

Parenting Support and Parental Participation

Working with Families: A Review of the Literature on Parental Participation

KEY FINDINGS



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Introduction

The engagement and participation of parents is increasingly acknowledged as an important issue for policy makers and service providers, with a general consensus that participation is beneficial for all, contributing to improved engagement, social inclusion and better outcomes for children, young people and families. Despite this, there has been less consensus on the definition of the term, particularly as it relates to parents. While Arnstein's (1969) conceptual model highlights the various levels of participation, from informing to consultation and partnership, the power dynamics of child protection contexts may mean that the trade-offs associated with partnership as conceived in this model are more complex.

This literature review explores the concept and practice of parental participation, including what parents want from participation, what works, and the challenges and barriers to realising meaningful participation of parents in decisions affecting their families.

Messages from the Literature

Barriers to participation may be from a service, professional and user perspective. Services may be working with large caseloads and limited resources. Professionals may feel constrained by the nature of their role and agency imperatives, particularly in a child protection context. Parents may feel ignored or powerless if their voice is unheard or not respected. They may resort to a cooperative voice with a view to ensuring a positive outcome, or fail to exercise their voice entirely. This can be influenced by the asymmetric relationships in place in a child protection context, fear of saying the wrong thing, cultural or language barriers, or dissatisfaction with the process.

The challenge for professionals and practitioners, as participation becomes a policy and practice imperative, is to overcome barriers to working in partnership with parents, while working within a complex power dynamic and negotiating difficult decisions. Key factors to successful engagement include recognising parents as having a right to participate, actively encouraging parents' voices, respecting their views and competencies throughout the process. Part of this involves reflexive work on the part of the professional. Professionals may benefit from support and training in this regard. Services need to consider how they adapt to enhance engagement and maintain the interests of parents.

Ultimately, parental participation is more than getting a view stated. It is a complex practice of building relationships and trust towards an optimum service experience and positive outcomes for the children and families. In the broadest sense it includes the provision of appropriate information and advice, consultation where possible, and working in partnership with parents in a respectful, supportive and encouraging environment, where the parents feel that their voice is valued and their competencies acknowledged. Once these elements are in place, parents feel validated by the participation experience.

Voice of the Parent

- There is increasing interest in service user consultation, in addition to a focus on practitioners working in a participatory way, particularly in family support and child protection settings.
- The increased emphasis on participation enhances the capacity of service users to be creative and reflexive and active agents in shaping their lives and acting upon the outcomes of welfare policies.
- Understanding what parents want from participatory practice is crucial to effective partnership working, potentially improving engagement levels, informing service design and contributing to better outcomes for children and families.

Prohibitive Factors

- Prohibitive factors to successful participation include a lack of respect for parents' opinions or suggestions, feeling outnumbered by the professionals present, feeling poorly informed and unfamiliar with the terminology and mechanisms used by professionals, and experiencing negative attitudes. High caseloads, time and resource issues were identified as organisational constraints.
- The parent/child-protection professional relationship has been identified as asymmetric. Because of the power dynamics in such settings, parents can feel defensive and threatened and may feel silenced, thereby failing to have their needs met. Alternatively, where parents do exercise their voice, it may be with a view to appearing cooperative and avoiding conflict with professionals.

Working in Partnership

- A number of factors contribute to successful participation and partnership working with parents, including being treated with respect, having competencies acknowledged, having a voice, experiencing teamwork and flexibility on the part of services, collaborative and cooperative communication, and non-judgmental attitudes.
- There are various levels of parental participation, from tokenistic consultation to working in partnership with parents. The latter is more meaningful, facilitating a move towards coproduction with parents and families.
- Parents who choose not to actively participate should not be seen in a negative light. They remain part of the process of working in partnership. This process extends beyond activating parents to realise goals set by practitioners, to one of shared responsibility.
- Some groups of parents have specific needs. These include migrant parents, parents from minority communities, lone parents, teen parents, disabled parents, fathers, and parents living in poverty. Mechanisms for participation should reflect this difference.

Participation in Practice

- Professionals need to be aware of their essential role in facilitating and supporting parents in the decision-making process, as well as the necessity of acquiring relational and communicative competence in engaging with parents in different contexts and different parenting relationships.
- Training service providers to provide culturally responsive services and utilise participation and partnership models effectively has the potential to facilitate the participation of parents in different contexts and different parenting relationships.

This literature is derived from the Parenting Support and Parental Participation work package as part of the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership & Family Support.

Full literature review is available online at: www.nugalway.ie/cfrc/mainstream/ourworktodate

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