


VICTORIAN EARLY YEARS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

PRACTICE PRINCIPLE GUIDE PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES





Practice Principles cultural knowledge story by Dr. Sue Lopez Atkinson (Yorta Yorta) and artwork by Annette Sax (Taungurung)

Adapted by the Department of Education and Training from *Practice Principle Guide – Partnerships with Families*, by Dr Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse.

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2 Treasury Place, East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002

CONTENTS

About this guide	4
Developing effective partnerships with families.....	5
Why do partnerships with families matter?	11
Benefits for children	13
Benefits for families.....	15
How do we go about developing partnerships with families?.....	17
References and resources.....	26
Appendix 1.....	28

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES – CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE STORY

- Bunjil the Eagle and Waa the Crow represent Aboriginal culture and **partnerships with families**.
- The water hole symbolises **reflective practice**.
- The gum leaves with their different patterns and colours represent **diversity**.
- The stones underneath the leaves represent **equity**. They reflect the additional support put in place in order for all children to achieve.
- The child and adults standing on 'Ochre mountain' symbolise the **high/equitable expectations** we hold for children and adults.
- The family standing on and looking out from 'Ochre mountain' reflects **assessment for learning and development**. Such assessments draw on children's and families' perspectives, knowledge, experiences and expectations.
- The child and adult figures also represent **partnerships with professionals**.
- The land symbol as mother earth represents the basis for **respectful relationships and responsive engagement**.
- The symbols for land, water and people signify **holistic and integrated** approaches based on connections to Clan and Country.

(Dr. Sue Lopez-Atkinson, Yorta Yorta)



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is one in a series of eight guides to the Practice Principles in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

It is revised and updated from the Practice Principle Guide: Family-Centred Practice written by Dr Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse (2012).

The Practice Principle Family-Centred Practice has been renamed in the revised VEYLDF (2016) to Partnerships with families. This change reflects the varied and unique ways early years' professionals engage and work in partnership with families, of which family centred practice is one example.

Use this guide to support individual critical reflection on your practice, for discussion with a mentor or critical friend and as a guide for discussion with colleagues.

The guide draws on the Evidence Paper for Practice Principle 1: Family-Centred Practice, written for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development by the University of Melbourne. For detail about the evidence mentioned in this guide, and for more depth on this practice principle refer to the evidence paper found at:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/edcare/Pages/profresource.aspx>

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

Children learn in the context of their families and families are the primary influence on children's learning and development. Professionals too, play a role and by uniting around a shared vision for all children, early childhood professionals work together with children and families to facilitate learning and development (VEYLDF, P. 3).

Developing effective partnerships with families requires professionals to hold a set of values, skills, behaviours and knowledge that recognises and respects the central role of families in children's lives. Every partnership will be unique, just as each family, with their different experiences, values and priorities, is unique.

Early childhood professionals:

- show respect in their relationships with families, adopting an open, non-judgemental and honest approach that is responsive to a family's situation
- understand that consensus with families is not always possible or desirable
- create a welcoming and inclusive environment where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to experiences that enhance children's learning and development
- listen to each family's understanding, priorities and perspectives about their child with genuine interest to inform shared decision-making and promote each child's learning and development
- actively engage families and children in planning for ongoing learning and development in the service, at home and in the local community
- establish partnerships where information sharing supports families' confidence, identifies what families do well, and recognise the family's critical importance in their child's life.

(VEYLDF, P. 9)

Education and health professionals who engage in partnerships with families share their knowledge and skills, respect the uniqueness of each family and support families' choices, knowledge and values. This role contrasts with that of professionals as experts who see their role solely as educating families.

Effective partnerships with families are characterised by:

- mutual respect and trust
- reciprocity
- shared power and decision making
- open communication and responsive listening
- honesty
- shared goals
- clarity about roles and responsibilities
- complementary expertise and contributions
- negotiation.

Some families may find it challenging to engage with early childhood professionals because of their own experiences, for example their language, cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, health or disability related issues. This requires early childhood professionals to use multiple ways to communicate with families, to negotiate and overcome barriers to equity and engagement.

(VEYLDF, P. 9)

Partnerships with families are most effective when early childhood professionals:

- understand why developing partnerships is important, are committed to it and know how to go about making it happen
- approach all interactions in a respectful and responsive way
- welcome and support families to develop a sense of community and belonging
- establish clarity about respective roles and responsibilities
- take a collaborative, partnership approach to working with families from the first interaction
- respect diversity and difference and are culturally competent
- establish fair and equitable procedures to manage conflict
- participate in ongoing professional learning to build their skills
- are supported to work in partnerships with families
- engage families in shared decision making.

Case study

A maternal and child health nurse committed to developing partnerships with families asks first time parents what supports they feel they need and how she can assist them to find that help in the local community. Different types of parent groups for different purposes have emerged from this approach.

Case study

A Prep teacher developing partnerships with families empowers families by asking them about their views on homework and how it fits with family lifestyles and beliefs. Each year homework tasks reflect families' beliefs and interests. There's flexibility in how and when children complete their homework. One parent commented 'We see this approach as a shift from our child doing more school work at home, to doing real homework!'

Reflective questions

- What would families say if asked for examples that illustrate the characteristics of effective partnerships with families?
- How do you think families see the relationship with professionals in the service? How could you find out?
- Reflect on and discuss with colleagues what partnerships with families means to you.
- Do your philosophy statement and policies reflect and encourage partnerships with families?
- What are some examples of practice in your service that illustrate key points about partnerships with families in the VEYLDF?
- What improvements can you make?
- What communication strategies work best for you to find what matters to your families?
- In what ways do you build on the strengths and resources families bring to the service?
- If working in partnership with families is a new concept for you, how could you find out more about it?

Working in partnership with families builds on the early intervention approach to family-centred practice and although each family and setting is unique, early intervention research has identified four broad models of program delivery. The four models as shown in Figure 1 are on a continuum from professional centred to more family-centred.

In the professional-centred model, professionals approach their work with families as experts who know much more than the families and who believe they can 'fix' the families' problems. In a family-allied model, professionals begin to engage families a little more by expecting them to accept guidance and carry out instructions. Professionals then move to family-focused model based on a more positive view of families.

Through ongoing critical reflection on practice and access to professional development, professionals gradually shift their practice to family-centred models as shown in the way professionals support families to identify their own needs, their strengths and skills.

Figure 1: Moving towards family-centred model (adapted from Dunst et al., 1991)

<p>PROFESSIONAL-CENTRED MODELS</p>	<p>The professional holds the knowledge with which to fix the problems, which the family cannot do without assistance.</p> <p>The professional is considered to know more than the parents about what the child needs in order to grow and develop as it should.</p> <p>Families are regarded as not able to assist their own children.</p>
<p>FAMILY-ALLIED MODELS</p>	<p>The professional holds the knowledge, but involves the family a little more by relying on the family to put this knowledge into practice.</p> <p>The family is seen to need the guidance of the professional.</p> <p>The professional knows best, but believes that families can help to carry out their instructions to benefit the child and the whole family.</p>
<p>FAMILY-FOCUSED MODELS</p>	<p>The professional regards the role of families more positively, but families are still encouraged to use a range of services to help them meet their needs.</p> <p>Families and professionals discuss what families need to improve the way they function.</p> <p>The professional and the family discuss the family's needs, and the professional helps families to select the best options for the family and the child.</p>
<p>FAMILY-CENTRED MODELS</p>	<p>The goal of exemplary family-centred practice is achieved when the family determines what assistance it needs, and the professional's role is to facilitate the meeting of each individual family's needs.</p> <p>A strength-based and competency-based approach is demonstrated by the professional, and support services are geared towards assisting families to develop their own network of resources – both formal and informal.</p> <p>The professional listens to what the family wishes for the child and helps the family by meeting those needs where possible, or by helping the family to meet its own needs.</p> <p>This approach is empowering for the family.</p>

Beyond family centred practice

Discussion starter

Discuss with colleagues where your service fits on the continuum from expert, professional-centred models to family-centred, partnership models.

Where do different practices and policies in your service fit on this continuum?

What steps could you take to adopt a more family-centred, partnership approach to your practice?

Families bring different knowledge and perspectives about their children, their culture and their community. Partnerships with families provide rich opportunities for professionals' learning and self-reflection. Building strong relationships with families supports engagement with the local community and connects a service or school with its community.

The Family Partnership Model as shown in Figure 2 is a well-established, evidence-based approach to working with families. Critical first steps taken by professionals using this model include helping parents to explore and understand their situation and helping them to set goals and objectives (Davis, H. & Day, C., 2010). This model, and other effective partnership practice models, are characterised by:

- taking a strength-based approach to working with families
- building parents' capacity to utilise their own resources and strengths
- establishing relationships based on trust and respect
- open communication, shared decision-making and a willingness to negotiate and compromise
- an appreciation of each other's knowledge
- openness to the views, values and experiences of others.

A STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH VIEWS SITUATIONS REALISTICALLY AND LOOKS FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO COMPLEMENT AND SUPPORT EXISTING ABILITIES AND CAPACITIES AS OPPOSED TO FOCUSING ON, AND STAYING WITH, THE PROBLEM OR CONCERN. THE PROBLEM AND THE PERSON ARE SEPARATE; HOWEVER, THE PROBLEM IS NEVER MINIMISED. (STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH: A GUIDE TO WRITING TRANSITION LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT STATEMENTS, P.6)

Figure 2: The Partnership Model (Children’s Workforce Development Council, 2011)

THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL	THE EXPERT MODEL	THE BEFRIENDING MODEL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents and professionals actively work together • Parents and professionals both influence decision making • Parents and professionals value and use each other’s strengths, skills and knowledge • Parents and professionals agree upon goals and desired outcomes and strategies to achieve them • Parents and professionals negotiate when disagreement or conflict occurs • Parents and professionals show mutual respect and trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionals are viewed as experts with superior knowledge and skills • Professionals lead and control parents and their interaction • Professionals diagnose the parents “problem” and outline goals and desired outcomes • Professionals search for information to support their view of the parent ‘problem’ • Professionals focus on their own personal or the service/agency’s agenda in outlining goals and desired outcomes for parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionals are warm and friendly with parents and may offer friendship • There are no clear boundaries or expectations of the relationship between parents and professionals • There is no clear model or framework for working through a problem and identifying goals and possible solutions • The relationship between parents and professionals have no clear beginning and end

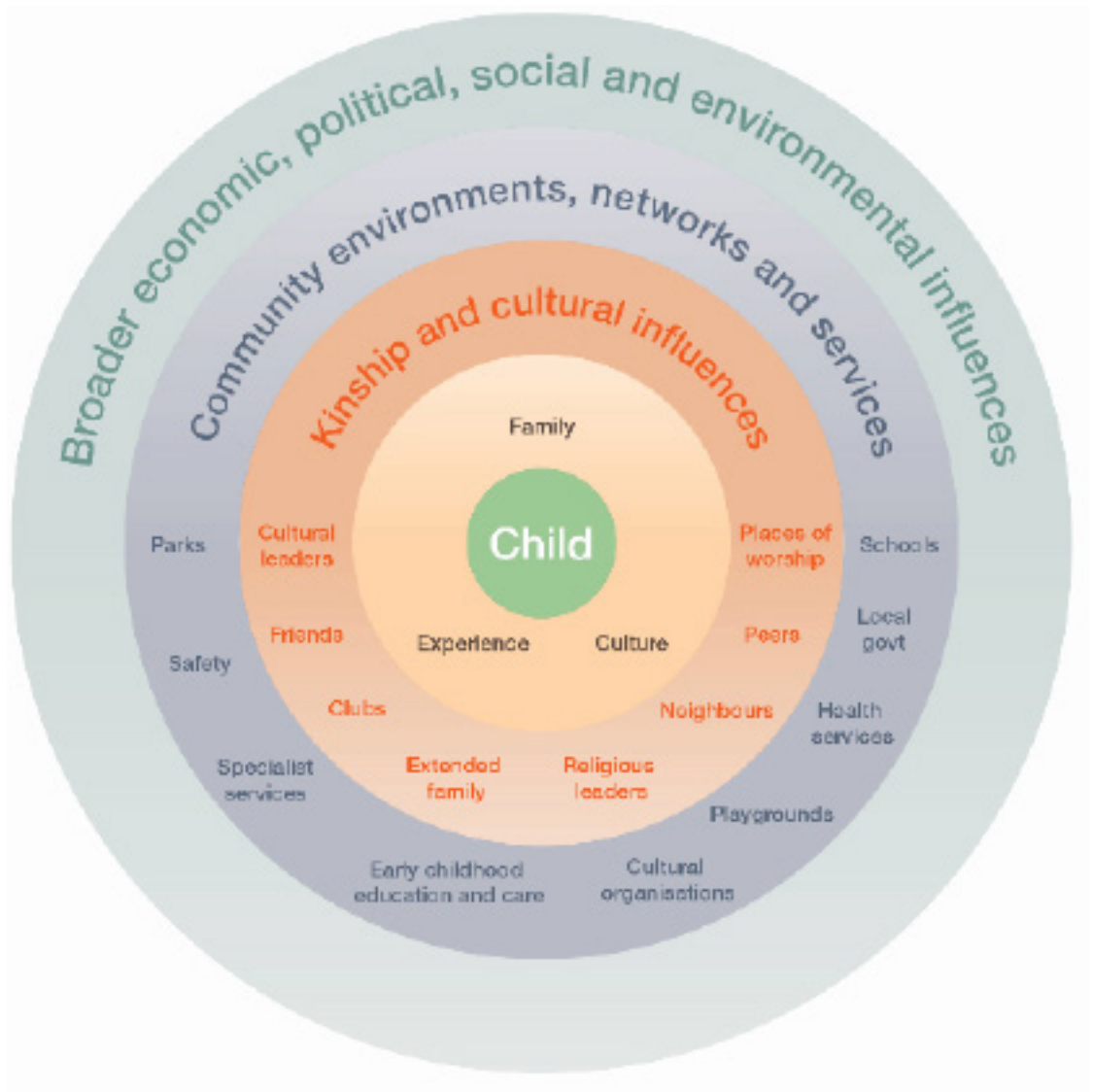
Reflective questions

- What do you do to get to know and understand the families you work with?
- How do you develop and strengthen your relationship with families to affirm their role in supporting children’s learning and development?

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS LISTEN TO EACH FAMILY’S UNDERSTANDING, PRIORITIES AND PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THEIR CHILD WITH GENUINE INTEREST TO INFORM SHARED DECISION-MAKING AND PROMOTE EACH CHILD’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
(VEYLDF, P. 9)

WHY DO PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES' MATTER?

Figure 3: Ecological model of child development adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979



The Ecological model(Figure 3) has family, experience and culture surrounding the child.

Families and kinship members have primary influence on their children's learning and development. Children's learning is supported and extended when families and professionals work together with children.

Professionals value positive relationships with families and seek out the knowledge a family has about their child's learning and development and use this to inform their practice. This includes developing an understanding of the child's home environment and the health and wellbeing of the family. Recognising the interests, abilities and culture of each family supports families' sense of belonging to a setting and their participation in and contribution to the community.

It is important that professionals understand the family, cultural and community contexts for every child and use this knowledge to build on children's values, and extend their knowledge and skills.

IN VICTORIA THE RICH ARRAY OF LANGUAGES AND CULTURES ENABLE MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR VALUING AND STRENGTHENING MULTILINGUAL CAPABILITIES, RESPECTING CULTURAL DIVERSITY, SUPPORTING COMMON VALUES AND BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ARE VALUABLE SOURCES OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FOR ALL EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS IN DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE.

(VEYLDF P. 18)

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN

Discussion starter

What do you see as the main benefits of partnerships with families for the children with whom you work?

Compare your list of benefits with those below.

Partnerships with families have numerous benefits for children. It:

- promotes attachment and strong family-child relationships
- supports continuity of learning and care experiences
- provides a secure base for learning
- promotes positive attitudes to learning.

Early childhood professionals play an important role in maintaining and strengthening children's attachment to and connection with family and community, which is critical to their sense of identity.

(VEYLDF Outcome 1)

Case study

A maternal and child health nurse explained how she enjoys helping parents to 'tune in' to their baby—to notice how competent the baby is at gaining adults' attention, communicating without words and showing pleasure in adult company.

By developing partnerships with each family professionals support continuity in children's lives. Learning opportunities that build on children's prior learning experiences from home and community enhance children's learning and support children to feel safe and confident as learners.

In early childhood settings, relationships between professionals and children provide a secure base that helps children to feel safe, secure and supported. This encourages them to try new experiences and to learn. The quality of these relationships depends on professionals having a deep knowledge of the child and an understanding of their home environment.

Major differences between practices at home and in other early years settings can cause confusion and may have a negative impact on children's wellbeing and learning.

Research indicates that when professionals and families work together to support children's learning, children's attitudes and performance improve. These improvements continue throughout and beyond children's years in education and care settings and are evident regardless of the parents' socio-economic status, cultural background, employment or marital status.

Case study

From conversations with children and families, a teacher recognised that some children were told stories at home through oral traditions rather than read to from books. The teacher decided to affirm and promote this literacy practice for all children as well as extend knowledge of how stories are shared through the reading of books. He acted on that planning decision by:

- using oral storytelling with small groups of children
- inviting parents familiar with oral storytelling to share their traditional stories with the children
- facilitating play with puppets to promote oral storytelling skills for children
- encouraging families to borrow books that could be shared with children at home
- ensuring there were books in local community languages
- continuing to engage in and model story-telling through books explaining the literacy benefits of both oral and print-based traditions of storytelling to families through conversations and using photos.

This example highlights the importance of understanding the cultural contexts of children's lives for creating continuity for children and affirming and extending their learning. It also shows how early childhood professionals can promote learning in areas where children may have less knowledge or skills.

The teacher's intentional planning is a good example of equity in action, as he ensured all children had opportunities to enjoy shared story telling through both oral and storybook reading experiences.

The teacher was not only aware of culturally different literacy practices, he also had a positive attitude to these differences and was able to explain to families how he was building on and extending children's knowledge and skills in different literacy traditions.

Reflective questions

- Evidence indicates that home literacy practices are more powerful than classroom literacy experiences – What are the implications of this for early childhood professionals?
- How does your current practice acknowledge the importance of home literacy practices?
- What could you do to improve connections between home literacy practices and literacy practices in your setting?

BENEFITS FOR FAMILIES

Partnerships with families have numerous benefits for families that in turn positively impact on children's learning and development. Partnerships with families leads to:

- greater satisfaction with the service
- a stronger sense of self-efficacy and control
- more positive perceptions of their children
- more positive perceptions of their own competence.

Case study

As one educator said:

"The benefits of partnership are that you end up building trust and a program that is far more responsive to a community of people who don't just think about themselves but rather about how the group will benefit and gain from their collaboration. That collaboration is based on listening to other people's perspectives. There's no distinction between the philosophy and how it is enacted in the program for children and for families. We treat each other as citizens and believe that each person deserves respect."

(Educator and director in an education and care service)

Case study

A Preschool Field Officer explained that for her the best way to engage families was to take a very positive, respectful approach and to be accepting of differences:

Just accepting or just being really positive 'oh that's great you've got kinder today' even though they might be really late. 'It's fantastic you've turned up, it's really great to see your child'. It's about the interaction that you have with the family and the child. My personal feeling is the kindergarten teachers I've seen who've had a big success rate with these families they've just made a big fuss 'it's so good to see you, I'm so glad you could come today, anything we can do to help you with attendance'. Give them a ring and see how things are going, what can we do to help you out. So you put it back on them and ask how we can support you rather than being judgemental about them, which would be annoying. I think seriously it's about your relationship and people pick up pretty quick whether or not you're being judgemental and condescending and so on.

Everyday experiences either contribute to or take away from families' sense of control over major life events. Partnerships with families in early years services can make a significant contribution to families' feelings of empowerment.

Through partnerships with families, early childhood professionals help families appreciate how important they are in their children's lives. Professionals respect diversity, reinforce the message that there are many good ways to raise children and promote the idea that there are learning opportunities in everyday experiences.

Working with families to identify what a child already knows, can do and is ready to learn shifts the focus from what a child can't do to recognising a child's abilities, interests and needs.

HOW DO WE GO ABOUT DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES?

Adopting a partnership with families approach can be challenging. It can require changes in attitudes and behaviour and adjustments to priorities and role definitions.

Some early childhood professionals may worry that parents will make requests or demands that they cannot accommodate. Practice and research evidence indicate that when there is mutual trust and respect for each other's complementary roles and responsibilities, expectations are reasonable.

When professionals engage in partnerships with families they:

- foster respectful relationships and responsive engagement characterised by warmth and trust
- share information openly with families using a range of styles and types of communication
- regard families as experts on their children's lives, actively seek children's and families' views and take them into account in practice
- offer choices and encourage families to make decisions
- take responsibility for initiating and developing partnerships with families
- reflect on their own practice, values and beliefs (see Practice Principle Guide – reflective practice).

These points are discussed below in more detail.

Foster respectful relationships and responsive engagement characterised by warmth and trust

Through their practice professionals show respect for difference in the partnerships they develop with families. They create welcoming, inclusive environments that reflect the lives, languages, cultures and communities of their families. They interact with families in warm friendly ways that demonstrate respect and convey the message that families belong.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS CREATE A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT WHERE ALL FAMILIES ARE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN AND CONTRIBUTE TO EXPERIENCES THAT ENHANCE CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT
(VEYLDF, P. 9)

"I VISITED NUMEROUS SCHOOLS AND THE ONE I SELECTED WAS THE MOST WELCOMING AND SHOWED ME THAT THEY REALLY WANTED MY CHILD TO COME TO THEIR SCHOOL."

(PARENT, *EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS: PRACTICE REVIEW REPORT*, P. 68)

Reflective questions

- What do families see in the physical environment in your service that links to their cultures, languages, communities and family life?
- What are some examples from your own practice of responding to the child in the context of family, culture and community?
- How do you find out about these contexts?
- What more could you do?
- Where might you find help to do this?

In early childhood intervention research the concept of 'help' is used to clarify the role of the professional in partnerships with families. Two categories of 'help-giving' practices have been shown to strengthen families' agency and effectiveness:

- relational practices, such as active and reflective listening, empathy, warmth, and trustworthiness
- participatory practices, such as emphasising the family's responsibility for finding solutions to their problems and for acquiring knowledge and skills to improve life circumstances and deciding on a course of action.

Case study

At enrolment an early intervention professional asks families to talk about what their child does well, their interests and how they support these strengths at home. The child is involved in these conversations by talking about or pointing to photographs of things they like to do. Together they plan how the service can continue what happens at home and extend it. Every semester, or more frequently depending on the child's age and circumstances, they revisit and assess these plans before setting new goals and consider ways these can be achieved.

This example is a reminder that a partnership with families approach includes the child who is an active contributor to their own experiences, learning and development.

Respect requires early childhood professionals to be sensitive to the complex relationships in the lives of children and their families, and the diversity of what constitutes a family. Sensitivity is shown when professionals have reasonable expectations of families that take into account the demands and pressures on families and individual family members. It is important to be aware that family participation or involvement may differ depending on a family's situation and that some families will require additional support to feel comfortable about talking about their child or offering information to professionals.

(VEYLDF, P. 19)

Appendix 1 provides links to additional resources to support professionals working with families and young children.

CHILDREN ARE CITIZENS WITH EQUAL RIGHTS AND ARE CONSULTED MEANINGFULLY, WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES, ABOUT ISSUES THAT AFFECT THEM.

(VEYLDF, P.19)

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS ACTIVELY ENGAGE FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN PLANNING FOR ONGOING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SERVICE, AT HOME AND IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

(VEYLDF, P. 9)

Case study

A director and educational leader of an education and care program said:

“The most important thing is trust. If there’s trust, then you can be open with families and them with you. Trust builds out of respect. Everything we do with children and with families is modelled on respect.”

Case study

The director of an education and care service explained that they do many things to support families who have busy or difficult lives, including providing nourishing breakfasts, which some parents enjoy with their child.

Share information openly with families using a range of styles and kinds of communication

Open and ongoing communication with families is a priority in achieving partnerships with families. A two-way process of communication between professionals and families might include daily or regular conversations or emails, shared diaries, newsletters, communication books or phone calls. Other more formal strategies might include interviews, school reports, the preparation of Transition Learning and Development Statements or completing sections of the MCH Health, Learning and Development Record.

Professionals also communicate with families by modelling caring interactions and respectful relationships. Developing a communication and feedback process, in consultation with families and children, is a helpful strategy.

Case study

At one education and care setting the early childhood professionals collected left-over lanyards (plastic pockets on a detachable cord for inserting name tags). On a regular basis they put a short note in the pocket about something interesting that happened with the child that day or some good news about an achievement – anything positive – and the child wears it home. They encourage families to read the note in the child’s presence as a basis for talking about the child’s day. Often parents put a note in it for the child to bring back to the centre.

Partnerships with families does not mean avoiding difficult topics or problems, but dealing with them respectfully. The trust between families and professionals that develops through partnerships with families makes it easier to talk about problems or difficult issues when they arise.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS SHOW RESPECT IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES, ADOPTING AN OPEN, NON-JUDGEMENTAL AND HONEST APPROACH THAT IS RESPONSIVE TO A FAMILY’S SITUATION (VEYLDF P. 9)

Regard families as experts on their children's lives and actively seek children's and families' views and take them into account in practice.

Working collaboratively with families requires professionals to be genuinely interested in and open to the ideas, questions and requests of others'. This is seen when professionals engage with children, families and other professionals in respectful ways and go beyond listening by demonstrating through their practice that they apply what others contribute.

'[WE SAID TO THE SCHOOL STAFF] PLEASE TREAD CAREFULLY [WITH THIS CHILD DUE TO HER PARTICULAR SITUATION] AND THEY DID AND THEY LISTENED TO US. THEY LISTENED, THEY DIDN'T JUST ASSUME THAT BECAUSE THEY WERE TEACHERS THEY KNEW THE BEST THING TO DO FOR HER [THE CHILD], AND I THINK THAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT.'

(OUT OF HOME CARE FAMILY CONCERNING A CHILD'S TRANSITION TO SCHOOL, *EARLY YEARS TRANSITIONS: PRACTICE REVIEW REPORT*, P. 68)

Case study

An educator working with four year olds decided to ask families in her intake interview with them what they hoped their child would get out of the year. She was afraid that the answers would either be impossible to achieve or that they might conflict with her philosophy and practices. She was pleasantly surprised and has used that initial conversation as a basis for further conversations about each child. She reported that families' answers to that question gave her valuable insights into their priorities and values.

Seeking the views of families can be challenging when there is limited time for conversations. For example, in education and care services conversations with families occur typically at the busiest times of the day. However, these obstacles can be overcome if early childhood professionals make time to seek out and pay attention to families' opinions with genuine interest.

Case study

A maternal and child health nurse uses the Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) in child health visits as a way of ensuring that parents' concerns are addressed first. She used to greet the parent and child and 'jump right in' with her agenda. She sees that the way she does it now is not only more respectful and satisfying for parents, but it results in valuable information being shared about the child and the parent-child relationship.

From their first interaction, professionals encourage families to share information about their child and their child rearing values and practices. They use that information in their practice.

Partnerships with families means that professionals are sensitive to families' preferences when considering ways to learn about the child's family life. Some families enjoy and appreciate professionals making home visits, some might prefer to meet in a local park or cafe while others may prefer to talk at the centre or service, either as part of a small group or individually.

Professionals respect privacy and confidentiality and recognise that some families will be much more interested in and willing to share information than others. As trust builds and families become confident that professionals respect them and want to hear what they have to say, they will share more information.

Case study

An educator of three and four year olds talking about responding to each family's unique circumstances said:

"I share information with families in different ways. For example, some are very keen to know what behaviour is normal, especially if it is their first child. And if I know a family is anxious about their child and they ask how their day was, I'll think carefully about how I share a concern with them. "

Professionals' expertise is not disregarded in partnerships with families

The table below provides examples of how families and professionals can make equal and complementary contributions to decisions about children in order to support their learning, development and wellbeing.

THE FAMILY HAS...	EXAMPLE	PROFESSIONALS HAVE...	EXAMPLE
...specialised and expert knowledge of their child.	A parent explains to a speech therapist that her child seems to stop using words when he is tired or frustrated.	...specialised professional knowledge about language development and problems.	The speech therapist works with the parent to find ways to reduce the reasons for the child getting frustrated. She also suggests some simple ways to encourage the child to vocalise his needs when he is tired.
...specialised parenting skills.	A Somali parent shows educators how she uses a long cloth to tie her baby to her body as a way to keep him close to her when he needs comforting.	...specialised professional knowledge and skills in the education and care of many children.	Educators reassure the parent that they have used the same practice with other babies and will use it with hers.
...deep knowledge of the impact of family and community contexts on their lives.	At school enrolment, the family of a child with complex additional needs discusses the impact of being involved with a range of health and early childhood intervention specialists since the child's birth.	...professional knowledge of and respect for the diverse contexts of children's and families' lives.	The school staff asks the family for advice about who to contact in regards to working collaboratively with the other professionals involved with the child.
...an interest in having a partnership with the professionals who work with their child.	A father identifies to a family day care educator that he feels isolated from other families as a single dad.	...knowledge of the importance of partnership with families and being a resourceful professional.	The educator tells the father about a local 'Saturday Dads' playgroup and finds details about it for him.

Offer choices and encourage families to make decisions

Early childhood professionals value and build on each family's strengths and recognise them as experts on their children. They actively promote the belief that families are confident and competent educators of their children.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS CREATE A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT WHERE ALL FAMILIES ARE ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN AND CONTRIBUTE TO EXPERIENCES THAT ENHANCE CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT.

(VEYLDF, P. 9)

Professionals encourage and support families to make choices and decisions. The relationship is dynamic and the role of leader in decision-making shifts from time to time depending on the situation. Sometimes families make the decision, sometimes professionals, and often decisions are made jointly. Professionals contribute their perspectives and professional knowledge and families contribute their deep knowledge of their child.

Consider the following statements and reflect on how you would approach the situation. Was your response similar or different? Why?

Case study

A director and educational leader in an education and care centre said:

"What I want to communicate to parents is 'I see you as an expert on your child. We will get to know your child in a different way, so eventually we may be able to tell you things you don't know – just as you can tell us things we don't know'."

The leader of a supported playgroup said:

"Sometimes promoting the parents' confidence and their sense of being a good parent conflicts with what might be called best practice with children, and we have to make some tough on-the-spot decisions, but mostly we try to keep at the forefront of our minds how important the parent-child relationship is. That's what matters most."

A director and educational leader said of drop-off times at his education and care setting:

"Families can stay until they're ready to leave. I don't know if there's ever a reason why a parent needs to leave – unless they want to. They decide, and if they don't want to stay that's okay too."

The director of an education and care service said:

"When a child begins and throughout the child's participation [in the program] the cook, educator, director and parent discuss the child's food preferences and opportunities for including it on the menu. Parents will initiate a discussion around the decision about toilet learning, which is made jointly with educators also sharing information. Educators actively encourage families to ask questions about the curriculum and contribute to it, for example by telling educators what is happening in the child's life outside the centre. This is achieved through what is called our 'living document, the curriculum' where children, parents and educators make notes and changes according to information provided."

Take responsibility for initiating and sustaining partnerships with families practice

In early childhood settings a variety of ways are offered for families to be involved in and connect with the service. However, educators understand that families' interest in and capacity to participate will vary. They also understand that participation and involvement is not the same thing as a collaborative relationship. Research suggests that it is important to families that their involvement is constructive and valued. Sometimes limited family involvement might mean that parents are happy with the service. Responsive professionals take care to ensure that parents do not feel guilty if they choose not to become involved.

Case study

A school in a regional city sought ways to encourage parents to engage with and participate in learning opportunities at the school. The school encouraged parents to volunteer by arranging with the local adult education provider to obtain recognition of the volunteering role. The parents were required to have a police check and a working with children card, which they wore with their volunteer badge. They also completed an induction process before commencing at the school and becoming part of the official pool of school volunteers. All of these features raised the profile of volunteering at the school.

The adult education provider also offered a range of accredited courses for volunteers at the school, for example, coffee making, food handling and introduction to computers. The school has developed as a community learning centre where students see adults benefiting from being involved and learning new skills.

Discussion starter

Read the following and then discuss the questions provided.

A family day care field worker described her scheme's attempts over several years to offer social events and talks about child rearing. Attendance was very low, which resulted in professionals complaining about parents 'just not caring'. They started to see it differently when a colleague suggested that instead of blaming families maybe they just got it wrong. 'What's wrong with parents voting with their feet?' she asked. That helped the scheme to see that they were making assumptions about what parents should be interested in. Now, she reports, they ask families what they want. As a result, what they offer is much more popular.

- Have you experienced similar unexpected outcomes from planned parent education activities or events? If so, how have you responded?
- What assumptions were you making about families?
- How might you challenge attitudes that may unfairly position some families as 'not interested' or 'uncaring'?
- Identify some new strategies that support a partnership with families approach.

Partnerships with families means welcoming and supporting each family to participate in the setting and respecting decisions families make. It is the professional's responsibility to find new ways of engaging families and linking them to other services if they are requested or needed. Attending local early years' network meetings and forming alliances with other professional agencies promote connections with the family and child services in your community. Participation in local networks helps professionals to understand the multiple and changing needs of the families they work with.

Professionals can support each other to develop partnerships with families and meet the challenges it brings. Reflecting regularly with other colleagues helps early childhood professionals to develop deeper understandings of a partnership with families approach, the benefits and how to embed the approach in everyday practice. A shift from a 'professional as expert' model requires a whole-of-organisation effort with support from management and at the policy level.

Reflect on practices, values and beliefs

It is important for professionals to critically reflect regularly not only on their practice, but also on the beliefs and values that underpin the practice. The area of partnerships with families is a particularly complex one, in part because each family is unique. Engaging in critical reflection with other professionals and being open to their perspectives on situations is not only reassuring but also leads to solutions and good outcomes. The Practice Guide: Reflective Practice is a useful resource to inform professional practice.

Case study

The director at an education and care setting summed up partnerships with families practice in her service:

"Our community has a strong belief that families need to feel comfortable in the centre if their children are to feel comfortable. Children benefit because the transitions between home and the centre are smooth. What is offered must reflect not only the children's needs but also the families' needs. There is a strong policy that translates into practices that acknowledge that the child's learning and wellbeing is viewed in this environment as a co-operative venture in which the centre temporarily shares responsibility for children and provides another place where children can feel at home and be themselves.

"It is important that people are allowed to be themselves. This occurs when educators have taken the time to gain an understanding of the child and their family. They are able to initiate conversations that are relevant to both the child and their family. The benefits include a sense of shared responsibility and positive outcomes for children, their families and educators."

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Kids Matter, Building partnerships between families and early childhood staff

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APPENDIX 1

Partnership with families – Links to additional resources and publications for education and health professionals working with families and young children

Australian Institute of Family Studies

www.aifs.gov.au

Capital Health Network

www.chnact.org.au

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

www.cfecfw.asn.au

Centre for Community Child Health

www.rch.org.au/ccch

Community Child Care Association

www.cccinc.org.au

Early Childhood Australia [see Collaborative partnerships with families]

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

Parenting Research Centre

www.parentingrc.org.au

Starting Blocks

www.startingblocks.gov.au

