Partnerships with Families

About Partnerships with Families

Working in *partnership* means that children's services staff work with families to understand each child's individuality, their family, culture and community. This understanding then forms the foundation for shared decision-making that supports the child's learning and development.

The partnership begins when the first contact is made by a parent or caregiver, enquiring about a place for their child in care. The partnership is not friendship but more a professional, supportive relationship. It is based on mutual respect, trust, and open communication.

Communication is the most important factor in the development of a quality relationship with families. Meaningful conversations between parents, children and staff are important to ensure that both the home and children's service environments are supportive of the child's wellbeing.

Why is this important for mental health and wellbeing?

Children's experiences and development in the early years can have a major impact on long-term outcomes for that child, including their mental health, physical health, learning and socio-economic wellbeing. Supporting a child's best possible physical, cognitive, social and emotional development in early childhood is a good foundation for positive outcomes later in life.

Children differ in their temperament, experiences, culture and interests, as well as many other factors. When staff have an effective partnership with the child's family, the adults can work closely together and make joint decisions about developmental goals for the child and strategies to help them reach these goals. Parents can also let staff know about any factors at home that may be affecting the child's wellbeing or behaviour, e.g. the loss of a family pet.

Staff and family members can use similar routines across both the home and service settings, where possible, helping to create a sense of security for the child. They can also adopt consistent approaches to reinforce positive behaviour and enhance the development of effective social and emotional skills, which are important to mental health and wellbeing later in life.

Working in partnership provides opportunities for staff to get to know the child's family and culture and will help them to reflect diversity in their service and program. Acknowledging and respecting diversity supports social inclusion, which is associated with more positive mental health outcomes. For more information about diversity and social inclusion, you may like to refer to another handout within this series, entitled *Diversity and Inclusive Practice*.

Staff and family partnerships also support effective early intervention if there are any concerns about a child's development or behaviour. An existing relationship based on trust and mutual respect will allow both staff and family members to bring up and respectfully discuss any concerns they may have, so they can work together to support the best outcomes for the child.

What should I look for?

In your day-to-day practice, look for opportunities to make connections and to build positive relationships with family members. The key to this is warm, honest communication that shows a genuine interest in the wellbeing of the child and family. Families are essential partners in the care and education of their child, so you need to show them that they are welcomed and valued as part of your service and community. Some practical ideas are suggested in the next section.

What should I do?

Foster positive communication and partnerships with families on an ongoing basis:
- Collect and share relevant information at enrolment and during orientation to the service.
- Create time and space for meaningful conversations with the family wherever possible.
- Share information about the child's day in an open and honest manner.
- Share positive information on an ongoing basis, rather than only discussing problems.
- Talk with families to develop goals and strategies for nurturing their child's development.
- Invite parents and families to participate and have meaningful involvement in the service.
- Invite parents to share information about their family but respect decisions not to.
- Show genuine interest in the family's activities and interests when they share these.
- Acknowledge and value family diversity, showing respect for cultural traditions.
- Be open to different ideas of family and community, including extended families, grandparents as primary carers, same-sex parents, stay-at-home dads, *etc.*

Manage difficult situations with empathy and support, but without being intrusive:
- Acknowledge that settling a child into care can be difficult for the child and family.
- Be empathetic and supportive if families are going through difficult circumstances.
- Acknowledge a family's feelings of grief or loss e.g. during separation or bereavement.
- Be aware of any support services that may help families in different situations.
- Recognise that sharing difficult news is hard for both parties.

Share information with families and help them to access further information and support:
- Discuss the child's progress, interests and development openly and honestly.
- Offer information and advice about children's development and wellbeing.
- Work collaboratively with families to help build the child-parent relationship.
- Discuss any concerns about the child's development sensitively with the family.
- Arrange an appointment time and a private space for any sensitive discussions.
- Provide advice about accessing support and early intervention services if needed.

Consider how your organisation as a whole supports partnerships with families:
- Have a philosophy and policies that acknowledge the important of the partnership.
- Be clear about staff roles in supporting families; know where the boundaries are.
- Have a standard procedure for dealing with difficulties or disagreements with families.
- Provide comfortable spaces for adults as well as children.
- Provide opportunities for various forms of communication e.g. newsletters, special events.

Where can I find out more?

The Response Ability website (www.responseability.org) has more detailed fact sheets on a range of issues affecting children and families, listed under *Education and Children's Services.*

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Kearns, K., & Austin, B. (2007). *Frameworks for learning and development* (pp. 27-31 and 182-190). Frenchs Forest NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

National Childcare Accreditation Council (2005). Quality Area 2 in extract from QIAS *Quality Practices Guide.* Canberra, ACT: Australian Government. Retrieved 1 April, 2010, from: http://www.ncac.gov.au/publication_extracts/qias_qpg_preambles.pdf