

Mum and dad AND ME

It is important to form strong, supportive relationships with the parents of your setting's youngest children, says **Ann Clare...**

I once heard someone say that when talking about parents, we have to start from the premise that all mums and dads love their children. So why is it that we are so judgemental about them, perhaps even accusing them of being uninterested? How many times do we hear such phrases as, "They almost throw them in the door and then they're off?" What we as practitioners need to do is step back and think about how it feels to leave your treasured child in the care of comparative strangers.

Those first few months of early morning goodbyes can be emotionally draining as a parent, as whilst working half of your mind is thinking about what your child is experiencing without you, whilst at the same time you are feeling perpetually guilty about the whole situation. In some recent research that I conducted, I interviewed two pregnant women about their experiences of pregnancy and their feelings about becoming parents. These conversations were all about the hopes and aspirations they had for their child, but this was overshadowed by their concerns about what childcare would bring, once they had to return to work in order to fulfil these dreams.

So, how can we as providers of this care support parents' emotional journey at the same time as truly involving them in the care and learning of their child whilst they are attending our settings? Where are the starting points for this relationship and the journey?



A safe environment

Firstly, practitioners in non-domestic settings and childminders alike have to ride the media storm of child abuse and neglect that frequently 'feeds' parents' anxieties, by demonstrating that their setting is safe and secure, both physically and emotionally. A close but professional relationship needs to be established between key person, parent and child, with an understanding of the interests, needs, anxieties, culture and community of all parties. An appreciation of these factors is seen in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, where in a series of concentric circles the child is at the centre with the surrounding circles identifying all the factors that influence and impact on that child's development and progress through life.

As one of these influences, a key person needs to understand and know all about the others if she is truly going to understand the child and establish a relationship with the family, where she can include all that they as a family have to offer.

When families first join settings they are required to complete registration forms, through which they provide information about

the individual care needs, likes and preferences of their child. This information is important, but settings need to know so much more than how to care for a child. How many settings ask parents about their home, their wider as well as their immediate family? Just think how you could offer truly individual care if, for example, you knew that a child had no access to the outdoors when at home other than a trip to the park? A lot of your planning for this child could revolve around offering experiences that he or she can't access elsewhere. Consider if you really asked about the family's culture how you could learn yourself and also provide experiences for the baby and child which are relevant and meaningful. Similarly, if you ask about a family's leisure activities, you could use these to form the basis of some of your assessments about a child's progress. For example, whether a baby goes swimming or out walking with his parents are details which give further information about a baby and young child's physical development.

We know from research that it is the home learning environment which has the greatest influence on outcomes for children. As David et al (DfES 2003) point out, "Parents are a child's



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ANN CLARE



Using technology

With technology advancing apace and much of society engaging in nigh-instant communication, many settings today use email to establish a conversation with their parents. Others have extended this by using social networking sites to exchange information about children's day at the nursery or in the home of the childminder. These modern techniques of communicating can prove to be very effective, though if practitioners are to use these methods to communicate with their parents they must ensure that all the correct policies and procedures are in place to ensure confidentiality and security.

Similarly, many nurseries now use video to further their observations of children's learning, but very few use this invaluable source of information when communicating with parents about their child's progress. In some recent research, I videoed mothers interacting with their babies and then had a discussion about the involvement of their babies within this interaction. By viewing the short video clips together, we were able to reflect on and discuss the importance of this interaction. I would suggest that this is yet another way in which we can engage parents in their children's early learning.

Finally, the partnership with parents and a child's extended family can be supported in settings through the sharing of photographs. If practitioners ask parents for images of their family members, pets, etc. then a small area of the room can be dedicated to a child. In this way, he or she can talk with their key worker about the pictures and the family can become a physical part of the setting too.

the duty of a setting to ensure that not only are parents informed about the ways in which their young child is developing and making progress but also knowledgeable about the ways in which they learn. Settings should share their practice and involve parents in a range of ways in order to better equip them for supporting learning at home.

Many settings now have books which are shared, so that parents can read with their baby from the earliest age; they also share resources, accompanied by an explanation of how they can be used, to encourage parents to play with their children.

Of course, another way in which parents can become involved in their child's learning journey is for settings to invite the parents in for a range of events. Consider the following:

- Practical workshops, so that parents can experience their child's learning.
- Inviting people to come in and speak on specific topics.
- Activity events at the weekends, where families can play together and where practitioners can model best practice.

Positive relationships

As discussed in previous articles, when babies first come into a setting their emotional wellbeing needs to be supported. One way of doing this is by key workers recognising the importance of involving the family in all that happens during a child's day. Most daycare settings provide parents with a daily diary when their baby is in the younger rooms, but this is usually all about the care needs of the baby; what they have eaten and drunk, what their nappies were like and how long they have slept for. All of this information is important, but it is not the real

partnership with parents that is frequently talked about. Practitioners need to do much more if they are to say that they truly have a partnership with their parents.

This partnership or relationship with parents can at times be very difficult; how do you establish a relationship with parents whilst maintaining a professional distance? How do you reassure anxious parents that you are not replacing them in their baby's affections? Jools Page has written widely on the term 'professional love'. In *Working with Babies and Young Children* (2008) she eloquently describes her own personal experiences as follows:

I think I have been able to love children and I think families, throughout my career, have had a capacity to permit me to love their children: a kind of love that is acceptable and reciprocal but does not seek to equal or to undermine or threaten the love of a parent for their child, which is so unique.

If practitioners in all types of settings can achieve this balance in the relationship that they have with their families then I believe they will truly have partnership working.

first teacher" and it is incumbent on practitioners to recognise this and include them in their children's early learning and development. The revised EYFS and the new Ofsted Inspection framework have rightly identified this importance. The government has also produced a document which gives parents a brief overview of the EYFS, which settings can use to begin the process of sharing information about how children learn and develop in the early years (see tinyurl.com/tnEYFSp for more information).

Progress reports

In the revised EYFS there is now a statutory duty for settings to report to parents on their child's progress at age two as part of an early intervention programme:

...practitioners must review their progress, and provide parents and/or carers with a short written summary of their child's development in the prime areas. This progress check must identify the child's strengths, and any areas where the child's progress is less than expected. (EYFS, p. 11)

Many practitioners have expressed their concern about this, saying that it will increase their workload. I, however, disagree – the majority of settings that I work with are already reporting to parents in this way at least twice a year from the start of a baby or young child's life within their setting. For me this is best practice.

Along with reporting to parents, it is for me

findoutmore

Ann Clare is an early years consultant and author. Her new book, *Creating a Learning Environment for Babies and Toddlers*, is available now, published by Sage.