Collaborating with families: Not a problem!

Relationships with families have always been considered an important area of early childhood educators’ practice. However, in the past many educators’ interest in relationships with families has focused mainly on problems or challenges: ‘What do I do about this parent who …?’

Two possible reasons for this problem-oriented focus are:

1. Strong tradition of parent involvement. Our profession has traditionally prided itself and done an excellent job of offering a variety of ways for families to connect with the services their children attend. Its many ways of doing this include working bees, the morning tea roster, fundraising, providing extra help on excursions, contributing materials and or/expertise, sharing talents or interests with children and serving on management or parent advisory committees.

2. Focus on children. People choose to work in the early childhood profession because they want to work with children, not because they want to work closely with families.

The Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) raises the bar for educators by requiring a rich and complex relationship with families. The Early Years Learning Framework asks educators to go beyond involving families in the operation of the service and reporting to them on their child’s learning, to collaborating with them to support children’s learning. In other words, the Early Years Learning Framework describes educators as working in partnership and collaboration with children and families to negotiate the child’s experience.

WHAT ARE PARTNERSHIPS? WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

A partnership is a relationship, not a set of activities or strategies. Principle 2 of the Early Years Learning Framework contains a description of what family–educator partnerships include:

- collaboration about curriculum decisions
- understanding each other’s expectations and attitudes
- valuing each other’s contributions to and roles in the child’s life
- mutual trust
- ongoing open and respectful communication
- valuing each other’s knowledge of the child, building on and contributing to each other’s knowledge through sharing insights and information
- deciding together about the child’s experience.

This list demonstrates that the relationship has certain characteristics and dispositions and also involves particular ways of working. Together these add up to negotiating the child’s experience.

Partnerships and collaboration are created and strengthened during quick and unconscious daily interactions and communications, as well as in practices that are grounded in thoughtful statements of philosophy and enacted through carefully considered policies and procedures. Real collaboration with families arises not from specific activities or strategies, but rather from a pervasive attitude and perspective that educators bring to every aspect of service operation.

WHY DO PARTNERSHIPS MATTER? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Answers are stated clearly throughout the Early Years Learning Framework:

- Families are ‘children’s first and most influential educators.’ (p. 5)
- ‘From birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place.’ (p. 7)
- ‘The diversity in family life means that children experience belonging, being and becoming in many different ways.’ (p. 9)
- ‘Children thrive when families and educators work together in partnership to support young children’s learning.’ (p. 9)
- ‘Learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families.’ (p. 12).

There is now, more than in the past, a greater understanding within the profession that in order to support children’s learning we need to know them in the context of their family, culture and community. It is difficult to imagine really knowing a child without knowing the child’s family.
What’s the difference between family involvement and partnerships?

The difference between involvement and partnerships has to do primarily with who has power and authority. Most family involvement activities are decided by educators and allow them to maintain control and power. Genuine partnerships, on the other hand, involve sharing power. That is the essence of negotiation.

Another difference is that many family participation activities focus on service operation, social events or parent education. Partnerships focus directly on the shared aim of supporting children’s learning as it is described in the Learning Outcomes in the Early Years Learning Framework.

Partnerships require confident educators who are open to families’ priorities and requests. They are clear about areas where compromise or negotiation is possible and where they are not because of regulations, conflicts with the service philosophy or policies or when families’ requests are clearly not in the child’s best interests. When there are partnerships, educators encourage families to express their concerns, question practices and policies and ask for what they want. When their requests cannot be granted educators explain this respectfully and without any implication that it was inappropriate to ask.

Where does parent involvement and participation fit in? Is it no longer important?

Having a variety of ways for families to become involved is important, and can contribute to a partnership. However, it is possible for families to be very involved and not have a partnership—that is, not have much of a say in their child’s experience. Similarly, it is quite possible for families to have robust partnerships with educators and not be involved in the service.

What matters most is that families:

- feel welcomed
- are respected
- see themselves as members of a learning community
- are empowered in their child’s experience.

The aims listed above are a useful lens for critically reflecting on the parent involvement opportunities offered in your service and the extent to which they contribute to partnerships and collaboration.

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Questions for reflection

- What is there in the physical environment that says to families ‘You are welcome here, you belong here’?
- What messages do families get about their ‘place’—their role in the service—from your communication with them and the ways you go about your work?
- What matters most in a child’s life is the relationship with family and the family’s ability to support the child’s wellbeing. If you genuinely take on board this message, how will it affect your work tomorrow? What might you do differently?

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References
ECA Facebook page: www.facebook.com/eylfplp
ECA Twitter feed: http://es.twitter.com/EarlyChildAust

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