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The Parent and Family Involvement Project: Skills for Early Years Educators.

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Abstract

The importance of parent and family involvement is generally acknowledged by early years educators, but many of them feel that they lack the appropriate skills. The challenge is to find new ways of working with families in a changing world. The aim of the PFI Project (beginning in October 2003) is to meet this need, to develop a model for the training of early years educators in developing these skills and to provide them with a bank of resources which may be adapted to local needs. A training module is currently being piloted in collaboration with a group of experienced people from a variety of early years services. This paper outlines the aims and methodology of the project and presents some of the ideas which we have already discovered

Introduction

The Parent and Family Involvement (PFI) Project began in October 2003. It was inspired by the wish expressed by many people working in early childhood settings for more support and training in working with families. It has as its goals

- To develop a conceptual framework for parent and family involvement in early years services in Ireland
- To develop a model for the training of early years educators in implementing programmes of parent and family involvement
- To put together a resource file for early years educators and tutors.

The importance of parent and family participation in education is well documented. Research internationally has shown that it is particularly important in the context of early intervention programmes, in programmes designed to counter educational disadvantage, and that it is vital to establish a climate in the early years where parents and families see a role for themselves in their children's education. A recent update by Anne Henderson and her colleagues (2002) added a further fifty one studies to the sixty-plus already included in her 1994 synthesis, almost all of which underlined the fact that children whose families are interested in and involved with their education

do better both in the short and in the long term. Family support has been identified as one of the most effective ways of improving the long-term outcomes for children, and early years services are a vital element in this. See for example Dunst and Trivette (1990), Gilligan (1995), Higgins et al. (1998), McKeown (2000), Murphy (1996), Pithouse et al. (1998), Pugh et al. (1994) and Yoshikawa (1994). The principles of parent involvement are a fundamental part of the philosophy and good practice guidelines of IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation, the National Children's Nurseries Association, Childminding Ireland, and other early years organisations, as well as of the Department of Education's Home School Community Liaison Scheme.

However, there is very little support material available to practitioners wishing to improve their practice in respect of parent and family involvement, nor is there much debate on what this means in practice. The dearth of support materials is all the more surprising given the general acknowledgement of the necessity for family involvement and indeed the rights of families to be involved. Pre-schools, nurseries and crèches are not just a service to the community- they are often a vital element in creating a sense of community, of helping parents of young families to build up formal and informal support networks. Two years ago, I suggested at an OMEP conference that it was time to re-think our approach to parent and family involvement (Murphy, 2002). This project is an attempt to give practitioners the tools to do just that.

People working in early years settings are being confronted daily with new challenges. However, it appears that people currently working in the field of early years care and education can feel unprepared for and somewhat daunted by the demands being made on them. Irish society has undergone huge changes in a comparatively short time – mothers of young children are now more likely to be in the workforce, families using early years services are likely to be from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In the course of the current research it has become apparent that there is an increasing emphasis being placed on services catering for children from birth to three as well as those generally regarded as "pre-school", i.e. those services which cater for children aged three to five in the year(s) immediately before they begin primary school. As many of these new services are full day care, service providers need to think of parent and family involvement in a different and

more structured way to the traditional one which relied largely on informal daily contact between carer and parent at hand-over time.

Preparing early years workers for these new challenges is in itself a challenge. Ideally, this preparation would be incorporated into initial training and integrated with other subjects and with work experience with families and communities. While parent and family involvement should be and is integrated with all of the other subjects (child health, social studies, early years education etc.), I would suggest that in my experience it is necessary, indeed vital, to devote time specifically to this topic in order a) to ensure that students are conscious of its importance relative to other aspects and b) that they are able to develop specific skills and knowledge in this area. The skill s they need include communication, empathy, conflict resolution and specific skills in sharing their own knowledge and convictions with parents and families. Recent research (Murphy 2001) found that while early years educators are very conscious of the importance of participation by parents and families, they would like to know more about how to go about implementing it. In some cases, they felt that while their training prepared them very well for direct work with children, they lacked the skills and knowledge to work with the family as a whole. The aim of the PFI Project therefore is to help early years educators to meet some of these challenges. The PFI project tackles this in two ways- firstly by asking people to reflect on their current practice, on the needs and requirements of the families they serve, and secondly by providing them with a file of ideas and resources which they can explore further and adapt to their own situation. There are however no easy answers- rather the project aims to give people the tools they need to find their own solutions.

Methodology

The objectives of the PFI project are to develop a training module in the skills necessary to promote parent and family involvement in early years services and to assemble a resource file for practitioners. In the process, a theoretical model would be developed, suited to Irish conditions, which will allow practitioners to evaluate their own practice and implement new initiatives suited to their own particular service. Throughout the project, the emphasis has been on reflective practice, on shared experience, on developing self-assessment skills, and on meeting the needs of

participants. The suggested resources – case studies, books, posters, websites, links with support organisations – are starting points which people can follow up and use according to their own circumstances and needs, rather than prescribed methods of working. Flexibility and diversity are paramount, both in the project itself and in how the resulting resources are used.

The approach adopted in this project was very much a collaborative one. As the principal researcher, I would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of all those who took part, and in particular the Togher Family Centre who hosted the workshops and which is itself an exemplar of good practice in family and community participation. Since October 2003, experienced practitioners and support workers from a variety of early years settings have taken part in a series of workshops, discussions and interviews. All of these are also parents, and in some cases grandparents. A separate group of parents have also contributed. Between them, they have helped to shape the project and ensured that it is grounded in the everyday realities of working in an early years service.

The conceptual framework underlying this project was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological view of development, in which the child is seen as developing not in isolation but in the context of family, neighbourhood, community and society. The care and education of young children is a matter for the whole of society, not just for the individual parent. The development of "family-centred" early educational programmes owes its origin to this ecological social systems perspective (Burton-Maxwell and Gullo, 1995). Key assumptions are that families provide the central context for children's learning and development, that supporting the formal and informal support networks available to families will benefit children and that families' own needs and interests should guide the activities that serve them.

The PFI Workshops

While this ecological perspective underlies the whole project, a functional approach was adopted in order to give a practical and action-oriented focus to the workshops. The topics addressed in the workshops were initially based on the work of Epstein (1995, 1997, 2001) but Epstein's framework of six types of involvement (parenting,

volunteering, communicating, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with the community) was adapted and considerably expanded. Through reflecting on their own experiences and beliefs, participants helped to identify the most important additional areas that needed to be addressed. These included equality and diversity, special needs, the impact of full day care on children and families, promoting continuity and managing the transitions in a child's life. Parent, family and community involvement is implicit in each of these topics; the workshops made this aspect more explicit.

Issues were explored through discussion, reflecting on people's own experiences, through considering case studies and scenarios, and through contributions from people with particular experience or expertise in different areas. For example, two parents who have served on management committees contributed their experience and insights on that topic, a crèche manager shared her experiences of running multi-cultural events, pre-school workers who were implementing the IPPA Quality Improvement programme told how they used video and photographs to share children's Learning Stories (Carr, 2001; IPPA 2004) with parents. At each workshop, points raised in discussion were recorded, written up and then sent to participants for comment. Workshops were also used to identify and share resources and ideas for practical activities. Examples included copies of newsletters and parent handbooks, ways of sharing ideas about learning and learning activities with parents and other sources of material which could be adapted to individual and group needs.

The topics addressed in the workshops were

- Defining parent, family, community.
- What does partnership mean? What are the factors that help or hinder partnership proneness? (based on the work of Pugh and De'Ath, 1989)
- Effective communication and its contribution to partnership with parents and families
- Parent involvement in decision-making and management in early years services.
- Parents as volunteers.

- Exploring the role of families' involvement in their children's learning. Identifying ways of helping families to help their children become effective learners. Parents' input into an early years curriculum.
- Equality and diversity – what does this mean in practice in early years services?
- Children with special needs and their families- implications for practice.
- Enhancing continuity and managing transitions: from home to pre-school and from pre-school to formal schooling, from one service dealing with the child to another, managing transitions within the day.
- The impact of full-day care on children and families.
- Sessional care as a support service for family carers and childminders as well as for parents.

During the first workshop, participants explored what the words *parent* and *parenting* meant for them. The response to this varies according to people's own life experience- their own experience of being parented, whether or not they have children of their own or experience of looking after young children. There are many styles of parenting, and in order to work effectively with a diverse group of parents, it is a valuable exercise to examine our own assumptions and beliefs on the subject. Support for parents and carers includes access to child care, access to information, and providing them with emotional, psychological and practical support in their parenting role. Pre-school centres provide these in different ways, depending on the needs of the families they serve and the resources they themselves command.

Involvement or participation was explored next. One can hardly better Gillian Pugh's definition of partnership as "a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability" (Pugh and De'Ath, 1989, p.33). Defining what this means in practice is in a sense what the whole project is about. It is closely related to the next topic- effective communication. The two-way sharing of information between home and pre-school is fundamental to a partnership approach. While informal contacts are the everyday bread and butter of communication, a more formal approach is needed to ensure that all parents are kept informed, not just those who have the time and make the opportunity for a regular

chat with the staff of the preschool. General information – activities, schedules, fund-raising etc- can be shared through posters, newsletters, notice boards, word-of-mouth and, where appropriate, by phone, e-mail or text messaging. However, specific times need to be set aside for meetings with individual parents where they can discuss their child's progress, share any concerns, and learn more about the work of the pre-school and how it is helping their child's development. A related skill is the development of inter-personal and conflict resolution skills – effective communication does not always mean the absence of conflicting viewpoints.

While a strong case can be made for all these aspects of parent involvement, families' role in supporting children's learning is of fundamental and long-lasting importance. The project participants reported that in their experience parents, given the opportunity, are very interested in helping their children to learn. Groups are looking at innovative ways of doing this, and some of them are engaged in developing specific programmes in this respect. The work of Margy Whalley and the Pen Green Centre team (1997, 2001) has been hugely influential in this, as has the work of Margaret Carr (2001) in New Zealand. Some of the participating groups in the PFI project are taking part in the IPPA Quality Improvement programme and they spoke about their experiences of helping pre-schools to document children's learning using video and photographs and to share these with the children's parents.

Some pre-schools run courses on early learning for parents, either designed in-house or brought in from outside. The structure and design of the course is important; participants felt strongly that hands-on experience of play should be included. Many parents have had very little opportunity to play in their lives and need to experience it first hand to appreciate its relationship to learning. Funding – or rather its absence- may pose a barrier to providing courses; the cost of speakers and materials for workshops may be prohibitive. It may be possible to link with local adult education schemes – family literacy programmes are one promising example.

The informal contacts that take place every day in a pre-school setting were also identified as a valuable means of sharing knowledge about how children learn. If staff are conscious of the value of sharing their knowledge about how children learn, they can draw the parent's attention to moments when learning is happening and explain

how and why this is so. However, early years services need to take positive steps to ensure that they are reaching all of the parents and not rely solely on chance encounters. A sample page from the draft PFI manual featuring a list of suggested ways to share children's learning experiences is to be found at the end of this article.

Some further areas of concern which arose in discussion were issues relating to equality and diversity, to the integration of children with special or additional needs into mainstream services, and the management of transitions. Each of these areas is complex in nature and will be treated in detail in the PFI resource materials. Changes in Irish society are reflected in the challenges faced by early years workers. Children attending pre-school services increasingly come from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including those where English or Irish are not the language of the home. Early years professionals need to adapt the way they work with parents and families to take account of these differences and work in partnership. The area of work with children with special needs has a longer history, and is perhaps the area in which parent and family involvement has always been most crucial. The trend towards the integration of children with special needs into mainstream services means that services need to be able to access information on how best to meet the specific or additional needs of children with disabilities.

A further area of concern at transitions in children's lives and the roles of the family and the childcare service in maintaining continuity and minimising disruption. Transitions occur at various points the child's life, as the child goes

- from care by parent to care by others
- from parent to childminder, nursery or preschool
- from one carer to another
- from one pre-school service to another
- from one class/group to another, e.g from baby room to toddler room
- from pre-school to primary school.

Very few of these transitions, apart perhaps from the transition to primary school, have received much attention in the research literature until very recently. Each of these transitions brings with it changes in the people the child encounters, in the physical environment, in the scale of the setting, in the limits on the child's

movements within it and in the expectations on the way the child behaves. This has implications also for the way in which services are organised- a realisation of the importance for children's well-being of continuity of caregiver has led to the introduction of key worker systems in nurseries for example.

Practitioners often find it difficult to take time to research, locate and evaluate material that is relevant, informative and useable. The resource file being assembled in the course of the project is one of the aspects on which participants have commented most favourably- it allows them to research further those areas which are of particular or immediate concern to them and to meet the needs of the children in their care.

Conclusion

The consultation process, case studies, workshops and other research conducted so far have identified a number of interlinked areas of concern. All of these impinge on the role of the early years educator as someone who works with families as a whole, not just with the child in isolation, and who therefore needs preparation for this role. Some of the most important issues to emerge from the present research are:

- Parenting- understanding and providing support for parents and caregivers.
- Coping with change and helping others, parents and children to cope with changes in their lives. This also includes understanding that children have a very different childhood experience from that of their parents and carers.
- Issues relating to the management of services and the involvement of parents and families in decision-making.
- The importance of consultation with parents and families on their needs and preferences.
- Issues relating to the professional role and the training of early years educators.
- Preparing early years educators for the challenge of working with parents and families whose home environment and culture differs from the majority one.
- Considering how to foster continuity of care for young children and help them and their families to cope with the necessary transitions in their lives.

Other areas which participants have mentioned include the role of the practitioner in the holistic development of the child, access to funding for parent involvement activities, breaking down barriers to parent involvement, and the role of men in childcare programmes.

Participants in this initial stage of the PFI project were already widely experienced in working with young children, their families and in a variety of early years settings, and they have contributed valuable insights as well as taking the opportunity to review their own practice and extend their range of skills. It is intended to incorporate their contributions into a comprehensive handbook on parent and family involvement. It is planned to make this available as a training module/resource file for use in courses, for self-evaluation, and as a resource for practitioners. The final manual will include suggestions and exercises for using this approach with students at the beginning of their careers- integrating it with experience on placement, using role play and case studies to explore issues and situations. It is hoped that the availability of this resource will help early years workers in their work with parents and families.

Appendix: From the draft manual for the PFI Project

Some ideas on helping parents to be more aware of how their children learn:

- Share with parents the topics that the children are interested in at pre-school- and vice versa- find out what their interests are at home.
- Parent and toddler sessions are an opportunity to share ideas about how children learn in an informal, play-based setting.
- Include ideas for supporting learning at home in newsletters and handbooks. Include as many ideas as possible that are free or very low cost.
- Develop shared concepts on learning with parents – for example Pen Green uses the concepts of *schemas* and *levels of involvement* to help parents observe and understand their children's learning (Whalley, 1997, 2001). Montessori, High Scope etc. each have their own structure and underlying concepts- share these with parents.
- Get parents involved in providing for play- helping to develop an outdoor play area, fundraising for new equipment. This often makes them more aware of the learning potential of such play.
- Draw up a *Wish List* of ways parents can help the pre-school and let them know about it. This might include collecting cereal boxes and

other materials for junk art, helping with the newsletter, accompanying children on outings, or whatever is appropriate to your particular setting. It should include a range of items and activities, many of which are free or do not require a lot of time or a long-term commitment.

- Invite parents into the pre-school for an hour or two to share a learning activity with their children – e.g. planting bulbs in the garden or in window boxes, baking, playing a game, making a book.
- Include the words of the songs and rhymes that the children are doing in the weekly newsletter – parents may have forgotten or never learned these.
- Have tapes of songs and rhymes available for parents to borrow.
- Learning kits- for children to use at home, before they start or over the summer holidays- crayons, safety scissors, ideas for activities.
- Share examples of children's work with parents and families- open days, exhibitions, photographs and videos of children at play (made with permission from parents), portfolios of children's work.
- Have a weekly hour when parents are invited to drop in to share story-time and to see children's work for the week.
- Posters, talks, workshops on learning through play and everyday activities.
- Have several copies of the children's favourite storybooks to lend so parents can read them at home with their child.
- Lend books on child development and learning through play.
- Collaborate with local Family Learning initiatives and adult education schemes.
- Many parents now have access to e-mail- why not use e-mail to share news and ideas with them as well as notices and printed handouts and newsletters?
- Be aware that parents may have different views on how children should be learning – they may think that a more formal or academic approach should be used. Help parents to become more aware of the social and emotional aspects of learning, and that play and active exploration of the environment is valuable both in itself and as a foundation for later learning.

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