Working Positively with Parents

Remember the SEN Code of Practice states that

• A delay in learning and development in the early years may or may not indicate that a child has SEN, that is, that they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for special educational provision. Equally, difficult or withdrawn behaviour does not necessarily mean that a child has SEN. However, where there are concerns, there should be an assessment to determine whether there are any causal factors such as an underlying learning or communication difficulty. If it is thought housing, family or other domestic circumstances may be contributing to the presenting behaviour, a multi-agency approach, supported by the use of approaches such as the Early Help Assessment, should be adopted.

• Identifying and assessing SEN for young children whose first language is not English requires particular care. Early years practitioners should look carefully at all aspects of a child’s learning and development to establish whether any delay is related to learning English as an additional language or if it arises from SEN or disability. Difficulties related solely to learning English as an additional language are not SEN.

Developing positive relationships with parents

Meeting with parents

When you arrange a meeting with parents it is important to do everything you can to make the parents feel comfortable. If the child you are discussing is their first child this will be their first experience of this sort of meeting. They will understandably be nervous. They may have had poor experiences of education themselves and this could bring back negative memories.

It may seem obvious but little things like offering a drink and making sure the chairs are of the same height can make everything more relaxed. Always begin with a short session of problem free discussion. Set out a few ground rules at the beginning. It is essential that confidentiality is observed. The process will not work if there is not complete trust.
Make sure that all parties know what the purpose of the meeting is and why it has been called (there is a pro-forma to help with this in the Pre-school SENCO Toolkit). Make sure you are clear about what you want to say in the meeting. It may be helpful to make a few notes to ensure all the points are covered. Set a time for the meeting to end. This can be arranged by acknowledging that everyone has given up time for the meeting and would like to get away on time. Leave time for summarising the discussion. This will also provide a warning that the meeting is coming to an end. The end of the meeting should not be hurried or abrupt. If the discussion has not reached a conclusion by the end of the allotted time, arrange a further meeting.

If you think the meeting could be difficult, prepare yourself beforehand. It is important to keep calm. You may need to practise this as if you go into a meeting thinking that you must not appear anxious that is how you will come across. How many times have you tried to prepare yourself by telling yourself not to be nervous and that is what happens. As we have seen in the exercise that anxiety can be transmitted to the parents. If you remain focused on the purpose of the meeting you will be in control.

There may seem a lot to remember about listening. Most of you are probably doing most of these points automatically, but it helps to be aware of them in order to improve your practice, especially when you are faced with a difficult situation. Open communication and the ability to listen are very important if partnership is going to be achieved. You can see that active listening skills are important to all elements of partnership with parents/carers. Practitioners need to show with body language, gesture and facial expression that they are receptive and welcoming.

Practitioners need to convey the idea that the parent/carer is the expert on their own child and that exchanges of information should be two way. Practitioners should never compete with the parent/carer, for instance showing their superior knowledge of child development which would be likely to undermine the parent/carers confidence. You should recognise that building a positive parent-partnership through understanding, supporting and respecting parents is more effective in the long term than correcting or
teaching them. After all any individual practitioner is only likely to interact with a particular child for a year or two or three whereas the parent-child bond is life-long.

**Active listening strategies**

**Attending**
This may seem obvious, but it is vital that your whole attention is given to the person you are listening to. This will ensure that you are at your most receptive. It will indicate that you are listening carefully and will encourage the talker. Try to ensure there are no interruptions from other staff or telephones. The ideal would be a small comfortable room.

**Looking**
If we want to be seen to be attending we should be looking in the direction of the person's face. There is a balance between looking and staring, which could be disconcerting. It is usual to be looking in the general direction of the speaker but your gaze will vary between being direct and looking down. The speaker may also be looking but may also look away if things become difficult to talk about. These are important clues to pick up.

**Facial Expression**
We can learn a lot from people’s facial expression. The different ways in which people smile, frown, raise their eyebrows or wrinkle their noses, provide us with information about thoughts and feelings. Even with people we do not know well, we can tell if someone is uncertain, sad or angry. We are constantly watching each other's faces for such information when we are interacting. While you are noticing these expressions in the speaker remember that they will also be noticing them in you.

**Position**
The usual position to adopt in order to indicate attention is at an angle between 45 and 90 degrees. If you position yourself directly facing someone it can be intimidating. The atmosphere will be more like interrogation than listening. It also helps if you lean slightly towards the speaker rather than
leaning back in the chair. The aim is to present a receptive picture for the other person. Leaning back conveys the idea that you are not really listening. Ensure that both chairs are a similar height. If one person is on a higher chair this could give an impression of superiority.

**Movement**

Some mannerisms, such as twiddling hair, swinging your legs or fiddling with paperclips, can indicate that you are bored and therefore not listening fully. They can also be distracting to the speaker. You may not be aware that you have mannerisms. We naturally move slightly when we are listening and often this can be in response to the movements of the speaker. A slight movement of the head can be reassuring.

**Prompting**

Some people find it difficult to talk. They may not be used to being listened to. It is important that you are able to give them prompts to encourage them to continue. This could take the form of a nod or a responsive comment such as “Mmh” or “I see”. If necessary ask a few open questions to get them started. These would typically be very general such as “How have things been?” Try not to ask questions that could only have “Yes” or “No” responses. You could introduce the session with a comment about something, such as telling the speaker that they are looking well.

Sometimes the opposite occurs and the speaker has so much to say that it is difficult to stop them. It may be the first time they have been given the opportunity and want to get everything out. In a situation like this it is useful to ask a few direct questions to refocus the speaker and also to clarify what you have heard. You may also feel it necessary to set a time limit before you start the meeting.

**Recognise parent/carers anxieties with regard to sharing their child’s affections and care.**

Parents/carers should feel that the practitioners have a shared and professional interest in their child. It is important that they understand that
a close relationship is likely to be established between the practitioners and their child, if their child is going to feel safe and secure. This is especially likely and important with younger children. Equally it is important for parents/carers to realise that they will not be replaced and that children do not have a limit to the love and care that they can accept and give. They will be the continuing and long lasting carers in their children’s lives and they are the people who love their children passionately. Practitioners should not be seen as in competition with parents/carers, they should take a great interest in the well-being of the children in their care. They should think carefully about how they interact with them. The overriding goal should be to provide a warm, secure, interesting environment for the children that the parents/carers entrust to them.

Focus on parent’s strengths
Practitioners should recognise that parents/carers will come to their setting for many reasons and with many hopes wishes and concerns. Some parents/carers will need to be reassured that practitioners recognise that bringing up children is one of the most important tasks that anyone ever does. Practitioners should respect the parents/carers wishes to be the focus in their children’s lives, and as such they should be the ones to witness the many ‘firsts’ that children accomplish as they grow. Many parents/carers will view the practitioners as the experts in child development and parenting skills and will be reassured by them or undermined by them if not sensitively handled.

Practitioners need to focus on parent’s strengths rather than any perceived faults or social difficulties. Putting children’s wellbeing at the centre of the practitioner-parent/carer relationship makes this possible. You have a shared undertaking to provide the best possible care and education for the child.

This means that we need to recognise and then disregard any discriminatory views we hold with regard to parenting and caring. Parents/ carers are a diverse group of people and include: people in professional occupations, people with no employment, teenagers, single parents, people with disabilities, retired grandparents, foster parents, nannies and au pairs. Children may come from families representing a variety of faiths, home languages, and political
beliefs. In addition, each practitioner will come with a different history and set of experiences with regard to child care and education. We need to recognise and then let go of any stereotypes and negative impressions we may have. Consider, for instance meeting a fifteen year old Mother with her baby for the first time. You may feel a number of different emotions; maybe you feel anger for her loss of childhood and concern over her ability to care for her baby. If these negative thoughts are conveyed to the Mother it will immediately put up barriers between you and her. However, if you consider this as a Mother who has come to you with her baby and that the baby deserves the best from both of us and together we can provide it. You have a positive starting point so that you can build a partnership and build on strengths and dreams. Maybe this Mother is young and energetic, very involved and committed with her baby, she wants to finish school and her determination and strength will give her and the baby a positive future.

**Use a problem solving approach to resolving disagreements.**

It is important to recognise that, given the diversity of family experiences and childrearing practices within our communities, there are likely to be times when disagreements occur.

**Steps in resolving conflict with adults** (a High Scope approach)

1. **Approach calmly**
   Calm yourself, mentally acknowledging your own feelings.
   Prepare yourself to listen.
   Use a calm voice and gentle body language.

2. **Acknowledge adult’s feelings**
   ‘You look really upset.’ ‘I can see you have very strong feelings about…’

2. **Exchange information**
   Take turns describing the details of the problem situation and your specific needs.
   Use ‘I’ statements rather than ‘you’ statements.
Listen attentively as the other person speaks. Remember, this is a dialogue, not a debate.

3. **Look at the problem from the child's viewpoint**
   'What is the child showing or telling us through actions and words about....?'
   'How do our adult needs relate to the child's needs'

4. **Restate the problem**
   'So the problem is...

5. **Generate ideas for solutions, and choose one together**
   'What can we do to solve this problem?'
   Together, think creatively about ideas for solutions.
   Select an idea and together design a strategy to try.

6. **Be prepared to follow up the problem**
   Take turns describing how the strategy is working.
   If necessary, make adjustments together or return to Step 6.

**Example:**
Let's consider an example of a father who becomes angry on finding his child dressed up in a Cinderella costume. The Father brings his son to your setting the next day and to make a complaint.

   **Father:** Why are you letting my son dress up like a girl?

The childminder greets the Father and suggests calmly that they might like to talk in confidence in the kitchen. She realises that the question is a sign of the Father's deep concern for his son, and how this might affect him in later life.
   (this was Step 1 Approach calmly)

   **Practitioner:** I can see that you are upset.

   **Father:** Of course I am you are making my son into a girl!
(this was Step 2 Acknowledge the adult's feelings)

Practitioner: Can you tell me what bothers you about Tom playing dressing up?

Father: Well he is a boy you know and he should be playing with boys toys and things... I don't want him to turn out funny. I think that it is only odd kids who do that, I never did that as a kid. My brothers would have laughed at me and what would my Dad say if he saw him dressed like that?

Practitioner; I like to provide all children with all of the toys and materials so that they can choose what to play with. I think it is important not to restrict children with stereotypical views of what they should and should not play with. I think it is good for all children to play at dressing up as it gives them the opportunity to put themselves into other people's positions which helps them to understand them better. I think that when boys understand girls it is likely to help them make better relationships with them. There is no evidence to suggest that playing at dressing up changes sexual orientation or preferences.

(this was step 3 exchange information)

Practitioner: I think Tom likes dressing up. He often puts on all sorts of different clothes, last week he was batman every time he came here

Father; Yeah well I liked batman when I was a kid

(this was step 4. Look at the problem from the child's point of view)

Practitioner: OK let's see the problem is .... You are concerned about Tom playing at dressing up as a girl, but Tom likes to choose what to wear and sometimes chooses a dress .... he was very upset when you seemed angry with him for wearing it

Father; but sometimes he chooses other clothes
Practitioner: Yes he does. Now let’s think of our options:

- Do not offer girls clothes for dressing up
- Do not offer girls clothes for Tom to use
- Continue to offer girls clothes but tell Tom not to wear them
- Continue to offer all clothes to all children and let Dad know what Tom chooses
- Continue to offer all clothes to all children, keeping them within the setting and ensuring that they are packed away by collection time

As being fair to Tom and the other children was obviously an issue with most of these ideas the choice came down to the bottom two. The last was agreed on.

(this was step 6: Generate ideas for solutions, and choose one together)

The practitioner also decided to ‘catch’ the Father a couple of weeks later to see how he felt now (this was step 6: be prepared to follow up the problem)