Partnerships—Working together in early childhood settings

A Research in Practice Series title

Mary Hood
About Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia actively promotes the provision of high-quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. Early Childhood Australia is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services and a leading early childhood publisher.

About the series

The *Research in Practice Series* is published four times each year by Early Childhood Australia.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide-ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children's services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children.

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She first trained in The Family Partnerships Model with Hilton Davis in 2004 when it was introduced through the state government Maternal Child Health agency. She has facilitated numerous Core Courses and Facilitator Training for people from all disciplines across a number of states in Australia, and worked with Hilton Davis to run a national Trainer of Facilitators Course in 2008. She also provides Supervision for Facilitators of the Family Partnerships Model.

Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.
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We recognise that different people act as parents—including birth parents, adoptive parents, grandparents, and foster parents. The term ‘parents’ as used in this book includes all adult family carers of young children.

Educators in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings work with parents every day, in ways that range from friendly, casual greetings and basic information sharing through to more serious and intense conversations.

The significance of these adult-to-adult interactions is widely recognised. Such interactions allow babies and young children to see their parents welcomed and comfortable in their ECEC environments, and they benefit from the information shared between these caring adults. Also, these meetings allow parents and educators to support each other in their work with children, and when these exchanges build into strong partnerships, they can bring even greater benefits. Educators benefit from developing adult-to-adult partnership skills—they can engage confidently with parents to share worries or when difficult situations arise.

This book supports the work of educators in building these partnerships with parents in ECEC settings. It considers the place given to partnerships with parents in Australia’s national ECEC frameworks and standards, expands on some of the qualities of real partnerships, and presents practical ideas for building such relationships. The book is a resource for:

- individual educators who want to consolidate and extend their work with parents, in ways that are consistent with professional partnership practice and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS)
- leaders in ECEC settings seeking to incorporate improvement in work with parents into a Quality Improvement Plan for the National Quality Standard (see Getting ready for the NQS, Barnes, 2012).

The approaches promoted in this book are based on the Family Partnerships Model (FPM) (see box on page 2).
About the Family Partnerships Model

The Family Partnerships Model was initially developed to ‘enable non-mental health workers to deal effectively with the psychological and social problems that arise commonly in the life of all families’ (FPTA, 2006–09), but over the years it has been evaluated and modified, and its strategies have proven useful to professionals working adult-to-adult in a wide range of ‘people’ settings. The model is being used to train early years staff, school nurses, teachers in primary and secondary schools, as well as social workers and other support staff from social services (for example, see Day, Davis & Hind, 1998). In Western Australia, the training has been embraced by community health nurses, early childhood teachers, allied health personnel, medical practitioners, clinical psychologists, social workers, volunteer family support workers and more (FPTA, 2006–09).

One of the basic ideas of the FPM is that strong adult-to-adult partnerships underpin and facilitate all other ‘work’. While it is not the role of educators to support parents to address the broader difficulties in their lives, they are often the first port of call for parents having difficulties; for advice regarding children needing assessment or treatment; and for referral to appropriate community services. The partnership-building strategies of the FPM are useful in strengthening work in all these areas. In addition, and most importantly, strong partnerships between educators and parents will support achieving the child-oriented goals of individual practitioners and parents, ECEC settings and the national EYLF and NQS.

With regard to the evidence base of the FPM, the Centre for Parent and Child Support says:

The Family Partnership Model ... is an evidence-based method, the effectiveness of which has been demonstrated through a number of research trials conducted by the Centre as well as independent randomised trials. The findings of these trials indicate positive benefits to the developmental progress of children (for example Davis & Rushton, 1991; APIP, 1998), parent-child interaction (Barlow et al., 2007; Puura et al., 2005) and the psychological functioning of parents, families and children (for example Davis & Rushton, 1991; Davis & Spurr, 1998) (CPCS, 2011).
Partnerships with parents—The EYLF and NQS

The Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard are major planks of Australia’s early childhood quality framework, and it is important to understand the emphasis they give to children’s families, and the partnerships between educators and families. Indeed, the EYLF and NQS make clear that these partnerships are an integral part of good early childhood practice.

The Early Years Learning Framework: The significance of families in children’s lives and in their learning, development and wellbeing is recognised throughout the EYLF, and ‘partnerships’ with families is highlighted as one of the five key Principles that underpin effective practice. The EYLF considers these adult-to-adult partnerships in a particularly rich way, recognising that ‘learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12). The EYLF expects that families will be welcomed and respected in ECEC settings, and actively encouraged to participate in curriculum decisions. It says that ‘In genuine partnerships, families and early childhood educators:

◆ value each other’s knowledge of each child
◆ value each other’s contributions to and roles in each child’s life
◆ trust each other
◆ communicate freely and respectfully with each other
◆ share insights and perspectives about each child
◆ engage in shared decision-making’ (p. 12).

‘... learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnerships with families’
Partnerships—Working together in early childhood settings

Consciously working to build strong partnerships with parents is a core professional activity and should be planned and carried out as such—that is, it is much more than the sum of all the daily contact between educators and parents. Reflective practice applies to all relationships in ECEC settings—with children and families, and with professional colleagues both within and outside the setting. Critical reflection on the way we do things through conversations with colleagues is the pathway to improvement of our own practice.

‘Consciously working to build strong partnerships with parents is a core professional activity and should be planned and carried out as such’

The National Quality Standard: Devotes Quality Area 6 to ‘collaborative partnerships with families and communities’. Collaborative relationships with families are fundamental in achieving quality outcomes for children, and this requires:

◆ the development and maintenance of respectful, supportive relationships with families, with effective enrolment and orientation processes for families; opportunities and support for families to be involved in the program and in service activities; and opportunities for families to influence and shape the service, to review service policies and contribute to service decisions

◆ support for families in their parenting role, with respect for their values and beliefs on child rearing; recognition of their expertise, and involving them in decision making about their child’s learning and wellbeing; and the provision of information to families about community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing’ (ACECQA, pp. 145–168).
Thinking about partnerships

Thinking generally about partnership values, the elements of partnerships, and other types of relationships helps us to understand more about true partnership relationships and their characteristics.

**Partnership values**

The Family Partnership Model is underpinned by different values—for example, the idea that:

- we all started as equals; we are all human; and we all face struggles and challenges, no matter what role we play
- every person is worth valuing
- all parents want their child to be and feel safe
- all parents want to feel respected, and to influence what happens to their child
- all parents want their child to do the best they can.

The EYLF’s emphasis on families and partnerships is consistent with these values. Using partnership values such as these makes it more likely that we will achieve useful and constructive outcomes in relationships.

To illustrate this, imagine yourself with a problem—for example, you have a strained relationship with your father-in-law. Whenever you visit with your children, he criticises their behaviour, saying that you are too soft on them and they need to be quiet and learn to listen to adults. Your six-year-old son has become timid in his company and never wants to visit. One friend advises, ‘You must tell him to stop criticising you and your children, otherwise you will never visit again’. Another says, ‘There is nothing that can be done, just accept it, life is like that’. In this situation, does either of those pieces of advice fit your needs?

When other people offer us their solutions, they are not necessarily what we would choose ourselves, and they do not always lead towards constructive problem solving. What seems to be most helpful is if another person listens to us carefully, and asks questions to help sort out what we are most concerned about. After that, brainstorming possible actions, and having the person encourage us to select the one that is the best fit can provide a workable solution. This way, we feel heard and understood, but we can also choose what we want to do about our own issue, as well as when and how to do it. The other person has had faith that we will make the best decision about our own life.
Elements of partnerships

Davis, Day and Bidmead (2002) have developed an intensive course to help practitioners really understand and practise how to work in partnership. Their work informs much of what is explained in this book. In their view, an effective partnership between parents and service staff has the following elements:

◆ Working closely together with active participation and involvement—each person gets a chance to contribute and is kept informed.

◆ Sharing decision-making power—each person has a chance to have a say in decisions, although one person may have the final responsibility.

◆ Recognising complementary expertise and roles—finding out what people know and can contribute.

◆ Sharing and agreeing aims and processes of helping—each person is involved in deciding what will be done and how.

◆ Negotiating disagreements—the interests of each are considered, and objective standards are used to decide. (Negotiation is discussed more fully in a later section.)

◆ Openness and honesty—neither person hides anything from the other, or themselves, and both use respect, empathy and thoughtfulness in this.

◆ Clear communication—each person uses clear language to share information and ideas, and checks to see if they have been understood and that needs have been met. (Communication skills are examined a little more closely in a later section.)

◆ Mutual trust and respect—each person has confidence in the other and knows that they value working with them.

Building these elements into a relationship with another person conveys confidence in their existing or potential expertise and knowledge. Working together on mutually agreed aims means that outcomes are more lasting. Participating in the process and understanding of how and why things are done enables both partners to learn the skills of working together, and prepares them for using those skills again in the future.

‘Working together on mutually agreed aims means that outcomes are more lasting.’
Other types of relationships
It is useful to know that relationships have different characteristics—so that we can be aware when they are operating in our work, and modify our approach if need be. Let us look at the stereotypical definitions of ‘expert’ relationships, ‘teaching’ relationships, and ‘friendship’ relationships.

‘Participating in the process and understanding of how and why things are done enables both partners to learn the skills of working together’

Expert relationships: An ‘expert’ has a special skill in or knowledge of a particular field—a specialist or authority (Macquarie dictionary, Macquarie University, 1991). Acting as an expert entails simply telling the other person what we know, and what we think they should know—as well as telling them what they should do. We are ‘in charge’ of what happens, and don’t expect to be challenged.

Of course, there are some situations where being ‘the expert’ is useful and effective—even necessary. For example, in emergency situations, someone needs to be acting with authority—making quick decisions that are clearly conveyed to others. It is important that ECEC practitioners are prepared for this role, should the need arise.

However, in non-emergency situations, most people are much less likely to do what someone else tells them, unless they agree with it.
The more you know, the more you see: Babies’ and toddlers’ learning and the EYLF

Many educators see babies and toddlers in the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), while others need to be convinced that the Framework is just as relevant to very young children as it is to children over three years. The aim of this book The more you know, the more you see—Babies’ and toddlers’ learning and the EYLF is to show that the big ideas in the EYLF, particularly the Learning Outcomes, relate to babies and toddlers and to educators’ practice with them. This book contains examples from educators that illustrate reflective practice and ideas in the EYLF.

Author: Anne Stonehouse. 35 pages.
Price: $15.95  ECA code: RIP1103

Seeing assessment as a stepping stone: Thinking in the context of the EYLF

Australia has a wonderful opportunity to benefit from its first national Early Years Learning Framework. While ideas are bubbling across the sector about the strengths of planning in terms of the over-arching concepts of ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming’, there is some hesitancy about tackling the concept of ‘assessment’ in prior to school settings. This booklet will help you understand: the Five Outcomes; educator examples using the EYLF; Belonging, Being and Becoming; concept of assessment; Educators guide to the EYLF and Monitoring, assessing and evaluating.

Authors: Alma Fleet and Catherine Patterson. 27 pages.
Price: $15.95  ECA code: RIP1104

Every Child - Vol.17 No.3

This issue of Every Child provides continued support for the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF)—articles on portfolios, learning stories, ethical reporting and work with families have provided ideas for implementing the Early Years Learning Framework and preparing for the changes.

Authors: Various. 40 pages
Price: $17.95  ECA code: EC1103

Every Child - Vol.17 No.4

The space and environment that provides an early childhood setting can act as a kind of silent educator: guiding and forming the learning experiences of children, place forms a crucial part of how a child understands the world and his relationship with it. This issue of Every Child magazine focuses on place-based pedagogy: place, space, play equipment, the outdoors and the ways that educators can use these to help a child grow in understanding, responsibility, and resilience.

Authors: Various. 40 pages
Price: $17.95  ECA code: EC1104

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The significance of adult-to-adult interactions in early childhood education and care settings is widely recognised. Casual exchanges and more formal meetings between parents and educators assist in supporting each other in their work with children, and when these contacts build into strong partnerships, they can bring even greater benefits.

Dr Mary Hood, author of *Partnerships—Working together in early childhood settings*, is an experienced professional who has been involved in the fields of child protection, infant and child mental health, and family social work. She outlines the Family Partnerships Model and how this can be used by educators to develop strategies focusing on the skills necessary to work with parents, as set out in the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *National Quality Standard*.

Chapters include important topics such as:

- Thinking about partnerships
- Skills in developing partnerships with parents
- Negotiation: An important skill
- Personal qualities.

Creating an environment where partnership relationships are the norm for everyone sets a tone of genuine welcome and acceptance; optimism that issues can be coped with; hope that changes can occur; and energy to apply to the work. This helpful book is a great place to start or continue this journey.

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