

Principles for engaging with families

A framework for local authorities
and national organisations
to evaluate and improve
engagement with families



Early Learning Partnership
Parental Engagement Group



Foreword

Research going back many years has consistently told us – not surprisingly – that parents are the most important people in their children's lives, and that their support for their children's learning and development is crucial. The 1967 Plowden Report into primary education, for example, concluded that parents' attitudes towards their children's schooling had a greater impact on how they did in school than either variations in home circumstances or in schools; and Uri Bronfenbrenner's substantial 1974 evaluation of the American Head Start programme concluded that strategies which included parents were more effective in the long term than those that did not. These findings have now, of course, been replicated by the longitudinal Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study (Sylva and others 2004), and by Desforges and Abouchar's overview of the impact of parental involvement on pupil achievement (2003); both of which have reinforced the importance of parental interest in and support for their children's learning, while pointing out that what parents do (how they relate to their children) is actually more important than what they are (the family background).

What has changed over the past 10 years is the impact that this continuing body of research has had on both policy and practice. Supporting practitioners to engage more effectively with families is a key plank in government policy for improving cognitive and social outcomes for children, first through the Ten Year Child Care Strategy and Every Child Matters (DCSF 2003, 2004) and, more recently, in the Families and Relationships Green Paper *Support for All* (DCSF 2010). Working in partnership with parents is now an integral part of early years and children's centre services and is embedded in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, and in guidance and inspection documents. Although this concept of partnership has been around for many years, there is now a greater understanding that this does not mean professionals dictating the terms of the relationship but rather a more equal approach based on respect, trust, empathy and integrity.

What is important is not just that engagement with families happens, but **how** it happens. As this booklet shows, partnership should be based on a 'principled' approach that recognises and builds on parents' expertise, where professionals and parents really listen to and learn from each other in ways that are valued and evaluated by parents themselves. In exploring and expressing the common principles on which engagement is a reality in their own organisations' work, the members of the Early Learning Partnership Parental Engagement Group (ELPPEG) have made a valuable contribution to the debate about the need for a broad base of evidence, and what that might look like. Demonstrated here are the importance of the processes of engagement and the importance of making explicit the beliefs and values held by those working to engage with families across the many agencies that play a part in families' lives.

Dame Gillian Pugh, Chair NCB

Contents

Background	4
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
Key definitions	8
Principles for engaging with families	
1 Successful and sustained engagement with families is maintained when practitioners work alongside families in a valued working relationship	9
2 Successful and sustained engagement with families involves practitioners and parents being willing to listen to and learn from each other	13
3 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens when practitioners respect what families know and already do	15
4 Successful and sustained engagement with families needs practitioners to find ways to actively engage those who do not traditionally access services	18
5 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens when parents are decision-makers in organisations and services	21
6 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens when families' views, opinions and expectations of services are raised and their confidence increases as service users	23
7 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens where there is support for the whole family	26
8 Successful and sustained engagement with families is through universal services but with opportunities for more intensive support where most needed	29
9 Successful and sustained engagement with families requires effective support and supervision for staff, encouraging evaluation and self-reflection	32
10 Successful and sustained engagement with families requires an understanding and honest sharing of issues around safeguarding	35
How might the Principles be used in practice?	39
References	41

Background

The Early Learning Partnership Parental Engagement Group (ELPPEG) was formed in 2009 by lead people from organisations who had come together through the Early Learning Partnership Programme (ELPP) strand 3, 2007–2008, funded by the DCSF.

The overarching aim of this strand of the project was to help create and support an early years workforce with the skills, knowledge and disposition to build respectful relationships with parents of children under three, and to help parents to support their children's innate readiness to learn. In addition, the project aimed to extend early years practitioners' continued professional development. The evaluation identified a 'huge appetite within the early years workforce for training in engaging parents' and that 'much of the training delivered within Strand 3 has the potential to positively influence practitioner–parents' relations within a short timescale'.

There was a strong feeling in the group that the principles informing their way of working with parents were very important and needed national recognition and focus. The group set out to formulate shared principles that underpin practice across all member organisations, which could be used to promote an effective way of working with families across the early years, family support, education, health, childcare and play sectors.

A consultation conference held at the Pen Green Research Base, on 9 November 2009, engaged stakeholders from a range of local authorities and national organisations in the formulation of the principles. ELPPEG members also consulted parents, through focus group discussions, and practitioners with a range of experience and backgrounds. Much consideration has been given to the language used.

The ELPPEG member organisations are:

- NCB
- Pen Green Research, Development and Training Base
- Parenting UK
- ICAN
- PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership)
- Parents as First Teachers
- Pre-school Learning Alliance
- ContinYou
- Parents 1st.

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We would also like to thank the National Quality Improvement Network (NQIN) Steering Group for their role in the production and dissemination of this booklet through their network.

NQIN is a specialist body that supports quality improvement managers and policy-makers working in early years and extended services (birth to eight) to improve outcomes for children and their families, by providing an extensive range of peer support, practice development, leadership and guidance.

The Network plays a central role in informing the national policy debate on quality improvement, while regional networks consider their unique concerns and challenges to ensure best practice and resources are shared locally.

In 2007, NQIN was funded by the DCSF to develop a set of quality improvement principles to support local authorities and national organisations to improve quality outcomes for children and young people. A companion guide and poster were subsequently developed.

The Principles for engaging with families complement this work and support the long-term drive to bring about learning, change and improvement in settings.

Please visit www.ncb.org.uk/qualityimprovement

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Introduction

For a long time in the UK, there has been an ongoing national and local debate about how to engage families in child and adult services. Recent and current government initiatives – building on the Ten Year Child Care Strategy and Every Child Matters agenda (DCSF 2003, 2004) – for example *Think Fathers* and *Reaching Out: Think families*, set out an agenda for engaging families (DCSF 2008, Social Exclusion Task Force 2007).

A key policy driver has been to 'narrow the gap' to improve the life chances of poor children. As Feinstein (2003) has noted 'there is already a social class differential at 22 months' between the children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the children from advantaged backgrounds in the UK. This gap widens as children get older. This is not the case with our European neighbours and presents us with an immediate and very real challenge.

We know that parental involvement is key. Blanden (2006), using the same data as Feinstein from the 1970 Birth Cohort Study, found that 'parental interest in children's learning enables some children to buck the trend and do well despite disadvantage'.

We have been aware that parents play a central role in relation to outcomes for children for some considerable time. The Plowden Report (1967) acknowledged both the importance of the parent's role and the need to engage parents respectfully in services. The Start Right report (Ball 1994) shaped a new kind of partnership between parents and professionals:

Parents are the most important people in children's lives. It is from parents that children learn most, particularly in the early months and years.

(Ball 1994)

One of the clearest messages that came out of the EPPE studies (Sylva and others 2004) was that 'what parents do is more important than who parents are'. Desforges and Abouchar (2003) have also highlighted the importance of the home learning environment, emphasising the fact that:

at-home good parenting has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation.

(Desforges and Abouchar 2003)

But how do we best encourage and support successful and sustained engagement with families to support them in their parenting role?

Over the past few years there has been a growing interest in parenting programmes. The adoption of the 'programme approach' can give the impression that parents can be processed and easily changed as a result of a limited number of sessions delivered over a short space of time, provided that a set formula is followed. The use of randomised controlled trials to evaluate programmes, and a concomitant reliance on

narrow, easily quantifiable behavioural outcomes, has also given the impression that parenting programmes can be viewed as akin to a medical 'cure'.

The organisations, workers and parents who have come together to create the Principles outlined here advocate a different approach. Their focus is not only on 'what' but also on 'how' workers engage with families. They stress the importance of the underpinning principles and beliefs that guide work with families on a day-to-day basis. This approach is more about challenging practice and building relationships than simply about 'teaching parents new skills'.

When working within multidisciplinary, multi-agency teams, the dialogue and debate about beliefs and values is crucial for achieving a 'joined up' approach. The focus is on building and sustaining relationships with families so that knowledge can be shared, both ways, between workers and parents in a respectful dialogue. There is therefore a need for the stability of services and for the support of staff to maintain their connections with a given community over time.

Parents' views and voice in the development of services and their evaluation of 'what works' is central. We need a broad evidence base looking carefully at the processes of engagement as well as the outcomes for children and adults. We need to develop ways to evaluate outcomes that are meaningful, within each local context.

We also need to ensure that the evidence of effectiveness is drawn from a range of sources across a number of dimensions and from different perspectives. The development of these principles gives us a focus for these investigations. They have been developed in line with the National Occupational Standards for working with parents (Lifelong Learning UK 2005). It is hoped that funders, commissioners and practitioners will be able to use them to identify, celebrate and support the development and quality improvement of practice in relation to engaging families within local community services.



Key definitions

parent	The term 'parent' refers to mothers and fathers as well as carers or key adults who have the responsibility for, and loving relationship with, children in their care. We have not emphasised the issues around the diverse nature of adult carers for children but want to make it clear that we have used the term 'parent' to represent all key adults. These include working mothers and fathers, parents with a special right, parents who speak English as an additional language and parents not living in the family home.
family	Refers to the network of important people around a child, in whatever form the family is constituted. This could involve parents, partners of parents, step parents, grandparents, carers and key adults in a child's life, siblings, step siblings and extended family members who have a close relationship with the child.
service users	Any adult or child accessing services either in settings or children's centres, or through services offered in their own home such as family visiting.
practitioner	Any worker in child and adult services, including workers in early years, health, family support or those working in the voluntary and community sector with children and families.
family support	Work carried out by practitioners who offer support for the whole family in many different ways including home visiting, one to one support and liaising with other professionals in addition to enabling families to access other services.
safeguarding	Keeping children safe and protected from physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect.
local authorities	Public sector activity at a local level in specified geographical areas.
group leader	Practitioners who run groups for children and/or families/parents, such as drop-in groups.

1 Successful and sustained engagement with families is maintained when practitioners work alongside families in a valued working relationship

Recognising parents' expertise in their own children and lives, doing things with families rather than to them is crucial.

(Moran and others 2004)

Parents need to feel that they are active participants in partnership with practitioners.

We know that parents want to remain in control of their family lives [and to] be listened to ... Relationships are at the heart of this process. For a parent lacking in confidence and trust to access services, forming a warm and positive relationship with a practitioner can be a bridge to available help and information.

(Roberts 2009)

Davis and others (2002) suggest a partnership model with the following key elements: a common aim; working together; complementary expertise; mutual respect; open communication; sharing power; and negotiation.

Roberts (2009) in *Early Home Learning Matters* describes how Braun and others (2006) set out the following list of qualities that underpin what they call 'a helping relationship and partnership'.

- Respect:** valuing parents as individuals, believing in their fundamental ability to cope and make a difference in their family lives, and working within an ethos of partnership.
- Empathy:** showing an understanding of the challenges a parent is facing in their lives, and being able to see the situation from their point of view.
- Genuineness:** being sensitive, honest, undefensive and trustworthy.
- Humility:** working in the context of an equal relationship and using parents' strengths, views and knowledge alongside your own at every stage of the process.

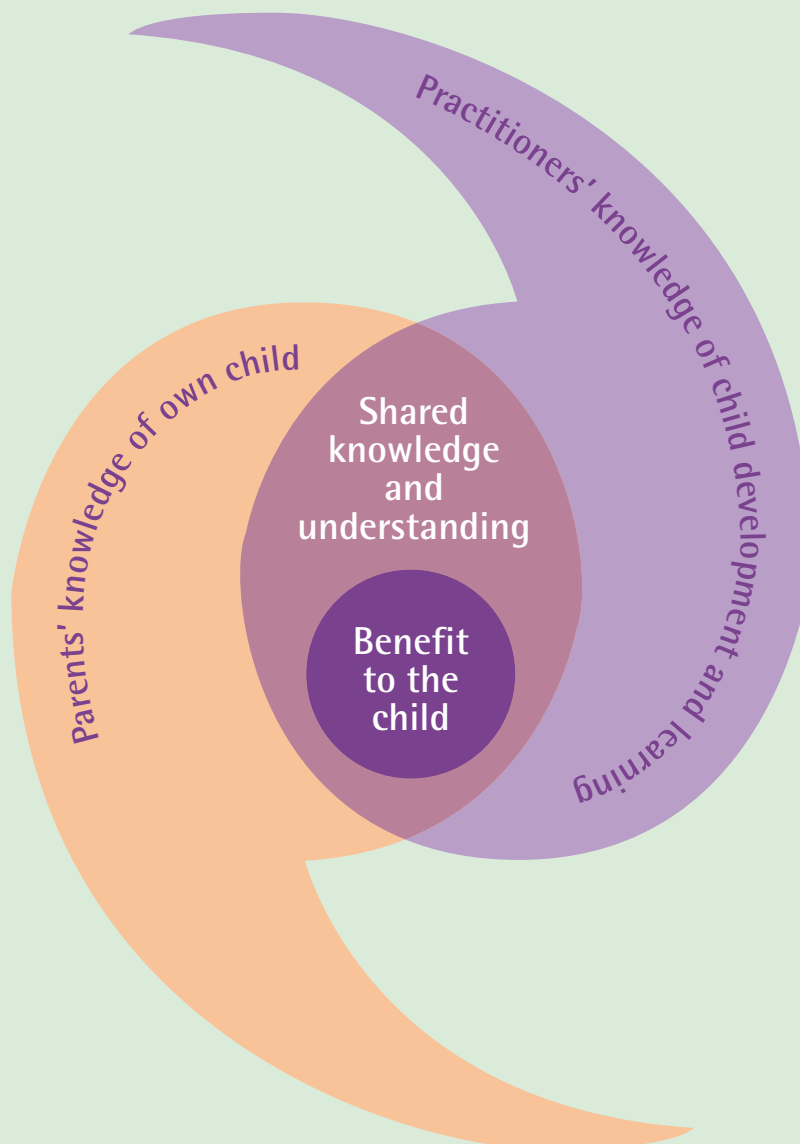
Quiet enthusiasm: bringing a friendly, positive energy to the relationship and a consistently calm, steady and warm approach.

Personal integrity: in addition to empathising with the parent, being able to hold alternative views and offer these when appropriate.

Expertise: the knowledge and experience that the helper [practitioner] brings to the work to complement the parent's existing knowledge and skills, both in building the relationship and in providing information and support.

Key to all successful engagement of families is working in partnership, acknowledging what families bring and what practitioners contribute. In all interactions with families, effective communication is key to building real relationships. This depends on making time to talk one to one, and giving individuals attention either in the home environment or in a welcoming environment outside the home and at appropriate and convenient times for parents.

Balanced relationships



Wheeler, H and Connor, J (2006) *Parents, Early Years and Learning: Reader*. London: NCB.

Easen and others (1992) talk about a '**developmental partnership**' in which both parent and practitioner contribute their expertise. Parents have their own specific knowledge of their child and their family. Practitioners have a more general knowledge of child development and learning. Through sharing both sets of equally important expertise, the provision and outcomes for the child are improved.

What would this Principle look like in practice?

Parents As First Teachers: An approach to personal visits that is based firmly on the belief that the parent is the child's first and most influential teacher.

When the project worker first visited my house, she was the only one to accept a cup of tea and sit down with me and listen to what I had to say. All the others, my social worker, drug support worker, just stand in the middle of the room and tell me what I'm doing wrong. Pam really helped me to realise I can be a good mum not only to my baby but to my other two children. I really look forward to her visits.

(Annette)

I was a little apprehensive going to my first meeting with Annette but having accepted the cup of tea I moved into the first part of the visit programme, building rapport with the parent. I visited weekly at first, working with her to increase observational skills of her baby's development, asking open-ended questions and listening carefully to her concerns. Annette enjoyed the parent-baby play activities I modelled, and increasingly asked questions about child development. As she grew in confidence the visits became fortnightly and then monthly. Her increased parenting skills impacted on her two older children who now regularly attend school and are making good progress – and to think the children were heading for being taken into care.

Annette and her partner increasingly offer to help in any voluntary work needed at school and are involved in our pilot study of assessing successful ways to engage families who do not traditionally access services.

(Pam)

Pre-school Learning Alliance: A discussion between parents and a practitioner, at the Charlton Family Centre, where they comment on their partnership.

Probably the most important thing is communication. Just talking one on one; you ask how they've been, they give you a rundown on what they've been doing.

Communication is not one way, it's flowing both ways.

(Russell)

We try to involve the whole family and build a relationship over time. Parents tell us what their child has been doing at home and the staff incorporate it into their planning.

Recently we asked parents if they would be interested in celebrating the diversity of the families in the centre and asked how they would like to contribute. Twenty out of thirty parents took part in the Language and Culture Week and decided what they wanted to do. Some read stories and sang songs in their own language, while others talked about their clothes or their food. One of the mums, Naya, led a music and dance session in Igbo for different age groups.

Parents are now asking for courses on child development and are keen to give feedback on book bags and puppets that they take home.

(Mona Naqvi, Charlton Family Centre, Greenwich)

Points for reflection

- What professional development opportunities are you offering in your setting or local authority to support practitioners in working with adults in families as well as with children?
- Do your policies and practice reflect the importance of valued working relationships (partnerships) with parents, through the processes of induction and recruitment and in the running of your organisation?



2 Successful and sustained engagement with families involves practitioners and parents being willing to listen to and learn from each other

We know that young children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with parents and share ideas about how to support and extend children's learning.

(Meade and Cubey 1995)

Knowing families well is the key to really listening and responding to what families want from services and how and when they want to engage. Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1970), challenges us by stating that being willing to listen and learn from each other requires an approach where practitioners are able to:

identify with others and recognise the fact that 'naming the world' is not the task of an elite. Value the contribution of others and listen to them with humility, respecting the particular view of the world held by different people.

(Freire 1970)

Recognising the complexities of families, and the knowledge within them about the child and their daily life, is vital if those working with families are **really** to create an approach that has families at its heart. It takes time to know families well, and to be able to share their 'funds of knowledge' (González and others 2005).

Easen and others (1992) acknowledge 'the parents' own learning process' in the dialogue with practitioners, and emphasise the importance of:

taking what children do now as the starting point for observation and reflection [as this] allows for a positive and non-judgemental dialogue to develop between parents and educators [practitioners].

(Easen and others 1992)

In this process the practitioner is also open to new learning and the sharing of knowledge about a child, which can be transformational for the practitioner.

Mezirow (1994) talks about how we can begin to see things very differently through a process of dialogue and reflection in what he calls 'perspective transformation'. If practitioners and parents are willing to listen and learn from each other they are both able to be transformed by their interaction.

What would this Principle look like in practice?

PEEP: A practitioner's review of a PEEP home programme.

Today we talked about a language issue with her three-year-old boy. Ranie is worried and surprised that the school has suggested he has this problem, because he is a good communicator in the house. We also talked about which languages they are using in the house. She told me that she and her husband speak Punjabi with each other and Urdu with their children.

I asked Ranie why they speak Urdu with the children if their own language is Punjabi? She replied: 'I suffer through my mother tongue and we don't want them to suffer or be embarrassed because they speak Punjabi.' I also discovered that her own language is not Punjabi but Pothowari. She explained that when she got married the first thing she experienced was everybody laughing at her dialect.

I encouraged her and let her say what she wanted to say, which she might never have said before: that she hardly speaks her mother tongue with anybody but Pothowari is the only language she knows by heart. She described her mother tongue beautifully like this: 'A Mother's language is mixed with breast milk and I heard her 20 years before coming to another area of other language, so I still think in it and can't forget for a minute no matter how much I try...' I used her words and reassured her that children will learn any other language easily if she will give them language mixed with her breast milk.

Points for reflection

- What opportunities do practitioners create to enable them to listen and learn from parents and for parents to learn from them?
- Does your organisation create time for practitioners to reflect upon their own learning?
- How does this process apply to **all parents and carers**; for example, working parents, parents of children who access services via local authority transport, parents with additional needs, parents who speak English as an additional language, and parents who do not live in the family home?

3 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens when practitioners respect what families know and already do

...early years educators need to recognise parents' roles as their child's first and most consistent educators.

(Whalley 2007)

It is very easy to describe parents as their children's main educators – but do practitioners work with families in a way that connects with and honours this knowledge? Practitioners can never know children as well as those who live with them and have had loving relationships with them over time, in many cases from birth. In the words of Paulo Freire, practitioners need to 'give up the idea that we are the exclusive owners of truth and knowledge' (Freire 1970).

Respecting what families know and already do with their child to support their learning and development enables workers to engage positively with families. This way of working recognises that the home learning environment is key. It is a way of working that respects the nurturing and supportive experiences that happen day to day within the home and with family members and friends outside the setting or group contact experienced by the practitioner.

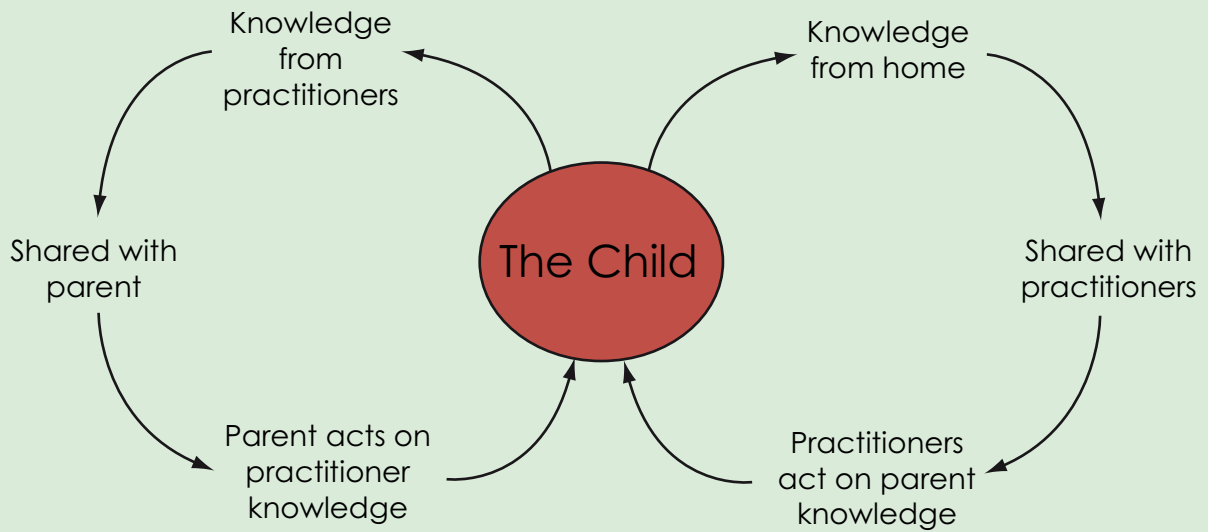
Making connections with children's experiences across all the environments they encounter day-to-day enables children to make sense of their world and build on what they know and can do.

(Pen Green Research, Development and Training Base 2007)



The Pen Green Loop

Knowledge-sharing between parents and practitioners, to enable all adults to work most effectively in supporting the child.



Adapted from Whalley, M (ed) (2007) *Involving Parents in their Children's Learning*. (second edition) London: Paul Chapman.

What would this Principle look like in practice?

Parents Involved in their Children's Learning (PICL): Parent's and worker's reflections following the sharing of knowledge about a child through using video.

I was a bit shocked seeing the video of Marie. I was blown away. I didn't understand that making a mess was learning. I liked watching the DVD, it's like being a fly on the wall. My house is Marie's little art box now. I also take videos, it's so exciting to show the workers. I really enjoy it. I lived with my mum and dad for the first two years of Marie's life – they have a big impact. There's always been a strong bond between me and my daughter, being a single mum, but understanding her a bit more has made us unbreakable.

(Nicola)

I did a home visit and met grandma and great grandma. It shifted me to go and talk about why Marie was doing things. They related what she was doing at home and how she was learning. It helped me to put all we know about Marie into context. I asked Nicola what she wanted for Marie and she told me she wanted her to be Prime Minister! PICL has helped Nicola to gain confidence and be an advocate for her own child and also other parents within the centre.

(Anne, Crescent Children's Centre Meir, Stoke-on-Trent)

Points for reflection

- Do parents and practitioners regularly share knowledge about children's learning and development?
- Does the information from home feed into the planning for that individual child in the setting or home-based project plan?
- Does the information from the setting or practitioner working in the home feed into what the parents provide for their children at home?



4 Successful and sustained engagement with families needs practitioners to find ways to actively engage those who do not traditionally access services

The sheer diversity of family life now means that 'one size fits all' approaches are unlikely to be successful and that instead, giving families access to information, advice and support of various kinds that they can make use of as and when they think best, is much more likely to be effective.

(DCSF 2010)

The phrase 'hard to reach' is often used to describe parents who do not access services. This rather loaded phrase puts the emphasis on the inaccessibility of parents but in reality it is the services that are hard to reach for some parents. There can be both organisational barriers to overcome, such as times of opening and distance to travel, and barriers connected to personal feelings and attitudes. Staff and parents in any setting can be inclined to treat some adults differently or to 'other' those who appear to have different family contexts to themselves (Muhr 2008).

Children's centres are now required to be accountable for the learning and development of children in their area, irrespective of their attendance at the centre; it is not acceptable to simply engage with those who choose to come through the door. Practitioners need to find ways to actively engage parents, particularly those parents who have not accessed services in the past. This could involve reflecting with parents on how they became engaged in services, and finding out what worked and what did not work for adults in a range of family contexts and with a variety of life experiences (Hayward 2010).

In the recent publication from the Family and Parenting Institute, *Early Home Learning Matters* (2009), Roberts reviews the learning from the DCSF-funded programmes, Early Learning Partnership Programme (ELPP) and Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL):

A major shift in focus for many services that participated in the ELPP and PPEL projects was to see vulnerable adults primarily as parents rather than clients and to bring them into a partnership that recognised the importance of their involvement in their children's learning.

(Roberts 2009)

The important key messages from the projects were that, if sessions are to engage parents who traditionally do not access services, practitioners needed:

- **time** – enough to develop relationships with families in a way that was acceptable
- **support** – and supervision for themselves
- **flexibility** – the ability for workers to make flexible and responsive decisions about how best to support families, involving other agencies where necessary, such as housing and debt relief.

And services needed:

- **fine-tuning** – to support specific needs and circumstances, including services for particular members of the family who do not traditionally access services, such as dads
- **outreach** – as it was important, in some cases, to 'take the service to the parent' rather than wait for the parent to come to the setting
- **to be complementary and networked** – as a raft of services are needed to address multiple needs, and different needs at different times.



What would this principle look like in practice?

The Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families: reflections from a children's centre outreach worker and parent.

I got to know Christine through her visiting my partner and she eventually persuaded me to take the kids to Dads Club on a Sunday.

The very first time I went it was a proper nightmare – I couldn't get in to the place! But Christine 'persuaded' me to try again and it worked out better after that. When I first went I had all sorts of stuff going on in my life and I found it very hard to speak to people or to go out of the house but gradually, as the time went on, I started to feel better in myself.

My kids Heather, Bobby and now Penny, won't let me miss a single Sunday! They have to be at Dads Club every week and it has definitely brought us closer as a family. It started with Christine hounding me – and I mean hounding! – to get involved with my kids and take them to Dads Club and after two years of asking I said I would give it a try and see if my kids liked the club.

(Jimmy)

I home-visited Jimmy's partner, Claire, on a regular basis and also began supporting Jimmy. Jimmy had very low self-esteem and lacked confidence. He had hardly left his house for the best part of two years and his continuing use of alcohol and drugs maintained his low self-esteem. I felt that it was really important to support Jimmy in taking his children to one of the weekend groups at Pen Green for dads and their children.

(Christine, family visitor, Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families)

Points for reflection

- Do all practitioners know their community, and the families within them, well?
- Do all practitioners know which sectors or social groups of the community they are not working with effectively?
- What systems are in place to monitor the level and quality of engagement with families from different family contexts and life experiences?
- Do practitioners involve parents in analysing what works and what does not work in terms of engaging families?
- Do practitioners find ways of talking to parents who are not engaged in services to understand their views?

5 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens when parents are decision-makers in organisations and services

The building was here, but we have created together the space for parents, children and staff to work, play and grow. Parents and staff have jointly defined the use of the space and consistently challenge and evaluate the centre's 'development'.

(Pen Green 1985)

Successful and sustained engagement with families is supported when there is a community development approach to developing services and they are co-constructed with families. Moss (1992) advocates for settings to develop:

from a perspective which regards early-childhood services as a need and a right of all communities and families, and as an expression of social solidarity with children and parents.

(Moss 1992)

Developing services is a joint venture between all stakeholders, and the involvement of families in making decisions about how services operate is crucial if the services are going to meet the needs of a particular community. Parent representation needs to be more than a sounding board for decisions made by setting leaders. If parents are working in true partnership with organisations they need to be part of the decision-making processes that shape and build the services they access.

Encouraging community members to be decision-makers in organisations requires an active approach to community education. Workers can support adults in the community to be self-directing, to have the self-confidence and belief that they can change things (Whalley 2007, p.4). Organisations need to open pathways for adult engagement to enable parents and family members to take on different roles within the organisation, building community capacity and enriching the learning community created by the setting.

Much better are approaches that invite parents to participate and choose the elements that they would like to try for themselves. That is, they fitted the programme to the parents' needs rather than fit the parents' 'problems' to the prescriptions of the service.

(Quinton 2004)

What would this principle look like in practice?

Parents 1st: Reflections from a community parent volunteer working in the community to support others.

I first heard about the Community Parents Programme from a friend of mine, who had been attending a weekday session at the children's centre with her son. She had picked up a leaflet ... which she dropped off at mine suggesting I might be interested ... What attracted me to the idea was the fact that I could use the skills and experiences I had as a mother to help better other parents' lives and use my skills and knowledge to help promote healthy living. It also made me feel a great sense of pride in being involved ... [I am now a community parent volunteer myself and] I believe the support the local families get from the community parent volunteer works well because parents find the visits to be more relaxing and less stressful knowing that another parent is helping and supporting them and not a professional.

(Tracy, community parent volunteer, NSPCC, Liverpool)

Points for reflection

- Does your organisation have an active parent forum or parent group?
- Does your organisation take into account the views of parents who do not attend the parent forum or group?
- Do parents jointly make decisions with workers about how services are shaped and developed?
- Do parents play active roles in your setting?
- How are parents involved in evaluating your services (for example, through a parent-led needs assessment)?
- Do parents have a voice in what is evaluated and how evaluations are conducted?



6 **Successful and sustained engagement with families happens when families' views, opinions and expectations of services are raised and their confidence increases as service users**

Approaches to families should be personalised and tailored to their self-defined needs, help parents and carers raise and realise aspirations for their children, enable them to feel in control and engage them as partners in tackling local problems and planning services.

(Sure Start 2010)

The initial and sustained experiences that families have of services will obviously affect their confidence in using them. Workers need to reflect on families' initial engagement with their settings. Who are the people that make this first contact: family workers, receptionists or outreach staff? How positive is this experience for families?

A consistent welcoming environment, with workers who build positive relationships with families, will boost parents' confidence in becoming service users. They will be supported in accessing a wider range of services according to their needs and preferences and good services will raise expectations, giving parents a key role in quality assurance. Engaging parents as decision-makers in organisations (Principle 5) will also support parents' confidence as service users, giving them a voice in the development of services.

At the Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families, engaging families effectively:

was not about compensating for disadvantage. Instead it was about acknowledging the impact of poverty on the lives of local children and their families and encouraging families to take an equal and active role in developing responsive services.

(Whalley 2007)

Practitioners need to be supported in developing the skills to enable parents to become advocates for their children and their families. Strong practitioners can help parents to have a voice in shaping services so that they meet their needs more effectively.

Holman (1983) talks about the qualities and skills he found in community social workers who successfully engaged families in family centre services and community projects. These workers brought the resources of their own personal strengths and sensitivities to the relationship with families, together with the resources they offered from the connection they had with agencies and services. He describes these workers as '**resourceful friends**'. Families were able to raise their expectations of being heard and of gaining access to resources through these workers.

What would this principle look like in practice?

Room to Play: comments on a PEEP drop-in based in a community shopping centre, taken from an evaluation of Room to Play.

This parent had three children: two of school age as well as a baby ... Initially she was only able to come in for short periods of time to change her baby's nappy, and over a period of around six months she gradually stayed longer each time, eventually accepting a cup of tea from staff, although she was only able to interact with staff through her children and avoided eye contact. She had no qualifications and had difficulties with literacy. In her own time she began to share information about herself and her family, and staff noticed that she became more confident and more able to interact with other users, although she only stayed for short periods of time. It emerged that her children were having difficulties at school in relation to behavioural problems and anger management issues, but she did not feel confident addressing this with the school. However, as she began to share this information, staff were able to suggest strategies for dealing with the children.

Staff also advised her how to raise her concerns with the school, making suggestions as to who she could contact, and trying to take a proactive approach – for example, helping her to identify triggers or key problem areas. Eventually she was able to access more support for her children at school. She had initially been reluctant to allow her children to participate in activities outside school, such as play schemes, commenting: 'I like to keep my kids with me ... they won't go anywhere without me.' However, staff noticed that as her own self-esteem increased she became more open to new experiences, allowing them to take part in outings and excursions.

(Adapted from Evangelou, M and others (2008) 'An evaluation of PEEP provision for "excluded" families: Room to play', Sutton Trust Evaluation Project (STEP) Phase 3 research report)

Points for reflection

- Do parents access services over an extended period?
- Do parents access multiple services?
- Do all parents tell you (by whatever means appropriate but non-returned questionnaires do not count!) that the services on offer meet their expectations and needs?
- Do you have a parent forum; how are the views of parents acknowledged and are they acted upon?



7 Successful and sustained engagement with families happens where there is support for the whole family

Good parenting happens in all sorts of families and policy needs to reflect this diversity, helping children to have the best. Policies and services also need to respond sensitively to the needs of all family members as it's not only parents who are important to children.

(DCSF 2010)

Children thrive when they grow up in families where they receive what Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) refers to as 'at home good parenting'!

Positive relationships between parents and children are fundamental to good outcomes for children.

(C4EO 2009)

Parent's lives are complicated and at times all parents can find they are under pressure. For some parents, their circumstances and unmet needs can severely impact on what they can offer their child at that time. What affects the family affects the child, so the focus needs to be on the whole family rather than any one individual within it.

By being inclusive of fathers and mothers (or carers where appropriate) and taking the whole-family approach, services can secure better outcomes for families at risk of poor outcomes by identifying support needs at the earliest opportunity.

(Sure Start 2010)

There has been a recent government focus on the importance of understanding the issues affecting the family as a whole and the strengths and challenges within families:

When parents experience difficulties in their own lives, the impact can be severe and enduring for both themselves and their children. The consequences can cast a shadow that spans whole lifetimes and may carry significant costs for public services and the wider community.

(Social Exclusion Task Force 2007)

Reaching Out: Think families (Social Exclusion Task Force 2007) goes on to highlight the learning from the Families at Risk Review, stressing that in order to engage effectively with all families, practitioners need to be aware that:

- 'one size does not fit all' and families need a personalised approach that works for them
- an integrated approach is required where families are supported by a range of integrated services
- early intervention is important, so practitioners need to build relationships with families effectively so that the best support can be offered as quickly as possible.

The whole-family approach stresses the importance of looking at the family as a unit and focusing on positive interdependency and supportive relationships. This approach takes the family's resilience and social capital as the foundations for achieving positive outcomes.

(Social Exclusion Task Force 2007)

We need to move to away from a long-standing concern with risk factors and towards a focus on protective factors, where families are viewed as active and knowledgeable participants (Council of Europe 2007).

If we are to reach out to families at risk, we need to identify and exploit opportunities to build the capacity of systems and services to 'think family'. This means a shift in the mindset to focus on the strengths and difficulties of the whole family rather than those of the parent or child in isolation.

(Social Exclusion Task Force 2007)



What would this principle look like in practice?

The Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families: reflections from a social worker and parent.

Karen was referred to me at the children's centre through her community mental health worker. Karen began to use many different parts of the centre with her children including crèche, nurture group, nursery and after school club. We set up meetings between all the professionals involved to give Karen continuity of support as there were difficulties in providing a consistent approach to her care.

After Karen was admitted to hospital last year, other family members became involved and supported at the centre. Karen's husband, Craig became actively involved with the children in the nursery and accompanied them on trips. Karen's mum, Mary, and her dad, John, regularly attend group support sessions and come in to bring and collect the children from the different groups that they attend. Enabling all family members to get to know the workers at the centre and receive support for themselves in caring for Karen and the children has been really important in maintaining Karen's support network.

(Sarah, adult mental health worker)

Without the Centre I don't know where I'd have been. One of the main reasons I came to the Centre was for breast feeding support because no one in my family had ever breast fed. I joined the breast feeding support group and went on to Sarah from there. Then I got referred to a Sure Start Family Visitor and Sarah who came to my home to help me with the family and my post natal depression at the time. The family started to become involved when I joined the GAP (Getting Ahead of Post Natal Depression) group and they found it supportive because Sarah made some home visits and she became a point of contact if they had concerns as well. Then the children moved from nursery and Sarah got some funding for after school club for us so that I could concentrate on my health issues and have continued one to one care and support.

(Karen, parent Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families)

Points for reflection

- How is support offered for all family members?
- How is information about families shared between different services offering support? How is the family involved in the sharing of this information?
- If families leave your service, is there a common approach and shared information regarding support?
- How do you involve extended family members?

8

Successful and sustained engagement with families is through universal services but with opportunities for more intensive support where most needed

Trust is key to success: staff in universal services such as teachers, doctors and health visitors [practitioners in children's centres] can be important sources of support where families have built strong and sustained personal relationships. This can be crucial in achieving positive outcomes.

(Social Exclusion Task Force 2007)

Providing flexible non-stigmatising universal services, where families are already known and have established relationships with practitioners, means that families have access to support as and when they need it. It is important that 'families are not pushed into action by professionals but are allowed to go at their own pace' (Council of Europe 2007, p.122).

Sometimes families need help to access specialised services, which is easier if support is offered by well-known and trusted practitioners or 'key workers' who have developed a relationship with both the children and the adults in the family. Building such relationships takes time. The development of trust between parent and this 'key worker' practitioner allows for this more specialised support to be offered, ideally by the same worker. This continuity of care is important in maintaining the trusting relationship with families. If further specialised services are required, it is important that the key worker is alongside to offer support to the family in engaging with other professionals. Parents may attend an 'open to all' drop-in group or experience a home visit from a health visitor or family nurse during which the practitioner-parent relationship builds.

As Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford argue:

services are more effective when ... they provide intensive support to vulnerable parents in the first three years to enable them to meet their children's needs, and they avoid labelling 'problem families'.

(Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2009)

In a review of the literature on ways of working with parents, the Council of Europe report (2007) *Parenting in Contemporary Europe: A positive approach*, suggests that programmes and services should be guided by certain principles. These are:

- *Non-judgemental and non-stigmatising attitudes*
- *A bottom-up approach*
- *Multi-focused and flexible services*
- *Integrated community-based services*
- *Inclusivity towards the experience of minority and ethnic groups.*
(Council Of Europe 2007)

Recent research has argued that services which offer specialised support within universal services are particularly effective and need to be inclusive of all families challenged by complexities, including disability. The Marmot Review says that:

actions must be universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage. We call this proportionate universalism. Greater intensity of action is likely to be needed for those with greater social and economic disadvantage.

(Department of Health 2010)

What would this principle look like in practice?

The Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families: reflections from a Growing Together group, a universal drop-in for parents and children aged 0–3, where there is access to specialised support through known workers at the Centre.

I got to know Alison through her health visitor as she had post-natal depression. She attended the Growing Together drop-in group, where she was able to develop relationships with practitioners in a non-stigmatised environment and engage in reflection about her relationship with her child. Because of the way the group is set up, she was able to do this in her own time and in her own way. She accessed other services for her post-natal depression through the centre, while maintaining her connection through the Growing Together group.

(Tina)

Growing Together was an important group for me and my child. The room was always set up in the same way every week, this made it predictable. The staff were always the same; and knowing I would always see the same people helped me to make relationships with them. I knew each week who would be there and I would know if someone was going to be off on annual leave. This helped me to feel safe.

(Alison, Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families)

Points for reflection

- How well do you know your families and how do you identify their needs? Do you do home visits?
- What professional development do you offer to universal service providers in assessing levels of need with families?
- How do statutory, voluntary and community services collaborate to support families?
- How is support offered to families with a range of complex issues and needs?



9 **Successful and sustained engagement with families requires effective support and supervision for staff, encouraging evaluation and self-reflection**

If staff members are to provide the kind of encouragement and support necessary for the support and development of children and families, they need to be encouraged and supported themselves.

(Mezirow 1994)

One of the many benefits from working in multidisciplinary teams is the opportunity to learn from the working practices derived in different disciplines.

Within the professions of psychotherapy, counselling and social work, it is generally accepted that those who work with distress and discouragement are at risk of becoming distressed and discouraged as well.

(John 2008)

Those practitioners are required to take part in regular formal supervision, which helps them to look at how their work is affecting them and to maintain, or regain, a healthier perspective and helpful distance from the distress of others.

(John 2009)

There is growing recognition that regular mentoring of staff, as well as support and supervision, are essential to the well-being of staff and their ability to work effectively with children and families. Effective supervision is different from performance management. Performance management tends to be guided by a narrow focus on designated outcomes. The supervision process is much more about the person and their personal and professional development.

Effective support and supervision has three elements:

- reflection and dialogue about your self and any personal issues that are affecting you and are impacting on your work
- reflection and dialogue about your work with children and families
- reflection and dialogue about your professional development and the opportunities that are available to you to improve and reflect on your practice.

Where support and supervision works best is when a lead person in a setting is responsible for the supervision of named staff and the supervision session takes place on a regular basis, generally lasting for an hour once a month. The supervision session takes place in an agreed confidential space where the supervisee will be at ease. There is an element of stimulation, challenge and emotional containment (Formishino and Oliveira-Formishino 2005). Regular designated time with a lead person in the setting enables practitioners to take stock and 'offload' before underlying issues become insurmountable. The space created for these discussions also enables workers to bring issues to supervision and to develop trust in the leadership of others that these issues will be discussed and addressed.

In some situations, for example for group leaders working with children and families, group supervision is required. This enables group members to reflect on difficult practice issues and to challenge, support and encourage colleagues and share knowledge, skills and insights with them in a non-threatening, safe and confidential environment.

Professional self-reflection and evaluation leads to reflective practitioners who constantly respond to feedback on their practice and strive to improve what they offer on a day-to-day basis. Supporting practitioners professionally in this way is an investment in their future and leads to a deeper commitment by staff and much better relationships within staff teams as practitioners feel nurtured and cared for.

What would this principle look like in practice?

The Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families: reflections from crèche workers at the Centre.

In Sarah's supervision we explored the challenges she was facing supporting Lesley, a parent of a 2½ year old boy attending crèche. The discussions we had during supervision helped Sarah to work through her feelings and anxieties. We were able to put a professional development plan into place that helped her to build on and enhance her practice within the crèche.

(Jenny)

I discussed my work with Lesley and her child in my supervision. This gave me the opportunity to explore my feelings and worries about my ability to support this family successfully. I had suffered post-natal depression many years ago and was feeling anxious. My supervisor suggested that I became a group leader within the GAP (Getting Ahead of Post-natal depression) group within the Centre. This enabled me to understand the support that was available to parents, and how I could enhance my practice in the crèche.

(Sarah)

Points for reflection

- Do practitioners have regular support and supervision sessions?
- How are practitioners encouraged to evaluate their practice?
- Are practitioners given time for self-reflection and review?



10 Successful and sustained engagement with families requires an understanding and honest sharing of issues around safeguarding

The separation between children's and adult services has resulted in a fragmented approach to work with families and different views about whether the focus of support is on child protection or on supporting people with their parenting role

(Commission for Social Care Inspection 2009; Roberts 2009)

Working hard to build positive initial relationships with families makes it easier later on if difficult issues need to be discussed. Parents need to know, and internalise, the feeling that they are important, that they are known to those working with them and that their difficulties are understood and acknowledged.

Many aspects of the wider environment impact on children's outcomes but the greatest influence, within a child's first years of life, are the experiences within the family, including the parental relationship, family environment, social and economic environment and culture. It needs to be recognised that it is parents' experiences of being parented in their turn, the history of their own relationships with family, peers, partners, professionals and the community, coupled with their current life stressors, that will affect the way they understand and interpret the needs and behaviours of their own children.

Early identification of parenting difficulties is crucial and it is important to recognise the value and significance of the role of universal services, such as midwifery, health visiting and education within this. But it is equally important to acknowledge the need for **clear pathways to targeted and individualised support**. Work with vulnerable families needs to be considered as long term, and this can best be done through organisations with a stable workforce who are well supported to remain curious about the families they work with and committed to the work they do.

It is apparent that practitioners' individual knowledge, experience and confidence about their own ability, as well as their own experience of being contained through effective supervisory provision, are significant in enabling them to consider their own emotions and therefore how they manage their work within challenging situations.

Those working with parents may not always find conversations about their safeguarding concerns easy, and all workers will need support through regular management and safeguarding supervision to cope with the complex emotional

demands of such work. In the same way that 'parents need to know that staff care about them as well as their children' (Whalley 2007), practitioners need to be cared for and supported within their staff team.

Although many factors influence the way in which families engage with services, the way that professionals respond to parents can be a key factor. As families are actively engaged in a two-way process through the common assessment framework (CAF), it is particularly important to follow a transparent approach that is underpinned by the above principles, throughout all levels of safeguarding work. Only then will there be a real commitment to building and sustaining relationships so that knowledge can be shared two ways in a respectful dialogue, with the focus remaining upon the needs of the child.

What would this principle look like in practice?

Sure Start children's centres: reflections from practitioners at Bowthorpe, West Earlham and Costessey.

The children's centre health visitor had previously worked with parents Sarah and Rick, both aged 17. Sarah had previously given birth to a daughter, Ebony, alone at 36 weeks, after a concealed pregnancy. Both parents have learning difficulties. Sarah's home life was chaotic and Rick had a history of abuse throughout his own childhood, and for two years had been on the Schedule 1 Offenders register. Aged 18 months, Ebony had been removed from the care of her parents to her grandmother's care following ongoing safeguarding concerns around neglect and Ebony's ambivalent attachment.

In 2009, Sarah presented to the GP with another unplanned pregnancy but this time at just eight weeks gestation. The health visitor immediately re-engaged with the family, instigating a planned package of intensive antenatal support and attachment work from the wider multi-disciplinary team, all of whom had met with the family while they were caring for Ebony. In the light of the previous history, a referral was also made to children's services. In February 2010, baby Callum was born. Rick and grandmother were both present at this birth, and the family returned home with a multi-agency package of support.

When I first met Sarah she was difficult to engage with, she didn't make eye contact and did not easily communicate with professionals. Due to his own past experiences, Rick was resentful of the need for any professionals in the family's lives. I visited regularly at home to develop a relationship with the extended family and gradually introduced the wider team, all of whom I knew would use a consistent approach. Although Ebony was removed from their care, Sarah and Rick developed a trusting relationship with the whole team

and, when Sarah became pregnant for the second time, she was able to ask for support at a much earlier stage. Most significantly, this gave an opportunity for the Centre to work alongside the family throughout the entire antenatal period; Sarah and Rick were visited by workers they were familiar with and, knowing individuals within the team, the family have been able to identify and ask for the support that they need, planning themselves for the care of their new baby son. I believe the trusting relationships that had previously been established enabled shared conversations with Sarah and Rick even during the most difficult and challenging times.

(Bowthorpe, West Earlham and Costessey Area Sure Start Children's Centres)

Points for reflection

- Do all staff have training not just in child protection but also in how to share issues around safeguarding with parents?
- Do all staff know how the common assessment framework operates and how to support and engage parents through the process?



How might the Principles be used in practice?

It is hoped that these Principles will be used to promote reflection at all levels within a local area – including children's trusts, local authority teams and settings.

They could be used, for example, to:

- identify the most effective practice, so that there is a consistent understanding and vision of quality
- contribute to local authorities' strategies to meet their statutory duties to improve outcomes for children and reduce inequalities
- shape training and staff development strategies for practitioners and managers of settings and for quality improvement mentors and verifiers
- enable local authorities to work together within a common framework.

But beyond this, the Principles have a wider use in informing and supporting any consultations, practice and policy developments and commissioning frameworks.

How might the Principles be used by parents?

A father speaking about his experiences with his child's school:

There should be some sort of way they [the school and the children's centre] can liaise together locally to be on the same par of how they run things.

The Principles could be used by parents to demonstrate their expectations of services and to point out when these expectations are not met.

How might the Principles be used by local services?

A parent speaking about children moving from nursery to reception:

The staff all work together in a way that you feel you can speak to anyone.

The Principles could be used to support communication and partnership between organisations, so that there is transparency about the approaches used and the values supporting them.

How might the Principles be used by national organisations?

A development manager used these at a stakeholders' meeting to reflect on a new model of support for pregnancy, birth and beyond.

The Principles helped reflect on the proposed new model for delivering a universal service and gave me confidence to raise points in the small multi-agency focus group. I really wanted to see the celebration of parents as experts in their children's lives, and the Principles supported discussions around partnership and learning from parents. This was especially useful as this was a multi-agency meeting.

The Principles can introduce debate about commonly held views, and challenge assumptions about so-called 'hard to reach' parents.

How might the Principles be used by commissioners?

A head of early years and extended services hopes to use the new Principles to provide a vehicle for debate, discussion and evidence-gathering for all their services, and to help their children's trust partners to engage successfully with all parents and families across the borough.

We recognise that it is parents who bring up children and that some parents need information, advice and support at different times as their children grow up. And that it is crucial that all services work with parents in a way that is consistent. In delivering our Family and Parenting Support Strategy we will be considering the principles which underpin all services' work with families, from housing to early years to schools and health as well as specific family support services.

The Principles could be used to ensure the development of a way of working with families and parents throughout a borough. They could help with commissioning family and parent support services, by ensuring they meet the ethos of the children's trust.

How might the principles be used by managers of settings?

A centre manager speaking about the importance of supervision, training and support for staff:

We know that how we work in partnership with parents really makes a difference, and we need to make sure all our staff are supported and trained. We can't assume they will all find this easy, or will see this as part of their role. Good supervision is vital. We encourage staff to develop their skills and seek accreditation, and have supported and celebrated their achievements.

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