

63 - Why Every Child Needs a Village for Academic Success

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. URL at www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha 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.

Dr. Stephanie 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. Don't forget to subscribe to our podcast for notifications about future episodes. Today, we are so fortunate to have with us Candra Morris. Candra is a first-generation Liberian-American who began her career in early childhood education, as an assistant in childcare. After seven years as an early childhood teacher in Waikomiko, I hope I said that correctly, County Public Schools and Prince George's Public Schools, she became a classroom teacher and she was selected as the PEECE, which is Promoting Equity in Early Childhood Education Fellow, where her cohort focused on special education for culturally and linguistically diverse learners at George Washington University. Candra is the director of family partnerships at Waterford.org. She leads a professional development for educators and oversees the Waterford Family Academy in her role. Candra is the author of Why Every Child Needs a Village for Academic Success, a practical guide on the importance of family engagement for early childhood practitioners.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Hi, Candra. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

Candra Morris: Hi. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yes. This is such an important topic, and I know we probably talk it over and over and over to death, but it's so important and so we wanted to make sure that our listeners had your knowledge. So, I know your title today is Every Child Needs a Village for Academic Success. So, tell us who the village is in today's school system.

Candra Morris: In today's school system, I believe the village is definitely the educators, the families and caregivers that are bringing their children into school, and then the community members. I really believe it's like everyone who is a part of that child's life, whether it be in school or outside of school, someone that they would reach out to within their community. So really thinking of it as educators, families, caregivers and their local community.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: This village is essential. We know that we spend a lot of time with our children in our environments, and we really want to make sure we're doing everything we can to really ensure that we're helping this village. So, what can teachers or early childhood leaders do, to ensure that they are indeed helping the village?

Candra Morris: So I think that as educators, and they do such a great job of this, is just making sure that they have that open-door policy being available so that if families and caregivers have questions about what's going on in the classroom, they are able to just be that helping hand, so that they can continue what's happening at school, at home. I think that it's just giving families practical nuggets, that they can apply to really continue the learning at home and it's reciprocating what's happening within the classrooms.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: And I love that because we truly, our classrooms are an extension of the home and vice versa. Our homes can be an extension of the classroom. So that's really great. Do you have any ideas or write any actually like specific advice that you could just share to tell our teachers and educators, how to do that specifically?

Candra Morris: So yeah, one of the things that I just think about is whatever you're doing in the classroom, think about the steps that it would take for a family or a caregiver to help the child with that same skill, at home. So, for example, if you are working on counting or counting sets, what are the steps or strategies that you would use in the classroom that

families can do at home? They may not have the same manipulatives, but can they use different objects around the house, to practice that same skill of counting? And then just like also explaining why it's important to the way that they're learning and just providing those practical steps, to be able to do those activities.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: So, Kendra, we know that teachers and caregivers have all of these cool things going on in their classroom. They invite the parents, they invite the families, they have open door policies. What do you see right now is the number one thing that is hindering families or keeps them from engaging?

Candra Morris: So, I think, you know, that's one of those things where like life just life so sometimes, right? Like there's all these different things that keep us busy, whether it be their job, or just different roles that they have at their home or, you know, maybe having multiple children. There's just different factors that can really play into being able to be involved. So, I think one of the things that I really think about is how can we provide just different opportunities, whether it's different times of day or different avenues, of how we're reaching out to families to be able to connect? Because I think that's really the hindrance of like, where do I fit this into everything that I'm currently doing? I think every parent and caregiver wants their children to be successful. It's just a matter of like; how do I do that? And how do I fit it into this box of everything else that I have to do? So, I think that sometimes becomes our hindrance. It's not that they don't want to. It's about figuring out how. How do you fit that into everything else that you have going on, knowing that their child is definitely like their priority, and they want to be a part of it, but just how to make it work with just the day-to-day life responsibilities.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Right. So, we see that sometimes the background experiences that parents have had with school or with education or with other adults hinders them and, you know, makes them scared to come and visit with us. And so, I just wanted to ask you, do you have something important that you do that really works to build that relationship, from home to school to help with this engagement?

Candra Morris: Yeah, I think that this kind of takes me back to being a classroom teacher. I think it really all starts with relationships on day one. I'm not really in the classroom right now within my current role. But when you meet people, it starts with trust. How are you, how and what are you doing to build trusting relationships, where people feel that they can be open and honest, and come to you for help or maybe just have a conversation to better understand what it is that you're saying? So, I think it's really just thinking about what are those practical ways that you can foster meaningful partnerships with the families that are in your school community? And just how do you create opportunities for them to come to you or feel comfortable, whether that's back-to-school night? I know we have a lot of information you want to give out to your families, but are you taking the time to actually learn about their interests, or what their desires are for their children, for that academic school year? So really, I know teachers are busy and have a million and one things to do, because their plates are so full, but are we taking the time to just really get to know the families that we're working with for the course of that year?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: I love that. I could just, I can hear the passion you have from this as you're talking. And I'm just wondering, I envision that you have probably done this, and you have probably structured this and just played it out for a year. And I'm just wondering personally, what do you feel has been a success or just a positive outcome that has come from this in your own personal experience?

Candra Morris: I think in my own personal experience, something that just lights me up is when I get to go into different schools across the nation, and really seeing families coming together and sharing their experiences, the things that they have in their personal toolboxes. Sharing that with other families and then being able to build on those things that they're already doing. I'm an educator. Early childhood educators are just, I'm super passionate about that. And I feel like when the two come together, and can just like work together, I think that for me is always a success. To see teachers and families working together because families are so important. But I think teachers are just really, really important. And I think sometimes they're forgotten about how much they do. And so, when they can really come together and foster a partnership that helps the child, I just love seeing that in different parts of the nation.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: One hundred percent. And I think that's something, like I said at the beginning, that we talk about and talk about how vital those relationships are. So, as we wrap up today, what are three takeaways that you have that you want our listeners to know?

Candra Morris: So, I think one is start early, start from back to school, back to school night. Or the first time you meet them, that first interaction is just really important because, as we mentioned, some families did not have a good school

experience. So, if you can make that positive from the start, I think that's really important. I also think elevating family voices, family and caregiver voices, any opportunity you get is extremely important. Sometimes we think we have all the answers, and we need to make sure that their voices are a part of it. And then also just having the belief that every child can be successful, if they have a supportive village. And that village means any adult that's in the school, or within their local community.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Yeah, engagement is huge, fostering those partnerships is huge, and I love how you speak to that. As our listeners walk away, do you have any challenges for them?

Candra Morris: Yeah, I think that one of the challenges I think about is like we all think or try these wonderful strategies, and amazing things that we spend so much time on developing. But I think that as we implement different strategies or try different engagement activities, I think it's important that we go back and reflect, right? We do surveys, we do evaluations, but are we taking the time to really go back and assess and make sure the feedback that we're getting, we're taking that and making the changes that we need to do? So that's what I would challenge everyone to do is really be meaningful and intentional, about reflecting and then taking critical feedback, and then applying what you're getting from your families or other teachers just to improve the overall experience for our children and families.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Candra, I think that's amazing. Thank you so much. This information is not new, but something that we need to continue to talk about, and we need to continue to ensure that our teachers and our families both know that that partnership is so important. So, I appreciate you for being here and thank you so much and have a great day.

Candra Morris: Thank you so much for having me. You as well.