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The benefits of involving parents in settings and in supporting their children's learning at home are now widely accepted. Partnership with parents is a key component of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The theme of Positive Relationships recognises that children will benefit more fully from attending a setting when parents and practitioners work together to support their learning. It also acknowledges that parents should be welcomed and encouraged to play an active part in the setting.

"Parents and practitioners have a lot to learn from each other."

"When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning."

"In true partnership, parents understand and contribute to the policies of the setting."

Early Years Foundation Stage (2007)⁴

Another theme of the EYFS is the *Unique Child*. Getting to know each individual child only happens when practitioners involve parents. Sharing information is essential to see the child as a whole, and discover his or her interests and needs away from the setting.

barriers to parental engagement

When early years practitioners genuinely want to work in partnership with parents, it can be disheartening when repeated attempts to involve parents are unsuccessful. It can help to consider some of the barriers and pressures that could be preventing parents from being engaged.

As practitioners, you may be parents yourselves and understand only too well the barriers to communication and engagement that exist. Overcoming barriers can be challenging and often requires creative approaches. But the benefits to children, their families and the setting are enormous so it is always worthwhile persevering and if one method does not work, try another.

Parents have a detailed knowledge and understanding of their child and can provide practitioners with insights into how to support their child. Research has demonstrated that mothers and fathers are committed to supporting their children's learning. Williams' (2002)¹⁰ research about parental involvement in schools asked whether parents would like more involvement in their children's learning and 72% responded that they would. For many working parents it is a question of time; some parents do not personally come in to the setting to drop off and collect their children, so you may not meet them in person. For other parents they may have the demands of other children or family members to meet; they may have stressful lives due to poverty, mental

At **Buckhurst Hill Baptist Church Hall Pre-school**, in Essex, staff continually reflect on their practice to plan how to get parents more involved. They currently use a range of strategies including letters, displays and special events but they feel that building relationships with parents by talking to them is essential. Parents who come in to the setting are able to talk to the key person every day. They are asked how they would like to be involved in the setting and whether they can contribute in any way.

Twice a year parents are invited into the setting to take part in a typical session, so that parents can see how children learn through play.

Parents are very involved with their children's learning journeys and work with the Early Years Advisor and staff to put in pictures and photos. They plan around what the children are interested in and encourage them to bring things in from home.

The staff conduct home visits, if appropriate, at a time convenient for the family and have found these to be successful, especially when there is a particular issue e.g. a child with autism. They report that these are very successful because everyone is relaxed and it is possible to learn a great deal about the family.

In cases where parents have had mental health issues, the setting has offered extra sessions for the child and given the parent lots of encouragement and support. Again, it is about building relationships and confidence.