

Relationships are all around us, wherever we may be and whatever we may be doing. Relationships and partnerships are the very vital connections that we make with others as we go about our day-to-day lives.

Only the other day, I was observing a three-year-old in my setting exploring magnets. She had discovered that if she chose a larger magnet, the rings could connect together to form a chain, but the smaller the magnet, the smaller the chain. In early years, the stronger the connection we make, the more meaningful a partnership can be. If we can get those connections and relationships right, then it will surely make everything run much more smoothly.

Early years professionals understand that partnerships are fundamental to good practice, and this is underpinned by both policy and official frameworks (2004 Children Act, 2006 Childcare Act and EYFS 2017). The EYFS framework speaks repeatedly of partnerships.

But have these become tokenistic - yet another box to tick without really understanding how to make them meaningful? Our relationship with parents is often the very first educational partnership they will experience as parents. If we can get it right at this stage, then these children have a real chance of their families being actively involved throughout their education.

The unique adult

We all know the value of our unique children, and we all value the very essence that makes each child who they are. The early years sector is great at nurturing these little people and differentiating our care of each of them every day. We can however, forget that our 'big people' - our staff, families, professionals and those within our very sector - are



Debbie Gunn, the founder of D-Dee's, which won both the Individual Nursery and Nursery Team categories in the NMT Nursery Awards 2017, explains why partnerships with parents and staff are fundamental

also unique. The uniqueness of everyone is at the very core of our practice here at D-Dee's and, indeed, the relationships that we have with each other are key to our reflective practice and future developments.

If we are honest, we often find ourselves alongside people that we would not necessarily choose to form a relationship with. But ensuring the team as a whole acknowledges and welcomes the value that each unique person brings enhances both the relationship and our professionalism.

Everyone, whether a big or small person, needs to feel important. That means that remembering the little things is a core part of our ethos: thanking someone for going out of their way to answer a simple question, inquiring about the wedding they went to at the

weekend or asking a parent how long they would like their child's settling-in to be - all these make people feel respected and secure. Feeling safe and secure makes people feel visible and important and this is where trust and respect come into play.

'Precious balancing act'

Understanding this sense of identity reminds us not to compartmentalise individuals or groups. Connections are important to all and could be said to be vital to our wellbeing. As a profession, we find that practitioners understand the value of the unique and do not impose value judgments on the little people in their care. However, we often do judge families and other big people such as other agencies, simply because we are human.

Yet, it takes just one person in a setting to try to see the other's point of view and you will achieve a more balanced perspective. Putting ourselves into another person's shoes helps us understand the remit or constraints that they are working under and the implications for your provision.

As a nursery proprietor and manager, it can be difficult to get the

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connections

relationship balance right - we wear so many hats. Parents tell us one day their deepest fears for their children and, the next, need a reminder to pay their fees. We may need to do a performance review with a staff member and then support them through a child protection issue in the same day. It is a precious balancing act and it cannot always be perfect.

Acknowledging this and working together as a team to move forward is pivotal for team development. At D-Dee's, we strive to ensure our team has ownership of developments within the setting by working together so we develop a truly shared vision. This is only possible with strong connections and mutual understanding. If a staff member feels respected and valued, they will develop self-confidence in their role and perform highly.

Ownership

Consider this. We constantly ask for the voice of the child and for feedback from our families; we receive gradings from Ofsted, but at times we expect our team to just do – no questions - what we ask. But these professionals are at the heart of our settings. They need ownership and the opportunity to celebrate their talents and tackle their weaknesses.

At D-Dees, our staff are longstanding and fully understand each other's weaknesses. Limited opportunities for promotion could have resulted in a high staff turnover, as people look for a step up the ladder elsewhere. But we have countered this by establishing a sense of belonging and teamwork: each staff member is given ownership of a specific area of interest. We follow children's interests. So, why not those of our team?

Relationships with other professionals who 'get it' are vital,



Big and small people learning together

and technology makes this all too possible. Forming relationships with those who do the same job each in their own unique way can add an incredible sense of self and confidence to your own practice, leadership and management. Becoming a listening ear and developing a shared thinking of our very own has had huge positive effects in our setting. We all know the expression to 'hold the child in your mind', but how about holding another professional in your mind as you introduce a new procedure or policy, deliver training to your team or challenge policy at local or national level?

Every cloud...

It is all about the little people, but we cannot achieve great things without a sound business model. Yet, this is becoming more difficult with the current funding fiasco. However, this in itself has led to strong links within the sector. The Champagne Nursery Lemonade Funding (CNLF) campaign, founded by Donna Row, has become the voice for the sector from within the sector. As part of the leadership team along with Jo Morris, Ian Morgan and Allan Presland, we have collaborated with many other providers.

CNLF have given providers ►

► confidence in themselves as they have understood policy and worked together to drive change. The relationships formed by the team have been meaningful and balanced - we are all leaders of our own businesses so share a common goal and vision. We challenge each other and share a willingness to negotiate and compromise, and we would not have got as far as we have without these skills.

Leadership connections

The development of yourself as a leader depends on the development of whole-team connections. Only when this has been significantly embedded, will you see mutual value. So, share your knowledge and learn something new:

- invite others to meet at your setting and visit their settings too
- network locally, nationally, face to face and remotely
- go beyond early years and seek out those in business, health, education and policy
- listen to others - really listen and unpick what you are being told
- do something different and new that challenges you and/or your team.



Debbie Gunn (4th from left) with members of a Chinese delegation

Never have I known the sector speak to each other and support each other so much as it does now.

Not just rose-tinted

My consultancy work has led to relationships with providers around the country, and this is a framework for future connections. The EYFS emphasises the importance of a child's identity and sense of belonging, which is strengthened through strong relationships. Similarly, our professional identity and wellbeing are harnessed by our relationships and our sharing of knowledge. When I have requests for advice, it really makes me think about - and change - my own practice too. This mutual respect can lead to healthy discussion, supporting broader practice.

At times, explaining why something is done in a particular way makes us realise that the only reason is that you've always done it that way. Defending your stance and making changes by reflecting on your practice can lead you to

develop further as a leader and early years professional, which can only be for the good of our little people.

This may sound rose-tinted, but these positive and very valuable connections are, in fact, hard work to maintain. So, do not let yourself be overly critical of your practice if your team fall out or the Ofsted inspector gives you a judgment that you disagree with. Our passion for our vocation can mean we take it personally if it goes wrong.

We need to remember to be kind to ourselves and to take the time to reflect and move on. Find a new connection today. Email someone in your area or join in a conversation on a forum online as there is always someone out there who will add real



Solidarity at CNLF. L to R, Debbie Gunn, Donna-Marie Row (Yorley Barn Nursery School) Jo Morris Golds (Playsteps Nursery)

Developing your team's ownership

- Actively ask for input on a given task
- Plan who to ask to work together on a project. Could this nurture a connection for the future?
- Reflect on the real-life interests of your team. How can these benefit both setting and team?
- Hold a CPD evening and ask your staff to support it and tell other professionals about their setting.

value to your practice. If you already have that relationship with someone, I am so pleased for you. Certainly, my practice is developing every day through the connections that I have both within my setting and beyond. ■

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