

How does parent partnership look at your setting? What research tells us about current partnership practice and what we can do differently

A ladder of participation: Where do your setting's practices sit?

Informing	Parents are informed of their rights and responsibilities but the information exchange is one-way, from staff to parent.
Consultation	Parents' opinions are invited but no assurance is offered as to whether or not these opinions are being listened to.
Placation	Parents begin to share some degree of influence though tokenism may be apparent at this level.
Partnership - emergin	Parents are involved, consulted and informed about the setting's practices and their child's particular learning programme, and decisions on these are negotiated as a result of discussion between parents and staff.
Partnership - consolidated	Negotiation leads to parents playing an equitable role in decision-making about their child's learning plans and assessments as well as the setting's philosophical ethos and direction. Parents identify and conceive ideas and work with staff as partners, and both initiate and direct projects.

Adapted from Martin, S. (2006) Opportunities for parent partnership and advocacy in early years services in Ireland. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 9, 15-31.

Much research shows that a gap exists between the desire of teachers and early childhood settings to develop partnership with parents and the actual practice of partnership. Inconsistencies are noted internationally between philosophies for the active collaboration with families in early childhood services and actual practices. Here we compile some of the greatest problems that research identifies in ECE partnership practice, and offer some pointers on how to tackle improvement in these areas.

Partnership problem	What are the issues with this?	How to do it differently
Teacher/ setting determination of partnership <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A limited set of options for participation are determined by the early childhood setting and its staff, without consulting families 2. Families are expected to conform to dominant discourses of appropriate involvement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Families perceive few opportunities for getting involved, are unsure about how partnership should occur, and experience dissatisfaction and disaffection 2. There is a mismatch between desired partnership goals and practices, for example: settings determine evening functions as the best way to transmit information, but these are stressful for parents; parent helpers want to get to know teachers and curriculum, but are given housekeeping tasks 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure the development of mutual and trusting relationships in which parents and families have agency 2. Focus partnership on shared purposes, sharing information and shared decision-making 3. Negotiate what partnership means to each family and how partnership might be used to support and influence the family and the child in the unique ways that best meet their need

<p>Minimal involvement / minor roles for families</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Families are often given minor roles in their child's educational experiences 2. Teachers have low perceptions of the effectiveness of involving families in planning, implementation and evaluation of the programme and maintain disempowering definitions of parental involvement 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a one-way flow of information from the setting to home 2. Parents are confined to a role in which they offer information to teachers to help teachers understand the child's background, family values and the child's health history 3. Parents' roles in supporting learning are unacknowledged and unsupported 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Find out what families already do to support their children's learning and recognise them as a strong resource for their child's learning 2. Match involvement strategies to family interest and expertise, for example, a family with a love of reading and a library membership might seek out books for a topic of interest 3. Involve parents as decision-makers in and resources for the elaboration of learning opportunities for children, which research associates with excellent outcomes for children
<p>Parents as recipients and consumers</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most procedures for partnership involve providing information, such as sending home newsletters or learning stories 2. Families are rarely invited to enter into the initial framing of assessment documentation 3. Decisions about children's learning are made and then communicated to parents, who rarely contribute to those decisions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Documentation and portfolios that are created and led by the teacher tend to position families as passive recipients 2. These processes may promote the teachers' values at the expense of families' cultural values 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Email newsletters and include questions or invite families to vote on options for follow-up actions 2. Share photos and retell observations with parents before writing it up as a learning story. Capture parents' comments 3. Use e-portfolios
<p>Infrequent and inadequate communication</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents' dependence on teachers for information about their child enables teachers to hold conversational dominance and strengthen their authoritative position 2. Parents are informed rather than communicated with, and do not feel that their contribution is valued 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing parent partnership relies on a sense of mutuality (shared values and assumptions) and reciprocity 2. Parents are unlikely to feel confident and capable of contributing ideas and information where teachers hold dominance 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create parent-teacher contracts which articulate the different areas of expertise that parents and teachers hold 2. Inquire what the parent thinks about the information you pass on to them. Be attentive and use active listening techniques to reflect back parents' comments. Avoid giving advice, labelling or in any way sounding like an expert!

Teacher dominance in interactions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. While teachers rate their number of communications quite highly, parents disagree 2. Newsletters and documentation do not enable parents to respond or exchange information in return 3. Newsletters and documentation tend to give information that is general and not relevant to the individual child, in which parents are most interested 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents do not get enough information about their individual child, what is happening with their child and what they are learning 2. Parents want ideas for supporting their child's learning, as well as information on assessment, planning, evaluation and curriculum 3. Parents feel uninformed and undervalued 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invites families' responses and ideas by using questions rather than statements 2. Communicate about children's learning interests and daily experiences, as these kinds of information are highly valued by parents 3. Personalise portfolios with direct comments and questions to parents (i.e. 'Did your child learn so much about gardening from helping at home?' rather than 'parent voice')
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While a large-scale survey of parental impressions of their early childhood service in New Zealand revealed that parents are reasonably satisfied with opportunities to talk with teachers, the information they receive from teachers (75%), involvement with planning and assessment (50%) and discussions about the philosophy and goals of the early childhood service (33%), other research suggests that many parents are highly influenced by normative discourses about early childhood education. In other words, early childhood practitioners should not be complacent, as parental acquiescence may not indicate that parent-teacher practices in New Zealand are as good as they could be. Explore our tips for improving parent-teacher partnership.

References & Further Reading

Elliot, R. (2003). Sharing care and education: Parents' perspectives. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 28 (4), 14-21.

McGrath, W.H. (2007). Ambivalent partners: Power, trust and partnership in relationships between mothers and teachers in a full-time child care centre. *Teachers' College Record*, 109 (6), 1401-1422.

Mitchell, L. & Brooking, K. (2007). *First NZCER national survey of early childhood education services 2003-4*. Wellington, NZ: NZCER.