

Partnerships with Families –
One More Thing to Do (Not!)

Anne Stonehouse

Partnerships with Families

- **What does *partnership* mean?**
- **Why are partnerships challenging?**
- **Why do they matter?**
- **What do they look like on a daily basis?**

- **As in all relationships, when there is a problem with a family, empathy helps. Try putting yourself in their shoes, seeing the situation from their perspective.**

- **A partnership is a relationship, not a set of strategies or a 'program component'. When it's a priority, it affects just about every aspect of your practice.**

- **Saying 'I don't have time' is saying 'I don't want to' or 'It isn't a priority'.**

Partnerships involve

- **Mutual respect**
- **Trust**
- **Sensitivity to the perspectives of the partner(s)**
- **Ongoing both-ways communication**

- **Shared goals (the child's wellbeing)**
- **Teamwork, absence of rivalry or competition**
- **Recognition and valuing of the unique strengths and contribution of the other**
- **Shared decision making**

- Children's learning, development and wellbeing are supported by strong, mutually respectful relationships between educators and children and their families.

- Early childhood services build on and strengthen the child's belonging to family, culture and community.

- Contributors and challenges to educator-family partnerships in FDC**
- Single carer
 - Possibility of long-term relationship
 - Child's experience occurs in a family home and alongside and as part of family life
 - Diversity of carers and settings

- Changes for good**
- EC services as supports for child rearing in the family
 - Every family needs support
 - Educators have to initiate and persevere
 - FDC not taking the place of the child's family
 - Less confusion with friendship

- More likely to share 'good news'
- Both-ways communication
- Recognition of family diversity and need to look at child in context of family
- Respectful of families' privacy

Challenges

- Confusion with involvement and participation
- Not an 'anything goes' approach – clarity about priorities, what matters most
- Not a license to educate parents
- Seeing partnerships as bringing two (or more!) perspectives and types of expertise together

- Partnerships involve professionals sharing power and authority with families.

It's worth asking:

What are the areas in which I will not or cannot be flexible or compromise?

What are the areas where I/we negotiate with families?

What are the areas in which families make the decisions?

- A parent's role is to be the President of his or her child's fan club.

More challenges

- Tendency to blame the other
- Parents' focus on their child
- Can't always put the child first
- Complex feelings about child's relationship with educator

Cautions and challenges

- **Taking responsibility away from families**
- **Keeping the child at the centre**
- **Individualising expectations**
- **Finding strengths, respecting vulnerabilities**
- **Accepting lack of objectivity**

Cautions and challenges (cont.)

- Offering a variety of ways to connect
- Letting parents be parents
- Getting issues out in the open
- Adopting a 'why not' approach
- Building relationships with other services

Working in partnership isn't an additional thing to do but rather a way of going about your work. It's as much about *how* you do what you do, *how* you say what you say, as it is about *what* you do and say.

A partnership is a relationship. A relationship is a matter of both heart and mind. It cannot be reduced to a strategy or a set of activities.

- **Partnerships are built over time not usually through major encounters but through a collection of small encounters, sometimes brief, often almost unconscious, sometimes seemingly insignificant.**

- **Practise your profession in the knowledge that the best thing you can do for most children is to support child rearing in the family and the child's relationship with his or her family.**

- **What is there in your physical environment that says to families 'You are welcome here, you belong here'?**
- **What messages do families get about their 'place', their role, in your service - from the ways you communicate with them and the ways you go about your work?**
- **If you genuinely take on board the message that what matters most in a child's life is the relationship with family and the family's ability to support the child's wellbeing, how will that affect your work on Monday? What might you do differently?**