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*The National Center for the
Business of Family Child Care*

Protecting Yourself When a Parent Leaves

by Tom Copeland

Occasionally parents are upset when they leave my care. How can I protect myself if they decide to file a complaint against me?

Family child care is a business where parents and children naturally come and go. Here are some suggestions for protecting yourself should a relationship end on an unhappy note:

- When a family first enrolls with your program, start keeping a notebook and record any incidents, arguments, problems, or observations about the child or parents. Situations when you may want to write something down might include the following: a parent yells at you and uses abusive language; you notice signs that the child has been injured; the child is biting other children; or the parent complains about how you are providing care. It is always a good idea to talk with parents right away about any problems that arise, but keeping a written record will help you remember incidents and can be useful later if a more serious conflict arises. Of course, if you suspect that the child is being abused or neglected, you should report this immediately to your licensor or child protection services.
- Ask parents to fill out a written evaluation of your program on a regular basis. The evaluation should contain these key questions: What do you like best about my program? What can I do to improve my program? Would you recommend me to another parent, and if so, why? Such evaluations should be passed out at least once a year and at the time a parent is leaving. Parents will usually say wonderful things about you, and you can use these evaluations as references with prospective parents. But you may also be able use them to help you refute any serious complaints by the parent later.
- Contact your licensor any time you are concerned about an incident with a family. Even if the incident isn't serious, you can ask for advice and go on record with your side of the story as soon as possible. If the licensor knows that you have been having trouble with a parent, he or she is more likely to be sympathetic to you if the parent files a complaint.
- Once the decision has been made to terminate the relationship with the parent, no matter whose decision it was to end it, try to be as positive as possible about the transition. If it was your decision, do not put the reasons for terminating the parent in writing. Parents will never agree with your reasons and anything you write will probably insult them. Just tell the parent that the situation is no longer a good fit and that no one is at fault.
- It is very important to contact your licensing worker whenever a parent is leaving. This is particularly important when the parent is expressing any bad feelings to you. Before you terminate a parent (or before suing a parent to enforce your contract), call your licensor and explain why you are taking this action. Ask for any suggestions the licensor might have about how to handle the situation. If you fear that the parent may file a complaint against you, tell the licensor. Refer to your notes about previous incidents with the parent. Licensors have told me



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that when a provider has talked to them first about a conflict with a parent and the parent later makes a complaint, the parent's complaint is often taken as a contract dispute rather than a violation of a child care regulation, which is more serious. Hopefully, you will not have to cope with an unhappy parent who files a complaint against you.