

Characteristics of impactful partnership

KEY CONCEPT

Open-ended but not unending

As intimate outsiders in family life, helpers always enter relationships knowing there will be an end. However, it is important to avoid endings that feel abrupt or unexpected to families. Being open-ended means giving a sense that the relationship can go where it needs to or connect with others when it finishes. Being unending means that it is working towards an inevitable closure of some kind.

Summary

Our findings show that impactful partnership has five characteristics. These are: working at the frontier; flexible stability; grounding and grounded; open-ended but not unending; and authenticity, which means working as people.

Working at the frontier

Working at the frontier means being in unfamiliar situations or charting new territory and it often results in encountering the unexpected. This kind of work is done through innovating, improvising, flexible logistics, going with the flow, going just beyond what is normal or routine. Working at the frontier connects with the idea of partnership as an evolving art (see Pages 8–9).

The study findings show that impactful partnership work is often at the frontier in one or more ways. Sometimes ‘going where you need to go’ can mean going just ahead of policies, procedures and systems; this needs to be done in a considered manner and guided by what is in a family’s or child’s best interests, and weighed against any risks to helpers. Open communication with colleagues, managers and supervisors about this kind of work is important.

Section 2 – Living partnership practices (Pages 22–37) explains how work at the frontier is done.

Flexible stability

The project data showed that where lasting positive change happened, the partnership combined consistency and predictability on the one hand, with agility and responsiveness on the other hand. This is flexible stability.

Parents need those helping them to be consistent and predictable, so that the relationship feels solid and secure.

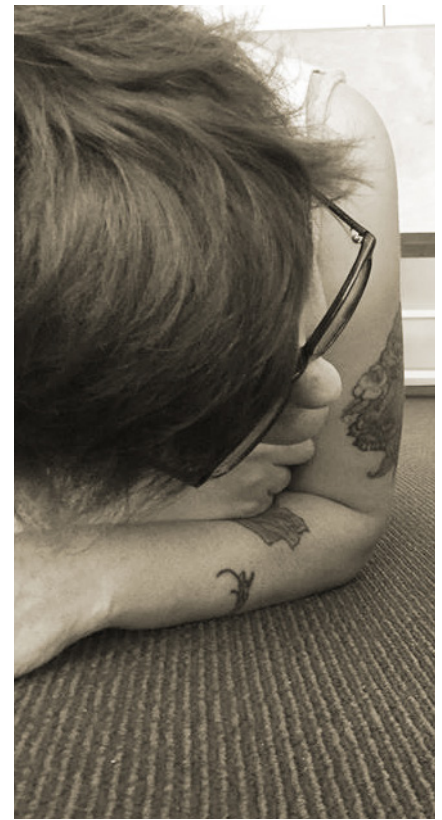
However, impactful partnership also requires helpers to be sensitive, agile and responsive. Conditions of flexible stability are critical. Pacing and timing are a key part of this – being flexible to work at a pace that is best for parents, and to change this as parents’ needs change, but also offering stability by avoiding long or unplanned breaks without contact.

Consistency and predictability have to be balanced with creativity and agility.

Helpers need to treat all clients with the same respect and empathy, but they also need to match their approach to specific parents’ needs and preferences.

Clear responsibilities help both parties navigate change together, but roles have to be fluid and adapt to circumstances.

Parents often need helpers to be reliably present and available, but also need to be given space from time to time.



Partnership work has to be stable in its positive orientation, based on families’ strengths and with purpose towards desired outcomes. It also needs honesty about struggle and difficulty.

“I can go on a home visit and I’ve got my agenda. Okay, today we’re going to talk about Max’s play skills. I’d get there and Tessa’s like oh my god, I didn’t get paid by Centrelink – all right, well, let’s do that.”

(Helper)

Families need to feel that those supporting them are always on their side, but this cannot rule out helpers being ready to challenge parents and raise things they may find hard to hear.

It can help to build trust and secure parents’ commitment to change if the help they get is consistent and predictable. However, impactful partnership often requires creative work and agile practice.

The third part of this section describes dual ways of being (Pages 18–21) that connect with the characteristic of flexible stability.



Grounded and grounding

Impactful partnership work has to be grounded in and interacting with what is happening for families, and can mean helpers actually getting involved, for example, by joining children in play, or assisting parents while they settle a child or respond to a toddler tantrum. It also has to be grounding – helping families respond to and shape their everyday experiences.

Being on the ground with parents, and helping them feel grounded, complement aspects of partnership that involve thinking about possibilities for change.

These characteristics are accomplished in a number of ways. Those in a supporting role can help bring families into a focus on the here and now, particularly when the future is scary for them.

Groundedness also comes from meeting parents where they are in the moment. This can mean getting down onto the floor with them during play, having a coffee together, or pausing to listen when parents need to get something off their chest.

Families trusted others, and outcomes were secured, when they felt helpers were walking alongside them through change. Remembering details, being contactable when needed, and talking about a journey taken together all helped to achieve this.

Open-ended, but not unending

We found that lasting positive change often depended on the partnership with families being open-ended but not unending. This is connected with the ways in which helpers are intimate outsiders in family life – sharing many difficult things, but never becoming part of the family (see Pages 8–9).

Parents' readiness to invest in a relationship and to take on challenge can be compromised if they see the pathway of support as short, leading to a cliff-edge, or if they fear it may end abruptly and unexpectedly.

Sometimes, services can offer indefinite timeframes, or at least have a long 'tail-end'. When this is not possible, parents need to be assured that help won't disappear just because they have used up what a particular service offers. However there is always the intention that the relationship ends in some way. This is why partnerships are open-ended, but not unending.

There can be multiple forms of ending in the course of a relationship between a helper and family, as their work together transitions from one focus to another, or as the relationship shifts gear.

Being open-ended means the door doesn't close on parents.

One early parenting group made effective use of social media to address this. While the group focused on the first 12 weeks of a child's life, parents made lasting connections and continued to support each other for months afterwards.

“We have this Facebook page that's fabulous and I think that should almost be a formal part of it, within that twelve week cycle, it should be set up and off you go, so you get a seamless transition.”

(Parent)

Being open-ended also means making sure the door doesn't close suddenly on parents. Sometimes parents may overstep the mark in a relationship with a helper, or they may miss appointments or be unable to take agreed actions. The condition of open-endedness means support remains available, without judgement, when parents are able to come back in.

Authenticity: working as people

Parents, professionals and volunteers all described the importance of working with each other as people – being real, not being a number. One parent described this as 'working on my level'. Being authentic as an intimate outsider in family life is a key challenge for helpers.

Engaging with *who* people are, not *what* they are, avoids clients feeling they are defined in terms of their problems, and helps to ensure a holistic approach.

When one parent mentioned star signs as important, the nurse helping her said, 'I'm a Capricorn, what are you?' This showed care for what mattered to the mother.

Remembering small details, or remembering families when they move between services or come back after a break (practice memory) help parents feel they are being treated as people.

Authenticity is also accomplished through respectful communication. This acknowledges parents' doubts and concerns as legitimate, but avoids confirming their sense of inadequacy. For example, when one mother said she didn't know what her child wanted when she was crying, the nurse replied, 'It's good to wonder about these things, isn't it?'

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

Diverse impacts
Small things with big effects
Mind-expanding
Intimate outsiders
Evolving art

Revision

Impactful partnership was found to have five characteristics. These are ways of describing what impactful partnership work is like. They involve embracing the unfamiliar and new; balancing consistency with agility; addressing the here and now for families; careful management of endings; and working at parents' level.

For more information on the key concepts and findings relating to this worksheet see: [creating-better-futures.org/](https://www.creating-better-futures.org/)

To claim a certificate on completed worksheets see: <https://www.creating-better-futures.org/claim-your-certificate/>

1. Key concepts – check your understanding

In your own words, explain what each of the characteristics means, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

WF Working at the frontier:

FS Flexible stability:

GG Grounded and grounding:

OE Open-ended but not unending:

A Authenticity – working as people:

2. Linking ideas to practice

Now you have the concepts in mind, the next step is to connect them to your practice:

Concept	How it relates to my practice
Working at the frontier	
Flexible stability	
Grounded and grounding	
Open-ended but not unending	
Authenticity – working as people	

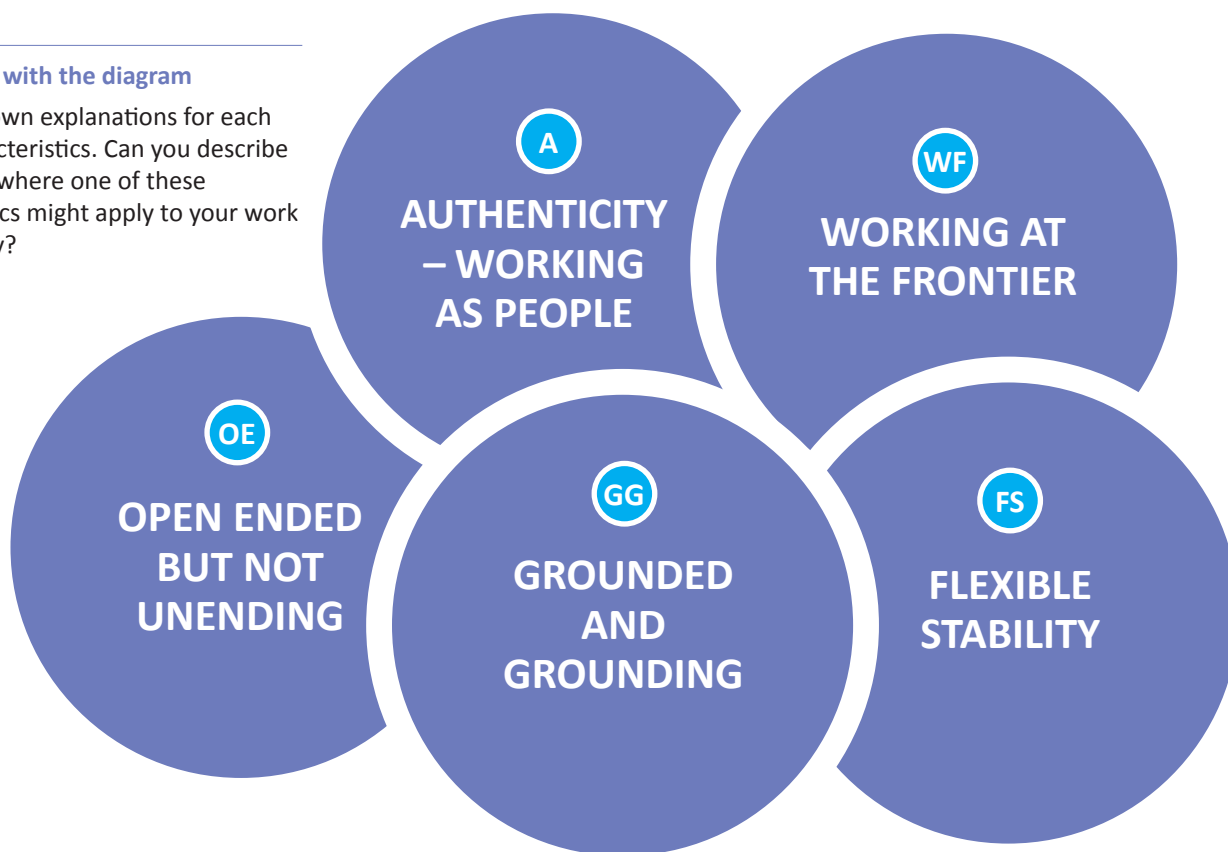
3. Understanding the diagram

The five characteristics of impactful partnership are shown as distinct but overlapping. This is meant to show that they each require particular reflection and action, and that they are in a messy relationship with one another.

If the diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the characteristics of impactful partnership on a separate sheet.

4. Working with the diagram

Write your own explanations for each of the characteristics. Can you describe an example where one of these characteristics might apply to your work with a family?



5. Enhancing your practice

On a separate sheet:

1. Choose two of the *Questions for reflective practice* (see right) and write your answer on a separate piece of paper. If they don't quite work you can adapt them.
2. Look at the *Questions to adapt and ask with parents* (see right). Think of a family you are working with or have recently finished working with. Choose two questions you think you could use or adapt to ask the parents, and explain why these might be important, and what you think they might say in response.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE	What have I done that places our work at the frontier?
	In what ways have I been stable and flexible?
	What is the ground that we are on together?
	What have I done to work with these parents as people, and to be a person rather than just a role to them?
	What from my past work could help me go further into frontier territory with this family?
	Based on my experience, what forms of stability are likely to be most important to this family?
	What benefits might there be if I were agile and responsive in different ways?
	What could I do to help the family feel that the door of help isn't going to close suddenly on them?
	What about our work has been unfamiliar or new to you?
	What have you come to expect from me?
QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS	What has helped you focus on the here and now?
	What else might it be good for me to know about things that matter to you?
	What things do you want us to work on that we haven't really covered yet?
	As we move forward, what about our relationship needs to stay the same?
	And from your point of view, what might need to change about the way I work with you?
	Thinking ahead a few (weeks/months/years), what help will be important to you?

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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