**Working with children, parents, families and carers**

**Some questions/ideas to think about:**

* How might working with the parents of children with SEND be challenging?
* What is your role in working with parents?
* Is there anything you think you could do better with regard to this? How?
* Does your setting have somewhere where staff can talk to parents in private? If not, could this be set up?
* Find the Local Offer for your local authority by searching for it online. Become familiar with it so you can advise parents.

Building effective practitioner and parent partnerships, in order to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (or SEND). The importance of working with all those involved in caring for young children, including parents, carers and the wider family, is widely accepted as good practice in the early years.

The requirement to work with parents is embedded in the principles of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2017) (EYFS), and is central to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 0-25 years (2015). These reinforce a setting’s duty to engage with and involve parents in decision making, and to provide information and support in order to achieve this.

Building effective partnerships with parents requires practitioners to understand the individuality and uniqueness of each family and members within it. Be aware of possible cultural differences and the impact these may have on how families interact with you. It is well established that families of children with SEND experience additional pressures and demands in their roles. When building effective partnerships, it is important to develop a sensitive understanding of ‘what is important to’ the family (which might include for example, the desire to go out for a meal together) and ‘what is important for’ the family (perhaps that they engage with outside agencies) and how they would like to be supported.

Whilst we know the importance of engaging and involving parents, it is essential to recognise that each parent that you meet may have very different feelings about how they engage with the setting, the key person, the SENCo and possibly others who may become involved over time. They may also respond to your concerns with a range of responses from relief, to shock or even anger. All of these responses are natural and depend upon the parent’s unique situation, and what their perspectives are on their child’s development and learning. In taking steps to build a trusted relationship with parents, the time, the place and the opportunities for honest and supportive communication is crucial. It may be that the parent takes some time to engage, or they may withdraw from contact, or they may want very frequent opportunities to check in with you. Therefore, during the process of developing an effective relationship, it is important to ‘hold the baton’ alongside the parent and in the best interests of the child. That is, to continue to put the best possible approaches and interventions in place, to continue to make useful and deeper observations and to continue building a picture of the child. It will take different amounts of time for each parent to be involved in the best way than they can, but it is important to share the responsibility throughout the relationship and for the family to know when they finally take hold of the baton, you are still available to be alongside them, if and when it is necessary. Remember that some parents may have learning or mental health difficulties themselves.

When discussing concerns about a child with their parent, getting the balance between exploring your concerns and ensuring that the parent feels that you genuinely wish to work together and that their views are valued is paramount. Respectful engagement with parents is about being aware that the impact of what you say and do affects not only the parent you are in direct contact with, but indeed the whole family. Developing a responsive and empathetic approach to working with parents will provide the basis upon which outcomes and actions can be freely discussed and agreed upon; a shared sense of ownership and involvement will lead to better outcomes for the child. Through the process of building and sustaining the partnership, each person within it will be able to see the importance of taking responsibility for their role in supporting the learning and development of the child.

When thinking about speaking with parents, it is important to offer them as many options as possible in relation to the timing, location and duration of the meeting. It is a good idea to find out what suits the parent best, so that they feel as at ease as possible. It’s important to give the parent as much information as possible in advance, so that they do not become anxious about the conversation, and if they wish, they can plan what they would like to talk about. If there are going to be other people present, make sure that the parents know who they are and why they are involved. Also suggest that the parent may like to bring someone along with them for support. Parents may be concerned about who else is going to hear the discussion; being clear about appropriate levels of confidentiality may help to settle a parent’s concern. During the conversation, make sure that there are plenty of opportunities for the parent to contribute and share their understanding of their child’s views and wishes.

Using clear and uncomplicated language is essential, as it is far too easy to slip into a style of conversation which can exclude parents; they may not feel that they can ask for explanations of certain terms or acronyms. This should be something that all of those involved adhere to at all times, both in spoken and written communications.

Parents can be supported in a variety of other ways, but remember it isn’t ‘one size fits all’. As a practitioner, SENCo or manager, it is a good idea to be aware of what support is available locally so that you can signpost parents to this or even support them to make contact. Every Local Authority has a Local Offer which should be on their website. There are Parent Carer Forums in each local authority and Information Advice and Support Services (IASS), who will all have information which may be useful. If you are signposting to different services, it is worth doing fairly regular checks that the information you hold about contact details, opening times, and availability is up to date.

There are many national organisations who have fact sheets and information for parents such as:

Contact: [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

IPSEA (Independent Parental Special Education Advice): [www.ipsea.org.uk](http://www.ipsea.org.uk)

Council for Disabled Children: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/>

There are also parent-led groups such as:

Bringing us Together: <http://bringingustogether.org.uk/>

Special Needs Jungle: [www.specialneedsjungle.com](http://www.specialneedsjungle.com)

Other organisations have useful information for parents and practitioners such as:

Autism Education Trust: <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>

Communication Trust: [www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk](http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk)

National Literacy Trust: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/>

Dyslexia and SpLD Trust: <http://www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk/>

National Portage Association: [www.portage.org.uk](http://www.portage.org.uk)

Royal National Institute for the Blind: [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

National Deaf Children’s Society: <http://www.ndcs.org.uk/>

**Reflection questions and activities:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Question/activity** | **Response** |
| How might working with the parents of children with SEND be challenging? |  |
| What is your role in working with parents?  Is there anything you think you could do better with regard to this? How? |  |
| Does your setting have somewhere where staff can talk to parents in private? If not, could this be set up? |  |
| Find the Local Offer for your local authority by searching for it online. Become familiar with it so you can advise parents |  |