As an early childhood professional, Jane sees herself as a practitioner. She values her work with children in her care, she shares notes on the children’s progress with their parents, and she invites fellow teachers to carpool to monthly professional meetings.

Recently she advocated for developmentally appropriate experiences for young children at a meeting of the local housing authority, and she suggested that administrators, parents, teachers, and other professionals contribute to a blog as a way to build connections among them.

Despite these actions, Jane does not consider herself a leader in the field nor does she recognize her potential. “No,” she would say, “a leader is someone who stands up and guides people to do the right thing. A leader is a Marian Wright Edelman or a Sharon Lynn Kagan.”

Jane’s feelings are common. It is typical for early childhood education and care professionals to see themselves more as practitioners than as leaders (Rodd 1998) and to downplay their activities with other practitioners and the community.

Much of the existing work on leadership in the early childhood field is anecdotal and in many cases does not go beyond how-to articles (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris, and Briggs 2004). Despite the lack of leadership research in the early childhood context, it’s clear that teachers, directors, consultants, and administrators crave the support and guidance professional networks provide.

Leadership and roles of leaders

Leadership is a process in which the leader sets individual and group expectations to influence others to move in a positive direction (Rodd 1998). An early childhood leader often wears many hats and at different times may serve as “…a plumber, a carpenter, and a counselor because she holds the ultimate responsibility for whatever needs to be taken care of” (Essa 2014).

Early childhood leaders work to build active and effective links between the early childhood setting and the community, translate research into practice, and think of the big picture to create change (Jor’dan, Muñoz, Figlar, and Rust 2013; Kagan and Hallmark 2001).

Professional relationships

Jor’dan and colleagues (2013) suggest that issues of leadership—developing best practices, examining cultural relevancy, mentoring adult students and emerging professionals, and even investigating the impact of blended families on children—are worthy and essential explorations in an ever-changing field. Relationships among teachers, other professionals,
children, and families intersect within early childhood settings. Leaders and the networks they create have immediate impact on children and the adults they will become (Hammond, Walsh, and Waugh 2012).

Local early care and education organizations, for example, create networks by doing such things as planning topical seminars, organizing reading groups, and setting up visits to each other’s programs. National organizations often offer access to Internet forums developed according to the specific interests of its members, such as emerging technology and its impact on young children, rough-and-tumble play, or the project approach in early childhood classrooms.

Conversations among group members help frame new concepts, new ideas, and new practices. Engaged and informed collaboration builds purposeful networks among members and can lead to new and impactful professional standards. NAEYC (2009), for example, has developed six Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs, five of which involve professional relationships:

- building family and community relationships (Standard 2),
- documenting and assessing in partnership with families and other professionals (Standard 3),
- using developmentally effective approaches to connect with children and families (Standard 4),
- building meaningful curriculum (Standard 5), and
- becoming a professional and advocating for sound educational practices (Standard 6).

In addition, Bredekamp (2014) characterized the early childhood profession as a sharing culture—children and adults learning together. Current and future early childhood leaders face the task of influencing and understanding other professionals, children, and families in order to administer a quality program.

Building the networks that support families and children is challenging and seldom easy (Rigby and Neuman 2005). For example, Jessa’s family has finally agreed to have their daughter evaluated for hearing loss. You have worked to help the family understand that early intervention is most effective, and family members have become comfortable with the idea that Jessa may need long-term therapy and accommodations that enable her to fully participate in the 3-year-old class.

Unfortunately, you’re also faced with children who tease Jessa as well as other families who are suspicious of Jessa’s differences and are lobbying for her to be transferred to another program. You and other teachers are panicked by fears that you won’t be able to meet Jessa’s needs and feelings of guilt that you didn’t recognize the need earlier. You recognize that your task is to help all parties find common ground—for Jessa’s sake.

Because “…professionals are always in the process of becoming more professional” (Castle 2009), consider setting program or individual goals for effective networks by employing national standards set by such organizations as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), and others.

**Personal reflection and professional guidance**

Professional relationships are essential as you write and live your own story as an early childhood leader. You probably have your own thoughts on how to nurture professional relationships. It may be helpful to reflect on these ideas and where they come from. Keeping a reflective journal, revisiting it, and revising your thoughts as you grow professionally and acquire new knowledge and experiences can be important to the process of leadership (Goble and Horm 2010).

National expectations set by professional organizations are sources of guidance for knowing what the profession expects in professional relationships with other adults.
Professional standards established by national early childhood organizations

To better understand your role and experiences with these national expectations, consider constructing a list of ways that you and other early childhood education and care professionals demonstrate each national expectation.

National Association for the Education of the Young Children (NAEYC) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice

- “Teachers themselves demonstrate high levels of responsibility and self-regulation in their interactions with other adults (colleagues, family members) and with children” (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, Guideline 1C, 5).
- “Practitioners ensure members of the community feel psychologically safe. The overall social and emotional climate is positive” (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, Guideline 1E, 1).
- “In reciprocal relationships between practitioners and families, there is mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility, and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals” (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009, Guideline 5A).

National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)

- “The provider tries to maintain open and easy communication with each family” (NAFCC, 2013, Guideline 1.15).
- “The provider respects diverse family styles and recognizes the strengths of each family” (NAFCC, 2013, Guideline 1.11).
- “The provider has the social support of friends, family, other providers, and/or community organizations” (NAFCC, 2013, Guideline 1.28).

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

- “Practicing collegiality with others who are providing services to individuals with exceptionalities” (Special Education Professional Ethical Principles, 2010, Principle 4).
- “Developing relationships with families based on mutual respect and actively involving families and individuals with exceptionalities in educational decision making” (Special Education Professional Ethical Principles, 2010, Principle 5).

Council for Professional Recognition

- “To establish positive and productive relationships with families” (CDA Competency Standards, 2013, Goal IV).
- “To ensure a well-run, purposeful program responsive to participant needs” (CDA Competency Standards, 2013, Goal V).
- “To maintain a commitment to professionalism” (CDA Competency Standards, 2013, Goal VI).

NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct

- “To establish and maintain relationships of respect, trust, confidentiality, collaboration, and cooperation with co-workers” (Feeny, Freeman, and Pizzolongo, 2012, Principle I-3A.1).
- “To share resources with coworkers, collaborating to ensure that the best possible early childhood care and education program is provided” (Feeny, Freeman, and Pizzolongo, 2012, Principle I-3A.2).

Being aware of your potential

Your awareness of national expectations of professional relationships is the first step in developing into a leader who can help shape and support quality experiences for children. Leaders are not always in highly visible positions. As evidenced in national expectations, the field of early care and education values professional relationships with colleagues, employees, children, families, and community members.

As we create and live our own leadership experiences, we may find that the national expectations in this article are already present in our work or capture part of the leadership process that we strive for in professional relationships.

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