

Challenging effectively

Effective challenge targets an optimal challenge zone between a comfort zone and an overwhelming zone.

KEY CONCEPT

The zone of proximal development

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to “The distance between the actual developmental level (ADL) as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”¹. Although originally developed and defined in relation to children’s learning, it applies equally to the ways helpers support parents in partnership². Effective challenge targets this zone, working on what lies just ahead of what parents are currently able to do. Over time, what was previously overwhelming can come within this optimal challenge zone.

Summary

Challenge is part of the essence of impactful partnership (see Pages 10–13). It is also a key way helpers make noticing count (see Pages 42–45). However, knowing when, how and how much to challenge parents can be difficult.

Effective challenge can be mind-expanding because it can add to what parents are capable of and what they think is possible. It can nurture the partnership and pave the way to further challenges down the track. In this way, small challenges can have big effects.

A previous study that focused only on residential services (see Page 72 [refs]) found that effective challenge targets an optimal zone between a comfort zone and an overwhelming zone. This was also found across the diverse service contexts in our Creating Better Futures research.

These ideas are based on the work of Lev Vygotsky, a pioneering child psychologist, who described the zone of proximal development, or ZPD^{1,2}. The ZPD refers to what a person becomes able to do when supported by others and/or using appropriate tools to help them work on a problem.

The ZPD points to the ways of working on a problem that are just ahead of where someone is currently able to operate independently. When helpers challenge parents, it should be targeted to this zone. For ease of memory we refer to this as the optimal challenge zone (though this is conceptually the same as the ZPD).

Thinking about challenge in this way can avoid helpers refrain from presenting challenge to parents because they seem to not to be ready for change. Vygotsky’s theory implies that we are all on the cusp of new capacities: what makes the difference is interaction with others who provide appropriate guidance or tools to help us.

In this way, being ready for change is not purely a matter of a parent’s capacity in isolation. All parents are potentially ready for change, provided it is targeted in the challenge zone and not the overwhelming zone. This readiness is a property of their relationships with others and the support available to them.

This shifts the focus from asking ‘Is this parent ready for change?’ to asking ‘What supports can I put in place to help this parent enter her ZPD, or optimal challenge zone?’.

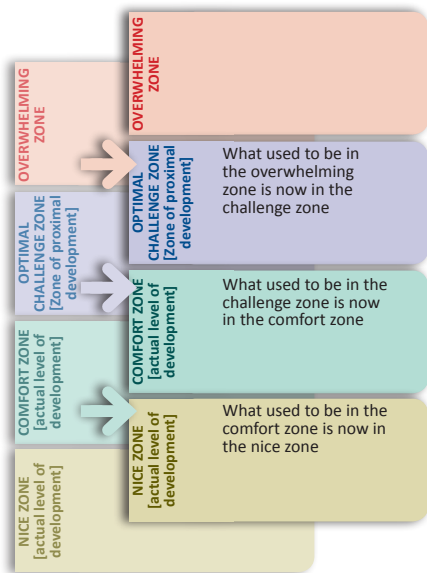
Scholars investigating the ethic of care have argued that the ZPD has an affective (relating to emotions) aspect. The ZPD has an interpersonal character that resembles a caring encounter³. This is precisely what was found in the Creating Better Futures study and in prior research on a Residential Service^{2,4}, suggesting that the concept of the ZPD and associated ideas are a good fit for understanding partnership.

Nice zone and comfort zone

Vygotsky wrote that the ZPD lies ahead of the ‘actual level of development’ – what someone is already capable of when acting independently. Our two studies suggest that in understanding partnership work with parents it can be helpful to divide this into two zones: the ‘nice zone’ and the ‘comfort zone’.

There is an important distinction between ‘nice’ and ‘kind’ here. Challenge can be presented in a kind way, but has a different feel and a different purpose from being nice. Helper expertise is needed to build trust and establish the relationship, and some interactions in the nice zone may be useful. While important, the nice zone is not sufficient to deliver significant impacts; the risk is of getting stuck and ‘nice’ becoming ‘too nice’.

The comfort zone also relates to what parents can already do. However, this has the purpose of setting parents up for challenge. This can involve finding out what they are motivated to work towards and what matters to them (see Pages 50–53). It can also involve exploring options for future challenges.



ZPD / Optimal challenge zone

The optimal challenge zone is the zone of proximal development. It is crucial if partnership is to be impactful. It involves asking parents to do things that are unfamiliar, new, and often without certainty of being successful.

Effective challenge has to be doable with support and guidance. Helpers can provide scaffolding to enable parents to move into this zone. Scaffolding can take the form of planning or rehearsing, in-the-moment guidance, written reminders or information, emotional support, and so on.

The intention is that scaffolding will be withdrawn at the appropriate time. The question of readiness is not parents' readiness for change, but readiness to act independently in what was previously the ZPD (ie. requiring support and guidance from another person).

The combination of correct judgement of where a parent's optimal challenge zone lies, and provision of the relevant support and guidance needed for them to enter this zone, help to set parents up for success when taking on something difficult. In this way, challenge becomes less risky, and more likely to lead to positive outcomes and to nurture the partnership relationship.

Expertise is needed to determine when to challenge and what the focus of challenge should be. It is also needed to judge what scaffolding to put in place, and how to withdraw it in a gradual process that is planned and anticipated.

Overwhelming zone

The ZPD does not stretch infinitely ahead of a person; it has a limit. Some challenge will be too much, even with support and guidance in place. Presenting challenge in this overwhelming zone may undermine the relationship, and have negative impacts on parents' confidence, esteem, and readiness to take on more appropriate challenges.

The boundary between the challenge zone and overwhelming zone often relates to what matters to parents (see Pages 50–53). Parents can be ready to take on significant challenges if they feel that doing so is aligned with what matters to them. But relatively minor challenges that are seen as misaligned can quickly be experienced as overwhelming or counterproductive.

Scaffolding

Findings from our study showed that another key feature of ZPD theory applies to challenge in the context of impactful partnerships with parents.

What is in the challenge zone (ZPD) initially can become the comfort zone (actual level of development) over time. Appropriate support, guidance and other tools can help parents move into the challenge zone. When this scaffolding is withdrawn and parents can now cope independently with this specific issue or task, this is now their comfort zone. In other words, this is now the zone from which to set up for the next success in a new ZPD.

A new challenge zone then emerges just ahead of where the comfort zone now lies. In this way, what was once overwhelming can become achievable as the challenge zone advances.

Seemingly impossible problems are tackled by focusing on what lies just ahead. This links with the characteristic of partnership as 'grounded and grounding' (see Pages 14–17).

Groundedness refers to connecting with what is happening for families in the here and now. Challenge that targets the ZPD is grounded, but works to what 'here and now' might look like tomorrow or in the near future. This gives partnership movement while also remaining realistic.

Change often happens through many small steps (see Pages 26–29 [making change happen]) – fitting with the framing idea of 'small things with big effects' (see Pages 8–9 [impactful partnership]). However, sometimes

these small steps can lead to significant leaps forward, especially as a result of challenges that build confidence and capacity, thereby changing a parent's sense of what is possible.

Targeting challenge through ideas of the ZPD makes partnership a mind-expanding process. Entering the ZPD is not about replacing old ideas with new ones, but about expanding what is possible. The mechanism for doing this relates to a core of Vygotsky's theory. Rather than focusing on the nature of the problem, entering the ZPD with appropriate support and guidance helps parents to focus on the nature of the solution.

For example, a parent is struggling to help her child settle for sleep during the night. The helper targets the ZPD, offering support and guidance just ahead of what the mother is already capable of. These include suggestions for gentle ways to help the child, which are rehearsed in the day and planned for the nights. Rather than focusing on sleep, the parent focuses on creating a safe sleep space, and being consistent and predictable in the way she supports and comforts the child. Her attention shifts from the problem to the nature of the solution. Over time these become second nature to the parent. The mother's ZPD has been lifted, and what was previously a challenge needing support and guidance is now part of her independent capacity. The journey towards bigger change has begun.

¹ Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. [Quotation in key concept box from p. 85]

² Hopwood, N. (2015). Understanding partnership practice in primary health as pedagogic work: what can Vygotsky's theory of learning offer? *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, 21(1), 9–13. doi:10.1071/PY12141

³ Goldstein, L. (1999). The relational zone: The role of caring relationships in the co-construction of mind. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36(3), 647–673.

⁴ Hopwood, N. (2016). *Professional practice and learning: times, spaces, bodies, things*. Dordrecht: Springer.

NOTES

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

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

Revision

Challenge is inevitable if helpers are going to facilitate positive change with families. Challenging effectively in partnership requires careful judgement about the timing, level and nature of challenge, the forms of support and guidance offered, and when to withdraw these without leaving parents feeling overwhelmed.

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 concept in challenging effectively means, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

Nice and comfort zones – actual level of development:

ZPD – optimal challenge zone:

Overwhelming zone:

Scaffolding:

2. Linking ideas to practice

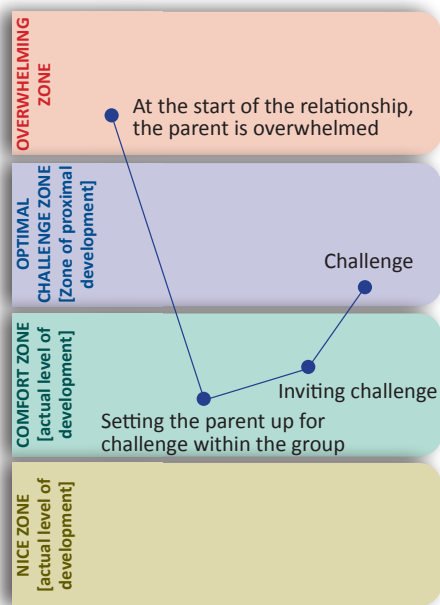
Now you have the concepts in mind, the next step is to connect them to your practice:

Concept	How it relates to my practice
Nice and comfort zones – actual level of development	
ZPD – optimal challenge zone	
Overwhelming zone	
Scaffolding	

3. Understanding the diagram below

In the diagram below, a professional establishes a relationship with a parent in a group over several weeks. She sets the parent up for challenge by listening, and moves her into the comfort zone through the group dynamic, building trust and understanding, until the parent invites her to help her at home.

If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the ZPD or optimal challenge zone on a separate sheet.



5. Working with the diagram to the right

Now, use the idea of progressive trajectories in the diagram (to the right) to pinpoint what has changed: What used to be in the ZPD but is now in the comfort or nice zone? What used to be overwhelming but is now in the ZPD?

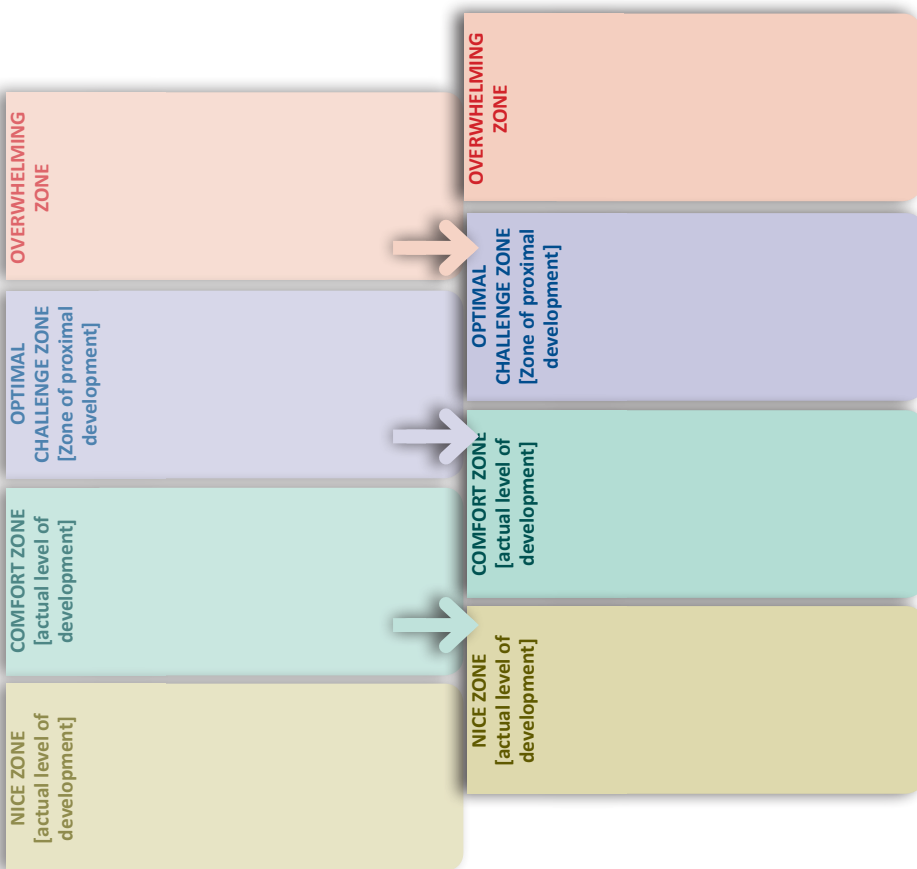
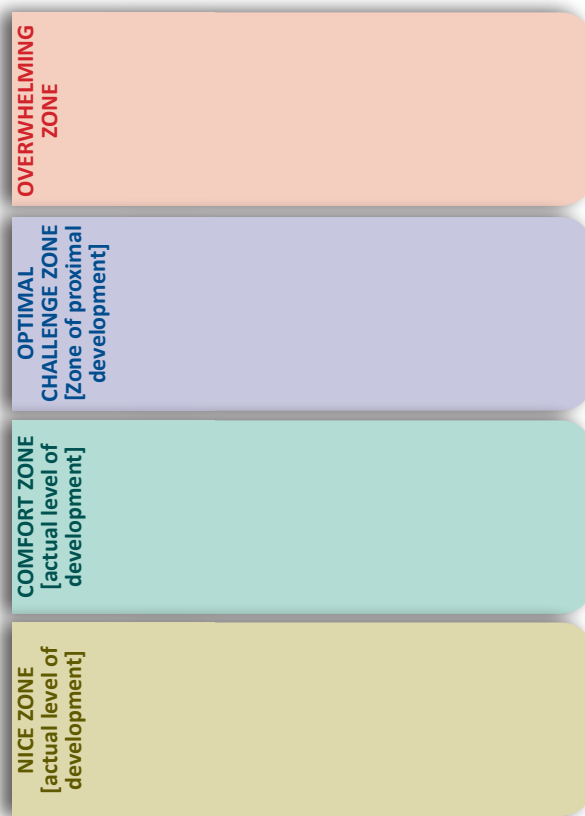
6. Enhancing your practice

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.

4. Working with the diagram to the right

Write what was at each level with a family and use the box below to describe the journey from one to another
Or draw a line to represent changes over time and label each point



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE	<p>What zones have I moved through with this family?</p> <p>What worked well in the past to judge where the optimal challenge zone lies and how to withdraw scaffolding?</p> <p>What does my knowledge of this family, and past experience, tell me to expect the optimal challenge zone will be for this family as we continue to work together?</p>
QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS	<p>What support and guidance could help you take on this challenge?</p> <p>When have you felt comfortable, challenged, or overwhelmed?</p> <p>What feels just in the overwhelming zone at the moment, but is something we could work towards bringing down into the optimal challenge zone?</p>

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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Department of Education

