

C HAPTER 3

Sharing the learning journey with parents

For some parents leaving their child in the care of others in an unfamiliar building can be a very anxious experience. There are many valid reasons why parents may be particularly anxious about their child. It is our role as practitioners to initiate and maintain positive relationships with all parents. Our observations provide evidence of children's experience and form a basis for discussion about planning for the child's learning. Parents' observations and knowledge about their child provide crucial insights into the ways in which we can best help them.



Parents and practitioners both learn about the child they share.

When parents bring their children to our setting they bring a collection of preconceived ideas of what the childcare experience may be like for their child. These meet our preconceived ideas about what parenting experiences their child may have had. Current parents have not generally experienced the same levels of childcare as their children. Combine this with the variety of

media coverage, both good and bad, which our day nurseries and pre-schools have had and it is not surprising that there are some misunderstandings. It is our role as practitioners to work for the best interests of the children in our care. In order to do this we need to be proactive in developing a positive relationship with their parents. This relationship starts the first time we speak to them. Parents are the child's first educators and have extensive knowledge about their child's character, personality, learning style, likes, dislikes, strengths and difficulties. They are their child's greatest advocate and want the best for them.

Along with any preconceived ideas we may have there are also many anxieties around when we first meet parents. These anxieties influence both sides of the relationship. Parents may have anxieties about whether they are doing the right thing by finding a childcare place at all, never mind finding the right place for their child. As parents we are also very quick to hear any suggestion or implication that we are not 'good' parents. Leaving your child with a professional childcarer can therefore be very daunting. From the practitioners' point of view, each parent who visits the setting is making a judgement about the quality of what we do, and the ways in which we look after their child. This first encounter is surrounded with adult concern and anxiety, something the child, if present, will pick up on but be unlikely to understand. The child may, however, identify the anxiety with the context of being at the setting, which may make the settling-in period more difficult. For the parents of a child with an additional need, however minor or major, the whole process is charged with considerably more anxiety. This may be focused on the likelihood of their child and them being rejected, criticised or even ridiculed. They may even have had such experiences at other settings before visiting yours.

As practitioners we have the opportunity to think about those initial contacts with parents and work to improve them because we go through the process so many times. It is our role to identify good practice and ensure that we do everything we can to make the beginning of our relationship with parents a positive one.

One approach which can start things off in an effective way is to think about the relationship as a journey. This journey is concerned with learning about the child's

- strengths
- pleasures
- concerns
- challenges.

In order to support the child to settle well in the nursery or pre-school, this journey must start with recognition of the extensive knowledge which parents already hold about their children. It is worth while to review our admission and information-gathering procedures on a regular basis and to include parents in the process. Finding quick and easy ways to listen to the views parents have about what works well for them, when they come to visit or are asked to share information, helps to identify good practice which can then be developed and improved.

It would be very surprising if all parents felt that one particular way of involving them would be preferable. We have to find a variety of ways to engage their interest and communicate our willingness to include them in the experiences of their child in our setting. For some parents this may be spending a significant amount of time in the setting once a year to share a talent or

skill; for others it could be arriving a few minutes early on one day a week to collect their child so that they can look at photographs and activities which are part of life in the setting. Our goal in each of these opportunities should be to highlight the positive and to make the experience one which everyone would like to repeat. Each small amount of time spent in the setting by a parent provides a chance to encourage and improve the partnership. The most effective way of increasing parents' involvement in their child's life at the setting is to focus on developing a shared knowledge and understanding of the child as a developing personality.

The learning journey, then, encompasses the child's learning and the adults' learning about the child. Each element of contact with parents needs to be reviewed in relation to good practice. For example, where English is an additional language for a family, the challenge for us is to find out from the family the ways in which we can best give and receive information. This does not always mean translating everything we write but may involve taking time to ensure that the message which was intended has been received. From the child's perspective, having keywords recognised or offered, using photographs to support initial understanding and celebrating specific achievements are all possible ways of giving a welcoming message and learning about the child. Generally, in our setting, it is important to consider the images and messages we give about respecting all families from whichever ethnic group or heritage and working to increase our understanding of others. The Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 both clearly require us to be not just welcoming but actively committed to finding ways to ensure our setting has a culture of valuing and respecting all individuals. With so many children experiencing childcare, we will obviously influence these future adults in the development of their understanding of relationships, in group situations, and the values which can make this a positive experience.

To support new or inexperienced staff it can be very effective to give examples of things to say which fit with the agreed idea of good practice. This process helps all members of staff to review their own scripts and reflect on ways to improve. This can be done in relation to specific situations such as:

- first contact
- admission procedure
- messages we want to give (being explicitly inclusive).

The next stage in the process is to ensure consistency throughout different opportunities which arise for communication:

- daily contact
- parents' evenings
- noticeboards
- newsletters
- phone calls
- letters.

No doubt there will be some relationships between parents and practitioners which will be established more quickly or easily than others. The responsibility for maintaining positive communication links, though, remains with the practitioners as part of their professional role. One of the major challenges to these communication links is when there is a difficult situation which needs to be discussed and resolved. If we can consistently work towards improving our relationship with parents, on a daily basis, we can minimise the difficulty there will be in having the more sensitive and controversial discussions which will inevitably happen. In the same way that we are able to start afresh with each child each day, giving youngsters the opportunity to move on from previous difficulties, as professionals we need to support adults, parents and colleagues in the same way. The other benefit will be that parents will be less anxious in coming to speak to us, share their concerns and be prepared to consider our views because they have belief in our wish to do the best for their child.

One of the most difficult conversations we are likely to need to have with parents is in the situation where we see behaviours and responses which, in our professional view, give us cause for concern about the child's development and this does not coincide with the parents' view. This is where it is essential to consider our relationship with parents as a journey. If the first time we invite the parents to come to talk to us is a formal invitation focusing on our concerns, then we set ourselves up for a very anxious and defensive interaction – in terms of both our feelings and the parents'. However, if we have continually shared observations, planning and strategies relating to the individual child and invited parents' views and their own observations, we are much more likely to have a shared understanding of when and if we need to be concerned. If we can agree that there is cause for concern, we are then more likely to be able to agree on a way forward which will be supported both at home and in the setting. This stage in the journey also paves the way for talking about the involvement of other agencies and professionals. The key message which is the thread throughout this process is that actions are being taken with the child's best interests at the centre of everyone's thinking. The evidence which supports these conversations is inevitably our observations.

These observations need to be effective in identifying what is significant for the particular child. For example, the collation of our observations in their Foundation Stage Record should communicate the essence of the child as an individual. It should evidence understanding of the child's personality, motivation, likes and dislikes. Through indication of levels of involvement in activities we can show strengths, preferred approaches and learning styles. All of this information combines to build a picture of the child's development and progress. Sharing each new discovery about a child provides the opportunity for parents to consider the child's responses to situations at home in a similar light. Enabling and empowering parents to contribute to children's records through their own observations, photographs, etc. gives a richness to the record which makes it something to be valued by child, family and practitioner.

There are several different structures and approaches for focusing and making observations. Kate Wall, in her book *Special Needs and Early Years* (2006), discusses in detail five specific methods. There is discussion of spontaneous observations, recorded in response to a practitioner noticing a child doing something – which could be described as evidence of learning – which is significant for that particular child. This is the form of observation which is most commonly used on a day-to-day basis. These observations are usually dated, recorded on a sticky label and then included directly in the child's Foundation Stage Record. This basic form of observation

can be developed to give information about patterns of behaviour and involvement in activities by making the observation at regular time intervals. For example, observing for 1 minute every 15 minutes for 1 hour. Any time interval can be used and the choice will be dictated by the planned purpose for the observation. The likely process leading to a planned observation will be:

- Concern or anomaly noted through standard setting observation process.
- Discussion with other staff, room leader, SENCO, etc.
- Agreement about what further information could be helpful, for example:
 - How often does this occur?
 - Does it happen every day, every morning, etc.?
 - Where does it usually occur?
 - Who else is there when it occurs?
 - What happens leading up to the situation?
 - What happens after the situation has happened?
- If we are clear what information would be helpful next, then we can decide which form of observation would be most useful.

This suggests that observations are only focused on individual children. However, there will also be times when it is useful to look at the way in which children are using the activities which are available in the room. We can do this simply by counting the number of children at each activity at set times or tracking children's movement between activities.

The model identified in the Effective Early Learning Programme, based on the work of Ferre Laevers, provides a very structured and useful means of judging when deep-level learning is taking place. Having identified when it happens, as professionals we can then begin to look for ways to increase the opportunity and consider the common characteristics in activities which will encourage increased levels of learning. The observation schedules can be used to plot the progress of either individuals or groups of children. This provides the possibility of comparing the levels of involvement in different areas of the curriculum, inside, outside and in different areas of the setting. Through this process there is also the means to evaluate the levels of engagement of the adults thereby encouraging reflective thinking about our responses and whether they support or inhibit the children's learning in a specific situation. This is particularly relevant to children with additional needs.

We often suggest that in order to meet the needs of individual children we need more adult time available for them. Through careful observation and reflective thinking we are often able to focus the time which we already have available in more effective ways. A particular concern would also be that more adult attention focused on one child may inhibit their natural relationships with other children and reduce the motivation for the child to try things independently. The adult, if specifically allocated to support an individual child, is also liable to feel responsible for all the child's actions and unconsciously feel they need to justify their role through helping the child more than is strictly necessary. The communication with parents can also be seen as this adult's responsibility or, alternatively, this adult may not be seen as a 'real' member of the team so have

no role in communicating with the parent. It is essential that the principle of all children being the responsibility of all practitioners is maintained. The role of the keyworker is then to provide and communicate relevant information to support the shared responsibility.

If we ensure that parents are introduced to the idea of our observation processes at the beginning of our relationship with them, these can then form a secure basis to discuss children's progress. This idea that we do observations needs to be extended to include what information we get from them and how we use the information. Encouraging the parents to share their own observations can be a very effective way of having a shared journey that focuses on getting to know the child and their abilities. As a principle, it is really important that observation notes are phrased positively: state facts and do not record judgements. Using words such as 'very' or 'only' immediately suggests that the child is not meeting your expectations. It is more helpful to record exactly what you see then discuss the implications and assessment later. For example:

Alesha put 2 out of 5 bricks on the tower following the colour pattern.

Our assessment can then focus on what further experiences Alesha needs, or what the adults need to do to help Alesha to extend her learning. The assessment may be that:

- Alesha may find this activity easier if the bricks were on the floor rather than the table.
- Larger or smaller bricks may make it easier.
- Items other than bricks would be more motivating for Alesha.
- Being involved with another child in the activity will give Alesha more confidence to play with the bricks and the idea of patterns.
- Laying equipment in a line rather than a tower may make it easier.

From our observation evidence we can have a positive discussion with both colleagues and parents about ways in which we can extend Alesha's current learning. This provides the opportunity for each adult to contribute suggestions from their own experience of Alesha and her learning in other contexts. It is important to remember, also, that often children can display higher skill levels at home than in a setting because they are more relaxed, using their own equipment and with very predictable and familiar adults. Our perspective as adults must always be to look for ways in which we can give children the best possible chance to succeed in the learning they are currently focused on.

This is hardest when the concern is around behaviour, as sometimes we can be drawn into negative feelings about a particular child's behaviour. We then begin to look for the child indulging in the unwanted behaviour to prove that our opinions are right. This is when it makes a difference if our general practice is in making non-judgemental observations and looking for ways to support future learning.

One of the contentious issues which frequently arises when supporting individual children is that of physical safety, either in relation to them hurting themselves through falling, running away, etc. or them hurting others. As with our approach to the safety of all children we would need to consider carefully a risk assessment so that we can identify and minimise the risks involved. However, it is important to maintain a realistic view of the extent to which we can

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provide a safe environment, and it is essential that all parents are aware of the risk assessment process which is in use. It is not possible or desirable to keep children away from any potential source of harm because, in doing so, we would be unable to:

- encourage a baby to take their first steps
- allow children access to toys
- allow children to feed themselves
- let children play outside
- provide equipment for use in the role-play area
- help children to learn to use stairs
- let children within arm's reach of each other or an adult.



Understanding how the child is feeling helps us to sensitively support their learning

This may sound over-cautious but it is important that parents are included in the discussions and actions taken in trying to ensure an appropriate balance of safety and practical learning about risk taking. As a parent leaving your child at an early years provision, you undoubtedly want to be reassured that your son or daughter will be safe. You are likely to believe that you are the best person to make sure that this happens. However, as your child grows they will need to learn to take increasing responsibility for themselves. There is a huge amount of learning involved in this process. As adults we still get it wrong sometimes, so our learning is continuing.

Seeing dealing with risk as a learning opportunity and part of the journey to independence is probably easier from a practitioner's perspective than a parental one because we do not have the same level of emotional involvement. We also have had more opportunity to develop our comparative view of the ways in which a child is likely to respond to a situation and the relative likelihood of an accident happening in particular situations when considered in the context of the number of children we have worked with during our career. Our role as practitioners is about helping children to have learning experiences which will build towards them being able to become as independent as possible and this includes making inappropriate choices and experiencing the consequences of these on some occasions. One of the initial discussions with parents could be about looking at the provision in the settings and talking about the learning which can be developed through the child's play. This is the time when parents can often give indications of which equipment or experiences would cause them most anxiety. This provides the opportunity for further discussion about the ways in which practitioners consider and manage the risks involved. This is a situation where practitioners need to be sensitive to the variety of reasons why parents may be anxious. For example, they may:

- have had an accident as a child themselves relating to the activity
- have heard of another child who has been hurt or frightened while involved in the activity – perhaps through the media
- have specific concerns about their own child's level of understanding about the dangers/risks in situations
- be particularly protective of their child because of early experiences of the child being vulnerable through illness, premature birth, etc.

No matter how we, as practitioners, feel about the level of risk for the child, we do need take account of the parents' anxiety. We should be proactive in finding ways to involve them in decisions and experiences which will support them to feel that the risk is manageable and the learning valuable for their child. As part of this process there is a clear opportunity for practitioners to review carefully the activity and the way we make it available for children, being clear that our risk assessment is recent and valid for this group of children and adults.

The ideal is for the parents then to be able to spend some time in the setting to see for themselves the children and adults' response to the particular activity. Meeting afterwards, the practitioner is able to talk through the shared experience, identifying key evidence of learning and planning for the next time children use the equipment. Involving parents in learning about safety and risk from the start is really important in ensuring joint parent–practitioner confidence and support for the child. The evidence of the child's progress is then collected through our observations, the identified next steps, details of adult actions, effective strategies and evaluations. Using these as the basis for building on progress is as important for developing independence as any other area of learning.

Undoubtedly, some parents will have more time, energy and enthusiasm for getting involved in the life of the setting than others. As practitioners, we need to maintain the imperative of supporting positive relationships with all parents, through encouraging whatever level of involvement they are able to offer. In our invitations to parents we can communicate clearly that we understand that there are a variety of levels of involvement and that all of these are

welcomed and valued. It is our role to promote 'one off' visits around a specific activity, occasional 'drop in' opportunities and regular, sustained joint activities which involve parents. Asking your current group of parents for their views and ideas of opportunities they would be able/happy to take part in to increase their involvement in the setting community is a useful starting point. This may not always be about being with the children in the setting; it may be that parents can support with more adult-orientated activities. Participation could be practical – designing/organising fundraising, sharing decisions about equipment purchase around a specific focus such as developing the outdoor area. Alternatively, it could be about being able to take part as equals in training opportunities which are offered for practitioners. The starting point for this could be having discussions with current or new parents which focus on finding ways to share our knowledge and learning journey with them. As a specific part of this discussion we can identify opportunity for joint practitioner–parent training. Initially this could be a one-off experience around a specific topic such as healthy eating, toilet training, supporting behavioural learning, creative activities, local places which are accessible and child friendly, Bookstart and library activities. All of these can begin with outside speakers being invited to lead the session. This can be developed to include sessions led by the manager to explore activities which will support a particular area of the curriculum, identifying ways these can be used both at home and in the setting. Positive communication following such a session about the impact on children's learning can increase parents' confidence in the role they can play in the learning which takes place in the setting.

For parents who are unable to attend the sessions it would be important to include them through other means such as a newsletter, photographs, displays with annotation or PowerPoint slide shows. These forms of communication can be provided jointly by a practitioner and a parent who did attend the session. From our knowledge of the current group of parents involved in our setting, we can identify any preferences for translation or interpretation. This should not just be an afterthought but part of the planning discussion with the parents concerned. If we are proactive in asking parents what would help to make such a training session accessible for them and explaining that we will find a way to provide what is needed, they are more likely to feel welcomed and valued and this will increase the likelihood of them attending.



Key points

- Involving parents in the life of the setting is important and helps the children's learning.
- Several methods of observation can be used to gather specific information which will inform the planning for future learning.
- Risk assessment processes should involve parents, and practitioners can be proactive in developing a joint understanding of the activity/situation and steps which are taken to ensure reasonable safety levels.
- Parents' levels of involvement with settings will vary considerably depending on many factors. The practitioners' role is to encourage and communicate the variety of possible ways in which the parents could be involved. This will range from one-off visits to joint parent–practitioner training.

Parents' views

There are several ways to gather parents' views about things without always using a questionnaire. For example:

- Post-it note display, e.g. ideas for outings, things I like to do with my child.
- Sticky name cards to place on display, e.g. I would like you to contact me by phone, face to face, email, etc.
- Pebbles in a container, e.g. choice of next parents' evening being about healthy eating or bedtimes.
- Laptop/Computer photograph display, e.g. things my child likes doing at nursery/home.
- Suggested foods for the menu with 'tick' voting system.

More in-depth parents' views

When you first met the team at our nursery:

- what did we do which made you feel welcome?
- what else could we have done to make you feel more welcome?
- did we give you enough/too much/ too little information about what we do?

Now that you know us better:

- do we give you about the right amount of information you want on your child?
- is there any other information you would like us to give you?
- what is the best way for us to give you news about things which are going on in the nursery?
- would it be helpful for us to get information translated into another language for you?
- would it be helpful for us to get someone to interpret for you when we meet?
- what would you like to see us do next to improve our relationship with you?
- what would you like to see us work harder at as a staff team?