

Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

Vol 8 No 1 March 2005

Exploring the Nature of Parent-Professional Partnerships

Creating and maintaining real partnerships between parents and professionals working in children's services requires attention and commitment at many levels. However, the heart of partnerships is the daily interactions and communication. Anyone who really knows children's services knows that it isn't easy to make partnerships happen. Many people who work in children's services, if they are being honest, believe that establishing and maintaining partnerships with parents on behalf of their child is one of the most complicated and challenging aspects of their work. Those same people however, would also say, that if they want to make a lasting positive impact on a child's life, then working in such a partnership is one of the most important parts of their job.

What's the problem? Why are partnerships difficult?

Most services have policies about working with and relating to parents, but putting those statements into practice is often challenging. A director was overheard saying "You know, parents today are very busy people. I think the best thing we can do for them is to take on the responsibility for their children and not trouble them with questions or making decisions unless it's absolutely necessary". Occasionally family day care carers describe their work as taking other people's children into their own family

and treating them as their own. Some people working in children's services will say that they have more influence over children than their parents do. Not only are these views inaccurate, but they are detrimental to children's well being. Partnerships in children's services have many of the same characteristics that business or personal partnerships do. These include:

- mutual respect
- trust
- sensitivity to the perspective of the other, or empathy
- on-going open "both-ways" communication
- common goals that are clear and agreed on
- teamwork, absence of rivalry and competition
- recognition and valuing of the unique contribution and strengths of the partner
- shared decision making.

Confusion about what partnerships actually look like and feel like is a barrier to achieving them. Sometimes partnership is confused with traditional



notions of parent involvement or participation, which typically involve parents helping out or making contributions to the service. Helping out in the program, coming to working bees, fund raising, or being on the management committee can all contribute to partnership, but will not necessarily do so. In some services there are opportunities for parent involvement but no partnerships. Partnership involves sharing power, while involvement is typically the result of the professional defining ways that parents can contribute, and usually in ways that don't threaten the authority of the professional. The focus of a partnership is the child's well being, not the operation of the service. Another barrier to partnerships is confusion about the role of early childhood services in a child's life. The child care experience is not a substitute for growing up in a family, and children's services professionals are not taking the place of parents; they do not typically have more influence on children than their parents do.

Janet Gonzalez Mena writes about *child saving*, and Ron Lally calls it *protective urges*. What they and others are referring to is the likelihood that the desirable attachment relationship between a child and a children's services professional, if unchecked, can lead to developing a critical attitude toward parents and seeing oneself as a better "parent" to the child than the real parent is. This works against a partnership, and can eventually reduce parents' feelings of confidence. A parent's comment such as "Thank goodness for the child care centre (or family day care home) – they are so much better with my child than I am" is actually a cause for concern.

Small tensions can grow if they are not acknowledged, and are usually best resolved by getting them out in the open. For example, we all have a tendency to blame someone else when something goes wrong, so when a child starts behaving in a disruptive way, child care professionals may wonder if something is going on at home, while parents will think the cause is something happening in the centre or family day care home.

Another complexity is that parents' needs are not always compatible with children's needs. This isn't because parents are selfish or uncaring, but because parents are often trying to balance many different obligations and responsibilities in a world that is not always supportive. Their responsibility to be a caring parent to the child is only one of these responsibilities.

Children's services professionals are trying to achieve something very complex: a balance between demonstrating competence so that parents feel confident about leaving their child and giving parents the message that they are needed, that the information and perspectives they contribute about their child are

invaluable, and that they are the most important person in their child's life. This tension is demonstrated in the common situation where a well meaning professional says to the parent of a child who is distressed as the parent is about to leave: "You go ahead – she'll be fine as soon as you leave". It's worth thinking about the message a parent might take from this statement.

Ways forward

Partnership is respect in action. There are many ways that respect and partnership are manifest in daily practice in children's services. Where there is partnership:

Priority is placed on talking with parents regularly, at drop-off and pick-up times. Partnerships on the run is the name of the game in many early childhood services, and the times that parents and professionals have to forge partnerships, mainly at the beginning and end of the day, are not conducive to doing so.

Get tensions and issues out in the open and talk about them. Talk about the things that may be on parents' minds. For example:

- Talk about how children almost always behave better for other people than they do for their parents. We all are more likely to be "on our best behaviour" with people other than the people we are closest to, the ones we know will love us no matter how badly we behave.
- Talk with parents about who is responsible for the child when the parents are present in the service. This is a common moment of discomfort or tension in children's services, when the child is "playing up", the parent is thinking the professional should do something and the professional is wondering why the parent isn't taking action.
- Talk about how children's services professionals who are young and who are not parents can nevertheless be highly competent and have much to contribute to parents and children.
- Talk about how it's normal for some parents to have trouble separating from their child even when the child doesn't.
- Talk about how it is normal for parents to worry that their child may become more attached to the people who care for them in the service than they are to their parents.
- Talk about how professionals are not trying to substitute or take the place of parents.
- Talk about what it means when a child doesn't act like it's a big deal when the parent returns at the end of the day or even resists going home that it doesn't mean she or he likes the centre or family day care home more than their own home and family.

Find ways of connecting with parents, letting them in on their child's day, ways that go beyond simply displaying the daily or weekly program. That is a good first step, but it isn't enough.

Find ways to help parents connect with their child's day, by giving them information about their child's experience.

Every effort is made to share with parents good news about their child. Any time you can honestly tell a parent something positive, interesting, amusing or affirming about their child, do so. These messages not only inform the parent about their child's experience, but they are also important signals to the parent that the child is noticed and valued. Some parents may operate on the assumption that no news is good news, in other words, that the only time you will want to talk to them is when there's something wrong. All parents really like to hear anything positive anyone has to say about their child.

Parents' focus on their child is accepted and seen as desirable. Parents are not going to be as concerned about and interested in other children as they are in their own. That is their job – to be passionate about and a strong advocate for their own child.

Parents are encouraged to ask questions, make requests, and give constructive criticism. When parents make a request or ask for something, professionals adopt a "Why not?" attitude instead of an immediate "can't do" position. Asking "Why not?" does not mean always saying yes. There are many times when parents' requests cannot be granted. The point is to make clear to parents that it is always okay to ask, and when the answer is no, this is conveyed respectfully with no condescension or suggestion that the request itself was improper.

Professionals operate with confidence. They are willing to negotiate but at the same time are clear about their bottom lines, confident enough to persevere in the face of obstacles, and open to others' perspectives. They are clear about what matters most in a child's experience and what is less important. They are committed to finding good solutions when there are differences, as they view children in the context of family, culture and community. A true professional knows that there are very few absolutes in child rearing except that each child should be treated in ways that let the child know that he or she is loved and made to feel valued.

There is evidence of empathy in action, based on taking the perspective of the other. Sometimes we are critical of parents when they are just being parents. It is unrealistic to expect parents to be as objective about their child as we are. Professionals understand that it takes time for parents to trust the people who look after their child.



Expectations are individualised just as they are with children. Some parents will want to know more than others, some will share more information than others, some will be more assertive than others, some will be more confident and secure about themselves as parents than others, some will be busier than others, and some will be more critical and demanding than others. Just as there is no generic child, there is no generic parent.

It is acknowledged that it is hard to work effectively in partnership with all parents, particularly those who are challenging. Some parents will alienate, annoy and even anger professionals. The most difficult parents to form a partnership with are often those who most need it. It is the essence of professionalism to work well with those parents.

Conclusion

Professionals who work well with parents have full appreciation of the power and influence they have on parents' perceptions of themselves as parents and their understanding of the importance of the parent-child relationship.

A cornerstone of high quality in children's services is when there is absolute clarity that the most valuable thing an early childhood professional can do for a child is to strengthen the parent-child bond and increase parents' appreciation and valuing of their child.

QIAS Quality Area 3.

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 6.2.

Note: This article has been adapted from an article called "The Agony and the Ecstasy – Exploring the Nature of Parent-Professional Partnerships" by Anne Stonehouse, in *Partnerships for Children – Parents and Community Together – a Summary of a 'Roadshow' offered in 13 Locations across Australia*, Centre for Community Child Health, Melbourne, 2001.

Partnerships With Parents – Clovelly Child Care Centre

Clovelly Child Care Centre has been operating for twenty years as a community based not for profit, parent managed service. It has grown over the years from a Centre with two rooms with forty children to a three roomed fifty five place centre. There has always been a high level of parent participation which was vital for the management by a parent committee.

Families have also contributed in many practical ways to the operation of the Centre, including gardening, fund raising, cooking and other activities.

The Director, Maria Pender said “One of my priorities has always been to develop partnerships with parents as I believe the better we know the family the more opportunities for everyone involved to enhance the child’s learning”.

In order to develop partnerships the Centre invites parents to an information evening early in the year. This is done room by room and childcare is offered. Staff try to establish an open communication system with parents, explaining the importance of a two way learning process.

Many of the families using Clovelly Child Care are socially isolated with no or very few members of the extended family close by. The staff try to assist parents to build relationships with other parents so they can support each other in a variety of ways. Many children are the only child in the family and parents find it beneficial to interact with others in a similar situation.

The majority of parents are professionals who are often very rushed in the morning so staff try to use the afternoons to communicate when parents have more time. Staff recognise the parents as the child’s first educator and make a point of letting parents know this. Maria said “There are 168 hours in a week and we see some children for only 12 hours or perhaps up to 40 hours for others. All staff recognise the importance of their relationship with parents. With the increasing use of part time care, staff need to be aware of how limited their time with parents is”.

Each room prepares a newsletter and in the under two’s room there is a daily communication slip for each child and a personal diary. Folders with documentation of the learning experiences are available in each room. Increased use of technology is occurring with the use of email as well as the telephone for more sensitive discussions.

Maria acknowledges the difficulties in establishing partnerships with families when over 90 families use the Centre each week. She explained that she finds the work of Mary Lewis useful. Mary believed that for the first year a parent has a child in child care they tend to have an egocentric view and tend to see only their own child. In the second year they start to see their child in relation to other children and by the third they have a greater understanding of the Centre, the staff and the Centre as a community.

*Contributed by Maria Pender Dip.T. B.Ed.(EC) M.Ed(Adult Ed.)
Director, Clovelly Child Care.*

AN INITIATIVE OF



CENTRE FOR
Community
Child Health



ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

SUPPORTED BY AN
EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM

Johnson & Johnson
PROFESSIONAL & EDUCATIONAL SERVICES
Health Care for Life

SUPPORTED BY THE
NATIONAL CHILDCARE
ACCREDITATION COUNCIL



SUPPORTED BY



Australian Government
Department of Family and
Community Services

National Editorial Panel
Professor Frank Oberklaid

Mr John Tainton
Dr Gay Ochiltree
Ms Denise Taylor
Ms Jo Comans

Associate Professor June Wangmann

Editors

Ms June McLoughlin
Ms Tonia Godhard AM
Ms Sharon Foster

Production Editor
Ms Cathy Archer

Contact Details

Tel: (03) 9345 6150

Fax: (03) 9345 5900

Email: catherine.archer@rch.org.au
Website: www.econnections.com.au