

## Time to talk

### Parents, Early Years and Learning: Practice example

Creating genuine time to talk to parents, build relationships and have regular dialogue about an individual child's learning is certainly a challenge.

#### Coming and going

The time that children arrive and leave the nursery are the obvious times for parent contact, friendly greetings and farewells. However, this time can also be used to exchange information about learning and development.

**The Pen Green Centre for Under Fives, Northamptonshire** has established a staggered entry. Families are able to arrive at the centre at any time between 8.15 and 9.45. This means there is a steadier flow of families into the nursery so there is more time to converse, exchange information and learning observations with individual parents.

**Konstam Children's Centre, London Borough of Camden** always ensures that a member of staff is on the door to meet and welcome parents and children on entry. It is established that part of this role is to exchange messages between parents and key workers. The management team also has an 'open door' policy and parents are made welcome if they need to talk.

**Thomas Coram Children's Centre, London Borough of Camden** has children arriving from 8.00 for an extended day, with many entering at 9.30. Between 9.30 and 9.45 all key workers are available to prioritise talking with parents before the focus activities with children begin. It is established as a 'meet and greet' time. A senior member of staff is also available during the morning for parent consultations or to take a key worker's place if a conversation is urgent. Parents are aware that between 3.15 and 3.30 is another good time to come in and talk, as children leave the setting. Parents of extended day children are encouraged to arrive five minutes early, when possible, to allow for communication.



### **Extended parent consultations**

These consultations are held once a term at **Thomas Coram** to talk about progress, with parents, together. Children's needs and learning priorities are discussed. Thirty-minute sessions are made available for this during the nursery day.

The time is extended for parents of children with special needs (up to an hour) so that Individual Education Plan review meetings can form part of the consultation with both the special educational needs coordinator and key worker in attendance. This means that parents don't have to make arrangements for two separate meetings, and practitioners benefit from the joint exchange of information.

**Gamesley EEC, Derbyshire** has also extended the time and frequency of dialogue with parents. As well as two home visits, parents take part in at least three consultation meetings. These can last up to an hour and the time is negotiated to suit work and child care commitments. A convenient time for families, plus persistent reminders, ensure full attendance. At each consultation, a record of achievement is shared and celebrated and a learning plan created based on a child's interests and needs. Activities that will be provided at school are talked through, but what the family can do at home to extend learning is also discussed. Parents borrow from a bank of equipment known as 'home school links' each week. Each pack has clear learning aims and objectives, which are discussed with parents, then the child's response is shared upon its return. Visits out of nursery are also planned together at this consultation so that parents can arrange to be free and accompany their child.

### **Additional home visits**

At **Pen Green** family workers can visit children and their families on a more regular basis. The initial home visit, before the child begins nursery, is followed up with two or three additional visits each year during which workers, families and children get to know each other more closely and share information about the child's development. Parents often feel more relaxed and confident in their own home. This is particularly useful for parents who may lack confidence in attending group sessions or participating in other ways. Practitioners also gain from an increased knowledge and understanding of a child's home context.

### **Post of responsibility**

Where possible, giving parental involvement a high profile, through a post of responsibility or coordinator at management level, enables strategic planning to create more time to talk to parents. At **Thomas Coram**, this responsibility is built into the post of Deputy Head of Centre. It also provides a champion for the importance of this work – so that all key workers are encouraged to understand that talking with parents about learning, on a regular basis, is a major part of their role.

It might also be possible for the coordinator or other member of the management team to free-up staff working in the centre, at regular intervals, to maximise the time for parent dialogue, and to offer regular supervision and support for this crucial work.

See also practice examples: Story home visits and Home visits.

