



National Day Nurseries Association

\*Brighter thinking  
for early years

# Factsheet

## Positive Relationships with Parents

England

# Positive Relationships with Parents

There is an abundance of research that demonstrates the importance of parents and carers in a child's life and the significant impact that parental involvement in children's education has on their learning, with positive effects that last into adulthood.

Parents hold a wealth of information about their child, it is a vital aspect of a practitioner's role to develop a positive relationship with parents and families to enable a two-way sharing of information and achievements.

This factsheet will specifically focus on parents as partners. It will support you in reflecting on developing and maintaining positive relationships with parents with practical tips and advice.

## Building relationships

Developing a strong and positive relationship with parents starts with their very first contact with your setting. Think about how parents learn about your provision and the type of information they get to see.

- Is the information welcoming and inclusive to all families in your community?
- Is the language easy to read and understand?
- Does the provision look inviting and do staff appear approachable?

Review your setting in the eyes of parents, start outdoors and work your way through all the spaces parents access.

- Are the spaces and staff welcoming to all parents?
- Is information shared with parents about their child?
- Are parent notice boards interesting and up-to-date?
- Do staff take time to talk to all parents?
- What different ways can parents find out about what you do and how this impacts their child's learning and development?
- Do parents who have English as an additional language have access to the information they need?

Once parents visit your setting you can start to build relationships and get to know each unique family. The settling in period and assigning a key person is an important step for both the child and the parent. Where possible the child should be given the time to choose their own key person based on their individual preferences for a specific member of staff.

The key person should be the main link between nursery and home and be given the time needed to talk to the parents and get to know them and their child, for example, time to talk to parents about their preferred way to communicate and share information (this might be a daily verbal chat, a telephone call, an email or text message). It will also help you to understand any specific communication needs e.g. translation, using large text or specific coloured paper for written communication.

#### **Best practice tip: Sharing information must be a two way process**

Reflect on your current practice and think about how often you seek information from parents and how much you give to parents. Is it an even 50/50 split of sharing information?

If not, what can you do to increase the opportunities you provide parents to share information with you?

### **Avoiding expectations and assumptions**

Parents and families will have a variety of cultural beliefs about educators and a range of experiences of education, formal schooling and learning. These experiences may affect their perception of their role and/or their confidence when being asked to share information about their child, seeing practitioners as the 'experts' and not feeling confident or the necessity to share their own ideas and thoughts.

Practitioners need to be mindful and sensitive to the differing experiences, confidence and skill level of families and be mindful of making assumptions about the reasons a parent may not appear to be engaged in their child's learning.

Consider some of the pressures families may be going through:

- Work and home life balance
- Financial concerns
- Poverty
- Parenting without wider family or community support
- Managing the stress and worries that can be involved in raising children, for example toileting issues, bedtime routines and behaviour
- Ill health of themselves or family members
- Issues relating to individual families, for example a family breakdown or divorce, a death in the family or domestic abuse
- Alcohol or substance misuse issues.

Parents may be dealing with any of the above (or multiples of the above) pressures so it is important not to make assumptions and to sensitively work with each family to support their individual needs.

Making assumptions about any parent or family can lead to inaccurate assessment of those involved and can mean that you don't get the chance to build a genuinely authentic relationship built on respect and trust. Practitioners should strive to get to know parents as individuals and plan for time to hold meaningful discussions and share information.

## Barriers to engagement

Each setting has unique families so it is important that you get to know your own families and the specific barriers they may be facing in regard to engaging with their child's learning journey and experiences.

Potential barriers to establishing good relationships with parents may include:

- **Physical barriers and the environment** - inclusively welcoming from the outside, geographical location and distance, local transport services, access to your setting, disabled access, sensory input e.g. lighting, noise levels or colour contrasts
- **Time** – parents face real pressure juggling work and family life, they may not have the time to have at the end of the session to stay and have a rich dialogue about their child's development
- **Language and culture** – communication may be hindered when parents and staff do not share a common language.. Parents may have different cultural expectations around education and involvement and may not be used to being included in every aspect of their child's learning
- **Experience based attitudes** - not all your parents will have had positive experiences in educational establishments, this may impact on how they feel about coming into your setting and speaking to a professional about their child
- **Isolation** – parents may be new to the area and have no friends or extended family to support them. They may not speak English so unable to communicate with staff or other parents
- **Confidence** – parents may see practitioners as the 'experts' and may fear being judged by the information they share so may choose to stay silent and let the practitioners do all of the talking. They may not understand the different jargon you use and rather than making themselves vulnerable by asking you to explain, they may choose to avoid conversations with you. There may be some parents who are struggling to find that 'natural parenting instinct' and compare themselves to other parents and staff
- **Relationships** – some parents may feel that they are not as welcome in the setting as others and as a result disengage. It might be that they struggle to forge relationships with the setting staff, they might feel they are not as well liked or as respected as other parents and families. If parents don't feel they belong or fit in with other parents, there will be a tendency to dash in and dash back out again. Some parents may be shy, introverted or have low self-esteem and don't feel able to push themselves forward to develop relationships. This could lead to disengagement and a reluctance to engage with their child's learning and development journey.

It is vital that practitioners empathise with parents that are not engaged with the setting, they are able to have a positive attitude in their approach to creating individual strategies to engage and support the parents effectively.

## Strategies for barriers to engagement

**Environment** – ensure your environment is welcoming to all parents and they can see and feel that they are important to you. Look at access points, share details of public transport, provide details of parents willing to car share or provide lifts. Talk to parents about their individual needs and what might present a barrier to them. Have visual representations of parents' ideas, input and how you have implemented them. Create an interactive parent board and update it on a regular basis. Have visual information for parents about how their child is developing e.g. photos, displays, videos. Review your environment as though you are a parent to find out how it supports individual families. Include opportunities for parents to share their feedback and offer their ideas.

**Time** – to engage parents you need to identify their preference for communication so that it is realistic and workable. Talk to parents when they first join your setting (or do a review question for existing parents) about how they would like to communicate with you to discuss their child. This could be via face-to-face contact, email, telephone, a WhatsApp message group etc. For parents that never physically get into the setting they may be very appreciative of a phone call once a week in their lunch break. Let parents determine the format the communication takes so that it doesn't just become another demand on their time pulling them in different directions. Think about having events at different times and dates to suit all families e.g. Saturday morning stay and play sessions, evening events, or a lunch time chat-and-nibble event (parents and staff bring along their lunch and have a relaxed chat whilst they eat). This approach is great for parents who can only get to you in their lunch break.

Consider ways in which you can help parents understand what is essential information, what is non-essential and the different methods you deploy to share the information with them. You could invent strategies such as colour coding all your essential information or adding a 'must read' logo so parents can easily identify important information. This system will help parents to organise their time and will enable you to get the essential information you are seeking.

**Language** – it is critical to find ways to communicate with parents in their preferred way, luckily there has been significant advancements with translator tools, for example, Google translate, translator apps for smart phones and translator services. Organisations such as NSPCC and The Literacy Trust offer information and factsheets in a range of languages that you can download and share with families.

**Culture** – spend time with parents to share your setting's vision and ethos, while also learning about their background and what matters to them. Engage in open, respectful conversations about any differences in approaches, explaining why certain practices are used and how they benefit the child.

Create opportunities for parents to visit and share their meaningful traditions, celebrations or experiences. Approach every family without assumptions, being mindful of any possible barriers they may face, work together to identify supportive and inclusive solutions.

**Experience based attitudes** – listen and learn from parents about their experiences. Use jargon free terminology and provide information in a variety of ways. Demonstrate the value each parent brings to your setting and provide opportunities for them to share stories about their child. Offer relaxed, informal opportunities to visit the setting and share information.

**Isolation** – introduce a buddy scheme for new parents so they have a friendly face in the setting, someone they can talk and get to know. Offer play and stay or coffee mornings so parents can get to know each other. Signpost parents to local groups where they can meet other parents.

**Confidence** – practitioners should ensure they do not come across as ‘the expert on the child’ making parents feel worried about putting their own thoughts and ideas forward in case they are ‘wrong’. Use plain language and explain any acronyms you use to parents. Offer play and stay sessions so parents can get to know staff in a relaxed environment. Create time to listen to the parents and highlight how you have actioned any advice, guidance, information they have shared with you about their child, showing you value their input. Offer parents the opportunity to come in and volunteer so they can learn about what happens in your everyday practice and see how much staff rely on parents’ knowledge and observations to support individual children. Ensure parents have effective methods of communicating with staff, making sure their views are understood and respected.

**Relationships** – reflect on how you develop relationships with each of your parents and families. Do you give those with the greatest voice the most time? Practitioners should support all parents and families to develop relationships with staff and other parents, by enabling time for discussions and getting to know the parents/families to develop and strengthen the relationships. Provide regular occasions to spend time with the key person supporting their child and show how all information regarding their child is important and valued. Ensure you have a separate space where you can have private discussions with parents when needed. Offer stay and play sessions or coffee meet and greets for parents to enable them to find commonalities, share parenting tips and develop friendships. Regularly evaluate your environment to reflect on your inclusivity for all your parents and families.

It is critical to remember that all parents and families are unique and there is no ‘one strategy fits all.’ The strategies above may need to be amended, extended or adapted to meet the specific needs of your own parents and families.

In order to provide a cohesive approach to engaging parents think about creating your own parent partnership strategy, this can be implemented across the setting to share skills and ideas and improve engagement levels.

## Parent partnership strategy

Use the information you have about the families that use your services to create an inclusive whole setting approach to parent engagement. Your parent partnership strategy might include:

- An introduction, setting out your high-quality vision and how parents are central to its success
- What you are aiming for – what a successful parent partnership looks like to you
- Why collaborative partnerships benefit the children
- How parents are involved in the decision making in your setting
- How you action parent feedback and advice
- An overview of the parents and families that attend your setting
- The range of ways you communicate with parents based on their preferences
- The types of barriers your parents face to engagement
- The solutions and strategies you have to minimise barriers to engagement
- How you support parents with home learning.

Managers and leaders should ensure they find opportunities to discuss the setting's parent partnership strategy on a regular basis with staff individually or in a room meeting. Ask staff what percentage of their current parents are engaged, find out what strategies they have tried and which have been successful, already tried for the parents that they identify as not engaged. Share ideas across your team and add any new suggestions into your partnership strategy to ensure it remains a meaningful and practical working document.

## Parent voice

Feedback from parents is essential to developing your practice. When seeking any form of feedback from parents and families or visitors to your setting be creative. Don't always present things in the same way, make your feedback options new and exciting so parents are interested and keen to have a look and they don't comment, "Oh, this again."

It is useful to consider a variety of ways to gather parents' views such as online survey tools like Survey Monkey or Facebook polls. This is a quick and innovative way to engage with time starved parents and ensure you have a wide range of feedback.

If parents ask for something that can't be done then explain to them why it can't be changed so they understand that you have considered their request and there is a good reason for not taking any action. Consider using a 'you said, we did' approach and provide feedback on suggestions made. When parents can see you have considered their suggestion, even if you have not been able to implement it, they will be much more engaged and willing to provide feedback in the future.

### Best practice tip

Seeking regular feedback is an essential element of parent partnership. How many different ways do you do this? How effective are they?

- Carry out exit interviews (parents who are leaving your provision) to find out how families felt about the service you offered or what they thought you could have done better. Not every family will be confident enough, or honest enough, to share negative feedback but some will provide valuable insights that you can learn from
- Follow up potential customers who didn't take up a place after visiting to find out why and ask about their overall impression of the setting, staff and service you offer.

If you find that you are not receiving feedback from your parents, then you need to review the ways in which you are asking for it, e.g. if you only ever get a very low number of parents engaging in your parent questionnaire then you may need to ask the questions in a different way:

- Break down the questionnaire into smaller themed questions e.g. have a weekly or monthly theme
- Use a scoring system with the option of comments so parents don't get put off by having to write lots of text and anonymity is protected
- Offer different methods of gathering their feedback - it is useful to remember that some parents may not be confident in writing due to insecure literacy skills or through having English being an additional language. Consider different ways in which you can capture feedback. Can you set up a parent forum or set up one-to-one meetings with the parents?
- Create an interactive feedback display with your questions (in big print, you may want to add photos to create a more visual display) and leave sticky backed numbers at the bottom of the board so parents can rate you in each category by sticking a number on each question box
- Ensure you share any action you have taken as a result of the parent feedback, so parents see it as a valuable use of their time. If parents never hear or see any action as a result of their feedback, then they will be less likely to use some of their precious family time to share it with you in future
- Be professional in your approach to the feedback. It is easy to take negative feedback personally, but it is essential that you step back and review the feedback from the parent's point of view. Think about what you can do to improve either the area they are referring to or how you can improve their perception of what is happening. If you are defensive and dismissive then this will prevent parents sharing the negatives with you in future. If parents haven't got a voice in your setting, then they may voice those negatives with people outside your setting instead.

## **Home learning environment (HLE)**

The home learning may be defined as the activities that mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandparents and other members of the wider family or other carers undertake with the child at home that support and encourage the child's learning.

Reflect on how you support parents, or think about how you might be able to support them moving forward. What strategies could you put in place with your staff team to engage parents in their child's learning?

When planning home learning activities remember to keep them time efficient, simple to complete and ensure that parents do not require any extra resources or financial outlay to complete the activities. Try to plan activities with resources that can be done using resources found in and around the home so that all parents and children can take part in e.g. painting letters with water.

When planning any HLE activity ask yourself:

### **How long is the activity going to take?**

We previously looked at the time pressures on busy working parents, so think about the time you are asking them to add to their already busy daily schedule. If it is a one hour activity it may have to be scrapped for other tasks parents have, but if it is a ten minute activity or an activity that can be done at the same time as other tasks e.g. talking to their child whilst they prepare the evening meal, then it is much more likely to happen.

### **Is it realistic to expect parents to complete the activity?**

If the activity is making an Easter bonnet or bringing in photographs of certain things or people, then it may mean parents just don't take part because they haven't the time or access to photos, rather than being disinterested in taking part. Parents may not have the resources in place to do the activity e.g. a camera or a camera facility on their phone, printing photos is costly and time consuming, they may not have a printer or access to one.

### **Do parents need any extra resources and if so, can we supply them?**

If you are asking parents to complete an activity at home it is important that they have the resources they need in or around their home, for example if you are asking parents to read a story with their child then you need to be sure they have access to books at home. Offer a lending library so parents can choose a book to take home. For parents who have poor literacy skills you could think about giving them picture books, puppets or story spoons to re-tell or make-up stories with their child or to provide a printed picture story so that they can make up their own stories.

### **Is it going to have a financial impact for parents (buying equipment or paying for trips etc.)?**

Activities need to be fully inclusive so all parents and children can take part. If the activity has a cost to it, then you should re-consider and think about how the desired outcome can be achieved without

costing any money. A pound or two may not seem a lot to invest in an activity but for a family it could be hugely important and could mean the difference between completing the activity or using their bus fare to work.

### **Supporting parents**

When sharing home learning activities with parents you should provide parents with very clear instructions, the learning possibilities and benefits of the activity. Printed cards or written instructions for the activity alongside the types of things children will be learning by completing the activity, e.g. if a child has been fascinated by water and pouring from jugs you may suggest that the parents provide some water and different sized containers at bath time, at the kitchen sink or outdoors in their garden. Add the range of learning potential such as size, capacity and volume, suggest some new vocabulary for parents to introduce during the play. This will help parents to understand the role of play, support them to take an active role in the home learning activities and have fun with their child.

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# Factsheet

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We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

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