



**Building partnerships
between parents and
practitioners**

Introduction

Parents are the most important people in their children's early lives. Children learn about the world and their place in it through their conversations, play activities, and routines with parents and families. Parents can also support children's learning in out-of-home settings, such as childminding settings, crèches, playgroups, pre-schools, and primary schools. By working together parents and practitioners can enhance children's learning and development.

All parents need support at some time or another. For example, the loss of a loved one, a money problem, or ill health might mean that they need extra help. Time constraints, poverty, social and economic background, cultural identity, discrimination, previous negative experiences, literacy difficulties, language, or different disabilities, can also make it difficult for parents to participate in their children's learning and development as much as they might like to. While partnership can benefit all parents and families, parent/practitioner partnerships can be especially important for these families.

These guidelines outline what partnership means and describe different ways in which parents and practitioners can work together.



What are partnerships? Why are they important?

Figure 1: Definition of partnership

Partnership involves parents, families and practitioners **working together** to benefit children. Each **recognises, respects and values** what the other does and says. Partnership involves **responsibility** on both sides.

Increasingly, the early care and education of babies, toddlers and young children is shared among parents, families and practitioners. A partnership approach between these people is very important, especially at times of change in children's lives. These times might include settling in to a new setting, getting to know a new practitioner, or getting used to a new baby at home. Other critical times might be when children experience bereavement, are upset or worried, or feel left out or different in a negative way. By working together and sharing information parents and practitioners can help make these times in children's lives easier.

Good partnerships are built on trust. Practitioners need to respect the confidentiality of information they receive about children, while understanding that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for example in cases involving child protection issues.¹



Table 1 outlines the benefits of good partnerships for parents, practitioners and children.

¹ See *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999), *Our Duty to Care: the principles of good practice for the protection of children and young people*, (Department of Health and Children, 2002) and *Child Protection—Guidelines and Procedures* (Department of Education and Science, 2001).

Table 1: The benefits of parents and practitioners working together

Parents	Practitioners	Children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ feel valued and respected ■ are more involved in their children's learning and development ■ can share information about their children ■ feel their family's values, practices, traditions, and beliefs are understood and taken into account ■ feel comfortable visiting the setting, talking to, and planning with practitioners ■ know more about their children's experiences outside the home and use this information to support their learning and development more effectively ■ understand why early childhood care and education is important ■ have increased confidence in their own parenting skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ understand better the children and families in their settings and use this information to make learning more enjoyable and rewarding for all children ■ can help children develop a sense of identity and belonging in the setting by actively engaging with and finding out about family values, traditions and beliefs, and building on these where appropriate ■ benefit from parents' skills and expertise ■ can provide a more emotionally secure environment for children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ feel more secure and benefit more from the educational opportunities given to them ■ move from one setting to another with greater confidence ■ see learning as more enjoyable when their home life is 'visible' in the setting ■ enjoy hearing and seeing their home language in the setting when their home language is neither English nor Irish ■ experience more connections between the different services that support them.

Partnership in action

There are many different ways in which parents and practitioners can work together. These guidelines focus on four:

- supporting learning and development
- sharing information
- contributing
- making decisions and advocating different approaches and courses of action.

There are connections across these different ways as can be seen in a number of the *learning experiences* on pages 11 to 25.

Supporting learning and development

Parenting involves giving children the care, education and attention they need to learn and develop. Parents provide children with their first learning experiences and they help ensure that children reach important developmental milestones such as sitting, walking, becoming toilet-trained, talking, cutting, doing up buttons, cycling, reading, and so on. As children go on to spend time in out-of-home settings parents continue to support their learning and development. This is more effective when parents complement children's experiences in a particular setting. Likewise, learning is more meaningful when practitioners use information from parents about children's interests, skills, abilities, and dispositions as a starting point for new experiences. Below are some ways in which parents can support their children's learning and development at home, and how practitioners can help them to do this.

Parents

You can support your child's learning and development at home in the following ways:

- Ask the **practitioner for suggestions** for what you can do at home with your child.
- Involve your child in **everyday activities** like cooking, shopping, working in the garden, going to the launderette, and travelling on the bus. Talk to your child about what he/she is doing, sees, and how he/she feels.
- Give your child opportunities to use his/her **senses**—to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear different things.
- **Read** to your child. Join your local library, and help your child to choose books to enjoy together.
- **Sing songs, tell stories** and **play games** with your child. Have **fun** together.
- **Talk** to your child. Encourage him/her to ask questions. Let your child know you don't always have the answer. Find things out together.
- Limit the amount of time your child spends watching **television**. Talk to him/her about what he/she watches.
- Find out **how children learn and develop**. Ask your child's practitioner about useful books or websites for information.
- Look at *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* for ideas about what you can do to support your child's learning and development. The *sample learning opportunities* in the four themes and the *learning experiences* in the guidelines suggest lots of activities that you can do together.



Practitioners

You can help parents to support their children's learning and development in the following ways:

- **Share information** about the curriculum with parents.
 - Use a notice-board to let parents know what activities children do on a particular day. Pictures might be useful in sharing this information with parents who have little English or Irish.
 - Send home photographs of the children with captions which describe what they have been doing and learning.
 - Let parents know about topics that interest their children. Find out what their interests are at home and build on these.
 - Invite parents to share information about their culture and traditions that might be useful in supporting their children's learning and development.
 - Organise information sessions for parents. Some of these might be especially important before and/or after children join the setting. A session might focus on *Aistear's* four themes and what you do to support children's learning and development in these. In the case of children in junior and senior infants, the information session might focus on the *Primary School Curriculum* and *Aistear*. Another session might highlight the importance of play and how children can learn through it.

Learning experience 1: Jack's New Zealand roots**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 1 and Learning goal 5****Age group: Babies and young children****Setting: Home and childminding**

Every evening Luke reads a bedtime story to his son Jack (5½ years) and his baby daughter Kate (16 months). As they snuggle up to their Daddy, Kate helps to turn the pages and points to her favourite characters. She loves 'lift the flap' books and Luke told Kate's childminder, Mags, about this when she was starting with Mags a few months ago. Mags has a number of these books and Kate loves to sit on her knee on the garden seat looking at them.

Luke also told Mags about Jack's interest in books, especially books about sport. Luke is originally from New Zealand and he and Jack love to read about rugby. Jack has taught the other children at Mags' to play rugby, and a few weeks ago Luke arranged for Mags and the four children she minds to go to a local school rugby match. She also purchased two books about New Zealand as Jack and his family are planning a trip there during the summer to visit his grandparents. The children and Mags are learning a lot about New Zealand. They are finding out about the weather, the sports people play, the food they eat, and the types of farms they have. They are also comparing these with the village in Co. Tipperary where they live. The children are really excited about Jack and his family flying on a huge aeroplane. They are even building one just like it in Mags' playroom. It's massive!



Reflection: How can I build on children's interests to enhance their learning and development, and to strengthen their sense of identity?

Learning experience 2: The beat of the drum**Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 2 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Toddlers****Setting: Home and full and part-time daycare (crèche)**

Gloria moved to Ireland from North Nigeria three years ago. She speaks English and helps out in the toddler room on a Tuesday morning every two weeks. Her grandson Lee (2½ years) has been attending the crèche since September and is in the toddler room. On each visit, Gloria brings along something from North Nigeria for the children to see, play with, and learn about. These items are all familiar to Lee. Today she brings an African drum. She plays it while she sings an African song. The children gather round her. Some sway and some clap while others dance to the beat. Lee and some of his friends join in with some of the repeated words and phrases. Afterwards, the children take turns to play the drum. Next time, Gloria plans to play some outdoor games with the toddlers. Sorcha, the room leader, takes a few minutes of video which she shows the children after Gloria goes home.



Reflection: In what ways can I involve parents and grandparents in giving the children rich experiences?

Learning experience 3: Helping me to learn**Theme: Communicating, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Young children****Setting: Home and infant class (primary school)**

Kara (4 years) is in junior infants. Her parents left school early. They have difficulties with literacy and know this is a disadvantage. They really want Kara to do well in school and to get a good education. But Kara says she doesn't like school. Kara and her family have the support of a Home School Community Liaison co-ordinator, Betty. Betty encourages Kara's parents to talk to her teacher, Ms. Nugent, and she suggests some questions they might ask. Ms. Nugent encourages them to help Kara in whatever way they can. She suggests that they use a picture book to read a story or to tell her stories themselves about when they were children. They can draw pictures together at home and talk about them. If they have time they can come in some days and help out in the classroom.

Ms. Nugent also encourages Kara in school by asking her what kind of books she likes to look at and read. Kara replies, *Books about babies are good and books about dressing up and going to my friend's house.* Ms. Nugent regularly uses books on these topics when reading stories to Kara and her friends. She puts dress-up clothes and props such as tiaras, dolls, buggies, and hand-bags in the pretend play area. Ms. Nugent regularly talks to Kara's mam to see how they can continue to work together to support Kara at home and in school. Betty also liaises with Ms. Nugent and Kara's parents regularly to ensure Kara and her family have positive school experiences.



Reflection: What can I do to give extra support and encouragement to some parents?

Sharing information

Good communication between parents and practitioners is key to promoting children's learning and development. Each person needs to be clear about the role and expectations of the other person. As noted earlier, it is important that everyone understands that some information shared by parents and practitioners is confidential although not in the case of child protection issues.

Some parents may have specific needs in accessing information or participating in activities. For example, parents who have physical disabilities, sensory impairments, literacy difficulties, whose home language is different from that of the setting need information in an accessible form. Parents themselves are the most valuable resource in building a partnership relationship. However, some parents may be shy or lack confidence, but with a little encouragement they may be happy to get involved. Getting to know them, their needs and their expectations, is the first step, as parents can offer valuable insights into how services can be improved or made more accessible for them.

Partnership between practitioners and other professionals who are involved in supporting children's learning and development is also vital, so that their inputs benefit children as much as possible. When direct contact between practitioners and other professionals is not possible parents can often act as a link and pass on information.



The setting

Parents should be given information about their children's out-of-home setting and the staff. This information² includes details of

- the setting's vision or mission
- the curriculum—its principles, what children learn and how
- the manager/principal, and the primary contact person and/or the child's key worker
- the setting's facilities
- opening and closing times
- staff training and qualifications
- adult/child ratios, and the maximum numbers and age range of the children
- fees
- policies on areas such as managing behaviour, promoting healthy eating, giving first-aid, and settling in.



Children's experiences and progress

Parents and practitioners need to communicate regularly about children's progress, interests, needs, and daily experiences. Parents have a wealth of information about their children. Sharing this information with practitioners helps build a more complete picture of what children can do—their likes, dislikes, interests, and so on. It is important, therefore, that parents have opportunities to meet with practitioners and share information about their children. For more information see the guidelines, *Supporting learning and development through assessment*.

Parents often talk with people from different professions about their children, and each profession can have its own specialised language. Even everyday terms can have different meanings in different situations. It is important that everyone understands what is being discussed, what terms mean, and what is being suggested for children. This is important for all children, but especially when parents' or the practitioner's first language is neither English nor Irish, when parents have little or no formal education, and, in the case of children with special educational needs, when technical terms may be used.

Information should be shared in plain English/Irish. Writing notes, talking, using pictures, and translating information are all helpful ways of communicating with parents. Different arrangements may be needed for different families. Practitioners need to be particularly mindful of parents who are separated or divorced when thinking about communication. The information may need to be sent to two different homes and separate appointments may need to be made to talk to the parents. Different arrangements work in different situations.

² The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (2006) set out the basic information that parents must be given. Many settings like to share more information than this about the way they work.

Parents: Sharing information with your child's practitioner

- **Get to know** your child's practitioner. Show your interest in hearing about your child's experiences. Talk to the practitioner regularly when dropping off or collecting your child. Where this may not be possible make an appointment or use a note or a diary to share information.
- Give the practitioner **feedback**. For example, tell him/her when your child comes home excited about an activity and wants to try it out at home.
- Tell the practitioner about your child's **achievements at home**.
- Share your family **traditions and culture** so that the practitioner can help your child feel he/she belongs in the setting. Let practitioners know about your **childrearing practices**, especially when these may differ from those in the setting.
- Tell the practitioner about anything that might be affecting your **child's mood or behaviour**, such as the death of a pet, a sick parent, a separation, as well as about exciting events at home such as a birthday, a cultural event, a new pet, or a visit from a cousin.
- Look at **displays of your child's work** or photographs of him/her in the setting. Talk to your child about these.
- Share **concerns** you may have about your child's learning and development with the practitioner.
- Share information about particular **supports or help** you or your child need in order to participate in activities. Share **specialist knowledge** about your child's needs with the practitioner. Pass on recommendations or suggestions that specialist services have made about your child. For example, if the physiotherapist has recommended exercises to improve your child's upper body strength make sure that the practitioner knows about these.
- Let the practitioner know if you would like more **information about the setting** and about how you would like to receive that information. If there is something that you are not clear about or that you are concerned about, **ask**.
- **Offer to help** with translation, or in other ways, to help other parents who use the setting.

Practitioners: Sharing information with parents

- Where possible **talk informally** to parents on a regular basis as well as at parent/practitioner meetings. Encourage them to come to you for information.
- Share **examples of children's work** with parents and families. For example, make portfolios of the children's work. Organise open days and exhibitions to display and celebrate these. Send the portfolios home at the end of a month, term or year. Display children's work and photographs in hallways and change these regularly.
- Make sure that displays reflect the **diversity of the families** who use the service, including family structure, disability, Traveller, and new community. (See the theme, *Identity and Belonging*.)
- Provide **information and feedback verbally** as well as in writing, and in children's home languages where possible. Use **email** as well as printed notices, handouts and newsletters. Use **text messages** to remind parents about special events, and leave details on **voice mail** or **answering machines** that can be accessed at weekends and holidays.
- Share **records** with parents, in addition to the statutory minimum requirements under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006). For example, a crèche or childminder might keep a daily notebook recording the baby's or toddler's physical care (bottles, meals, nappies) and achievements such as smiles, new words, friendships, and so on. It is important that practitioners are honest with parents and let them know about problems and issues of concern, as well as progress and achievements, as early as possible. This needs to be done in person. (See the guidelines, *Supporting learning and development through assessment*.)

- Some parents may need help to interpret **report cards** when these are used, for example in primary schools. Including definitions of words or using graphics on the cards could help with this.
- Let parents know that there is a **regular time** when a staff member is available to **talk** on the phone. This might be especially helpful for parents who are at work during the day or have difficulty in coming in to the setting. However, it is generally better to have face-to-face discussions, especially if there is a problem.
- Hold **workshops** on children's learning and development, for example on learning through play. Give parents hands-on experience of some of the activities. Inform them of the social and emotional aspects of learning, and help them to see the importance of play and active exploration.
- Organise a **variety of activities** for parents at **different times** of the day and week to include as many parents as possible. For example, organise a crèche to allow parents of younger children to attend a meeting or another event. Ensure that people with mobility problems, literacy problems and sensory impairment can take part.
- Make a special effort to include **dads**. Building a relationship with them as they drop off and/or collect their children might help to encourage them to get more involved in their children's learning and development, and to come along to activities and meetings in the setting. Providing a crèche facility might encourage and enable both parents to attend a meeting or social event.
- Arrange **social events** for parents to help them to meet and build support networks with other parents as well as with practitioners.
- Collaborate with **local adult education groups** and encourage parents to participate in adult learning initiatives which can help to build parents' confidence in their own literacy and numeracy skills and in using the home as a learning environment.



Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *What information can I share with the practitioner that will help him/her to get a clearer picture of what my child's interests and strengths are?*
2. *Do I share my concerns with the practitioner? How could I do this better?*
3. *How can I use the written and oral feedback I get on my child's learning?*
4. *Have I told the setting of any difficulties I have with attending events or accessing information?*
5. *What could I do to help other parents to get involved?*

As a practitioner

6. *How can I improve how I communicate with all parents about their children?*
7. *How can I make better use of the feedback and information that I get from parents about their children?*
8. *In what ways can I share my knowledge with parents about how children learn and develop?*
9. *When I invite parents to events, how can I make it easier for them to attend, in terms of timing, accessible information, crèche facilities?*

Learning experience 4: An open-door policy**Theme: Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Home and sessional service (playgroup)**

Mina greets the children and their parents as they arrive at the playgroup every morning. She finds these few minutes of contact invaluable. Parents can let her know if they would like more time to chat about their children and she arranges a time to suit. At the beginning of the year she also lets them know that she can be contacted by phone every day from 1 p.m. to 1.30 p.m. if they have any concerns, or just want to chat about how their child is getting on in the playgroup. She reminds them of this regularly, and many of them find it reassuring that they can keep in touch like this. Some children are brought by relatives or childminders, and this form of contact is invaluable for their parents as they can ring Mina during their lunchtime.

Mikie (2 years and 11 months) started in the playgroup a month ago. His mam, Lucy, is very shy and Mina makes a special effort to have a chat with her once a week. Mina shows Lucy something, such as a photograph of him playing or a picture that Mikie has made. She uses this to encourage Lucy to talk about Mikie. She asks about things he likes to do at home and she offers ideas to Lucy to help extend what he is learning in the setting.



Reflection: What strategies could I use to help parents to feel more confident in talking to me about their children?

Learning experience 5: The newsletter**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Home and full and part-time daycare (nursery)**

The staff of the Happy Start Nursery have made a welcome pack for parents of new children. The pack includes the nursery's mission statement and information about how the staff support children's learning and development. They also send home a short newsletter each month so that parents know what songs, stories and activities the children are doing. Children are involved in deciding what information is included. An example of a recent newsletter available in English, French and Polish (the main home languages of the children) is included below. The staff also plan to use text messages for parents who want to receive reminders about events in the nursery.



Reflection: How can I share more information with parents about what their children are doing in my setting?

May 2009

Doing Great Things Together!

Happy Start Nursery: Senior toddlers and pre-schoolers

Our day out in the woods!

A big thank you to all the parents who came with us on our trip to Glengarra woods. A great day was had by all. The children tell us that they enjoyed the trip on the bus and the picnic the best! They also loved splashing in the puddles in their wellies. Since our return we have been learning about the trees and flowers that grow in the woods. We have also begun to learn about making honey since we discovered the bee hives hidden in the corner of the woods. Mr Mackey, who supplies honey to the local shops, is visiting the pre-school on **June 12**. He will bring some honey and show a video of the bees. Why not join us at 10 a.m. that day?

Photos of the Glengarra trip are on display in the main hall.

Time for more stories

We are going to the library as usual on the **last Friday of this month**. Thanks to the parents who came with us last month.

Have you spotted our bus?

Since the children enjoyed the trip on the bus to Glengarra Wood so much we decided to make our own bus. Thanks to Darren's daddy who gave us some lovely big cardboard boxes to work with. After much hard work we now have our own colourful buses complete with steering wheels, horns and seats. To build on the topic of transport Ava's mam Nora is coming in next week to talk to us about her job as the driver of the primary school bus. Many of the children in the pre-school will be travelling on this bus when they start school in September. Nora will be here at 10.30 on Thursday morning **May 14**. Come along if you can and stay for a cup of tea/coffee afterwards in the parent room.

Rhymes

As you know we always include a nursery rhyme or a poem in our newsletter. This month the children asked us to give you the words of the song, *The Wheels on the bus*. They'll teach you the actions. Hope you enjoy it.

- The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round,
- The wheels on the bus go round and round, All through the town.
- The wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish ...
- The doors on the bus go open and shut ...
- The horn on the bus goes beep, beep, beep ...
- The gas on the bus goes glug, glug, glug ...
- The money on the bus goes clink, clink, clink ...
- The people on the bus go chatter, chatter, chatter ...
- The wheels on the bus go round and round ...



Look who has a birthday in May

Rarish Obert will be 2 on May 1st.

Sharon O'Brien will be 3 on May 7th.

Fiachra Long will be 4 on May 15th.

Kia Mihas will be 5 on May 17th.

We hope you all have a lovely birthday.

Important date for your diary

During the **first two weeks in June** we hope to meet you and your child for a short while. Your child will show you his/her portfolio so you can see what he/she has been doing and learning through the year. If the time and date don't suit please contact Michelle on 084 6655437.

Learning experience 6: Paul's daily diary

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 1 and Learning goal 5**Age group: Young children****Setting: Home and infant class (special primary school)**

Paul (5 years) has moderate general learning disabilities. He goes on a bus every morning to attend Holy Angels' Special School seventeen miles from home. His parents rarely visit his school because of the distance, so they and his teacher use a daily diary to keep each other up-to-date on how Paul is getting on. This means that his parents can talk to him about what happens at school and can reinforce his learning at home. It also means that his practitioners are able to take what happens at home into account, as Paul has difficulty communicating this himself.

Paul was very excited recently when his family got a new puppy. His mam wrote about this in his diary. His teacher used this information when planning his activities for the week. Paul screeched excitedly when Miss O'Malley knew the name of the puppy and he seemed to really enjoy it when she read him a story about a sheepdog working on a farm. An example of an extract from Paul's diary is included below.



Reflection: What special arrangements can I put in place to share information with parents I don't often see?

Figure 2: Extract from Paul's daily diary

February 28

Hi Fiona

Paul had a poor night's sleep. Seemed fine when he came home from school. Had his tea and we went for a walk with him in the wheelchair. Toby, the puppy came too. As usual Paul had his bath and we read him a story but for some reason he never settled. He may be tired in school today. I know I am!

Regards

Aileen

February 28

Thanks Aileen. Jackie, Paul's physio did a session with him today. I told her he might be a little tired. She did some gentle exercises with him and when she brought him back to class he seemed very tired so we put him in the quiet area with his teddy and his blanket and he went for a short sleep. He had a good lunch and seemed in good form after that. He's still enjoying the books about animals. He's also getting very good at knocking the towers of blocks with his head and your practice at home is really showing. Hope you sleep tonight.

As always, give me a call on 087227569 at any time,

Fiona

Learning experience 7: Showing empathy

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home, childminding and infant class (primary school)

Mike, a widower visits his daughter Saoirse's school today to hear how she is getting on in senior infants. The school has a policy of giving parents a written mid-year report in February at the parent/teacher meetings and again towards the end of June. This is Mike's first face-to-face meeting with Saoirse's teacher. His wife Mary used to look after all contacts with the school. Saoirse's childminder, Niamh, drops and collects Saoirse from school every day while Mike is at work and she fills Mike in about how things are going at school. She knows Saoirse's teacher well and has an informal chat with her regularly, especially since Mike asked her to do this for him. The school has been very good about supporting Saoirse since her Mammy died five months ago. Miss Buckley, Saoirse's teacher, has been in regular phone contact with Mike since then. However, Mike is still a bit nervous about the meeting.

Miss Buckley immediately puts Mike at ease and reassures him that Saoirse is doing very well. She goes through the report card in detail with him and regularly asks him if he has any questions. She also shows him samples of Saoirse's work on display on the walls, in her books, and in her portfolio. She shares some photographs with him. Two of these show Saoirse minding two babies while playing with a friend. The caption beside the photographs reads, *Don't worry Lucy. I'll look after you.* Miss Buckley explains that Saoirse and her friend were pretending that Lucy's mammy was sick and died. She asks Mike how Saoirse is getting on at home and he tells her about the things she enjoys and the things that she finds hard, now that her Mammy is gone. Miss Buckley gives Mike the report card to take home and tells him to call or to send in a note if he wants to talk to her about Saoirse. She reassures him that she will continue to keep a close eye on Saoirse and that she will give him a call in a few weeks to give him an update. She re-emphasises that Saoirse is doing well in her learning and is coping well at school after losing her Mammy.



Reflection: Do I give enough thought to the events and circumstances in families' lives which can impact on children's learning and development?

Contributing to the setting

Parents can make a valuable contribution to their children's learning and development by sharing their time, experiences and talents with the out-of-home setting. For example, they can help with sports, drama or musical activities. They can share information about their home culture and background. They may be able to suggest or organise places for the children to visit or interesting people to talk to. Parents can also work together through parents' associations to support the setting and to improve their children's learning environment. Grandparents can contribute in similar ways. They can visit the setting and talk about their childhood helping the children to begin to develop a sense of time. Seeing members of their own family in the setting enhances children's sense of identity and belonging, as well as enriching their learning and development.

Involving parents in the setting can also benefit the parents themselves. Often, the best way to improve children's lives is to support their parents in their parenting role. One source of this support is the informal networks and friendships that are often created when parents meet. These can act as a valuable source of support and information for parents, particularly those who are isolated or new to the area. Parents can act as mentors for each other, or can simply offer friendship.

Parents: Contributing to your child's setting

- Spend **time** in the setting. Share a learning activity with the children like playing an instrument, coaching in a sport, demonstrating a craft such as knitting or origami, planting bulbs, playing a game, making a book, accompanying the children on a trip, telling a story using some words from your home language where this is different from the setting's.
- Support **play**. Help to develop an outdoor planting and play area. Help with a play activity or send in play props such as dress-up clothes and empty shopping containers.
- Share **information** with the children and staff about who you are, for example Irish, Traveller, or American, and what is important to you. Talk about your family, festivals, interests, and so on.
- Talk to the children about **your work**. Organise a trip to your workplace if possible and provide props from your work that can be added to the pretend play area.
- Help organise **outings, sports days** and other events.
- **Fund-raise** for new equipment or help the setting access statutory funding.



Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *What talents and skills could I share with children in the setting?*
2. *Could I offer to help with or organise an activity or outing?*

As a practitioner

3. *How can I tap into parents' knowledge, skills and goodwill to ensure the best outcomes for all the children in my setting?*
4. *What could I do to let parents know that their help and input are valued, and benefit their children?*



Learning experience 8: Dan the music man**Theme: Communicating, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Babies, toddlers and young children****Setting: Home and childminding**

Dan is a musician. His own children love music, and he has sung with them at home since they were babies. Now he comes to their childminding setting once a fortnight on one of his days off work to play his guitar and sing songs with the children. They are fascinated by his guitar. They want to know how heavy it is, what it is made from, and how strings make music. Dan shows them how it works. One day he brings along his drums and introduces them to drumming. He uses spoken rhythms to help them tap out the beat: *An-nie Jou-bert* (names with the younger children) and *Do you want a cup of tea?* (sentences with the older children). The children look forward to his visits. They practise almost every day so they can show Dan how good their clapping is when he returns. Before his next visit Noeleen the minder and the children make guitars and drums from junk materials. They can't wait to show Dan their band!



Reflection: What special talents do the parents have that I could tap into and share with the children I mind?

Learning experience 9: It's never too late.**Theme: Communicating, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Young children****Setting: Home and sessional service (pre-school)**

When Sonia was young she missed a lot of school. As a result, she had difficulties reading and she found it hard to work with written information. When her children's pre-school sent notes home she had to ask her sister to read them for her. Over time she got to know Maggie, another parent. Maggie persuaded her to go along with her to the classes in the parents' room. There was a crèche in an adjoining room where Sonia's toddler could stay. Sonia and Maggie chose a craft course for beginners. Sonia's four-year-old Evan was delighted to see her coming into his pre-school. Sonia enjoyed the course and felt more confident about talking to Evan's practitioner. Next, she attended a parenting course and felt that she was able to contribute a lot to it from her own experience. The teacher who organised the courses encouraged her to enrol in an adult literacy class. Sonia is making good progress. She especially enjoys reading to her children and looks forward to notes coming home, which she can now read herself.



Reflection: What can my colleagues and I do in our setting to help parents in their role as their children's educators?

Learning experience 10: Bláithín's dad

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 4 and Learning goal 6*

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home and infant class (primary school)

Joan and Con have three children at primary school. They are both active members of the Parents' Association (PA) and take turns going to meetings. They have built good relationships with the teachers and other parents since their first child started school. A new housing estate has been built locally and the number of children attending the school has greatly increased. The PA and the school staff recently helped to organise an open day for parents of new children. Patrick whose daughter Bláithín started junior infants this year, went along. The PA are also developing an outdoor play area for the infants which includes a place for planting. Con suggested to the teachers that Patrick might be interested in getting involved in setting up the outdoor area. Patrick looks after his children each weekend since he and his wife separated. He is a part-time builder. Patrick is delighted to be asked and especially so when the teacher suggests that the children might help him out. His daughter Bláithín is delighted about this. Patrick feels that he is contributing positively to his children's learning and development and also benefiting the school community by using his skills.

Over the next few weeks Patrick, the class teacher, children, and some other parents enjoy working together and have the play area ready for the sun in June!



Reflection: Are there ways in which I can encourage dads to become more involved in their children's learning and development?

Making decisions and advocating different approaches and courses of action

Parents continually make decisions about their children—about their health, activities, food, routines, who they spend time with and where, and the kind of care and education they receive. Parents can provide settings with important information to help with decisions about their children's learning and development. They also need to be included when important decisions are being made about their children by others.

In addition, parents can act as advocates for their children, seeking out services they need and letting the practitioner know of special or individual needs that they may have. They sometimes work as advocates for children in general, for example by campaigning for amenities in the local area or for particular facilities for children in the school. Management boards and committees, parents' associations and consultative committees, can be a way for parents to do this. To become involved, parents need to understand these structures and the role they can play in them.





Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *How can I be more involved in decisions that affect my child?*
2. *What can I do to improve services and experiences for all children?*

As a practitioner

3. *How can I involve parents to a greater extent in making important decisions that affect their children?*
4. *What can I do to encourage parents to get involved in the Management Committee/ Board of Management/Parents' Association?*

Learning experience 11: Do you understand my culture and traditions?

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Home and sessional service (playgroup)

Joseph (2 years and 11 months) and his family are Travellers. They recently moved to the area and Joseph's mammy, Kathleen, enrolled him for two mornings a week in the local playgroup. The manager, Joan, meets with Kathleen and explains how the service works and shows her the different rooms and the outdoor play area. Joan asks Kathleen about Joseph and his likes and dislikes. She explains that she knows very little about Traveller culture and traditions. Joan asks Kathleen to tell her a little about their way of life and the Traveller traditions that are important to her. Understanding these will help the staff to support Joseph. Kathleen tells Joan that as a family they generally travel in their trailer during the summer months and settle in one area for the rest of the year. She also explains that most Travellers are not as nomadic as they used to be. Kathleen says that Joseph loves animals, especially horses and dogs. She tells Joan that she doesn't want Joseph to be discriminated against because he is a Traveller. She is worried because her older children had negative experiences in other settings.

In preparation for Joseph's arrival, and with Kathleen's help, Joan gets some books and jigsaws that depict Traveller life today. She organises displays of animals for Joseph to look at when he arrives. She tells the children that a new boy is joining them. A few days after Joseph's arrival Joan talks to the children about their homes. She uses wall displays to reinforce some of the points they talk about. These include pictures of the children's homes such as trailers, flats and terraced houses. They use these to talk about 'where we live'. The children bring photographs of their families and homes, and make lollipop stick models of them using junk materials, fabrics, wool, glitter, fancy paper, and card. They display these beside their photographs. Over the coming days they enjoy sharing stories about their family, pets and outings. Joan observes the children during their activities and ensures Joseph is included and that he is beginning to form friendships. She updates Kathleen regularly on how he is settling in.



Reflection: How much do the children and I know about each other's family life and community?



Learning experience 12: A big move

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home and childminding

John has been a stay at home Dad for the past six months. He and his partner Bernice are now looking for a setting to look after their baby, Eimear (1 year) three days per week, as John is returning to work part-time. They would like to find a childminder as they are keen for Eimear to experience a setting similar to her own home. John and Bernice contact the local Health Service Executive for a list of notified childminders in their area. They have short-listed three and have made arrangements to visit them. They prepare a number of questions they want to ask. Each childminder describes her training and qualifications. All three have first-aid training. Through the childminding grant from the local County Childcare Committee all three have bought a range of toys and safety equipment. Each childminder has access to an outdoor area.

When they get home John and Bernice go through their notes and they agree that Liz's home would suit Eimear the best. It is a bungalow with easy access to a garden with lots of grass and a plant area. Liz minds two other pre-school aged children which John and Bernice think is important for helping Eimear to learn to interact with other children. Liz interacted very well with Eimear, and Eimear seemed to like being with her. Liz made John and Bernice feel welcome and at ease. She gave them a booklet with information about her childminding service, including the types of activities she organises and the routines she follows with the children. She also explained to them that she uses a little notebook each day to record basic care provision and the child's activities, expressions and achievements. She takes regular photographs and gives these to the parents. John and Bernice appreciate these as a way of sharing information. They ask Liz for references from other parents. After checking these out they contact Liz. Together they fill out an application form and discuss Eimear's preferences, medical conditions, allergies, vaccinations, comfort items, games she likes to play, routines, and general contact information. Eimear spends a short time each day with Liz over the coming two weeks. Liz uses the information from John and Bernice to help Eimear settle in and feel happy and content in her new setting.



Reflection: What information should I gather from parents to help children settle in my setting?



Learning experience 13: Transitions

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3*

Age: Young children

Setting: Home, sessional service (pre-school) and infant class (primary school)

Simon (almost 6 years) attends his local primary school. His parents became concerned about his behaviour when he was around two-and-a-half. Simon had difficulty concentrating and completing activities. They spoke to the public health nurse. She felt that there was no immediate cause for concern and advised them to send Simon to pre-school the following September. He settled in well. The ratio of adults to children was very good and Simon was assigned a Key Worker, Kelly, who often spent time in one-to-one interactions with him and helped him to play and interact with other children in the group. Kelly helped break down tasks for Simon and modelled things for him a number of times. She gave one piece of information or direction at a time which helped him to join in activities with others. Simon especially liked water play and being outdoors. Kelly helped set up a buddy system and Rachel really enjoyed being Simon's special friend. Simon spent two years in the pre-school.

Simon's parents were concerned about his transfer to primary school. He was going to the local school where there were 19 junior infants, senior infants and first class children in the classroom. Simon's parents met the principal and his teacher before he started school and they outlined their concerns and the additional help Simon had received at pre-school. They arranged to meet again in mid-October when the teacher had a chance to get to know Simon. After that meeting Simon was referred for an educational assessment. Following his assessment, an Individual Education Plan was drawn up and a special needs assistant was appointed to help him in the classroom for 10 hours per week.

Simon is now in senior infants. He spends time with the school's special education teacher working on specific skills that will help him to learn. His parents are pleased with Simon's progress and the work his teachers are doing to ensure that his needs are met. They get regular feedback from the school and they talk to his teacher once a fortnight by phone to find out what they can do to help Simon progress.



Reflection: How can I improve how I work with parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to involve them more in their children's learning and development?

Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of a quality early childhood service is that it works in partnership with parents to provide an environment in which babies, toddlers and young children are happy, feel they belong, and can develop to their fullest potential. In this environment parents and practitioners work together to share information and expertise, and to make decisions in order to give children rich experiences across settings.