Effective practice: Parents as Partners

Key messages

- Parents provide a learning environment which is enduring and comprehensive. It begins even before birth, operates beyond the child's day at the setting and provides continuity as the child transfers from one setting to another.
- Over 70% of children's lives are spent, not in a setting, but with their family and the wider community. Therefore home and community must be recognised as significant learning environments in the lives of children.
- All parents can enhance their child's development and learning.
- Parents have the right to play a central role in making decisions about their child's care and education at every level.
- Successful relationships between parents and educators can have long-lasting and beneficial effects on children's learning and well-being.
- Successful relationships become partnerships when there is two-way communication and parents and practitioners really listen to each other and value each other's views and support in achieving the best outcomes for each child.

What Parents as Partners means

All settings should develop effective partnerships with parents in order to enhance the learning and development of the children with whom they work. We are all learners from birth and it is usually our parents who first give us the confidence and motivation to explore the world around us and who continue to keep us learning and stretching the boundaries of our understanding.

Parents are very interested in their children's progress from baby to child and beyond. Early years practitioners are also interested in children's progress. Parents and practitioners thus share a joint interest in, and responsibility for, children's development and learning. Both parents and practitioners are key people in building children's self-esteem and dispositions to learn, although they bring different perspectives and expertise. Parents are experts on their own child, practitioners are experts on children's learning and development. Children usually feel more confident and positive about themselves and their learning when parents and practitioners work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Effective practice in relation to Parents as Partners

Respecting diversity

We live in a diverse and changing society. Young children's attitudes towards diversity are affected by the behaviour of adults around them and by whether all children and families using the setting are valued and welcomed. Inclusive settings recognise and celebrate diversity. Sometimes practitioners assume that their own way of being a parent, a family member or relating to children is the only right way to do things, but effective parenting can take many different forms.

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The first contact parents have with practitioners sets the tone for all future contact. The smile that greets a parent as they walk through the door conveys a really important and simple message, 'You are welcome here'; the lack of a smile, however, can say, 'You are not welcome here'.

All parents will feel slightly apprehensive the first time they walk through your door. Some parents may find it relatively easy to find the door in the first place; others may feel more intimidated about taking the first steps to get to know about, and make contact with, a setting. Consider your admissions policy: if a setting operates on a purely 'first come, first served' basis, parents who are unfamiliar or unable to cope with the procedures may feel excluded. Parents who do not easily access settings have sometimes been categorised as 'hard to reach'. A more helpful way of thinking about this situation may be to see the setting as being 'hard to reach', rather than the parent. This then involves the setting itself taking responsibility for becoming more accessible to the whole community.

The majority of early years practitioners are female. This, coupled with stereotypical views of childcare as 'women's work', often has the effect of making the setting feel like a 'no-go area' for fathers. However, it is the responsibility of settings to challenge this and make fathers and other significant males in children's lives feel valued.

Some questions to consider:

- Do you actively seek to recruit male staff?
- Do you run any men-only sessions?
- Do you ask for volunteers to help with activities that might appeal more to fathers in your area than mothers?
- Do you avoid sexist language when talking with fathers?
- Do you share their children's achievements with them in the same way as you do with mothers?
- Do you value boys' play (including superhero and weapon play) as highly as that of girls?

The following case studies demonstrate some key features of effective practice around admission and accessibility.

Case study 1

Barbara is a childminder who belongs to an accredited network linked to a children's centre. She has lived in the area for many years and knows a lot of people. She puts local parents in touch with the children's centre because she is aware of the support it offers and feels part of it herself. She takes children there for sessions and has gone to the centre in the evening for her own continuing professional development.

She is sensitive to the way in which parents may be very worried about leaving their children with her. She knows that often, although parents really want warm, loving, home-based care for their child, they are worried that they will grow to love Barbara more than them. She tactfully explains that children do not have a finite pool of love, that there is more than enough to go around and that parents are always special to their child. If the child seems reluctant to go home it is not because they don't love the parent, but usually because they are enjoying what they are doing and don't want to stop immediately. She makes time to chat about what they have been doing and to share the progress the child has made in a friendly, informal way.

Throughout the time children are with her she ensures that she talks about the children's learning and development with any other settings they attend, for example, the children's centre, and any other setting or school sessions during the day. This ensures continuity of learning for them and also means she can inform working parents about things they need to know about their children's day: their progress, development, learning and/or particular needs.

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Case study 2

At the children's centre families come from a range of ethnic groups and cultural traditions. The centre employs practitioners from the local community, some of whom are bilingual. There is one member of staff who has particular responsibility for ensuring that families know about the services available and acts as a link between the families, key staff and other agencies.

All practitioners ensure that the displays and resources reflect children's home and community experience and they all know some words of greeting in the main community languages.

Before admission, the child's key person visits the family and child at home to get to know them. The home visit starts the process of building relationships and it is the first opportunity to discuss with parents how the staff use the Early Years Foundation Stage, the kinds of activities the children will engage in and how the key worker will observe their child, to help decide how they will plan future activities and how parents can be involved. It is also an opportunity to watch parents and children interacting in their own home and to find out about what is important to them and what the child likes to do.

The parent is encouraged to stay with the child as part of the process of transition between home and the group wherever possible and arrangements are flexible to accommodate the needs of working parents.

Throughout the family's association with the setting, the key person, parent and child talk regularly to check how well they are all adjusting to the arrangements for settling in, learning and teaching. She makes sure that the family or child's particular interests and experiences, such as the birth of a new baby or when a child has moved from sleeping in a cot to a bed, are used in planning work with the child. She also liaises with other settings in the area in order to ensure continuity for children.

When the child transfers to primary school, the key person ensures that the parent knows how to select a school and how the transition will work. She meets the parent to prepare the final record of the child's progress and attainment. She liaises with the school the child will attend and with the family so that everyone is kept fully informed.

These case studies illustrate the importance of a key person in building relationships with children, whether it is with one person in their own home or with many in a large and complex centre. However, these relationships can be very challenging for that key person and other staff.

Practitioners may find some parents and parenting styles easier to value than others. It is important to make time to reflect on why this might be. All of us bring our own cultural and social baggage to our jobs. This may enrich our understanding of some parents and family patterns but also make it difficult to:

- communicate with some parents;
- understand the needs of some parents;
- value some parents' lifestyle or religious beliefs;
- approve of some childrearing practices.

These difficulties may reflect events in our own pasts or may make us feel inadequate or angry. Sometimes we may think that parents do not love their children enough and this may lead us to consider what parental love means. Family patterns may differ, but when does 'different' become 'dangerous'? When does 'good enough' parenting become neglect?

These are just some of the questions that practitioners may find themselves asking and how they deal with them will depend on their own values, experience and training, the support they get from their colleagues and the values and ethos of the setting. Time is needed to explore these issues so that practitioners and parents can build relationships which value everyone. All practitioners will benefit from

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professional development in diversity, equality and anti-discriminatory practice, whatever the ethnic, cultural or social make-up of the setting. Part of the professional duty of educators is to see the world through the eyes of others, both parents and children, in order to understand, support and extend their learning.

Sometimes practitioners have to put the welfare and safety of the child first. All settings have child protection procedures which may require practitioners to be very clear about their professional responsibilities. A setting may have a very informal ethos. However this does not mean that professional boundaries do not exist. Sometimes less experienced staff may make the mistake of trying to be a friend to parents rather than a friendly professional. This is an important distinction: part of a professional mental attitude is not getting emotionally involved to the extent that one forgets the need to put the child first. Professionals need to be able to de-centre, focus on another's needs rather than their own, and respond rationally and helpfully.

For instance, when a parent becomes very distressed or angry it is usually not helpful to them, or oneself, to collude with them, cry with them or shout back. Offering what Rogers (1980, p.116) referred to as 'unconditional positive regard' is important for anyone in distress and a refusal to be deflected by defensive behaviour, or be drawn into a row, often breaks into the negative self-defeating cycle that parents in difficult situations may set up. It then becomes possible for parents to become more coherent and begin to try and find ways forward for the benefit of their child.

Communication

All settings communicate with parents in a range of ways: sometimes without realising it. Posters, pictures and other resources will communicate the setting's attitudes to disability and to ethnic, cultural and social diversity. However, no amount of welcoming displays in community languages or positive images of disabled people will compensate for a lack of friendliness and warmth from staff. You do not have to be bilingual, or indeed know any words of another person's language, to make them feel welcome.

Parents will feel valued by the setting if:

- Resources and displays represent the ethnic, cultural and social diversity in society.
- They can see their own family background and culture represented as well as those of others.
- They always get a warm and genuine greeting.
- They do not see other parents being treated better than they are.
- Staff pronounce parents' and children's names correctly.
- Staff are flexible and able to cope with the unexpected twists and turns of family life.

When settings ask parents what they need from practitioners, their comments include the following. Someone who:

- really likes my child and knows them well;
- listens, and doesn't just tell us what to do;
- understands if we are a bit late arriving;
- cares about me as well as my child;
- gives me time to talk;
- smiles and has a sense of humour;

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- helps my child learn;
- keeps me informed.

When practitioners are friendly professionals with a genuine interest in the children, parents come to like and trust them, and mutual respect can flourish.

Arrival and collection times are crucial in allowing this sort of informal but important communication to take place. In a large setting it may be more difficult to organise quality time for children's key people to talk with parents. Some parents will be working and will not be regular visitors to the setting.

However, it is important that regular times are made for the key person and parent to review the child's progress and for the parent to contribute to the child's profile. It is also important that when necessary parents can talk in confidence to practitioners and that there is somewhere private where this can happen.

As well as listening to parents, staff can share expertise. Different stages of development can cause stress and tensions, and practitioners can offer advice and assistance to ease parents and children through emotionally charged times such as weaning, toilet training or tantrums. Knowing that what your child is demonstrating is a normal part of a young child's development can be reassurance in itself. If there is cause for further concern the practitioner can offer advice and strategies for coping.

All settings write to parents. This may be in the form of notices on the walls, the setting brochure or prospectus, regular newsletters or letters home. Some of these communications are ignored. This may be because:

- they look boring;
- they are too long for busy parents to take in;
- parents have low literacy levels;
- parents do not read English.

Start by considering if using a lot of paper in individual letters home is the best way to communicate every message. Consider:

- using plain English, pictures and cartoons;
- using children's pictures, mark-making or writing;
- using photographs of children;
- keeping the text short and snappy;
- translation, either in writing or orally, where English is an additional language;
- handing out written communications personally and taking time to explain the main points;
- using alternative forms of communication, such as tapes or CD-ROMs, email, or the internet.

Learning together: from participation to co-researching

Reggio Emilia is a region in northern Italy renowned for its high quality education of young children. In the Reggio Emilia Pre-Schools Charter of the Rights of Parents, there are two concepts underpinning partnership with parents: participation and research.

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Much of what has been discussed up to this point covers the concept of participation. The concept of research involves helping parents to understand their own child's play behaviours and to study it for themselves. It is taking the concept of partnership one step further and involving parents more fully in the game of learning.

One of the areas that practitioners sometimes complain about is that parents do not value play: they think that children should be working and do not understand that the distinction between play and work is misleading. This parental misunderstanding is sometimes used as a justification for providing inappropriate activities such as worksheets for very young children because they can take them home and prove that they have been working. However, consider which of these activities children are more likely to learn from and remember:

- The experience of watching and looking closely at real frogs.
- Playing with plastic frogs, plants, wood and water in a builder's tray.
- Singing and acting out 'Five Little Speckled Frogs'.
- Listening to stories about frogs.
- Colouring in an adult-drawn picture of a frog on a lily pad.

Parents draw on their own experiences of education when they formulate their expectations of early childhood settings and the skills of practitioners who work in them. Effective settings can help them become co-researchers of their child's learning and development by sharing their knowledge and supporting their learning. One way to do this is to take a family learning approach where parents work in a group together with a practitioner on an area such as early literacy. They explore current thinking about how children become literate from birth onwards, they discuss how the setting supports children's literacy development and what they themselves do, or could do, at home. They carry out activities with their children both in the setting and at home and come back again the next week to share their findings.

That is just one example; there are endless possibilities which will depend on the context of the setting. Parents and children may work together with an artist or on creating an outdoor area, they may think about how emotional well-being is developed through play, and document their child's experience at home to share with practitioners.

Whatever the activity, it is something that practitioners and parents share and where they acknowledge their different but complementary expertise. Parents who are informed about the ways in which children learn, think about and represent their thoughts through talk, drawing and action are in a better position to support the continuity and progression of their children's learning and development between home and early years setting. Practitioners who are informed about how children learn and behave at home and in the wider community can better support their learning in the setting.

Not all parents will have time to attend sessions in a setting but many will respond positively to being asked to record their child's play or favourite things at home, possibly with a loaned or disposable camera. One of the greatest benefits to early years practitioners in working with parents is the encouragement it gives to making the setting's approaches to learning and teaching more open and shared. When this happens it is easier for parents to get involved in the drafting of policies and procedures and to feel really valued as their child's first and most enduring educators.

How does your setting involve parents in partnership?

- What opportunities are there for parents to contribute to practitioners' developing understanding of the child as a unique individual?

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- Do you have information around the setting which makes the process of learning visible for all parents and children?
- Do parents understand your policies on important areas such as key person, inclusion, behaviour, learning and teaching? Have they been involved in drawing them up?
- Have you ever started a joint project with parents when both they and practitioners were researching children's learning?
- Do you support parents in developing their own skills and understanding so that they might be better able to support their child's learning?
- How do parents contribute to planning the learning environment?
- Are parents encouraged to evaluate the environment with their child's needs and interests in mind?

References

Rogers, C.R. (1980) *A Way of Being*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

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