

Working in partnership

*'A partnership approach within and between policy-makers, service providers, organisations, mothers, fathers and children, based on an understanding of mutual rights and responsibilities, is essential in all aspects of provision for young children.'*¹ In this leaflet, working in partnership will be considered in relation to ECF's four other work themes:

- championing young children's rights and entitlements
- supporting early childhood practitioners
- addressing inequalities and valuing diversity
- evaluating practice and ensuring quality.

The child is central in all partnerships. Children's rights and entitlements are fundamental to working with and for young children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,² an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people a comprehensive set of rights, should provide the basis for policy and practice developments.

Partnership working is best developed through the reflective practice of all partners. An evaluative framework to ensure that partnerships evolve and are effective in improving outcomes for children and their families is essential. The National Quality Improvement Network has developed a framework for assessing the efficacy of local authority quality improvements. The framework has proved a very useful self-evaluation tool and has been adapted to help partners to assess and improve effective

partnership working. It is referenced in the 'Evaluating your partnership' boxes.

Championing young children's rights through partnership

Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that *'the best interests of children should always be a top priority'*.² This should be the core principle of all partnership arrangements.

A child's view of their family may differ from that of their mother or father. A child may consider a non-resident parent, grandparent, foster carer, stepbrother or sister as their immediate family. Conversely, they may fail to define a stepparent as a family member, even if they live with them.³ Practitioners' close relationships with family members and carers are vital for children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Enabling the best outcomes for children requires an understanding of who a child perceives their family and community to be, and defining the contribution these people can make to the child's life.

Working with families is a journey into trust where strong, respectful relationships are developed. It implies *'a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision making and accountability'*.⁴ Practitioners must have a commitment to working with all the individuals who are of central importance to a child, whether they live with them or not; managers should ensure their staff are equipped to work within these parameters. Home visits are invaluable in offering parents and families the opportunity to meet with practitioners in their environment where the distribution of power is reversed. Practitioners, with parents' permission, can learn a huge amount about children by entering the home learning environment(s). Initial training and continuous professional development, which provide a balance between theory and practice, is key.

Traditionally, practitioners have focused on the needs of mothers, but with flexible working arrangements now enshrined in law, and cultural definitions of the 'good father' changing rapidly, fathers in all cultural

Early Childhood Forum

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) is a coalition of 56 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the care and education of young children from birth to eight. Part funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), it aims to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to debate issues, celebrate differences and develop consensus to champion quality experiences for all young children and their families. It promotes inclusion and challenges inequalities. See www.ncb.org.uk/ecf for more information.

groups are becoming more involved in their children's lives and are expressing commitment to the nurturing father ideal. Reports have shown that the amount of time British fathers spent with their children rose from 15 minutes per working day in 1975 to two hours by 1997, and that three-quarters of fathers now feel that spending time with their families is their top priority. Practitioners need to ensure that fathers are not marginalised. Young children's language development, better peer relationships and higher IQs have been linked to high-quality involvement by their fathers in their lives. This positive impact can continue well into adolescence and beyond, and can result in less involvement in criminality and substance misuse. The Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to support all parents and prospective parents, including fathers, to access early childhood services.

Practitioners must respect what family members wish to tell them and recognise that a level of openness that allows free exchange of information may take some time to develop. A strengths-based approach is key, and professionals should avoid making assumptions or judgements about particular situations, motivations or capacities. It is important that practitioners use a shared and common language that mothers, fathers and children understand; and that reports provided are clear, concise, jargon-free and take account of literacy and language levels. It is imperative that there is a shared vision and ethos among practitioners with regard to working in partnership with mothers, fathers, children and other key individuals, which can be adapted to the home learning environment(s)

Case study

Children North-East has been developing engagement with fathers throughout the region by offering them access to a range of services, particularly through a Children's Centre in Durham. Key features are:

- A serious commitment from the centre's manager and staff to include fathers.
- A recognition by staff that fathers would only attend if they felt they had 'permission' to do so.
- Ongoing whole-team training in engaging with fathers.
- Activities designed to appeal to men have been developed out of identified needs (e.g. a martial arts course, food hygiene, etc.).
- Encouraging fathers to use other services – they now access Stay & Play and baby massage.⁵

Case study

The Early Years Toybox Project in Northern Ireland is a rights-based service development model which aims to significantly reduce the social and education inequalities experienced by young Traveller children through an outreach play-based early intervention service provided in partnership with children and parents.

Evaluating your partnership

- Have you considered home visits and the importance of building trust with marginalised families?
- Have you implemented Article 30 of the UNCRC: minority ethnic children have a right to enjoy their culture, language and religion?
- Have you considered building children's confidence and self-esteem to enable them to become visible in their communities?



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as well as to childcare and educational settings and wider children's services.

Evaluating your partnership

Is the partnership clear about its outcomes for partners and the intended outcomes for:

- children
- mothers and fathers
- other key professionals
- practitioners
- local organisations (children's trust, local authority, voluntary sector, private providers)?⁶

Think of partnerships you are engaged in. Do they involve:

- working closely together with active participation and involvement
- sharing power and parents leading
- complementary expertise
- agreeing aims and processes
- negotiation
- mutual trust and respect
- openness and honesty
- clear communication?

At the early stages of partnership working, members should ensure that these elements are built into the terms and conditions or 'rules of engagement'.⁷

Children's and practitioners' rights must be central to the Children's Workforce Strategy. The vital role that practitioners play in improving outcomes for young children should be acknowledged.⁹ Integrated working is at the heart of the Children's Plan, with early years no longer seen as a separate strand but as an integral part of the wider children's agenda. Everyone working for children, no matter what their position, should be valued as an important team member.

Partnership working is essential at all points of transition for young children. Some children have access to up to five settings in the course of the day. This may include a nursery setting, childminder, grandparent, drama club, extended school, children's centre or play provider. Continuity of care is essential for a child's well-being. It is important that a continuing dialogue takes place between mothers, fathers and each provider and, wherever possible, between practitioners. For instance, sharing of information between health and children's centres can enable services to reach vulnerable or excluded families.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study found that the quality of the home-learning environment had a greater effect upon children's learning and development than parents' education level, occupation or income: *'What parents do is more important than who parents are.'*¹⁰ High-quality partnerships between parents and practitioners are therefore essential. Respect and valuing of each other's contribution must be at the heart of these partnerships, and communication that helps parents and staff to work together in a genuine partnership is essential to providing positive learning environments for children.

Evaluating your partnership

How could you use inter-professional values statements?

- To what extent have values statements been debated at local levels, within and across teams, settings and services?
- How can your values statements be used to assess the level of shared values and to unblock difficult areas?
- What actions are needed to address conflicts of values?

Supporting early childhood practitioners through partnership

The Inter Professional Core Values for Professionals Who Work With Children⁸ statement asks those who work with children to recognise children's rights, to involve families in decision making and to make use of areas of expertise.

Developed by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the General

Teaching Council for England and the General Social Care Council, the joint values statement was drafted following discussions with practising nurses, midwives, teachers and social workers, who were keen to work together and felt that this was most effective when there was a shared understanding of each others' professional values and different ways of working. It is hoped that the values statement will be used as a tool to assist practitioners in developing services around the needs of the child.

Further developments to integrate practitioners and professionals within the children's sector include the Integrated Qualifications Framework (IQF) and the Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce. The IQF will provide a 'set of approved qualifications that allows progression, continuing professional development and mobility across the children and young people's workforce.'¹¹ The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge sets out the six areas of basic skills and knowledge needed by people (including volunteers) whose work brings them into regular contact with children, young people and families:

- effective communication and engagement with children, young people and families
- child and young person development
- safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child
- supporting transitions
- multi-agency working
- sharing information.

By using a common language, professionals will be able to work together more effectively in the interests of the child and underpin successful partnership working.

Equality, diversity and partnership

Everyone involved in a partnership is entitled to be treated with respect, and any form of discrimination and stereotyping, across the six strands, should be challenged.

Six strands of equality:¹²

- age
- disability
- gender
- race and nationality
- religion or belief
- sexual orientation.

Evaluating your partnership

Is your partnership based on effective leadership, training and development?

For example:

- Do partners value the range of professional and personal backgrounds of each member?
- Does the partnership build on the skills and knowledge of all partners and are there joint training opportunities?
- Does the partnership enable challenge as well as consensus in a way that leads to better informed decisions being made?
- Is there a clear lead or project manager who can support the partnership?
- Is the partnership valued at leadership level? Does it have champions?
- Are key decision makers signed up to the decisions/outcomes of the partnership?
- Are there developmental processes, e.g. induction, buddying, opportunities to shadow others?
- Is information shared appropriately and jargon free?⁶

The findings of the VCS report *Engaging hard to reach groups*

An evaluation has been undertaken to assess the impact of engaging black and other minority ethnic and faith-based organisations in Every Child Matters and commissioning training.

A series of training days on Every Child Matters and commissioning was held in each of the nine England regions, which resulted in additional engagement activities being offered. The aim of all the activities was to ensure that both sectors were equipped with the skills to engage in local area commissioning and the local delivery of Every Child Matters.

The findings of the report highlighted the following:

- Many felt that funders and key organisations prefer to consult and work with larger (and therefore more visible) organisations. Smaller organisations were not as 'hard to reach' as generally thought.
- More support was required at a local area level to ensure that grassroots organisations understood local authority procurement procedures.
- Although smaller organisations are encouraged to collaborate on tenders, many felt that their ideas and projects were being plagiarised, and that partnerships were often unequal.

As a result of some of the issues highlighted, a pilot of additional support mechanisms was developed to enable groups to make links with local area commissioners and to develop collaborative partnerships.¹⁴

ECF has defined inclusion as 'a process of identifying, understanding and breaking down barriers to participation and belonging.'¹³ It is important for

those working within the early childhood sector to recognise the strengths and skills that different partners can bring to the table.

Evaluating your partnership

1. What is the most exceptional partnership that you have ever been part of?

This might be a current or past work partnership, a social situation or your experience in a great team or group.

2. Reflecting on your current children and young people partnership, what successes are you most proud of?

What has helped that success? What has helped your partnerships to grow and mature?

3. What do you value most about partnership working?

What do you value about what you bring to a partnership? What do you value in others?

4. What are your three hopes and wishes for your future partnerships?

Imagine all the possibilities for new and enhanced partnership working within your organisation for children, young people and their families.



This is our partnership: all hands on deck. There are opportunities for everyone, large and small, and also for the people swimming around who do not know where they are going. We wanted to include little hands, to ensure children and young people's voices are heard. The smiling people are the partners who are all aboard – they are looking out for people in need.¹⁵

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Partnership members should be encouraged to look at ways of working which enable people with differing lifestyles to engage. For example, looking beyond the nine-to-five culture to cater for the needs of both working and stay-at-home mothers and fathers. Organisations should be encouraged to offer equality and diversity training, including training on engaging with

fathers and father figures, as part of their induction process.

At the outset, a procedure needs to be put in place to bring people together. Partnership members, wherever possible, should represent the community as a whole, and tokenism should be avoided. Currently, the early years workforce is not as diverse as it

could be, and those working within partnerships should consider ways of widening participation to under-represented groups.

Early intervention requires a holistic approach, with partnership working between different practitioners and professions.

- The Team Around the Child¹⁶ was developed to respond to the need for joined-up services and greater interface between practitioners. It brings together parents, practitioners and other agencies to support a child who has been identified as having an additional need. It can be defined as an evolving team of practitioners who have contact with a child and their family on a regular basis and who provide practical support and advice to those who are able to work directly with the child or young person and their family.
- The Common Assessment Framework¹⁷ assists integrated services in assessing the needs of children and young people and deciding how these needs can be met.
- Early Support is the government's recommended approach to coordinating services for disabled children and their families. All local authorities and their partners are encouraged to engage with the Early Support approach.

It is important to promote and celebrate good practice. Practitioners and managers should be actively encouraged to use tools to monitor and evaluate practice, in addition to Equality Impact Assessments¹⁹ used by local authorities. (Some suggested tools are located in the Further reading section.)



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Quality in partnership

ECF believes that high-quality partnership working is paramount to ensuring better outcomes for young children. Only effective, value-based partnerships that both challenge and consolidate, and offer a beneficial experience for those involved, will produce good results.

It is essential for partnerships to work well across all sectors within children's services and from grassroots to strategic levels in order to improve outcomes for children. Local Area Agreements can provide a framework for improving integrated working between councils and local communities by offering greater coordination of services, for instance, through children's centres.

Research on integrated and extended services²¹ has identified a range of improvements in outcomes for children and parents, including feeling happier and safer, more positive attitudes to learning, raised self-esteem and aspirations, and improved relationships. From a practitioner's perspective, multi-agency working can promote social inclusion and identify children in need or at risk of harm sooner. ECF has

Case study

In Cornwall, 90 families are using the Early Support approach. Three Early Support coordinators have been appointed and are jointly funded by health services to facilitate the development of the scheme across the county. The coordinators work across agencies, supporting and training professionals to:

- introduce the scheme to families
- facilitate Team Around the Child (TAC) meetings
- act as lead professionals.

The team is firmly embedded in Cornwall's integrated working approach and shares a common quality assurance and administrative support with the Common Assessment Framework scheme.

Early Support in Cornwall is part of the children's centres' core offer and, as such, is an important part of the county's overall move towards integrated service delivery. A supportive multi-agency steering group, including representation from service managers and parent/carers, has been an essential feature of the Early Support framework. The fact that health services and children, young people and families services in Cornwall jointly fund the Early Support team also makes a significant difference.²⁰

Evaluating your partnership

Is the partnership clear about its values and principles; are they inclusive and do they address inequality? For example:

- Is everyone signed up to actively promote equality of opportunity and challenge discrimination?
- Is everyone willing to learn new skills, make changes to the way they usually do things and adapt their behaviour and language?
- Does the partnership have clear protocols to ensure its work is fair, open, inclusive, transparent and accountable?
- Do these protocols embrace and build on the shared values and principles of the partnership?⁶

encouraged greater input from health both within the Forum and as part of the wider agenda for integrated children's services.

Final thoughts

Unless and until we have effective partnerships between practitioners and families, within and across all early years settings, in local authorities, through multi-agency working and across government departments, all of

which have been carefully planned and are based on common values, we will not be achieving the basic rights for all children and providing them, wherever they are, with the best possible expertise in their early and most important years. This challenge must be addressed by all those working for and with an interest in young children.

Case study

Little Treasures Nursery Ltd provides the childcare within Southmead Children's Centre. The two settings work seamlessly together to ensure smooth transitions for children and a fully integrated service. Key elements of the partnership include:

- An open and honest relationship where problems are discussed and shared. Prior to Little Treasures opening within the centre, both parties underwent training together, funded and supported by the local authority, to help build relationships.
- The two providers work as one team, sharing observations and assessments to inform planning for all children at weekly meetings.
- The school teacher and school nursery nurse are based full time in the pre-school room of the nursery and work alongside Little Treasures staff to provide the Early Years Foundation Stage, supporting transitions.
- The integrated model of joint working is part of a structured approach led by the local authority.

As the two teams are based in one building, children from as young as three months experience integrated care and early education.

Evaluating your partnership

Is the partnership based on continuous self-evaluation and reflective practice? For example:

- Is the partnership always seeking to improve through reflective practice?
- Does the partnership build in time and opportunities for reflection on both the process and outcomes?
- Is the partners' capacity increasing through self-reflection?
- Is the process of partnership working clear and based on realistic and honest expectations?

Does the partnership have in place systems for monitoring and evaluating practice and outcomes? For example:

- Do the partners accept that improving outcomes through partnership requires a medium- to long-term approach, with investment of time and funds?
- Is the partnership clear about its impact on the outcomes for young children using qualitative and quantitative measures?⁶

References

- ¹ As cited in the Early Childhood Forum Policy Agenda 2006–9 (unpublished).
- ² Children's Rights Alliance for England (2006) *Children's Human Rights: What they are and why they matter*. London: CRAE.
- ³ Dunn, J, O'Connor, TG and Levy, I (2002) 'Out of the Picture: A study of family drawings, by children from step, single-parent and nonstep families', *Journal of Clinical and Adolescent Child Psychology*, 31, 505–12.
- ⁴ Pugh, G and De'ath, E (1989) *Working Towards Partnership in the Early Years*. London: NCB.
- ⁵ <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?id=3&cid=770>
- ⁶ National Quality Improvement Network (2008) *National Quality Improvement Network Companion Guide*. London: NCB.
- ⁷ Davis H and Meltzer L (2007) *Working with Parents in Partnership*. London: Early Support.
- ⁸ <http://www.nmc-uk.org/aArticle.aspx?ArticleID=2344>
- ⁹ Early Childhood Forum (2008) *Working for Children*. London: NCB.
- ¹⁰ Sylva, K and others (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final report*. London: DfES and Institute of Education, University of London.
- ¹¹ <http://www.iqf.org.uk>
- ¹² <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com>
- ¹³ Early Childhood Forum (2005) *Participation and Belonging in Early Years Settings*. London: NCB.
- ¹⁴ VCS Engage (2008) *Engaging 'Hard to Reach' Groups: Communicating and collaborating with the BME and faith-based VCS*. London: VCS Engage.
- ¹⁵ VCS Engage (2008) *Creating Exceptional Partnerships: Working together to build on our success*. London: NCB.
- ¹⁶ Siraj-Blatchford, I, Clarke, K and Needham, M (2007) *The Team Around the Child: Multi-agency working in the early years*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/resources-and-practice/IG00063/>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.earlysupport.org.uk>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=8017247>
- ²⁰ <http://www.cornwallcyp.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=46351>
- ²¹ Lord, P and others (2008) *Evaluating the Early Impact of Integrated Children's Services*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Further information and resources

Relevant policy

Education and Skills Act 2008 to strengthen the arrangements for partnership working through children's trusts (under the Children Act 2004): http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2008/ukpga_20080025_en_1

2008 consultation on legislating for Sure Start children's centres to strengthen partnership working under the Childcare Act 2006: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/index.cfm?action=conResults&consultationId=1575&texternal=no&menu=3>

Local area agreements (LAAs) set out the priorities for a local area that have been agreed between central government and a local area (the local authority, Local Strategic Partnership and other key partners): <http://www.communities.gov.uk/localgovernment/performanceframeworkpartnerships/localareaagreements/>

Tools and resources to support effective partnership working

Enquiry Wheel (aka *Bullseye*) – useful when planning, running and reflecting upon projects and research: <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/e-bulletins/enquiry-tool-evaluating-information-3729>

Fatherhood Institute – developed a toolkit for father-inclusive practice: <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/index.php?prodID=23>

Index for inclusion – developing learning, participation and play in early years and childcare: http://www.eenet.org.uk/index_inclusion/index_inclusion.shtml

Oxfam (2004) *Oxfam Gender Training Manual*. London: Oxfam – measures the impact of projects, how much they lead to social change and to what extent they are informed by the inequality between men and women.

PQASSO – Quality assurance scheme for smaller organisations developed by the Charities Evaluation Service: <http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/index.cfm?pg=42>

Participation Works – 'How To' guides to encourage participation of all children and young people: <http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>

VCS Engage resources: http://www.vcsengage.org.uk/sector_wide_resources/useful_links/collaborative_working.aspx

WorkRight – Mencap scheme that supports people with a learning disability into genuine work opportunities with employers: <http://www.mencap.org.uk/page.asp?id=1533>

Further reading

Cummins, J and Miller, C (2007) *Co-production, Social Capital and Service Effectiveness*. London: Office for Public Management.

HM Government (2007) *An Introduction to the Local Performance Framework – Delivering Better Outcomes for Local People*. Wetherby: Department for Communities and Local Government.

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Useful websites

www.ncb.org.uk/earlychildhood
Information on specific topics within early years care and education.

www.ncb.org.uk/ecf
The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) website.

www.cwdcouncil.org.uk
CWDC aims to ensure that all people working with children, young people and families have the best possible training, qualifications, support and advice.

www.dcsf.gov.uk

DCSF leads work across government in relation to children, young people and families.

www.equalityhumanrights.com

The Equality and Human Rights Commission aims to reduce inequality, eliminate discrimination, strengthen good relations between people, and promote and protect human rights.

www.earlysupport.org.uk

Early Support is the government programme to achieve better coordinated, family focused services for young disabled children and their families.

www.peal.org.uk

PEAL training supports early years settings to work in partnership with parents to enhance children's learning and development.

www.vcsengage.org.uk

VCS Engage was a programme funded by DCSF to strengthen the engagement of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in delivering Every Child Matters.

Further copies of this leaflet or the earlier leaflets in this series – 'Championing young children's rights and entitlements' and 'Working for children' – can be purchased from the Early Childhood Unit: email ecu@ncb.org.uk or call 020 7843 6064.

Author

Heather Ransom, ECF coordinator.

Editors

Julie Jennings, RNIB; Melian Mansfield, ECF Chair; Dwywen Stepien, NCB.

Picture Editor

Anne Nelson, Early Education.

Contributions

Celia Watson, VCS Engage; Hayley Wilson, NDNA; Adrienne Burgess, Fatherhood Institute; Allie Mavor, Cornwall County Council; Kathleen O'Kane, Early Years; members of National Quality Improvement Network.

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National Children's Bureau
8 Wakley Street
London
EC1V 7QE
tel: + 44 (0)20 7843 6000
fax: + 44 (0)20 7278 9512

Book Sales: 0845 458 9910
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Young NCB: 020 7843 6099

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