

We bandy around the word 'partnership' so much in early years that it has lost its meaning. **Vanessa Linehan** argues that professionals need to re-examine their relationships with parents if they are going to give children the best start in life.

A man with glasses and a dark shirt is sitting on a black chair, reading a book titled "Cock-a-Moo-Moo" to a group of children. The children are sitting on the floor around a table covered with a patterned cloth, which has several small farm animal toys on it. The man is pointing at the book. The children are looking at the book and the toys. The background shows a red carpet and a white perforated screen.

A partnership for life



Encouraging educators and parents to work together in partnership can greatly improve a child's life chances. This may be obvious but it's not always straightforward – targeting 'hard-to-reach' parents from deprived backgrounds who are sometimes difficult to engage in their children's education can be challenging. But additionally, there are parents who choose *not* to engage because they view parent partnership as another example of the over-formalisation of a child's early years. Perhaps it's time for practitioners to see not only children as unique, but their parents as well.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) seeks to provide 'partnership' working between practitioners and parents. It states that key workers should build 'relationships' with parents, keep them up-to-date with their child's progress, respond to observations that they share, involve them in assessments and support them to guide their child's development at home.

The word 'relationship' signifies the value and status of the connection between the two parties, but a true partnership is more than this. A connection can simply express the fact that both parent and practitioner care for the same child. However, a partnership describes the way in which people behave towards or regard one another. It requires mutual respect, a recognition of the importance of the role of each partner and an understanding that it is only by working together that children's learning and development opportunities are maximised.

It's unfortunate that the updated EYFS does not explore in more detail the type of relationship that is needed to develop the partnership that it is advocating. Elaboration would help build a picture of the sort of relationship that practitioners should be seeking to build. Instead, it is left to settings to decide what they mean by 'partnership' and how it should underpin practice. This inevitably means that consistency is hard to achieve because it relies on individual interpretation.

Definition of partnership

The dictionary definition of partnership is: 'A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterised by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal.' In the EYFS, the goal is promoting children's learning and development and getting them ready for school. Although the EYFS emphasises that parents should receive information and be guided to support their child, it doesn't explain how parents should be contributing to and influencing practice in the setting. This raises the issue of how much joint responsibility there is in reality and how many early years' settings really do have an ethos of partnership with parents in their practice.



Different definitions of parent partnership are used in literature alongside alternative terms such as 'parental involvement', 'participation' or 'engagement'. These terms are often used interchangeably but it is important to reflect on the nuances. If we see partnership as mutual co-operation and responsibility it becomes clear that 'involvement' and 'engagement' are subtly different and would be placed on different steps of the ladder of participation. Involvement and engagement are very different from a relationship that demands equal commitment from both parties.

True parent partnerships have been described as 'positive, mutually respectful relationships between parents and early years practitioners'¹. This definition is helpful because it identifies that it is more than just actions – it is about personal relationships,

and the connection that exists between those who jointly care for a child. Lindon² argues that the partners do not need to occupy exactly the same role in a child's life but they both need to be equally valued, respected and heard. This is an important distinction. Children may be viewed differently by parents and practitioners because they have different relationships with them, however both views are valid and together make up a complete picture of the child. These combined observations link home and nursery and, as Nutbrown³ suggests, can be used to reinforce and extend children's ideas.

First educators

Acknowledging parents as first educators of children has been firmly established in policy over the last decade. Government policy has been influenced by research⁴ showing that a child's future achievements are heavily influenced by what happens at home. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) research concluded that: 'What parents do is more important than who they are'. The quality of the home learning environment directly affects intellectual and social development. It includes such activities as reading to children, singing songs and nursery rhymes, visiting the library and playing with numbers.

However, some researchers conclude that parental involvement in the form of interest in the child and parent-child discussions in the home can have a significant positive effect on children's behaviour and achievement even when the influence of background factors such as social class or family size have been factored out. They found that parental values and aspirations are internalised by the child and affect their motivation to succeed. In a child's early years, parents also aid skill acquisition such as early literacy through reading to their children regularly.

Disadvantaged children

The EPPE⁴ project discovered that attending a high quality early years setting could improve children's life chances. By linking the experiences of the child, both at home and in the early years setting, and by enriching both learning environments, practitioners and parents can create better outcomes for the child. The study found that in the most effective settings, parents and staff shared information about children and parents were involved in decision-making about their child's learning programme. Children did better where the centre shared its education aims with parents so they could support children at home.

The move in early years to focusing on the most disadvantaged children inevitably requires closer working with parents. Simply having good quality early years provision on its own will not make the necessary impact – the home learning environment has to change too. This, linked with the idea that parents want more support, means that parent partnership has become increasingly important.



Funding for early years settings is increasingly dependent on recruiting low-income and disadvantaged families. Although the purpose of this funding is in part aimed to help parents into work, it also recognises that some children's home environments are of poor quality and that children may be more stimulated in a high quality setting than they would be at home. The challenge then is to engage the parents and encourage them to participate actively in their child's learning and development. Professionals need to learn and understand about these parents' experiences in order to persuade them and support them to do so.

Barriers to partnership

Although there is increasing legislation to enforce parent partnership, formulating policy on its own is not enough – attitudes need to change.

In a small-scale research project in an inner city community playgroup, seven barriers to parent partnership were identified. These were:

1. negative attitude of practitioners towards parents
2. difficulties in personal circumstances of parents
3. the physical environment
4. finding the time to talk
5. lack of confidence by both parents and practitioners
6. low income and ethnic minority parents less likely to be engaged
7. parents viewing parent partnership as part of the over-formalisation of early years.

Barrier 7 is particularly interesting because it has not been identified in other research and has implications for policymakers and for the way that early years staff are trained. The research showed some parents and staff recognise the benefits of having a good relationship with one another but also believe that the early years of a child's life should be play-based. They believe that children learn through play and interpret partnership working as an example of the formalisation of the early years with assessments, reviews and reports from practitioners on whether their child has met targets and outcomes.

For example, as practitioners, we are supposed to ensure that parents know about the EYFS. But during this research, one parent said: *'To be honest, I didn't really want to know. I have an older child and know quite a lot about it. I could tell that the playgroup was following it and that was fine.'* This shows that practitioners should not always assume that parents do not already know about the EYFS or that they actually want the information that is available.

Another parent commented: *'That wasn't a priority for me particularly. I wanted my child to be in a child-led play-centred environment. Not so bothered about meeting particular goals set by EYFS.'* Another, when asked about the information they had been given about the EYFS, said: *'Probably very good but I have to admit not reading any of it. I am a big believer in playing at this age and am happy that he was getting to do that.'*

Similarly, a parent commented that she was not always kept up-to-date with the progress her child was making, *'but I am very happy with the playgroup because I feel that my child is loved and supported there, that he is happy and enjoys it, and that he is developing good friendships.'* This indicates that she might value these things more than being given information about learning and development. The same parent commented on a question about knowing the daily routine: *'I chose a community playgroup because I wanted my child to be able to play, and I did not want his life to be overly structured at this age.'*

Forcing parents and staff into a relationship that is unproductive is clearly not to the benefit of the child. But might children suffer if there is no partnership at all? The parents in this research spoke articulately and convincingly about the relationship they wanted with staff. For some, this did not include formal reviews, information about whether their child was reaching their developmental targets or suggestions for what they could do at home with them. Instead, they wanted an informal relationship where practitioners simply

shared information about their child's day at pick-up. Further research is required but perhaps this type of partnership is the most beneficial for these particular children.

Models of childhood

The views of these parents echo the belief of organisations like Childhood in Action and **Save Childhood Movement** who favour a more 'natural' childhood and less of an 'audit culture mentality'. They believe that play is being eroded in an early years sector that is increasingly having to concentrate on preparing children for school (see **Too Much Too Soon**). Prescribing what parent partnerships should be and issuing compulsory guidance for it (in the form of the EYFS), could be seen as a move towards formalising the early years sector.

Some parents argue that they send their child to playgroup to socialise with other children and to play. They see the EYFS, Ofsted and the idea of school readiness as over-formalising a time when children should be having fun. In fact, some practitioners and experts agree with this view. Indeed, some argue that we are 'sacrificing relationships' if we concentrate too much on milestone achievements and how these are communicated rather than delighting in children just being who they are⁵.



Tailored partnerships

No one denies that we need to strengthen partnerships between staff - close professional relationships between practitioners and parents are invaluable. Practitioners and parents need to be able to discuss the child they both look after and support in their learning and development in an easy and beneficial way. However, this research highlighted that as professionals, we need to acknowledge that parents want different things from their early years settings – not all want regular reviews or to know whether they are achieving their learning goals. This is not because they don't care, don't understand, don't have the time, lack confidence or any of the other barriers which have been identified in the past.

It is because they genuinely believe that they are their child's first educators and that a playgroup offers their child play and socialisation opportunities and that is all they want.

This research was undertaken in a community playgroup and it is likely that parents who send their child to such a setting may be more likely to hold these views than parents whose child attends a nursery five days a week. The maximum number of hours a child can attend this playgroup is 20 per week and many attend for 15 or less. This means that most spend the rest of their time with their parents, whereas a child at nursery full-time may spend 50 hours a week or more there and only spend two or three hours a day with their parents. This is an important distinction. In a partnership, both parties are seen as equal, but if the practitioner and parent spend an unequal amount of time with the child, this can alter the dynamics.

It's a mistake to generalise. It was clear from surveys and focus groups that many parents did want more reviews of their child's learning and development. However, it is also clear that a significant number of parents felt that the requirements of the EYFS were seen as over-formalised.



Implications for policy

Many of the barriers to parent partnership focus on 'hard to reach families' who are usually thought to be from low income, working class backgrounds. What was found during this research, was that well educated, professional, knowledgeable parents could also resist becoming engaged simply because they believed that the early years of a child's life should focus on play and not be about monitoring and assessment. The difficulty is that while policymakers focus on the most disadvantaged children in order to reduce inequality of opportunity, they are in danger of ignoring the views of other groups of parents. Of course, we need to ensure that children from

disadvantaged backgrounds do not fall behind in the early years, but we also need to recognise that some parents hold strong personal beliefs about the experience that they want for their child in the early years, and this brings us back to treating all children as individuals.

Some policymakers and experts argue that all parents are interested in their child's education and attainment⁶. If we believe this then we also have to conclude that all parents want to have some sort of partnership with other people who care for and educate their child because this is the way that they feed that interest. Yet, the barriers identified in this research prevent parents and practitioners from having the model of partnership which would be of most benefit to their child.

Practical changes will not, on their own, enhance parent partnership in the long term. By looking at the identified barriers, it is clear that many of the problems are attitudinal. The fact that practitioners sometimes have negative views of parents, that they do not prioritise making time to talk to them, and that both parents and staff sometimes lack confidence affects the way that partnership is approached. It is only by changing beliefs and mindsets that partnership can really be enhanced.

Others have identified that practitioners are not being adequately trained in parent partnership and certainly the new Early Years Teacher standards fail to emphasise parent partnership. Practical guides to parent partnership in the early years tend to focus on

aspects such as sharing policies with parents, home visits and including fathers. They do not delve deeper, encouraging practitioners to consider the beliefs that parents hold about the way that they wish to bring their child up. If practitioners do not do this, they are in danger of making tokenistic gestures while failing to enter into a meaningful dialogue with parents about what sort of partnership they would like to have with their child's key worker and other staff at the setting.

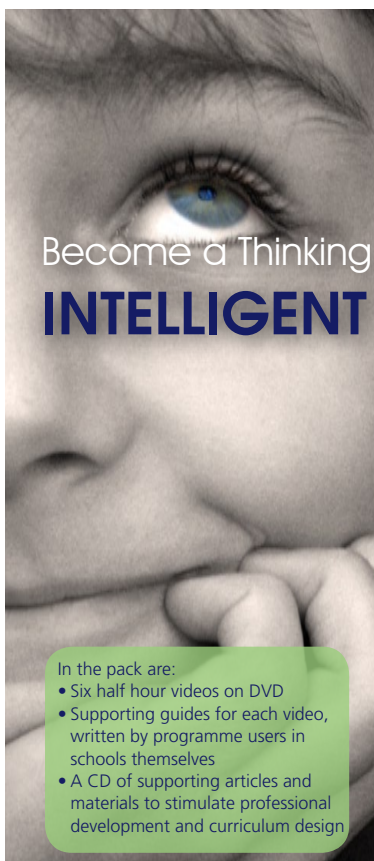
This research took place in one particular playgroup and therefore the findings and recommendations may not apply to all settings. But looking at parent partnership in a broader context, professionals working in early years should consider the attitudes of parents who may have strong beliefs about over-formalisation of the early years. As practitioners, I would argue that this view needs to be respected and practice adapted accordingly.

This area has not been highlighted in other research and as a result, has not been considered by policymakers. The EYFS does not distinguish between nurseries and playgroups. The guidance that it gives on parent partnership applies to all settings regardless of whether a child attends a nursery 50 hours a week, or whether they are at a playgroup for three hours each morning. Although the standard of care and opportunities for learning and development should be the same, I suggest that it can alter the way that both staff and practitioners perceive parent partnership. And this is why it is important that parents are treated as individuals and are asked about their views and expectations when their child starts at a setting. While one parent might expect a formal review every half term, others may prefer an informal chat at drop-off and pick-up. While some might prefer to attend group meetings to find out information, others may prefer written communication. Policymakers and practitioners need to acknowledge individual attitudes and needs. It is not just children who are unique. Parents are too.

Vanessa Linehan is an early years business manager and practitioner with an MA in Early Years from Canterbury Christchurch University.

Reference

1. Brunton P and Thornton L. 2010. The Parent Partnership Toolkit for Early Years. Optimus Education, London.
2. Lindon J. 2009. Parents as Partners: Positive Relationships in the Early Years. Practical Pre-School Books, London.
3. Nutbrown, C. 1999. Threads of Thinking. Sage London.
4. Siraj Blatchford I et al. 2004. Effective provision of Pre-School Education Project. DFES. Nottingham.
5. Hughes A and Read V. 2012. Building Positive Relationships with Parents of Young Children: A guide to effective Communication. Routledge, London.
6. Hobart C and Frankel J. 2009. A Practical Guide to Working With Parents. Nelson Thornes Cheltenham.



Become a Thinking School with **INTELLIGENT LEARNING**

What sort of teaching allows students to take ownership of their own learning?

What will motivate and excite children's curiosity and haul them out of passivity?

What style of teaching will develop their intellectual skills to the point that they can become effective agents of enquiry in any field?

PRICE:
£235.00
+ VAT



Written and presented By Steve Williams
Acclaimed by the NUT

Intelligent Learning is a teaching practice course, executed through six half hour video sessions, which address in detail the changes in pedagogy you and your school need to introduce to start addressing the issues of motivation and becoming a thinking and learning community.

The central theme of the course is to give students the skills to ask more and searching questions. ...it's the questioning skills, not of the teacher but of the student that really count in developing their cognitive abilities and engagement. Their questions dominate the learning agenda and the ownership of learning follows.

At the end of the course teachers will have the skills and practical strategies to:

- facilitate more and more sophisticated student questioning
- support children in using concepts to organise their thinking
- manage dialogue and discussion to develop children's ideas
- plan lessons and study programmes that promotes questioning and dialogue
- create communities of inquiry in their classroom

In the pack are:

- Six half hour videos on DVD
- Supporting guides for each video, written by programme users in schools themselves
- A CD of supporting articles and materials to stimulate professional development and curriculum design

Imaginative Minds Ltd, 309 Scott House, Gibb Street, Birmingham B9 4DT

To order call: **0121 224 7599**

visit our website: www.teachingtimesbookshop.co.uk

