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Working with Parents in Early Years Services

Anne Fitzpatrick

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter the reader will be able to:

- Discuss the concept of partnership with parents in early years services.
- Explain why partnership with parents in early years services is important.
- Outline the Irish legal and policy context for partnership in early years services.
- Demonstrate a range of practical ways to promote partnership.
- Evaluate the benefits and challenges of working in partnership with parents.

INTRODUCTION

The case for partnership between parents and early educators is now well established and a partnership approach is widely agreed to ensure best outcomes for children (Wheeler and Connor 2009). The case for partnership is based on the following factors:

- Parents have a right and a desire to play a key role in their child's life in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) service.
- Research evidence shows that the best outcomes for children are achieved when parents and educators work in partnership.

PARENTS' RIGHT AND DESIRE TO PLAY A KEY ROLE

A child's most important relationship is the one the child has with its parents ('parent' denotes anyone who is the primary carer of a child) (NCCA 2009). Belonging to a family is critically important to a child's development and well-being. Parents are experts on their own child while educators are experts on children's learning and development. The child benefits when both sets of experts work together.

Research has shown that most parents want to be listened to and have their views taken into account by educators (Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe 2004; Quinton 2004; Tunstill *et al.* 2005).

A UK study in 2007 found that 67 per cent of parents surveyed wanted to be more involved in the life of their child in the ECEC service. Parents living with socio-economic disadvantage felt strongly about having more involvement (Peters *et al.* 2007). At Pen Green, an early education centre of excellence in the UK that has for many years focused on working with parents, 84 per cent of parents were involved in their children's learning when a variety of types and levels of involvement were offered (Whalley and the Pen Green Centre Team 2001).

The Reggio Emilia approach believes that parents entrust their children to the public institution, so it strongly supports the right of parents to participate actively in the care and development of their children in ECEC services.

The educator should begin with the firm belief that parents are interested in the development and progress of their own children.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE ON BEST OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

Parents are the child's first and most influential educators. The learning environment that parents provide, which begins before birth, has a lasting impact on emotional, social and intellectual development. Evidence from research on the development of the baby's brain shows that early childhood experiences can positively or negatively affect how the brain develops (Perry 2002).

Children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage show less ability at 22 months in language and cognitive development and this link continues over time (Feinstein 1999). However, it is possible both to involve parents living with disadvantage in their child's learning and to support them in enhancing the home learning environment (Seaman *et al.* 2006; Evangelou *et al.* 2008).

Research from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in the UK found that for all children, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. A key conclusion of the study was that what parents do is more important than who parents are. Parents who regularly undertake activities that 'stretch a child's mind' positively impact on the child's development. Activities found to be particularly useful include reading with children, going to the library, singing songs and rhymes, drawing and painting, facilitating play with friends and playing with numbers and letters (Siraj-Blatchford 2011). The EPPE research confirmed that the quality of the home learning environment provided by parents can act as a significant modifying factor, giving children an advantage in both social and intellectual development (Sylva *et al.* 2004; Evangelou *et al.* 2005; Siraj-Blatchford 2011).

Therefore, when parents and educators work in partnership in early years services, children's long-term development and learning can be enhanced (Schweinhart,

Barnes and Weikart 1993; Desforges 2003; Sammons *et al.* 2008; Evangelou and Sylva 2003; Lopez, Kreider and Caspe 2004; Siraj-Blatchford 2011).

WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS?

The term 'partnership with parents' is often used interchangeably with the term 'parental involvement' when in fact they are quite different. Early years services have a long and respected tradition of parental involvement. Parental involvement might include activities ranging from a conversation at going-home time, fundraising or parents helping out in the service to participation in the management of the service. Partnership goes far beyond involvement, though some types of involvement may also constitute elements of partnership.

The key characteristics of partnership are:

- mutual respect and trust
- commitment to working together
- a common goal
- complementary expertise
- appreciation of different perspectives
- open communication
- willingness to negotiate
- power-sharing and joint decision-making.

'Partnership involves parents, families and educators *working together* to benefit children. Each *recognises, respects and values* what the other does and says. Partnership involves *responsibility* on both sides' (NCCA 2009:7, emphasis in original).

WHY WORK WITH PARENTS?

In this section, the rationale for adopting a partnership approach will be reviewed under the following headings: Irish legal and policy context; child protection; best practice guidelines and early education curricula; and views of early education theorists.

IRISH LEGAL AND POLICY CONTEXT

The Irish state recognises the primary role that parents play in their children's education, which flows from the Constitution. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1992, and more recent public policy (e.g. Sólta and Aistear) have also reflected this right. Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution states that:

[The] primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and [the Constitution] guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children. (Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937)

The right and duty of parents to provide for their child's education confers on them the right to active participation with the educator.

Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) provides that:

State parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, identifies parents as the primary educators of the child, and that they have a pre-eminent role in promoting the child's well-being, learning and development. Standard 3 states:

Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures. (CECDE 2006)

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, emphasises the role of parents in its twelve principles of early learning and development. The following principles are particularly important in relation to partnership with parents:

- the child's uniqueness
- equality and diversity
- relationships
- parents, family and community.

The Guidelines for Good Practice focus on four ways in which parents and practitioners can work together.

- 1 Supporting learning and development.
- 2 Sharing information.
- 3 Contributing to the setting.
- 4 Making decisions and advocating different approaches and courses of action. (NCCA, 2009)

CHILD PROTECTION

Practitioners in ECEC services play a key role in the prevention of child abuse through their work in promoting children's development and supporting parents. *Children First*, the national guidelines for children's protection and welfare, states that partnership

with parents is a principle of best practice in child protection. Good practice in preventive work with parents would include building respectful and trusting relationships, developing honest and regular two-way communication, focusing on families' strengths and collaborating with other professionals in the community. *Children First* highlights the importance of early intervention and support in promoting the welfare of children and families and as a way of minimising risk (DCYA 2011).

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES AND EARLY EDUCATION CURRICULA

Many international guidelines for best practice and curricula emphasise the role of partnership as an indicator of quality in early years services. These include, for example:

- Anti-bias/discriminatory practice guidelines: Derman-Sparks 1989; OMC 2006.
- Codes of ethics for early educators: NAEYC 2005.
- Early education curricula and programmes recognised internationally: HighScope, Te Whariki, Reggio Emilia, Pen Green.

VIEWS OF EARLY EDUCATION THEORISTS

Influential theorists in the history of early education have recognised the important role of parents in young children's learning.

- *Comenius* (1592–1670), who influenced the formulation of the general theory of education, spoke about the school of the mother's lap.
- *Pestalozzi* (1747–1827) believed that for children the teaching of their parents will always be core and that the teacher's role is to provide a decent shell around the core.
- *Montessori* (1869–1952) emphasised the importance of the mother's role before the child goes to school.
- *Froebel* (1782–1852) believed that the mother is the child's first educator.
- *Margaret McMillan* (1860–1931) educated mothers in her London nurseries so that they could take control of early years services and their lives. She encouraged every nursery to have its mothers' club to empower mothers both as women and as parents.
- *Vygotsky* (1896–1934), in his development of socio-cultural theory, identified the important role more knowledgeable others (including parents) play in supporting and scaffolding children's learning.
- *Bronfenbrenner* (1917–2005) explained different spheres of influence on the child's life and elevated the role of parents through his belief that the parent/child/educator triangle builds the strongest structure and that home and school should be brought together.

WHO BENEFITS WHEN ECEC PRACTITIONERS AND PARENTS WORK IN PARTNERSHIP?

CHILDREN

- Feel more secure in the service. A trusting relationship with the educator and a safe emotional environment are essential for children's development and learning.
- Feel respected when their family's values, language, culture, diet and traditions are reflected in the service.
- Achieve greater success in their social, emotional and cognitive development.
- Learn from modelling how to develop respectful relationships with other people.
- Have a more meaningful and appropriate experience when there is continuity between home and service.

PARENTS

- Feel more comfortable in the service through knowing educators better.
- Feel valued and respected.
- Will know their child better and have access to information/advice about their child's interests/development.
- Feel confident about contributing to their child's development and learning, both in the service and at home.
- May confide in the educator if they are experiencing difficulties.
- May have higher aspirations for their child and become involved in their later education.
- May get to know other parents better, which may lead to developing support networks.

ECEC PRACTITIONERS

- Can enhance children's sense of emotional well-being, identity and belonging in the service by building on their knowledge of each child's family.
- Can draw on this knowledge in planning for children's learning.
- Can support the parents in their overall parenting role.
- Can benefit from parents' expertise and skills.
- Feel parents value them more in their role.
- Find their roles more varied and interesting.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO DEVELOP A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH?

Partnership will be evident in ECEC services where there is mutual respect between practitioners and parents, where connecting with parents is a priority and where specific strategies to promote partnership are implemented. To develop a partnership approach, the ECEC practitioner should have:

- respect for parents' right to be involved in their children's lives in the ECEC service
- a belief that all families have strengths and want to do the best for their children
- positive, non-judgemental attitudes to parents
- knowledge about each family's values, structures and traditions
- knowledge of the research evidence on the effectiveness of partnership
- good communication skills, including good listening, negotiation and conflict-resolution skills
- knowledge of a wide range of strategies to promote partnership.

GUIDELINES FOR GOOD PRACTICE IN BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND ECEC PRACTITIONERS

MAKE ALL FAMILIES FEEL WELCOME

- Talk to, listen to and get to know parents.
- Offer an induction programme (visit to centre, home visit, settling-in plan).
- Establish an open-door policy.
- Ensure that the building is accessible for all families.
- Develop good signage for the building.
- Develop a diverse family-friendly environment (adult furniture; tea/coffee facilities; family/language wall; parents' noticeboard; multilingual documentation; pictures and other resources promoting positive views of disability and ethnic, cultural, family and social diversity; staff photos and job titles; family room).
- Arrange social events to help parents develop support networks with other parents and with educators.
- Undertake an audit of the physical environment from a family viewpoint (consider mothers, fathers, grandparents, families from different cultures).

Student Exercise

Arising from the ideas above, how could you make families feel more 'at home' in your service?

PROMOTE RESPECTFUL, EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND ECEC PRACTITIONERS

- Make building trust and confidence core values and practices in all work with parents.
- Consider a key worker system.
- Review the balance of power between parents and educators.

- Ensure that parents are central in decision-making about their child.
- Encourage parents to act as advocates for their child.

Student Exercise

Evie is 20 years old and mother to Jamie, 18 months, who attends your service. Evie is in her second year at college and she and Jamie live in a one-bedroom apartment. Consider the challenges for Evie and how the early years service might support her and Jamie.

ESTABLISH AND COMMUNICATE SERVICE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

- Develop an accessible 'partnership with parents' policy in consultation with all stakeholders (clear language, in children's home language).
- Make the educational aims of the service accessible to parents.
- Develop a parents' handbook (include mission statement, overview of policies, child protection policy, curriculum offered, information on staff qualifications, complaints procedures, opening times, payment of fees).
- Set up a parents' committee or ensure parent representation on any existing committees.

Student Exercise

Plan a parents' handbook for an ECEC service.

DEVELOP GOOD PRACTICE IN TWO-WAY COMMUNICATIONS

- Promote regular, informal opportunities for parents to talk to educators (consider the needs of parents working full-time).
- Make a regular time for educators to be available to talk to parents.
- Offer written, oral and visual communication opportunities (phone, text, email, daily notebook, photos).
- Share information with parents (e.g. child and family information forms; newsletters; noticeboards; information sessions; workshops; websites; open mornings; home visits; special events).
- Provide a crèche facility to enable parents to attend meetings and events.

Student Exercises

- 1 Consider all of the above issues for parents who do not live together or are separated/divorced.
- 2 Plan a monthly newsletter for parents.

COMMUNICATE ABOUT CHILDREN'S LEARNING

- Share regular two-way observations about the child's learning (e.g. interactive family diary/observations; reviewing children's records; examples of children's work; photos; video footage; curriculum workshops).
- Parent and educator jointly plan for and support the child's learning (see Aistear's 'Building partnerships between Parents and Educators' guidelines for working with parents to support learning and development).
- Use coming and going times to exchange information about children's development.
- Invite parents to participate in the daily life of the service and share in learning activities (read a story; talk about their home culture; demonstrate a skill; play a game; go on an outing; help with cooking; run a book/toy library).
- Support learning in the home through sharing ideas with parents, loaning materials, home visits.

Student Exercise

Plan a 'Learning Story' for one child in your service and outline how you would present the Learning Story to the parent(s).

RESPECT DIVERSITY

- Acknowledge and celebrate difference as an underpinning principle of good practice.
- Develop an understanding of the culture, value systems, child-rearing practices, religion, abilities, disabilities and additional educational needs of the families you serve.
- Ask parents how they would like their culture to be depicted and celebrated.
- Consider the extra challenges of the settling-in process.

Student Exercise

Develop a profile of a family in your service. Consider their values and beliefs, culture, family structure, living accommodation, language and communication style, childcare routines, types of ability/disability, views on curriculum, child management, food preferences.

MAKE FATHERS FEEL WELCOME

- Explore educators' attitudes to father involvement.
- Ensure that the environment is father-friendly.
- Consult with fathers about how they would like to be involved (consider also outings, sport, ICT, practical skills, fathers-only sessions).
- Support fathers in their involvement.

- Arrange flexible timings to suit work schedules.
- Consider non-resident fathers.

Student Exercise

Plan a 'Dads' Week' for your service.

OFFER A VARIETY OF TYPES AND LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT TO PARENTS

- Parents can contribute to the work of the service without being present in the service (parents might make a Storysack (see www.storysack.com); develop a newsletter/website; fundraise; suggest ideas for activities or outings).
- Parents could become involved in the management of the service (policy development; recruitment of staff).
- Parents could give feedback on their satisfaction with service.
- Practitioner might offer links to other agencies and services (parent and toddler groups; counselling services; adult education classes; parent education courses).

Student Exercise

What opportunities for involvement exist in your service?

Prepare a presentation you will give to parents outlining the possibilities for becoming involved in their child's service.

CHALLENGES OF PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

Why might partnership be difficult for educators and parents?

Educators may experience some of the following:

- Negative attitudes towards parents: not valuing parents' views; resistant attitudes to partnership with parents.
- Lack of training/confidence for working with all or some parents, e.g. fathers, vulnerable or 'different' parents.
- Lack of time and/or funding to work with parents.
- Difficulty in balancing parents' and children's needs and rights.
- Lack of a shared language (literally and metaphorically).
- Lack of time to develop relationships due to constant turnover of children.

Parents may experience some of the above issues and others, such as:

- Negative memories of the education system.
- Not feeling welcome.
- Lack of knowledge/confidence of possible role.

- Fear of being judged.
- Suspicion of professionals.
- Lack of childcare for other children.
- Cost of travel and distance to travel.
- Other personal and social pressures.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that parents and home play a powerful role in young children's learning and development. This role should be understood, respected and supported by ECEC practitioners. Furthermore, parents have a right to be fully involved in all aspects of their child's life in an early years service. Early years services that develop strong partnerships with parents promote the best long-term outcomes for every child.

Key Learning Points

- Parents and home are the most powerful influence on children's learning and development.
- Parents have a right to active involvement in their child's life in the service.
- When parents and educators work in partnership in early years services, children's long-term development and learning is enhanced.
- Partnership works best when built on respectful relationships, clear communication and commitment to power-sharing between educators and parents.
- Parents should be offered a choice about types and levels of involvement.

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Useful Websites

- Aistear – www.ncca.ie
- Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project – www.eppe.ioe.ac.uk
- Family and Parenting Institute (UK) – www.familyandparenting.org
- Fatherhood Institute – www.fatherhoodinstitute.org
- Office of the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs – www.omcya.ie
- Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) – www.peal.org.uk
- Síolta – www.cecde.ie