

Parents as Partners

Positive Relationships in the Early Years

by Jennie Lindon

The meaning of partnership

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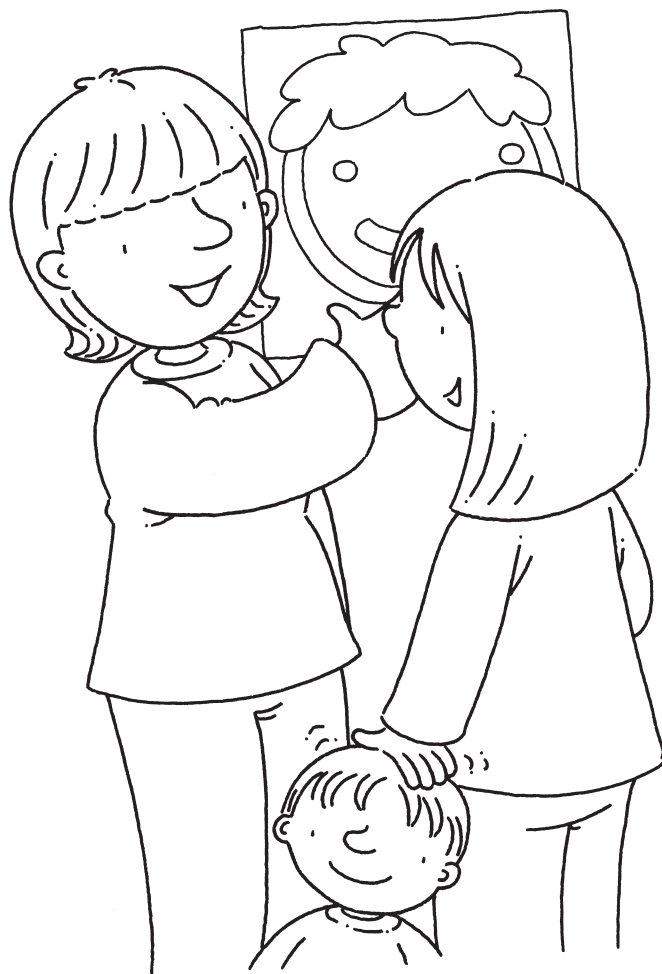
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Updated to
reflect the
2012 EYFS



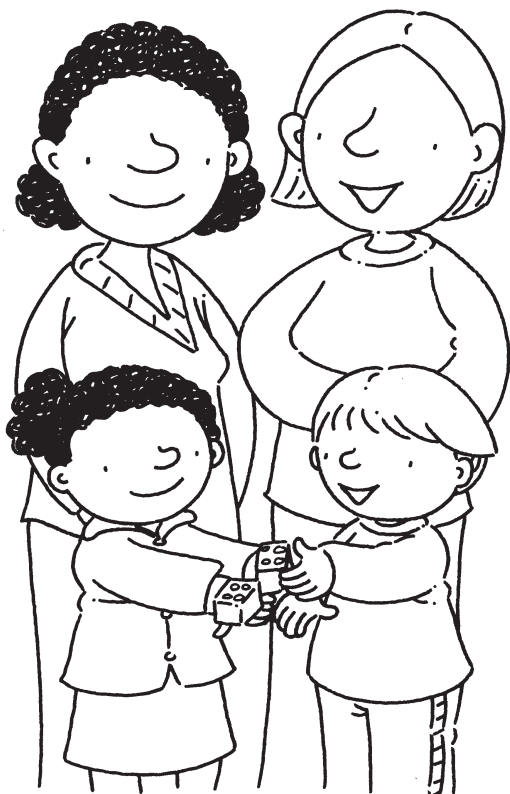
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The meaning of partnership



For many years now, good practice in services for young children has included a strong focus on bringing together the different parts of their life. In particular, practitioners within early years provision – the full range of group settings and the childminding service – have been expected to work closely with families.

Partnership within early years practice

The non-negotiable nature of partnership with parents is made clear in early years guidance across the UK. Establishing and maintaining close contact with young children's families is a professional obligation. This book is linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS): the Birth to Five framework for England. However, the approach to good practice is consistent with principles which apply across the UK. For instance, the Care Commission in Scotland announced in 2009 that the focus in inspection will shift to reflect the details of the government's Early Years Framework. Part of this development is a greater emphasis on how settings actively involve parents and other family carers in their children's early learning, including any identified needs.

The importance of partnership with parents has been confirmed in the revised EYFS (DfE, 2012). The statutory framework, with the welfare requirements, has been much reduced from the 2008 version. However, a significant aim is still that early years provision works closely with the families of young children. The first paragraph of the introduction states that, '*Good parenting and high quality early learning together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up*' (DfE, 2012, page 2).

Best early years practice is grounded in partnership with parents, and other significant family carers. Early years practitioners should have expertise and professional insights to share. Part of your contribution to the partnership is that you will sometimes have knowledge about local services and specialist help, of which parents are unaware. An element of partnership continues to be the obligation to ensure that a young child's life does not end up fragmented. Practitioners need to make active connections between children's experiences at home and their time in early years provision.

Partnership over children

Effective practice recognises that partnership is a continual process, not something that can be established, like a one-off project, and then left alone. Partnership working relies on practitioners' relationships with a child's family, most often with the parent(s). The central aspects of the partnership therefore have to cover the following practice issues:

- Good, personal communication is crucial from the outset; from the time a parent makes an enquiry about your provision. Your relationship becomes established through the early conversations, as you explain what you offer and then, when the parent wants to take up a place, the further details.
- You work in partnership with a parent in order to ease the transition as a child settles into your provision. This process will include some joint time together with the baby or child in your home, as a childminder, or an agreed minimum time for a parent to stay with their child in a group setting.
- The settling-in process is for the emotional well-being of both parent and child. But it is also for a childminder, or the key person in a group setting, to begin to build a personal understanding of this baby or child. Although you aim to be

Different kinds of involvement

This section explores different ways in which parents and other family carers might be invited to be closely involved with their child's learning and experiences in early years provision. There is no set approach that will be right for everyone, because settings and the parents whose children attend will never be the same. For any given centre or childminder, the pattern is also likely to change over time as the result of turnover in the families who use your provision.

Parents as partners in their child's learning

The core to partnership has to be open communication in terms of regular conversation and use of personal records of children, with reports like a daily diary that often travel between the family home and nursery or the childminder's home.



Example from a setting

You share highlights of the day in conversation with a mother or father. But parents and children alike really appreciate something more permanent.

- **Georgina Mellish-Laws, a childminder from south London, is very committed to getting children outdoors and is part of the local Forest School initiative. She described two special books in which she documented children's experiences in their Forest School sessions, but also the highlights of their regular walks in the local park.**

Words matter but, in any early years provision, photos can be a powerful message about what engaged a child today and this week.

- **Buckingham's Nursery School has a laptop set up in the open reception area, providing a slide show of photos from this week. I have talked with childminders who have taken the same opportunity in their home.**
- **I have seen dedicated shelves for work in progress, with a child's name card against their project that may not be finished today. Southlands Kindergarten, like some other day nurseries I have visited, has cleared a low shelf for children to place anything they wish to show their parent(s) at pick-up time.**

Food for thought

Childminders in the Charlton Childminding Network raised the sensitive issue of what to do/say about significant developmental milestones. I have had similar conversations with practitioners in day nurseries. Do you tell a parent that their toddler took their first step today or appeared to say a real word?

Experienced practitioners recognise how much time the children of working parents can spend in the care of their childminder or key person. You will be excited when your key baby or toddler does something new. However, it is considerate to wait until a parent shares an important milestone from home. You could contribute, 'she's so close to ...' or 'It won't be long before he ...'.

When you have established an easy two-way communication, then mothers and fathers will tell you about magic moments from family life. They are confident that you are interested.

Such conversations can also be your opportunity to put an event in context. For instance, what Marie has brought in from home is a good example of emergent writing and is in no way 'just scribble'. You contribute to this exchange with your care in building up each child's individual portfolio, to show an individual learning journey.



Links to your practice

No group should be started within an early years centre or school unless you can guarantee the appropriate amount of time and skilled attention.

- One person from the practitioner team, or the same family support worker, should take responsibility for a group, even one with mainly social aims.
- A fund-raising parents' group might meet sometimes without a practitioner, but there should be regular communication with the same team member. A familiar and predictable face shows that this group is valued, provides continuity and builds trust.
- If the group facilitator/leader has to leave, then the change needs to be warned and the transition handled with courtesy and at least one session of joint working.
- Sometimes an open parents' group becomes unwelcoming to any new members. It can also happen that an informal group effectively establishes territorial rights over the parents' room. It is easier to spot this development earlier, when a practitioner or family support worker is regularly in the parents' room and available for informal conversations. You may have to act deliberately to bring in and support other parents to break the exclusive clique.

feel particularly uncertain over their skills of parenting. However, some childminders are accredited (and have gone through relevant training) to offer a specialist service for families with additional social and childcare needs. Local schemes have included childminding places for young children with health needs or disability, or families under severe stress. Some childminders provide support to young adolescent mothers who appreciate friendly guidance over their own parenting, as well as the childcare that enables them to continue with their studies at school or college.

Example from a setting

The approach of the team of Thongsley Fields Nursery and Primary School is that what is outside the school will become part of school life because experiences travel in with children. The team aim for personal relationships with children as individuals and positive relations with their family, including clear communication with families about their child's nursery, and then school experience. Additionally, the head, Rachel Meyer, has worked in partnership with other agencies to offer more extensive family support within the school. Initiatives are developed steadily: in response to what parents say they would welcome and then based on an evaluation of how an event or session has gone.

- A community room is available for parents and a range of sessions are offered. Some, such as a baby and toddler music session, focus on activities that work well with babies or young children. A toy library operates from the school.
- The team at Thongsley Fields has recognised that some parents are keen to learn, but past experience has made them unlikely to start with a local college. Sessions have been offered on adult skills such as literacy, numeracy, computer skills, and practical messages around healthy eating.
- Parents commit to the whole run of sessions for Family Talk or for the ten week Raising Children parenting programme, which gives time for parents to explore how their own childhood has affected their approach to parenting their own children. Some parents have chosen to repeat the full course, recognising that their hard work on reflection means they are now in a different position and ready to learn more about positive parenting.

Centres or schools that are able to run parenting sessions or programmes usually invite mothers and fathers equally and also welcome couples who are able to attend together. Some fathers-only sessions have developed in response to men's preference to talk with fellow males.

Example from a setting

The Fatherhood Institute has developed an approach called 'Hit the Ground Crawling' – a wonderful title.