



Inclusion is building on strengths

Parents, guardians and other family members play a critical role in children's learning and development. Educators' practices and their relationships with children and families also have a significant effect on children's involvement and success in learning. Children benefit most when families and educators work together in partnership to support children's learning. Strong partnerships can also be developed with allied professionals, relevant community groups and organisations.

There are many ways of understanding the development of reciprocal partnerships based on mutual respect. The challenge for educators is to move beyond traditional notions of engagement to more authentic processes of collaboration.

'Partnership' describes close personal or business relations between two adults, such as the relationship between educators and parents in children's services. Partnerships are based on the foundations of understanding each other's expectations and attitudes, and builds on the strength of each other's knowledge and experience. Developing and maintaining partnerships can be challenging and requires members of the partnership to think about their common goals.

Successful partnerships:

- Are built on trust, respect and empathy
- Engage with a common goal or purpose
- Are built on open and respectful communication

- Value each other's knowledge of each child
- Value each other's contributions to and roles in each child's life
- Share insights and perspectives about each child
- Engage in shared decision making
- Demonstrate a willingness to compromise

Practical ways in which to implement your philosophy:

- Develop a strong vision statement that includes comprehensive partnership policies that guide current practice
- Speak with families about expectations, shared responsibilities and common goals
- Speak with families about how you will continue to communicate about your ongoing partnerships (i.e. provision for both formal and informal discussions)
- Invite parents, families or other children's services professionals to become part of a hub or network, or to speak at your centre about relevant issues
- Ensure your policies and practices

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acknowledge family diversity (conduct an audit of your program's policies and practices to ensure that diversity is valued and represented)

- Make time to critically reflect on your partnerships through professional development, staff meetings, reading professional journals, and reviewing and updating policy to reflect your program's ethos or philosophy.

While there are diverse ways of working in collaboration with families, it is imperative that in respecting the uniqueness of families, educators refrain from judging families based on their level of participation within the program. Many of the processes created for families to participate are created by educators with little or no consultation with family members. Cope suggests that if you keep on doing what you've done, you'll keep on getting what you have got. It is timely during challenging times that educators reflect on how participation and partnerships can look different, and engage with families around their

expectations and the contributions they can bring to the program.

Critical questions

- How do you create democratic partnerships with families that respect everyone's contribution?
- How do you ensure that you don't label or make assumptions about families based on generalisations and stereotypes?
- How do you recognise and utilise family strengths?

Key Points

- Positive partnerships require an ongoing commitment and investment of time and attention
- Communication is a critical component of open and respectful partnerships
- Acknowledge each family's right to participate in their own way and at their own level

If teams are unsure or have any further questions they can contact the *ACT Inclusion Support Agency (ISA)* for further assistance on **6287 3330** or via email **inclusion@commsatwork.org**

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The ACT Inclusion Support Agency is managed by Communities@Work and is an initiative of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) funded by the Australian Government.