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Every early childhood service, regardless of its type or circumstances, has the potential to a strong support for families' child rearing. This happens most effectively when families and professionals work in partnership, and when services have strong connections with other family support services in the community.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENT-PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

- mutual respect
 - trust
 - sensitivity to the perspective of the other
 - ongoing open 'both-ways' communication
 - common goals that are clear and agreed on (the child's wellbeing)
 - teamwork, absence of rivalry or competition
 - recognition and valuing of the unique contribution and strengths of the partner
 - shared decision making.
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True collaboration involves teamwork in which

- each person is respected and empowered to use her or his strengths and talents to the maximum
 - there is a common purpose that each person is clear about and committed to
 - interconnectedness is valued.
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Benefits of partnership for professionals include:

- information about the child from an expert on the child
- a variety of help and contributions
- affirmation of their importance and support for their work
- the satisfaction of knowing that they may be making a lasting positive difference in the child's and family's life.

Benefits of partnership for parents include:

- greater confidence in their decision to use care and in their parenting skills
- a feeling of belonging to a community of people who care about their child
- the opportunity to contribute significantly to their child's experience even when they are absent
- increased feelings of attachment to the child
- additional information about and a different perspective on their child
- continual reassurance that they are the most special person in their child's life.

Most importantly, benefits of partnership for the child include:

- the experience of the special people in his or her life working together co-operatively, getting along with each other, which promotes feelings of security
- consistent, sensitive, individualised care because of information shared
- greater continuity between life at home and in care
- parents who feel empowered in the care of the child, which will enhance feelings of attachment to the child
- parents who feel confident about their child rearing
- a personal professional advocate.

Partnership is a relationship. A relationship is a matter of heart and mind, a perspective or way of approaching everything that you do. Partnership cannot be reduced to a set of activities, strategies, principles or outcomes.

The focus of the relationship is the child's wellbeing. The main purpose of the relationship is to support the parent-child relationship by:

- contributing to parents' understanding of their child and appreciation of their child's uniqueness
- re-inforcing the importance of the parent in the child's life
- promoting feelings of competence and confidence.

Parent involvement in the operation of the service is a *vehicle* for forming connections on behalf of the child.

Quality exists only when early childhood professionals are clear that the most positive contribution they can make to a child's life is to nurture a strong and positive relationship between the child and his or her parent(s).

PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE INCLUDES:

- priority on on-going informal communication and 'getting things out into the open'
 - sharing good news about their child
 - acceptance that parents will focus on their child
 - encouragement to ask questions, make requests, engage in constructive criticism – a 'why not' approach
 - optimum certainty – willingness to negotiate and clarity about 'bottom lines'
 - readiness to compromise and look at children in context
 - empathy in action
 - expectations individualized.
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Parents may wonder:

- Am I doing the right thing, the best thing for my child and family?
- How will being in this service affect my child?
- What do I know – about rearing a child? About the service I have chosen?
- What do they think of me?
- What do they think of my child?
- Do they understand my child?
- Do they like my child?
- What do they expect of me?
- Do they know how difficult and complicated my life is?

- Is my child too attached to the staff or carer?
 - Am I going to be less special and important to my child?
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It's worth asking: In my work with children and families, what practices are:

- 'sacred', unalterable, things I won't compromise about?
Why is this so?
- determined through discussion and negotiation, shared decision making with parents?
- the parents' decision?

In the final analysis the best thing we can do for children is to promote a strong sense of connection and belonging with their family.

The partnership with each family is unique.

Relationships are built through a collection of small, sometimes unconscious, often brief, sometimes seemingly insignificant encounters.

As in most human relationships, when there is a problem with a parent, empathy helps. Try putting yourself in their shoes and seeing the situation from their perspective.

One important dimension of working in partnership with families is having strong links with other family support services in the community. In other words, working in partnership with families requires working in partnership with other services.

**Anne Stonehouse AM
Author, Editor, and Consultant in Early Childhood
Melbourne**