

## PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

Anne Grey  
Elizabeth Horgan  
Senior Lecturers, Early Childhood Education  
Auckland University of Technology

Partnership with parents is a phrase that has become part of the professional dialogue of early childhood education. However, the concept of partnership is rarely discussed and debated amongst early childhood practitioners. The phrase is often used, but have we really reflected on current practices and understanding of partnerships? Without such debate and understanding for many in early childhood education, partnership with parents is a concept that is easy to support in theory but hard to put into practice. This paper examines some of the barriers to effective partnership. It is hoped, in doing so, some pragmatic suggestions to facilitate positive approaches to working in partnership with parents will be provided. It is anticipated that by addressing these issues, further dialogue will be created to enhance our understanding and to create yet more searching questions.

### Why is partnership with parents important?

The New Zealand curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1995) and The Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices, (6) (Ministry of Education, 1996), states that early childhood professionals should work in partnership with parents to develop an effective programme for their children. However, these directives alone are unlikely to motivate busy early childhood professionals to form a true partnership with parents. Commitment to partnership is more likely to stem from a deeper understanding of the benefits to all concerned. The advantages of involving parents have been well documented (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996; Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999). By forming a partnership with parents, early childhood professionals acknowledge that young children do not live in isolation, and so validate the role of parents in the child's life. As professionals we understand the importance of contextual influences on the child's development and learning (Berk, 2001), and parents can provide insights that could not be gained otherwise. By involving parents in the child's learning process, professionals and parents can be mutually supportive, and together set meaningful goals for their children. For children, this results in increased achievements. For example, it has been suggested that parental involvement is a contributing factor in improving children's literacy achievements (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000).

benefit

Parents are the children's first teachers. However, research suggests that parents and professionals value different facets of learning. Parents often value academic skill acquisition more than professionals, whereas professionals view learning and development of children from a broader perspective (Powell, 1998). However, by respecting that values and beliefs may differ but still be acknowledged, a basis for understanding and trust is formed. In forming such trust, professionals imply they believe that parents bring with them the strengths and resources to make decisions for their children (Stonehouse, 1985). In turn, when children observe professionals placing value on the contributions that their parents bring

to the centre, the children's self esteem and sense of self efficacy is enhanced (Arthur, Dockett, Beecher & Death, 1993).

Involving parents also has positive benefits for professionals, as research indicates that parents who are involved in their children's education viewed the teachers and the learning context as more effective than those parents who are uninvolved (Powell, 1998). In addition to involving parents in their child's learning and development, parents have a role to play in the management of a centre. By including parents in forming and reviewing policies in a centre, accountability is formed and recognition is given to the importance of multiple viewpoints. Although this could sometimes result in tensions and uneasiness, it should ultimately increase the quality of a centre as accountability to parents builds *customer satisfaction* into the centre's processes and systems (Stonehouse, 1997).

Thus, partnership with parents can take three main forms – as teachers, as programme planning collaborators, and as decision-makers (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999). However, while a partnership may be easy to commit to in theory, it may remain daunting in practice.

#### What does partnership mean?

Before a partnership can be formed, it is important that both professionals and parents have the opportunity to explore and find out what the other believes and values. It is through this mutual understanding that an environment of trust can develop and the scene for partnership set.

In early childhood education in New Zealand, parents have long been involved in passive roles such as parent help and committee work, but a partnership implies more than a peripheral involvement. If involvement does not result in active partnership between parents and professionals (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996), the parents may feel that the involvement they have is tokenism. Vocabulary such as participation and involvement, rather than partnership, suggest that within the parent-professional relationship the level of contribution from parents has less significance, value or responsibility (Hughes & McNaughton, 2000).

Partnership with parents is often used as a catch-all phrase. There are, however, common characteristics and elements within all successful partnerships (Rosin, Whitehead, Tuchman, Jesien, Begun & Irwin, 1996). One such characteristic is the principle of empathy that is embedded within Humanistic Theory. Empathy involves walking within another's footsteps and developing an understanding of the point of view of the other person. Within this approach to relationships attitudes of genuineness, acceptance, warmth, trust and positive regard for the stance of the other can be developed (Rogers, 2002). Implicit within this perspective is a real desire on the part of the professional to understand the parents' viewpoint. Such understanding should result in reciprocity and mutual support between parents and professionals.

The term partnership also implies that collaboration or sharing takes place between parties of equal status (Erwin & Rainforth, 1996). Partnerships are formed through shared decision-making and a sense of equality within the relationship (File, 2001). Partnership is a union where the contributions of both parties are recognised as useful and worthy. In a partnership consisting of parents and professionals, this implies neither is more knowledgeable than the

definition of  
Partnership.

other, and that both parties are equally capable of making sound decisions. However, it should be noted that these contributions are more likely to be complementary than similar.

### Barriers to successful partnership

*Language*

The views of early childhood professionals have often been given a voice; the views of parents much less so (Larner & Phillips, 1994). This paper suggests that it is often language and attitude that form the greatest barrier to partnerships between parents and professionals. Language, although endorsing involvement and participation on a superficial level, can impose different levels of importance or power status within the working relationship between parents and professionals.

Traditionally, our method of involving parents in centres has often revolved around a parent-education approach. That is to say, the professional expert has imparted knowledge on child development and learning to parents who need this knowledge in order to become expert parents. Unfortunately, this approach has often resulted in parents being viewed through a deficit lens (Powell, 1998). Where the professional assumes the role of expert and the parent a subordinate role, rather than becoming a partner, then parents takes on a sense of "otherness" that is inferior.

Parents possess knowledge and value the opportunity to share their experiences (Rennie, 1996). However, if the language used when conversing with parents consists of professional jargon, parents can feel disempowered and marginalised. This occurs particularly if the professional assumes that the parents lack knowledge and therefore, need to be educated. It has been suggested that the less we know families on an individual basis the more likely we are to accentuate the professional-parent gap (File, 2001).

Another facet of the parent-professional gap is reflected in the differing roles that each play in the care and education of the child. The role of the professional is quite specific, while the parent's role is all-encompassing, and far-reaching. The parent has a much greater emotional connection with the child than the professional. For this reason, a parent may have more reason to feel vulnerable in any interactions with professionals. Erwin & Rainforth (1996) state "many parents, particularly those of children with disabilities, have experienced a long history of feeling ignored, blamed, labelled, and treated like submissive recipients of professional decisions" (p.231). Professionals have a responsibility to ensure that their interactions do not contribute to the development of such emotions.

*Confidence*

However, lack of confidence from either professionals or parents can form a barrier to a partnership. This lack of confidence may result from differing beliefs and values. Parents place value on the professionals' knowledge and skills, and the perception of the professional as a competent caregiver, while the professionals place value on the parenting skills of parents and their ability to communicate openly (Powell, 1998). For professionals a lack of confidence mean that they feel too threatened to involve parents in any meaningful way. For parents, a lack of confidence may inhibit them from collaborating with the professionals. For the parent, this lack of confidence may be accentuated by the fact that most, if not all, of the interactions between professionals and parents take place in the professional's space (File, 2001). Generally, however, if each feels judged and found wanting by the other, it is unlikely that a partnership will be established.

### Successful case studies

In early childhood education, there are two well-known examples of successful partnership with parents. One is the example of Reggio Emilia in Italy, the other is Penn Green in the north of England. By considering these two case studies, we can reflect on why and how they have been successful in achieving partnership with parents.

The schools in Reggio Emilia subscribe to the philosophical ideal that the education of children is important and that parents are as important to the schools effectiveness as teachers and children. It is believed that the roles of parents and teachers are different, and so complement each other. Parent-teacher partnership enhances and strengthens both the family relationships and the integrity of the teacher, and makes possible collective solutions that maximise the child's potential for learning and development. Partnership between parents and professionals is regarded as the "integration of different wisdoms" (Spaggiari, 1998, p. 104).

In Reggio Emilia, it is felt that there are three concepts that are fundamental to the successful participation of parents: that the rights and wishes of each individual must be met within the needs of the group; that the notion of participation must be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of families; and that communication must be meaningful and effective as it is communication that forms the basis of partnership (Spaggiari, 1998).

The commitment to this philosophical ideal results in high rates of participation. The schools are managed by the community with 75% of parents voting for the committees, and 1:5 parents actively participating on those committees. Parents are given many different opportunities to participate. They are responsible for the transition-to-school programme and for developing strategies to involve other parents. Parents are also involved in documenting the children's learning and communicating this to other parents. Records of parents' participation are also kept as a basis for further communication about the role of parents in centres.

Loris Malaguzzi (1998) stated in an interview:

*"family participation requires many things, but most of all it demands of teachers a multitude of adjustments. Teachers must possess a habit of questioning their certainties, a growth of sensitivity, awareness and availability, the assuming of a critical style of research, and continually updated knowledge of children, an enriched evaluation of parental roles, and skills to talk, listen, and learn from parents."*

Penn Green is situated in a lower socio-economic area in the north of England. Penn Green aims to offer "a centre where parents are engaged in an equal, active responsible partnership with shared concerns about young children's learning" (Whalley, 1999, p.3). This is achieved by involving parents in the centre in three ways: by supporting parents to become involved in *second chance* education; by increasing parents awareness and understanding of their children's learning and development, and by involving parents in the management of the school. Staff recognised that many parents need to develop confidence before they are able to participate. Staff at Penn Green recognised the gap that often exists between families and early childhood staff and so worked actively to bridge this. The process involved staff reallocating or sharing power with the parents so that their opinions could influence decision-making and effect change. Sharing power included admitting mistakes, apologising when necessary, and arranging a physical space for parents to call their own. At the same time, it was recognised that while staff at the early childhood centre were committed to working with

families, they did not all have the skills necessary to do this effectively. Moreover, the diversity of parents was acknowledged and accepted. At Penn Green, successful partnership is such that parents have now become involved in documenting and reflecting on their children's learning. The principle underpinning this partnership is that a dialogue is established about the child's learning at home and in the centre that empowers both parents and staff.

#### **What made these partnerships successful?**

Although Reggio Emilia and Penn Green exist in very different contexts, both have established successful partnerships with parents. So what are the factors that have facilitated this. In both Reggio and Penn Green, parents were regarded as playing a pivotal role in the child's learning and development. Parent's role was viewed as complementing the teacher's role. Both centres were committed to a culture of inclusion and respect that accepted the diversity of parents. In both cases, respecting parents meant that staff must remain flexible and open-minded to including parents in a variety of ways. In both contexts, the staff recognised that partnership with parents was a political process and were willing to share decision-making power with parents. Most of all, in each case, the early childhood professionals needed to accept that their professional knowledge base was different from, not necessarily superior to, the knowledge base of parents. In addition, in some cases, parents needed to have their confidence boosted before they were able to participate in the centre.

#### **The New Zealand context**

In New Zealand, partnerships with parents in early childhood education is a relatively new concept. There are, as yet, no significant documented models of successful partnership. There are however, several exciting initiatives that will facilitate partnership between professionals and parents. These initiatives cater for different aspects of partnership. Two in particular will be mentioned. The first is the Learning Stories method of describing and documenting children's learning and development. The inclusion of the Parent's Voice gives the opportunity for parents to contribute in a meaningful way to their child's learning programme. The second initiative is the Design and Build scheme implemented by the Ministry of Education. This centre design incorporates a space that is designated specifically for parents and will help to facilitate a sense of belonging to centres using this plan.

It is important to note that while there is little published documentation of successful partnerships with parents from within early childhood education in New Zealand, this does not mean that none exists. Hopefully, the new centres of excellence will raise awareness and bring to the fore further evidence of successful partnerships.

#### **Fostering positive partnerships with parents**

From the above discussion, several practical strategies can be developed to nurture a meaningful partnership with parents. They can be summarised as follows:

- take time to get to know each family on an individual basis;
- accept and acknowledge parents as a pivotal part of each child's life, and therefore a pivotal part of the early childhood centre;

- accept and acknowledge that beliefs and values of parents and professionals are complementary rather than the same, and so together form a complete picture of the child;
- recognise that communication is the basis for partnership – ensure that language is understood easily by parents and avoid language that disempowers and marginalises;
- value parents by giving them decision-making power and allowing them to feel that their views do make a difference;
- recognise the diversity of parents by being open-minded, flexible and providing a variety of ways that parents can be involved in a centre;
- parents may need to have their confidence boosted before they participate fully in the early childhood centre –this may be even more important if the family is of low economic status, or from an ethnic minority (Rennie, 1996); and
- accept that as professionals we do not always have the skills to facilitate positive partnerships – we may need additional professional development to extend these; we may also need to say sorry when we make mistakes, and to step outside our comfort zone and to take risks.

Above all, professional should view partnership with parents as a positive attribute that has benefits for all.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion demonstrates that many of the barriers to a positive partnership with parents are caused by attitudes and perceptions around the image of the family. In recent times early childhood professionals have realised that the image of the child influences attitudes and perceptions of children. Similarly, images of families also influence attitudes and perceptions. One of the aims of Te Whāriki is to regard children as confident, competent learners. Families, too, need to be viewed as confident and competent. When this view prevails, there is a strong foundation for positive partnerships with parents.

### Reference List:

- Arthur, L., Beecher, B., Dockett, S. Farmer, A. & Death, E. (1993). *Programme Planning in early childhood settings*. Australia: Nelson Thomas Learning
- Berk, L. (2001) *The developing person through the lifespan*. USA: Allyn & Bacon
- Erwin, E. & Rainforth, B (1996). Partnerships for collaboration. In E. Irwin (Ed.) *Putting children first: Visions for a brighter future for young children and their families* pp.227-251 Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes
- File, N. (2001) Family-professional partnerships: Practice that matches philosophy. *Young Children*, July 70-74.
- Greenman, J. & Stonehouse, A. (1997) *PrimeTimes: A handbook for excellence in infant and toddler programs*. Australia: Longman
- Hughes, P. & MacNaughton, G (1999). Who's the expert: Reconceptualising parents-staff relations in early education. *Australian Journal of early Childhood Education*, 24(4), 27-31
- Hughes, P. & MacNaughton, G. (2000) Consensus, dissensus or community: the politics of parent involvement in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 1 (3), 241-258.
- Larner, M. & Phillips, D. (1994). Defining and valuing quality as a parent. In P.Moss & A. Pence *Valuing quality in early childhood services: New Approaches to defining quality*. New York: Teachers College Press
- Malaguzzi, L. (1998). History, ideas and basic philosophy: An interview with Leila Gandini by Loris Malaguzzi. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini & G. Foreman. *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach – advanced reflections*. USA: Ablex Publishing Corporation
- Ministry of Education (1993). *Te Whāriki – He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: early childhood curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media
- Ministry of Education (1998). *Quality in action: Te mahi whai hua – Implementing the revised statement of desirable objectives and practices in New Zealand early childhood services*. Wellington: Learning Media
- Powell, D (1998). Reweaving parents into the fabric of early childhood programs. *Young Children*, September 60-67
- Pugh, G. (1996). Contemporary issues in the early years: working collaboratively for children. United Kingdom: Paul Chapman
- Rogers, C. R. (2002). The interpersonal relationship and the facilitation of learning. In R. Harrison, F. Reeve, A. Hanson, & J. Clark (Eds.) *Supporting lifelong learning*. London: Routledge Falmer, pp. 25-39

- Rosin, P., Whitehead, A. D., Tuchman, L. I., Jesien, G. S., Begun, A. L. & Irwin, L. (1996). *Partnership in family centred care: A guide to collaborative early intervention*. Baltimore. Paul H. Brookes.
- Stonehouse, Z. (1985). Family involvement in early childhood special education programs. In N. H. Fallon & W. Eernan (Eds). *Young children with special needs (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)* pp442-469). Columbus, OH. Merrill
- Whalley, M. (1999). *Parents involvement in their children's learning*. Conference paper presented at the Seventh Early Childhood Convention. Whakatu - Nelson 27<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> September, Aotearoa/New Zealand