

13 ideas and activities for promoting partnership in early childhood settings



ECE resources

Parent involvement in early childhood education services is influenced by the opportunities and resources made available by the setting. Here we compile a range of methods used by early childhood settings to engage parents in partnership, as reported in research. However, bear in mind that this research does not usually explore the detail of parents' and teachers' interactions or in what ways particular interactions are understood and experienced by parents and teachers. For example, while teachers and services can be working hard on particular forms of communications for partnership work such as noticeboards and newsletters, some research indicates that parents do not find these forms particularly interesting or engaging and, when asked, do not request more of these forms of information. The following are some potential strategies for providing families with information and encouraging them to participate in the settings activities, assessment and planning.

1. Welcoming and settling routines

Settling-in conversations are about teachers and families getting to know each other and should aim to initiate a relation of mutual confidence which will be consolidated over time.

Tips for implementation:

- Prioritise listening and observing during family visits.
- Take time to listen to what the family has to say about their child, their relationship with and aspirations for the child, as well as the child's interests, strengths, needs and emotions.
- Try not limit these conversations by predetermining what information will be collected through a form or agenda.
- Take time also to introduce the setting and its features, but avoid a focus on the rules of attendance at the setting.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Initial visits in which parents accompany their child.
- Guided tours.
- An open-door for parents' visits.
- Handbooks for general information.
- Orientation DVDs, in English and other key community languages.

2. Parent-teacher contracts

A parent-teacher partnership contract can be used to help prioritise and communicate expectations for teacher-family collaboration. Such an agreement can help families to understand that they are recognised and respected as equal partners with teachers in supporting their children's learning.

Tips for implementation:

- Make a statement recognising families' expertise and knowledge about their children and the importance of teacher-parent partnership. Emphasise that no one should feel disrespected or unqualified to participate in partnership.
- Outline the opportunities for collaboration with teachers, and the kinds of information that families might offer teachers. Stress that families' comments and suggestions are welcome.
- Detail the roles and responsibilities of the family and teacher.
- Keep it brief and general, allowing for adaptation where required.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Setting up contracts with families on enrolment. Once the family is aware that they are valuable contributors to the learning, teachers work with them on shared goals that increase the family's involvement and ownership of their child's learning experience.

3. Keyworkers

A keyworker system allocates a particular teacher special responsibility for coordinating planning and assessment activities for an individual child, working in close partnership with the child's family.

Tips for implementation:

- Prioritise individual relationships so that families can become confident and comfortable in their relationships with a particular teacher.
- Match keyworkers to families based on attendance, previous relationships, languages spoken and so on

Examples from early childhood settings:

- 'Family group teachers' with responsibility for assessment and planning for a particular child (coordinating contributions from the whole team), meeting and liaising with their families, and documenting plans.

4. Informal conversations

The brief and informal interactions that parents experience daily on entering and leaving the early childhood setting are very significant for relationship-building, and help build families' trust and confidence in the service and its teachers.

Tips for implementation:

- Roster staff members to greet and farewell children and families.
- Use short exchanges to build rapport with families, and to learn about home routines and families' child-rearing practices.
- Discuss the child's day with parents at pick up time.
- Use informal conversations for complex information such as families' aspirations for their child. Families state that notes cannot substitute for daily conversations with a teacher.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Dedicated time for greetings and information-giving in the morning, and in the evening for parents and children to share a book or a game the child has been enjoying in the day.
- An open invitation for parents to join their children for lunch.

5. Surveys and forms

Forms can be a useful way to collect information from families about their child, whereas surveys can canvas parental opinions on the setting's environment, processes and programme. Some research suggests that parents want to be asked their opinions and to be able to put forward suggestions through the use of surveys and forms.

Tips for implementation:

- Be respectful of the time taken to complete surveys and forms and ensure that any information you request and collect through a survey is utilised. Let families know of your response to their information.
- Talk with families about the kinds of information families might provide on the form.
- Personalise questions to provoke responses.
- Make forms visually appealing.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- 'Parent voice' templates for families to share information about children's activities, experiences and milestones. One setting found this encouraged more families to share information.
- Surveys for parental input into the programme. For example, one setting surveyed parents to gain information on parents' responses to the initiative of a choir, and the child's musical experiences at home.

6. Newsletters

Newsletters can be informative of children's current learning and learning plans, and specifically request family participation. They can also build a sense of community, particularly when they highlight the achievements and activities of particular groups of learners.

Tips for implementation:

- Ensure newsletters address the concerns of families.
- Use language that is easy to understand.
- Support and reflect diversity in the content and languages used.
- Include real stories about children and what they are doing in the setting, rather than general information such as topics of interest or educational plans. Note that parents are interested in specific information that helps them understand their child's learning rather than generalised information about rules and themes.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Newsletters emailed for increased contribution and collaboration. Parents often respond to these emails with requests and ideas.

7. Documentation

Documentation shares information with families about children's activities in the setting and can highlight children's learning so that families come to understand the curriculum and programme better. Documentation can also be carried out by families or through teacher-parent collaboration.

Tips for implementation:

- Include child observations (particularly conversations), as well as photos and videos, as parents find these most meaningful.
- Use documentation as a platform for teacher and parent co-construction of understandings about children's knowledge, learning and activity. Allow family input into documentation to challenge your expectations and encourage you to reflect upon your teaching role and the children's experience.
- Recognise family and community contributions to learning to show families that they are valued as making a difference for children. Documenting home and community knowledge, skills and interests will help family members to connect and describe other related experiences from these contexts with teachers.
- Avoid providing copies of educational plans, which parents find too general. They are better supported to understand the learning opportunities provided when they are given specific information about their individual child's activities.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Individual home contact books, in which children store and revisit their work to create dialogue between parents and children.
- 'Quotes' books, in which parents and teachers collect interesting things that children have said.
- 'Home books', sent for a week with different children for parents to share things about their child (a day in the life of a child, photos of special events) on a page. The home book is shared with the larger group at mat-time.

8. Display

Parents regard wall displays as helpful for demonstrating what children have learned, and as important for children to learn from. Displays can be collaboratively produced, with parents and children making decisions about what learning should be exhibited.

Tips for implementation:

- Consider location. Ensure displays that are intended for families to see are clearly visible, for example, in entrance ways. Consider spaces in the community where you might also display children's work (with permission).
- Make displays visually appealing with lots of large photographs, and space well to reduce clutter.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- 'Aspirations whiteboard'.
- An emergent curriculum notice board to display the current focus of the programme, and inviting parents to share their expertise and resources.
- Curriculum plans displayed on a wall or noticeboard, although note that some studies indicate parents find these plans too generalised and difficult to understand.

9. ICT

The use of digital technologies can facilitate a greater flow of information between settings and families. Families can gain a better understanding of their child's learning and be reassured that their child is settled. ICT can also enable families and teachers to engage in shared planning and assessment and can stimulate conversations about children's learning. However, making children's experiences and activities visible through digital technology does not guarantee that families will understand what learning is taking place or contribute to its development, so teachers need to capitalise on the interest generated by the use of digital technologies for these purposes.

Tips for implementation:

- Use multimedia, especially video, which has been found to increase discussion about learning and strengthen relationships. Foreground learning by adding a commentary to visual media that highlights the learning that is occurring.
- Encourage children to take photographs and share and discuss them with their families. Photographs support children to share many more details about their day.
- Explore new technologies before use with parents and children - for example, by creating a teacher-only blog.
- Ensure families understand how use of the technology benefits their child, show them how to use it and make the technology and software available to families (with a handbook or leaflet).
- Email daily diaries and learning stories or use an e-portfolio or blog to offer channels for communication outside of busy pick-up times. Ask parents to share information and advice, or to discuss goal-setting and ways to support or extend ongoing learning and be sure to follow these up. Give parents the responsibility of adding material to blogs or e-portfolios.
- Share documentation using ICT across the service for all teachers, children and families to view. Use ICT to connect with local schools, other early childhood settings and community groups.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Slideshows playing in the setting, and photos sent home electronically.
- Videos of children's learning.
- Emailed 'daily/weekly diaries' including photos and the occasional YouTube clip.
- Blogs as eportfolios. Blogs for children to communicate with the wider world and other early childhood settings, both nationally and internationally. Whānau blogs sharing learning experiences in the setting and at home.
- Individual movies of images and video clips of children's learning.
- Digital diaries as a chronological record of children's learning electronically using photo, video and audio.

10. Shared planning

Shared planning and assessment of a child's learning is a very powerful use of parent-teacher partnership, enabling the development of appropriate and relevant plans that take account of a wide range of perspectives on the child's learning, and supporting a continuity of learning experiences across the home and early childhood setting.

Tips for implementation:

- Share observations with families and together negotiate a shared understanding of the child's strengths and interests.
- Use planning proformas with parents to note children's existing strengths against curriculum goals. Collaboratively wonder with parents about what might strengthen the child's interests and existing abilities.
- Ask families what they would like their child to experience during the term.
- Involve parents in talking with children about their plans for activities when they get to the setting. This is found to lead to richer play episodes that are based on children's family experiences and relationships, and to staff being more aware of the richness of children's home experiences.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Showing parents Te Whāriki goals and discussing these in relation to the child to develop programmes.
- Individual programme plans that include observations made in the setting, and parents' observations from home, and shared goals for the child.
- Parents and children planning together at home for play in the setting.
- 'Parent helpers' observing / videoing their child's learning during session.
- Shared decisions about which cultural festivals to celebrate and how.

11. Meetings

Meetings offer an opportunity for information sharing, discussion and decision-making with families at a time dedicated to listening and contributing.

Tips for implementation:

- Ask parents personally to come to meetings and make it important that they be there. Insist that their contribution will be significant and genuinely valued.
- Ensure that the content of the meeting is important and positive.
- Get parents planning activities for meetings as a means of securing their participation.
- Welcome families with a warm atmosphere. Ensure each family is able to express, in their own individual way, their questions, concerns and ideas.
- Allow time for teachers and families to get to know each other.
- Avoid meetings in which you present information, but rather facilitate information-sharing and discussion.
- Where possible, provide dinner or transportation to make it easier for families to attend. Invite children, and have an activity or supervision for children during the meeting.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Personalised interviews with parents on transitions to discuss expectations and aspirations.

- Meetings to explore philosophies of development and education, and/or educational values and aspirations for children.
- Annual strategic planning sessions.
- Parent 'cafés' in which groups discuss key questions (such as 'how do you help your child manage her strong emotions?') with 'table hosts'.
- Project planning meetings for small groups of parents of children that have similar interests.
- Fathers' evenings planned and advertised by fathers.

12. Collaborative professional development

Unlike parent education, in which teachers support parents by teaching them specific skills or giving professional advice, collaborative professional development (PD) involves teachers and families in developing their knowledge and skills together.

Tips for implementation:

- Use collaborative PD as a way to bring together people from home environments and education environments in a shared endeavour. This has been seen to create interesting interactions in which participants discuss needs and interests and negotiate appropriate practices.
- Link professional development to family's community and home knowledge and practice, for example, by identifying opportunities for learning in home routines. Some research indicates that parents hold back from participating until they are shown specific strategies they can use.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- Workshops with parents and whānau based in the early childhood setting, to improve learning interactions in relation to the practice of story-reading.

13. Parent help

Some parents are keen to be involved in sessions, on an occasional or regular basis, especially if there is a clearly demarcated role for them.

Tips for implementation:

- Give parents clear instructions as some parents find it difficult to determine how they are to help their children and assist with the programme without direction.
- Avoid giving domestic tasks such as food preparation or tidying up, but focus parent helpers on tasks that will develop their understanding of their child's learning and the setting's programme.

Examples from early childhood settings:

- A parent help roster as a way of connecting families with the work of the setting.
- Encouraging parent helpers to observe and video their child's learning during the session.

References & further reading

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PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.