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Author: Martin Needham, Dianne Jackson
Pub. Date: 2019
Product: Sage Academic Books
DOI: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473910188
Disciplines: Education, Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Education (general), Early Childhood Studies, Early Childhood Teacher Resources
Access Date: September 12, 2023
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: 55 City Road
Online ISBN: 9781526473899

Parental Involvement and Partnership with Parents: ‘T'ain't what you do (It's the Way that you do it)’

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Chapter Overview

Many aspects of professional practice in early education require individuals to make judgements about how to balance competing arguments. This chapter examines some of the choices that professionals working with parents need to consider when they frame these relationships. The chapter briefly outlines the work of Baumrind (1996) on parenting styles, which underpins many parenting programmes. The chapter suggests that Baumrind's model, which advocates a middle course between authoritarian and too permissive parenting styles, may be in tension with political pressure to deliver formalised parenting courses. The title of this chapter is taken from the popular song, originally written in 1933 (Oliver and Young, 1939). The lyric draws attention to the argument developed in this chapter; that the medium is the message and try as we might, with the best of intentions and the best planned resources, if we fail to connect with parents through respectful relationships little progress will be made.

Introduction

Postman and Weingartner (1969) were very influential early advocates for more active and learner-focused approaches to learning. In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, they argued that *the medium is the message*; meaning that the learning which makes the most lasting impression is that where there is some harmonisation between the content and style of delivery. ‘It is not what you say to people that counts. It is what you have them do’ (1969: 30). Postman and Weingartner pointed out that many schools used to test pupils’ memories rather than promoting the development of serious question asking. In this chapter we consider the harmonisation of content and methods of delivery in groups where professionals offer support to parents.

There is a growing body of international research evidence that indicates that parents play a crucial role in enhancing educational outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2010). There is far less evidence regarding the impact of early interventions where practitioners engage with parents (Cummings et al., 2012). Nevertheless the political commitment to early interventions with parents continues to gather momentum. This chapter draws on examples from Australia and England to illustrate some of the common issues arising internationally with regard to working with parents (see also Chapter 19 by Josephine Bleach and Chapter 17 Sian Wyn Siencyn on parenting support initiatives in Wales and Ireland).

In 2011 the UK coalition government made a commitment to increase access to parent support in England (DfE, 2011) initiating the 'CAN Parent' trial in 2012 (DfE, 2012). This policy continued to build upon the Sure Start early intervention initiatives of the previous labour administration (Needham, 2007). The evidence is compelling and many authors internationally report that providing strategies to support parents and children early in children's lives maximises developmental opportunities and enhances early childhood outcomes which extend into adulthood (see Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; McCain and Mustard, 2002; PPEL, 2007).

To provide a further example, research conducted in Australia shows similar investment in prevention and early intervention strategies such as *Community for Children Plus* (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2013) and *Pathways to Prevention* (Barnes et al., 2006). These strategies also aim to influence children's, parents' or families' behaviours in order to reduce the risk or ameliorate the effects of unfavourable social or physical environments. The goal of these programmes, both in the UK and Australia, is to effect change so that protective factors outweigh risk factors and build resilience. It is argued that preventative programmes and interventions that offer social support to parents and quality learning environments to children are protective for families (Jackson, 2010).

The Content of Parenting Support Initiatives

The most commonly occurring named parenting programmes in both Australia and England are Webster-Stratton's The Incredible Years and Triple P Parenting (Cummings et al., 2012). These programmes have been widely adopted because they have a track record of research evidence to indicate their effectiveness (Sanders et al., 2005; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Both programmes include initial elements which are intended to be universally accessible with discussion sessions drawing on book- and video-based

materials. These are aimed at improving mental well-being through improved home relationships which help children assimilate into educational processes. Triple P and The Incredible Years both seek to promote authoritative parenting styles which advocate the setting of clear predictable boundaries that are negotiated and discussed with children rather than imposed. These are considered to lead to a more positive sense of personal agency, self-control and self-confidence in the child (Sanders et al., 2005; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

This idea of parenting styles is very pervasive in regard to supporting social and emotional development. The parenting style typology developed by Baumrind (1973) identified three key parenting styles, *authoritative, permissive* and *authoritarian*. *Indifferent* is a fourth identified path (Bornstein and Zlotnick, 2009). Baumrind describes authoritative parenting as an integrated approach to parenting which is neither too permissive in deferring too much to the child, nor too authoritarian, where the adult exerts too much control over the child (Baumrind, 1996).

> Within the authoritative model, behavioral compliance and psychological autonomy are not viewed as mutually exclusive but rather as interdependent objectives: children are encouraged to respond habitually in prosocial ways and to reason autonomously about moral problems, and to respect adult authorities and to learn how to think independently. (Baumrind, 1996: 405)

Bornstein and Zlotnick (2009) showed how these styles have been increasingly widely tested and found to be helpful in a range of contexts which suggest them to be influential in the toddler period in shaping the child's attitudes to social engagement and collaborative learning. Bornstein and colleagues (2011) give an overview of a cross-cultural study comparing authoritarian and progressive parenting styles in over 1000 families in 9 countries. This study suggests that in several contemporary cultural contexts around the world there is a trend towards more progressive parenting styles, particularly in China. They suggest that country differences in progressive and authoritarian attitudes articulate with societal encouragement of child agency. ‘Parents who hold more authoritarian attitudes may encourage less agency in their children than parents who hold more progressive attitudes’ (Bornstein et al., 2011: 229). However, they still report considerable variance in interpretation within and across countries, cultures and communities. Rogoff (2003) showed how cultural expectations mediate both children's and parents’ ideas about what are fair and acceptable. The same events might lead to more consistently progressive responses in one culture compared to another. This reminds those working with families of the importance of developing relationships which explore such cultural differences rather than assuming shared perceptions.

In programmes with more educationally orientated objectives there is also considerable emphasis on developing autonomous and positive learning dispositions. Evidence from pre-school studies, which included parents, emphasise the value of sensitivity to children's learning needs and scaffolding their learning through playful activity and problem solving (Jordan, 2004). The High/Scope research study from the USA (Schweinhart et al., 2005) demonstrated the potential long term benefits of a model of pre-school education which is neither too formal or too laissez faire. What is often under-reported is that the High/Scope children's parents were also encouraged to support this pre-school programme during weekly 90 minute home visits. Sylva et al. (2010) show that such pre-school approaches to supporting children's learning are effective but highlight that a positive home learning environment has a greater predictive power with regard to education attainment. The benefits of sensitive support of child-led learning in combination with the idea of working together with parents are well documented (Evangelou et al., 2007; Whalley and the Pen Green Team, 2007; Rinaldi, 2008).

Decisions about the Content of Parenting Sessions

As evidence of a parenting programme's effectiveness develops there is political pressure to repeat those formats that have been proven to work (Rhodes, 2009). This may, however, lead to tensions if practitioners feel there is a mismatch between the expectations in a prescribed parenting programme and the needs of the parents participating in their local community. Rhodes (2009) argues the Incredible Years programme has a potential draw back where a set format is imposed, because while such programmes have been refined in terms of content for targeted efficacy there will be some individuals and groups for whom a set format is less appropriate. Rhodes suggests that there is a need to collect evidence to evaluate more flexible programmes which could be facilitated through the consistent use of similar pre- and post-test materials. In the second half of this chapter examples from case study research are presented to illustrate why a more flexible approach might be considered.

An Example from Practice

The first part of this chapter demonstrates that while there is broad agreement on the thrust of activities with parents and young children, professionals delivering parent and toddler groups are sometimes faced with making difficult decisions on the balance of approaches to adopt: how much guidance to offer, how to offer guidance and whether to concentrate on supporting the parent or the child. The importance of offering support

for the parents' self-esteem, emotional well-being and bonding with their child are clearly extremely important and connected issues (Jackson, 2006). The following case study examples illustrate practitioners recognising the tension between what they are learning about and what they are doing with particular groups of parents.

The first example is taken from a case study of an English parent and child group offering a ten week programme located within a dedicated Children's Centre. These sessions were intended to include planned group discussions of children's learning; the group is referred to here as Talktime.

In this case study excerpt the practitioners facilitating the group are discussing adapting the format and weekly discussion agenda of the group with their manager.

Practitioner D:	If you follow the programme exactly it is quite prescriptive – this [showing a folder] is just our training notes. I'll show you this activity is in the parents' folder, we have given the paper work out in the sessions but they (the parents) don't take it.
Practitioner B:	No if we're not following the activity in the talking time group I thought it was better to leave it.
Manager M:	It might be worth documenting the informal activity following what the parents are doing which is obviously very rich so it might be worth almost retrospectively documenting. I mean there has been a very real discussion about a dilemma perhaps if we became more aware of the informal stuff we would be reassured that we are doing it well and are more tuned in to the moment and this is still a Talktime under any other name and I am going to interact with it and go with it. And there might be a moment where it is appropriate to just summarise and you'd be using their knowledge, their shared knowledge.
Practitioner D:	I found when I did the programme training it was very structured and I liked the bit where they did the hello and goodbye because I like singing but I was discussing it with B and that didn't work here and we decided that we were going to follow what B had learned from conducting our last group and keep it very similar.
Practitioner B:	This is a different type of parent.
Practitioner D:	That is it. It's not been tailored to fit our parents, we are looking at the parents we have got and it is all coming from their interests rather than us saying this, this and this. If you look on here [points to planning] it has all completely changed

> because we are supposed to be talking about living with television this week and we haven't. And we are supposed to be talking about favourite stories next week but we won't. We'll be continuing this week's activity and because Cheryl (child) wanted to bath the baby we are going to bath the babies aren't we? Because that is what they are interested in.

In this review meeting the practitioners indicate their reservations that the formal structured discussion part of the session is not working in the way they would like. Interviews conducted with the parents as part of the case study showed that their purposes in attending the sessions were not primarily to learn about parenting but rather to find creative and socialising opportunities for their children and to a lesser extent for themselves. Needham (2010) and Needham and Jackson (2012) highlight the importance of acknowledging and exploring each other's purposes rather than risking tensions arising from feelings that one party is not meeting the expectations of the other.

Manager M's comments highlight that there is some anxiety with regards to deviation from the proven programme but she demonstrates a clear willingness to support the practitioners' professional judgement, particularly if this can be documented and evaluated. As the discussion continues the practitioners highlight their perceptions that a formal structure is not in tune with the parents' purposes. The practitioners encouraged parents to interact supportively to promote the children's learning, and they reflected this in what they did with the parents. The questions for discussion and ideas for developing activities were arrived at jointly with the parents. Discussions, rather than being hypothetical and themed for the group, were sought in personalised exchanges arising from the activity of the child or the parent's questions. This approach has the advantage of helping bridge the divide between theory and practice. It takes what might be abstract ideas and helps to make them visible in personally meaningful situations. It supports parents who are uncomfortable talking in the formality of a group circle or possibly uncomfortable with discussing their personal circumstances. It is not, however, without drawbacks; such sessions may lose structure and important topics may not arise. Omitting structured discussions may miss opportunities to form group bonds or to show the wisdom and diversity of the parents or to build the skills of asking questions of each other. Monitoring the outcomes of these changes on parents' attitudes, self-confidence as well as their satisfaction with the programme could provide helpful

evidence and future reference points. As with many things in life, judgement is needed to get the balance right. The medium should match, and model, the message.

The Style of Parenting Support

While there may be broad agreement on the core principles of practice, the personal dimensions of human interaction will always be more complicated. Different families have different routines and cultural outlooks on many aspects of behaviour that are taken for granted by practitioners. Many authors highlight the limited research evidence addressing the broader questions of why programmes appear to work, under what circumstances and for whom (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009; Jackson, 2010). Vandenbroeck and colleagues argue that practitioners need to be more aware of the specific cultural adaptations that parents have to make in realising their own unique family identities based on ever changing circumstances as their children grow up and their needs change. They urge practitioners to be flexible and responsive to what parents have to say about their own inherited and emergent values.

An Example from Practice

The second example is from case study research that examined supported playgroups in Australia (Jackson, 2010). Supported playgroups are early childhood, dual-focused groups facilitated by practitioners in which parents and young children participate together. In this excerpt one practitioner articulates her awareness of the importance of acceptance, respect and sensitivity.

> There's always the risk that people will come and actually be harmed because the interactions are negative towards them, and they actually go away feeling less well off than when they came. So because of that risk, I think it's quite important to keep an eye on the overall dynamic, and make sure that that stays positive and moves towards even, I mean, I still think we've got a lot of growth to do in that

> area, being more consciously demonstrating strength-based parenting, so consciously embodying that philosophy … we're trying to further that cultural change … because I think the natural or enculturated way of adolescents interacting can be quite brutal and harsh. And they've just come from that … it's how you deal with your own feelings about seeing parenting you're not that comfortable with … and some people feel like, oh, I've just got to say something, or, I need to be nasty to that person to express that I don't like the fact they haven't changed that baby's nappy. And really it's not helpful, and it's good to just have support for the feelings you're having, which are just almost like loyalty to your own sense of what is right, but have some other ways to manage the interactions with that parent. Because as you know, if you are doing the wrong thing, if you feel judged as well, it doesn't really help you change. It just makes you feel more probably bad about yourself, which might be where the problem's coming from in the first place.
>
> (Supported playgroup facilitator)

In this research emotional support was integral to the relationships developed by the group facilitators with parents, particularly in cases where parents were known not to have experienced nurturing relationships themselves. The facilitators expressed genuine care and respect for parents in their groups and built trusting relationships with them. Parents benefited greatly from this type of support which enhanced their ability to provide nurturing care to their children.

Further, there were many examples that demonstrated the technical qualities, i.e. the knowledge and skills, that the facilitators possessed as a direct result of their training and experience. The main technical aspects in this context were their expertise related to child development and the provision of early childhood learning experiences and their family work expertise. The facilitators' understanding of the local community and welfare service system and their professional knowledge of formal supports and referral pathways could also be considered part of the technical skill that they brought to their facilitation role. Participants spoke at length about the importance of all of these aspects to the process of facilitation.

Relational practices (Dunst and Trivette, 1996), also known as *help-giving traits* and attributions, were seen as vital to the facilitation role by all participants in this research. These attributes included the facilitators' interpersonal skills, active listening skills and their ability to be empathetic, caring and nurturing. It also included the facilitators' ability to view parents as capable and to recognise their parenting capacities. The extent to which facilitators demonstrated these traits and attributions was evidenced through the ways in which they developed meaningful relationships with parents and through their ability to engage in processes of ongoing reflection that informed their behaviour and practice.

Also highly important in this context was the use of participatory practices (Dunst and Trivette, 1996). These practices included facilitators acting on their beliefs about involving parents actively and meaningfully and seeking and paying attention to parent input into the types of activities that were presented. There was particular emphasis placed on providing a range of supports within mainstream, social environments that were based on what parents said they wanted. Based on these same beliefs, facilitators at times also engaged in processes that addressed particular issues and promoted positive relational growth amongst parents.

The real strength of facilitators' work within the case study groups lay in their ability to provide a holistic, family-centred approach to working with families. The ways in which they situated their professional expertise and beliefs in parents' capabilities within caring and respectful relationships, enabled truly supportive environments to be created.

Above all, because the facilitators combined relational and participatory practices rather than relying on technical knowledge alone, parents experienced psychological benefits from their participation (Dawson and Berry, 2002; Trivette and Dunst, 2007). Parents in this research experienced emotional support, decreased isolation and increased confidence in parenting, which are known to influence children's positive developmental outcomes and to assist in the reduction of abusive or neglectful behaviours by parents (Munford and Sanders 2006; Higgins and Katz, 2008).

Conclusion

The development of nurturing, trusting and supportive relationships within groups such as the ones described in this chapter is dependent on the engagement and ongoing participation of parents, often over lengthy periods of time. This aspect of service provision is problematic in cases where families' participation is time-limited by the funding specifications dictated by government departments. The current policies that govern the operation of most groups involving parents are based on the premise that the support of parents influences positive child development. However, these policies also need to take into account that the relationships on which this type of support is dependent take significant time to develop and that outcomes for children are likely to be based on the continuity of these relationships. This issue deserves serious consideration by policymakers, especially in areas where supported playgroups are used as a strategy to target vulnerable communities (Jackson, 2010).

In very practical terms, whether activities with parents are structured, not structured or a mixture of the two, can be negotiated in the specifics of the group context. Keeping some degree of flexibility will allow for genuine exchange of meaningful questions and supportive open dialogues. Often people don't know what they don't know and there are times when practitioners should lead and others where responding to an individual's issues will open up a topic for a whole group. Sometimes a formal turn-taking discussion group will encourage everyone to join in, while at other times this may be overwhelming. People often benefit from thinking spaces and returning flexibly to themes may help parents to talk about what they do know rather than what they do not. In short celebrate difference, be self-critical, evaluate carefully, *take it easy, then your jive will swing* (Oliver and Young, 1939).

Critical Learning Activity

Essential warm up: use your favoured search engine to find a video recording of 'T'ain't what you do'. Listen to the original version by Jimmy Lunceford or the Fun Boy Three/Bananarama version (you might wish to use percussion instruments and join in).

This chapter examines a number of ways to encourage collaboration and harmony between those in

an early years setting and parents. It asks that we understand the difference between parental involvement and partnership. Can this be seen within your setting or any group that you are familiar with? Represent this in words or bullet points within two circles as seen from the viewpoint of the parent and the viewpoint of those in the setting. How might each see their purposes and relationships? Importantly, ask yourself if these viewpoints overlap or interrelate?

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