

CHAPTER ONE



A solid foundation: basic principles of why and how

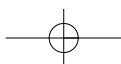
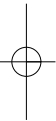
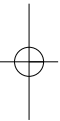


The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the importance of practitioners working in partnership with parents. It explores the principles which underpin this relationship and outlines relevant documents. It gives practitioners the opportunity to consider how they work with parents in their own setting.

The chapter sets out:

- ▶ A parent's perspective
- ▶ Government guidance and recommendations
- ▶ A starter quiz – 'Working with Parents'?

It also offers hands-on activities.



Welcome to Holland

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability – to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It's like this ...

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip – to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum. The Michelangelo David. The gondolas in Venice. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and says, 'Welcome to Holland.'

'Holland?!?' you say. 'What do you mean Holland?? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.'

But there's been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, disgusting, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place.

So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you would never have met.

It's just a different place. It's slower-paced than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around ... and you begin to notice that Holland has windmills ... and Holland has tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy ... and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life, you will say 'Yes, that's where I was supposed to go. That's what I had planned.'

And the pain of that will never, ever, ever, ever go away ... because the loss of that dream is a very very significant loss.

But ... if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things ... about Holland

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Our starting point

Emily Perl Kingsley wrote her poem 'Welcome to Holland' in 1987 after the birth of her own child. For us, when writing this guide, it seemed a good place to begin as it helps to illustrate how the parents of a child with special or additional needs *may* be feeling – we emphasise *may* as, like all individuals, each parent is unique and some may feel differently.

however, we know that through meeting and working with many parents over the years Emily's poem has helped *us* to gain insight into what it means to be the mother or father of a child with special or additional needs and, further, that it has helped *us* to begin to understand the special value of parenting such a child.

Why work with parents?

For the parents of a child with an additional or special need the path to pre-school has been at best bumpy, at worst a series of hospital stays, appointments and meetings with a whole host of professionals, often retelling their story over and over again. Most parents have embarked upon a long road to understanding their child's condition and how best to meet their own child's needs. Practitioners need to know how to best tap into this wealth of knowledge that parents have and recognise that for parents to leave their precious, often vulnerable child at pre-school is a hard step. Parents need to be able to trust practitioners and feel assured that they, as parents, will be allowed to be involved and consulted as their child progresses through the pre-school years.

Over ten years ago, another parent, Cory Moore, when speaking to professionals, said:

We need respect; we need to have our contribution valued. We need to participate, not merely be involved. It is, after all, the parent who knew the child first and who knows the child best. Our relationship with our sons and daughters is personal and spans a lifetime. (Moore, 1993: 49)

Early years Practitioners already recognise the importance of working in partnership with *all* parents and often go the extra mile to ensure parents are involved in every aspect of their child's care and education. The best learning takes place for children when practitioner and parent are working together.

Through this guide we will illustrate how best practice can be achieved by all practitioners for the benefit of those most important to us all, the young child.

Guidance and recommendations

The government has made it policy over the past few years to create good quality, affordable childcare and education for all children.

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At the heart of this policy lies *Every Child Matters* a document which identifies five outcomes for children that should be achieved no matter where they live, whatever their needs or the services they use.

The outcomes are that children should be helped to:

- ▶ Be healthy
- ▶ Stay safe
- ▶ Enjoy and achieve
- ▶ Make a positive contribution
- ▶ Achieve economic well-being.

CARTOON TO COME

Illustration 1 Woman with a toddler (18 months) in a buggy standing on the pavement looking at a nursery called Perfect Kids (in background) she looks apprehensive. There is a welcome sign over the door

The government's ten-year strategy for childcare *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children* promised to establish a single coherent development and learning framework for all young children from birth to the age of five.

From September 2008 the **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)** is the relevant framework and plays an important role in helping children achieve all five of the Every Child Matters outcomes.

Like all government guidance and recommendations it has a strong emphasis on working in partnership with parents, especially those parents who have children with special or additional needs.

The principles of the EYFS are grouped into four distinct but complementary themes:

- ▶ A unique child
- ▶ Positive relationships
- ▶ Enabling environments
- ▶ Learning and development

The themes of 'A unique child' and 'Positive relationships' in particular highlight the importance of celebrating diversity, inclusion and partnership with parents.

Guidance as to how these principles can be put into everyday practice is described on the 'Principles into Practice' cards which accompany the framework.

EYFS: THEMES AND COMMITMENTS

A Unique Child

Card 1.2 Inclusive Practice

The diversity of individuals and communities is valued and respected. No child or family is discriminated against.

Positive Relationships

Card 2.2 Parents as Partners

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.

The statutory guidance also describes how the EYFS sets out to create equality of opportunity and a framework for partnership working which it identifies as underpinning the successful delivery of the EYFS.

On working in partnership with parents

Close working between early year's practitioners and parents is vital for the identification of children's learning needs and to ensure a quick response to any area of particular difficulty.

Parents and families are central to a child's wellbeing and practitioners should support this important relationship by sharing information and offering support to learning in the home.

On working in partnership with others

Practitioners will frequently need to work with professionals from other agencies such as local and community health services, or where children are looked after by the Local Authority, to identify and meet needs and use their knowledge and advice to provide children's social care with the best learning opportunities and environments for all children.

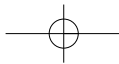
On providing for equality of opportunity

Providers have a responsibility to ensure positive attitudes to diversity and difference – not only so that every child is included and not disadvantaged, but also so that they learn from the earliest age to value diversity in others and grow up making a positive contribution to society.

All government guidance and recommendations, including the EYFS, also has a strong emphasis on working in partnership with parents, especially those parents who have children with special or additional needs.

Other bodies concerned with the quality of childcare and education such as **Ofsted** also place importance on the relationship between professionals and parents.

Under the Ofsted framework of inspection, inspectors are required to assess the contribution that parents make to the preschool and the children's learning. They also evaluate the effectiveness of



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the links with parents, the quality of the links with the community and the links with other early years settings and providers.

Some legislation which is more specific to children with special or additional needs and their parents such as the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2001) also stress the need and benefit of practitioner and parent working together in the best interest of the child.

The Code of Practice dedicates a whole chapter to working in partnership and outlines certain expectations in regard to all stages of a child's education. These begin in the early years and pre- school practitioners and settings are expected to 'have regard' to them.

These expectations include a series of principles that preschool settings are expected to adhere to, as well references to policies and procedures.

The principles of the Code of Practice:

- ▶ Every child with special educational needs should have their needs met.
- ▶ As far as possible these needs will be met within a mainstream setting with access to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum.
- ▶ The views of parents should be sought and taken into account.
- ▶ Wherever possible the views of the child should be taken into account.

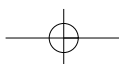
(DFEE, 2001: 2:2, p. 16)

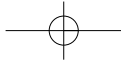
One of the key principles of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice therefore is the importance of working in partnership with parents.

Parents hold key information and have a crucial role to play in their children's education. They have unique strengths, knowledge and experience to contribute to the shared view of a child's needs and the best way of supporting them. It is therefore essential that all professionals actively seek to work with parents and value the contribution they make.

The work of professionals can be more effective when parents are involved and account taken of their wishes, feelings and perspectives on their child's development. This is particularly so when a child has special educational needs.

All parents of children with special educational needs should be treated as partners.





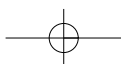
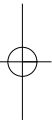
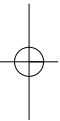
Hands-on activity

Use the 'Working with Parents Quiz' to help you measure how well you are working with the parents in your setting.

Look carefully at your score and put together an action plan to make improvements (see the template provided on p. 00).

Whatever your score on the Working with Parents starter quiz you will find the following Starter Ideas a useful basis for improving your working partnership with *all* parents.

These starter ideas are expanded further to illustrate how they can be used more specifically when building relationships with those parents of children with special or additional needs.



Working with Parents Quiz

1. Have you recently surveyed parents' views on any aspect of your setting?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Not recently
 - (c) No

2. Do all staff recognise the importance of working with parents?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Some
 - (c) No

3. Do you communicate with parents in a range of different ways, e.g. through a newsletter, notice board, etc.?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Sometimes but could do more
 - (c) No

4. Do you regularly offer information about your planning and the curriculum?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Sometimes
 - (c) No

5. Do you involve parents in their children's learning?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Sometimes
 - (c) No

6. Is your pre-school environment physically accessible to all parents?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Parts of it
 - (c) No

7. Do parents have the chance to meet with staff regularly to discuss their child?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Not regularly
 - (c) No

8. Do you have systems in place to allow parents to contribute their views and opinions?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Some but need more
 - (c) No



9. Do parents take a part in the wider life of the pre-school, e.g. by volunteering etc.?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Sometimes
 - (c) No

10. Are you aware of local and national parent support organisations, e.g. Parents for Inclusion.
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Some but could investigate more
 - (c) No

11. Do you hold an annual parent child event?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Sometimes
 - (c) No

12. Do you have a parent space for parents waiting, meeting or settling their children?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) Thinking about creating one
 - (c) No

Scoring

For each answer (a) score 3 points; answer (b) score 2 points; answer (c) score 1 point

Score between 28 and 36

* **Gold Star** awarded – You are well on your way to working successfully with parents. This book will help you go the extra mile.

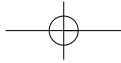
Score between 20 and 27

* **Silver Star** awarded – You are half way there! Well done. This book will help you clarify your ideas and improve even further.

Score between 12 and 19

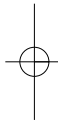
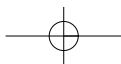
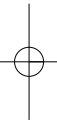
* **Bronze Star** awarded – You still have quite a long way to go. *However*, you have made a good start by consulting this book. We are sure you will find the following ideas and suggestions helpful. Go for it!

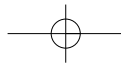




Working in Partnership with Parents – Action Plan

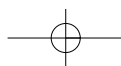
Area to be improved	How this is to be achieved (including person/s responsible)	By when	Cost and resources	Evaluation





Starter Ideas: 20 Easy Ways to Support Good Relations with *All* Parents

1. Make a list of parents' names and use them regularly.
2. Greet all parents and children every day.
3. Celebrate birthdays and special days for families and children.
4. Involve parents as volunteers and fundraisers.
5. Have a conversation at least weekly with every parent about their child (keep an informal list).
6. Listen carefully to what parents have to say about their child. Acknowledge they know best.
7. Share positive events of the day through talk, or send home notes or photographs.
8. Keep parents informed about bumps and scrapes.
9. Make sure parents know what is happening in the setting – use a newsletter and have a notice board.
10. Keep a register of parents' skills ask them how they think they can support the pre-school.
11. Ask parents to contribute to record keeping.
12. Establish a pattern of talking to parents' about everyday matters. This will make it easier to discuss difficult issues.
13. Deal with issues and difficulties the same day, as they occur.
14. Remind parents about agreements, payments, etc. in a way that is non-embarrassing.
15. Support parents to get to know each other by introductions, coffee mornings, socials, etc.
16. Tell parents who their child is friendly with and encourage play dates.
17. Encourage parents to tell you social stories about their child.
18. Set up a small comfortable 'Parents Space' for parents waiting or settling their children.
19. Hold an annual parent/child event such as a concert or a picnic.
20. Have a notice board for parents' use only.



How the Starter ideas relate to the parents of children with SEN/additional needs

1. Make a list of parents' names and use them regularly

As a key worker or as the setting manager or SENCO you will build a close relationship with the parents of a child with special/additional needs. It is vital then that you start on a good footing. Find out their name, ask them what they would like you to call them and decide what you would like to be called in return. Make time for regular contact with these parents – this can be face to face, over the telephone or by using a daily home school diary.

2. Greet all parents and children every day

Make sure you talk to whoever brings any child with special/additional needs to school. Important information may need to be given to you about medication, appointments or how a child has slept.

3. Celebrate birthdays and special days for families and children

Children with special/additional needs may, through circumstance, have less contact with other families. It is important then to make the most of any opportunity such as birthdays or other special days to raise the child's profile within your setting. Involve the child's parents in any planned celebrations.

4. Involve parents as volunteers and fundraisers

Many parents of children with special/additional needs do not go to work outside the home so are often available to get involved in fundraising activities within the preschool. Also many families of children with special/additional needs may already have links with charitable organisations and groups. Consider whether your setting may be able to hold fundraising events such as a jumble sale or a sponsored event on behalf of the group. This will go a long way to ensure good relations with parents as they see the preschool staff making such efforts on behalf of their child and others.

5. Have a conversation at least weekly with every parent about their child (keep an informal list)

As well as a daily chat with parents it is worth trying to set aside a short time weekly or every two weeks to talk to the parents of any child with special/additional needs. This more formal meeting gives an opportunity to share information and deal with any issues that may arise. This meeting can be held with the SENCO or key worker.

6. Listen carefully to what parents have to say about their child. Acknowledge they know best

Make sure that during any meetings you are listening closely to parents. Make sure conversations take place in a quiet area with little disturbance (this is difficult in many preschools). Read and familiarise yourself with the listening skills described in Chapter 2 'The toolkit'.

7. Share positive events of the day through talk, or send home notes or photographs

During daily talks with parents make sure you start any conversation with a positive. If there is a digital camera available photograph the child carrying out activities or playing with a friend. Share the photographs with parents and regularly print them out to be sent home.

8. Keep parents informed about bumps and scrapes

When a child has special/additional needs it is particularly important to inform parents of any mishaps that have occurred within the setting. The smallest bump or scratch could affect some children, e.g. those with a low immune system. Some children may not be able to explain to their parents later, perhaps at bath time, how they came to have a bump or scratch. Parents will always appreciate being kept informed.

9. Make sure parents know what is happening in the setting – use a newsletter and have a notice board.

Pre-empting and informing parents of children with special/additional needs of any proposed or planned changes such as changes in routines or planned visits outside of the preschool is often a good idea. Planning for change is very important for some children, e.g. those with an autistic spectrum condition, and practitioner and parents need to work closely to avoid difficulties.

10. Keep a register of parents' skills ask them how they think they can support the preschool

The parents of a child with special/additional may need to be in the preschool more or for longer periods than other parents. It is worthwhile finding out if they have any other skills that they can offer the setting. This is often useful when the child is settling into the preschool as a parent busy elsewhere but still in the room gives the key worker a chance to build her own relationship with the child. Often parents have many skills and areas of expertise that they would love to share.

11. Ask parents to contribute to record keeping

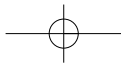
All parents know their child better than anyone. The parents of a child with special/additional needs has a better overview of their child than anyone else. They are aware of even the smallest progress. It is worthwhile sharing any record keeping and the findings of observations with parents. Ask them if they have noted the same progress or difficulties at home. Discuss ways to move their child forward with them.

12. Establish a pattern of talking to parents about everyday matters. This will make it easier to discuss difficult issues

When sensitive matters need to be discussed with parents a well established partnership between practitioner and parents is invaluable. Parents will be more inclined to trust a practitioner and acknowledge any difficulties highlighted before working together to resolve any difficulties. Remember when having what may be a difficult meeting make sure you and the parent have the time as well as a private place to talk.

13. Deal with issues and difficulties the same day as they occur

Discussing incidents or difficulties several days after they have occurred do little to improve parental relations. Daily feedback always starting with a positive should be the regular routine for parental relations.



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14. Remind parents about agreements, payments, etc. in a way that is non-embarrassing

Practitioners who have sound relationships with parents will find it easier to have other conversations about sensitive issues. These conversations may be in regard to payments, lateness, etc. The key is sensitivity and privacy.

15. Support parents to get to know each other by introductions, coffee mornings, socials, etc.

Often (not always) the parents of children with special/additional needs have had less chance to make friends in the local community than other parents. This may be due to prolonged hospital stays, visits, etc. The preschool can provide an invaluable role in helping parents and their children make new relationships and friendships.

16. Tell parents who their child is friendly with and encourage play dates

By raising the positive profile of a child with special/additional needs within the preschool setting practitioners play a positive part in ensuring the child makes relationships with his/her peers. These relationships can be further extended by telling parents who their child is friendly with. Once both sets of parents are aware of childhood friendships often they will encourage the relationship by inviting each other to play dates, parties, etc. When practitioners display a positive attitude to a child with special/additional needs and their family, this often gives the parents of other children in the setting the confidence to try to get to know them better.

17. Encourage parents to tell you social stories about their child

Background information about children and their lives is invaluable for any practitioner. By sharing social or home stories practitioners are looking beyond the special or additional need and begin to see the whole child. By asking about and listening to such stories a practitioner will go a long way in improving relationships with parents.

18. Set up a small comfortable 'Parents Space' for parents waiting or settling their children

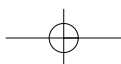
Often (not always) the parents of children with special/additional needs will spend longer periods of time in the preschool, settling their children, perhaps staying if their child is unsettled or under the weather. It is beneficial to set aside a 'Parents Space' within your preschool. This space could also be used as a quieter place to talk to parents. The ideal Parents Space would include a comfortable chair, some toys (for younger siblings), some magazines including educational magazines, a photograph album of outings, a parents' notice board, etc.

19. Hold an annual parent/child event such as a concert or a picnic

When organising such an event practitioners should be mindful of the needs of any children with special/additional needs. If in doubt discuss ideas with parents. The families of children with special/additional needs often have busy diaries which can be full of a succession of hospital appointments, sessions with speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, etc. Make sure parents have plenty of notice of the date of any trip.

20. Have a notice board for parents' use only

A parent's notice board allows parents the opportunity to communicate with each other. They may choose to put such things as 'looking for a nanny share' or 'selling a child's bed' etc. on the board. The parents of a child with special/additional needs should feel free, and be encouraged, to put information about any organisations' events they may be involved in such as the national Deaf Children's Society or the National Autistic Society etc.





Further reading

Department for Education and Employment (2001) *The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*. DfEE.

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *Every Child Matters*. DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Removing Barriers to Achievement: The Government Strategy for SEN*. DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for Children from Birth to Five*. DfES.