THE CORNERSTONE OF QUALITY IN FAMILY DAY CARE AND CHILD CARE CENTRES – PARENT-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Author

Anne Stonehouse

Acknowledgments

Supported by:

DEPARTMENT OF
**FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**

Developed by:

CENTRE FOR
Community
Child Health

ROYAL
CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This booklet aims to present a "picture" about parent-professional partnerships in a practical and relevant way that can support continuous improvement in family day care and centre based child care. Included in this booklet is a brief discussion of areas to consider in parent-professional partnerships. Following the brief discussion are some key questions, strategies, and desirable outcomes to support reflection, self evaluation and continuous improvement. The word *some* is used over and over because this is not an exhaustive list. Each scheme or centre has to find its own way toward partnership. Looking seriously at the level of partnership will lead to many more questions, strategies, and outcomes than are mentioned here.

This booklet has been designed with the belief that child care can play a crucial role in strengthening parent-child attachment through giving attention to the quality of the parent-professional partnerships. High quality parent-professional partnerships can:

▲ improve the quality of the child's experience in care

▲ improve the overall health and wellbeing of the child

▲ support parents' and professionals' awareness that they have a major impact on children's development

▲ promote parents' confidence in their parenting role and their appreciation of their ongoing importance in their child's life.

The term *professional* is used in this booklet to refer to all people working in centres and family day care. Putting partnerships into action successfully requires commitment, skill and professionalism. While the message in this booklet is therefore for everyone, it has been written mainly for people in leadership roles. The booklet is designed to support professionals to examine the extent to which they are working in partnership.

Communication between parents and professionals about the child is the heart of partnership. This booklet is not complete in itself and it is recommended this booklet be used in conjunction with two other publications produced by the Centre for Community Child Health that specifically focus on communication. They are:

▲ For centre based care: *Sharing a Picture of Children's Development*

▲ For family day care: *The heart of partnership in family day care: carer-parent communication*

The fact that this resource is for both family day care and centre based child care demonstrates the fundamental commonalities in issues related to parent-professional partnerships.

It would be useful to consider the following diagram and reflect on your current practice of partnership building.

WHAT IS A PARTNERSHIP?

Partnership is a relationship, a matter of heart and mind, a perspective and not a discrete set of activities or strategies.

It is interesting to think about the main characteristics of successful partnerships in business or personal relationships. The characteristics of an effective partnership between parents and professionals in a centre or family day care scheme are no different and include the following:

▲ Mutual respect

▲ Trust

▲ Sensitivity to the perspective of the other, or empathy

▲ On-going open "both ways" communication

▲ A common goal that is clear and agreed on, namely the child's well-being

▲ Teamwork, the absence of rivalry or competition

▲ Recognition and valuing of the unique contribution and strengths of the partner

▲ Shared decision making

The focus of parent-professional partnerships in child care is the child's well being, not the operation of the scheme or centre. At the heart of the practice of partnership is communication. The following points highlight the notion of parent-professional partnerships and the application to practice;

▲ It is about the operation of the whole centre or scheme and therefore is intertwined with all dimensions of quality. It is not a component or simply a set of strategies.

▲ Parent involvement is not the same as a partnership, but is included as a component of a partnership. A major distinction between the two is that inviting parents to be involved typically allows the professional to retain power and control, while working as partners necessarily requires sharing power and giving up some control.

▲ It almost always takes a long time and many interactions to build trust. It is not an all-at-once or once-and-for-all phenomenon.

▲ It is not about parent education, but parents will be wiser as a result of working in partnership, as will be professionals.

▲ There is no generic formula that applies to all. The practice of partnerships must be tailored to each service. Similarly, the relationship with each family is unique. Just as practice is individualised for each child, so must it be with each parent.

▲ It is not the same as friendship, although warm, caring, respectful partnerships have some characteristics in common with friendships.

▲ A partnership is not possible if professionals have biases about parents, or make judgements about the decisions they have made to use child care.

There is nothing more worthwhile that professionals can do than strengthen parents' understanding and appreciation of their child and contribute to a strong parent-child relationship. A good parent-professional partnership supports the parent-child relationship. It is not easy, but it is worth the effort.

Some key questions:

▲ *What are the notions of partnership that operate within the centre or scheme from a professional, management and parent perspective?*

▲ *Do the professionals working in your service have biases, either hidden or exposed, about categories or types of parents or particular parents?*

Some suggested strategies:

▲ *Use surveys or questionnaires to find out what people think.*

▲ *Hold discussion sessions.*

▲ *Observe relationships and communication with parents in practice and hold follow-up discussions with professionals.*

▲ *Prepare a statement about partnership that goes to everyone involved.*

▲ *Develop a resource that explains partnership to parents.*

One desirable outcome:

▲ *Everyone involved in the centre or scheme understands and embraces the notion of partnership, and appreciates the application to practice.*

PHILOSOPHY OR VISION STATEMENT

A philosophy or vision statement is an important statement of how the scheme or centre sees itself, what it aims to achieve, and where its priorities lie. It needs to be sufficiently broad to be long lasting, and sufficiently specific to give definition and direction for policy development and review.

The philosophy or vision statement should make reference to working in partnership with families, supporting families in their child rearing and acknowledging diversity. Parents need to be involved in developing and reviewing a philosophy or vision statement.

Some key questions:

▲ *Does the vision statement provide a clear description of what matters?*

▲ *Is it too general and/or full of early childhood cliches that mean little?*

▲ *Does it reflect the culture and richness of our particular centre or scheme?*

▲ *Does it contain a strong statement about working in partnership with families? Do the aims incorporate supporting families in their child rearing?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Review the vision statement.*

▲ *Survey parents, management and professionals to get views about it.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *The vision or philosophy statement is dynamic, relevant, and includes working in partnership.*

▲ *Parents, management and professionals feel a sense of ownership of and commitment to the philosophy or vision statement and its links to practice.*

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Every centre and scheme needs to have a comprehensive set of policies that are relevant, up to date, and give direction to practice. These policies should be developed and reviewed with input from and consultation with all interested parties. Everyone should be clear about the implications of policies.

While it is desirable to have policies that are expressly about working in partnership with families, most if not all of the polices of the service need to reflect the spirit of partnership.

Procedures are needed and must reflect policies. An optimum number of agreed upon and commonly held procedures can smooth the running of a centre or scheme. The word *optimum* is used because too few procedures lead to confusion and inefficiency, too many lock people in and inhibit flexibility and initiative.

Some key questions:

▲ *Are there explicit policies on ways of working in partnership with parents and families?*

▲ *In which policies do dimensions or elements of working in partnership appear?*

▲ *Which policies need revision?*

▲ *Are there new policies that are needed to reflect working in partnership?*

▲ *How will policies be reviewed and new ones developed in ways that exemplify partnership?*

▲ *What system can be put in place to ensure that policies are relevant, appropriate and up to date?*

▲ *Do policies link with procedures?*

▲ *Are there too few or too many procedures?*

▲ *How does management monitor the match between policies and practices?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Set up a small group (comprising management, professionals and parents) to look closely at policies and the procedures that flow out of them.*

▲ *Devise a plan for revision and development that maximises the likelihood of input from everyone and engenders feelings of ownership.*

▲ *Survey parents about the need for fewer, more or clearer procedures and act on the information received.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *There is a comprehensive set of relevant policies that guide and inform practice and everyone involved feels a sense of ownership of and responsibility for them.*

▲ *Partnerships are given prominence in policies and procedures.*

▲ *Processes are in place to ensure that policies remain relevant, current and appropriate and that new ones are developed as needed.*

MANAGEMENT

Where there is partnership, parents have the opportunity to influence management decisions and also access to those decisions. Ideally parents have the opportunity to participate in management. In organisations where the structure does not allow or encourage parent participation in management, parents still need to be encouraged to have a voice in all matters that affect them or their child. Consultation with parents goes beyond the superficial, and every effort should be made to listen to parents' views and perspectives. Including parents on committees or working groups where they do not have the confidence or the background to make a solid contribution is tokenistic and not reflective of partnership.

Management must have strategies for finding out what each parent thinks, and genuinely invite him or her to engage with issues around management if they want to. Assuming that one or a few parents can always speak for all parents is simplistic. This means that it is not sufficient to address parents solely through working with a few parents. Consideration also needs to be given to involve parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in management. Parents may feel they do not have enough English to participate or that they may not have anything to offer.

Whilst effective management involves some elements of a customer service model or a client-centred approach, working in partnership is more empowering for parents and professionals.

Some key questions:

▲ *How does management find out what parents think?*

▲ *How does management ensure that parents understand that they are welcome to contribute to the management of the centre or scheme?*

▲ *What does management do to support parents to have the confidence, skills and knowledge to contribute substantially to the management of the centre or scheme?*

▲ *What are some ways that management can contribute to a culture of parent-professional partnership?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Interview or provide questionnaires to parents to find out what they think about their ability to affect the management of the scheme or centre. The questionnaires could be available in relevant community languages and accessing bilingual workers would assist with the interviews.*

▲ *Interview parent representatives to obtain their perspectives.*

One desirable outcome:

▲ *Management is truly open to operating in partnership and a variety of processes and strategies are in place to ensure that this happens.*

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Spaces and places, whether they are personal (our homes), professional (offices, waiting rooms), or shared community spaces (shopping centres, churches, schools, child care centres, parks) give powerful messages about what is valued, who is welcomed, and what behaviours are expected. Some of these messages are overt and explicit, for example, in the form of notices, signs, and posted statements about rules. The number of rules and the ways these are worded give powerful messages. For example, contrast the feeling evoked by these different ways of saying basically the same thing:

▲ *Please watch your children and make sure they don't break anything (the straight message).*

▲ *Children must be under the control of adults at all times, and all breakages must be paid for (ominous).*

Some other messages are much subtler and less obvious, but equally powerful nevertheless. Some examples of this are the provision of toys and play materials for children in a restaurant or shop, uncomfortable or very limited seating, or on the other hand comfortable and plentiful seating, loud music playing, the presence of dead or dying plants, or provision of a water cooler.

There are many ways in which the environment in a child care centre, family day care home, or co-ordination unit office can reflect an approach of working in partnership with parents and families. Some of these features of the environment apply to all three settings, while others are more relevant to one or two of them. Some are small things, others more major. Examples of these follow in the form of some key questions.

Some key questions:

▲ *Is parking easy and the entrance accessible for parents, especially those with babies or several children?*

▲ *Is the entry welcoming?*

▲ *Is careful thought given to what notices and "rules" are best posted on the walls, and which ones can be communicated most effectively in other ways? A space filled with written "musts" and "don'ts" isn't very inviting.*

▲ *Is there a notice board with current information for parents presented in an attractive and accessible manner, and is the information changed and updated regularly?*

▲ *Does each child have a space for her or his belongings and for individual written communication?*

▲ *Is it clear in the physical environment that the centre or scheme embraces and celebrates children and families, particularly through appropriate use of their photos?*

▲ *Is there a welcoming and comfortable place for parents to sit down and be with their child?*

▲ *Are waiting areas child-friendly and comfortable for parents?*

▲ *Is there a place for parents and professionals to have confidential conversations?*

▲ *Do the pictures, materials and equipment used (including such things as books, music, puzzles, home corner equipment, fabrics among others) reflect the lifestyles and cultures of the families and the communities they come from?*

▲ *Is written material (not just in notices, but also on posters) presented in the most accessible languages for all families?*

▲ *Are there tangible signs in the environment that parents are acknowledged as people rather than simply as parents? For example, can they get a cup of tea or coffee? Are there brochures or other resource materials available?*

▲ *Is family culture respected and supported in the environment?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Ask parents what could be done to make the environment more welcoming, comfortable and empowering for them.*

▲ *Conduct an audit, using the questions above and others that professionals or parents may come up with.*

▲ *Observe parents using the environment and take note of difficulties or things that could be improved.*

▲ *Visit a similar centre or co-ordination unit office and compare their environment.*

▲ *Look at the wording of rules to see if they are friendly and firm, invite co-operation and reasons are given where appropriate.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Parents and other family members are comfortable in the environment.*

▲ *Parents feel welcomed and are empowered to be partners in their child's experience.*

ENROLMENT AND INDUCTION

"Off to a good start" is an important concept to apply to the beginning of a child and family's participation in child care. Parents will approach child care in a variety of ways because of their backgrounds and previous experiences. Some may have had good experiences and will want to replicate that. Others may have had a bad experience and are quite clear about what they are looking for. A previous experience where it was clear that the professional was in charge may mean that the parent will bring this expectation with them. When parents are approaching their first experience in child care, they may have only a vague idea for example, a place where their child will be safe and happy, or sometimes no idea at all, about what they should expect, especially in terms of partnership. All of this supports the importance of establishing in the beginning an understanding of the nature of parent-professional partnership and how this operates in the daily experience of care.

It is best to have information in a written form, and to discuss it. Parents may feel overwhelmed if too much information is given at one time. It is worth thinking about what parents need to know first and what can best be left until later.

The embodiment of partnerships at the time of considering and then settling on a child care situation includes the suggested strategies listed below.

Some key questions:

▲ *Does the written and verbal information provided to prospective users communicate partnership and what it means and is this information available in languages other than English?*

▲ *Is care taken to give parents sufficient information without overwhelming them – what needs to be given in the beginning and what can wait?*

▲ *In what ways are parents actively assisted to become aware of what is important to them in the care arrangement so that they can make an informed choice, or do we mostly assume that they know what they want?*

▲ *Are initial encounters with parents friendly, welcoming and respectful?*

▲ *Do professionals have effective ways of getting essential information from parents about their child and encouraging them to share their picture of their child with us, and what they want in care?*

▲ *Are professionals genuinely open and interested in parents' questions and concerns?*

▲ *Are parents encouraged to stay in the beginning of a child's participation to help the child settle in and for them to feel more secure about the care, are individual differences in their willingness and ability to do so respected, and are parents who have trouble separating from their child assisted to do so?*

▲ *Are parents and families who speak very little English made to feel comfortable during the orientation/induction and do they understand the settling in procedures for their child?*

▲ *Is the orientation process flexible enough to support the parents who have children with additional needs?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Ask parents who have recently started using the scheme or centre to critique the enrolment and induction experience they had.*

▲ *Review written information given to parents with the aim of assessing the extent that it sets the stage for partnership.*

▲ *Observe closely the enrolment and induction procedures.*

▲ *Support families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with bilingual workers wherever possible to ensure a more comprehensive orientation.*

One desirable outcome:

▲ *From the beginning parents understand what partnership means and are supported to operate as partners.*

INVOLVEMENT

In any child care centre or family day care scheme that aims to work in partnership there are many avenues for the involvement of parents. Sometimes this involvement may be directly related to their child's experience and sometimes not. What is critical however, is that these opportunities for involvement are presented as invitations to parents, with no attached implication that they are requirements. It is common for professionals to confuse involvement with partnership. Involvement can contribute to partnership, although it does not always.

The following points highlight ways that involvement can contribute to parent-professional partnership and ultimately improve the experience for the child:

1. Involvement is usually about ways parents can contribute to the operation of the centre or scheme - for example, by attending working bees, conducting fund raising activities, helping out in some way with the children - in short contributing time, resources, skills and energy or doing "jobs". This type of involvement typically improves and benefits the centre or scheme. When parents feel they are genuinely benefiting the centre or family day care home that their child uses, their contribution can be empowering and give them a sense of connection and of being part of a community. This may encourage more of a sense of partnership. It is important that parents are not given "busy" work or tasks that do not really need to be completed, as these can be frustrating, making them feel patronised and that their time is being wasted.

2. Through involvement parents may get to know professionals, come to feel more comfortable with them, resulting in communication about the child becoming easier.

3. Involvement often provides the opportunity to get to know other parents.

Social occasions for families and parent meetings or workshops are frequently included in ways to be involved. These too are constructive ways for parents to become familiar with the professionals, get to know other families, and perhaps acquire some new information. Like other forms of involvement, these should be viewed as an option, and the success of relationships with parents should not be measured by participation in such functions.

Involvement in planning and carrying out the child's experience in care is the type of involvement that most directly contributes to partnership.

It is possible for a parent to be very involved and still not have a partnership. It is also possible for a parent to operate in partnership with a child care professional and not be involved at all. Involvement is a vehicle for establishing a partnership, but is not essential. Parents are individuals, therefore a range of ways for parents to choose to be involved should be available. No one way should be valued more than others.

Some key questions:

▲ *What is the range of ways for parents to be involved?*

▲ *Are some kinds of involvement valued over others, and is there a tendency to view " involved parents" more favourably than "uninvolved" ones?*

▲ *Is the help parents give genuinely valued, or are there some types of involvement that are tokenistic?*

▲ *Are the links between involvement and partnership clear?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Conduct an audit of all the ways parents are involved, with an eye to ensuring that they are varied and meaningful.*

▲ *Look at developing new ways for parents to connect and be involved, and ask parents for ideas.*

▲ *Ensure that professionals' view parent involvement accurately and positively, and that they are clear about the distinction between involvement and partnership.*

▲ *Assess professionals' views about parents to ensure that they are not seeing involved parents as superior to those who are not involved.*

▲ *Think carefully about the purposes and appropriateness of family social functions, and parent education and support sessions.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Parent involvement is valued and seen as a contributor to partnership.*

▲ *A range of ways to be involved is available as an option, not an obligation, for parents.*

The cornerstone of quality – parent-professional partnerships

PRACTICE

Practice is a broad term covering a range of things related to the child's experience. Practice encompasses elements such as:

▲ structuring of time

▲ conduct of routine daily living experiences such as eating, sleeping and toileting

▲ play and learning opportunities provided for the children

▲ interaction between children, parents and professionals.

Parents need and want to know and contribute to the philosophy behind the children's experience and understand how this relates to practice. Letting them in on not only what is happening with the children but the rationale behind it gives the message that what goes on is their business, and also increases the likelihood that they will become curious and more interested. Partnership suggests not simply reporting to parents: this is what we do and why, but rather letting them in on questions, dilemmas, issues being faced, letting them contribute to solutions and to providing direction. Shared decision making about the child's experience is the embodiment of partnerships in action.

The more information parents have the more empowered and confident they are likely to feel. It is important to let the parents know the expectations in a centre or family day care home. For example who is in charge of the child when the parent is present, the parent or the professional? Is it appropriate for the parents to get involved with children other than their own? What materials or places can parents access – for example, in a family day care home should he or she knock before coming into the house? If parents are participating with the children, then they need information about the expectations that children operate with. No parent wants to make a mistake and be corrected.

Wherever possible the planning of what happens can benefit from parents' input. There should be systems in place to encourage parents to regularly talk to professionals about their picture of their child, including strengths, interests, any concerns the parent has, and suggestions about what experiences they would like to see their child have. These systems should include both regular informal communication and opportunities to provide written thoughts and suggestions. The experiences of children should reflect and complement the lives of the families.

PRACTICE (cont.)

Routine daily experiences are often arenas of children's and families' experience where cultural background makes a large difference. It is particularly important to consult parents about these matters, especially with very young children and incorporate their wishes if at all possible and not detrimental to the child. When professionals operate with the concept of partnerships as a priority, compromising and going along with parents' wishes, even when they may not agree totally, is the essence of good practice.

Another issue in relation to practice is a more practical one, although one that is very important and very challenging: the organisation of the day. Partnerships are forged mainly through the daily interchanges, often brief, usually on the run, between parents and professionals. These occur at the busiest and messiest times of the child care day - at drop-off and pick-up times. It is important to think carefully about how to organise the day to maximise opportunities for communication between professionals and parents. This communication can extend to acknowledging noteworthy events in the parent's or family's life.

Some key questions:

▲ *How informed are parents about the practice with the children - not only what is going on but why?*

▲ *What systems do we have in place to ensure that parents and professionals together periodically update their picture of the child?*

▲ *How much is known about what each parent cares most about in his or her child's experience in child care?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Gather information about cultural groups represented among the parents, and use that information as a basis for talking with them about their own practices and ways of doing things.*

▲ *Ask parents regularly what they like about what is happening with their child, what they would change if they could, what they don't understand.*

▲ *Have a number of means of encouraging parents to contribute insights and information about their child and to have input into their child's experience.*

▲ *Have a number of ways of letting parents in on children's experience and supporting their input.*

▲ *Look at the organisation of the day with the aim of maximising availability to talk to parents without compromising children's experience.*

▲ *Talk to parents sometimes about their own lives, not just their children.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Parents are fully informed about what goes on with their children.*

▲ *Parents contribute ideas and suggestions about their child's experience and know that these are taken seriously.*

DIVERSITY

Acceptance of diversity among parents, families, and professionals is essential to work in partnership. Diversity must be thought of as an enriching element, not as a problem or undesirable circumstance. Cultural diversity typically comes to mind, but there are many other sources of diversity, such as age, gender, socio-economic status, lifestyle, religion, as well as a huge number of differences that can be described as *individual*. These differences are a source of richness and pleasure, but they also lead to tensions and conflict.

Working in partnership requires that professionals make every effort to understand differences and to be empathetic. It also requires professionals to be clear about their "bottom lines" in practice, how far they are willing to compromise when parents make a request.

Diversity also applies to the perspectives of professionals. Among a group of professionals working together, there will be different ideas about practice, about what works most effectively with a particular child, about which parents are the easiest or most challenging to deal with. This presents a challenge in giving consistent feedback to parents.

Parents and professionals may have a different perspective on the operation of the centre, family day care home or scheme as well as a different perspective on their child. Professionals have to have the "big picture" keeping in mind all of the children and families. Parents are naturally going to focus mainly on how things impact on them and their child and this is desirable.

Acceptance of diversity means tossing aside notions of the ideal parent or family and accepting that some parents will be easier to work with than others. Some parents are very challenging to work in partnership with, because they can be critical, unco-operative, demanding, irresponsible, or seemingly uncaring about their child. At the same time some parents may be challenging because of critical things happening in their lives. It is worth remembering that the parents who are most difficult to work in partnership with are the ones who are in greatest need of support. There are many families whose needs go beyond those that can be met by even the most excellent centre or family day care home. Hopefully professionals won't give up on them, but help them to connect with other services that can help them also.

DIVERSITY (cont.)

The presence of professionals from diverse cultural backgrounds and with diverse languages is likely to enhance parents' feelings of comfort and security. Similarly diversity in age, gender, and background can create a sense of openness and acceptance that gives a powerful message to parents and children about what is valued.

There are specialist training and support agencies that focus on children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and children and families with additional needs, These agencies are invaluable as a source of written, audio-visual, and electronic resource materials as well as advice and support. Contact details for many of these resourcing agencies can be found on the Centre for Community Child Health's Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

Some key questions:

▲ *To what extent do the professionals reflect openness to all kinds of diversity?*

▲ *How is diversity dealt within the centre or scheme?*

▲ *How are issues of bias and intolerance tackled?*

▲ *In what ways does the centre or scheme demonstrate an openness to diversity of all kinds and a commitment to deal constructively with it*

— *in the environment*

— *in policies*

— *in practice?*

▲ *Does the diversity in the scheme or centre reflect the diversity that exists in the near and broader community? If not, what steps can be taken to improve this?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Discuss the main categories of diversity that exist within the centre or scheme. Think about which types of diversity are easy to deal with and which are more challenging.*

▲ *Look at what practices with parents contribute directly to a culture of tolerance.*

▲ *List areas of practice where: there can be no compromise with what parents want, where professionals and parents compromise, where parents can make the decision. See if the balance is one that promotes partnership and maintains the integrity of professional practice.*

▲ *Undertake an analysis of policies to see where respect for diversity appears.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Partnership is based on respect for diversity.*

▲ *The centre or scheme embraces diversity and works actively to promote tolerance.*

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT

A characteristic of being a true professional in any field is life-long engagement in learning, reflection, and change with the aim of continually improving practice. To work effectively in partnership with parents and families, professionals need opportunities to learn more about families, about communication, about cultural groups, about children. This learning happens in a variety of ways, through participating in training, workshops and conferences, through reading, discussion with colleagues, visiting other schemes, homes, or centres, and opportunities to critique one's own practice. To be effective, however, there must be a culture of shared learning, questioning, and a desire to improve that permeates the overall operation. Assistance and support must be readily available to help professionals work in partnership with difficult parents. Training and support agencies operate in every state and territory. Other child care centres and family day care schemes are also a source of information and ideas. Contact details for many of these resourcing agencies can be found on the Centre for Community Child Health's Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

The existence of a noticeable culture of support for partnerships not only helps professionals but is also a powerful sign for parents about priorities. Once a culture of parent-professional partnerships has been established it should not be assumed that it is there to stay. A few changes of critical personnel can change practices. Even when there are no changes in personnel, people can become complacent, take things for granted, pay less attention. A means of continually monitoring and evaluating what is happening between parents and professionals is essential.

Some key questions:

▲ *What are the range of supports provided to assist professionals to work in partnership with parents and families?*

▲ *What additional supports are needed, and where can we find those?*

▲ *Is there a culture of support and learning? If so, what is the evidence for this? If not, what steps can we take to bring it about?*

▲ *What do we have in place to ensure that there is widespread understanding of the dimensions of partnership among professionals and continual monitoring of practices?*

▲ *What do we have in place to ensure the quality of parent-professional partnerships?*

Some strategies:

▲ *Look at the schedule of recent and future professional development to see the extent to which it supports partnership.*

▲ *Ask professionals what would be useful to support them working in partnership.*

▲ *Take specific steps to improve the "learning together" culture.*

One desirable outcome:

▲ *The centre or scheme is characterised by a variety of kinds of active support and encouragement for professionals to work in partnership with parents and families.*

LINKS WITH OTHER SERVICES AND THE BROADER COMMUNITY

In order to work in true partnership with parents, there need to be strong ties to the local community as well as the professional community. Schemes and centres cannot work in isolation and still be successful. There need to be strong links with other agencies and services that also support families. These and other professional bodies can also support professionals through advice and information. Strong vibrant links simply make the centre, scheme or home stronger, more dynamic, more visible,

and more likely to contribute positively to the lives of children and families. Contact details for many of these resourcing agencies can be found on the Centre for Community Child Health's Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

Links with the local community strengthen the centre, scheme or home and also ensure that it is more closely in touch with the families it serves.

Some key questions:

▲ *With what other professional organisations, agencies and services is the centre or scheme most strongly linked?*

▲ *Are there additional links that should be formed? If so, how should this be undertaken?*

▲ *How can the already established important links be more dynamic and more mutually beneficial?*

▲ *How can assistance be given to each professional to strengthen her or his individual links with the community, both the professional community and the broader community?*

Some strategies:

▲ *List all the links the scheme, centre, or individual family day care home has. Think about the strength of those.*

▲ *Actually bring together the organisations and agencies that are or should be linked for networking and information sharing.*

▲ *Consider where new links would be useful. Think about how to make the first approach.*

▲ *Ensure that the links exist across a number of professionals in each scheme or centre in most cases, rather than with a specific individual.*

▲ *Use professionals from other agencies and organisations for professional development sessions.*

▲ *Develop protocols with different services that clearly set out the nature of the relationship between the services and how the issue of confidentiality and parent consent will be resolved.*

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *There are strong mutually beneficial links with a range of professional organisations, agencies, services, and individuals.*

▲ *The centre or scheme is strongly connected in its local community.*

▲ *Professionals have an awareness of the most appropriate agency to link with.*

▲ *Parents are aware that professionals can link them into other services if necessary.*

CONCLUSION

There is nothing more worthwhile that professionals can do than strengthen parents' understanding and appreciation of their child and contribute to a strong parent-child relationship. A good parent-professional partnership supports the parent-child relationship.

Working in a true partnership with parents and families is;

▲ always challenging,

▲ sometimes frustrating but worth the effort,

▲ critically important for the wellbeing of children.

KEY RESOURCE MATERIALS ON PARENT-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

This list is not exhaustive. It contains the major resources that schemes or centres would have access to, and provide immediate assistance. By and large it does not contain research articles from academic journals, and the focus is mainly, but not exclusively, on Australian materials. It includes a few resources that focus on issues around professional-parent partnerships in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children, and partnerships with families of children with disabilities. However, as the focus of this resource booklet is partnership in the broad sense, the list is very selective.

A'Beckett, C., 1988, Chapter 13: Parent-staff relationships, in A. Stonehouse ed., *Trusting Toddlers*, Australian Early Childhood Association, Canberra.

Adelaide Lady Gowrie Child Centre, 1998, *Programming for Infants and Toddlers: Group Care*, Gowrie Folios Good Practice series, Adelaide.

Arthur, L., et al., 1996, Chapter 2: Family participation and empowerment, in Arthur, L., et al., *Programming and Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, 2nd edition, Harcourt Brace, Sydney.

Arthur, L., et al., 1996, Chapter 3: Valuing and planning for diversity, in Arthur, L., et al., *Programming and Planning in Early Childhood Settings*, 2nd edition, Harcourt Brace, Sydney.

Baker, A.C. and Manfredi/Pettit, L.A., 1998, Circle of Love: *Relationships between Parents, Providers, and Children in Family Child Care*, Redleaf Press, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Centre for Community Child Health, 2001, *Partnerships for Children - Parents and Community Together*, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

Cook, C. and Porter, C., 1996, *Babies and Toddlers: Considering Multicultural Perspectives*, FKA Multicultural Resource Centre, Melbourne.

Dau, E. (ed.), 2001, *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood* (2nd ed.), Longman, Melbourne.

Dau, E., 1995, *Partnerships with Parents*, The Gowrie Folios - Accreditation Series, Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Adelaide.

Faragher, J. and MacNaughton, G., 1998, Chapter 1: Communicating with staff, parents and children, *Working with Young Children* (2nd ed.), RMIT Publishing, Melbourne.

Fleet, A. and Clyde, M., 1999, Chapter 3: Teaching children means working with families, *What's in a Day? Working in Early Childhood*, 2nd ed., Social Science Press, Wentworth Falls NSW.

Gonzalez-Mena, J., 1997, *Multicultural Issues in Child Care* (2nd edition), Mayfield Press, Mountain View, California.

Greenman, J., 1998, Chapter 7: Places for childhoods include parents too, *Places for Childhood: Making Quality Happen in the Real World*, Exchange Press, Redmond Washington.

Greenman, J.T. and Stonehouse, A., 1997, Chapter 14: Partnerships with parents, *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*, Longman, Melbourne.

Harris, V., 1995, *Building Partnerships with Parents*, Lady Gowrie Child Centre Brisbane.

Hughes, P. and MacNaughton, G., 1999, *Communicating in Early Childhood Services*, RMIT Publishing, Melbourne.

Hughes, P. and MacNaughton, G., 1999, Who's the expert: Reconceptualising parent-staff relations in early education, *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 24(4), 27-32.

Hutchins, T. and Sims, M., 1999, Chapter 2: The Mesosystem - Partnerships with Parents: Building Communities, in *Program Planning for Infants and Toddlers*, Prentice Hall, Sydney.

Khoshkhesal, V. 1999, Quality interactions, *Jigsaw*, Issue No. 14, Spring, 18,19.

Khoshkhesal, V. 1998, Realising the potential: *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Family Day Care*, Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Sydney.

Lady Gowrie Child Centre Melbourne, n.d., Sheets No. 5: Attitudes to parents, 6: Relating to parents daily, 7:When a child is new, 8: Arrivals and departures, *People Growing series*, Lady Gowrie Child Centre, Melbourne.

Milne, R., Orzeszko, S. and Clarke, P., 1994, *Affirming Family Diversity*, FKA Multicultural Resource Centre, Melbourne.

New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, *Te Whariki: Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Programmes in Early Childhood Services,* Learning Media, Wellington.

Powell, D. R., 1989, *Families and Early Childhood Programs,* National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Clarke, P., 2000, Chapter 5: Parents as Partners, *Supporting Identity, Diversity and Language in the Early Years,* Open University Press, Buckingham.

Stone, J. G., 1987, *Teacher-Parent Relationships,* National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington.

Stonehouse, A., 1994, *How does it feel? Child Care from a Parent's Perspective,* Australian Early Childhood Association, Canberra.

Stonehouse, A., 1999, *Our Code of Ethics at Work,* 2nd ed., Australian Early Childhood Association, Canberra.

Stonehouse, A., 1989, *Parents and Caregivers in Partnership for Children,* Community Child Care Co-op Ltd, Sydney.

Stonehouse, A. 1994, Chapter 6: Partners, rivals, or ships that pass in the day (or night): the intricacies of parent-carer relationships, in A. Stonehouse, 1994, *Not Just Nice Ladies: a Book of Readings on Early Childhood Care and Education,* Australian Early Childhood Association, Canberra.

Stonehouse, A., 1991, Chapter 4: Partnership with parents, *Opening the Doors: Child Care in a Multicultural Society,* Australian Early Childhood Association, Canberra.

Stonehouse, A., 1994, Chapter 7: A place for parents: Partnerships in action, in A. Stonehouse, 1994, *Not Just Nice Ladies: a Book of Readings on Early Childhood Care and Education,* Australian Early Childhood Association, Canberra.

Warren, R., 1977, Caring, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington.

Waters, J., 1996, *Making the Connection: Parents and Early Childhood Staff,* Lady Gowrie Child Centre (Melbourne) Inc., Melbourne.

Journals and professional magazines that are likely to contain useful information include:

▲ *Child Care Information Exchange*

▲ *Every Child*

▲ *Young Children*

A STARTING POINT

The materials in this booklet have been designed to support family day care and centre based child care professionals to improve parent-professional partnerships. To assist in this process the outcomes, questions and strategies from the previous sections have been pulled together in a format that can be photocopied and used as a "starting point" for reflection and review.

The outcomes, questions and strategies can be used as presented, but the process would be strengthened by tailoring these to your particular context and issues. If a serious examination of partnerships is to be undertaken, prioritising the areas listed in this booklet and tackling only one or two at a time is likely to be more manageable and productive than trying to tackle them all at once.

What is a partnership?

One desirable outcome:

▲ *Everyone involved in the centre or scheme understands and embraces the notion of partnership, and appreciates the application to practice.*

Some key questions:

▲ *What are the notions of partnership that operate within the centre or scheme from a professional, management and parent perspective?*

▲ *Do the professionals working in your service have biases, either hidden or exposed, about categories or types of parents or particular parents?*

▲

▲

Some suggested strategies:

▲ *Use surveys or questionnaires to find out what people think.*

▲ *Hold discussion sessions.*

▲ *Observe relationships and communication with parents in practice and hold follow-up discussions with professionals.*

▲ *Prepare a statement about partnership that goes to everyone involved.*

▲ *Develop a resource that explains partnership to parents.*

▲

▲

Philosophy or vision statement

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *The vision or philosophy statement is dynamic, relevant, and includes working in partnership.*

▲ *Parents, management and professionals feel a sense of ownership of and commitment to the philosophy or vision statement and its links to practice.*

Some key questions:

▲ *Does the vision statement provide a clear description of what matters?*

▲ *Is it too general and/or full of early childhood cliches that mean little?*

▲ *Does it reflect the culture and richness of our particular centre or scheme?*

▲ *Does it contain a strong statement about working in partnership with families? Do the aims incorporate supporting families in their child rearing?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Review the vision statement.*

▲ *Survey parents, management and professionals to get views about it.*

▲

▲

Policies and procedures

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *There is a comprehensive set of relevant policies that guide and inform practice and everyone involved feels a sense of ownership of and responsibility for them.*

▲ *Partnerships are given prominence in policies and procedures.*

▲ *Processes are in place to ensure that policies remain relevant, current and appropriate and that new ones are developed as needed.*

Some key questions:

▲ *Are there explicit policies on ways of working in partnership with parents and families?*

▲ *In which policies do dimensions or elements of working in partnership appear?*

▲ *Which policies need revision?*

▲ *Are there new policies that are needed to reflect working in partnership?*

▲ *How will policies be reviewed and new ones developed in ways that exemplify partnership?*

▲ *What system can be put in place to ensure that policies are relevant, appropriate and up to date?*

▲ *Do policies link with procedures?*

▲ *Are there too few or too many procedures?*

▲ *How does management monitor the match between policies and practices?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Set up a small group (comprising management, professionals and parents) to look closely at policies and the procedures that flow out of them.*

▲ *Devise a plan for revision and development that maximises the likelihood of input from everyone and engenders feelings of ownership.*

▲ *Survey parents about the need for fewer, more or clearer procedures and act on the information received.*

▲

▲

Management

One desirable outcome:

▲ *Management is truly open to operating in partnership and a variety of processes and strategies are in place to ensure that this happens.*

Some key questions:

▲ *How does management find out what parents think?*

▲ *How does management ensure that parents understand that they are welcome to contribute to the management of the centre or scheme?*

▲ *What does management do to support parents to have the confidence, skills and knowledge to contribute substantially to the management of the centre or scheme?*

▲ *What are some ways that management can contribute to a culture of parent-professional partnership?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Interview or provide questionnaires to parents to find out what they think about their ability to affect management of the scheme or centre. The questionnaires could be available in relevant community languages and accessing bilingual workers would assist with the interviews.*

▲ *Interview parent representatives to obtain their perspectives.*

▲

▲

The physical environment

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Parents and other family members are comfortable in the environment.*

▲ *Parents feel welcomed and are empowered to be partners in their child's experience.*

Some key questions:

▲ *Is parking easy and the entrance accessible for parents, especially those with babies or several children?*

▲ *Is the entry welcoming?*

▲ *Is careful thought given to what notices and "rules" are best posted on the walls, and which ones can be communicated most effectively in other ways? A space filled with written "musts" and "don'ts" isn't very inviting.*

▲ *Is there a notice board with current information for parents presented in an attractive and accessible manner, and is the information changed and updated regularly?*

▲ *Does each child have a space for her or his belongings and for individual written communication?*

▲ *Is there a parent notice board or other means for parents to jot down interesting or relevant information?*

▲ *Is it clear in the physical environment that the centre or scheme embraces and celebrates children and families, particularly through appropriate use of their photos?*

▲ *Is there a welcoming and comfortable place for parents to sit down and be with their child?*

▲ *Are waiting areas child-friendly and comfortable for parents?*

▲ *Is there a place for parents and professionals to have confidential conversations?*

▲ *Do the pictures, materials and equipment used (including such things as books, music, puzzles, home corner equipment, fabrics among others) reflect the lifestyles and cultures of the families and the communities they come from?*

▲ *Is written material (not just in notices, but also on posters) presented in the most accessible languages of the families who use the centre or scheme?*

▲ *Are there tangible signs in the environment that parents are acknowledged as people rather than simply as parents? For example, can they get a cup of tea or coffee? Are there brochures or other resource materials available?*

▲ *Is family culture respected and supported in the environment?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Ask parents what could be done to make the environment more welcoming, comfortable and empowering for them.*

▲ *Conduct an audit, using the questions above and others that professionals or parents may come up with.*

▲ *Observe parents using the environment and take note of difficulties or things that could be improved.*

▲ *Visit a similar centre or co-ordination unit office and compare their environment.*

▲ *Look at the wording of rules to see if they are friendly and firm, invite co-operation and reasons are given where appropriate.*

▲

▲

Enrolment and induction

One desirable outcome:

▲ *From the beginning parents understand what partnership means and are supported to operate as partners.*

Some key questions:

▲ *Does the written and verbal information provided to prospective users communicate partnership and what it means and is this information available in languages other than English?*

▲ *Is care taken to give parents sufficient information without overwhelming them – what needs to be given in the beginning and what can wait?*

▲ *In what ways are parents actively assisted to become aware of what is important to them in the care arrangement so that they can make an informed choice, or do we mostly assume that they know what they want?*

▲ *Are initial encounters with parents friendly, welcoming and respectful?*

▲ *Do professionals have effective ways of getting essential information from parents about their child and encouraging them to share their picture of their child with us, and what they want in care?*

▲ *Are professionals genuinely open and interested in parents' questions and concerns?*

▲ *Are parents encouraged to stay in the beginning of a child's participation to help the child settle in and for them to feel more secure about the care, are individual differences in their willingness and ability to do so respected, and are parents who have trouble separating from their child assisted to do so?*

▲ *Are parents and families who speak very little English made to feel comfortable during the orientation/induction and do they understand the settling in procedures for their child?*

▲ *Is the orientation process flexible enough to support the parents who have children with additional needs?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Ask parents who have recently started using the scheme or centre to critique the enrolment and induction experience they had.*

▲ *Review written information given to parents with the aim of assessing the extent that it sets the stage for partnership.*

▲ *Observe closely the enrolment and induction procedures.*

▲ *Support families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with bilingual workers wherever possible to ensure a more comprehensive orientation.*

▲

▲

Involvement

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Parent involvement is valued and seen as a contributor to partnership.*

▲ *A range of ways to be involved is available as an option, not an obligation, for parents.*

Some key questions:

▲ *What is the range of ways for parents to be involved?*

▲ *Are some kinds of involvement valued over others, and is there a tendency to view " involved parents" more favourably than "uninvolved" ones?*

▲ *Is the help parents give genuinely valued, or are there some types of involvement that are tokenistic?*

▲ *Are the links between involvement and partnership clear?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Conduct an audit of all the ways parents are involved, with an eye to ensuring that they are varied and meaningful.*

▲ *Look at developing new ways for parents to connect and be involved, and ask parents for ideas.*

▲ *Ensure that professionals' view parent involvement accurately and positively, and that they are clear about the distinction between involvement and partnership.*

▲ *Assess professionals' views about parents to ensure that they are not seeing involved parents as superior to those who are not involved.*

▲ *Think carefully about the purposes and appropriateness of family social functions, parent education and support sessions.*

▲

▲

Practice

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Parents are fully informed about what goes on with their children.*

▲ *Parents contribute ideas and suggestions about their child's experience and know that these are taken seriously.*

Some key questions:

▲ *How informed are parents about the practice with the children - not only what is going on but why?*

▲ *What systems do we have in place to ensure that parents and professionals together periodically update their picture of the child?*

▲ *How much is known about what each parent cares most about in his or her child's experience in child care?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Gather information about cultural groups represented among the parents, and use that information as a basis for talking with them about their own practices and ways of doing things.*

▲ *Ask parents regularly what they like about what is happening with their child, what they would change if they could, what they don't understand.*

▲ *Have a number of means of encouraging parents to contribute insights and information about their child and to have input into their child's experience.*

▲ *Have a number of ways of letting parents in on children's experience and supporting their input.*

▲ *Look at the organisation of the day with the aim of maximising availability to talk to parents without compromising children's experience.*

▲ *Talk to parents sometimes about their own lives, not just their children.*

▲

▲

Diversity

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *Partnership is based on respect for diversity.*

▲ *The centre or scheme embraces diversity and works actively to promote tolerance.*

Some key questions:

▲ *To what extent do the professionals reflect openness to all kinds of diversity?*

▲ *How is diversity dealt within the centre or scheme?*

▲ *How are issues of bias and intolerance tackled?*

▲ *In what ways does the centre or scheme demonstrate an openness to diversity of all kinds and a commitment to deal constructively with it*

    — in the environment

    — in policies

    — in practice?

▲ *Does the diversity in the scheme or centre reflect the diversity that exists in the near and broader community? If not, what steps can be taken to improve this?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Discuss the main categories of diversity that exist within the centre or scheme. Think about which types of diversity are easy to deal with and which are more challenging.*

▲ *Look at what practices with parents contribute directly to a culture of tolerance.*

▲ *List areas of practice where: there can be no compromise with what parents want, where professionals and parents compromise, where parents can make the decision. See if the balance is one that promotes partnership and maintains the integrity of professional practice.*

▲ *Undertake an analysis of policies to see where respect for diversity appears.*

▲

▲

Professional support and development

One desirable outcome:

▲ *The centre or scheme is characterised by a variety of kinds of active support and encouragement for professionals to work in partnership with parents and families.*

Some key questions:

▲ *What are the range of supports provided to assist professionals to work in partnership with parents and families?*

▲ *What additional supports are needed, and where can we find those?*

▲ *Is there a culture of support and learning? If so, what is the evidence for this? If not, what steps can we take to bring it about?*

▲ *What do we have in place to ensure that there is widespread understanding of the dimensions of partnership among professionals and continual monitoring of practices?*

▲ *What do we have in place to ensure the quality of parent-professional partnerships?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *Look at the schedule of recent and future professional development to see the extent to which it supports partnership.*

▲ *Ask professionals what would be useful to support them working in partnership.*

▲ *Take specific steps to improve the "learning together" culture.*

▲

▲

Links with other services and the broader community

Some desirable outcomes:

▲ *There are strong mutually beneficial links with a range of professional organisations, agencies, services, and individuals.*

▲ *The centre or scheme is strongly connected in its local community.*

▲ *Professionals have an awareness of the most appropriate agency to link with.*

▲ *Parents are aware that professionals can link them into other services if necessary.*

Some key questions:

▲ *With what other professional organisations, agencies and services is the centre or scheme most strongly linked?*

▲ *Are there additional links that should be formed? If so, how should this be undertaken?*

▲ *How can the already established important links be more dynamic and more mutually beneficial?*

▲ *How can assistance be given to each professional to strengthen her or his individual links with the community, both the professional community and the broader community?*

▲

▲

Some strategies:

▲ *List all the links the scheme, centre, or individual family day care home has. Think about the strength of those.*

▲ *Actually bring together the organisations and agencies that are or should be linked for networking and information sharing.*

▲ *Consider where new links would be useful. Think about how to make the first approach.*

▲ *Ensure that the links exist across a number of professionals in each scheme or centre in most cases, rather than with a specific individual.*

▲ *Use professionals from other agencies and organisations for professional development sessions.*

▲ *Develop protocols with different services that clearly set out the nature of the relationship between the services and how the issue of confidentiality and parent consent will be resolved.*

▲

▲

Funded by: Developed and distributed by:

DEPARTMENT OF
**FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**

CENTRE FOR
Community
Child Health

ROYAL
CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL