

# Early Years and Childcare Team



# Parents as Partners

## Guidance booklet



# Introduction

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The aim of this toolkit is to provide practitioners from all types of Early Years settings with support to develop their practice when working with Parents as Partners.

This toolkit has been written and compiled by the following people:

Early Years and Childcare Team:

Amanda Macdonald

Julie Callaghan

Helen Parker

Margaret Thornley

Sue Hawitt

...and

Keir Hopkins – Bram Longstaffe Nursery School/Kendal College

Karen Fisher – Footsteps Nursery

Emmy Sealey – Ravenscar Kindergarten

Joanne Routledge – Kinder Park Nursery

Emma Webster – St Marys CP School, Kells

Angela Ellis – Joeys/Daisies Day Nursery

Jane Faulknor – Natland and Oxenholme Pre-school

Valerie Bailey – Cleator Moor Nursery School

Jackie Mutton – Hindpool Nursery School

Veronica Broyd – Kendal Nursery School

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In addition to this guidance booklet the toolkit contains:

- Case studies of effective practice
- A booklet of supporting materials

*Throughout this toolkit the term 'parents' is used to mean all the male and female adults who play a primary carer role in a child's life.*



The working party that developed this toolkit used the following values, beliefs and principles as a starting point.

## Values and beliefs

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- Children learn best in the context of warm, loving relationships.
- Parents play a key role in children's learning. They are experts on their own children and they are a child's first and most enduring educators.
- All parents are entitled to be involved in children's learning and to be supported in whatever way they are able or wish to engage.
- All families and individual children are different and acknowledging and respecting this is crucial to building genuine relationships built on trust and openness.
- Life for young children isn't separated into education and care, times and places, play times or learning times. It is a seamless whole, whether they are in their own homes or in early years provision; and the importance of this continuity should be reflected in settings.

## Principles for practitioners

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- Practitioners need to acknowledge value and support the role parents play in their children's learning.
- Time needs to be given to enable practitioners to develop meaningful relationships with parents and children, so that they know families and the wider community well.
- Parenting is complex and families have to cope with a wide range of pressures. Practitioners need to ensure that they are creating opportunities for all parents to be involved and to acknowledge that if parents don't respond to invitations this does not mean they are not interested in their children's education.
- Practitioners must show interest in and respect for family background, culture and language. Stereotypes and assumptions should be avoided.
- To work effectively with parents, practitioners need to reflect on their own practice – setting time aside for genuine evaluation.
- Practitioners and parents must share knowledge about a child regularly in order to promote learning and development.

*Taken from PEAL Reader, NCB, 2006, and adapted by the Cumbrian Working Party.*

# What is parental involvement and why is it important?



There are two main types of parental involvement in settings and schools.

**The first type** could be described as general involvement in the life of the setting. In other words attending coffee mornings or other social events, taking part in fund raising and supporting different activities carried out by the setting such as making costumes for the role play area.

**The second type** of involvement is when parents become involved in supporting their child's learning and development at home by working in partnership with the setting. Research has proved that this second type of involvement has the most impact on outcomes for children and this is the main focus of this guidance. The Early Years Foundation Stage is based on principles backed up by research and as such has embedded working in partnership with parents.

## The commitment for this in the EYFS states:

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.

There is an expectation in the EYFS that staff in settings will initiate and work in partnership with parents and families. This is explained in the following parts of the pack.

- Card 2.2
- Statutory Framework section, 1.16,
- Practice Guidance sections, 1.11, 1.12, 1.27, 3.4

Research into children's learning and development supports the view that having parents as partners is an essential part of early years practice.

The *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE project, 2004) made some key findings regarding home learning.

- Parents who create high-quality home-learning environments engage regularly in activities that stretch a child's mind.
- The home learning environment gives children an advantage in both social and intellectual development.
- This advantage is already noticeable by age 3 and continues to 7.
- It has more impact statistically than either social class or parents' own education level.

A study by Desforges, C and Abouchar, A on *The Impact of Parental Involvement* (2003) found that:

- Parental involvement has an impact across all ethnic groups and social classes.
- The impact on achievement of different levels of parental involvement is bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools.
- When parents are more involved in their children's learning children gain skills at home, but also absorb a positive attitude to and enthusiasm for learning.

Research done by the Pen Green team (2001) resulted in a huge amount of information about developing a close working relationship with parents.

- Young children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with parents and share ideas about how to support and extend children's learning.
- Parents and professionals can help children separately or they can work together to the greater benefit of the children.
- Parents are the most important people in their children's lives. It is from parents that children learn most, particularly in the early years. The closer the links between parents and nursery.....the more effective that learning becomes.
- Parent's expectations are the most powerful predictor of children's later school success.

In the 2008 document *The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education* produced by the DCSF the benefits of family learning on children's achievement is discussed. Research shows that when families have taken part in family literacy programmes there were:

- Significant improvements in the reading and writing of parents and children following the programme, which was sustained 9 months later.
- The children who had taken part had better classroom behaviour and better support from their families compared to their peers.
- Communications between parents and children were also found to improve markedly, and parents also reported being more confident in helping their child at home and communicating with the teacher at school.

## For the children

- Children will do better and achieve more when their parents are involved.
- It is easier for children to learn when they get encouragement from home.
- Their concerns can be sorted out more quickly when their parents have a positive relationship with staff.
- Children are offered experiences based on a holistic view of them as individuals.
- They are happy when their parents enjoy being involved in the setting
- They get consistent messages from all their important carers.

## For the parents

- They are able to help and encourage their children.
- They have more information about their child's learning and can support this at home.
- They can build their own confidence and skills.
- It is easier to raise concerns when there is a positive relationship with staff.
- Their children do better when they are involved.

## Benefits and outcomes of an effective partnership with parents.

## For the setting

- Parents bring skills and knowledge which complement the practitioners.
- Children's behaviour and attainment improve.
- A parent contributing their time and knowledge increases the variety of experiences that can be offered.
- The setting becomes a stronger part of the community.
- Practitioners are more successful because they are meeting the needs of the children more effectively.



# Involving all families



As shown by the research described previously all children benefit from the involvement of their families therefore it is vital to make sure that all families have opportunities to be involved in their children's learning.

As practitioners we need to consider that all families at some time may have barriers to getting involved in their children's learning. Some of the barriers are described below.

- Work commitments.
- Time and pressure in busy life.
- Childcare needs.
- Pressure due to lack of money, illness, disability, single parent status.
- Own educational level, confidence that you can make a difference.
- Unpleasant memories of own educational experience.
- Own literacy and numeracy levels poor.
- English not first language.
- Feeling unwelcome.
- Past and ongoing experience of discrimination-race, gender, class, disability and sexual orientation.
- Parents unable to understand or share educational approach.
- Attitudes of the practitioner – not valuing or listening to parents view of child.
- Rural isolation, lack of public transport.
- Parent's owing childcare fees.

*Taken from PEAL Reader, NCB, 2006, and adapted by the Cumbrian Working Party*



## Possible strategies and good practice examples

- Initiate contact with parents and display positive listening skills such as eye contact and remember to smile!
- Share information with parents in a variety of ways such as on a notice board, in a letter sent home, verbally and repeated.
- The setting is a welcoming place with space for parents and clear indications that they are welcome and valued. For example a parent's room or welcome poster in a variety of languages.
- Parents individual needs are identified and a plan is put in place to ensure access.
- Regularly consult parents on how they want to be involved and anything that may help them get involved, for example translation, interpretation, childcare, transport.
- Be aware of the support available for families in the local area and share this with families, for example the services provided by the local children's centre (see Children's Centre contact details in the Supporting Materials booklet).
- Where opportunities are provided for parents to meet with staff, offer them at different times of the day for example in the morning, afternoon and evening.
- Document who has parental responsibility for the child and share information with these people. For example if parents are separated consider ways to involve both.
- Consider sending specific invitations to fathers to encourage involvement and consider the wording, 'come and have a cup of tea and a chat' will probably not appeal to many men.
- Consider the home language of the parents and how information can be shared with them. (For more advice please see Cumbria Children's Services document 'Embedding cultures and diversity within an early years setting and supporting children learning English as an additional language').
- Events and activities take account of any specific cultural or religious festivals that may affect the involvement of some families.
- Displays and resources reflect a wide range of families and cultures.
- Plan social events that will appeal to all families.
- Avoid making assumptions about parents.
- Avoid assigning group characteristics to any particular community.
- Develop a policy for Parents as Partners. (There is some advice on what to include in the supporting materials).

**This section has particular links to case studies 8, 10 and 12.**





# Partnership working with families to support children's learning



## Getting to know families

Partnership working is easier when practitioners have worked very hard to develop respectful relationships with families. A strong relationship provides a good foundation to develop effective partnership with parents. It makes it easier to share a range of information and develop agreed ways of supporting the child and family.

Developing a trusting relationship means parents are more likely to approach practitioners and get involved in their children's learning.

When practitioners really know about families it is easier to plan an appropriate range of opportunities for involvement.

### Possible strategies and good practice examples:

- Document who has parental responsibility for the child.
- Find out the parents preferred name and use it.
- Spend time getting to know a child/families interests.
- Provide a range of informal events to get to know families, for example family disco, fathers day lunch, fundraising events, trips.
- Settling in visits can be used as an opportunity for parents to get to know staff, other parents and see how children play and learn.
- Home visits are an effective way to get to know families. Parents may feel more comfortable in their own home and exchange more information.
- Ensure the child and parent or familiar adult attend for at least 1 session (preferably more) before the child stays on their own.
- Initiate and respond to informal dialogue with parents as often as possible.
- Try to provide a private space for parents to talk to practitioners.
- Develop an information gathering format to use with parents.

**This section has particular links to case studies 3, 5 and 7.**



## On-going communication

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Research tells us to use a range of methods to share information in order to reach all parents. We need to consider how we communicate with all parents and regularly review our communication methods to ensure that they are effective.

### Possible strategies and good practice examples:

- Use posters, letters, verbal methods, electronic forms of communication and audio. Using a combination of all of these methods will reach most parents.
- Consider how written information is presented to parents, larger fonts and a bullet point style is more effective than long narratives.
- Have an awareness of parents who may be struggling with poor basic literacy skills and try and support them in a sensitive way.
- Keep notice boards up dated but don't overwhelm them with too much information.
- Be flexible and consult parents about the best way to communicate with them. A working parent may need information sent home rather than just displaying a notice in the setting.
- Opportunities should be provided for parents to share information with staff both informally and at planned times throughout their child's time at the setting.
- When planning meetings consider the timings. Do we offer these opportunities in the morning, afternoon and evening? (see 10 Top Tips for planning meetings with parents in the supporting materials).
- Parents find it hard to resist images of their children, therefore photos and videos can draw parents in and stimulate discussion. Ideas for this could include photographic displays, a digital photoframe in the entrance or playing a video of the children on a television as parents arrive.
- Ensure parents are given the opportunity to regularly update initial information.
- Ensure information is shared with everyone who has parental responsibility for the child – if parents live separately they may need separate letters.
- Staggered starts and finishes to sessions allow parents and practitioners time to talk.
- Continuous provision areas where children can work independently also allow practitioners to have time to talk to parents.
- Remember communication should be 2 way it is not just about us informing the parents but about listening to what parents want and can share with us.
- Don't use technical 'educational' language when sharing information with parents unless you have made it clear what you mean. For example 'behaviour management strategies' may seem perfectly obvious to practitioners but will all parents know what this means?
- With parent's permission share agreed successful communication strategies with other professionals.

**This section has particular links to case studies 4, 5, 6, 10 and 13.**



## Observing children and planning together for their learning

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*'It is only when parents and early year's educators share their knowledge about an individual child's development that we can provide a rich and challenging provision in the early years setting and in the home.'*

**Pen Green Team**

To have true partnership with parents the flow of information needs to be two way. A combination of practitioner's observations and professional experience and parents observations and everyday experience results in a broad picture of the child. The broader more accurate the picture of the child the better the experiences that are planned for that child will be.

### **Possible strategies and good practice examples:**

- Develop a format to use with parents to gather initial information about the child's interests and development; this information should be used to inform planning. Some parents may need support to complete this. (There are some examples of formats in the supporting materials).
- Encourage parents to continue to tell you about what their child is like at home this could include asking parents to share observations of their child.
- All parents need to be made to feel that their observations are welcomed and valued. To support this observations could be verbal, written, photographic, audio or electronic.
- Provide information to parents about observing their children. (There is an example of this in the parents diary in the supporting materials).
- If parents are asked to contribute observations from home time needs to be spent having joint sessions looking at making observations and how these can support planning for children. These could be workshop type sessions for parents or stay and play type sessions where part of the session is spent observing the children and discussing.
- If parents provide observations or information to include in their child's learning records practitioners should try and use this information in their planning.



- Use video to share observations of children in the setting with parents or loan cameras to parents to video their children at home and then share with practitioners back in the setting.
- Parent diaries can be used to record information from home to share with practitioners (see example in the supporting materials).
- Consider ways to make time for parents to share their knowledge about their child with practitioners.
- Home to setting books can be used to share information about the child's interests, likes and dislikes rather than just information about their sleep patterns and care needs.
- Observations from the setting should be shared with parents.
- Children's learning records should be easily accessible to parents and produced in 'parent friendly' language - confidential information is stored elsewhere.
- Children's records involve parents and children by including lots of photographs, observations, and information from home.
- Children's records can be developed in a scrap book or a file or folder. They are very effective and easy for parents to follow when they are arranged chronologically charting a child's 'learning journey' during their time at the setting.
- Regular open sessions are planned when parents can come and share their child's learning records.
- A display board can be used to display photographs and comments about children both at the setting and at home.
- A simple format could be sent home when families have an event such as a holiday or a celebration; this can then be included in the child's learning records and followed up in the setting.
- Use a soft toy which accompanies different children home for a while. Parents and children can record their adventures with the toy.
- Consider how information is shared when the child attends more than one setting.

**This section has particular links to case studies 4, 5, 6, 9, 10 and 13.**



## The home learning environment

*'Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.'*

The experiences offered to children at home and the attitudes and aspirations of their families with regard to learning are often described as the home learning environment. Home learning covers a broad range of activities and research has established which type of experiences are the most effective.

- Developing loving, warm, and responsive relationships.
- Listening, responding and vocalising from birth onwards.
- Playing together, allowing a child to lead.
- Reading with and to children.
- Singing songs and rhymes.
- Going on visits, for example going for a walk or visiting the local shop.
- Painting and drawing.
- Creating opportunities to play with friends.
- Visiting the library.
- Playing with letters and numbers.

Parents with higher aspirations for their children are more likely to become involved in their child's learning. There is evidence to show that the attitudes and aspirations of parents (which are often passed onto their children) predict children's educational achievement.

This impact of the home learning environment is so strong because parents have the first and most long lasting effect upon their children and their influence is woven into every aspect of daily life. Parents often know their children the best and so can provide real meaningful experiences for their child.

This is summed up in the Parents as Partners commitment statement from the EYFS which is stated at the beginning of this section.

When developing any work with parents on the home learning environment it is essential to value what parents already do with their children and avoid being patronising.

Celebrate the experiences they are already sharing with their children and build on these.





## Possible strategies and good practice examples:

- Offer parents information on early learning such as 'play' or 'schemas' in a variety of ways through booklets or group sessions.
- Offer parents workshops and family learning groups for example, Number and Play, Language and Play, Early Start.
- Send resources home such as books, treasure boxes, story sacks, include some information about the resources and ways to use them. Include a camera and post its for parents to record their child's play and prompt discussion with practitioners.
- Arrange meetings for parents to share ideas with each other about what they do with their child. Invite parents into the setting to share their interests with the children and staff and build this into future planning both at home and in the setting.
- Information/sessions could be provided which share with parents the potential for learning through everyday activities such as sorting out the washing, going to the shops, playing with empty boxes and tape. Parents do not have to spend lots of money on 'toys'.
- Joint activity sessions for parents and children for example, football skills or cooking and gardening.
- Hold information sessions at different times of the day to share ideas with parents on early learning such as different types of play, outside play, songs and rhymes.
- Through the sharing of children's learning records, give parents ideas of how they are supporting their children already at home and other things they could try.
- Arrange visits for children and parents to local parks/woodland to share ideas about learning outdoors and how valuable this is for young children.
- Offer 'Stay and Play' sessions or a parent and toddler session where that child and parent can play together, learning together in a fun way.

**This section has particular links to case studies 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 11.**







*'The best providers are continually working to improve that already excellent practice'*

**Ofsted 2008**

Reflective practice is at the heart of good early year's provision. Being able to continually evaluate and reflect on your current practice and then to develop it even further is the sign of a really good practitioner. Effective self evaluation will help practitioners consider how best to create, maintain and improve their setting.

This is as true for our practice when working with parents as for all other aspects of provision.

Possible strategies and good practice examples:

- It is a good idea to carry out an audit of your current practice to identify strengths and areas that may need developing further. (There is an example of an audit in the supporting materials).
- This audit should be completed by all staff who work at the setting and parent's views should also be sought. Consultation with parents is a very important part of effective partnership working.
- After you have identified areas for development it is a good idea to complete an action plan that clearly identifies what the steps to completion will be, when they will be completed by, who will be responsible, and how they will be evaluated. (There is an example of a blank and completed action plan in the supporting materials).
- Consideration should be given as to how parent's views are gathered. A written questionnaire is one method, this could be returned anonymously so parents are not worried about saying what they really think! (There is an example of a questionnaire for parents in the supporting materials).
- It may be effective sometimes to do parent 'interviews' which can be more personal and may be more useful for parents with poor literacy skills.
- Some consultations may need targeting at specific groups of parents for example, finding out what sort of activities male carers may be interested in.
- Consultations need to be carried out regularly as parents needs change and new families begin at the setting.
- Any self evaluation tools that you use should not be a 'one off' activity. They should be returned to after a period of time and used to monitor progress.

The information that you gather from consulting with parents and completing an audit can be used to inform the completion of the setting's Self Evaluation Form (SEF). Prompts to help you decide what to include in each section are included in the supporting materials booklet.

**This section has particular links to most of the case studies. Lots of the projects and ideas described in the case studies came about as a result of consulting with parents, evaluating current practice and adapting ways of working as a result.**

# Summary



Developing a true partnership with parents is not an easy task, there are no quick fix solutions, although there are some simple changes that practitioners can make that can make a setting into a much more approachable and 'easy to reach' place.

Anything however that tries to change attitudes and pre-conceptions takes time and must be persevered with. Added to that is the fact that every setting is different and every family is different and at a different stage in their lives and it can seem like a daunting task.

**But** partnership working with parents is possible and if practitioners are flexible and willing to provide a range of options for families to get involved the outcomes for children will be worth it.

If you would like further information on anything contained in this booklet, the case study cards or the supporting materials booklet please contact the Early Years and Childcare Team on the following numbers.

01946 506229

01539 773184

01228 601213



## References

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Desforges, C and Abouchar, A (2003) The impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review, Research Report 433. London: DFES

The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education (2008) DCSF

Whalley, M and the Pen Green Team (2001) involving Parents in their children's Learning. London: Paul Chapman Publishing

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project: Final Report (2004) DFES

The Early Years Foundation Stage (May 2008) DCSF



## Where can I find out more?

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### **earlyhomelearning.org.uk**

The early Home Learning Matters website brings together research papers, further reading and links to other useful websites.

### **teachernet.gov.uk/publications**

Every Parent Matters. The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education.

### **nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk**

Parents as Partners in Early Learning Project

An e-learning course to support practitioners in developing effective partnerships with parents.

Also the EYFS and lots of related resources.

### **peal.org.uk** Tel: 02078436100

PEAL training supports all early years settings to meet the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage and Children's Centre Practice Guidance to work in partnership with parents to enhance children's learning and development.

### **pengreen.org** Tel: 01536443435

Pen Green Centre for Under Fives and Families provides training and publications on working with parents.

### **pre-school.org.uk**

Lots of resources available which support settings in engaging parents and details of training programmes offered.

### **familyandparenting.org**

Lots of valuable information and case studies of projects such as ELP.

### **fatherhoodinstitute.org** Tel: 08456341328

The fatherhood Institute provides research, training, consultancy and publications including posters, guidance and training materials on father-inclusive practice.

### **paretinguk.org** Tel: 02072848370

Parenting UK is a national organisation for people who work with parents.

### **c4eo.org.uk**

The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's services.

### **cumbria.gov.uk/childrenservices/adulteducation/learners/family-learning.asp**

The family learning team will work with settings to deliver family learning courses. They have a range of courses that help parents to have fun with their child while supporting their learning and offer the opportunity for parents to brush up on their own literacy and number skills.



If you require this document in another format (e.g. CD, audio cassette, Braille or large type) or in another language, please telephone 01228 606060.

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