



Parents, Early Years and Learning Activities

Helen Wheeler and Joyce Connor

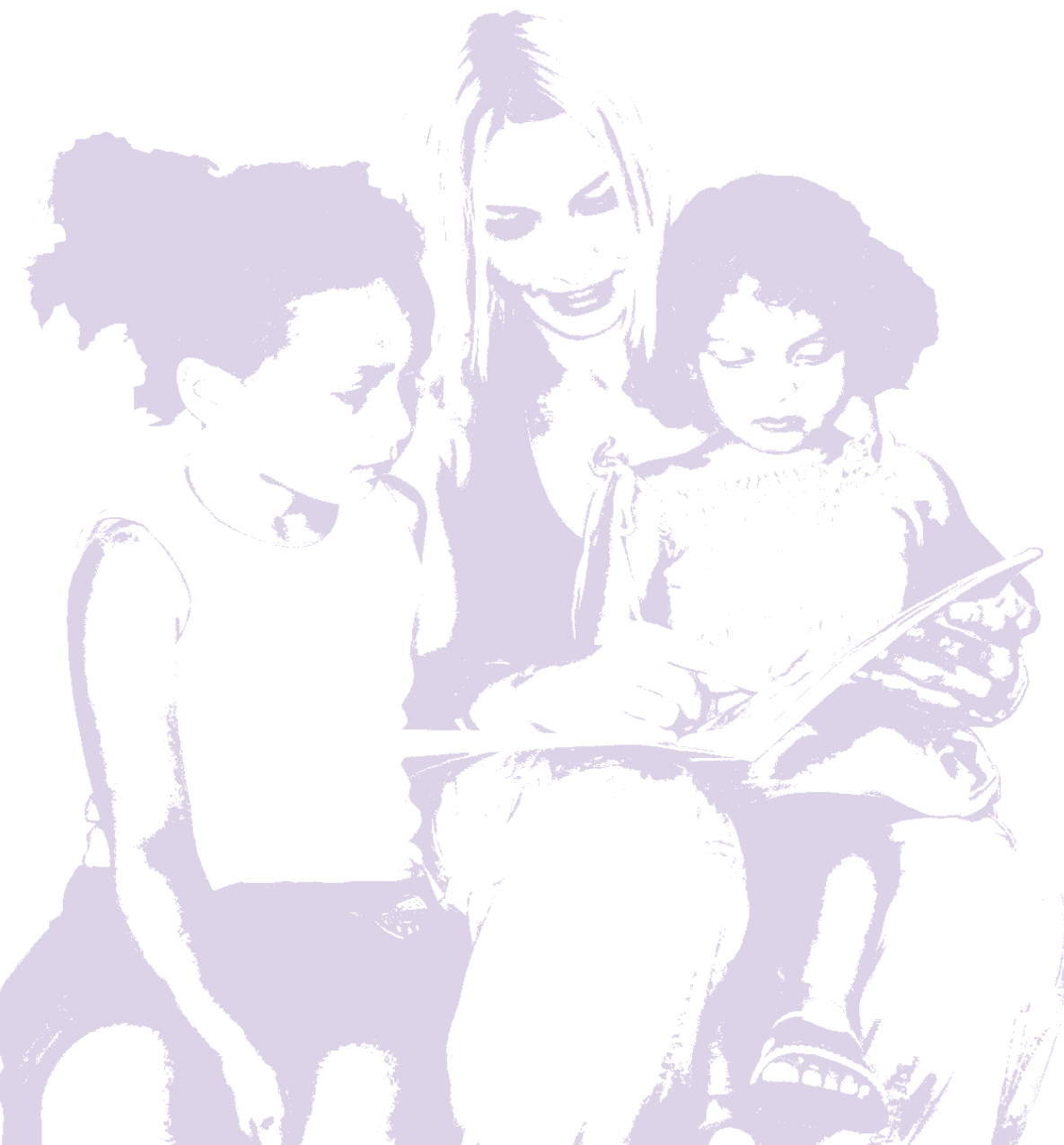


Activities to undertake before PEAL training



Parents, Early Years and Learning Activities

Helen Wheeler and Joyce Connor



NCB promotes the voices, interests and well-being of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives.

As an umbrella body for the children's sector in England and Northern Ireland, we provide essential information on policy, research and best practice for our members and other partners.

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- promote multidisciplinary cross-agency partnerships and good practice
- influence government policy through policy development and advocacy
- undertake high quality research and work from an evidence-based perspective
- disseminate information to all those working with children and young people, and to children and young people themselves.

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What is
the PEAL
programme?

Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for two years (April 2005–April 2007) as a consortium project run by NCB, Coram Family and the London Borough of Camden. PEAL set out to develop a model – a best practice framework – for working in partnership with parents living in disadvantaged areas in order to support the development of parental involvement in children’s early learning. PEAL training continues to be available through NCB.

The PEAL team would like to acknowledge all those who contributed to this programme. Details of contributors can be found in Appendix 1.

Aim

The aim of this programme is to support practitioners in developing work to engage parents in their children’s learning. The programme has been organised into preparatory activities to reflect on practice and look at what is already happening in settings and services, followed by a training day. In both the activities and training parts of the programme, key elements of the PEAL model – authentic relationships, communication and partnership – are examined, and related to current research into what works best and why.

The activities contained in this booklet are carried out in the practitioners’ own settings and services, in advance of the training day.

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How to use this book

Practitioners need to work with their manager to decide when and how to find time and support to do the activities. The illustration on page 8 shows how long each activity should take. This should be referred to while looking through the activities to see what they involve. Not everything in this book needs to be done before the training day – but it is important to plan what to complete in advance of it.

Background to the training: issues of equality and diversity

In tackling this programme, practitioners will be working with issues such as how discrimination and prejudice affect young children and their families, and examining how they can offer inclusive practice.

Also raised are the issues of the diversity of family lives and experiences. Wherever possible these issues have been integrated into the training activities, and research and practice examples. A more in-depth discussion and examination will be carried out on the training day, and is referred to in the *PEAL Reader* in the pack which supports the training events.

The term *working with parents*, as used in this training programme, acknowledges the wide range of people who might be in a parental role in children's lives. The terms *mothers* and *fathers* and *parents* when used here mean all the male and female adults who play a primary carer role in a child's life. This is explored more in the *PEAL Reader*.

Objectives

The objectives of these activities are:

- to enable practitioners to identify why engaging parents is important and who benefits
- to help practitioners start to identify their own skills and knowledge and build on their own practice
- to provide knowledge of the policy context and research that underpins parental involvement in the early years
- to identify some of the barriers that stop parents from being involved
- to identify opportunities for, and barriers to, further work in the practitioners' own settings/teams.

How to approach the activities

The activities are designed to take place in your own setting or service, and to be worked on over the equivalent of a day, fitting in with your own requirements.

The aim is to have some time to reflect on how you/your team/your setting is currently involving parents in their children's learning and to look at any issues this raises – both for your team or organisation, in building on current practice, and for yourself as a learner. The activities are also designed to help you to reflect on what you might want to get from the training, for example what information you might want about how others are working to involve parents in their children's learning.

Although the activities are designed to link to the training, you will not be asked to share the results (such as the feedback from parents and colleagues) in detail. Reflecting on practice in this way promotes autonomous learning and aims to develop understanding and critical thinking skills. There is more about reflective practice on page 9.

What support you will need from your manager

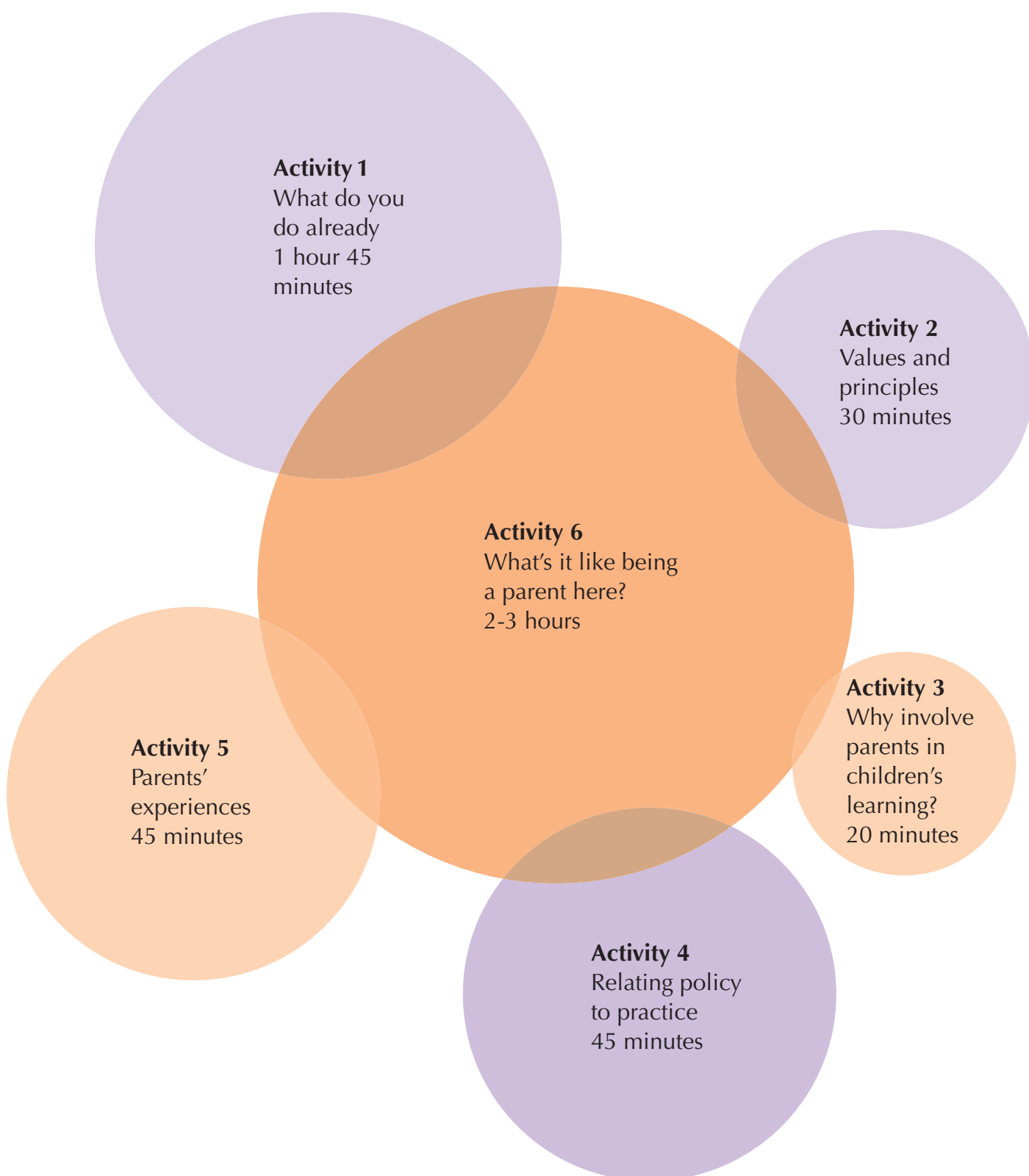
If you are a practitioner, your manager should be asked to give you the time and support necessary to complete the tasks and you could both need to complete the agreement (Appendix 2).

If you are a manager undertaking the programme, you will need to involve another member of staff to work with you in order to aid discussion and find support for the activities. You could use the agreement form (Appendix 2) to show how this support and time will be provided.

What you will need to do

Agree on the support you will need and fill in the agreement with your manager or chosen member of staff. Plan what time you will set aside to tackle the activities. Some of these, for example the parent interviews in Activity 6, are optional at this stage but you could start to make plans for them. As the activities are designed to prepare you for some of the areas that will be looked at on the training day, make a note of any ideas or questions you want to take to this. You will not be asked to talk about any of your findings in detail, but you will be asked to think back to what you have found out.

PEAL training day activities – planning your time



What is reflective practice?

When talking about reflective practice in this programme, we are referring to an approach in which practitioners reflect on experience to affect what they do and to improve professional practice. Some people refer to this as drawing on our intuition to do what feels right. It is an emotional response that complements our knowledge and what we understand about a subject, and which enables us to act in a situation.

Schön and Kolb refer to *reflective practice* as using and applying a basic principle of reflecting on our own experience to improve action and professional practice. However, this is not a new or original idea; it has been developed by educationalists, such as Dewey and Lewin, and can be traced back to the work of Socrates and a form of learning through questioning and feedback. It forces us to question what it is that we know and how we come to know it.

Reflection can also offer us a chance to ‘unlearn’ things we accepted as knowledge – which may have caused us to form stereotypes or make assumptions – before we learn something new.


More currently, Claxton has suggested that *learning to learn, or the development of learning power, is getting better at knowing when, how and what to do when you don't know what to do*. This lack of certainty forces the individual to examine the basis on which he or she believes something to be true. Reflection on what they know and don't know helps practitioners to decide which ideas are facts and which ideas are open to interpretation. It also helps them to understand that learning is individual, and that only they can make the connections to existing knowledge and so make them make sense for themselves.

The term *reflective practitioners* refers to adult learners who are engaged in some kind of activity (often professional) which they can use to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and areas for development.

Schön (1983) speaks of reflective practitioners who are not just skilful or competent but *thoughtful, wise and contemplative*, whose work involves *intuition, insight and artistry*. Using intuition to inform learning is referred to in education as developing ‘meta-cognitive’ skills. That is, a more developed or higher order version of the ‘cognitive’ (knowledge, reasoning) skills that we employ in learning. Meta-cognitive skills are more likely to be employed in analysis, synthesis, critical judgement and evaluation, autonomy and the ability to learn.

Meta-cognitive skills are important because they affect the ability to understand and make sense of experience. They are essential to the process of reflection and for working in situations of uncertainty, and so are necessary skills for practitioners in the changing world of education and childcare.

Adapted from The UK Centre for Legal Education (UKCLE)
<http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/reflection/what.html> accessed 24 June 2006,
 Claxton (1999), Schön (1983), Dewey (1909), Kolb (1984) and Lewin (1952).



Learning
outcomes
from the
activities

By the end of the activities you will have achieved the following:

- have information about why parents' involvement is important for children's outcomes and know of two key findings from research to support this
- have identified and know about key policy initiatives linked to partnership with parents for children's learning
- be able to identify your own and your setting's/team's current attitudes, activities and strengths in this area, gaps in practice and areas for development
- have identified barriers that prevent parents being involved
- have begun to identify ways in which your setting/team or others have tried successfully to overcome particular barriers.

The *PEAL Reader* looks in more detail at the learning from the activities in this training.

Activity 1

What do you do already?

This activity looks at how your setting/team is currently operating in partnership with parents to enhance children's learning, and asks you to reflect on how this is working.

What you will learn from this activity

You will examine your current practice and begin to identify strengths and gaps.

Time required

1 hour 45 minutes in total over a period of time

What to do

Work on your own or with a partner. Using Resource sheet 1.1/1.2 *What does your setting/team do with parents already?*, look at how you are currently working to involve parents in their children's learning. Fill in the grid, including some reasons for your responses.

You may have a variety of ways of showing how you reached your conclusions. For example, you may already know the policies of your setting/team and how these are put into practice, or perhaps you can think of particular examples of when parents have talked to you or colleagues about their children's learning and development.

When you have recorded what you already do and your evidence for reaching these conclusions, consider the following:

- Were there any surprises?
- How do you feel colleagues' reactions would compare with yours?
- What areas do you feel are strengths for your setting and for your own practice? What areas do you feel need development?
- As a practitioner, what do you find hard about working with parents on children's learning? What else would you like to do with parents concerning children's learning? What stops you?
- How much time, in the past week, did you spend talking with parents about their children's learning? What conversations have you had?
- How does your setting/team support you to develop your practice in this area?

What further information or support would you like to gain from the training day in the light of your findings?

Resource sheet 1.1. Teachers and early years practitioners in settings.

What does your setting/team do with parents already?

The terms *mothers and fathers* and *parents* are used here to mean all male and female parents and carers of children who are in a primary carer role in a child's life. This is explored more in the *PEAL Reader*.

We know the make-up of our local community and families well (e.g. <i>ethnicity, languages spoken, religion practised</i>).
We are approachable and welcoming to mothers, fathers and families.
We have a clear 'settling in' strategy – when both children and parents are actively helped to settle into the setting.
Our physical space is designed to encourage parents to spend time in the centre.
A member of staff leads on parental involvement in learning and actively works to promote it.
All children have a key worker or person who gets to know families.
Key workers know and use parents' first names (<i>with permission</i>).
Mornings and/or going-home times are structured to give extra time for parents to discuss their children when they arrive/leave.
Key workers have the opportunity to visit children at home before entry.
Key workers have the opportunity to visit children at home on other occasions throughout the year.
Parents have open access to records of children's learning. They are parent-friendly and easy to understand.
All parents sometimes share their own observations of what children say and do at home.
All parents regularly share their own observations of what children say and do at home.
Parents' observations of children are used to plan future learning in the setting and at home.
We discuss with parents the best ways of including and involving disabled children.
Parents are given informal support for their children's learning at home (e.g. <i>occasional book borrowing</i>).
Parents are given more regular support for learning at home (e.g. <i>activities/equipment regularly shared between home and setting</i>).
Resources are attractive and accessible to all parents and children, and reflect a wide range of families and experience.
Parents are offered workshops/courses to help them support children's learning.
We monitor who borrows material, attends workshops, shares observations (e.g. <i>we would know if a particular ethnic group is not participating</i>).
We have strategies in place to try reaching parents who are not taking part in what is offered.
We have good knowledge of where to find support for our parents locally (e.g. <i>English as additional language classes, housing advice</i>).
Parents are involved in offering training and information to other parents about children's learning.
We have a clear 'transition' strategy – to support children and parents moving on to Reception.

What does your team do with parents already?

The terms *mothers and fathers* and *parents* are used here to mean all male and female parents and carers of children who are in a primary carer role in a child's life. This is explored more in the *PEAL Reader*.

We know the make-up of our local community and families well (e.g. <i>ethnicity, languages spoken, religion practised</i>).
We liaise closely with health visitors so that we visit all families (new births).
We have a clear explanation of the purpose of home visits and give parents choice about when and how they take place.
We explain to parents that part of our role is to support children's early learning and development.
We offer families support with their child's early emotional, social and language development from birth.
We work with local early years settings to help children and families settle in e.g. nurseries, children's centres, play groups, play and stay groups.
We work closely with local settings and services to access training, management and support in how to involve parents in children's early learning and development.
We have initiated joint policies/training e.g. on home visiting or child development with local providers.
We have links and relationships with the key person/worker of the individual children in the families we work with.
We arrange joint visits to families with the key person/worker at relevant times e.g. before entry to nursery, moving to reception.
We have access to and contribute to records of children's learning and development, with the key person/worker.
Parents share their own observations of what children say and do at home and at nursery with us.
Joint planning sessions with the key person/worker are arranged to share observations and plan for support for home learning.
We discuss with parents any support needs to help include and involve disabled children in local provision.
We signpost, encourage and support access to sources of support for children's learning at home – e.g. play and stay groups, libraries, toy libraries.
We signpost, encourage and support attendance at locally offered workshops/courses about children's learning and development.
We have access to monitoring information from local services and we monitor who takes up activities e.g. we would know if a particular ethnic group is not participating.
We have ways of identifying and sharing with local provision why particular groups and particular parents are not accessing services, and have planning sessions with services to follow this up.
We share our knowledge with early years settings about where our parents can find further support.
We encourage/support parents to take part in training that will support them to share information about children's learning and development with other parents.



Activity 2 Values and principles

This activity invites you to reflect on the values and principles behind the PEAL programme. It provides an opportunity to examine your own attitudes and practice in relation to these values and principles.

What you will learn from this activity

This activity will enable you to learn about your attitudes to working in partnership with parents and to identify values and principles held by your own setting/team.

Time required

30 minutes

What to do

The PEAL training is built on the belief that quality provision for young children develops from acknowledging and responding to the unique experience each child brings.

Look at Resource sheet 2.1 *Values and principles promoting parental involvement in children's learning – the PEAL model*.

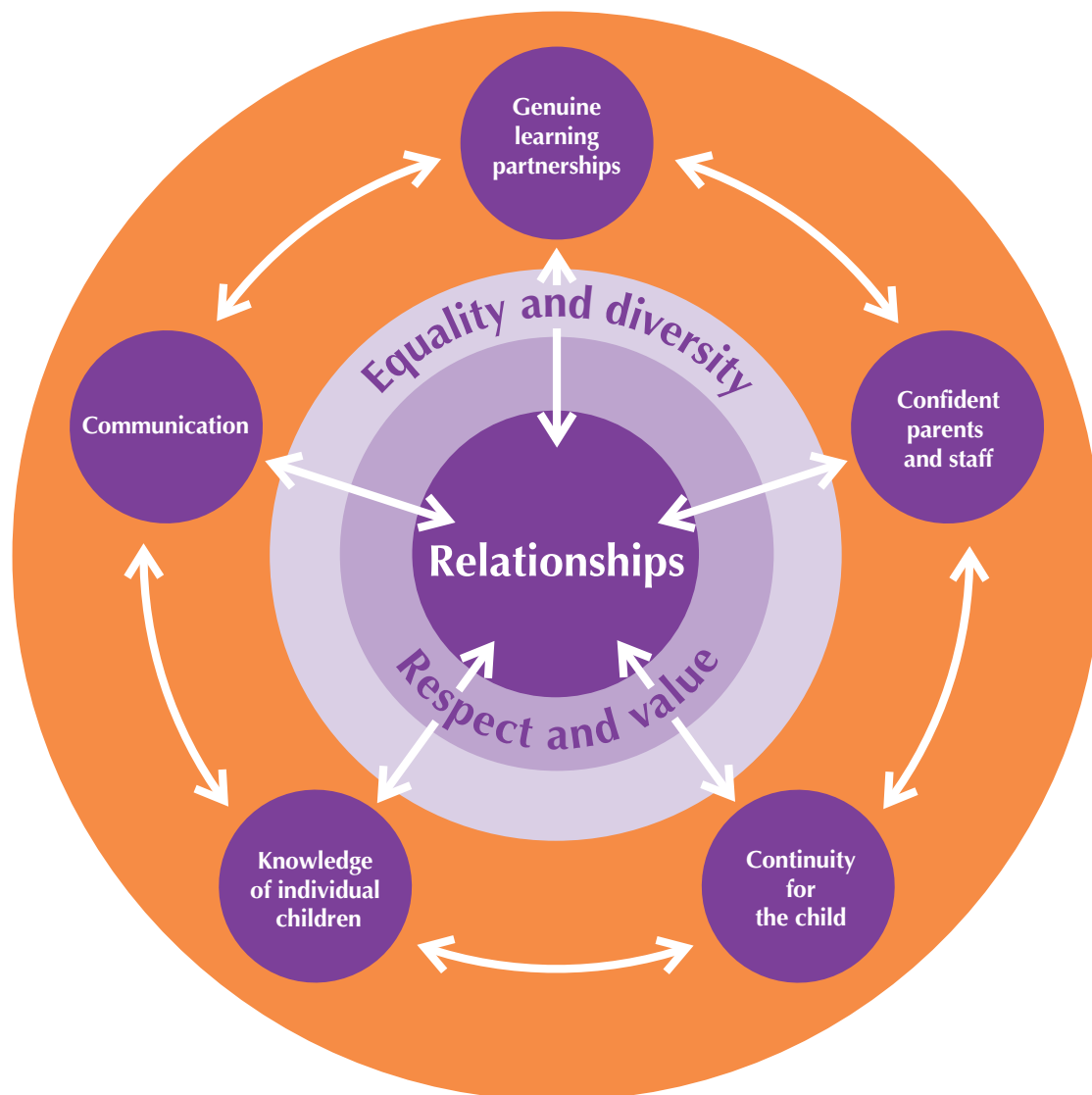
Think about the model and any ideas or questions it raises. Answer the question: How does it relate to what you know about parents and their involvement in children's learning?

Look at Resource sheet 2.2, *Values underpinning the PEAL programme*. Consider each one in turn, using the prompts at the end of the statements.

How do you react to each of these statements? Are there any which you feel uncertain about or disagree with? How do they relate to the work you do in your own setting/team? Has your setting/team looked at its values for this area of work? If so, how do they compare with those listed here?

This activity serves as an introduction to values and principles, which are covered in more detail in the *PEAL Training guide* and *PEAL Reader*.

Values and principles promoting parental involvement in children's learning – the PEAL model



Explanation of the model

The model has been built by looking at the widely available research that shows why parental involvement in children's learning is important and how it can be supported.

The value at the heart of the model is that good quality relationships between parents, practitioners and children are fundamental and need to be developed before anything else can happen.

These relationships need to be built on respecting and valuing each other's

contribution, and embedded in principles of equality and diversity. If these relationships are developed well, communication will flow backwards and forwards between settings and home.

This will lead to genuine learning partnerships and to confident parents and staff, enabling them to provide continuity for the child. This continuity will allow parents and staff to really get to know individual children, and this will enable planning to take place which will provide further continuity for the child.

Quality relationships enable knowledge to be communicated between the setting and home. Again, this leads to an increase in knowledge of individual children; and helps to provide a setting or activities that will build on what happens at home and vice versa.

Communication helps to enable parents and staff to work together in a genuine partnership to provide positive learning environments for each child.

Resource sheet 2.2

Values underpinning the PEAL programme

The terms *mothers and fathers* and *parents* when used here refer to all the male and female adults who are in a primary carer role in a child's life. This is explored further in the *PEAL Reader*.

Children learn best in the context of warm, loving relationships.

Parents play the key role in children's learning. They are experts on their own children and they are a child's first and enduring educators.

Parents want the best for their children and want to be involved in their children's learning.

All parents are entitled to be involved in children's learning and to be supported in whatever way they are able or wish to engage.


All families and individual children are different, and acknowledging and respecting this is crucial to building genuine relationships built on trust and openness.

Life for young children isn't separated into education and care times and places, play times or learning times. It is a seamless whole, whether they are in their homes or in early years provision; and the importance of this continuity should be reflected in settings and in other family support services.

What are your first thoughts on these?

What do they mean for you as a practitioner?





Activity 3
Why involve
parents
in children's
learning?

This activity introduces some key pieces of research about the importance of engaging with parents on children's learning, highlights the benefits this engagement can bring to outcomes for children and compares this with your own experience.

What you will learn from this activity

You will learn about two major research reports that detail the benefits of involving parents in children's learning.

Time required

20 minutes

What to do

Read Resource sheet 3.1 *Why involve parents in their children's learning?*

Reflect on what this research means and your reaction to it.

How does this fit in with your own experience – as a learner in your own early years as well as your personal, family and setting observations?

Make a note of your thoughts and reactions, and any questions this may raise for you.

Why involve parents in their children's learning?

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)

EPPE is a study of 3000 children, tracking the impact of their early years experience.

It shows that by the age of three, there are already marked differences between individual children's social and intellectual development. An important factor that impacts on this difference is the quality of the early home learning environment. This effect continues through to the age of seven. What parents do at home has a major impact across all occupations, income and education levels.

EPPE concludes that:

What parents do is more important than who parents are.

All parents who regularly involve their children in early home learning activities that 'stretch a child's mind' can enhance their children's learning and development. *(Sylva and others 2004)*

EPPE's findings are confirmed by other studies

A wide ranging review of research by Desforges (2003) confirms that what parents do at home with children is critical.

Research consistently shows that what parents do with their children at home is far more important to their achievement than their social class or level of education.

Parental involvement has an impact across all ethnic groups and social classes.

In the primary age range, the impact on achievement of different levels of parental involvement is bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools.

Home influence is powerful because it is *enduring, pervasive and direct*. Children absorb enthusiasm and a positive attitude towards learning from their relationships with adults at home. A parent who feels it is his or her role and believes they can make a difference, models positive interest in learning.

In the early years, children also pick up skills and knowledge directly from parents and carers. *(Desforges and Abouchaar 2003)*

Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL)

Activity 4 Relating policy to practice

This activity helps you to make links between policy and practice. All settings offering early years provision are required to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS sets out clear expectations for practice in working with parents to support early learning, as do the inspection guidelines for early years settings and the Healthy Child Programme. These requirements have relevance for all those working in children's centres and children's services.

What you will learn from this activity

You will find out what key policy documents say about parental involvement in young children's learning and development.

Time required

45 minutes

What to do

Read Resource sheet 4.1 (next page), then consider the following questions:

- What do you understand by the term *partnership* and how do the requirements of the EYFS fit in with your understanding?
- How far do you/your setting/service already meet the EYFS requirements to:
 - Share information with parents
 - Extend learning in the home
 - Take account of parents' views and observations on their child
 - Maintain an ongoing dialogue about individual children's progress?
- What role do outreach/family support workers have in the promotion of children's early learning and development? How can outreach services give parents information about young children's development?
- What role do health professionals have in the promotion of children's early learning and development? How can parents be encouraged to interact with their babies from birth?
- What kind of relationship between parents and practitioners do you think is most useful to enable parents to be involved in their children's early learning?

Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) Resource Sheet 4.1

What do key policy documents say about supporting parents with their child's early learning and development?

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012) confirms that partnership with parents is a statutory requirement and a fundamental element of practice within early years settings.

Overarching principles:

The guiding principles of the EYFS set out the importance of partnership with parents as follows:

- Children learn to be strong and independent through **positive relationships**
- Children learn and develop well in **enabling environments**, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers; DfE (2012, p3)

Key person

All settings are required to assign a key person to each child to ensure care and learning is tailored to that child's individual needs. There is also now a **statutory requirement** for the key person to support the child's early home learning environment:

'The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home' DfE(2012, 1.11)

Supporting the early home learning environment (EHLE) will require the establishment of a warm, respectful relationship with the child and their family, and an ongoing two-way exchange of information with parents on their child's progress.

Sharing information about children's development

The EYFS (2012) describes ongoing, observational assessment as an integral part of practice and part of this is taking into account observations shared by parents:

'In their interactions with children, practitioners should respond to their own day-to-day observations about children's progress and observations that parents and carers share.

DfE (2012, 2.1)

Alongside this is a **statutory requirement** to discuss with parents any concerns about a child's development in the three prime areas of learning and development. The prime areas are communication and language; personal, social and emotional development and physical development.

'...throughout the early years, if a child's progress in any prime area gives cause for concern, practitioners must discuss this with the child's parents and/or carers and agree how to support the child....They should link with, and help families to access, relevant services from other agencies as appropriate.'

DfE (2012), 1.7

Statutory Assessment

Positive relationships and ongoing dialogue with parents about children's development should also underpin two points of summative assessment within the EYFS:

The EYFS Progress Check at age Two

A summative assessment at age two is a **statutory requirement** of the EYFS (2012):

'When a child is aged between two and three, practitioners must review their progress and provide parents and/or carers with a short written summary of their child's development in the three prime areas'

DfE (2012),

2.3

One key **statutory requirement** of the EYFS Progress Check at age two is for practitioners to discuss with parents how their child's learning and development can be supported at home. Practitioners should encourage parents to share the written summary with health visitors and must also draw up a plan to address any identified issues or concerns.

The EYFS Profile (EYFSP)

Practitioners must complete an EYFS profile for each child at the end of the year in which they turn five. This involves practitioners assessing each child's level of development against the early learning goals and indicating whether they are meeting, not yet meeting, or exceeding the expected levels of development. Practitioners must also write a short commentary on the child in relation to the characteristics of effective learning.

The exchange of information between parents and practitioners is once again an integral part of this process:

‘The profile must reflect: ongoing observation; all relevant records held by the setting; discussions with parents and carers and any other adults whom the teacher, parent or carer judges can offer a useful contribution’. DfE
(2012, 2.6)

Finally, it is a **statutory requirement** for providers to share the results of the profile with parents and provide opportunities for parents to discuss it with practitioners.

Evaluation schedule for inspections of registered early years provision

The evaluation schedule (Ofsted, 2012) gives outline guidance and grade descriptors for inspectors visiting registered early years provision. The schedule embeds positive engagement with parents as a key requirement for achieving ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ status.

In settings described as ‘Good’, the provision is expected to meet a number of criteria, including the following:

‘The key person system supports engagement with all parents, including those who may be more reluctant to contribute. Parents contribute to initial assessments of children's starting points on entry and they are kept well informed about their children's progress. Parents are encouraged to support and share information about their children's learning and development at home.’ Ofsted (2012, p9)

If a setting is to be described as 'outstanding' then it needs to meet the criteria in the grade descriptors for 'good', plus all or nearly all of the additional descriptors for 'outstanding'.

Descriptors for 'outstanding' include:

'Highly successful strategies engage all parents in their children's learning in the setting and at home.'

Healthy Child Programme: Pregnancy and the first five years of life (HCP)

The HCP (DH, 2009) places 'a major emphasis on parenting support':

Supporting mothers and fathers to provide sensitive and attuned parenting, in particular during the first months and years of life (p11):

The HCP Schedule requires, as part of a universal service provided to all children and their families, the:

Promotion of sensitive parenting and child development. P32

This reflects new evidence about neurological development and the importance of early relationships:

A child's brain develops rapidly in the first two years of life, and is influenced by the emotional and physical environment as well as by genetic factors. Early interactions directly affect the way the brain is wired, and early relationships set the 'thermostat' for later control of the stress response. This underlines the significance of pregnancy and the first years of life, and the need for mothers and fathers to be supported during this time. P11







Activity 5 Parents' experiences

This activity offers a range of real-life experiences, in parents' own words, to help you consider how schools and nurseries make parents feel.

What you will learn from this activity

You will identify barriers to parental involvement and begin thinking about what to do to make parents feel welcome.

Time required

45 minutes

What to do

Read Resource sheet 5.1 and think about the parents' experiences. List what you think is good and poor practice.

How do you think they compare with what happens in your setting/team?

Think of an example from your own experience of being made to feel welcome or unwelcome somewhere. What stopped you being as involved as you could be? How did others make you feel and why?

What do you think are the main factors that prevent parents being involved in what you offer in *your setting/service*?

List the main factors that you think may be preventing parents being involved in what is on offer. Think about what you would like to change. What information and support would you like to get from the training day to help you with this?

The main barriers referred to in research are listed in Resource sheet 5.2. As a setting-based practitioner can you think of ways in which your setting has tried to overcome barriers to parents being involved in their children's learning? If you are a family support/outreach worker, in which ways have you already supported parents to be involved in their children's learning?

Parents' voices

Debra and Sam's story

When my child first needed a childminder, I went to see a number to choose one that would suit me. I was a residential worker and worked shifts. Some I looked at seemed to be trying to make our lives fit in with theirs. Then I found this one, and it fitted into our lifestyle and patterns.

I also felt I might be missing out on what was happening. The childminder involved me in getting to know what they'd do, gave me an account of a typical day, how they'd go out swimming or to the park and how she believed in learning through play.

She knew I'd get a bit anxious and there would be a bit of anxiety about separation and she would acknowledge this. I felt encouraged to ring to see how things were going. I felt I could share what my child had been doing at home. My child could take things in from home – it became a home from home. That was the place with the sort of person I wanted.

When my child started nursery I went with the childminder and we both stayed and settled him in. I feel it's important to connect with the person, to see how open they are to questioning and how reassuring they are. Now my son is seven, but my daughter goes to the same childminder.

Jenny and Mel's story

I went to collect my daughter from nursery. The nursery worker said she wanted to have a quick word because my daughter had been showing what she felt was some unusual behaviour, running across the room and being completely disruptive and pushing other children. She said she had never seen her behave that way before and just wanted to let me know. I went home feeling very worried but not really knowing what to do about the conversation. I didn't know what I should do about it.

A year or two later, she was diagnosed with autism and ADHD [attention deficit hyperactive disorder]. The teacher then said that the nursery staff had always been worried about her learning, about her reading and about her development generally. I hadn't known there were these worries about her learning – only the time when I was told she was being disruptive, they'd never discussed it with me.

Parents' voices

Azhar and Tazneem's story

We had not long arrived in the country, everything was new. I took my child to the nursery. We didn't know anyone there; it was all different to home. I put my child's name down and they offered her a place the next week. When we came on the first day we went to her peg to hang up her coat. They'd spelled my child's name wrong, so I told them – it's not Tasmin it's Tazneem. The next week something came home with the name spelled wrong again. I thought 'that is not my child's'. I told them again but they kept getting it wrong. It made me feel I don't want to go back again... they don't listen to me or care about my child.

Charraine and Kearnu's story

Once I'd given birth to Kearnu they found out I'd got osteoporosis and I'd actually fractured my spine twice so, for a period of three or four months, I couldn't actually lift Kearnu at all. Pen Green Centre really really helps me. They've helped in every way. They get him in and out of the pram for me because they know I can't do it, they're still doing it for me because I've still got a weakness there, and they understand that, and when I go to the groups they look after him for me.

They take him round the playgroup itself, they play with all the different toys and it's something I couldn't have done without them. Kearnu wouldn't have had really such a good time because he would've just been sitting at home on his own. So I really don't know where I'd personally be without Pen Green Centre because they've been so wonderful.

Lisa and Sophie's story

At six weeks it all started with Sophie. She went for a six-week check and found out that she had an ASD and a VSD, which is a hole in the top chambers of her heart and a hole in the bottom, meaning that her heart's enlarged as well because it works harder so she's prone to viruses. That's why she's on the small side as well. It was nice to have some free time to think. I know she's alright with Tracy, Tracy knows what the difference is and I knew she'd be safe but at least I could keep an eye on her. Tracy was probably the only other person she's been with apart from family members.

Parents' voices

Malc and Imogen's story

I started going because I was just curious to see where Linda was taking Imogen and she was just raving about it, said it was a great thing. I went up there and what I liked was the fact that as a male going up, most of these groups tend to be female and child, and I went in there as the father and I'm not made to feel odd at all, it's great. Even the other mothers talk to me, the carers come up and explain things and chat about issues you may not have thought so much about, they talk to you about things and I get a lot out of it as well. It's great to see her playing obviously, I like to follow her around and get involved as well and I'm getting to know a lot of the other kids as well which is good. They actually come up to me now and offer me toys and things to play with so you really feel part of the group up there, they're really good.

Joanna and Josh's story

Kim asked if she could come and see Josh and me. She said she wanted to come and read a story and leave things for me to do with him as well. I told her Josh hasn't been sleeping and my mum has him most nights to give me a rest so he is often not with me in the mornings – it's just me and the baby most days. Anyway, I didn't really want her to come – and anyway, I didn't know her. She asked me again and said that Cath would come as well – Cath has helped me a bit before. They came to the flat – Josh wasn't there but they sat and talked to me and had a cup of tea and looked after the baby. Kim said she'd come again but I forgot and I felt really bad at first when she turned up. Josh was pleased and jumped about – he got all his toys out to show her. She was really good with him and had a story and toys with her. She came again and we went shopping with Josh.

Parents' voices

Jasbinder, Nila, Niren and Dani's story

Nila is nearly four and the twins are nearly one. When I arrived one morning with Nila at nursery school, the teacher wanted a word because I was getting her in five minutes or so late. She said it was really important to get her there on time. I told her about how hard it is getting out with the twins as well. If one of them needs a nappy change at the last minute I see to them – I have to see to them first as I have to take them to the childminder ready for going on to work. It's twice as likely something will hold us up with the two of them. I felt she was telling me off but I don't think she really understands what my life is like.

The teacher asked me why I wasn't reading to Nila for half-an-hour every night. She said it was really important to fit that in. I told her I have to fit things in around getting in after work and getting the meal and getting the babies fed and to bed. I do tell the children stories – often when we're out together, or I try to read to Nila when I can or point out words in the supermarket when we're shopping. It's a case of what's possible at the moment.

Waris and Ahmed's story

Before Ahmed went to reception class, the nursery school teacher talked to me about how it might feel and what it might be like. We thought about the questions I wanted to ask his new teacher and rang the school to arrange a visit. She went with me and Ahmed to meet his new teacher. We talked about Ahmed – things like what he likes doing, things he might find different to nursery school – and Ahmed showed his new teachers his portfolio. Back at the nursery we talked about how the visit went and what else we could do to help Ahmed. She really made it easier for us to make the move.

(With thanks to parents who gave permission for their stories to be used, please see Appendix 1 Acknowledgements.)

‘We need to begin with the firm belief that all parents are interested in the development and progress of their own children.’

The Pen Green Team
Nursery World, June 2004

What stops involvement?

- Work commitments
- Time and pressures in busy lives
- Childcare needs
- Pressures due to lack of money, illness, disability, single-parent status
- Own education level, confidence that you can make a difference
- Knowledge of what to do
- Negative feelings about schools from own experience
- Own literacy and numeracy levels poor
- English not first language
- Attitudes – ‘it’s the school’s job’, ‘intelligence is innate’
- Feeling unwelcome, not trusting teachers
- Poor experience of other professionals – suspicion of motives
- Past and ongoing experience of discrimination – including race, gender, class, disability, sexual orientation
- Parents unable to understand or share educational approach
- Practitioner attitudes – not valuing or listening to parents’ view of child
- Parents not confident in the face of professional expertise
- Practitioners lacking confidence in talking to parents
- Practitioners unable to communicate educational approach effectively

84% of parents at Pen Green were involved in their children’s learning when offered a range of options. **(Whalley 2001).**

98% of parents surveyed believe they have either equal or some responsibility for their children’s education; 58% said equal. **(Williams and others 2002).**

67% of parents surveyed want more involvement – especially those in most disadvantaged groups. **(Peters and others 2007).**


Pugh and De’Ath (1989) found parents interested in their child’s progress and appreciated information.

(Desforges 2003)

(Draper and Duffy 2006)

(Harris and Spencer 2000)

(Whalley 2001)



Activity 6 What's it like being a parent here?

This activity is about looking at a setting from a parent's point of view and asking, 'What's it like being a parent here?' Is involvement really encouraged? If so, how?

This activity could be done after the training, if necessary. It involves setting up interviews with parents. When you have looked at the task below, you may find you have recently asked parents similar questions for a different purpose. If so you could draw on this experience rather than ask parents again.

Family support/outreach workers/health professionals might wish to work with a practitioner from a setting. Alternatively they could think of questions to ask parents about how they share information about their children's learning during visits, and about parents' experiences of being supported to help their children learn.

What you will learn from this activity

You will be able to identify your own and your setting's current attitudes, activities and strengths in this area, gaps in practice and areas for development.

Time required

2–3 hours in total

What to do

Read through Resource sheet 6.3 *Parent interview sheet*, looking at the suggested questions for parents. Looking back at Activity 1 where you thought about what your setting already does with parents, think about how parents might respond.

Using Resource sheets 6.1 *Structuring an interview*, and 6.3 *Parent interview sheet*, as guidelines, interview two parents from your setting. You can be flexible in how you approach this. You could interview two parents together or talk to them separately, arrange a home visit or find a quiet space in the setting where parents can feel comfortable and at ease.

It is easier to ask a parent with whom you already have an established relationship to help you with this task but, if possible, include parents you don't know quite so well or those who rarely participate in what is offered. Alternatively you could ask a parent who has recently moved on from the setting to reflect back on their experience. It may be easier for that parent to express any reservations they have more openly.



Some people may have difficulty talking about their experiences because they have felt excluded or feel they have experienced discrimination. Discuss with your centre manager how best to structure interviews to make them accessible to all parents who want to be involved and the most appropriate ways of communicating to ensure that parents feel able to contribute.



If possible, involve parents in collecting responses for this activity, supporting and training them in asking other parents for their views (Save the Children 2000).

The questions provided are meant as prompts to help you have a conversation about involvement in learning, but you will need to adapt them to enable parents to focus on a particular area if they wish, giving a picture of their experience in their own way.



Look at Resource sheet 6.1 *Structuring your interview* before you begin and consider the issues of confidentiality covered in Resource sheet 6.2 *Confidentiality*.

Look at your findings. Consider how the views compare and what might be the reasons for this. Are there any issues that you think the interviews raise for you or for your setting?



Resource sheet 6.1

Structuring your interview

The purpose of the interview is to find out what it's like for parents in your setting and what they feel about how they are encouraged to be involved. The following are some general principles for conducting interviews.

Introduction: Introduce the research, for example by explaining what you are finding out about and why, what kind of questions you want to ask, and how long it will take. Talk about confidentiality, and ask if it's okay to tape the interview. Give the interviewee the opportunity to ask any questions.

Opening: Start with easy-to-answer questions. Move on to more sensitive questions later.

Probing: In-depth questions draw more relevant information. You should not prompt. Questions should be kept relevant to the topic being discussed.

Closing: Make sure the interview has a good ending. Ask easy, closing questions which don't bring up sensitive issues. This is particularly important when sensitive issues have already been discussed

Ending: Thank the participant and, if they have spoken about sensitive or personal issues, reassure them that they have done the right thing by speaking.

Terminating the interview: The participant should be told that if they do not want to answer a question they can remain quiet or leave the interview at any time. As it can be hard for people to say 'no', this should be made as easy as possible.

(Adapted from McKeown and Hedges 1996.)

Resource sheet 6.2

Confidentiality

People who take part in any feedback about their experiences in a setting are entitled to confidentiality. They need to know the purpose of the information and how it will be used, and if the material they give you can be linked to them as individuals. They will need you to listen to their views and to address any concerns they have about this.

If you want to tape-record your interviews to ensure that you accurately represent people's words, think about what will happen to the tapes. Sometimes it is agreed to destroy tapes after a certain time. Consider exactly how you will request permission to record, and how you will explain exactly who will hear the tapes. People being interviewed are often nervous about being recorded.

It is always helpful to discuss issues of confidentiality with all those participating – they will give you helpful pointers to issues of concern to them. It will be necessary to consider whether a person's story might identify them. This might be the case, for example, if a parent is the only one of a particular ethnic group and therefore feels they could be identified by their differences.

Stories can sometimes be altered so as to disguise identifying details, without interfering with the findings, but at times it may be obvious who has volunteered the information and individuals may want to opt out of giving their views if this is going to be the case.


(Adapted from Save the Children 2000.)



Resource sheet 6.3

Parent interview sheet

- Who do you go to if you want to talk about your child?
- How easy is it to talk to staff? What makes it easy/hard?
- How was the settling-in period? How did it make you feel?
- What worked well during settling-in? What might have made it better? How did the staff help?
- What do you know about how children are learning here?
- What do you think you do at home with your child [children] that helps them learn?
- Has anything that the setting has provided or done helped you to do more with your child at home?
- What additional support would you like to help you understand more about how your child is learning and developing, for example some training, information sheets, or more time to talk to someone?
- Have you heard about any opportunities we offer here to find out more about how children are learning?
- Have you come along to anything like this before?
- If so, what is helpful? If not, why didn't you feel like coming?
- Do you know you can see your child's records? Are you able to see them whenever you want to? Do you understand them?
- Are you ever asked for your own observations about your child's learning? Have you written anything on the records?
- What do you think, for future parents, could make it easier to understand your child's learning? What could be better?
- If you could describe what makes a good teacher/early years worker, what would you say?
- If we had known anything more about you as a family, would it have helped?
- Who else visits to support your family and how have they helped you to help your child learn?



What will
happen next?

These activities will be built on in the training part of the programme – a group event with a trainer to lead the day's sessions.

A programme for the training day follows.

Training programme materials will be given out on the day.

Look at the information you have collected. What do you feel you or your setting need more information on or support in developing?

Outline of training programme

Session 1

Welcome and Introductions

Session 2

What is it like for parents?

Session 3

Respectful relationships

Session 4

Why work with parents?

tea and coffee

Session 5

What might stop us?

Session 6

Involvement at the heart of practice

lunch

Welcome back

Session 7

Communication and confidence

tea and coffee

Session 8

What needs to be in place? Action plan and evaluation

Appendix 1

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Appendix 1 (continued)

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Ready, Steady, Go Nursery, Camden

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Coram Fields Nursery, Camden

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Appendix 2

Parents, Early Years and Learning, Manager and Participant Agreement

Please complete and bring to the training day

Name of participant _____

Name of manager _____

How will the participant be given time to undertake the activities?

Cover made available _____

Study time _____

Other _____

How will the participant be supported in doing the activities?

Supervision discussion _____

Partnered activities _____

Other _____

How will the participant be supported in carrying out their action plan after the training?

Supervision discussion _____

Staff meeting _____

Partnered activities _____

Other _____

**I agree to take part/support _____
to take part in the Parents, Early Years and Learning programme and follow up
action plans arising from the training.**

Participant Name _____

Date _____ Signed _____

Manager Name _____

Date _____ Signed _____

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Parents, Early Years and Learning Activities

The activities in this book are to help practitioners prepare for the Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) training. PEAL has developed a best practice framework, looking at what works best and why, with the aim of supporting the development of parental involvement in children's early learning.

The PEAL programme includes preparatory activities to reflect on practice and look at what is already happening in settings. The key elements of the PEAL model – authentic relationships, communication and partnership – are then explored in a training day for practitioners.

The introductory activities contained in this book are preparation for the PEAL training and are for practitioners to use in their own settings/teams prior to attending a PEAL training day.

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