they also love to really tell stories.

And I'm sure as a teacher, you've been sitting there, and they'll come, and they'll tell you these things about things that are happening at home. And you wonder, oh my gosh, is this a real story? Is this a fabricated story? Are they meshing together a bunch of different episodes into one thing that sounds so horrible or so funny or so whatever?

Just know that the stories they tell you, they will also go home and tell their family stories about you. So don't automatically assume everything you hear from a kid coming to you is true, because they're probably telling ridiculous stories about you at home.

Whether they're true or not, it's their imagination, whatever it is. So just knowing that what you hear is coming through the filter of a child. And I'm not saying if someone came to you with a very serious thing, you should ignore it.

That's not at all what I mean. But what I'm wanting to say is make sure you have the relationship with parents so that when a kid comes and tells you this interesting and maybe ridiculous story, you can reach out to the parent and talk to them about it. If you don't have that relationship, it's really hard to do.

And you really want to make sure you're ensuring the best environment for that child in their classroom and at home. And so having that relationship is key. My son's kindergarten teacher said she would only believe 20% of what the kids say about us, if we would only believe 20% of what they say about her.

So just remember, those stories go both ways. Oh, go ahead.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: That's so funny, because same thing.

Students would come tell me stuff, and I would laugh. But then the parents would come and tell me things that they would say about me at home, and it was just as funny. So that is so true.

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: Yes, they really are the best storytellers. That's why the internet is full of funny things kids say, right? You can't even make it up. So having the relationships with parents to be able to talk about that is also entertaining.

But if something serious happens, you'll have the connection with them to talk. And I think the third thing that I really think is the most important thing is every parent, whether it's a biological parent, a guardian, a grandparent taking care of their grandchildren, they love to hear good things about their children. No parent ever says, no, please don't tell me the good stuff. I don't want to hear the good stuff.

Every parent wants to hear everything good about their child. The more good you can find in your children and your students, especially at the beginning of the year, and share that openly and freely and as often as possible means that when those not so good moments happen, you can reach out to parents and have a conversation, and they'll trust you because they know that you love how their child makes you laugh.

They know that you think they're brilliant. They know that you notice when they're sharing their breakfast with a friend who forgot theirs, you know, they have all that good intentions already built in with the relationship you've created with them. If you start out and your first phone call home is about Johnny, you know, pushing down Cindy in line, they're going to expect something negative every time you call.

And I can tell you as a mom of two, as a mom of a child who has severe ADHD, I don't like it when I look at my phone and see the school number and dread it. You don't ever want that. You want your parents to see your phone number and be so excited to talk to you.

And that takes effort, and it has to be something you build from day one. So please, if anything you take away from this is seek the positive, seek the good and share it.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: That is 100% true.

Awesome. As we leave, Ali, what is one challenge that you have for the listeners as we wind down?

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: Um, I would say think most about that one parent that you avoid. I challenge you to do one thing a week to mend that relationship, whether it's a phone call home, it's a nice email, or it might be just, hey, I like what you did with your hair today.

Simple, easy. If you start building those things up, little by little, I guarantee you will see a transformation in the relationship you have with that parent.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: That is exactly right.

And thank you. So that is one thing that you can go and start doing today when this episode is over. Ali, thank you so much for being here today.

You have no idea how much we appreciate you and your knowledge. So, thank you.

Dr. Allison Rief Speaker: Thanks for inviting me.

This is so much fun.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you.