

Common partnership challenges and how to address them



ECE resources

There is a great deal of research showing that a gap exists between the desire of teachers and early childhood settings to develop partnership with parents and the actual practice of partnership. Inconsistencies are noted internationally between philosophies for the active collaboration with families in early childhood services and actual practices. Here we compile some of the greatest problems that research identifies in ECE partnership practice, and offer some pointers on how to tackle improvement in these areas.

Partnership problem: Teacher/ setting determination of partnership practice

When the early childhood setting and its staff determine only a limited set of options for participation, without consulting families, or when families are expected to conform to dominant discourses of appropriate involvement, this limits partnership. This can mean that families perceive few opportunities for getting involved, are unsure about how partnership should occur, and experience dissatisfaction and disaffection. It also means that there is a mismatch between desired partnership goals and practices - for example, when parent helpers want to get to know teachers and curriculum, but are given housekeeping tasks.

How to do it differently

- Ensure the development of mutual and trusting relationships in which parents and families have agency
- Focus partnership on shared purposes, sharing information and shared decision-making
- Negotiate what partnership means to each family and how partnership might be used to support and influence the family and the child in the unique ways that best meet their needs

Partnership problem: Minimal involvement / minor roles for families

Families are often given minor roles in their child's educational experiences, sometimes because teachers have low perceptions of the effectiveness of involving families in planning, implementation and evaluation of the programme and maintain disempowering definitions of parental involvement. This can mean that parents are confined to a role in which they offer information to teachers to help teachers understand the child's background, family values and the child's health history without being involved in a meaningful, reciprocal relationship with teachers over their child's learning, and their roles in supporting learning are unacknowledged and unsupported.

How to do it differently

- Find out what families already do to support their children's learning and recognise them as a strong resource for their child's learning
- Match involvement strategies to family interest and expertise - for example, a family with a love of reading and a library membership might seek out books for a topic of interest
- Involve parents as decision-makers in and resources for the elaboration of learning opportunities for children, which research associates with excellent outcomes for children

Partnership problem: Parents as recipients and consumers

Most procedures for partnership involve providing information, such as sending home newsletters or learning stories. Families are rarely invited to enter into the initial framing of assessment documentation, and decisions about children's learning are made and then communicated to parents, who rarely contribute to those decisions. This means that documentation and portfolios that are created and led by the teacher tend to position families as passive recipients, and may promote the teachers' values at the expense of families' cultural values.

How to do it differently

- Email newsletters and include questions or invite families to vote on options for follow-up actions
- Share photos and retell observations with parents before writing it up as a learning story. Capture some of the parents' comments
- Use e-portfolios to co-construct assessments and individual planning for children

Partnership problem: Teacher dominance in interactions

Parents' dependence on teachers for information about their child enables teachers to hold conversational dominance and strengthen their authoritative position, so that parents are informed rather than communicated with, and do not feel that their contribution is valued. Developing parent partnership relies on a sense of mutuality (shared values and assumptions) and reciprocity, and parents are unlikely to feel confident and capable of contributing ideas and information where teachers hold dominance.

How to do it differently

- Create parent-teacher contracts which articulate the different areas of expertise that parents and teachers hold
- Inquire what the parent thinks about the information you pass on to them. Be attentive and use active listening techniques to reflect back parents' comments. Avoid giving advice, labelling or in any way sounding like an expert!

Partnership problem: Infrequent and inadequate communication

While teachers rate their number of communications quite highly, parents disagree. Newsletters and documentation do not enable parents to respond or exchange information in return, and tend to give information that is general and not relevant to the individual child. This can mean that parents do not get enough information about their individual child, what is happening with their child and what they are learning. Parents want ideas for supporting their child's learning, as well as information on assessment, planning, evaluation, and curriculum, so this kind of information means they feel uninformed and undervalued.

How to do it differently

- Invite families' responses and ideas by using questions rather than statements
- Communicate about children's learning interests, and daily experiences, as these kinds of information are highly valued by parents
- Personalise portfolios with direct comments and questions to parents (i.e. 'Did your child learn so much about gardening from helping at home?' rather than 'parents' voice')

A ladder of participation: Where do your setting's practices sit?

While a large-scale survey of parental impressions of their early childhood service in New Zealand revealed that parents are reasonably satisfied with opportunities to talk with teachers, the information they receive from teachers (75%), involvement with planning and assessment (50%) and discussions about the philosophy and goals of the early childhood service (33%), other research suggests that many parents are highly influenced by normative discourses about early childhood education. In other words, early childhood practitioners should not be complacent, as parental acquiescence does not indicate that parent-teacher practices in New Zealand are as good as they could be. The following table will allow you to examine the nature of your setting's partnership practices.

Informing	Parents are informed of their rights and responsibilities but the information exchange is one-way, from staff to parent.
Consultation	Parents' opinions are invited but no assurance is offered as to whether or not these opinions are being listened to.
Placation	Parents begin to share some degree of influence though tokenism may be apparent at this level.
Partnership - emerging	Parents are involved, consulted and informed about the setting's practices and their child's particular learning programme, and decisions on these are negotiated as a result of discussion between parents and staff.
Partnership - consolidated	Negotiation leads to parents playing an equitable role in decision-making about their child's learning plans and assessments as well as the setting's philosophical ethos and direction. Parents identify and conceive ideas and work with staff as partners, and both initiate and direct projects.

Adapted from Martin, S. (2006) Opportunities for parent partnership and advocacy in early years services in Ireland. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 9, 15-31.

References & further reading

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