



Building impactful partnerships

KEY CONCEPT

Partnership-building as an expansive, evolving art

Building an impactful partnership with families is not a one-off process. A relationally safe space for learning is never finished as long as the work with families continues. The process is not linear, but is expansive, meaning it is about opening up new possibilities for learning together. Describing this work as ‘evolving’ implies small steps, and as an ‘art’ suggests it requires nuanced judgement and relational skill, rather than strict adherence to rigid protocols or sequences.

Summary

This is about how partnerships between families and helpers come about. We found the most impactful partnerships were built up through many actions and steps that make a significant difference to the relationship and what becomes possible through it. The way of building a safe relationship for learning is one example of how the study found small things with big effects (see Pages 8–9) to be crucial in impactful partnership.

This means that investing in seemingly minor aspects of a relationship is important because it can have major

pay-offs. These pay-offs may be immediate and visible, or they may be deferred and harder to detect. However, all the elements presented here were found in the impactful partnership relationships studied over the three years. Some ways of building partnership can initiate a helpful contagion through features that catch or take hold in other ways. We use the metaphor of helpful contagion to imply a force that begins to do work of its own and spread.

Effective partnerships are built up through many smaller actions and steps that make a big difference.

Seemingly small steps can still require a lot of work. Smallness relates not to the effort involved or to significance, but to their being part of a bigger, expansive partnership-building process, and to their coupling with effects that are bigger.

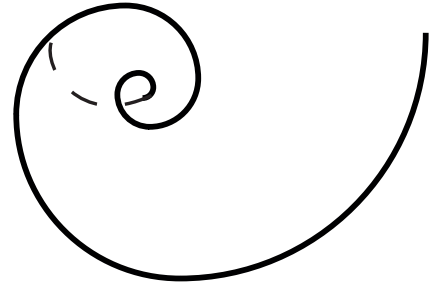
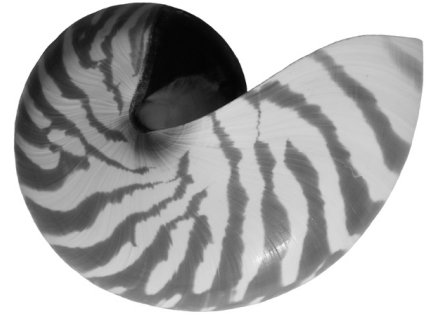
The relationship underpinning an impactful partnership is not just established at the start, but is an ongoing accomplishment that changes as people work together. Building impactful partnerships is an evolving art (see Pages 8–9) – it changes from family to family, and over time with any one particular family.

“It’s the little steps that make the big changes. A lot of little steps, big changes in the end.”

(Helper)

Building on an idea expressed by a helper, we think of partnership-building in terms of a spiral. At the centre is the essence of partnership – help, challenge and possibility (see Pages 10–11). The spiral indicates expansion, linking to the idea of partnership as mind-expanding (see Pages 8–9), and suggests that the process is non-linear. Spirals occur often in nature and can convey both dynamic and stable, secure qualities.

Building an impactful partnership can be conceptualised as a journey along the spiral. Different steps progress the relationship (indicated by movement along the line), and expand possibilities (indicated by outward movement). As the relationship-building advances, the



Each action links back to the core – the partnership – as well as expanding the process along the spiral

same issues may be addressed multiple times, but each time from a new relational place (indicated by the loops of the spiral around a centre). Each successful investment in the relationship has consequences for the core essence: help, challenge and vision (indicated by the lines curving back to the centre). A shift in the relationship may make help more acceptable, may elevate scope for challenge (either of parents or helpers), and may make new things possible.

This reminds us that partnership-building is not for its own sake, but serves a purpose that relates to making change happen for families.

We found many examples of small steps and actions that had big effects in terms of the partnership itself. They can be collected into these groups: working to gain acceptance; working so that families value themselves; subtle intervention; obvious intervention; and repair after rupture when needed.

Building impactful partnerships also involves working at the frontier of the relationship. This means not always resting in a comfortable relationship space, but always being alert to the possibilities that a new aspect of the relationship may bring about.

¹ Day, C., Ellis, M., & Harris, L. (2015). *Family Partnership Model: reflective practice handbook* (2nd ed.). London: Centre for Parent and Child Support, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

1 Earning acceptance

Helpers need to earn the trust of parents, to be accepted as an intimate outsider in family life. This means being someone who shares in some of the most difficult, private things, but who is not part of the family (see Pages 8–9).

Gaining this trust and position takes effort and skill, and is itself an evolving art. Examples of how this is done include:

- Listening to what parents have to say
- Reflecting back to show you are listening but not judging
- Securing quick wins to show you're there to make a difference
- Living out that you care – remembering details, bonding with the child.

In some services we studied, acceptance work was done quite quickly, although it never finishes. In Tasmania's Child and Family Centres, practitioners sometimes worked for months or years to help parents feel comfortable with accessing support.

The time taken to secure acceptance should not be a barrier to families getting the help they need.

Steps relating to acceptance are contagious – small things with big effects – because they enable other aspects of partnership-building to proceed. They also nurture the essence of partnership.

2 Helping families value themselves

This is about helping parents feel positive and capable of good things. It is also about helping parents feel they have something important and valuable to contribute to the partnership relationship itself. They are not victims being rescued, but crucial agents in a collaborative, shared journey. A mutually mind-expanding partnership (see Pages 8–9) is not possible if parents see themselves as passive, of limited worth, and wholly dependent in their relationship with helpers.

Many parents feel like they are failing and have low self-regard. Those who are convinced they are hopeless are unlikely to commit to the challenges that change inevitably requires.

Helping parents recognise their own value and worth is a way of revealing to parents that they are important, capable and have lots to give in the partnership.

It can be done by:

- Using specific, labelled praise to reflect what parents have accomplished
- Encouraging parents to consider how they look after themselves
- Taking time to dwell in the issues that parents feel are important, even if they are not the focus of a particular service or practitioner role.

These actions show the parent that the helper respects and values them as an active partner. It also helps the parent see themselves in a new light. A changing sense of how they are in a relationship with a helper can be one of many shifting interpretations that support changing actions in a mind-expanding process.

3 Subtle intervention

Subtle intervention is offered gently, but never by stealth, hidden from parents. It helps to build the relationship by effecting relevant change without confronting parents with overt challenges or strategic discussions that might feel corrective or daunting. We found that helpers usually offer subtle intervention of their own accord and may draw attention to aspects of it later on. Examples include:

- Comments that show you notice something about a parent's physical or mental state – suggesting their wellbeing is as important as their child's
- Putting a young child down on the floor for some tummy time and watching with the parent how she or he responds
- Asking parents questions that require them to think in specific ways, such as 'What do you think he feels when you cuddle him?'

These small, gentle steps help to build strong, purposeful partnerships that can deliver lasting positive change.

4 Obvious intervention

Some intervention is obvious in the sense that it is subject to negotiation about what to do, why, when, how, who with, and so on. It is part of what is referred to as guided or planned change in the Family Partnership Model. Not all partnerships are 'ready' for obvious intervention, especially right at the start. However, obvious intervention can also contribute to the relationship between helpers and parents by explicitly working on issues that parents have said are important to them.

While other steps in building impactful partnership may work towards making obvious intervention possible, obvious intervention is itself a way of strengthening the relationship between helpers and parents.

Working through an obvious intervention can nudge the relationship along the spiral, creating new kinds of shared experiences. It moves outwardly (expands), as it means the relationship is now being used as a basis to take on new aspects of what matters to a family. It also nurtures the essence of partnership – sometimes addressing help, challenge and possibility simultaneously.

5 Repair after rupture when needed

Many of the impactful partnership relationships we studied had moments when the relationship was strained or even broken in some way. Readers may recognise ideas of rupture and repair from descriptions of relationships between parents and children (as in the Circle of Security²). Helper-parent partnerships are not impervious to ruptures, and when these happen repair is needed. Such ruptures can arise through logistical mishaps (like when home visitors turn up at an unexpected time or when parents miss appointments), through expectations not being met, or sometimes confrontation or behaviour that is not okay. Helpers taking the lead in facilitating repair helps parents to recognise that they are important in the relationship, and that they matter to the helper.

² Powell, B., Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., & Marvin, R. S. (2016). *The Circle of Security intervention: enhancing attachment in early parent-child relationships*. London: The Guildford Press.

NOTES

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

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

Revision

Building impactful relationships is an expansive process, and involves helpers becoming intimate outsiders in family life. It is an evolving art that is never the same twice, but has some key elements that were found consistently in the study. Helper-parent relationships may need to be repaired after a rupture, just like those between parents and children.

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/>

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1. Key concepts – check your understanding

In your own words, explain what each of the ways of building impactful partnership relationships means and who it applies to, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

Earning acceptance:

Helping families value themselves:

Subtle intervention:

Obvious intervention:

Repair after rupture when needed

2. Linking ideas to practice

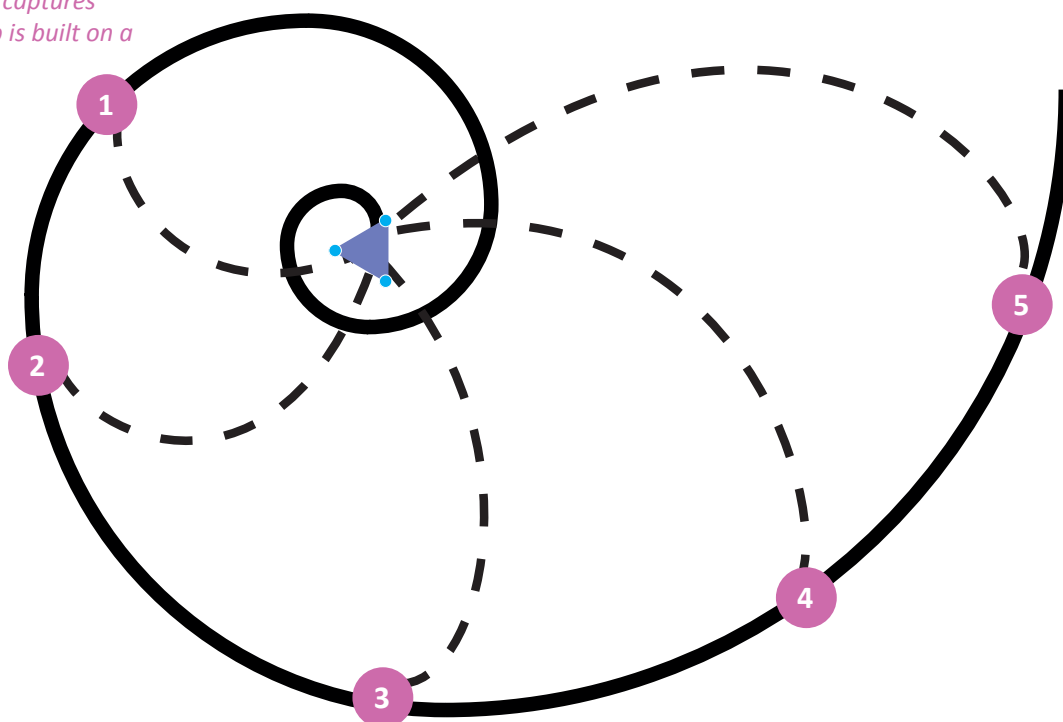
Now you have the concepts in mind, the next step is to connect them to your practice:

Concept	How it relates to my practice – think of a family you are working with, and say how each dot on the spiral connects back to the essence
Earning acceptance	
Helping families value themselves	
Subtle intervention	
Obvious intervention	
Repair after rupture when needed	

3. Understanding the diagram

The spiral represents partnership-building as an expansive, evolving process. At the centre is the essence of partnership – help, challenge and possibility (see Essential ingredients of partnership). The outward movement of the spiral links to the idea of partnership as mind-expanding (see Living partnership practices). The spiral loops around, showing that the helper and parent never visit the same issue twice from exactly the same relational basis.

If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures how impactful partnership is built on a separate sheet.



4. Working with the diagram

Think of a family you have worked with recently and map the issues you addressed along the spiral to represent the evolving process in which the partnership was built.

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 to gain acceptance as an intimate outsider with this family?

What have I done to help the parents value their knowledge, experience, and capacity as parents?

What subtle and obvious interventions have I offered?

What has helped me gain acceptance of nervous families in the past?

How did I decide which subtle and obvious interventions to use when working with similar families in the past?

What could strengthen this family's acceptance of me so that we can extend help, challenge and possibility?

What could I do to help families recognise more value and worth in themselves?

What subtle or obvious interventions seem likely to deliver positive outcomes on what matters to the family?

What has made you feel comfortable in working with me?

If I asked someone who knows you well what your strengths are, what would they say?

What have you been doing or thinking about differently?

How did you cope with challenges in the past?

When you were engaged in actions relating to a strategy or intervention we planned, did you notice any effects?

What would make you feel more comfortable in terms of how we work together?

What is the problem that you most want to focus on right now?

If you look into your future and things are better, what is different about you and your family?

QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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