

The Early Years Foundation Stage recognises the need for 'a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers' as part of the overarching principle of enabling environments. That is all it has to say on the matter.

As childcare professionals, we believe that the most important thing we need to provide for parents is peace of mind. After all, they are entrusting us with their very precious child, and we have to earn their trust.

Partnership, though, by definition, implies a reciprocal relationship with input and action from both parties. Strong partnerships are characterised by good communications, rapport, mutually respectful relationships, and shared expectations. These do not just happen. They take time, effort and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain.

Building relationship

The opportunity to build such a relationship with parents and carers starts with their initial contact with us. It's helpful to review our approach:

- does everyone who answers the phone, door or email do so in a friendly, welcoming and professional manner?
- do we make judgements about carers? And what might we base our judgements on? Race, colour, gender, age, accent, language, clothes, job or no job?
- have we already decided whether this is someone we feel comfortable to work with?



A cake and a chat at a grandparents' day



David Wright reviews the techniques and practices he and his business partner and wife Anna have developed over the years at their seven settings serving diverse communities in order to build a strong partnership with parents and carers

Genuine partnership

- how do we communicate the importance of shared values between home and setting?
- do we explicitly acknowledge parents as their children's primary carers?
- do we recognise and value their knowledge, experience and expertise regarding their child's culture, character, needs and potential?
- do we acknowledge their legitimate worries about leaving their child in our care?

We have found that a simple phone call to reassure a parent that their child is settled and happy, is really appreciated. Often the conversation is along the lines of – "No, there's nothing wrong; I just wanted to let you know that he calmed down within a minute of you leaving and he's having a lovely day out in the garden . . ."

When you've left a distressed infant, receiving a text message or email with a photo of your child, contented and playing cheerfully is very comforting.

Getting to know you

When a child is staying with us on their own for the first time, we provide parents with a My First Day at Paint Pots sheet with a photo of

their child and simple details of who cared for her, who she played with, the day's activities et cetera. It's not only a great keepsake but also a good starting point for a discussion about her character, likes and dislikes, care routines, learning dispositions and development areas.

We have found that opportunities for staff and carers to get to know one another as individuals create openings for building relationships. The parent who has shared a slice of cake, a cup of tea and a chat with you about your mutual interest in cats, is more likely to see you as a trusted partner when it comes to discussing their child's development or to be more understanding on that rare occasion when the 'precious' toy from home goes missing.

We have an open-door policy for parents and carers to join us at any time but rather than leave this as a passive default option, we regularly encourage engagement through the scheduling of a rolling programme of events including:

- grandparents day (really popular)
- dads' (and other male carers') breakfast, on a Saturday
- teddy bears' picnic (for new pre-school children each year)
- Divali celebration
- babies' picnic

My First Day at Paint Pots

Monday, 15th April 2013

I have been really happy today. I spent a lot of time exploring new things.

I have enjoyed lots of cuddles with all the staff and playing with wooden spoons and brushes in a basket.

I settled really quickly and smiled a lot.

This morning, I squeezed jelly between my fingers.

This afternoon, I went for a walk to the common.

I slept from -
10:00 - 11:15, 1:30 - 2:25

I had all my bottles

My special person's name is :

Sam

and the other staff who looked after me are called :

Jo, Becky

I met some new friends :

Ben, Aisha, Mia and Ffion

They can't wait to see me next time.

I had a great first day!!



- Christmas fayre
- spring bonnet parade
- mums' pamper day, with children providing the pampering
- Stay-and-play sessions
- settling sessions when children start
- dads' football match
- invitations to join your child for lunch.

Breaking down barriers

Our settings serve diverse communities across our city. Sometimes we find barriers to engagement: families for whom English is not their primary language; families who may be suspicious of us because they view us as another 'official' agency; those, often males, who might be embarrassed or intimidated by the thought of entering the nursery or pre-school environment. In these situations, it is even more important to work at communication, respect, trust-building and empathy.

How do we make our settings less 'threatening' and put parents at their ease?

- We try and employ staff from the local community.
- When organising dads' breakfasts, we try to make sure there is at least one male staff member present. We recognise that men like doing things. So, we organise practical activities that they can help their child with – read a story, build a tower, paint a picture. They are not just stood around awkwardly.

- We invite carers in for a purpose. We ask them what their interests, talents or skills are and get them to come and share them with the children – so we have had an Africa day, Polish day, India day and other activities based round dancing, a pirate, a police officer, a farmer, a vet and so on.

Working together

We work with families to share and extend learning-and-development ideas between setting and home. We have developed leaflets covering learning areas, ideas and development activities to do with 'your child at home', including Tummy Time, Weaning, Maths, Physical Development, Healthy Eating. We are now packaging these for distribution on a CD-ROM.

Sharing bags are a great way of packaging activities. Bags contain laminated information sheets, items and resources. We have developed a whole range of story (or book) bags:

- language and communication bags – bubbles, Mr Tongue books
- activity bags – maths, science
- creativity bags
- care bags – potty training and so on.

We also use our own 'All About Me' books to encourage parents to work with their children to share pictures and details about their home and family with staff and friends.

Let's talk

Communication is such a vital component of the partnership recipe. There is no single infallible method of communication. If there were, we would be using it! But first and most important, we talk with, and listen to, carers –

every day, at the start and end of sessions, at parents' meetings and during all the opportunities we create for their involvement. We also use newsletters, email, Facebook, our website, Twitter, notice boards, daily diaries, photos, video, questionnaires and so on.

Sharing the benefits

Building relationships, trust and mutual respect and working together, sharing information and expectations, and celebrating achievements, all bring huge benefits – for us as a staff, for our parents and, of course, for our children.

Friendship and fun make partnership happen. We make working together achievable through listening, encouragement, invitation and support. We build welcoming environments. We use home resources that build on our daytime activities. We actively ask for input from our families. We are building an extended family where we all have a contribution to make and in which we all live and grow together. The benefits? – happy staff, children and families. How do we know? – they tell us! ■

Simple but effective props for a pirates' day



- David Wright co-owns, with his wife Anna, Paint Pots Nurseries. They run the seven settings, all in the Southampton area, together, guided by their motto, 'Love, Laughter and Learning'.

T: 023 8022 7931 M: 07932 427 727 E: info@paintpotsnursery.co.uk
W: www.paintpotsnursery.co.uk Twitter: @Mr_Paintpots