

What to try when building partnership with families is challenging

ECE resources

It can sometimes be frustrating when your attempts at partnership with families go unrecognised or are ignored. It seems as if some families are hard to reach and uninterested in participation or partnership, but research indicates that most parents are highly engaged with their children's learning in the home and are prepared to help their children as much as their resources enable them to do so. Reticence to get involved with the setting may reflect the incongruence families experience in relating to the setting, and not families' involvement with their children's learning outside of the setting. The recommendation here is to match your partnership opportunities to the families that you work with. While the value of parent partnership goes unquestioned in the literature and policy documents, it is important to remember that parent partnership is a Western phenomenon, and might actually exclude diverse families. This means that, if teachers do not reflect upon and accept the variability of language and cultural practice, they might limit families' capacities to develop partnership. Further, when families' cultures and languages are valued, families are more likely to participate actively in their children's education.

Occasionally even actively-engaged families can be difficult to work with. Like families characterised as hard-to-reach, actively-engaged families may bring a different set of values and goals for their children that conflict with those of the early childhood centre or that are difficult to fit with the centre's philosophy and routines.

What can cause difficulties in creating teacher-parent partnership?

Research has found evidence of a number of factors that may serve as barriers to creating positive partnership with parents and families.

Inadequate communication: Partnership is strained when information in both directions is not timely or clear. Additional factors here include **English as a second language and differing proficiency in English** which may hinder comprehension or result in the more proficient speaker gaining conversational and decision-making power, as well as **linguistic and communication differences**, such as differences in communication style.

Conflicting values, beliefs and understandings: Different **views about child development and appropriate curriculum and pedagogy** may lead to difficulties in communication and feelings of dissatisfaction. Learning through play may not fit with parents' cultural beliefs about learning, and some parents may prefer more formal, organised and repetitive teaching approaches. Teachers may **lack understanding about family goals** for attending an early childhood setting. For example, many culturally diverse families value children learning to conform to group norms, to respect rules and limits, and to tolerate unpleasant experiences, whereas teachers emphasise children's autonomy and decision-making. Teachers may **lack knowledge of family cultures and practices**, and use bureaucratic practices which treat all parents the same. Families may hesitate to share their home practices due to their **lack of understanding of or desire for continuity of care**. They may express a preference for the early childhood setting to implement the dominant group's practices rather than replicate home practices, because they see this as important for their child's integration into the dominant society.

Power imbalances: Teachers' status as professionals with specific expertise and knowledge can give them a status and power that creates an imbalance in their relationships with families, and lead them to dismiss or devalue parental input. Parents' positioning as 'fee-payers' and consumers of newsletters and products about children's learning, in contrast, can tip the balance of power toward parents. Teachers may hold **deficit views of parents** as lacking the skills needed to be involved in the teaching process and decision-making. Parental knowledge is then subordinated to the knowledge of teachers, and seen as inadequate, unimportant or supplementary. Parents' **views of teachers as respected authority figures** may mean that working alongside the teacher is seen as inappropriate, disruptive and disrespectful. Some parents may perceive teachers who seek parental involvement to be incompetent, while a desire to avoid conflict also influences some families' non-involvement and non-interference.

Lack of confidence or trust: Some families may **lack confidence** and a willingness to work with teachers for various reasons which include communication difficulties and a lack of familiarity with the New Zealand education system. **Parents' educational history**, especially if there is previous experience of negative encounters with teachers, exclusion, or professional insensitivity towards families from culturally diverse backgrounds, may create attitudes of distrust and a lack of confidence. Previous experience of having concerns or aspirations disregarded leads to parents feeling disempowered and losing the motivation to express disagreement, make further requests or offer suggestions.

Lack of time and opportunity: Insufficient time for meaningful contact, or a **lack of privacy or appropriate space** for conversations, may result in superficial relations and communications. Parents describe feeling awkward and waiting for a chance to speak in 'snatched time' with the teacher who is at the same time managing other children and the environment. Parents find it difficult to talk about their child in a public space and may feel disrespected in being forced to do so. Staffing also tends to be lighter when parents are present at the beginning and end of the day. Parents often have more time for conversation at the end of the day but teachers are busy tidying up and wanting to leave, and more senior teachers have already gone home. In addition, snatched conversations at the end of the day are less likely to involve creative decision-making about children's learning. Culturally diverse families may experience the difficulties of the lack of time and space for conversations more often and feel them more keenly. The **scheduling and location** of meetings and other opportunities for decision-making may limit the potential for families' involvement. Some families may have competing work, family or community commitments, or have limited access to early childhood settings because of public or private transport limitations.

Frequent changes: **Frequently moving children between rooms or groups** within an early childhood setting may restrict the long-term engagement with families and children that offers greater potential for building strong and substantive partnerships.

Families' personal circumstances: Difficulties and stresses such as poverty, physical or social isolation, feeling shame, frustration or embarrassment, ill health, special needs, and family crises can negatively affect their motivation and resources to become involved in their child's education. Financial pressure can leave families too busy with work to be able to commit to partnership. This is often the case for immigrants or refugees, for example.

Specific strategies for partnership with diverse families

This section focuses on ways to uncover differences in values, goals and attitudes, and to work through them in the name of developing the shared decision-making which is so important in partnership. These strategies complement the **principles of partnership**.

- **Do not make assumptions about families' disinterest.** Families' lack of involvement might be because they do not know how to be involved, or they do not value the way that it is expected they are involved, or because teachers do not know how to facilitate relations in a respectful and inclusive way.
- **Be clear about your own values and expectations** with regard to teaching, learning and your role as a teacher. Use reflective practices in which you question your goals for children and families to develop your cultural awareness.
- **Find out and familiarise yourself with the values, beliefs and expectations of your families** related to learning and education, especially where there are cultural differences, and be aware of the diversity of expectations between and within given cultural communities. Inquire into the cultural resources and processes of individual families, for example, their beliefs and practices around children's involvement with food and mealtimes, or which play activities are most highly valued as conducive for children's development.
- **Acknowledge a diversity of practices, beliefs and understandings as culturally valid** which will help you become more inclusive of all families. Culturally diverse families are likely to value different sets of skills and attitudes, including the ability to conform, to respect rules, and to be exposed to unpleasant experiences as preparation for real life. This can be in direct contrast to teachers who value children's autonomy and assertiveness and seek to recognise children's individuality. It is important not to discount parents' values.
- Some parents appreciate **homework** as a means to connect their child's learning in the early childhood centre with learning at home. You might support families that have limited understanding of play-based pedagogy with a play-based learning activity to engage with at home, and offer an explanation of how this supports children's learning.
- **Make your own practices as a centre explicit**, as some practices may not be clearly understood by families who are unfamiliar with the culture of the setting.
- Put time into **regular and informal interactions** with families. The development of open communication and understanding for effective collaboration requires much effort and commitment.
- **Develop specific communication strategies** to best suit families. For example, making an effort to find **interpreters** shows families that you really care and are interested in what they have to say. Also ensure information is communicated effectively and in good time.
- Regularly **request parents' opinions** on their children's education and learning needs, while indicating your desire to learn from parents. Culturally diverse families, including Māori whānau, may not find it easy to articulate their expectations for their children's learning and experience in early childhood education. Don't assume that silence on the part of culturally diverse families means they are satisfied with the programme.
- Make **visits to children's homes**. Showing a genuine interest in families and children will make you more approachable to families when they want to discuss their children's learning experiences and needs.
- **Develop a collaborative approach to planning and evaluation** as most of the difficulties in parent-teacher relations appear to be related to approaches in which the teacher is positioned as the expert.
- **Demonstrate diverse cultural values in your practices and processes.** When Māori ways of knowing, doing and relating are legitimated and included in the settings' practices and programmes,

particularly those negotiated and validated by Māori families and elders, Māori engagement, contribution and participation increase. Specific factors that are found to empower Māori families are the valuing of the whānau concept in the setting, trusting relationships, respectful and appropriate use of te reo and tikanga, and Māori presence on the staff and in decision-making processes.

- **Be aware of the support services** available to families which they might be able to access.
- **Be very careful of discrimination.** Racial and discriminatory events have been documented in early childhood research literature. Parents note the subtle and unintended effects of racism much more than teachers.

What to do when you can't agree

In New Zealand's multicultural society, there are likely to be differences in attitudes, beliefs and values on a multitude of issues and decisions regarding children's educational experiences. For example, one area of potential tension or conflict is the use of home languages, which is often encouraged in early childhood education as a way of valuing the child and encouraging them to join in with centre activities, while parents often believe that use of the home language in the early childhood centre will negatively affect their children's acquisition of English. Other families are likely to value direct teaching and rote learning. These families can be concerned about the use of play in early childhood programmes.

One way to handle these types of conflicts is to be confident in your professional decisions, while recognising that these may not meet parental expectations. It is important to acknowledge differences, and to ensure that your decisions are informed by evidence which is shared with families. For example, provide information and evidence on how play-based pedagogy is an effective approach for young children's learning and reassure parents that children will make a successful transition to more didactic learning styles in the later stages of their education. At the same time, respect parents' views and acknowledge the benefits of direct teaching.

References & further reading

Beneke, M. R., & Cheatham, G. A. (2016). Inclusive, democratic family–professional partnerships: (Re)conceptualizing culture and language in teacher preparation. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 35*(4), 234–244.

MacNaughton, G. (2004). Children, staff and parents: Building respectful relationships in New Zealand and Australian early childhood contexts. *Early Childhood Australia Inc., 29* (1), 1-7.

Guo, K. (2005). Asian immigrant parents' and New Zealand early childhood teachers' views of parent-teacher relationships. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education, 8*, 125-135.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.