

Parental involvement - A handbook for childcare providers

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Resource Centre
ISBN-13: 978-1-906004-01-9
ISBN-10: 1-906004-01-3

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Published by
The National Children's Resource Centre
Barnardos
Christchurch Square
Dublin 8

Whilst every care has been taken to ensure the
accuracy of the publication, no liability is accepted
by the author or Barnardos for any errors.

Acknowledgements

Mary Crosbie, who compiled the content
Anne Conroy,
National Manager, Barnardos' NCRC
Sinéad Lawton,
Publications Co-ordinator, Barnardos' NCRC
Imelda Graham,
Training Co-ordinator, Barnardos' NCRC
Brid O'Sullivan,
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Parental Involvement – A Handbook for Childcare Providers
Why Involve Parents? - Barriers to Parental Involvement - Methods of Involvement -
Involving Fathers - Ensuring the Inclusion of All - Methods of Conflict Resolution -
Evaluating the Service - Sources of Further Information

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Introduction

This handbook is not about whether or not parents should be involved in their children's education and development, that argument is long over. The majority of providers of childcare in Ireland recognise the need to establish a true partnership with parents based on trust and respect. The challenge remains, however, how to translate theory into practice.

Parental involvement can be defined as engaged participation by parents in a consistent, organised and meaningful way in the consultation, planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes and activities that assist their child's development. It includes regular two-way and meaningful communications between parents and childcare provider and involving parents in decision making. It is essential that parents play an integral role in their child's development and that they are encouraged to be full partners in their child's educational and social progress.

This guide explores strategies that enable childcare providers to engage parents in their child's learning and social development. It is important also that practitioners learn to allow for the level of involvement that each parent is comfortable with. Practitioners can create a climate where parents and carers are encouraged to have an active participation in decision making and are

able to question, challenge and make choices concerning their child while positively affirming the professional role of staff.

As part of their professional practice, practitioners must welcome parents as partners. Parents must feel there is willingness on the part of staff to communicate with them and be able to discuss mutual expectations about the child and the setting. At present, many practitioners have had little or no formal pre-service/training in relating to and communicating with parents and are not prepared adequately for how to involve parents.

Partnership needs to happen in all aspects of the childcare setting. This involves information sharing about the child, the setting and its goals, and outlining approaches to curricular and activities, policy and planning.

Building partnership is a daily process based on ongoing communications. To do this, it takes commitment, time and a range of skills. This handbook will give childcare providers in the various settings, whether it is day care, school age childcare or sessional pre-school services, the opportunity to reflect on what measures are in place already and how effective they are. It also offers new approaches in giving parents opportunities to participate in their child's learning.

For the purpose of this handbook, the term 'parent', in addition to the actual parent, includes a legal guardian or other primary caregiver such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle or member of the extended family.

Section one

WHY INVOLVE PARENTS?

REASONS FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

There is consistent evidence that positive and interested families have a major influence on their children's achievement at all stages through life. When developing a partnership with parents, practitioners need to recognise and understand that parents have rights and responsibilities and are an essential resource in the childcare setting.

The main reasons why parents should be involved in their children's learning are outlined below.

Legal

Bunreacht na hÉireann, Article 42.1, identifies parents as primary educators: 'The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.'

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by Ireland in 1992. The Convention acknowledges the primary role parents and the family have in the care and protection of children as well as the role the State has in helping them to carry out these duties. In particular, Article 5 of the convention states: 'State Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where

applicable, the members of extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child.'

Organisational

Research in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated that the most effective schools were those that had positive home-school relations. The research also confirmed the importance of parental involvement from the earliest age in the educational development of children.

Since the 1980s there has been an increased demand from the public for more direct involvement in decisions affecting all aspects of their lives. This has led to public participation in many areas of the community and is reflected in the involvement of parents on Boards of Management and Parents Associations in schools. The National Parents Council, which has the same rights to consultation as the management and teachers' unions, was established in Ireland in 1985.

Sociological

When a child first moves from the home environment to a childcare setting, they need a place where they can build their own identity and self-esteem and learn to be self sufficient outside their family. Research suggests that when parents work closely with their child's childcare setting, the child performs

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better, irrespective of social background, size of family or the level of the parent's education. In the long term, children will make positive life choices more in line with their capabilities that will benefit the wider community.

Psychological

For childcare practitioners, when home-school, parent-carer/educator relations are characterised by respect and a constructive approach, the children have a more positive attitude to the setting and to learning itself. Children develop high level of social skills and are more co-operative and self-controlled in both the home and setting environments. The positive outcome is improvement in relationships for all.

Professional

Successful childcare services invariably identify parental involvement as a significant contributory factor to their effectiveness. The more professional approach, therefore, is to encourage a climate of parental involvement. This leads to positive outcomes for the setting as they gain a better understanding of the child's needs, a positive reputation in the community, and improved staff morale and job satisfaction with higher rating of participation by parents and increased support from families.

To participate fully, parents need to have a clear understanding of the policy/structures in place to facilitate

participation. Building partnership is a daily process based on ongoing communications and dealing with issues as they arise.

BENEFITS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Traditionally, the care and education of children have been viewed as separate entities. Research has demonstrated, however, that from birth to adolescence children need a variety of positive learning experiences provided in a secure and loving environment if they are to achieve their full potential.

In recognition that parents are the primary educators of their children and have a life-long relationship with them, effective programmes of parental involvement are essential to enable them to support their children to be cared for and educated to the highest standard. Such involvement is beneficial to parents as it builds on their knowledge of child development and helps to support them in their parenting skills.

In turn, parents are needed by the childcare setting if children are to optimise their cognitive, emotional and social learning. In effective childcare settings, practitioners find a real help in the presence of parents and in a good relationship with them. Each brings their own competence to educate the child and this requires mutual respect and understanding.

To achieve this aim, practitioners must consider the diversity of families, listen to them and help them to fulfil their role as parents. Parents' needs rather than those of the setting should be considered first when devising ways and means of involving parents.

The importance of parental involvement can be understood using the ABCs.

Achievement and attendance

When all adults work together in the best interest of the child, the child will develop a positive interest in reaching his or her own potential. This is borne out in achievement and attendance, both of which are associated with life-long learning.

Behaviour of children

When parents provide a rich learning environment at home with activities complimenting those of the setting, including talking positively about the setting, evidence shows that children develop high levels of social skills and are likely to be more co-operative and self-controlled. This has a positive outcome for the child, parent and practitioner.

Climate of the setting

Parents will become involved if they feel that the setting's climate, i.e. its social and educational atmosphere, is one that makes families feel welcomed, respected, trusted, heard and needed.

THE NEEDS OF THE CHILD

There is a large body of evidence that discusses the nature and importance of the child-parent/family attachment relationship. The attachment relationship has been shown to be important for both the survival and the quality of a child's development. There are a multitude of factors that can negatively affect a child's experience.

Parents want the best for their children and many go through a period of anxiety and uneasiness when their child enters a childcare setting because they are concerned about their child's well being. Practitioners can ease some of these concerns by explaining the setting's policies and procedures and outlining the daily activities. Parents can also be encouraged to help staff to get to know the needs of their child such as their fears, how they are best comforted and their favourite toys, food or songs.

The needs of the child must be the centre of any service that is provided and one of the hallmarks of a quality childcare service is that it works in partnership with parents to focus on these needs. One of the benefits of parental involvement is that a positive experience gained in an early years setting will leave parents more confident about getting involved in their child's primary schooling.

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Section two

BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

MAIN BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

In a 2002 study in Ireland, 'Parents as Partners in Early Years Services', Martin and Fitzpatrick* examined parental partnership in early years settings. This involved using observations, questionnaires and in-depth interviews with parents and staff in approximately 200 settings in the Dublin region. The study focused on policies relating to parental involvement and participation on management boards, parent's attitudes and expectations, and attitudes of staff. The analysis concluded that the main barriers to participation were:

- A lack of time.
- A lack of opportunity to participate.
- A sense that the activities they did participate in were 'staff directed and not characterised by a sense of partnership or mutual understanding'.

Other common fears of parents and staff were being judged, lack of knowledge and fear of losing one's 'power'.

Other challenges that can arise from parental involvement in childcare settings can include staff concerns about having the service open to scrutiny; the lack of resources, space and time to think about and implement

constructive liaison strategies; and the lack of training given to staff about communications with parents.

OTHER ISSUES THAT MAY AFFECT PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

In the best interests of the child, it is important for the setting to establish who has legal rights and responsibilities for the child where the parents are separated and/or not married.

Guardianship

The following people have guardianship:

- The mother of the child.
- The father of the child if the parents are married. If the parents of the child are not married, the father can become a joint guardian if both parents complete a statutory declaration to that effect. If the mother is not in agreement with the father becoming a joint guardian, the father can apply to the district court for joint guardianship.
- Any other person who has been assigned guardianship by the Court.

What does this mean for the setting?

Consent forms can only be signed by parents with guardianship. Children can be collected by any person as long as the setting has written consent from the parent with guardianship.

* Martin, S. and Fitzpatrick, A. (2002). 'Parents as Partners in Early Years Services in Ireland: An Exploratory Study' pp. 138–154 (in) Horgan, M. and Douglas, F. (Eds.) (2002). *Lessons for the 21st Century – Research, Reflection, Renewal: Proceedings of the OMEP (Ireland) Conference.*

Section three

METHODS OF INVOLVEMENT

KEY ISSUES AS A WAY FORWARD TO PARTICIPATION

Leadership is the key to effectiveness in partnership. In many ways, the childcare service manager is most influential in creating the atmosphere in the setting. With a clear mission and goals they set the tone, the climate, and the level of professionalism of the staff. They are the link between the parent, staff and the wider community. If the centre is inclusive of all the stakeholders, a trusting relationship will develop if the following are taken into account:

Political will

Practitioners must accept that parents have a legitimate purpose in participating in the childcare setting because they have first responsibility for their children's social, emotional, educational and physical growth. Some countries have legislated for the involvement of parents in childcare facilities.

For many reasons, however, involvement has become a greater challenge due to the change in family make-up and the fact that more mothers are in the work force. Practitioners

must put in place strategies to address barriers to participation.

Accountability

Practitioners must make a commitment to engage parents in the following ways:

- By giving them information on how the system works.
- By allowing them to become decision makers, actively involved in policy-making that affects them and their children at the setting.
- By developing two-way communications with all parents, which will improve understanding between parents and practitioners in the best interests of the child.

Condition of service and training

Managers must give staff the opportunity to become trained reflective practitioners in an environment where they are consulted by management and can build satisfactory relationships. Staff will become more confident, articulate and excited about working with both adults and children.

In the words of Paulo Freire, it's about opening up for parents a 'language of possibilities'.

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ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

The following exercise could prove to be valuable for new parents and staff joining a service as well as for existing parents, staff and management as a way forward to an inclusive setting for all. Settings interested in improving parental involvement should ask (parents, staff, management body) the following questions:

- As a parent/provider of childcare, do I believe that parental involvement in the setting benefits all the stakeholders?
- When a child is enrolled at the childcare setting, are parents introduced to all of the staff from the manager to kitchen/caretaker staff?
- What do parents experience when they walk into the childcare building?
- Who or what is parents' first point of contact when they enter the building?
- Are parents greeted in a friendly manner?
- Is the building physically accessible for everyone including parents and children with physical disabilities and parents with prams and buggies?
- Are key workers allocated to individual children and families?
- Are individual cultures and religions depicted, valued, respected and celebrated?
- Have families been consulted on how their child's culture, religion or language should be depicted?
- How are parents contacted about events?
- Is there a parents' room or space where parents can meet?
- Are parents truly involved in decision-making?
- Do parents feel that they are part of the childcare community?
- What steps do you think can be taken to promote greater parental participation in a child's learning and development?
- What role can management play in promoting this participation?
- Does the setting find it hard to recruit and keep parents as volunteers?
- If so, why, and how can this trend be reversed?
- Do parents believe that in working with their partners in education they can make a difference?

SIX TYPES OF PRACTICE TO PROMOTE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

In 1995, Dr. Joyce Epstein, a leading researcher in the field of parental development, developed types of practice to promote parental involvement. Families, the childcare setting and the community can all collaborate in six key ways to foster the caring community that children need in order to maximise their potential in school/childcare setting and in later life. Each section looks at types of involvement and offers examples of activities and approaches.

1. Parenting

Children spend a high percentage of their waking time in the home setting. Research shows that the quality of the home environment strongly correlates with children's academic and life achievement. Therefore, it is essential that families are assisted in ways they can create an environment that supports their children's development at home.

Methods

- Host parenting classes
- Offer a lending library that provides educational material

2. Communication

Creating partnerships based on two-way communications enhances the parental involvement critical to a child's success. Communications stressing

children's achievements rather than problem-centred discussions create a more positive and open dialogue between parents and staff.

Methods

Introduce:

- Newsletters, which can be translated into other languages where appropriate
- Calendars
- Fliers
- Handbooks
- Parent committees
- Face-to-face meetings with individual parents
- Websites

3. Volunteering

Childcare settings that recruit parents as volunteers show that they value their time and talents. Also, by encouraging parents to become more actively involved in the childcare setting, they gain in self-confidence and develop new skills.

Methods

- Seek a parent representative on management boards and policy-making committees
- Ask parents to help on outings, supervision, volunteers organising work shops for parents

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4. Home links to supporting learning

Supporting families' concerns and expertise regarding their children's learning establishes good practice for life-long learning which, research indicates, helps children to succeed throughout life.

Methods

- Host family events/workshops about the importance of learning and play
- Give learning tips and contributions from parents in the newsletter

5. Involving parents in decision making

Effective programmes encourage parents to become actively involved in the decision-making process within the setting. This involvement helps to develop positive partnerships between parents and staff and increases parents' understanding of how the setting operates.

Methods

- Have parental representation on management boards
- Ask parents to partake in policy development

6. Collaborating with communities to bring families together

The school, the family and the community are the three major contexts in which children live and grow. Effective partnerships are based on understanding

the culture, socio-economic, health, social and recreational needs and interests of families. Childcare settings should identify and integrate resources from the community to strengthen their practices.

Methods

Introduce:

- Literacy programmes
- Health services advice
- English as a second language programme in collaboration with community services

CREATING A PARENTS' HANDBOOK

Sharing information about your setting is vital to building partnership with parents. Create a parent friendly handbook with no jargon, short sentences and inclusive language outlining details of the programme. This should be updated on a regular basis with the following information:

- Manager's name and contact details
- Staff names and number of staff working at centre
- Number of children attending the service and their age groups
- Who the key workers are in the different groups
- Whether the setting welcomes children with special needs
- Who sits on the management board and how often it meets
- The complaints procedure for the setting

- Copies of policies, for example, admissions, child protection, record keeping, partnership with parents, behaviour management
- How the setting is funded (private/public)

SETTLING IN – A GOOD START

What parents want

In 1997, Duignan* studied the factors, aside from affordability, that affect parental selection of childcare and identified five key factors as being of paramount importance to parents when choosing childcare:

- Hygiene
- Space
- Staff training/experience
- Staff/parent relationships
- Staff/child interaction

To ensure that parents remain confident about their choice of childcare setting, it is essential for all settings to have a settling-in programme to create the foundations for a strong staff/parent relationship. By addressing any expectations or potential issues from the outset and ensuring that parents are fully informed about all policies and procedures that may affect their child, the transition to a new setting can be made easier for both parents and child.

The benefits

Settling-in programmes have the following benefits:

- They make the transition into a new environment easier for children as they have the comfort of the initial presence of a parent followed by their gradual withdrawal.
- They make the setting a safe, welcoming, positive place, which is an important part of a strong community.
- They give staff the opportunity to get to know families and to build a deeper relationship with parents.
- If included as stated policy where parents take part, for example, in a two-week programme, they connect families to a network of other parents, neighbours and community members.
- They give families a practical understanding of the mission, aims and objectives of the setting while sharing expectations about curriculum, approaches to behaviour and attendance.
- They foster a relationship between parents and staff that ensures the best possible care is given to each child.
- They create a positive outcome for parents leading to an interest in their child's education.
- They reassure parents from the start about the quality of care their children are receiving.

* Duignan, M. (1997). *Choosing Childcare – A Study of the Factors Affecting Working Parents' Choice of Day Care for 1–2 Year-Old Children*. Unpublished Postgraduate Diploma, DIT, Dublin.



TYPES OF SETTLING-IN STRATEGIES AND THEIR OUTCOMES

As part of getting to know families, settings could offer some of the following:

- A social gathering that includes management, staff, parents and the wider community during the settling-in period. This builds trust between the partners and connects parents to a wider network of support (other parents etc.).
- A session on transition from home to the childcare setting, which provides valuable insights into strategies and comforting routines for supporting the child.
- Information and discussions on the importance of being involved in the child's learning and development. This helps to make parents confident, assertive for their children and keen to learn more.

- An explanation as to the benefits of collaborative learning between all the stakeholders and how it benefits the child. This shows that practitioners are genuinely interested in them.
- A session on how children learn through play – exploring parent's experience of play with practical examples of play for them to try out.
- A session on the policies that affect parents and children and how policy is developed and reviewed. This supports parents in understanding the way the setting works.
- A discussion session about parents' needs, for example, educational and parenting skills.
- An information and discussion session with families on diversity and equality needs. Identify what will make families feel welcome, involved and empowered. This helps parents to realise that their views are actively sought, valued and built on.

INFORMATION SESSIONS/ WORKSHOPS

The following guidelines are useful if planning a workshop/information session for parents. Think of the four 'S's':

- Make it **Safe**
- Make it **Sane**
- Make it **Sparkly**
- Make it **Specific**

Make it safe, welcome and secure

- Have informal seating arrangements.
- Welcome everyone and make introductions every time.
- Have refreshments.
- Have a positive focus.
- Remember 'the end in mind' – the children.

Make it sane

- Ensure the meeting is organised and run well. Understand the structure.
- Put ground rules in place.
- Respect time pressures (where possible, limit to a one hour session).
- Deal with conflict.

Make it sparkly

- Gain the audience's attention with something relevant to the topic in hand.
- Keep emotional tone positive.
- Use energising techniques (movement, interaction or play a game).
- Use humour and laughter when appropriate.

Make it specific

- Deal with the job on hand, for example, 'Today we are going to review our _____ policy.'
- Ensure any involvement is meaningful.
- Remember that sessions that meet a specific need of the parent or child have been proven to work best.
- Close on a positive note and compliment attendance.

Section four

INVOLVING FATHERS

TRADITIONAL ROLES

In Ireland in the past, the role of the father was traditionally that of breadwinner while childcare was traditionally carried out by mothers. Yet boys and girls need positive male role models. When fathers take an active role in their children's education and social development, evidence suggests an increase in the child's achievement. Children also develop less stereotypical views about the roles of men and women.

Since the 1980s, there has been a shift in the work place, with more women taking up employment. The labour market has also been a strong influence on the development of childcare places via the Equal Opportunity Childcare Programme. Caring roles are becoming less stereotyped on gender grounds and fathers are increasingly moving towards greater participation in various activities associated with their children from antenatal classes and childbirth to

educational endeavours, but this needs to be developed further.

The establishment of Boards of Management in 1975 in primary schools was the beginning of formal participation by parents in school management; the parents of that school electing two parents, one male and one female, to sit on the board. There are also two representatives of the wider community on the board. As equal partners, the Board of Management has a very important legal role in the school, a provision laid down in the Education Act, 1998. This Education Act also states: 'The parents of students of a recognised school may establish and maintain from among their number, a parents' association for that school and membership of that association shall be open to all parents of students of that school.' However, in general there has been a gender imbalance in parents' associations, with women taking a more active role.

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We know that men have minimal involvement in childcare as practitioners. Experience would suggest that, despite some progress, fathers still also have a low level of involvement in childcare and childcare services so childcare providers need to be particularly proactive in their efforts to engage fathers.

BARRIERS TO THE INVOLVEMENT OF FATHERS

Research indicates that income is at times a barrier to participation as families on low income may have other priorities and may not be aware of the importance and value of participation in their child's learning. Even if families want to offer additional experiences, sometimes they do not have the money to do so. Fathers have traditionally taken up this financial burden.

Other barriers to participation by fathers include:

- The belief that a child's education is a mother's responsibility.
- A tendency for childcare settings /schools to communicate primarily with mothers.
- The family structure and how roles are labeled within the family.
- Mothers having custody of children.
- A lack of awareness on how to help.
- Financial and work commitments.
- A failure to recognise the importance of becoming involved both on the part of the father and the childcare setting.

While more fathers are becoming involved in their child's life, sometimes fathers in two-parent families have no significant involvement in their child's school or childcare. This is of further concern when fathers do not live with their children.

To address this issue, practitioners can examine how inviting the setting is for fathers by looking at the enrollment form, notice boards and methods of communication to be sure they are welcoming towards fathers.

When appropriate, where parents are separated, staff and parents should be aware of what agreement is in place in terms of parents attending activities and meetings. It is in the best interest of the child that they do not have to make the choice between their mother and father.

It is suggested that father's fall into one of four groups (Equal Opportunities Commission UK, 2002):

- Enforcer – not involved in day-to-day care, solely acting as a role model for setting clear rules.
- Entertainer – often entertaining the child while partner carries out household roles.
- Useful – entertains but also takes a share in household tasks and childcare.
- Fully involved – parental roles are virtually interchangeable.

Most fathers fall into the two middle groups. It is, therefore, essential that practitioners do all they can to involve fathers.

'It is a wise father that knows his own child.' William Shakespeare

METHODS TO PROMOTE THE INVOLVEMENT OF FATHERS

Some strategies identified to promote participation by fathers in childcare settings include:

- Offering activities for both parents and stressing that 'parent' definitely means fathers as well as mothers.
- Welcoming fathers, even where parents are separated.
- Scheduling activities after work hours or at weekends.
- Including activities that support fathers to help their children to learn. Parenting programmes that encourage the learning process, for example, by developing play skills in addition to the emotional side of childcare, help to reach fathers. Levine (1993)* suggests reaching fathers first as men by encouraging their involvement in an activity that they feel confident with, and then building on this. Having a specific goal is a good way to get fathers interested and engaged. There is clear evidence that children

need the kind of rougher horseplay that men/fathers engage in – it helps children develop their physical and emotional development. Tennis, football skills, interactive play and construction are all examples of this.

- Introducing pictures of fathers and children around the setting. This simple method reinforces the importance of fatherhood.
- Telling fathers how much their involvement is appreciated and encouraging them to come in as volunteers.
- Recruiting male staff.

By using the skills of both parents in ways that meets the needs of children, staff, parent and child will all benefit.

* Levine, J.A. (1993) 'Involving fathers in Head Start: A framework for public policy and programme development', *Families in Society*, Vol 74, pp. 4–19.

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Section five

ENSURING THE INCLUSION OF ALL

It is essential that childcare settings devise a curriculum that reflects the cultures, values, interests, experience and concerns of all parents and children.

Irish society has changed considerably over recent years. By 2006, the total population of Ireland had risen to over 4 million inhabitants and society had become multicultural and multiracial. Increased levels of inward migration into Ireland mean that childcare for non-nationals and their families must be based on an understanding, appreciation and a respect of their values and beliefs. Other groups to consider when creating an inclusive setting are the Traveller Community, special needs children and lone parents.

Our survival as a community may depend on a better understanding of both the interconnectedness and diversity of the people who live in it. Family roles and expectations are being

transformed and while people are experiencing these changes, they are struggling to retain their traditions and heritage. Working in partnership with parents creates an opportunity to help children to develop respect for other cultures and needs, and to teach them how to deal with the prejudice of others.

Through attitudes and actions, practitioners must show that cultural diversity is a positive and natural part of life. When a child arrives at the childcare setting, they cannot be expected to leave their culture and native language at the door.

By welcoming a child's home language and family traditions into the childcare setting staff are teaching the whole child.



Common needs/barriers identified by minority groups of parents are as follows:

- Language needs
- Information needs
- Availability of places
- Affordability
- Integration
- Prejudices

In 2006, the Office of the Minister for Children launched 'The Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers', which outline ways families and staff can work together to support the development and implementation of a diversity and equality approach. These include the understanding that children, parents and other family members are the most knowledgeable about their background, culture, language and needs, so it is essential to ask for families to share this knowledge. In this way parents can inform staff on how their individual cultures, religions or traditions can be depicted, valued, respected or celebrated.

METHODS OF INVOLVEMENT

- Include examples of children's work in progress and finished products and display images of the children and family events. Visual images are an important part of developing a feeling of belonging in all children.

- Reflect diversity in the setting through maps and projects about different countries' customs.
- Host information and discussion sessions with families on diversity, equality and anti-discrimination issues.
- Identify areas of concern to families.
- Use correct terminology when addressing people. If unsure, practitioners should ask individuals or representative organisations which term is preferred to describe a minority group.
- Provide a parent's notice board with general information, examples of children's work, photographs etc.

AREAS TO CONSIDER

Practitioners may wish to consider the following issues as outlined in the 'Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers':

- Families, in particular those who did not leave their country of origin by choice, may have experienced trauma, or be upset or depressed. Being dependent in an unfamiliar culture can be very difficult.
- When the culture and services are unfamiliar, families may feel nervous and isolated.
- Families seeking asylum or parents who are gay or lesbian may find it difficult to give personal information.

- Families may have different beliefs and attitudes concerning causes of illness or injury, or language to describe body parts, illness, symptoms, pain, or medical care.
- Parents of disabled children or disabled parent(s) of non-disabled children may not have come into contact with the diversity approach or social model informing the organisation's practice. They will need to be informed and assured of the importance of depicting all children in the setting. Images and photos of disabled children or/and parents interacting with communities can promote assurance and recognition. 'Disability' is not necessarily a health issue.
- Some cultures may have different standards and expectations concerning discipline. Service providers need to reinforce that corporal punishment is not acceptable in Ireland.
- Body language may mean different things in different cultures. For example, making eye contact, shaking hands or using someone's first name can have differing connotations.
- How is information shared about the children's activities with families who may have literacy or English language difficulties? Be creative; use photographs and signs to communicate.

- Staff or families can find discussing difference or challenging discriminatory behaviour embarrassing or uncomfortable.
- Take care to explain the policy on dealing with illness and medical emergencies, using simple and non-medical language. Policy will need to be reviewed and updated to reflect all the children's conditions. Families need to know they can share information within the bounds of confidentiality. Practitioners have to be open to input from families and to adapting policy.
- Interpreters may be needed. Be aware that where a family member acts as an interpreter, confidentiality may be an issue. It is not acceptable to use children as translators; alternatives should be sought where possible.

The childcare setting needs to be carefully evaluated and assessed on diversity issues on an annual basis as more is learned about the needs of parents and children. Involving parents in this process can build bridges and reduce isolation. The information gained from this evaluation enables staff to facilitate the optimum learning for the children and create an environment that makes parents and guardians feel welcome, involved and empowered.

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 Parental Involvement – A Handbook for Childcare Providers

 Why Involve Parents? - Barriers to Parental Involvement - Methods of Involvement -
 Involving Fathers - **Ensuring the Inclusion of All** - Methods of Conflict Resolution -
 Evaluating the Service - Sources of Further Information

CREATING AN ANTI-BIAS ENVIRONMENT

(From ‘Every Child Matters: Developing anti-discriminatory practice in early childhood services’)

The following checklist can be used by practitioners to gain a sense of whether they are creating an anti-bias environment.

In my childcare service I use resources and provide activities that reflect and support:

- All the children, families, students/ trainees, staff members in my group.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

- Children and adults at work and at play from the major ethnic groups living in my community, region and country.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

- Diversity within each group, for example, a range of languages, especially those spoken by families and children in the group.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

- People from class, cultural or ethnic groups that are different from my own without encouraging or reinforcing stereotypical thinking.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

- Women and men from various ethnic backgrounds doing a range of tasks in the home and having professional, manual, managerial, artistic or administrative jobs or who are unemployed.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

- Older people of various backgrounds doing a variety of activities.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

I use materials and provide activities that reflect and support:

- Differently abled people of various class, ethnic and cultural backgrounds working and being with their families and playing.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

- Diversity in family lifestyles including single mothers or fathers; mothers in jobs outside the home and fathers at home; fathers in jobs outside the home and mothers at home; families with grandparents or other relatives and no parents; families with two mothers or two fathers; middle income and low income families; families with differently abled members; foster families; and families whose members come from different ethnic and cultural groups.

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

For every ‘Always’ answer give yourself 2 points.

For every ‘Sometimes’ answer give yourself 1 point.

For every ‘Never’ answer give yourself 0 points.

Now total your points and examine the results:

- If you scored between 14 and 16 you are operating out of an anti-bias approach with regard to your environment.
- If you scored between 11 and 13 you are engaging an anti-bias approach in some areas of your environment.
- If you scored between 5 and 10, you may be operating out of what Louise Derman-Sparks calls a ‘tourist approach’, i.e. introducing cultural activities at special times,

seeing other cultures as ‘exotic’ and not incorporating them into all aspects of the programme. The ‘tourist approach’ does not support children or give them the tools they need to comfortably, empathically and fairly interact with diversity.

- If your score is 4 or below, you are reflecting and teaching from the dominant culture’s point of view in the environment and ignoring the experiences and views of people from groups different from your own.

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Section six

METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Tensions can often occur in the partnership between parents and childcare practitioners as each party tries to define their role. This can be avoided through the sharing of respective knowledge and expertise. Parental involvement may reduce conflicting behaviour between home and the setting and minimise confusion for children.

Some parents, for example, may have different standards and expectations concerning approaches to discipline. Practitioners need to reinforce the idea that corporal punishment is not acceptable in Ireland while continuing to promote the inclusion of the setting's ethos (values) and the behaviour of all members of the community as a key factor in promoting good behaviour.

When approaching discipline issues, practitioners should always aim to take the 'No Blame' approach.

CHALLENGES

These are some of the issues that practitioners may find difficult to discuss with parents:

- Bullying
- Chasing late payments
- Introducing price increases
- Consistent late pick ups at the end of day or session
- Behaviour management

Resolving issues

For successful resolution of any of these or other issues consider the following steps:

- What do I want to achieve?
- What do parents need?
- What can I say and how can I say it?
- How can I overcome the concerns of parents?

The steps below show how the issue of late payment could be resolved.



What do I want to achieve?

Payment on time as this affects all aspects of the setting.

What do parents need?

Parents need to understand that by not paying on time management cannot meet the needs of staff and the setting's financial commitments.

What can I say and how can I say it?

What would help you as a parent to pay on time?

How can I overcome the concerns of parents?

Ask if a better system of payment could be put in place that would help them to meet the deadline for payment.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Practitioners need to decide what process they are going to use if faced with an on-going conflict. Whatever methods are used, settings should focus on the six steps to problem-solving.

1. Identify the conflict.
2. Brainstorm and alternate solutions.
3. Evaluate possible solutions.
4. Decide on the best acceptable-to-all solution (may agree to try another later).
5. Implement the solution.
6. Try for a limited time and evaluate.

The first thing to decide when faced with a problem is whether a formal meeting needs to be arranged with a parent or whether the issue could possibly be resolved with an informal chat.

Informal meeting

- An informal meeting can happen when an individual parent or practitioner has a concern about a child.
- Most concerns can and should be dealt with at this level.
- Practitioners need practice and experience in dealing with these one-to-one situations.
- Focus on reaching a mutual decision based on shared information and respect.
- Advise parents as to how they can bring their concerns through the proper channels, i.e. practitioner/ keyworker, manager and management committee.
- Give parents information about how to make a formal complaint. Inform as to the complaints procedure and encourage parents to use this procedure if necessary.

Formal meeting

- Arrange the meeting at a time that suits the parent and the practitioner.
- Think about the choice of words.
- Listen attentively to show respect for the parent's point of view.

- Show understanding for the parent's perspective.
- Ask a question: 'Can you give me an example?'
- Genuinely ask for help: 'Do you have a suggestion?'
- Be willing to apologise if it is appropriate: 'I am very sorry this has happened.'
- Aim to find common ground.
- Clearly state any ideas, opinions or relevant experiences.
- Clarify the problem and invite discussion on how to work together on this.
- Give reassurance: 'I want us to work on this together.'
- Check assumptions.
- If necessary, ask to have time to consider the situation and make an appointment to phone or meet at a time that suits both parties.
- Take notes and agree what is to be recorded, including any follow up action to be taken.

Section seven

EVALUATING THE SERVICE

INVOLVING PARENTS IN EVALUATING THE SERVICE

The purpose of evaluation is to identify strengths and weaknesses in the delivery of a service, and suggest improvements. Most people will not voluntarily give feedback for the following reasons:

- They are uncomfortable about possible confrontation.
- They don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.
- They are afraid of reaction.
- They don't want to risk disapproval.

In order to get honest feedback, practitioners need to ask for it and make it safe for the person to give it. In other words, 'don't shoot the messenger'.

Asking the following questions is one type of approach.

Q1. On a scale of 1–10 how would you rate the quality of this service/ your relationship within this childcare setting during the last 2 weeks/ month/term?

Q2. What would it take to make it a 10?

If practitioners make it a habit to regularly ask these two questions it will give them the information they need to create a winning service for all involved.

There is never only one right way to communicate and childcare providers should constantly question their assumptions and ask 'What would it be good to...'

- Start doing?
- Stop doing?
- Do more?
- Do differently?

The following methods could be used to gather the information:

- Suggestion box
- Informal chat with parents
- Questionnaires/feedback forms
- Meetings/workshops

SÍOLTA

Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, recognises that valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures. It outlines questions that childcare practitioners should ask themselves in an effort to ensure that they are doing all they can to involve parents. Practitioners can use these as a checklist against which to determine the quality of their service.

What kind of arrangements are in place to facilitate regular formal meetings between parents and staff?

Think about...

- Types of meetings organised for parents
- Involving both parents (where appropriate)
- Frequency of meetings
- Responding to requests from parents for meetings
- Space for/location of meetings

How is information disseminated to parents?

Think about...

- Notice boards
- Daily schedules
- Photographs/children's events and activities
- Oral communication
- Newsletter
- E-mail
- Texting

What kind of opportunities are in place for informal, regular conversations with parents?

Think about...

- Creating opportunities for informal interaction with parents
- Making parents welcome

How do the formal and informal opportunities for communication with parents support the child's learning and development?

Think about...

- Accessing parents' expert knowledge of their child's development and learning
- Communicating information to parents about their child's learning and development
- Integrating parents' knowledge in the planning/assessment of children's learning
- Supporting parents in understanding their child's learning and development

How is parental involvement supported and encouraged within the setting?

Think about...

- Opportunities for parents to be involved in the management of the setting
- Opportunities for parents to contribute their skills and resources
- Facilitating parents to participate based on their interests, abilities and cultures
- Being proactive in encouraging parental participation

How is information provided for parents?

Think about...

- Range of information
- Regular review of the information available to parents
- Response to specific requests for information
- Making parents aware of information relevant to their key role
- Supporting parents in the use of this information in the home

Are opportunities created for other professionals from the community to engage with parents within the setting?

Think about...

- Public Health Nurse
- Garda
- Fire Safety Officer
- Other professionals

How does the setting use its policies and procedures in support of parental involvement?

Think about...

- Positive promotion of parental role
- Involving parents in the management of the setting
- Ensuring that parents have read and understood policies and procedures
- Involving parents in compiling policies for the setting
- Processes for regular review and update of policies
- Putting policy into practice
- Documentation of procedures
- Ensuring that everyone understands and follows these procedures

CONCLUSION

Working in partnership with parents, children and the wider community provides a foundation from which a childcare setting can build on and develop attitudes towards inclusion and equality for all families.

Childcare is a necessary and valuable part of life for many families. By focusing on building a trusting relationship with parents from the very beginning, childcare settings not only promote growth and development in children, but also help to strengthen families and communities.

In a partnership, childcare practitioners bring their knowledge of children's educational and development needs and parents bring the knowledge of their children's individual needs and interests. It is when these are brought together that children benefit most. By making parental involvement a core value in the setting, providers indicate how important the setting values partnership with all the stakeholders.

As there is no set recipe for building partnership, each individual setting must reflect on its current approach and how this can be improved. Using self-reflection and evaluation, childcare providers and parents can jointly determine which strategies are most likely to be effective in creating a lasting partnership.

By connecting with families on an ongoing basis, sharing information with them and developing a trusting relationship, practitioners can ensure that children get a solid foundation to make positive life choices.

Sources of further information

The following organisations provide a combination of information, support and training on issues related to childcare. Barnardos does not endorse any agency listed below and they are listed for information purposes only.

Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre
Christchurch Square, Dublin 8
T: 01 453 0355 E: nrcr@barnardos.ie
www.barnardos.ie

Border Counties Childcare Network
Unit 10d, M:TEK Building, Knockaconny,
Armagh Road, Monaghan
T: 047 72469 E: bccninfo@eircom.net
www.bccn.ie

Childminding Ireland – National Childminding Association of Ireland (NCMAI)
Wicklow Enterprise Centre, The Murrrough, Wicklow
T: 0404 64007 E: info@childminding.ie
www.childminding.ie

City/County Childcare Committees

Carlow: 16 Dublin Road, Carlow
T: 059 914 0244 E: carlowccc@eircom.net
www.carlowccc.com

Cavan: Railway Station, Belturbet, Co. Cavan
T: 049 952 9882 E: cavanccc@oceanfree.net
www.cavanccc.ie

Clare: 1 Kilrush Road, Ennis, Co. Clare
T: 065 686 4862 E: info@clarechildcare.ie
www.clarechildcare.ie

Cork City: 29 Penrose Wharf, Cork
T: 021 450 7942
E: corkcitychildcare1@eircom.net
www.corkcitychildcare.ie

Cork County: Floor 2, The Mill,
Castletownroche, Co. Cork
T: 022 26648 E: corkchildcare@eircom.net
www.corkchildcare.ie

Dun Laoghaire Rathdown: 5a Woodpark,
Sallynoggin, Co. Dublin
T: 01 236 8030 E: dlrccc1@eircom.net
www.dlrccountychildcare.ie

Donegal: Glenview Business Park, 1st Floor,
Donegal Road, Ballybofey, Co. Donegal
T: 074 913 2416 E: info@donegalchildcare.com
www.donegalchildcare.com

Dublin City: Block 4, Floor 1, Dublin City Council,
Civic Offices, Woodquay, Dublin 8
T: 01 222 3073 E: dccc@dublincity.ie
www.dublin.ie/child

Fingal: ABCO KOVEX Building,
Swords Business Park, Swords, Co. Dublin
T: 01 807 7660 E: info@fingalcountychildcare.ie
www.fingalcountychildcare.ie

Galway: 9B Liosban Retail Centre,
Tuam Road, Galway
T: 091 752039 E: mail@galwaychildcare.com
www.galwaychildcare.com

Kerry: 1 Powers Court, Boherbee,
Tralee, Co. Kerry
T: 066 718 1582 E: kccot@eircom.net
www.kerrycountychildcare.ie

Kildare: The Woods, Clane, Co. Kildare
T: 045 861 307 E: info@kildarechildcare.ie
www.kildarechildcare.ie

Kilkenny: Rear Choill Mhuire,
Glendine Road, Kilkenny
T: 056 7752 865 E: kkccc@eircom.net

Laois: 6 Lismard Court, Portlaoise, Co. Laois
T: 0502 61029 E: laoischildcare@eircom.net
www.laoischildcare.ie

Leitrim: Laird House, Church Street,
Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim
T: 071 964 0870
E: leitrimcountychildcare@eircom.net

Limerick City: City Hall, Merchants Quay, Limerick
T: 061 407 427 E: childcare@limerickcity.ie
www.limerickcitydb.ie/childcare

Limerick County: 32 Main Street, Croom,
Co. Limerick
T: 061 600 918 E: clcc@eircom.net
www.clcc.ie

Longford: Unit 17,
Longford Shopping Centre, Longford
T: 043 42505 E: lcchildcare@eircom.net
www.longfordchildcare.ie

Louth: Unit 14, Ardee Business Park,
Hale Street, Ardee, Co. Louth
T: 041 685 9912 E: info@louthchildcare.ie
www.louthchildcare.ie

Mayo: 2nd Floor, Mill Lane, Bridge Street,
Castlebar, Co. Mayo
T: 094 903 4778 E: jpower@mayococo.ie
www.mayocdb.ie

Meath: 11 Watergate Street, Navan, Co. Meath
T: 046 907 3010 E: meathchildcare@eircom.net
www.community.meath.ie/countychildcare/

Monaghan: 7 The Grange,
Plantation Walk, Monaghan
T: 047 72896 E: monaghancoc@eircom.net
www.monaghanchildcare.ie

North Tipperary: North Tipperary County Council,
Civic Offices, Limerick Road, Nenagh,
Co. Tipperary
T: 067 44886 E: childcare@northtippcoc.ie
www.northtipperarychildcare.ie

Offaly: St Joseph's Community Centre,
Kilcormac, Birr, Co. Offaly
T: 0509 35878 E: offalychildcare@eircom.net
www.offaly.ie/offalynet/occc/network.asp

Roscommon: Antogher Road, Roscommon,
Co. Roscommon
T: 090 662 8669 E: roschildcare@eircom.net

Sligo: 50 The Mall, Sligo
T: 071 91 48860 E: sccc@eircom.net
www.sligochildcare.ie

South Dublin: Block D,
Bawnogue Enterprise Centre, Bawnogue,
Dublin 22
T: 01 457 0122
E: southdublinchildcare@eircom.net
www.southdublinchildcare.ie

South Tipperary: 1 O'Connell Street,
Clonmel, Co. Tipperary
T: 052 82274 E: cccadministrator@eircom.net
www.southtippccc.ie

Waterford City: Unit 15,
Tycor Business Centre, Tycor, Waterford
T: 051 860 444
E: waterfordcitychildcarecom@eircom.net

Waterford County: Youth Resource Centre,
Friary Street, Dungarvan, Co. Waterford
T: 058 43601 E: waterfordcochildcare@eircom.net
www.waterfordcoco.ie

Westmeath: 6 St John's Terrace, Blackhall,
Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
T: 044 35454
E: westmeathcountychildcare@eircom.net
www.westmeathchildcare.ie

Wexford: 11 Weaver Street, Enniscorthy,
Co. Wexford
T: 054 37156 E: lindacountychildcare@eircom.net
www.wexfordchildcare.ie

Wicklow: Kilmantin Hill, Wicklow
T: 0404 64455 E: jeremywccc@eircom.net

Clare Family Learning Project

Adult Education Centre, Clonroad
Business Park, Ennis, Co. Clare
T: 065 682 4819
www.clarefamilylearningproject.org

Colorado Department of Education – Parent/ School Partnership

www.cde.state.co.us/cdeprevention/pi_parent_
school_partnerships.htm

Comhairle

7th Floor, Hume House, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4
T: 01 605 9000 E: info@comhairle.ie
www.comhairle.ie

Emigrant Advice

T: 01 8732844
www.emigrantadvice.ie

Forbairt Naíonraí Teo

7 Cearnóg Mhuirfean, Baile Átha Cliath 2
T: 02 639 8442 E: forbairtnaoinrai@eircom.net
www.naionrai.ie

Integrating Ireland

10, Upper Camden Street, Dublin 2
T: 01 478 3490 E: info@integratingireland.ie
www.integratingireland.ie

IPPA – The Early Childhood Organisation

Unit 4, Broomhill Business Complex, Broomhill Rd,
Tallaght, Dublin 24
T: 01 6719245 E: info@ippa.ie
www.ippa.ie

Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association (ISWECA)

Cappaduff, Mountshannon, Co. Clare
T: 061 927257 E: isweca@eircom.net
www.steinerireland.org

National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA)

12C Bluebell Business Park, Old Naas Road,
Bluebell, Dublin 12
T: 01 460 1138 E: info@ncna.net
www.ncna.net

National Disability Authority

25 Clyde Road, Dublin 4
T: 01 608 0400 E: nda@nda.ie
www.nda.ie

National Parents Council Primary

12 Marlborough Court, Dublin 1
T: 01 887 4034 E: info@npc.ie
www.npc.ie

Office for the Minister for Children

National Children's Office, 1st Floor, St Martin's
House, Waterloo Road, Dublin 4
T: 2420000 E: nco@health.gov.ie
www.omc.gov.ie

Pavee Point Travellers Centre

46, North Great Charles Street, Dublin 1
T: 01 8780255 E: pavee@iol.ie
www.paveepoint.ie

Pobal (formerly ADM)

Holbrook House, Holles Street, Dublin 2
T: 01 240 0700 E: enquiries@adm.ie
www.pobal.ie

Primary ABC a guide for Parents and Practitioners

www.primaryabc.ie

Síolta

Centre for Early Childhood Development
and Education
St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9
T: 01 884 2110 E: early.childhood@spd.dcu.ie
www.siolta.ie

St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland

Toghal House, 1-3 Callaghan's Lane,
George's Place, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin
T: 01 2805705 E: snmta@eircom.net
www.snmta.com

The Ohio State University

<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5304.html>