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# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

This free document has been created to help childminders, nurseries and schools engage in important conversations about meaningful relationships with families.

# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

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# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

**"At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the positive involvement of families."** Jane D. Hull.

How do we achieve an authentic, respectful relationship that allows the people that are most important to the children in our care to feel they truly belong in our setting?

## DEFINITION - MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Meaningful relationships occur when families (I use this term to refer to all the people that are important to the child) feel that they are an integral active partner in their child's setting. It works when the relationship is built on mutual respect, trust, shared power and decision making, open communication and responsive listening (Department of Education and Training, 2017, p. 5). These relationships are developed through shared goals, clarity about role and responsibilities, and complementary expertise and contributions.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

The way we go about building and maintaining these relationships can make a huge difference to the feeling of belonging for the child and their family.

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## THE 4 C'S OF CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

### COMMUNICATION

Communication is key to any relationship. Fostering clear, open channels of communication between families and settings from the beginning is paramount, but the most important thing is to LISTEN.

Here are a few suggestions to help you reflect on your current provision:

- Greeting – is there a point of contact every day? Do families have the chance to informally 'catch up' with someone who works with their child. Is there a friendly face at the door that knows them and their child?
- Do the adults that work with their child know how to pronounce their name correctly?
- Are there chances to engage with families as part of their child's learning? Do you communicate themes and learning opportunities with families in advance so that they can get involved? This is a good way to include families' cultures, values and beliefs that they may feel comfortable to share given the opportunity.
- Are you aware of the language(s) your children use at home? Do newsletters and any other forms of communication need to be translated? Is there the option to translate your website?
- Can families access your communication processes? For instance, do they need a workshop or point of contact to support accessing the technology?
- Could you learn a few words in their first language?
- Have you asked the families their preferred methods of communication?
- Do you have some Frequently asked questions and answers available?

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## THE 4 C'S OF CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

### CONSISTENCY

Reaching out to families can't just be a 'one off.' Consistency is key! As well as the day-to-day opportunities to connect, are there planned, predictable sessions throughout the year that are accessible for all. Consistency fosters feelings of security and confidence.

- Will families get the same welcoming, calm, non-biased response from all adults in the setting no matter the time or day?
- Do you host a range of regular events run by or in conjunction with families, e.g. book clubs, time to talk, clothes swaps or breakfast club?

### COLLABORATION

Collaboration is the act of working together to produce something. This can be very powerful when nurturing relationships with families. It's important that you think about the balance, which can sometimes tip towards the setting giving information to parents instead of working with or alongside them.

- Do you include 'Family Voice' when planning activities?
- Do you host workshops with subjects chosen by the families?
- Do you invite families to enter the setting and see their child in action?
- Is there a clear way to make suggestions that is accessible for all?

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## THE 4 C'S OF CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES CELEBRATION

Early Years settings are renowned for being skilful when celebrating special occasions and events but do you make them authentic and meaningful by celebrating the families or community that you are in?

- One of the easiest ways to create a setting where every child can be themselves and that families feel connected to is to actively celebrate difference. Doing this highlights the diversity of the world beyond children's immediate experiences.
- Work to celebrate difference and diversity shouldn't just be a 'one off'. This can be tokenistic and ultimately counterproductive. This is where collaborating with your families to plan celebrations can be really beneficial.
- As part of celebrating your families it is important to really look at your setting through your families lens. What would they see as they walked around the setting? Are they all represented in the displays, books and resources?

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## HOME VISITS

Starting with an open day or even an hour at your setting may help to rid families of any worries or apprehensions about a home visit. Introduce your families to the adults that will be coming to their home and prioritise discussing what will happen and the benefits of taking some time to get to know them and their child really well before they start with you. Tell them about your values as a setting and how important their role will be in shaping their child's learning and development.

Here are a few points to consider when carrying out the visit:

- Be non-judgemental - remember that you are in a position of power and should take the time to plan not just what you do but 'ways to be.' Check your mindset before you enter their home. Are you coming in with any preconceived ideas about the family or any more general biases. You may find someone else is better suited to carry out the visit.
- Think about your body language - gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, are they open, positive and welcoming?
- Be flexible and think about how you frame the visit, letting the family know that it is not compulsory, another place could be organised if they feel more comfortable. It could be that they would prefer a coffee shop or local community hall, it doesn't have to be in the setting.
- Allowing plenty of time in advance to find a date and time that suits them. Remember that a visit to a family's home is a privilege. You are their guest. In this way, the visit must take place on their terms, and at their convenience.

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## HOME VISITS CONTINUED

- Discuss if an interpreter is needed, do they want someone external or would they prefer a family member or friend? Do you have anyone in the setting who could help, or could you ask another family?
- Taking notes could be perceived as threatening so plan to do this after the visit if you need to or be open about what you are writing and what it will be used for. Remember the visit is a chance to meet in an informal way, so be present.
- Don't overstay your welcome – plan and inform the family of the maximum amount of time you will spend in their home **AND STICK TO IT!** Think about how long you will need so that you aren't rushed, and leave earlier if you need to.
- Feel free to accept a drink or something to eat if you feel comfortable to do so.
- Invite them to share all they can about themselves. Find out about their family, culture and personal histories. Remember to ask what they expect from you, however also bear in mind that this is an invitation and they may not feel comfortable yet. Have some information ready to share about the setting and some key questions about the child instead.
- End the visit on a positive and leave contact details and clear ways of asking questions as they arise.



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## INCLUDING FAMILIES IN YOUR ANTI-RACIST JOURNEY

An integral part of establishing meaningful relationships with families particularly those from the Global Majority is a clear and publicised plan that details how conscious choices to challenge racism will be taken by everyone in the setting.

- Do all your families know where you are on your anti-racist journey? Do you clearly communicate the systems and processes in place to deal with racist incidents?
- Do you speak openly about the actions you are taking to ensure that their children are in a setting that is aware of and working towards an anti-racist culture?

## FURTHER READING

Creating Communities in Early Years Settings by Debbie Chalmers

Building Positive Relationships in the Early Years by Jamel Carly Campbell

Creating an Anti-Racist Culture in the Early Years by Sandra Smidt