

Principles for parent partnership: A four-step approach



ECE resources

Research suggests that for parent-teacher partnership to work, settings and teachers need to shift from being child-oriented to being family-oriented, although this shift is difficult to make. Partnerships are expected to move beyond tokenistic offerings for participation towards the empowerment of families and involvement of families in curricular decision-making. These kinds of genuine partnerships require new practices, new ways of thinking and new ways of interacting with families. Strategies for two-way communication, collaboration, and empowerment can develop positive relationships, reciprocity, mutuality and equal power in decision-making as four (overlapping) steps that lead to effective parent partnership.

1. Strengthen relationships with all families

It is important to build relationships before expecting families to come to events or serve on committees. Offering opportunities for partnership without creating strong relationships is unlikely to increase parental participation. Improving communication and interpersonal interactions will make the most difference in terms of the quality of partnership. **Make the decision to actively pursue meaningful relationships with all the families** that attend your setting. This is an important step. This decision to engage in positive relationship formation with families changes your outlook and influences the frequency and nature of your interactions. **Make a positive and early first contact** with parents, to set the foundation for an effective relationship. In the early period of relationship-building, the creation of trust is critical.

Project a positive attitude toward the child and family. Use strength-based strategies such as affirming parent competence, sharing information and creating open communication, which have led to positive outcomes in some intervention research. **Create a sense of belonging** for all families, and make your setting a safe place for parents to share their experiences and opinions as parents. Ensure every family can feel welcomed, respected, listened to, and supported. **Welcome and farewell families daily** by rostering a person to be at the door, and **have an 'open-door' policy** where parents are free to come and visit the setting and their child whenever they like, or identify times when parental involvement would be most beneficial, such as during free play times so that parents can engage with children while they are playing. Māori families appreciate the enactment of rituals and tikanga for welcoming and farewell as well as opportunities for sharing food. **Ask for specific assistance** from parents. Be careful not to delegate unimportant tasks which will convey to parents that you don't really think that they are capable of contributing meaningfully to the programme.

Dedicate more time for interactions and discussions with parents and adjust staffing patterns accordingly, where possible. Taking the time to sit and talk responsively with parents and families is found to lead to a deepened understanding and sense of empathy and is interpreted by parents as a sign of interest and respect. Find ways to also **build relationships with fathers and other extended family members**. **Be attentive to families as you converse**. Attend to facial expressions and body language and clarify understandings by asking questions. Provide wait time.

Communicate regularly, and consider ways to communicate with parents outside of pick up and drop off times. Consistent and regular positive interactions build and maintain positive relationships. Focus

on interactions which nurture and strengthen families. **Share your observations about the child**, the small achievements and meaningful experiences and interactions of their day in the setting, which helps parents feel reassured that their child is visible, and that you really care and are focused on their learning. **Use a range of communication skills and means of communication** that make space for families to communicate strategies, offer stories, or impart knowledge about their children. Move beyond efficient or generalised communication processes and instead promote conversations which acknowledge the strengths, **cultural resources** and preferences of each family. Personal and face-to-face communication is best, but phone calls, email and letters will also help. **Make personal invitations** to parent events, rather than hand out a notice, as some research reports that parents are more likely to respond to a personal invitation.

Respect differences in views and ideas and explore potential ways in which differences can be reconciled. For example, this might involve acknowledging the validity of parents' views on the benefits of direct teaching, while at the same time sharing information about play-based pedagogy. Genuinely show an attitude of respect, acceptance and willingness to listen and change. Deal with conflicts respectfully and openly. Keep a **focus on building, maintaining and revisiting relationships** to ensure they are working well for children and families. Relationships require continual work and maintenance and you will need to engage in constant discussion and negotiation over time.

2. Create a sense of reciprocity with families in helping each other and sharing information

Partnership should be beneficial for both families and teachers, and this relies on reciprocal exchanges in which information is shared and help given in both directions. Quality partnerships require a depth of understanding for each partner about the other's experiences, values and beliefs. **Learn from each other** and make your alliance with parents mutually beneficial. Engage in dialogue to find out about families' everyday lives and get a better understanding of parents' and children's cultural capital or strengths that can then be used to their advantage in the programme. Be aware that the family's cultural knowledge and resources may be unrecognisable to you, particularly if you come from another culture or context.

The ways in which teachers communicate with families is found to affect parents' trust in teachers and their relationships with them. Be careful not to engage a transmission model when you offer information. **Initiate a two-way exchange of knowledge, ideas and beliefs** so that you can find out about families' learning beliefs, knowledge and perspectives. **Ask questions and show genuine interest. Value family knowledge** and take the attitude that family knowledge of their specific child is as valuable as your professional knowledge of children's development in general. State explicitly that you value parents and families as their child's most influential teacher, and that you value the knowledge and pedagogy they use when helping their child to learn. Demonstrate a willingness to incorporate different perspectives and world views into your practice and programme. **Visit families' homes** to increase your knowledge of family practices and values and children's experiences in the home and community.

Find out about parents' needs, goals and concerns and respond to them, either by adapting the programme to accommodate their needs, concerns and goals, or by explaining the rationale for particular events and activities. See complaints, as well as compliments, as chances to learn about a family, and do not assume that silence indicates acquiescence. Ensure you follow up by asking if issues have been resolved satisfactorily, and if needs and goals are being met. **Find out parents' perceptions of involvement** and use this knowledge to construct pathways for parent participation. Recognise and value all kinds of parent involvement, expanding your definition of involvement to include many different family values and activities.

3. Develop a sense of mutuality through shared goals, attitudes and values

Teachers' and families' shared goals and understandings about children and their learning inform responsive programmes for children. Parents really value having a shared understanding with their children's teachers. This builds mutual trust and strengthens the consistency of environment and interactions for supporting children's learning and development. Start by **finding common ground**. Aim to build relationships on common values, understandings and practices. Your desire to support the child's learning is your first point of agreement. **Develop a sense of mutual accountability and co-responsibility** for children's learning. This is an important step towards shared decision-making. Parents need to feel valued and feel a sense of being needed. **Identify parental aspirations and expectations**. Find ways to be direct in questioning parents about their expectations, and be careful that conventional discourses and practices in early childhood education are not silencing or negating some of your families' aspirations.

Don't just make information available, but **engage in the mutual sharing of information and mutual interpretation** which leads to a new common understanding. **Be aware of the variability and value-laden nature of culture and language**, which can make it difficult to develop cross-cultural partnerships. This means you need to actively inquire into families' cultural meanings and processes and seek to acknowledge and be inclusive of a plurality of culturally valuable expressions. **Reflect on and acknowledge your personal sociocultural context** and the ways in which it influences the way you create and respond to partnerships with families. Your interpretations of parents' behaviour and actions will be influenced by your own cultural understandings about appropriate conduct and behaviours for parents and can lead you to make negative judgments, creating distrust and exclusion. Be aware of what it is you value, so that you can minimise the impact of these beliefs in your practice if necessary. Use families' diverse perspectives to research, adapt and even change your practice.

4. Empower families with shared decision-making

Some parents report in surveys that they prefer to be informed rather than involved in shared decision-making activities such as setting goals, or curriculum planning. It is important to be aware of families' confidence and understanding of planning and goal setting, and to scaffold their involvement at first. **Make an ideological commitment to giving parents and families rights to shared decision-making** in relation to the teaching and learning pedagogies and programme. **View parents as capable leaders, contributors and decision-makers** to achieve greater participation. Parents tend to meet the expectations that you have for them.

Pay careful attention to power relations and the way in which these relations affect the experience of partnership. You might need to reframe your partnership model to ensure parents and teachers are equally empowered. One way to do this is to affirm the expertise of the family and their culturally-based caregiving practices. **Use dialogue to agree educational aims, pedagogical strategies and curriculum** with families. You might need to act as a mediator or broker to develop shared understandings about how children develop and learn. This takes both time and skill. In order to develop an inclusive pedagogy, you might even need to question cherished concepts and negotiate new hybrid ideas.

Collaborate with families to make curricular decisions about programmes and learning, as this has been shown to improve children's learning, and try to **reduce educational jargon**. Start by negotiating a shared understanding of the child and from here, set goals. Then work towards strengthening the child's existing or emerging abilities. Part of collaborative planning should include clear, mutually agreed understandings of the learning happening with examples of ways in which the child demonstrates that learning. Then you can brainstorm methods for helping children learn particular things. Collaboratively list ideas for increasing learning opportunities in the child's day-to-day routine and for learning in the home. Encourage

families to engage in parent and child planning for activities in the setting, as this can result in richer play activities which are connected to the child's culture.

Tailor your processes for partnership to each family based on families' priorities, concerns and resources, and focus on responsiveness. Enable families to choose how and when to contribute, and offer families choice regarding different aspects of practices and programmes. **Build parent leadership** by involving parents in planning activities and events, or get parents to lead projects or meetings. Ask parents to give input on ways they think they could be involved. **Offer events that help parents discover their expertise and knowledge**, as encouraging a sense of efficacy in parents will inevitably lead to positive outcomes for children and increase parental confidence in shared decision-making. Note that parent partnership is not parent education, which assumes to correct parents' current strategies and knowledge. It is instead about co-education or learning together. Present yourself as a facilitator, rather than expert or leader, construct parents as competent and valuable, and focus on negotiating solutions, rather than 'advising' parents about child-rearing, or expecting parents to conform to your expectations.

References & further reading

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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.