

## What is parent partnership and why is it important?

Parent partnership is well-established in the research literature as a key factor in effective early childhood programmes but, without a clear definition for parent partnership, there can be enormous variation in the way this concept is interpreted in practice. Family involvement can range from receiving information and keeping informed, to participation in sessions and events, and finally to a partnership where families work alongside teachers to determine and implement decisions in the early childhood service.

## Partnership with parents: What does it look like?

Parent partnership involves early childhood practitioners developing responsive and reciprocal relationships in which power is shared. Genuine partnership occurs when teachers and families collaborate in making curriculum decisions about children's learning. In such partnerships, the different strengths, expertise and culture of individuals are valued and relationships are characterised by mutual respect.

## Why is it important?

Close and sustained interactions between children, parents and teachers that take into account the family's cultural background are best able to support the rapid development of children in the early childhood period. Family participation in education from a young age can support a healthy developmental trajectory for a child that continues into the schooling period. Parents and families can develop skills for enhancing their children's learning through participation in their child's programme and involvement in shared endeavours related to their children's education, such as ideas for activities and helpful strategies for interactions and routines at home.

Parent partnership is found to increase:

Education and care	high quality relationships between teachers and children, and between teachers and parents	Achievement	children's progress and achievement* (and to decrease the achievement gap between children of high and low income families)	Families	parents' self-efficacy, confidence and resilience
	the consistency and sensitivity of care		children's language and literacy skills and social-emotional competence		parents' peace of mind as well as their trust in teachers and tendency to be responsive to teachers
	the quality and quantity of exchanges of information		children's initiative and persistence, self-esteem, feelings of motivation and efficacy, and well-being		social inclusion and maintenance of children's culture and languages
	meaningful involvement and cognitive interactions between parents and children, and teachers and children				families' understanding of teaching approaches such as learning through play, which influences the experiences provided at home

<p>consistency of interactions and environments to support children's development and learning</p>		<p>families' access to a range of services including early intervention and adult education, and the efficacy of interventions</p>
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\*One New Zealand study, the *Competent Children, Competent Learners* study found no associations between parental involvement in the early childhood setting and children's competency scores at 14. However, parental involvement was limited in this study to volunteering in the centre and did not take account of the quality of relationships and communication between parents and teachers.

Fostering positive partnerships with families helps families to feel valued, recognised and supported in their role in children's learning and development. Within early intervention practice, research shows that there are strong correlations between parental perception of personal control and equal partnership in the programme, and family well-being. Strong partnerships between teachers and families of children with special needs are particularly important because of the specialised knowledge that families have about caring for these children.

Learning with and from families to gain a deep knowledge of children's strengths, interests, family and community activities enables teachers to create links to these within the programme and to provide children with continuity in their learning and expectations. Parents and teachers working together can support children in connecting their home and school experiences, which enables deep learning. Discontinuity between home and the early childhood setting has been shown to have a negative effect on child development, particularly in relation to behaviour, social competence, language and motor skills. Knowledge of children's experiences outside of the setting also enables greater complexity in the conversations teachers have with children.

Partnership with teachers and early childhood services can support improvements in the home learning environment. For example, when families are aware of what children are learning about science in the early childhood setting, there are supporting discussions at home and children ask scientific questions more frequently at home. Research also shows a greater impact on children's achievement when early childhood services include parents and families in making a change to practice and provide parental education in areas such as picture book reading, joint writing or elaborative conversations. In addition, supporting parents to engage their children's learning at home is found to be more significant for positive learning outcomes than involving parents in activities at the centre.

## Conclusion

Parent-teacher partnership and effective family involvement is complex to understand, particularly as it is not the quantity of involvement but rather the quality of involvement that is important. This is both difficult to analyse and likely to vary for different families and contexts.

## References & Further Reading

Mitchell, L., Haggerty, M., Hampton, V & Pairman, A. (2006). *Teachers, parents and whānau working together in early childhood education*. Wellington, NZ: NZCER.

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