

# Caring & Sharing

Educational psychologist **Julia Dunlop** considers the benefits of close links between early years practitioners and the parents of young children with additional needs...

**I**n previous articles, I have outlined ways in which early years practitioners can identify children's additional needs and begin to take action. I have also examined the role of the SENCO in an early years setting. Now it is time to look at ways of establishing and promoting good relationships with parents – particularly with those parents whose children have additional needs.

Early years practitioners have long been aware that most parents have a deep commitment to their child's development. Not only are parents the child's first carers, they are also their offspring's primary educators. Once an infant enters an early years setting, the role of carer and educator becomes shared for the first time with adults beyond the immediate family circle. Research tells us that young children achieve more and are happier when early years practitioners work closely together with parents – sharing observations and pooling ideas about how to promote learning and development. This is true for all children – whether or not they have additional needs.

## Parents' feelings

The arrival of a new baby makes a major impact on any family. New parents go

through a wide range of emotions as they adjust to the new life in their midst. These feelings will naturally include love and pride, but will also encompass anxiety, fear and frustration. With some new babies it is obvious from the start that there is a special need or disability. In other young children the additional need only becomes evident over time. When this happens, in addition to the emotions already mentioned, the parents are likely to experience feelings of panic, confusion, denial, resistance, loss and even grief. We need to remember, though, that all parents are individuals and will react in their own way and at their own pace.

## Parents' rights and wishes

A couple of generations ago parents of children with additional needs had few rights and their views were rarely sought or heard. One of the earliest suggestions that it might be beneficial for professionals and parents to work in partnership came in the 1978 Warnock Report on Special Educational Needs. The report stated: "Parents can be effective partners only if professionals take notice of what they say and how they express their needs, and treat their contribution as

intrinsically important."

More recently, in 2009, the Lamb Enquiry investigated parental confidence in the SEN system. The subsequent Lamb Report, which applies to settings as well as schools, noted that parental confidence could be maximised if:

- it was made clear by professionals that each child is valued as an individual
- professionals are responsive to each child's needs and their educational issues
- the wider family context is acknowledged
- parents have access to knowledgeable front-line professionals.

New out this year is the Government's Green Paper on SEN. It emphasises that "parents know their child best" and that "approaches which involve professionals working together with parents right from the start to support the child's learning and development can have huge benefits for the child's



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## Parent-friendly provision

It is useful for practitioners to spend time considering just how 'parent-friendly' their provision is. Try asking yourself the following questions about your setting...

- How are parents greeted when they arrive?
- How welcoming is the entrance area?
- Are information displays / notice boards easy to access?
- Is time set aside to talk to parents individually?
- Do parents know who to talk to if they have a concern?
- Is there a quiet area available if there needs to be a sensitive conversation?
- Do staff value the things parents have to say? If so, how do they show this?
- What training are staff given in communicating with parents?

achievement and wellbeing. Learning from parents and sharing information with them can give professionals a much better understanding of how best to support a child".

## Effective partnerships with parents

Perhaps we first need to consider what we mean by 'effective'. The more balanced the relationship between practitioner and parent, the more effective the partnership. Bringing to bear complementary expertise in order to promote learning and development will ensure the best outcomes for the child.

In years gone by, professionals (early years practitioners included) adopted what could be described as an 'expert' model of working with parents. In this model the professional is assumed to have superior skills and knowledge than the parent and expected to take the lead and control any

interaction – then take the credit for any success. The 'expert' model also assumes that the parent's skills and knowledge are inferior and that they are dependent on the practitioner's expertise. In contrast, the 'helper' model (put forward by Hilton Davis et al in 2002) assumes that practitioner and parent work together as closely as possible, collaborating equally and sharing ideas and expertise.

The latter model is a good example of effective partnership working. It is based on the following steps:

**EXPLORATION** – of the issues, specific or general

**CLARIFICATION** – arriving at a clear understanding of the situation

**SETTING GOALS** – agreeing key objectives





## find out more

Julia Dunlop was, for 12 years, a senior educational psychologist and early years specialist. As a teacher, she also had several years' experience in a Child Development Centre multi-disciplinary team.

partnership exists between parents and practitioners in a setting will be evident in many different aspects of the organisation and daily life of that setting.

## Promoting partnership working

Practitioners in an early years setting are well-placed to have a key role in establishing and promoting a partnership approach with parents, but relatively few will have received any direct training in this area. A number of personal qualities and skills underpin successful relationships and partnerships with parents. These include:

**UNDERSTANDING** – grasping the factors affecting the child and family

**EMPATHY** – trying to see and take account of the parent's perspective, but stopping short of saying, "I know how you feel" (you don't!)

**RESPECT** – valuing parents as individuals and accepting differences

**TRUST** – being sensitive and mindful of confidentiality

**OPENNESS** – being honest and avoiding hiding information

**ACTIVE LISTENING** – using gaze and body language to show you are listening. Asking questions for clarification. Summarising, but avoiding judgements.

### PLANNING ACTION

– a set of strategies to work on jointly

**IMPLEMENTATION** – providing parents with support and encouragement

**REVIEW** – jointly considering how well things went.

All these steps are set within the context of a strong, positive relationship built up over time – without this, communication will soon fail.

The factors valued by parents/carers in a relationship with early years practitioners are likely to include:

- feeling welcome and that they are listened to
- being treated as active participants in meeting their child's needs – not just being told what to do
- feeling that practitioners in the setting, particularly the key person, knows their child well
- being able to agree shared goals and actions
- clear positive communication – not just being told what's gone wrong
- being consulted on key aspects of the setting.

The evidence that an effective

## Case study Sofia – age 3 years

Sofia, an only child, has been attending her pre-school for three months and has settled in quite well. Jenny, her key person, had begun to have some concerns regarding aspects of Sofia's development.

Jenny's observations have shown:

- Sofia can speak in sentences, but she never initiates communication with other children.
- She is very quick to complete inset puzzles and will do the same one over and over again.
- She can count to 100 and notices numbers in books and on wall displays.
- Sofia gets upset at story time – she doesn't like to sit on the carpet near the other children.

Jenny has built up a good relationship with Sofia's mum and regularly gives her positive feedback about her

many skills. She's able to use this established relationship to sensitively explore with mum Sofia's behaviour at home. Mum is also concerned that Sofia is shy with other children of her own age – she puts this down to her being an only child. She adds that Sofia's young cousin Ella is soon to be living locally and hopes that the two will become playmates. Mum asks if Jenny can help Sofia develop her collaborative play skills and Jenny agrees to target this area specifically. In time, Sofia becomes more confident amongst other children and readily talks to them and joins in their play.

