Working in Partnership with Parents

A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals
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Introduction

Development and education research confirms that the more involved parents* are in their children’s learning and development, the greater chance children have to succeed. We now know that ‘parental attitudes, styles of interaction, behaviours and relationships with schools are associated with children’s social development and academic performance’ (Lopez, Kreider, & Caspe, 2004, p. 2). One of the hallmarks of a quality early childhood setting is that it works in partnership with parents to provide an environment in which babies, toddlers and young children are happy, feel they belong and can develop to their fullest potential. In this environment, parents and educators work together to share information and expertise, and to make joint decisions in order to give children rich experiences.

Over the past 14 years there has been a wealth of information developed in Ireland to support professionals working in early learning and care. Most notably, Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, along with the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. These frameworks highlight the important role that parents play in the lives of their child, and provide ideas and strategies that early childhood settings can implement to ensure real and meaningful partnership with parents. In 2018, the Government launched First: 5 A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028, which further emphasises the critical role the family has in supporting positive experiences for young children.

Educators working in the early learning and care sector in Ireland recognise the need to establish a true partnership with parents based on trust and respect. The challenge remains, however, how to translate theory into practice. This guide explores strategies that will enable you to work in partnership with parents in children’s learning and social development. Building partnerships is a daily process based on ongoing communications. To do this takes commitment, a range of skills and time to reflect on the measures already in place, how effective they are and what could be done differently.

The terms ‘parent’ or ‘parents’ used throughout this book refers to any person or persons who are the primary caregiver for the child (mothers, fathers, foster carers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, etc.).
Section 1

What is Partnership with Parents?

What Do We Mean by Partnership?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines partnership as ‘an association of two or more people as partners’, with a partner defined as either one of ‘a pair of people engaged together in the same activity’ or ‘a person or group that takes part with another or others in doing something’.

The partnership between parents and professionals in early learning and care is defined in Aistear as involving parents, families and educators ‘working together to benefit children’ (NCCA, 2009, p.7) with each recognising, respecting and valuing what the other does and says. There is responsibility on both sides of this partnership, which is about building the relationship between the parents and the setting based on a sense of purpose, and the willingness to collaborate (French, 2018).

Parental partnership in early childhood settings requires us, as educators, to encourage participation by parents in a consistent, organised and meaningful way in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes and activities that assist the development of their child. This involves exchanging information, asking questions, listening to one another, and sharing decision-making, responsibility and accountability (Jackson & Forbes, 2015). The partnership/relationship needs to be based on trust and a mutual respect that is cultivated over time.

Quality early learning and care settings value and support the role of parents and seek open and honest partnerships that establish harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences. The development of connections and interactions between the setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community add to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows (DES, 2017).

It is tempting to sometimes think that parents are too busy with their work and family to become true partners in early learning and care, but dedicating time and energy to develop relationships with parents shows a respect for them as the primary educators of their child and has long-reaching benefits for everyone involved (Albrecht, Fienchtener & Banks, 2016).
How Our Understanding of Partnership Developed

The Bio-Ecological Systems Model of Relationships

Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems model of relationships has been highly influential in the re-thinking of early childhood development in a social, cultural and political context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The model places the child nested in a series of interacting systems made up of caregivers, family, community, wider society and culture, with children’s development and learning being influenced not only by these systems, but by the interactions that occur between them. Bronfenbrenner's core belief was that trusting bonds and positive relationships are the basis for healthy positive development and learning. Figure 1 below shows the structure of Bronfenbrenner’s model.

![Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems model](image)
Bronfenbrenner’s model provides us with a framework to help understand how effective relationships between parent, educator and the environment impact on the child. The layers or systems in the model interact with and influence each other, and have direct and indirect influences on the child’s development over time. In order to fully understand a child’s development, therefore, we must look not just at their immediate relationships and environment, but also consider the interaction between the systems in their wider environment. For example, the way a child’s parents interact and connect with you in the early learning and care setting can increase the parents’ knowledge of child development and early learning as well as their confidence in the parenting role.

**Types of Parental Partnership**

Joyce Epstein, Director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnership in the US, expanded on Bronfenbrenner’s model, developing a theory of overlapping spheres of influence, again based on the idea that children learn more when parents, educators and others in the community work together to guide and support learning and development. Epstein (2007) suggested that parents are valuable resources that bring added value to an education setting, and that when parents spend more time in the setting the curriculum is enriched.
Epstein (2009) outlined a framework of six types of what she called ‘family involvement’:

1. **Parenting** – Supporting the role of parents through education or family support, and assisting families to establish home environments to support children as learners.

2. **Communicating** – Ensuring effective exchange of information between the home and setting about children’s learning and addressing issues such as language and literacy.

3. **Volunteering** – Recruiting parents to assist in the setting as required.

4. **Learning at home** – Providing ideas and information to support learning experiences in the home.

5. **Decision making** – Empowering parents to make real decisions about the setting, usually as part of a committee.

6. **Collaborating with the community** – Identifying local resources for the benefit of families, settings and community.

Epstein emphasised, however, that partnership is a better description than the often used term ‘involvement’ to recognise that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for children’s learning and development. Parental involvement is more of a ‘doing to’, in other words telling parents what they should do, whereas authentic partnership with parents is a ‘doing with’, listening to parents’ ideas and knowledge of their child.

As far back as the early 1980s the Pen Green Centre for children and their families have been committed to engaging parents as decision-makers in the planning and implementation of work at the centre. Their approach is about encouraging families to take an equal and active role in developing responsive services. They learned that, in order for such engagement to take place, educators need to give up some of their power, listen to the views of the parents and discover their reality through a two-way conversation. The vision of the Pen Green Centre is underpinned by two firm beliefs (Whalley, 2007):

- All parents are interested in their own child.
- It is the task of early years educators to find ways that parents can participate.
Partnership with Parents in Context

As outlined above, we know that children learn, develop and mature within a wider social, cultural and political context. It is important, therefore, to understand the policy context in Ireland and how it impacts on children and families, and the relationship between parents and educators.

Parents as primary educators

*The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*

Ireland signed up to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. The Convention provides an internationally accepted standard on respecting the rights of children. The UNCRC impacts on Irish policy and legislation to ensure that children’s right to survival, development, protection and participation are central to the education and care they receive. The Convention acknowledges the primary role that parents and the family have in the care and protection of children as well as the role of the State in helping them to carry out these duties. In particular, Article 5 of the convention affirms that ‘State Parties shall respect the responsibilities and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child’.

*Bunreacht na hEireann*

Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution also identifies parents as the primary educators of their children:

> The state acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their child.

Policy and regulation

*First 5 Strategy*

*First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018) is a 10-year plan that focuses on improving the lives of young children and their families. *First 5* highlights that ‘the provision of quality services requires everyone working with children and families to communicate and cooperate with one another and with children and families in
an atmosphere of mutual respect and common purpose and partnership.’ In order to achieve this, there is a commitment within the strategy to develop advice, guidance and training for early learning and care settings to build effective working relationships with all parents, families and communities.

**The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016**

It is the duty of every person carrying on a pre-school service to take all reasonable measures to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of the children attending the service and to comply with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (DCYA, 2016a) and the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendments) Regulations 2016 developed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Known as the Early Years Regulations 2016, these place a significant emphasis on the governance of early childhood settings to ensure that the attending children are safe, receive appropriate care and have a positive experience where they can develop and learn in a quality service.

In September 2018, Tusla published a Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla, 2018a), which gives further guidance on how settings can ensure compliance with the Early Years Regulations 2016. Parents are referenced specifically in two regulations and the QRF gives more guidance on these as outlined below.
Regulation 17. Information for Parents

As a registered provider, you must provide all relevant information about the service, the type of care provided and the facilities available to the parents and guardians of children proposing to attend the service in a way they can understand. The Regulation outlines four core requirements: roles and responsibilities, information provided to parents and guardians, access to information, and publically displayed information in the service.


As the registered provider, you must ensure the health and welfare and development of the child. You achieve this through implementing an appropriate programme and care practices that support the learning, development and wellbeing of each child, taking their individual interests and needs into consideration.

Tusla’s QRF highlights the importance of services respecting and valuing all parents, guardians and families. Examples given in the QRF are as follows:

- Recognising parents and guardians as the primary carers and educators of their children.
- Communicating with parents and guardians in a sensitive, supportive and confidential manner, while being open and honest.
- Working with parents and guardians by sharing knowledge and observations of the child’s interests, strengths, developmental and care needs, approaches to learning, changes in their life, and any other concerns.
- Providing parents and guardians with daily information, including significant events or activities involving their child (for example, their child’s sleep and rest patterns).
- Providing opportunities for parents and guardians to be involved with service activities, taking into account the family circumstances, the parents’ or guardians’ particular interests and their time commitments.

Early Years Quality Frameworks

There are a number of quality frameworks in place in Ireland to support early childhood educators to work in partnership with parents and these highlight how important it is for parents to be involved in the care and education of their child.
Síolta

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, is designed to define, assess and support quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood settings where children aged birth to six years are present. First developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in consultation with the early childhood sector in 2006, a revised edition was published in 2017 (DES, 2017).

Síolta is based on **12 Principles of Quality** that reflect the values underpinning the framework and the vision of quality provision it offers. One of the principles acknowledges the role that parents have in the lives of their children and the need for early learning and care services to value and support this role, ‘Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.’ The practical application of the Síolta principles is supported through 16 Standards of Quality. Síolta Standard 3 Parents and Families states ‘Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.’ *Síolta Standard 3 is examined further in Section 3.*

Aistear

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009, provides information to support educators in planning for and providing enjoyable and challenging learning experiences. At the heart of Aistear is the vision of children as competent and confident learners from birth.

As well as highlighting how, by working together, parents and educators can enhance children’s learning and development, Aistear acknowledges that, where there are specific needs such as poverty, cultural identity, or issues with literacy or disabilities, the parent/educator partnership is especially significant. It also acknowledges that a partnership approach is particularly important at times of change in a child’s life and that, by working together and sharing information, parents and educators can help make these times easier for the child.

*Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*

The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (www.aistearsiolta.ie), designed to support settings to use Aistear and Síolta together, focuses on four areas in relation to the partnership with parents: supporting learning and development, sharing information, contributing, and making decisions and advocating.
Section 2

Benefits of Working in Partnership with Parents

The needs of children must be the central interest of any early learning and care service and one of the hallmarks of a quality service is that it works in partnership with parents to focus on these needs. Research consistently demonstrates that this ongoing partnership approach is not only beneficial for the here and now, but can lead to positive outcomes for children into adulthood.

The benefits of developing a partnership with parents is well documented in both Síolta and Aistear, as well as many research papers including Anne Fitzpatrick (2012) ‘Working with Parents in Early Years Services’.

Benefits for Children

When you work in partnership with parents:

- Children feel more secure and settled in their environment as their home life is visible in the setting, for example on a family wall.
- Children can benefit more from the educational opportunities given to them and enjoy learning.
- Children feel respected as their family’s values, language, culture, diet and traditions are reflected in the service.
- Children learn social skills from the respectful relationships they see between the adults in their life.
- Children have the potential to experience a richer learning environment at home with activities complementing those of the early childhood setting.
- By learning about children’s needs through parents, educators can tailor the curriculum to suit.
An example from practice

Jen had recently started in the local pre-school setting. Although she was settling in reasonably well, over a number of weeks Tania, Jen’s key person, noticed that she had some difficulty communicating and at times isolated herself from her peers, choosing to play alone. Tania met with Jen’s parents, Michele and Cormac, to discuss their observations and how Jen could be supported. It transpired that Jen had recently started attending speech therapy so Tania suggested that some of the exercises that Michele and Cormac were doing with her at home could be replicated in the setting on a daily basis. They agreed and were delighted that the service could offer this level of support. Over the following weeks Tania blended the speech therapy exercises into small group time and noticed a significant improvement in Jen’s communication and that she was also isolating herself less from her peers and immersing herself in the play activities that the group were engaged in.
Benefits for Parents

When you value and respect parents:

- Parents feel that their family’s values, practices, traditions and beliefs are understood and taken into account.
- Parents’ knowledge of their child increases as they have access to information and advice about their child’s interests and behaviour when they are not present.
- Parents feel confident about contributing to their child’s development and learning both in the service and home.
- Parents understand why early childhood care and education is important.
- Parents feel more confident about becoming involved in their child’s primary school and later education, and may develop higher aspirations for their child.
- Parents may get to know other parents better, which can lead to developing social networks.
- Parents are supported to create a good home learning environment for their child.

An example from practice

Marita ran a full day care service where the children attending came from culturally diverse backgrounds. As a way of promoting identity and belonging in the children, Marita decided to develop ‘show and tell’ opportunities for parents and children. She posted a notice about this on the service Facebook page and put fliers up on the noticeboards throughout the setting. She also mentioned it to parents during conversations at collection time. She asked if any parents would be interested in reading stories or demonstrating cookery, arts and crafts, music or anything else that showed aspects of their home culture. The initial response was slow until a mum from Syria, Sabra, volunteered to read a Syrian story that was popular with her children and bring in some treats that they ate as a family that she had made with her daughter. It was a great success and Sabra and her daughter both felt proud that their contribution had been so appreciated by staff, children and other parents. Marita felt that her relationship with Sabra had been enriched as a result, and had given Sabra confidence to ask Marita for advice and support with her parenting. Other parents became involved in ‘show and tell’ and together these parents created their own support network.
Benefits to Educator/Service

Working in partnership with parents enables you to:

- Draw on parents’ knowledge in planning for children’s learning, making it more enjoyable and rewarding for all the children.
- Support the parents in their overall parenting role.
- Learn from parents’ expertise and skills.
- Provide a more emotionally secure environment for children.
- Feel more valued in your role by parents.
- Find your role more varied and interesting.

An example from practice

Patrick ran a busy sessional service and was always looking at how he could improve the quality of care that he and the team were providing. Within the service there were a number of children who were benefiting from AIM (Access and Inclusion Model) supports but Patrick believed that he could do more to help.

He began researching sensory rooms and looked at how he could incorporate this into the service. Naturally, cost was a factor and Patrick was realistic about the timeframe for sourcing the money needed. He spoke with the parents of the children who would directly benefit from this additional support and they all got behind the idea of the sensory room. The parents formed a fundraising group and put in place a programme of events for the coming months where both an awareness of the potential benefits of a sensory room and money could be raised. Patrick was overwhelmed by their initiative and generosity. He also recognised that the relationships that he had developed and cultivated with the parents through this project would greatly benefit the service in many ways.
All children are unique and each child’s way of being in the world is different from the next. For this reason, as an early childhood educator, you will consider children’s interests, temperament, knowledge, skills, values and understanding when planning to support their learning, development, wellbeing and belonging. Parents too are unique in their parenting role yet they are often viewed by educators as a homogenous group. As a result, parents are sometimes offered only very limited or inflexible opportunities to become more involved in the setting.

Parental partnership should take many forms, with each service determining what ‘fits’, not only for themselves but also for the parents in the setting. A good starting point is to reflect and evaluate as a team on what you are currently doing, what is working well and what could be working better, and agree the issues that you need to address and the action you need to take. This will help to create a shared understanding of what parental partnership means, enabling you to reflect on what it currently looks like in your service and plan actions to build relationships with parents.

The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide has a useful self-evaluation form to help individual practitioners or whole settings to reflect on how they work with parents. 
**Welcoming Parents**

Considering how parents feel when they are in your setting is key to setting the scene for building strong relationships. Ensuring people feel safe and secure, are in a welcoming environment and know that they are being seen and heard helps to create a strong foundation for partnerships with parents.

**Ideas to help parents feel welcome**

- Be friendly, warm and respectful in your interactions with parents.
- Greet parents by name.
- If space allows, set up a parents’ room with facilities for tea and coffee.
- Ensure parents feel welcome to stay in their child’s room for a period at arrival and collection times. Adult-sized seating in the room will help with this.
- Display photos and names of staff outside children’s rooms so parents know the names of the people who spend time with their child.
- Ensure the setting is physically accessible for everyone, including people with physical disabilities and parents with prams.
- Reflect the diversity of the families attending the setting in the environment, for example in posters and visual displays.
- Put up signs in the setting to help direct people around the premises.
- Plan the settling-in period with parents so they know from the outset that their input is welcomed.
An example from practice

Martina had been appointed as key person to Lenny, a one-year-old boy who was joining the early childhood setting. Before Lenny started, his mother Sarah, who was parenting alone, had been asked to fill in a form giving details about Lenny’s interests and needs. Martina then visited Lenny at home to discuss this further with Sarah and to observe Lenny in his home environment. Martina discovered that Lenny was very attached to Sarah, he loved being outdoors and had a favourite bunny called Lopsy.

Martina and Sarah made a plan together to enable Lenny to settle into the Centre. Sarah would come in with Lenny the following week and stay for a couple of hours for the first three days. Lenny would be able to see the other children and educators in the room and Martina would be emotionally and physically available to him. On the fourth and fifth day, Sarah would leave Lenny with Martina for an hour and would extend the time she left Lenny until the time was reached when he was clearly happy to go into the setting. Lenny would bring his bunny to the setting, his favourite book and a little album of photos of his extended family.

For the first couple of weeks, Martina and Lenny played with the bunny together and went through his photo album, and Martina made sure they went outside every day. She observed and monitored the playthings, people and equipment Lenny found interesting and soon began to learn his cues for hunger, tiredness and need for nappy changes. Lenny learned that Martina was there for him and settled in quickly. Sarah was happy leaving her son with Martina, knowing that she cared for Lenny and respected her input as his mother.

Síolta Standard 3: Parents and Families

As outlined in Section 1, Síolta Standard 3 relates to the practice area of Parents and Families. This standard is comprised of four components, which provide quality indicators to be addressed when reflecting on how we engage with parents: formal and informal opportunities for communication and information sharing; opportunities for parents to be involved in activities within the setting; provision of information and support to parents; and parental involvement policies and procedures. We will now look at each of these in more detail.
Formal and Informal Opportunities for Communication and Information Sharing

Sharing and gathering information on a child’s developing and emerging interests is important for building a more complete picture of the child and planning the curriculum. Parents are the child’s primary caregiver and educator, and, as such, are a wealth of information on their child. Informal and formal opportunities for communication and information sharing should take place on a regular basis with both parties having a say about how this should happen (French, 2018). Parents continually make decisions about their children – about their health, activities, food, routines, who they spend time with and where, and the kind of care and education they receive – and can provide settings with important information to help with decisions about their children’s learning and development. They must always be included when important decisions are being made about their children.

The key person approach

An effective way to build relationships with parents is through a key person approach. The key person approach in early years is a method of care in which each child is assigned a particular educator who will support the child and their family by building a special relationship with them. It is important for a child’s wellbeing that they have an adult in the setting with whom they feel connected. This person gets to know the child really well through the provision of sensitive and responsive care, acting as a secure base from which the child can explore and learn, and providing a safe haven at times when the child is feeling overwhelmed and is in need of comfort. The key person acts as the primary contact with a child’s parents and will develop warm, responsive and sensitive communication with the parent (Barnardos, 2016). As this is a reciprocal relationship, it facilitates both the formal and informal opportunities for communication and information sharing.
An example from practice

Liz brought her 10-month-old son Niall into the baby room and sat on the sofa to take off his jacket. Sinéad, Niall’s key person, noticed that Liz appeared a little stressed so she approached the two of them gently, greeting them with a smile. Liz told her that Niall woke several times during the night crying and she was now exhausted as a result. Sinéad acknowledged how tiring that must be and wondered if Niall was feeling ok. Liz reflected on her son’s behaviour and considered possible reasons such as teething, an ear infection or the fact that Niall’s cot had recently been moved to his own bedroom. Sinéad listened empathically as Liz talked and remarked, ‘It can be difficult to know what is going on for babies when they can’t talk yet.’ They sat together for a few minutes and discussed different possibilities and made a plan together.

Ideas for supporting two-way communication and information sharing

Informal opportunities

- Have an open door policy.
- Initiate daily chats with parents at arrival and departure times.
- Use a daily diary.
- Encourage parents to contribute to children’s portfolios by documenting observations and photos from home.
- Have regular phone calls (especially with parents you don’t see regularly).

Formal opportunities

- Ask for information during the enrolment processes, for example through use of a ‘Getting to Know You’ form.
- Go on home visits.
- Arrange parent-educator meetings to discuss the developmental progress of individual children.
Methods of information sharing

- Parent notice board – regularly updated
- Parent newsletters (print and email)
- Social media posts
- Emails
- Texts
- Website
- Use of software such as early years apps

A note about technology

As information sharing through technology (through text messages, group chats, social media platforms, forums and websites) has become more prevalent, there is an opportunity to improve the speed and efficiency of communication with parents. You might choose to communicate the service’s policies and expectations on the service website, for example, or relay arrangements for the Christmas party with a group of parents through the service social media account such as Facebook or Twitter. This saves time, keeps parents in the loop and is useful for informing or reminding parents about upcoming events and activities. Technology can be used to enhance the partnership relationship in other ways. For example, you might share children’s learning and development with parents through photos or videos taken throughout the day, for example of a child engaged in junk modelling. This allows parents to view and comment on records of activities and observations shared by the service, or share their own observations of their child through video.

While the benefits of technology are many, ‘there is a need for a measured and balanced approach when introducing technology to the service’ (Barnardos, 2019). You must always consider the rights of children, families and staff members to privacy and personal dignity before posting or sharing any information about a child or family. Barnardos publication Social Media and Technology Use by Early Childhood Educators (2019) offers more guidance on this.
Opportunities for Parents to be Involved in Activities within the Setting

Parents can make a valuable contribution to their children’s learning and development by sharing their time, experiences and talents with the setting. However, it is important to respect the level of involvement that each parent is comfortable with (Barnardos, 2012). Some parents may decide not to become involved in activities at all or may wait until their second or third child joins the setting before feeling confident enough to participate at this level. A lack of involvement can be due to a number of factors such as family pressures, language barriers, serious changes in family life, employment status, lack of trust in outside services and the setting’s capacity to engage parents (Tait & Prodger, 2017). It is important that you engage parents ‘where they are at’ by finding ways of tuning in to their interests and values.

Ideas for getting parents involved

- Ask for parent representation on board of management or parents’ committee.
- Invite parents to contribute their skills, for example, storytelling or web design.
- Invite parents to spend time in the setting (volunteering).
- Involve parents based on their interests, for example, during a gardening activity.
- Include parents in celebrating special occasions.
- Invite feedback from parents, for example, through a suggestion box.

An example from practice

Agnieszka was managing a full day setting and was working with the cook, Clarissa, to review the three-week menu plan. She was aware that Colin, one of the parents, worked as a chef and she asked him would he like to be involved in the process. Colin said he was delighted to be asked and although he wasn’t available to meet with Agnieszka and Clarissa due to work commitments, he reviewed the current menu and made suggestions through emails. Colin’s knowledge and skills proved very beneficial as he shared nutritional recipes and tips in relation to cost effectiveness. When the menu was finalised, Agnieszka shared it with all the parents for further feedback. Colin’s contribution was acknowledged in the next parents’ newsletter.
Provision of Information and Support to Parents

As a daily feature in families’ lives, the early years setting is ideally placed to be a source of information and support to parents. However, it is important to be careful not to display your expertise in child development at the expense of parents’ self-confidence (Post, Hohman & Epstein, 2011). Regardless of how much you know about infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers, an effective and sensitive educator will understand that parents will always know their child best. Supporting parents in a sensitive and respectful way is key to building effective caregiver-parent partnerships.

There are many good sources of information that can be accessed to support you in your role of providing information and support to parents.

- Barnardos has a wide range of free booklets for parents on topics such as behaviour, child development, arts experiences and outdoor play (shop.barnardos.ie)
- The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide has a range of tip sheets that can be printed for parents on a variety of topics including play, enjoying books and using open-ended materials. Some of these are available in different languages.
- Helpmykidlearn.ie is another useful source of information that can printed and distributed to parents. This website was created by the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) to help enable parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development.

Ideas for providing information and support

- Display photos/storyboards with captions to help share knowledge of child development and learning.
- Share examples of children’s work with parents through visual displays and videos of children at play.
- Hold parent workshops on a range of topics, for example nutrition.
- Develop a lending library for toys or books.
- Collect information on services and organisations that parents might be interested in, for example, speech and language therapy.
- Invite professionals into the service to meet parents and share information, for example, oral health promotion.
- Engage in a transition programme to support parents in preparing their children for primary school.

An example from practice

Jolanta's son, Max, was due to start primary school in September and she was feeling anxious about this big transition. She worried about the big class sizes and was concerned that Max would feel overwhelmed in a school classroom environment. Max's preschool engaged in a transition programme every year to support children's move to 'Big School'. As part of this programme, the staff helped prepare the children for junior infants through a number of actions including the provision of materials and activities related to starting school. The preschool also involved parents in the programme, asking about their plans for school, discussing school readiness, providing them with leaflets and completing transition report forms, which were then shared with the primary school.

When Max's key person, Ger, approached Jolanta to introduce the transition programme, this gave Jolanta the opportunity to talk about her concerns. Ger listened attentively, acknowledged her concerns and advised Jolanta on the research findings in relation to supporting children's transitions to primary school. Jolanta felt reassured when she heard that the preschool and the primary school share information about the children to support their transition. She was also relieved to know that the preschool staff considered Max to be 'school ready'. Jolanta read the information the preschool provided and felt more prepared to support Max in his upcoming transition. As Ger was now aware of Jolanta's anxieties, she checked in with her over the following months to offer reassurance, advice and a listening ear.
An example from practice

Brian, the manager of a large full day community service, made several attempts to run parent workshops on different topics and was disappointed with the poor turnout each time. With his team he reflected on why parents might not be attending these events. They considered how popular events such as graduation, sports day and Christmas parties were with parents and they began to wonder if parents might be more comfortable going to a workshop if their children were also in attendance. The team looked at ways they could share information with parents on child development while involving the children. They decided that they would hold a play session for the children and parents on sensory play and use this as an opportunity for the parents to experience sensory play alongside their children. The children got involved in the preparations by making invites for their parents and family members, and by deciding what sensory activities they wanted on the day. The session was held during the last hour of the day to facilitate parents and caregivers and was very well attended by parents, grandparents and other important people in the children’s lives.

Policies and Procedures

When your setting is developing policies and procedures, all stakeholders should be consulted (Tusla, 2018b). This means that the people affected most by the policies and procedures, that is, the children, parents, staff and management, are all included in the process of both developing new policies and reviewing existing ones.

Ideas for working with parents on policies

- Set up an advisory group that includes parents to inform the process.
- Consult with parents on an individual basis for feedback.
- Invite opinions and ideas from parents through everyday conversations, interactive parent notice board, suggestion box etc.
Ideas for communicating the setting’s policies

Parents must be provided with all the information they will need to successfully engage with the setting. It is also important to check parents’ understanding of policies in a sensitive manner and to be open to hearing parents’ views and responding accordingly.

- Create a parents’ handbook detailing the key policies of the setting and make them available on the service website.
- Display key policies in areas where parents may congregate.
- Create a policy folder which is easily accessible to parents at any time.
- At enrolment, spend time with parents, talking them through the main policy statements and encouraging them to ask questions.
- Record a podcast for parents so they can listen to key policy statements.
- Translate policies into the natural language of all parents in the setting.

It is recommended that settings have a specific policy in relation to parental engagement, which sets out how the setting will aim to work with parents. However, it is important that all policies consider how best to promote the parental role. For example, the policy on managing behaviour should include how settings will partner with parents in relation to their child’s behaviour.
When considering ways to involve parents in your setting, it is essential to take time to consider the needs of all parents. Irish society has changed considerably in the past 20 years, resulting in a rich diversity of cultures and family forms. The early learning and care sector is ideally placed to highlight how diversity is a positive and natural part of life by finding ways to ensure that all families feel welcome and find a sense of belonging within the setting.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the child 2.1 states:

All forms of early years provision should be...without discrimination of any kind irrespective of the child’s or his/her parents or legal guardians race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, nationality, ethic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

There are many factors that can impede parental involvement (see Section 5) and some of these might relate to one or more of the grounds outlined in the above quote. Wheeler and Joyce (2009) explain that, while all parents are interested in their child’s development and progress, some family backgrounds and circumstances can provide challenges for active involvement and engagement. This includes parents not feeling welcome or valued, not having English as a first language and this not being accommodated, previous negative experiences of other professionals, past and ongoing experience of discrimination, the setting not being fully accessible or educators lacking confidence in working with parents.

*The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (DCYA, 2016b) references ‘funds of knowledge’, which encapsulates the idea that all individuals bring knowledge, skills and experiences acquired through their everyday interactions with family, community and cultural life.
We all have our funds of knowledge which we bring with us, often unconsciously, wherever we go. Drawing on the knowledge and skills that children and parents bring into an early childhood service, early childhood practitioners can enhance the curriculum and create meaningful experiences for those children attending the service. (p.15)

An inclusive environment will take into account the diversity of all family members including (Wilson, 2015):

- Mothers and fathers of all ages
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents
- Grandparents
- Foster carers
- Adoptive parents
- Parents whose first language is not English
- Parents who have a range of cultural and religious values
- Separated parents, one parent families, sharing parenting

As a team you should devise a curriculum and create an environment that reflects the diversity, culture, values, interests, experience and concerns of all parents and children. By doing so you are teaching children about respecting others and celebrating difference as well as addressing prejudices.

Both Síolta and Aistear promote the cultivation of a child’s identity and sense of belonging as an important aspect of their care and education. Síolta Standard 14 Identity and Belonging states that promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practices that ‘empower every child and adult to develop a confident self and group identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others’. Aistear’s theme of Identity and Belonging is about ‘children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community’.

Communicating openly and listening to the views and concerns of families and children is the key to promoting respect for diversity and inclusive practice. To help bridge the gap between the home and the early childhood service, establish real dialogue with families and adapt an anti-bias approach with values and principles that support and embrace differences and act against bias and unfairness. To be successful, it is important that any anti-bias efforts rest on strong relationships between educators and families (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010).
Including both mothers and fathers

The past decade has witnessed a shift in paternal and maternal roles with greater inter-changeability in the structure of the family and work patterns (French, 2018). Fathers play a greater role in the care of their children than previous generations. However, focused strategies to encourage fathers to participate in their child’s early learning and care continue to be relevant. In order to be ‘father inclusive’ and ‘father friendly’ (Ferguson & Hogan, 2007; Keane, 2017):

- Believe that fathers, as well as mothers, can nurture and be carers.
- Engage in critical self-reflection and organisation reflection to monitor and challenge assumptions or unconscious bias about men, women and gender roles.
- Access professional development for working with fathers.
- Create a positive environment within the setting and community for working with fathers.
- Commit to supporting ‘democratic families’ where all family members, including young children, are given equal opportunities to join in decision-making processes.
- Affirm fathers in their role by using all opportunities to acknowledge the positive impact of their involvement with their child’s education.
- Ensure you are well informed about the significant male figures in children’s lives.
- Be proactive in initiating communication with fathers.
- Always keep fathers on the agenda.

(Ferguson & Hogan, 2007; Keane, 2017)

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents

LGBT headed families are an increasing feature of Irish family types and recent advances in rights for same sex couples will likely result in more couples planning to start a family together (Fagan, 2018). Research on early childhood educators and their settings indicate a dominance of heteronormative practices, which creates a situation where children who have parents that identify as LGBT may never see their family acknowledged in the setting through either the pedagogy or the curriculum (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014). To work effectively with LGBT parents it is important to consider ways to support the affirmation of LGBT identities in the learning environment in a respectful and meaningful way.
Parents whose first language is not English

Parents who do not speak English or do not have English as a first language may feel isolated within the setting. Communication is often the key to building relationships with parents and, if language barriers are not resolved, parents can find themselves experiencing difficulties accessing information and supports, and participating in opportunities to become involved in the setting. By supporting families whose first language is not English, you can help create a positive and inclusive experience for all parents. Types of support can include translations of policies and other documentation, use of photos to share information about their child, carrying out home visits, hiring staff who speak different languages, learning essential words and phrases, use of visuals to display daily routines and sharing information with parents on the importance of using home language(s).

Parents with specific requirements

Parenting children can be challenging under any circumstances, however there may be increased challenges for parents who are visually or hearing impaired, have a physical disability, an intellectual disability, a psychological or emotional condition or a chronic illness. Parents with a disability can often face discriminatory attitudes both by professionals and by family and friends (Topp, 2004). All parents should be able to ask and receive the support they need without the fear of being judged. The National Disability Authority (2017) advise that positive attitudes such as trust, openness, respect and gratitude are particularly important for social inclusion and can build a climate of cooperation and reciprocity.

Topp (2004) advises that ownership of power and control is fundamental to a parent’s sense of autonomy and independence, and parents with a disability must always be consulted and included in all decision making in relation to their child.

Separated parents, one parent families, shared parenting

One in four families with children in Ireland is a one-parent family which includes single, widowed and separated or divorced parents (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Many children also live in families where both parents have an active parenting role in their child’s life, irrespective of how much time they might actually spend with their child, but the parents live separately.

To best support all parents it is important to get to know more about the families you work with. To achieve this, Wheeler and Joyce (2009) suggest taking a genuine interest in family backgrounds and circumstances so you can adopt a sensitive approach to individual families. This will include finding
out who lives with the child, who else cares for the child outside the home and who are the significant extended family members including step family. Knowing more about a child’s family will mean that you can better understand the possible challenges parents might face in terms of engagement and adapt strategies to meet the needs of parents and offer options for involvement. For example, in the case of separated parents, it is important to consider ways that will ensure effective communication between the setting and each parent in keeping with their wishes.

**Inclusive Communication with Families**

The ideas below for communicating with families are adapted from *The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (DCYA, 2016b).

- If you are unsure how to address families, due to their ethnicity or background, then ask them, or research what terms are best to use. Representative organisations will happily advise you which terms are preferred in order to describe a minority group.

- As part of your induction, provide accessible information to families on your inclusion policy and your curriculum approach. Operate an open door policy whereby parents can come to you to discuss sensitive issues relating to their child/children.

- Ensure that the language you use when talking or writing to families is accessible and inclusive of diverse family structures: two-parent, lone-parent, separated, gay or lesbian, adoptive, foster, extended or communal, inter-racial, or those with a disability.

- Be creative in how you share information about the children’s learning experiences with families who may have literacy difficulties; families who may be visually impaired; may be deaf/hard of hearing, or may have English language difficulties. Use photographs, Braille, sensorial evidence of their child’s work, and signs in order to communicate with the families.

- If a child has a disability, the parent is the person best placed to advise you of the child’s needs. Ensure that disability is represented in the imagery and in the materials. Showing that you are genuinely interested in knowing how to support their child is the first step in supporting equality and inclusion. Take care to explain the policy on dealing with illness and medical emergencies, using simple and non-medical language, and reviewing and updating the policy based on the input from parents if required.

- If you are aware of any prejudicial or discriminatory issues arising for any family, it is important to implement the early childhood services inclusion policy, and also ensure that you discuss with the particular family what their needs are.
Section 5

Other Issues to Consider

In addition to those outlined in previous sections, there are a number of other issues you will need to consider when working in partnership with parents.

Barriers to Parental Partnership

Despite the many positives attributed to parental partnership, it can sometimes be difficult to fully implement. Challenges might arise, for example, parents may have a lack of time to engage further as many are working and can be in a rush when dropping children off, or there may be a lack of opportunities created where parents can participate. There may also be times where parents feel that when they do participate in the service that it is service led and that their participation is ‘tokenistic’.

Other barriers identified by French (2008) are given below with some ways to address these.

- **Concerns about who has professional expertise.** Having confidence in your skills and knowledge as a professional is a positive, and sharing advice/information with parents is an important aspect of this role, but how you communicate this knowledge is crucial. While you have professional expertise, the parent is the most knowledgeable about their child. It is when both of these are combined that improved outcomes for the child are achieved.

- **Concerns about the setting being open to scrutiny.** Inviting parents into the setting might make you feel apprehensive about your practice being judged. It is more helpful to see this as an opportunity to affirm the quality of your practice while also highlighting areas that could be improved. As a professional it is important to have confidence in what you do but it is equally important to accept feedback and seize opportunities to reflect on and improve your practice.

- **The lack of resources, space and time to think about and implement constructive partnership strategies.** Working in partnership with parents requires a whole setting approach and time set aside as a team to consider your understanding of what partnership is and how you, as individual educators and as a service, can improve your practice. This space for discussion and planning can also be useful to consider and reflect upon your own values and how they can impact on your practice. You could also consider the external resources available to help you navigate your way through the development
of strategies for working in partnership with parents such as your local childcare committee, a voluntary VCO such as Barnardos and Better Start Quality Mentors, all of whom have a wealth of information available and can offer practical solutions. Parental partnership should be regularly included on the agenda for team meetings, supervision and team planning sessions.

- **The lack of training for communicating with parents.** Communication skills should be considered as a topic for continuous professional development. Even if you feel that you communicate well with parents and/or colleagues, it is always worthwhile to allow time for training and mentoring to help you improve.

- **The system operating in the setting does not allow for engagement with parents.** It is essential to continually evaluate all procedures to consider whether they are working in the best interests of the child. For example, if your service has a procedure where parents must stay outside of the premises to wait for their child at collection time, it can be difficult to cultivate and build true partnership with parents, create good communication and build relationships. As a team discuss the benefits of parents coming into the setting such as children being keen for a parent to see the activity that they were engaged in that day or their art work displayed, and how this might impact on educators and parents working together in partnership to support children’s learning and development.

Parents themselves can sometimes bring their own challenges to the partnership relationship, for example, a lack of self-confidence, stress, financial worries or language barriers. As a result, it might seem to you that a parent is not interested in engaging with the setting. It is important to remember that parents care and are interested in their child and, in many cases, would like to be more involved or consulted more often on issues relating to their child. The initial contact you have either face to face or on the phone with a parent will lay the foundations of the relationship you will have with them so it is important that you engage with a parent in a positive and unrushed manner, allowing the passion for your work shine through.
Guardianship

In the best interest of the child, it is important for the setting to establish who has legal responsibilities for the child where the parents are separated and/or not married, the child is in care or is living with relatives. The table below outlines some questions you might have relating to guardianship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>ANSWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do we know who is or is not a child’s guardian?</td>
<td>On enrolment parents are asked to sign a declaration stating the relationship to the child of those with whom the service may come into contact with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who should sign enrolment forms?</td>
<td>The child’s legal guardians or those authorised in writing or in person by the legal guardian/s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who can give consent on behalf of a child?</td>
<td>Only parents who are guardians and legal guardians can give consent on behalf of their children. Tusla can give consent in relation to a child who is the subject of a care order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who can collect children?</td>
<td>Only those who have been granted guardianship or those named on the enrolment form can collect children from your setting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who can and who should be given information by the provider.</td>
<td>The child’s mother and the child’s father if he is the child’s legal guardian, anyone who has been appointed the child’s guardian by the court and others only with written consent from the child’s legal guardian/s. In the case of child protection concerns, only those authorised by the State to carry out any investigation in the child’s best interest should be given information relating to a child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Children and Families Relationships Act 2015 is the guiding legislation in this area and will support you in devising policies and procedures that the above issues arise in such as:

- Enrolment Procedure
- Daily Arriving and Leaving Policy
- Interactions Policy
- Communication Policy
- Confidentiality Policy
- Child Protection Policy
- Health and Welfare Policy
- Policy on the Use of the Internet and Photographic and Recording Devices
- Outings Policy
- Policy on Administration of Medications

**Sharing Concerns**

If you have concerns to share with a parent it is important to create a supportive space. Choose a time and a place that suits both of you where you can talk privately and where you won’t be interrupted. While you can schedule this meeting over the phone or by email, you need to share your concerns in person; concerns about a child should always be discussed face to face. Make sure that you both have enough time to fully engage; such conversations should not be done in a hurry as the parent is rushing out the door. It is important to allow enough time for both you and the parent to discuss the issue and for you to answer any questions that the parent may have.
Some other things to consider are given in the table below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlight the child’s strength</th>
<th>We love having Roisin in the group, she is always so considerate to other children and loves to sing and dance.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Let the parent know what the child does well and the milestones he or she is meeting.</td>
<td>I have noticed a few things about Roisin that I would like to discuss with you. I have been completing a milestone checklist like I do for all the children and, while she is meeting her physical and cognitive milestones very well, I have noticed there are some language/communication milestones that she is not meeting. I have noticed that Roisin doesn’t speak clearly enough for most people to understand and, as you can see from the checklist, it would be typical for a child of her age to do so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Keep the conversation positive.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make sure you are well prepared</th>
<th>Note: I have noticed a few things about Roisin that I would like to discuss with you. I have been completing a milestone checklist like I do for all the children and, while she is meeting her physical and cognitive milestones very well, I have noticed there are some language/communication milestones that she is not meeting. I have noticed that Roisin doesn’t speak clearly enough for most people to understand and, as you can see from the checklist, it would be typical for a child of her age to do so.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Complete a milestone checklist for the child’s age to help the parent know that you are basing your comments on facts and not just feelings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Invest time in building meaningful relationships with the parents and discuss developmental progress regularly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encourage the parent to share any concerns with their doctor</th>
<th>Note: There might not be anything to be concerned about but I do think it is important to speak with your doctor to be sure. Getting advice and help at this stage can make a big difference. If I can help in any way please don’t hesitate to ask.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Remember it’s not your role to make or even suggest a diagnosis.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Remind parents of the importance of acting early on concerns.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow up with the parent</th>
<th>Thank you for taking the time to meet with me again, I am just wondering if you have had a chance to meet with your doctor yet and if there is anything we can do to support Roisin.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Conflict Resolution**

Tensions can sometimes occur in the partnership between parents and the early learning and care setting for a number of reasons. For example, some families may have different standards and expectations concerning approaches to discipline or a parent might have difficulty in accepting concerns highlighted. Incidences such as these require skilled communication, and you should plan your approach...
and outline this in your policy on engaging with parents. As a team discuss the issues that could arise and decide which issues will be addressed by the manager and which by the educator working directly with the family. Agree a consistent approach as to how to deal with issues, such as listening to and acknowledging the parents’ point of view and allowing time as well as a private space for the parent to air any grievances.

For example, if there is a disagreement relating to behaviour management, the DCYA (2016b) gives the following advice:

…aim for consistency between the home and the early childhood service, so that the child does not have to cope with two different regimes. However, if the approach in the early childhood setting remains different from that in the home, this can be explained to the child in a way that does not undermine that child’s cultural/family background: ‘at home you can do X, but in here we do Y’. Discipline and behaviour management techniques must take into account child protection legislation with due regard for child protection.

But importantly goes on to state that:

…respecting a child’s cultural background does not necessarily translate into respecting all the practices of that culture, and the importance of child protection must never be compromised. Rules and laws may need to be explained to families, especially those not familiar with Irish legislation such as the Child Care Act, 1991 and the Children First Act 2015. The child’s safety and well-being is always the priority. (p.54)

Dealing with complaints

- The service that you provide should be seen to be professional, friendly and efficient. It is important to view even one complaint as the opportunity to raise standards for all. The service needs to have a clearly written policy on your complaints procedures. Make it easy for a parent to complain. Use an on-site complaints/suggestions box and use parent questionnaires throughout the year to ascertain parents’ opinions, creating an open-door approach.
- Thank them for telling you. It’s not always easy for parents to complain/share their opinions as they might feel it will have a negative impact on your relationship with their child.
- Deal with the complaint immediately if possible or set a deadline for reporting back to the parent. Giving feedback to the parent is crucial as it is important that they feel their opinion matters.
- Find out what went wrong and set things right. Reflecting as a team is the most effective means of dealing with an issue as it ensures a consistent team approach to any issues identified.
Final Reflection

Your service may already be proactive in seeking out and engaging with parents or you may be considering how to do it better. The following are a few areas to think about:

- Do you need training in the area of working and communicating with parents?
- Does the current system allow for time to be spent with parents and to follow up if necessary?
- How can you work to not to feel as if you are under scrutiny by parents?
- How can it be made easier for parents to be involved?
- Are there regular meetings between parents and staff?
- Do you have a clear policy on parental participation and is everyone aware of it?

Always remember that parents and early years educators bring different but equally valuable skills to caring for young children. All the adults involved will respect and value each other, listen, learn and be open to new ways of cooperation (French, 2018).
References


Barnardos
Christchurch Square, Dublin 8

T: 01 4549699
E: training@barnardos.ie or resources@barnardos.ie
W: www.barnardos.ie

CHY 6015 / RCN 20010027