

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.

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.

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'.

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: parents who are unfamiliar or unable to cope with the procedures can easily 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.

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 attitudes 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 parenting styles.

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.

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;
- helps my child learn;
- keeps me informed.

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

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.**

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?
- Do you have information around the setting which makes the process of learning visible for all parents and children?

Do you offer opportunities for:

- children to share news about themselves and their families?
- children and families to share their own cultural and religious festivals with others?

How do you:

- support children and families whose first language is not English?
- involve parents in promoting positive outcomes for their children?

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Respecting Each Other

Key messages

- **Respect for others is the basis of good relationships.**
- Babies and children learn who they are and what they can accomplish through relationships.
- Children learn about others through their relationships. They become aware that others may have different needs, feelings and ideas from their own.
- Through friendships children learn that there are different viewpoints than their own and develop interpersonal skills.
- Effective relationships foster children's emotional and social development.
- Within secure relationships children feel safe to express feelings and learn to cope with and understand them.
- Responsive, supportive, warm and respectful relationships between children are bolstered when these qualities feature in interactions between adults.
- **Good relationships between practitioners and parents enable practitioners to build on family and cultural practices when tuning in to children's needs and ideas.**

What respecting each other means

This Commitment shows that respect for others is the basis of the good relationships and attachments that are so fundamentally important to a child's healthy development. It also highlights that this quality must be evident in all relationships within a setting if everyone is to work well together.

In its reference to beliefs, social practices and feelings, this Commitment shows that respect is dependent on recognition that not everyone is the same, thinks the same, or reacts and does things in the same ways.

Why respecting each other is important

Within a setting, relationships with parents and with other professionals are important and where these relationships are effective, parents are respected as partners in supporting their children's development and learning. Close and frequent links between parents and practitioners provide the means for practitioners to build on family and cultural practices when tuning in to children's needs and ideas. They can also alert practitioners to times when families may need additional support. Respect involves recognising the difficulties in life that children and their families experience from time to time and being ready to show care through comfort, reassurance and support.

- Help children to relate easily and respectfully with others by showing them how good relationships can work in your own interactions with everyone who works in or visits the setting.
- Build a network of good relationships with other professionals in the multi-agency team by creating links with named staff in the setting.
- Try to ensure that these personal liaisons are maintained so that trusting and respectful relationships are generated.
- Where a child has special needs, and receives support from several sources, try to ensure that the key worker is included in contacts so that a close web of relationships between the key worker, child, family and other professionals is achieved.

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WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

All parents need to know that staff are committed and interested in their children and be informed as to how they are settling and progressing.

Parents also need to know that they will be kept informed and involved as a matter of course, not that they will only be contacted if there are some difficulties.

This is especially true for the parents of a child with special educational needs. They may require opportunities to be informed and involved with the provider, which does not always focus on their child's difficulties or problems.

Whereas some children may arrive at a childminder with special educational needs already identified, the special needs of other children may emerge during their time with you. It is therefore much easier for staff and parents to discuss concerns if they have already established a secure and trusting relationship. This can be developed in a variety of ways, from an initial enquiry about a place, through the admission process, an induction / settling in period and beyond.

Involving parents of children with special needs

All involvement and work undertaken with the children needs to be seen as a joint enterprise a true partnership between parents and staff.

- Make and take every opportunity to talk with parents and involve them whenever possible or appropriate
- Make decisions with parents as partners, not just telling them what has been decided
- Encourage parents to stay with their child in those early days
- Always inform parents if a professional they already know is visiting the child within the setting, and inform them of known outcomes

Publicity information

- Ensure parents are aware and encouraged to visit well before their child starts and have access to relevant written information.
- A useful statement may be:
'We welcome and encourage parents to contact us as early as possible regarding children wishing to join us. This allows me to be able to explore together the best ways to meet the particular needs of each individual child'
- It is useful for parents to know what policies are available and how they can arrange to read them.
- All parents should be made aware from some source of standard information that the provider seeks to welcome and include all children, whatever their needs may be.

Apart from information given in publicity materials it is also helpful to spend time with prospective parents before their child's admission date. This will allow you to emphasise your inclusive principles and your openness in discussing any concerns which yourselves or parents may have in relation to their child's development.

Admissions Form

This is a vital source of information, consider including the following as well as more general information:

- Interests, likes and dislikes
- Name and phone number of Health Visitor (as well as doctor)
- Any medication or treatment that needs to be known about and the possible need of a Care Plan
- Does the child attend any other childcare / education provider to enable information to be shared within the principals of the EYFS
- Does the child have any additional / special educational needs / disability that the provider needs to be aware of to ensure the child is fully included in the life of the setting
- Has any other agency or specialist professional been working with or involved with the child? It is helpful to give a selected list to prompt responses, e.g. Portage Service, Child Development Centre, Speech and Language Therapists, Education Preparation Unit.
- Ask parents if they are registered with **Early Support** and use the **Early Support Family File**, if so ask them to share the information this holds.
- Ask parents if they are willing to share their '**Parent Held Record Book**', commonly known as the '**Red Book**', as this will also hold various types of useful information, including immunisation details.

Rather than requiring masses of information on a standard form, answers to these basic questions should alert the need for a fuller discussion.

It is also important to have a system for **checking and updating** information, as details given on admission may soon be outdated and change.