

Building partnerships between families and early childhood staff

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Mary's story



A staff member Mary was having a difficult time with three-year-old, James. He was refusing to do what she asked and often throwing tantrums. Mary was unsure about whether to talk to anyone; she felt she should be able to manage and was worried her work might be judged. After talking with staff, Mary approached James's mother Cathy. She asked if they could catch up later in the day to talk about James. When they caught up, Cathy described to Mary how she supported James at home, the boundaries she used and the approaches that generally seemed to work. Cathy shared her understanding of her child and how things might be different for him at preschool. The information Cathy provided allowed Mary to understand James in a new way and to reflect on how she might support him. The two agreed to meet again to talk about how James was going and how they could work together to support him.

What do partnerships between families and early childhood staff look like?

We have relationships with many people in our lives, for example with family, friends and neighbours, however we do not always develop partnerships with all of them. Relationships turn into partnerships when the people involved share a common goal, for example supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children, and share the responsibility for reaching that goal. Partnerships start with positive relationships and involve:

- ▶ everyone being equal and contributing in different ways
- ▶ each person being valued and respected for what they think even if there are differences
- ▶ listening and talking to each other
- ▶ making an effort to understand and trust other people's points-of-view
- ▶ checking in with each other when making important decisions and staff following a parent's or carer's lead.

Within early childhood services, families and staff may be in different stages of building partnerships. Some families and staff may have a relationship, but not yet developed a partnership. Some may be in the process of building a partnership. Others will have built and maintained partnerships over a long period of time and know each other quite well. Families may choose to be involved with their early childhood service at different levels. Whether a family and service shares a relationship or a partnership, they are able to work together to support children. Building partnerships takes time and ongoing effort and everyone needs to keep working at it; taking small steps works best. Families and staff who build partnerships experience more satisfaction when they interact with one another. Children benefit from this positive environment as it helps promote their mental health and wellbeing.



Families and staff who share partnerships experience more satisfaction when they interact with one another.



Partnerships benefit children, families and early childhood staff

'Young children do best—now and later—when they are nurtured within a tightly woven web of love.'

How do children benefit from partnerships?

Young children flourish when the adults caring for them work well together. Families and staff can share discussions about how children are going and how best to meet their needs. Families know their child's strengths, personality, moods and behaviours very well. Staff can also get to know a child well through their daily experiences and can share their understanding of how children develop. When families and staff work together they can exchange information and can focus on meeting each child's needs and supporting their development.

Partnerships allow children to see important people in their lives working well together. When children see positive communication between their parents or carers and staff, they begin to learn it is important to build healthy relationships. For example, children who see their parents or carers communicating well and being friendly with staff can learn this is how to relate well to others. Children can trust and feel safe with staff who are respected and supported by their family and who respect and support their family in return. Children can then feel comfortable at their early childhood service and enjoy positive experiences. Children feel valued and important when families and staff support and respect each other equally and take an interest in their lives. Parents and carers who are positively involved with their children can help reduce mental health difficulties.

In a partnership, families and staff can share their experiences with each other and their understanding of how their bond is important to a child. For example 'Ben really likes it when we read our farm book together and he just loves the animal noises I make'. Children are still developing and find it hard to separate their experiences from one environment to another, for example, being comfortable in the care of those at home as well as staff. When families and staff are in a partnership, children are more able to negotiate differences between settings, such as home and the early childhood service, as they see the adults who care for them working together. For example, children are able to manage different rules and routines in different places when they have an understanding of what the rules and routines are and when they are supported. The greater the predictability in care, the easier it is for children to develop a sense of who they are and what they can expect from those around them.

¹Baker, A.C. & Manfredi Petitt, L.A. (2004) Relationships, the heart of quality care: creating community among adults in early care settings. Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children, p. 7

How do families benefit from partnerships?

Through participation at their early childhood service, families have increased opportunities for connecting with other families that attend the service. Families benefit greatly from having a support network of people they can share information with and work through challenges together. Early childhood services may be able to connect families with one another or help access support in their community. With support from staff, families can feel comfortable leaving their children with people who are working in their child's best interests. When families feel understood and supported by those around them they experience better health and wellbeing.

Partnerships can help families and staff feel comfortable about approaching each other and relying on one another for support.



How do early childhood staff benefit from partnerships?

When staff share positive bonds with children's families, it helps the staff feel more connected, valued, rewarded and appreciated. Staff can more easily respond to children's needs by understanding a child's relationship with their parents, carers and siblings. Staff can also develop a deeper understanding of how each family would like their child to be raised. Having a 'bigger picture' of a child's world allows staff to relate to children in a way that makes them feel understood which then strengthens relationships. Relationships and partnerships assist staff feel confident and satisfied in their role of supporting the child and their development.

Mutual benefits of partnerships

Working together can help families and staff trust one another and communicate openly. When information is shared, families and staff are able to gain a deeper understanding of:

- ▶ how to work together to support children
- ▶ children's behaviour at home and at the early childhood service
- ▶ the most effective ways to support children's learning
- ▶ what children enjoy and what their strengths are
- ▶ resources for addressing children's difficulties.



Interacting within a partnership helps families and staff:

- ▶ feel welcome, respected and valued
- ▶ feel comfortable, confident and supported in their roles
- ▶ feel a sense of satisfaction from the trust others place in them
- ▶ work through differences, allowing adults to continue working together to support children
- ▶ benefit from the resources, ideas and energy that others provide
- ▶ benefit from shared decision-making
- ▶ see things from other people's perspectives
- ▶ develop strong connections with children
- ▶ feel a sense of satisfaction when children explore, learn and develop their skills
- ▶ have more opportunities to discuss child development.

Working together helps develop trust and communication.

The building blocks of partnerships

Building and maintaining partnerships takes time and effort from the people involved. There are four building blocks of positive partnerships between families and staff. These are family-centred care, communication, empathy and respect for diversity.

1. Family-centred care

Family-centred care is about families and staff being actively involved in the care and education of children. Utilising family knowledge and understanding, resources, and strengths assists shared decision making for children in the early childhood service. Family centred care also occurs when staff share information about children in an open, respectful and collaborative way. This enables parents and carers to feel acknowledged in their parenting role and have their own needs acknowledged. This helps provide the base for partnerships between families and staff. To provide family-centred care, it is important that staff and families:

- ▶ appreciate and value each other's knowledge and use this in caring for children
- ▶ communicate openly
- ▶ share information and decision-making
- ▶ recognise and respect diversity
- ▶ build support networks as needed.



2. Communication

Effective communication helps build partnerships. Honest, respectful communication and a genuine interest in one another helps to build trust. Trust allows people to be open about their thoughts and feelings. For families, effective communication assists them in explaining how they would like their child cared for in the service. For example, when a family member describes how they manage a behaviour at home so a similar approach can be used in the service. Communicating well involves two-way sharing of information, helps develop a common understanding and means it is easier for parents, carers and staff to support one another.

What kind of information may be beneficial to communicate?

- ▶ Beliefs and values in families and services
- ▶ The child's interests, strengths and challenging behaviours
- ▶ Social supports outside of the early childhood service
- ▶ Early childhood milestones and expected behaviours
- ▶ Family expectations and circumstances
- ▶ Service expectations and practices.

3. Empathy

Empathy is the effort made to understand others by considering and respecting their thoughts and feelings. It does not always mean people will agree with each other, but refers to being able to respect and accept differences. Empathy helps people feel connected with one another and means people are more willing to accept differences, helping relationships and partnerships survive. When parents, carers and staff show empathy and try to see things from each other's point of view they can become more connected. For example, when a parent or carer is too busy to stop and chat at pick up time, having empathy means understanding how stressful it can be when time is limited.

Ways to be empathetic toward others can include:

- ▶ Showing respect for other people's point of view, even when you do not agree
- ▶ Having a sense of goodwill or kindness towards other people
- ▶ Valuing the experience, knowledge and commitment the other brings to a partnership
- ▶ Being aware of the difficulties and challenges others face.

4. Respect for diversity

Diversity refers to differences between individuals, for example differences in family values, cultural or community background or people with a disability. Diversity also refers to differences in family structures, such as single-parent/carer families, same-sex parents and carers or inter-racial family compositions. Respect for differences between individuals means it can be easier to work with one another and share their background, values and beliefs. This helps people communicate their needs, find common ground, share an understanding and work together to achieve shared goals. For example, some individuals may have beliefs about the type of food they eat or have ways of dressing that are part of their community background. It helps for both families and staff to understand these beliefs and preferences and then also help children develop an understanding of diversity.



Building positive partnerships

Sometimes, a partnership means trying to understand things from another person's point of view. Every now and then, this can be difficult. The table below shows some common situations and suggestions for families and staff to work through them.

When things are difficult	What families might do	What staff might do
Feeling like your values are not respected	Bring something to the early childhood service to share your value or belief. For example, bring photos of special occasions or festivals that can be shown to staff and shared with children.	Share information or feelings with other staff during a team meeting to try to understand the family's point of view. Display the values of the early childhood service so families have access to see them (e.g., all families are welcome at the service)
Feeling like they are the only ones responsible and best able to care for children's safety and needs	Understand the demands on staff (e.g., having to care for many children, relate to different families and think about multiple family needs) and that they are doing the best they can.	Understand the family's situation and that they are doing the best they can. Share specific safety policies (e.g., sun smart policy), provide information in the newsletter or in the common area of the service.
Not feeling comfortable with each other	Learn the names of staff members and use their names when you greet them. Ask them about their day and take an interest in staff as you would your own friends. Share information about your own day and interests. Relationships develop as people start to share some personal information.	Learn the names of family members and use their names when you greet them. Ask them about their day and take an interest in families as you would your own friends. Share information about your own day and interests. Relationships develop as people start to share some personal information.

When things are difficult	What families might do	What staff might do
Disagreeing with other people's opinions	<p>Find a time to speak to the staff member when you are not rushed and try to be clear about your issue or concern.</p> <p>Try to see things from the other person's perspective.</p> <p>Try to find a common understanding if possible. If not, acknowledge differences.</p>	<p>Find a time to speak with the parent or carer when you are not rushed and try to be clear about your issue or concern.</p> <p>Try to see things from the other person's perspective.</p> <p>Try to find a common understanding if possible. If not, acknowledge differences.</p>
Not knowing who to approach or how to ask questions	<p>Ask a staff member you feel comfortable with. If you can't identify anyone ask to speak to the person in charge.</p> <p>Ask another parent or carer how they might approach the situation.</p> <p>Use the communication book in your service or email or phone with your questions.</p> <p>Provide the service with a family contact person in case staff have any questions, need help understanding your family or child's needs or wish to share information.</p>	<p>Approach family members and check who you can talk to if you have questions.</p> <p>Have information evenings to let families know which staff they can approach if they have questions or give contact phone numbers and email. Explain how the service communication book works to families.</p> <p>Provide families with a key staff contact person in case families have any questions about the service, their child's wellbeing or wish to share information.</p> <p>Put up posters in highly visible areas letting families know who they can go to if they have questions.</p>



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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