

Research Digest

Standard 3 Parents and Families



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.

Introduction

Parental involvement¹ is a term that is often used loosely. As the primary caregivers and educators of their children, parents have a tremendous responsibility to be involved in their children's lives both inside and outside the home, including their children's non-parental childcare and education arrangements. Research demonstrates that the more involved parents are in their children's learning and development, the greater chance children have to succeed, particularly (later on) in their academic performance. As Lopez *et al.* (2004:2) point out:

"Family involvement predicts children's school success. Developmental and education research confirms that parental attitudes, styles of interaction, behaviours, and relationships with schools are associated with children's social development and academic performance."

As early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings play a strategic role in both the current and future learning patterns of children, and in their socialisation, encouraging partnership with parents and families should be seen as an integral component of quality provision. This requires a proactive partnership approach and should be evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.

1. In order to avoid repetition, the terms 'parents' and 'parental involvement' are used throughout the Research Digest, and are intended as a blanket term for parents, families and, where appropriate, carers and legal guardians of children.



Recent Research

Defining parental involvement

Much controversy surrounds what 'parental involvement' actually constitutes. Reynolds and Clements (2005) define it in its broadest sense, along three dimensions; behaviour with or on behalf of children; attitudes and beliefs about parenting or education; and expectations for children's futures. Other definitions of parental involvement are based on the belief that it needs to be divided into two independent components - parents as supporters of their children's care and education, and parents as active partners. The ideal, and often most unattainable, model would combine and promote both roles. That is, parental involvement could be defined as the participation of parents in the development and education of their children from birth onwards, in recognition of the fact that they are the primary influence in their children's lives.

Epstein (2001) presents a comprehensive model of parental involvement. She observes how children grow and learn through three overlapping spheres of influence, which must form partnerships, in order to effectively meet the needs of the child: the family, the setting and the community. This model is based on six elements of parental involvement: *Parenting*, considers helping all families to establish home environments which support children as learners (e.g., parent education and training, family support programmes, etc.). *Volunteering* is based on the recruitment and organisation of parental help and support (e.g., a parent might volunteer to accompany the group on an outing where additional adult supervision is necessary). *Communicating* focuses on designing effective forms of setting-to-home and home-to-setting information exchanges around setting children's activities and progress. This two-way communication is strategic to a child's development, and involves communicating both positive developments (e.g., a child learning the alphabet, walking for the first time) and negative developments (e.g., disruptive behaviour, learning difficulties). *Learning at home* advocates providing information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with learning (e.g., recommended

book lists that are recognised by practitioners as helpful to young children's literacy development). *Decision-making* encourages the inclusion of parents in the decisions made by settings, mainly through the development of parent representative mechanisms. Finally, *collaborating with the community* involves identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen the setting's curriculum, family practices and children's learning (e.g., the provision of information for parents on community health, cultural, recreational and social support) ( Research Digest/ Standard 16: Community Involvement).

It should be noted that involving parents in decision-making is one of the strategies that is most difficult to invoke. In families where both parents work, time can be the predominant constraint. In areas of socio-economic disadvantage, limited educational opportunities and the resulting lack of confidence to engage with practitioners may be a contributing factor in non-involvement. Full involvement in decision-making can only be realised when parents are empowered to believe that their contribution is both necessary and welcome. Information evenings, for example, could present options to parents, as could regular newsletters, etc.

Inherent to any definition of parental involvement must be an acknowledgment of its variability – that is, the changing nature of parental involvement within the context of an evolving society. Changes in the family dynamic, for example, have resulted in a current model that encompasses family priorities, an emphasis on the intrinsic strengths of families, and recognition of the influence of broader neighbourhood and community settings. In an Irish context, there are some key statistics that illustrate a dramatic change in family structures (Barnardos, 2002:7):

- Approximately 1.2 million Irish adults are parents, 47% of men are fathers and 51% of women are mothers
- Ireland has the highest proportion (24%) of children in the birth to 14 years age category in the overall population of the European Union



- In 1998, approximately 12% of all dependent children lived with just one parent (compared to a figure of around 5% in 1983)

Partnership

Parents and practitioners bring unique elements to the home/setting. Parents know about the home situation, their extended family, significant people in their child's life, culture, health, history, adversities and issues related to the individual child (Fitzgerald, 2004). Practitioners have knowledge about the needs of all children in the setting, child development and learning, curriculum activities and peer relationships. The contribution of each to the partnership could be modelled as follows.

Parents could:

- Read to younger children, encouraging them to participate and learn
- Promote engagement with practitioners
- Encourage children's efforts in learning
- Keep in touch with practitioners, keeping them up-to-date with any significant changes in the child's home environment that may hinder learning (e.g., moving house, divorce, death, and so forth)
- Volunteer to participate in setting activities
- Join and participate in advisory or decision-making activities

Practitioners could:

- Seek out opportunities for professional development and training in parental involvement
- Try to make parents feel welcome in the setting, beyond merely dropping off and collecting their children
- Learn about the different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the children in their care and know how to communicate with families from diverse backgrounds

- Facilitate parent's work schedules when creating parental involvement opportunities
- Keep parents informed of their child's performance and setting activities, by means of meetings, phone calls, notes, and so forth
- Provide opportunities for parents to visit the setting, observe activities and provide feedback
- Invite and encourage parents to participate on relevant committees

These actions represent a thumbnail sketch of the kind of activities that can contribute to successful parental involvement in ECCE. Fostering this type of partnership can often be stressful and problematic, and so depends on three primary factors (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000): A recognition of the fact that staff-parent relationships are immersed in knowledge-power struggles; the management of staff-parent relationships in such a way that gives parents a real voice without threatening staff's identity as professionals; and collaboration with parents to build sustainable 'interpretive communities' based on shared understanding of the child. Reynolds and Clements (2005) further conclude that a coordinated partnership system of ECCE should span at least the first five years of a child's life and that family services and parental involvement activities must be intensive and comprehensive.

Policies and procedures

An important factor in determining both the extent and quality of parental involvement is the degree to which family partnership forms a central part of the setting's philosophy and practices. Fitzgerald (2004) suggests three themes around family involvement and support that could be used to guide policy formation and practice: parental involvement needs to be individualised and reflective of the diversity of families; parents need to be active partners and should be provided with opportunities to participate; and services should be organised in ways that allow and enable families to feel competent. As with all policies and procedures, they should be used to guide quality practice and provision ( Research Digest/Standard 10: Organisation), and made available to all relevant stakeholders.



Implementing the Standard

Settings should ensure that staff and parents have both formal and informal opportunities for communication and information sharing about the child. While the formal opportunities may seem quite apparent (e.g., meetings with parents), due consideration should also be given to creating informal interaction with parents, and may begin with something as fundamental as making them feel welcome within the setting. The practitioner needs to ensure that this communication supports the child's learning and development, and could achieve this through:

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

Parental involvement in the setting can be supported and encouraged through a variety of means. The setting could, for example, consider opportunities for parents within its management structure, or facilitate parents to participate based on their interests, abilities and cultures. It is vitally important that the setting uses its policies and procedures to support this type of engagement. Examples of this include:

- Positive promotion of the parental role
- Involving parents in the management of the setting
- Ensuring that parents have read and understood policies and procedures
- Involving parents in the compilation of policies for the setting
- Processes for the regular review and update of policies

- Ensuring that policy is translated into practice
- Documentation of procedures
- Ensuring that everyone understands and follows these procedures

Conclusion

A number of various interrelated factors have served to highlight the importance of parental involvement in ECCE, particularly in the last decade. At the very least, these include: the diversification of family structures; a concern with a shift in parent-child relations and its perceived implications for social cohesion; a policy shift towards prevention and early intervention in the fight against social exclusion; and a growing emphasis on children's rights (Clavero, 2001). Any response to such shifting dynamics needs to be outlined in a sustainable framework for supporting parents. The true achievement of such can only be realised once parents are recognised as experts in terms of knowing their own children, access to all relevant supports is facilitated, a partnership approach is fostered, and all planning is achieved in a locally responsive way. As the *Supporting Parents Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2002:57) highlights, this type of investment in parents is beneficial to all involved:

“Parental involvement in programmes of early childhood development maximises outcomes for their children and is an added element of quality in the programmes. Parents also benefit where parental support is provided, often gaining new skills and confidence and an ability to contribute in new ways to their communities.”



Resources for Parents and Families

Barnardos National Children's Resource Centre (2002). *Parents Under Pressure*. Dublin: Barnardos.

Clavero, S. (2001). *Parenting Support: An International Overview*. Belfast: School of Sociology and Social Policy, Queen's University.

Department of Health and Children (2002). *Best Health for Children - Investing in Parenthood to Achieve Best Health for Children, The Supporting Parents Strategy*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children.

Epstein, J. (2001). *School, Family and Community Partnerships*. New York: Westview Press.

Fitzgerald, D. (2004). *Parent Partnership in the Early Years*. London/New York: Continuum.

Hughes, P. and MacNaughton, G. (2000). Dissensus or Community: The Politics of Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Volume 1, No. 3, pp. 27-35.

Lopez, M., Kreider, H. and Caspe, M. (2004). *Theory and Practice: Co-Constructing Family Involvement*. The Evaluation Exchange, Volume X, No.4, Winter 2004/2005. Accessed at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue28/theory.html>, February 2nd, 2007.

Reynolds, A. and Clements, M. (2005). Parental Involvement and Children's School Success (in) Patrikakou, E., Weisberg, R., Redding, S. and Walberg, H. (Eds.) (2005). *School-Family Partnerships for Children's Success*. New York: Teacher's College Press, Chapter 7.

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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

