

What is parent partnership?

ECE resources

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, 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 and why is it important?

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.

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 their years at school. 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 have a positive influence on a range of factors in ECE. It impacts education and care by improving:

- the quality of relationships between teachers and children, and between teachers and parents
- the consistency and sensitivity of care
- the quality and quantity of exchanges of information
- meaningful involvement and cognitive interactions between parents and children, and teachers and children
- consistency of interactions and environments to support children's development and learning

It also leads to greater achievement by enhancing:

- children's progress¹ (and to decrease the achievement gap between children of high and low income families)
- children's language and literacy skills and social-emotional competence
- children's initiative and persistence, self-esteem, feelings of motivation and efficacy, and wellbeing
- Parent partnership also has a positive impact on families by increasing:
 - parents' self-efficacy, confidence and resilience
 - parents' peace of mind as well as their trust in teachers and tendency to be responsive to teachers

- social inclusion and maintenance of children's culture and languages
- families' understanding of teaching approaches such as learning through play, which influences the experiences provided at home
- families' access to a range of services including early intervention and adult education, and the efficacy of interventions

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 family wellbeing and parents' perception of both personal control and equal partnership in the programme. 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, research shows that, 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.

What do parents want in partnership with teachers?

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. Research shows that parents want:

- To feel cared for, to feel their children are cared for and that the teacher knows them well.
- To be respected and to be seen as effective in their role in the shared education of their child; to have their ideas respected and used in environments and programmes.
- To be given as much information as possible about their individual children's experiences and well-being and what their child was learning (rather than the programme), so they can feel connected to their child's experiences. Parents want information primarily on how children eat, sleep, and behave and also to hear the teachers' opinions on their child's well-being, relationships, and behaviour, and to be told if their child is upset or having difficulties. This information enables them to trust the teachers and setting and feel assured that their child is well cared for, settled and secure.
- To collaborate and communicate with teachers about their child's learning so they can be involved in their children's learning and support continuous learning experiences between home and school.

Further reading

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

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). The effective provision of pre-school education [EPPE] project. Technical paper 12: The final report: Effective pre-school education. Retrieved from <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10005308/>

Endnotes

¹ 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.

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.