

Partnership with Parents

Introduction

'Partnerships with Parents' are a key element of the services that you provide, to the children and their families. This toolkit will help you to develop strategies which can enhance those relationships and help you to engage with parents in the most positive and productive ways possible.

The 'Partnership with Parents' toolkit will help you to meet some of the requirements and recommendations set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The toolkit will also provide you with effective examples of good practice and some links to useful websites and other external resources, which can help you achieve best quality in partnerships with parents. We know that no two early years providers are the same, therefore you may find that some of these ideas work perfectly for you the way they are. Other ideas may need to be adapted to suit your provision.



Links with other documentation

Working in partnership with parents is fundamental to meeting the requirements of the 'Early Years Foundation Stage', particularly the theme of 'A Unique Child'. Parents have a great deal of knowledge and understanding to offer practitioners to support their practice. In this section we have only referred to the most obvious links, but it is worth considering how you can work with parents to support each other and the children in all areas of practice.

The Early Years Foundation Stage

Positive Relationships: & Enabling Environments. *"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 carers."* As such they have a wealth of information about their child which will be beneficial to you to support their learning and progress. When practitioners work in partnership with parents, it helps to develop strong, trusting relationships, builds avenues for communication and in turn greatly benefits the child's development and learning.

Positive Relationships: Key Person. *"Positive relationships are built on key person relationships in early years settings"* A key person has special responsibility for the care and development of a group of children, and for building relationships with these children's parents. Effective relationships can have a strong and very positive impact on children's learning and development and so it's important to consider how best to make your partnerships with parents work.

Ofsted self-evaluation form

Part A, section 2 of the Ofsted self-evaluation form seeks the "Views of those who use your setting or who work with you". Building strong relationships and good communication links with parents will help to ensure that their views are forthcoming, enabling you to incorporate their views into the ethos of your provision.

Part B, section 3, asks you to reflect the ways in which you can....."Support partnership working with parents and agencies to support children in your setting." This toolkit includes prompts which will help you to reflect on the effectiveness of your relationships with parents and also provides examples of effective practice, some of which you may choose to include in your provision.

Effective practice

Building and maintaining good, trusting relationships with parents plays an important part in the care, learning and development of each child within your provision. Working in partnership with parents will support you in ensuring that your provision is an ongoing success, as you listen to and act upon the views of your parents. It will also help you to provide a truly inclusive service, which takes into consideration the needs and views of each child and family.

Pre-admissions, admissions and transitions

It is important to start building positive relationships with the children and their families at the earliest opportunity, so you should consider how you make the most of those first impressions throughout the period before a child joins your provision.

- **Website, FIS and other marketing materials** – When parents are looking for childcare, many of them will do a bit of research before going out to look at different providers. One of the key agencies for sharing information is the **Families Information Service** (FIS) on 01609 533483. To ensure that parents have access to correct, up to date information you should update your details with the FIS on a regular basis. If you have a website of your own, make sure that this is kept up to date and looks interesting and professional. You could include stories about what you have been doing, such as trips to the woods or baking butterfly cakes. If you're not sure, ask a few friends to have a look and give you an honest opinion! Any marketing material that you use could include a statement about the 'ethos' of your setting. To do this, spend some time thinking about what is important to you in your provision. Do you pride yourself on a homely atmosphere, being a beehive of activity or being responsive to individual needs? Telling prospective parents about what makes you special, will help them to make an informed choice about which early years providers they want to visit.
- **Open Days** – Open days can provide an informal opportunity for new or prospective children and families to visit your childcare provision. It may be that they are just curious about what goes on, or it may be that they are looking for childcare in the near future. Either way, a good open day can be another way of helping you communicate to the community and possible future parents about your provision.
- **Prospectus** - You may be contacted by someone who wants to know a little bit about your provision but is not yet ready to come in and have a look around, or talk to you about the possibility of you providing childcare. For this situation you may decide to use a prospectus, which will enable you to share important information with prospective parents. Deciding what to include in your prospectus is entirely personal to your provision – you need to decide what is important. Your prospectus should give parents some information about how your provision is run and so the pack could include:

- Your aims and objectives
 - Your contact details
 - Photographs of the provision (ensure that you have signed permission from parents if any photos of children are included)
 - Basic information about the provision, such as your opening hours, ages of children etc
 - Some important policies and procedures, such as your admissions policy
 - Some information on how you follow the Early Years Foundation Stage
 - A typical day in your setting
- **Home visits** – We recognise that not every provider will be able to make home visits to children and parents before they start at a setting, but they can be invaluable. It is an opportunity to meet the child and their parent(s) in a situation, and environment that is most comfortable to them, and this can help to give partnership with parents an excellent grounding. Home visits should be carried out by the child's key person but we would recommend that for group settings, home visits are done in twos. Information about a child's needs and interests can be shared and the relationship between the family and key person can begin even before the child starts at the provision.
- **New starter meetings** - This is an excellent opportunity to share information with parents and is especially helpful if you have a number of children joining your provision at the same time. It provides a chance for parents to get to know each other, which can often encourage them to become more involved in the life of the provision, for example starting up small informal coffee mornings. It can also be beneficial to invite existing parents to the meetings so they can share some of their experiences with the new parents.
- **Starter packs** – You may decide to give a starter pack to a parent who comes to look at your provision, or who has decided that they want you to provide care for their child. These can contain a range of materials and information. A few examples include:
- Admission/registration forms to collect all the required information about a child
 - Parent partnership agreements/contracts
 - Information about routines, clothing, meals etc
 - Information about any special events
 - Selected policies and procedures, plus information on how/where to access the policies and procedures
 - Information about observation, planning and assessment processes and how parents can be involved in this
 - Information about the range of opportunities available for parents to become involved in the life of the provision

- Information about lunch boxes, healthy eating etc
- **Visits and Settling in** – It is very hard to stick to a set procedure for settling new children into any provision, as the needs of each child and family will vary greatly. As an early years provider you will have a great deal of experience in settling children in, and each parent will have a strong knowledge of their own child's needs. As such it is a very important time to work in partnership to ensure the best outcomes for each child. Your settling in procedure should provide an opportunity for a child and their parent to spend some time in your provision, getting to know the practitioners and most importantly the child's key person. Many providers offer a minimum of three visits, however this should always be flexible enough to suit each individual situation:
 - First visit – the parents stay and play with their child to help settle them into the environment and get used to the staff and their key worker.
 - Second visit - the parents stay and play for a short time, and then leave the child for a short period.
 - Third visit - the parent settles their child in your provision and then leaves them to play for approximately two hours.

If the parent is anxious about leaving their child, you may consider different ways of communicating with them once they have left their child to play. For instance, they may be able to sit in a waiting area in your provision, or stay close to the building in which case you will be able to update them on how their child is settling. You may offer to ring them, send them a text, or ask them to ring you so that you can update them if they're worried. If the child settles well you may choose to take some digital photographs, so that you can show this to the parent when they come back to collect them, putting their mind at ease.

- **Parent's Charter or Contract** – having a contract is another important way of ensuring trusting relationships. Having some important details written down and agreed before the child starts at your provision will lessen the chances of misunderstandings later on. Parents will know what they can expect from your provision and will be aware of your expectations with regards to their role in supporting their child and the provision.

Information Sharing and Communication

There are many different methods you can use to keep parents informed about their child's time in your care, for example meetings and workshops, posters, notice boards and leaflets. These and other methods of communication and information sharing, can really support the positive relationships you build with the parents using your setting, while keeping them up to date on topics such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), how children learn through play, and how parents can support their learning.

Of course, face to face, daily communication is very important and the communication method that you will probably use the most, so try to make sure that you make the most out of these opportunities. Talk about the child's day with you, ask what they have

been doing at home and try to share as much information about the child as possible. This will give you a greater understanding of the child's development which will help with your planning and the child's outcomes. It will also reassure the parent that you have a genuine interest in their child's welfare. Here are some other methods of communication which you may choose to use:

- **Daily contact and exchanges of information** – This will mainly be used by the child's key person but it is extremely important that all staff to be friendly and welcoming, and to remain professional and positive when talking to parents. This is particularly important when the feedback you need to give is more negative, for example when reporting a child's inappropriate behaviour. Staff and parents should also be made aware of whom to contact if they are unsure or need support with a particular issue.
- **Home / provision diaries** - These can be a useful way of sharing information between parents and the provision, and can be particularly helpful where practitioners and parents have limited time to talk at the beginning or end of sessions. They make a fantastic record of the child's time at your provision and can be a great way of sharing information about the child's current interests and developmental needs. For instance, some weekend photos showing a trip on a steam train could be built upon in your provision by providing train track for children to play with, or by placing toy trains in trays of paint for printing.
- **Sharing Policies and Procedures** - It is essential for parents to have easy access to your policies and procedures, and to be informed when changes or additions are made, to prevent misunderstandings or disagreements. Early years providers who have strong partnerships with parents are likely to consult with them before making any changes to policies and procedures, especially those policies which directly apply to parents, such as settling in and transitions.
- **Information and Signposting** - Information and signposting can be very useful to parents, and in some cases can be provided in such a way that parents can access the information themselves especially if the subject is delicate. There are a number of ways information can be shared and signposted:
 - Notice boards and whiteboards can display information about contact details such as the health visitors, and information about children's centre services. They can also include information about the provision, such as planning, visits, events and updates. Whiteboards are useful for sharing daily update information, to ensure that as many parents as possible are aware of daily news such as menus.
 - Newsletters are a good way of keeping parents informed about everything that is happening in the provision, especially when other providers or family members collect the child. Paper copies can be given to every parent and/or they can be emailed, depending on a parent's preference.
 - Websites can be regularly updated to include useful information about the provision, and you can also use them to signpost directly to other useful sites and resources. However it is important to keep websites and links up to date.

- **Social networking sites** – Although it is essential to ensure appropriate safeguarding procedures are in place, some childcare providers have found sites such as Facebook and My space very useful for keeping parents informed about the setting and developing effective links with parents. Creating a page for your setting, rather than a personal page, allows you to provide instant updates to parents. You can use the page to talk about events that are coming up or provide reminders such as “Please remember to bring your child’s wellies in tomorrow!”
- **Texting, emailing and phoning parents** – It is good practice to ask parents about the method of communication they prefer, and where permission is granted, some parents appreciate a brief phone call or text to let them know that their child is happy, especially if they were unsettled when the parent left. You can also use texting and/or emails to share information with parents, such as photographs of their child engrossed in an activity and/or important messages, for example an emergency closure.
- **Family rooms** - Although not always possible, it can be useful to provide a family room. This is a space where parents can go to meet other parents, talk to staff, attend meetings etc. You could also provide information leaflets and books in this space and organise workshops or talks. Family rooms are very useful for confidential conversations and a space for visiting agencies such as health visitors, speech and language therapists and other professionals who may wish to meet with parents. It can also be used as a comfortable area for parents to wait when first settling their child into the provision.

Including Parents in the Life of the Provision

Creating a relaxed, welcoming and inclusive atmosphere will ensure that all parents feel welcome and confident to come into the provision at any time. The following is a list of some initiatives that have been used to encourage partnership with parents in a range of provisions across North Yorkshire:

- **Key person** - A successful key person system is highly effective in developing links between parents and practitioners. It gives a family a clear link to your provision. The key person and the parent can share information on a daily basis in order to meet the needs of the child. In some settings, key persons give parents a short leaflet which tells them a little about them. This can in turn help parents to feel more comfortable about sharing things about themselves, their child and their family.
- **Open door policy** - having a friendly and approachable service which is always welcoming to parents and carers throughout the day, for example, parents coming in to spend their lunch time with their child. Open door policies can also enable parents to feel that they can pop in and have a quick chat, to discuss any problems or concerns they may have without feeling rushed.

- **Parents evening / open evening** – Open days, coffee mornings, and fundraising events can encourage parents to become more involved and support the childcare provision. They can also create an informal event for communicating and sharing of ideas. They offer an informal way for parents to meet other parents which again, will help them to feel as if they are a bigger part of the provision. Some providers offer ‘open weeks’ during which parents are welcome to come into the setting and spend some time playing with their child. This has been very popular – the parents are able to see their child at play and talk to the key person about their development and learning. There is flexibility about when they attend and the fact that it’s not right at the beginning or end of the day means that there is often less rush than normal.
- **Empathy dolls and weekend and holiday teddies** - In many provisions children take turns to take an Empathy doll or teddy home for the weekend, or even on holiday. Parents can help children to provide a diary of photos and notes about what they have done, where they have been and what they have seen. This can not only enhance the child’s learning, but it can help providers to gain an insight into the families’ life and build relationships further.
- **Parent Volunteer Rota** - In some provisions parents are invited to join a parent volunteer rota, and help out in the provision on a regular basis. This not only encourages parents to become more involved but also gives extra opportunities for information sharing.
- **Talent sharing visits** - Some provisions invite parents or grandparents with specific talents and skills to come into the provision to share these with children. For example, the parent could be a chef, musician or artist. One provision invites parents to come in and talk to their children about their jobs, and the photographs are displayed for the children to look at later.
- **Story reading and story telling** - Inviting parents to come in and read to their child and/or join in story times has been successful in some provisions. Some parents might be happy to read or tell stories to a small group of children in the book area.
- **Slide show of pictures** – an interactive whiteboard with a slideshow of photos at the end of each session is good for parents to see what their child has been enjoying. Televisions can also be used in the entrance area and/or digital photo frames which can rotate photo’s throughout the day. One provision holds a photo evening every half term for parents to come and see what the children have been doing in a more social way.
- **Trips and regular activities** – Early years providers often need helpers on trips, and this is a good opportunity to build relationships with parents, however remember to give them plenty of notice. One provision is able to call on many parent helpers to accompany them to regular forest school sessions.
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- **Dad's Days** - Many provisions organise this kind of event on a regular basis. Dad's are of course welcome to attend any parent event, but having events which are specifically for Dad's may appeal to more. You can use your imagination as to what you make available –whether it's a sporting event or crafting activity for instance. Some providers organise these events on a Saturday, as this can often be easier for Dads to attend.
- **Grandparent weeks** - In a similar way, some provisions invite grandparents to join their grandchildren in the provision. In some places this has developed into a programme of grandparents coming to help more regularly in the provision – for example, with baking activities.
- **Parents lunch** - Some provisions invite parents to come and join the children for lunch occasionally. This is a good way for parents to see meal times in the nursery, and to sample the food provided.
- **Parent social events** – Some providers organise a range of social events for parents. These are particularly useful in helping parents to get to know each other. Often where parents know other parents they may be more willing to come along and be involved in the provision. Events have included meals out, shopping trips, bowling nights, curry nights, and summer balls.
- **Family events** – A lot of provisions hold annual social events which can be a good way of bringing parents into the provision. Christmas parties and concerts, sports days, and leavers' parties can all be very popular and successful. Some parents also enjoy helping to organise fundraising events. With such events as these it is vital that parents know about the dates well in advance so that they are able to plan around their work commitments. Good communication is essential.

Joint Working to Improve the Provision

Joint working with parents can be a really useful way of building relationships whilst improving the setting and securing its future. In some cases this is done directly through management committees which are built up of existing parents, who play a direct role in the running and development of that provision. Although this is not the case for everyone, it is important to remember that you have access to a wide variety of knowledge and experience in your parents, which can be very useful to tap into in a variety of situations.

- **Management Committee** - Where a provision is run by a Voluntary Management Committee, parents have a central role to play in developing the provision. It is important that you encourage as many parents as possible to participate to ensure that the widest ranges of views are represented. It can also be helpful if you offer information about the roles and responsibilities of the committee to parents, and positively promote membership and its value.

- **Parent's forum** - Some provisions operate parent forums where parents can become more directly involved, and work with practitioners to influence the development of the provision.
- **Comments books / boxes and questionnaires** - These can be useful strategies for gaining feedback from parents. Comment boxes etc can be available on an ongoing basis, although it is obviously important that they are regularly checked for comments. Questionnaires are a useful way of ascertaining parent's views and can be sent out on an annual basis or can be done on an occasional basis concerning a specific issue. However it is important to provide feedback on comments and suggestions to show that the parent's participation is valued.
- **Joint training for staff and parents** - Some provisions organise training courses for both parents and practitioners to attend. These can take the form of practical workshops where ideas for play activities for children are shared, or more formal training, such as first aid courses of the EYFS. This is useful for building relationships and providing parents with an insight of the practitioner's role.

Boundaries and Expectations

It is extremely important that childcare providers and practitioners remain professional at all times. In order to help practitioners do this they need to be clear about the boundaries and expectations.

- **Baby sitting** – baby sitting has been a tricky subject for some time and many leaders and managers debate on the potential impact it could have on their provision. More and more providers are choosing to have a baby sitting policy which stops existing parents and staff arranging baby sitting during working hours. Some provisions also refuse to allow staff to take children home, to remove the elements of liability. There are many issues to consider, such as ensuring staff maintain confidentiality and are clear about who is ultimately responsible if a situation does arise.

What ever the decision is the manager / leader should consider:

- A clear policy on the subject which is available and made clear to both parents and staff.
 - That staff and parents are clear on if it is acceptable to arrange baby sitting with staff during working hours.
 - Who is held liable, especially if staff are allowed to transport children home, and if they are insured to do so.
 - That staff are clear about the boundaries and the importance of maintaining confidentiality and professionalism at all times.
- **Social networking** - It is extremely important to ensure staff are clear about the boundaries when considering social networking sites. It has always been good practice to build partnership with parents, and although positive relationships are formed they

should always remain on a professional level. Generally it is good practice to avoid personal relationships with parents, which can include, baby sitting and accepting invitations to family events.

It is not usually considered to be good practice for practitioners to become online friends with parents on social networking sites, as this can blur the lines between personal and professional relationships. In some cases such as long term friendships this can be difficult. It is therefore extremely important to establish a clear policy on social networking sites, which covers various media such as message boards, chat rooms and tweets / comments etc. The policy should be clearly linked to your confidentiality policy. An example of a possible statement could be *“Our policy is that staff do not make or accept invitations to become online friends with parents or other family carers on any social networking site”*. The policy can then be shared and explained to all parents in the usual way.

Confidentiality

It is vital that you are clear about confidentiality from the start. You should highlight your expectations with regards to all those using your provision, and also explain when it may be necessary to break confidentiality for example with regards to safeguarding.

- **Confidentiality Policies** - All childcare providers should have a clear confidentiality policy to ensure that everyone using the provision understands what is expected, what they can expect and the importance that the provision gives to confidentiality.
- **Personal Conversations and Gossip** - Over time as partnerships with parents build it is natural for staff and parents to feel more and more comfortable with each other and this often leads to discussions and disclosures which can be very personal. Parents may discuss the difficulties they are experiencing at home following a divorce, and although such information can be helpful to ensure the child and their family is supported, it is also vital that those discussions are only shared on a need to know basis, and not discussed for example with friends in the pub later, e.g. “you’ll never guess who Tommy’s mum is seeing now”
- **Inquisitive or Upset Parents** - It is worth considering what you or your team might do if you were approached by inquisitive or upset parents. For instance, a parent who asks for information about another parent or child, or a parent who wants to make a loud complaint in front of the children. You should be aware of the types of responses you might give, e.g. unfortunately I am unable to discuss this here, but please feel free to pop into nursery where we will be more than happy to listen to your concerns.
- **Sensitive and Difficult Situations** - Staff should also be aware of how to deal with a sensitive or upsetting situation, and know who to share details with as appropriate, such as a safeguarding disclosure. Do you have an appropriate area to hold

confidential and/or sensitive conversations? How will you ensure they are documented? For instance, writing notes down immediately after the meeting.

Reflecting on practice

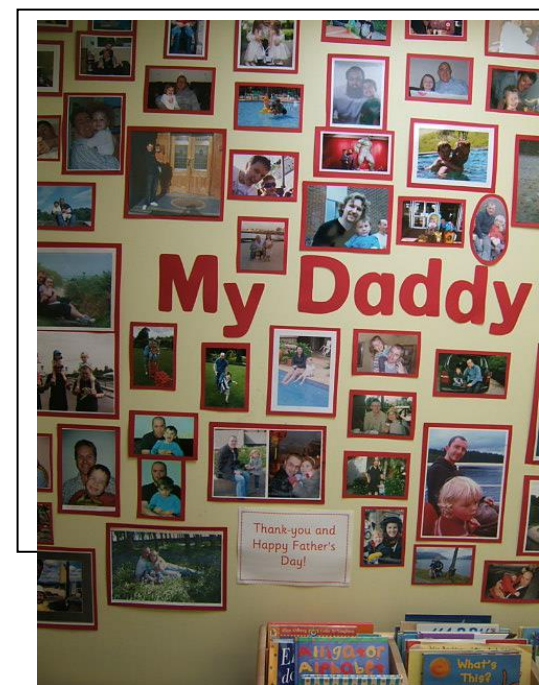
Before you go any further, you might find it useful to evaluate how good your partnership with parents is right now. By definition, a partnership means working together, and cooperating with each other for the same purpose. An effective partnership within an early years provision would include parents and practitioners communicating well and sharing information – working together to ensure the best outcomes for the child. It's important that you recognise the knowledge and experience each parent has with regards to their child

The questions below may help you to review your current practice and ensure that everyone is fully aware of your policies and procedures. We have provided suggested questions for the leader/childminder, staff and parents. You may choose to use all of these or just one or two sections, depending on your provision and how confident you feel about your policies and procedures. You can use the questions as individual questionnaires or use them informally through staff meetings, chats with parents etc.

When you answer these questions, don't just answer yes or no – think about the question and ask yourself:

- How do I know?
- What is my evidence and where is it?
- Is that always the case?
- Is that true of everyone using the provision?

The column for **“Any further development needed”** on each questionnaire is best completed by the whole team or by the childminder. This becomes part of the development plan for your provision so it's important that it is thought about and completed by the person/people who will be responsible for carrying it out.



Questions for the setting leader / manager and childminder

Consider	Our current practice	Examples of evidence of this within our setting	Any further development needed To be completed by:-
What message do you give to the community around you through marketing etc?	<i>e.g. That all are welcome within our provision. We are inclusive and promote diversity.</i>	<i>e.g. We celebrate each child's individuality with their own book about themselves which is added to regularly.</i>	<i>e.g. Increase imaginative cultural resources such as fabrics, and trips into the community.</i>
What information do you give to parents before their child starts to attend your provision?	<i>e.g. Policies, fees, opening times, funded provision, parental contract</i>	<i>e.g. Welcome pack</i>	
What sort of message do you think this gives parents about what you do?	<i>e.g. Very business like and organised – all relates to our management of provision</i>		<i>e.g. Could add information about EYFS and the activities we do to the welcome pack</i>
How do you ensure that parents feel included in the settling in procedure?	<i>e.g. We are flexible in our approach and spend time discussing possible approaches with parents.</i>	<i>e.g. When J started, we agreed with parents that he would have two short sessions for settling in. He didn't settle well and so we agreed an extended approach with parents</i>	
How do you ensure that parents are well informed about the EYFS and the steps you take to support their child's development?	<i>e.g. Daily talks with key person. Parent evenings held termly where parents are invited to talk about their child's progress and look at their learning journey.</i>	<i>e.g. Parent evenings are not always well attended. Some parents feel that the children should be learning to write etc.</i>	<i>e.g. Parent information evening on EYFS and learning through play. Ensure daily talks with key person are related to child development and EYFS. Invite parents to take learning journeys home weekly and add comments.</i>

Consider	Our current practice	Examples of evidence of this within our setting	Any further development needed Completed by:-
<p>Group provision: Do you use a key person system in your provision? What opportunities does the key person have to build initial relationships with parents?</p> <p>Childminders: What opportunities do you take to build initial relationships with parents?</p>	<p><i>e.g. The key person gives parents a leaflet telling them a bit more about herself, and they have the opportunity to meet with her without the child present. The key person focuses on the child and this helps to build trust.</i></p> <p><i>I always offer a home visit so that the child can show me what is important to them in their own house. Families are encouraged to visit often before the child starts attending properly.</i></p>	<p><i>I built a very strong relationship with Ts mum as she visited regularly before T joined us properly. This really helped when I had to approach her about concerns I had about Ts development.</i></p>	<p><i>e.g. The leaflet could be two-way, with parents offering similar information about their family.</i></p>
<p>Once children have settled, what information do you give parents on a daily basis?</p>	<p><i>e.g. Daily talks at end of session to discuss how the child has been. Daily diary completed for babies to record sleeps, nappy changes etc. Information about accidents, medication etc.</i></p>		<p><i>e.g. Ensure daily diaries and talks have a focus on child development and EYFS. Could also discuss with parents how they can extend what the child has been doing with us.</i></p>
<p>What information do you request from parents on a daily basis?</p>	<p><i>e.g. How their child has been since they were last with us.</i></p>		<p><i>e.g. What the children have been interested in at home, any developmental steps made</i></p>
<p>Do you always act on the comments and recommendations of parents?</p>			
<p>Are you sure that all parents know that their views are valued and respected?</p>			

Useful Links

Department for Education

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education

Ofsted

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted

4Children

www.4children.org.uk

Downloads

Policy toolkit / guidance – this is a very useful document that can guide you through all your policies and procedures and what you should include in your admissions information to ensure effective partnerships with parents.

Good example of:

- Parent questionnaire
- Website
- Prospectus
- Flyer
- Starter pack
- Newsletter
- Notice board
- Social Networking page
- My space board.
- Key Person Leaflet