reflections
GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION **ISSUE 4 2020**

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS: BUILDING QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS THAT BENEFIT CHILDREN

Anna Russell, Educational Leader, Gowrie Broadmeadows Valley, Victoria
Olivia Clayton, Senior Practice Design Specialist, Parenting Research Centre

Early childhood educators understand that building quality relationships with families is vital for supporting children to thrive. Parenting Resource Centre (PRC) has designed a new practice support system to strengthen educators' skill and confidence in this area. The new system is called *Partnering with Parents,* and it is helpful guide for early childhood services to create an environment that is welcoming of, and responsive to, parents and families.

The Parenting Research Centre, an independent not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to help children and families thrive by driving improved ways of supporting parenting. The Centre worked in partnership with several Victorian-based long day care and kindergartens, including Gowrie Carlton North and Gowrie Broadmeadows Valley, to develop the system, especially in refining the resources and training material.

This article provides an introduction to the system, explains how it works in early childhood centres, and includes feedback from Gowrie Victoria on how the system was incorporated into programs during its early development and field test. The Parenting Research Centre is currently conducting an experimental trial to further determine the effectiveness of the system in supporting educators.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS: BUILDING QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS THAT BENEFIT CHILDREN

BACKGROUND

Collaborative relationships with families are fundamental to achieving quality outcomes for children. Working with parents and families is a critical part of an early childhood educator's role, as demonstrated by its inclusion in essential guiding documents for all early childhood education and care services and programs. These should be based on active communication, consultation and collaboration.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016) includes 'Partnerships with families' as a core practice principle. This practice principle recognises that 'Children learn most in their early years from those adults with whom they have the closest relationships' and that '*Families and kinship members have primary influence on their children's learning and development'*. Similarly Belonging, Being, Becoming – The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia highlights the essential role that families play in the lives of their children and how 'from birth children are connected to family…' (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2009).

The National Quality Framework is informed by research that shows children are much more likely to reach their full potential in life when their family and education and care service work together. These benefits are evident when families and educators exchange information regularly and collaborate on consistent approaches to daily routines, child development and learning. The importance of building collaborative partnerships with families is reflected in the National Quality Standards (NQS); included in the Guiding Principles, which states 'the role of parents and families is respected and supported'. Quality Area 6 of the National Quality Standard (NQS) Area 6 of the Standards, *Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities*, also includes key elements such as respectful relationships with families that acknowledge their expertise as a parent as well as shared decision-making about each child's learning and wellbeing (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, 2018).

Although the importance of services developing these relationships with families is acknowledged, recent research suggests many educators find this challenging. In a Parenting Research Centre online survey conducted in 2016, 98% of 318 educators said they wanted training in partnering with families, specifically in how to conduct conversations with parents about the children in their programs. Based on this research the *Partnering with Parents* was developed to help address this need.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS: BUILDING QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS THAT BENEFIT CHILDREN

A key part of developing *Partnering with Parents* was ensuring it is easy to incorporate into the daily rhythm of busy early childhood educator's activities. It has been designed so that centres nominate staff members to act as a 'Practice Coaches'. Practice Coaches undertake a combined online and face-to-face training course, and then are supported through a series of phone consultations to guide and support other educators at their centre to implement the skills and strategies.

The system has three main components:

Making moments matter

This component helps educators create a positive relational environment in their centre every day for parents and families. Strategies for communicating with parents in typical day-to-day interactions include 'Warm and Gentle', 'Tuning In', 'Following their lead', 'Listening and Talking', and 'Teachable Moments'. These mirror strategies educators are already familiar with when working with the children in their programs. When educators need support in using these strategies, Practice Coaches are available to guide them on a day-by-day basis.

More than moments

In More than moments, educators learn more about how to have successful constructive conversations with parents when needed. For example, when responding to a concern a parent has about their child, or raising a concern. Practice Coaches support educators to do this with just-in-time coaching, involving scheduled interactions between coaches and educators to plan approaches, model and role-play strategies, and reflect on actions taken.

Working on concerns

This describes working collaboratively with parents through a series of structured phases on an issue requiring more intensive, and possibly longer-term, attention. Coaching for this component is supplied by the Parenting Research Centre project team via a series of live webinars and telephone consultations.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS: BUILDING QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS THAT BENEFIT CHILDREN

EARLY RESULTS OF THE FIELD TEST

In 2019, the authors shared the findings of the *Partnering with Parents* field testing at the Early Childhood Australia National Conference in Hobart. Through this presentation we shared how the team at Gowrie Broadmeadows Valley engaged with the professional learning and the resources to support educators in their partnerships with families. Anna Russell, Educational Leader at Gowrie Broadmeadows Valley reflects on their involvement in the '*Partnerships with Parents*' trial:

> *"The strategies in Partnering with Parents required us to break down each interaction and each relationship to plan its purpose and implementation. Initially, some of the steps sounded too simplistic - we already had experiences with other early years teaching and assessment tools such as the Abecedarian Approach and CLASS assessment. However, the model kept to the forefront for us that children thrive when the relationship between parents and educators is strong and the door for working together is kept open."*

One element of Partnering with Parents that has become well-embedded in the classrooms at Gowrie Broadmeadows was the investment in team meetings and planning. During the ten-week roll out each program team would meet every Monday morning. They would review the Making moments matter tip-sheet for the week's focus, and then plan what each educator was going to do, and this would be very specific, for example: "I will stop what I am doing when Joe's mum walks in....", or: "I will ask Joe's Mum whether she would like to discuss how we can support pencil grip."

Teams would then meet each Friday morning to critically and honestly reflect together on each educator's progress. By doing it in a team situation each educator was offered feedback, support and encouragement. This was supported by the expertise of the Practice Coach. These meetings were held in the classroom, with children and often were only short meetings to capture the learning. Educators reported that they did not impact their daily program or require any additional resources. The planning process made it all seem more achievable. The team were also able to easily incorporate these strategies into their program planning process for children – it just took a slight shift in mindset to apply it to parents and families as well.

LEARNINGS

One of the key learnings for the team was that we shouldn't assume that all our relationships with families were strong just because they were pleasant. Taking the time to work through each of the stages and planning and reflecting as they went allowed the team to form strong bonds and prepared the relationship for harder discussions such as raising concerns. The other elements of 'Partnering with Parents', 'More than moments' and 'Working on concerns', enabled educators to plan and reflect on conversations where they might raise or respond to a concern.

> *"We really view the strategies learnt throughout this project and accompanying resources as tools we can add to our teaching tool belts. This approach to partnerships has become an engrained part of our teaching identity. The strategies are always with us and have allowed us to develop a community full of rich relationships."*
>
> Anna Russell

NEXT STEPS

The Parenting Research Centre is currently conducting an experimental trial of *Partnering with Parents* with 19 early childhood services across Victoria. The trial is due for completion in June 2020. We look forward to sharing more information about the outcomes of this trial with you as these are completed.

References

1. A six-week field test of the system was conducted at Gowrie Broadmeadows Valley and Carlton North, Acacia Children's Services in St Albans and Richmond and Acacia Fitzroy Creche.

- Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (2019). The National Quality Standard. Retrieved from https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard
- Department of Education and Training. (2016). Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For All Children from Birth to Eight Years. Victorian Government, East Melbourne. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf
- Petrovic, Z., Clayton, O., Matthews, J. et al. (2019). Building the skills and confidence of early childhood educators to work with parents: Study protocol for the Partnering with Parents cluster randomised controlled trial. BMC Medical Research Methodology 19, 197 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0846-1

For your professional learning and support contact your state based Gowrie listed below:

NSW www.gowriensw.com.au

QLD www.gowrieqld.com.au

SA www.gowriesa.org.au

TAS www.gowrie-tas.com.au

VIC www.gowrievictoria.com.au

WA www.gowrie-wa.com.au

Gowrie Australia reflections