

# Partner with families through purposeful and positive relationships

**Partnering with families is considered a key factor supporting positive mental health outcomes. Working with families helps to support children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, learning and development opportunities during unplanned activities and conversations.**

## What partnerships look like

A partnership is a collaborative relationship between people who agree to share responsibility and work together towards a common goal.

Effective partnerships are based on:

- mutual trust and respect
- open communication
- sharing ideas, knowledge and expertise

- valuing each person's unique perspectives and contributions
- making decisions together.

**Family involvement in education is a known protective factor for children and young people's mental health.**

The benefits of strong educator-family relationships are clear, with research consistently showing their importance to social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, regardless of other factors.

Many learning communities have a long history of family involvement – families may assist in the classroom or canteen, help with fundraising, or participate in various committees. This type of involvement supports family-educator relationships and offers a valuable community and governance function. There's a distinction, though, between involving families and engaging with them.

**The goal of engagement is to develop an equal partnership around the child or young person's everyday experiences.**

Engaging families motivates them to contribute to learning and mental health and wellbeing outcomes in the home as well as at the early learning service or school. Though there are barriers to partnerships from time to time, barriers can be overcome.

## Developing partnerships with families

It takes time to build partnerships and may take longer with some families than others.

Although effort is required – such as planning, gathering information, preparing staff and promoting the learning community as a place of support – the benefits of this work are significant. The building blocks for developing positive partnerships between educators and families include:

- **Building trust:** You and the families you partner with need to value each other's knowledge of each child or young person, as well as each other's contributions to, and roles in, each child or young person's life.
- **Family-centred practice:** Draw on family knowledge, resources and strengths. Share information in an open, respectful and collaborative way.
- **Communication:** Honest, respectful communication and a genuine interest in one another helps to build trust, which, in turn, allows people to be open about their thoughts and feelings. Effective communication involves sharing of information, which helps everyone in the learning community to be aware of a child or young person's strengths and challenges, and to work together to support one another.
- **Empathy:** Try to see things from a family's point of view – for example, when a family is too busy to stop and chat at pick-up time, being understanding of how stressful it can be when time is limited.
- **Respect for diversity:** Review your environment with inclusion in mind. Respect differences when discussing backgrounds, values and beliefs. This helps you to find common ground and work together to achieve shared goals.

## Connect, collaborate, communicate

Connecting, collaborating and communicating are all key to working with and partnering with families.

Children and young people benefit when the significant people in their lives collaborate. This boosts the outcomes for children and young people's mental health, as well as their learning and development. As an educator, think about the naturally occurring opportunities for conversations with families about development, social and emotional learning and mental health and wellbeing.

**The development of positive relationships between families and educators takes effort from all parties and typically develops over time rather than over a single event.**

Increasingly, families are becoming more complex and have varying expectations of what early learning services and schools can provide. Continue to reflect on and develop communication skills to ensure you're well prepared and ready to communicate effectively with families. Communication is a two-way process where educators and families share information with each other and commit to work together in an ongoing way. Review policies and procedures so that you know what to do when families raise concerns.

## Partnerships and SEL

**By partnering with families, you can strengthen the network of relationships essential for children and young people's mental health and social and emotional learning (SEL).**

SEL occurs throughout childhood and into adolescence, and individuals develop SEL skills through their relationships with family, educators and peers. They also observe relationships between their family and educators. When you partner with families, it can make a positive difference. Keep in mind that SEL develops over time and may vary for different individuals.