

Parents and Professionals: Partners on the Journey

How to Work as Partners

A resource manual produced by:

Minnesota Technical Assistance for Family Support

Strengthening and broadening family involvement efforts



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Hallmarks of a Successful Partnership

The special power of a partnership comes from the fact that it is *created on purpose*, it is *sustained by conscious effort*, and it *flourishes as a result of commitment by the partners*.

The following six tenets are the key components that make a partnership work:

- 1. Active support of each other**
- 2. Equal participation/shared power**
- 3. Common objectives**
- 4. Clear boundaries and scope**
- 5. Consensus and openness**
- 6. Trust and mutual benefits**

The work toward partnerships begins with each individual, through self understanding and practice. Relationships and trust take time to build and good communication requires effort. Once the foundation has been laid, partnerships will be of endless value.

Dent, Stephen M. *Partnering Intelligence; Creating Value for Your Business by Building Strong Alliances*, Palo Alto, CA, Davies-Black Publishing, 1999.



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Comparison of Teams and Partnerships

Teams	Partnerships
A team is organized to work together.	A partnership is based on building a relationship.
A team will focus on the job to get done.	A partnership is based on a mutual commitment to a common interest.
Members of a team don't necessarily have equal status.	A partnership is based on equal status between partners.
Members have questionable commitment to each other outside the team.	Partners have an implicit obligation to each other.
Teams can be any number of people.	A partnership is typically built on a 1:1 relationship.



Understanding Parent and Professional Perspectives

Both parents and professionals want what is best for the child, but perspectives and focus may differ. These differences influence perceptions, approaches and decisions. Understanding each others perspective can be helpful in building relationships and working as partners.

Parents

- Understand they have a life long commitment and responsibility for their child
- View the present as one small segment of a long distance marathon
- Assume complete responsibility for their child
- Typically do not choose this role

Professionals

- Do not typically have long term contact or follow up that last a number of years
- Address a deeper narrower segment of the child's life, compared to "running a sprint"
- Are responsible to various governing boards and/or taxpayers
- Choose this role in life



BENEFITS OF BEING PARTNERS

Why be a partner?

Being in a partnership with someone is not always easy and takes time and energy to maintain. Yet the benefits far outweigh the effort required. The benefits of partnering may not be evident immediately, but will become more obvious over time.

When we become partners and work in partnership:

1. Children achieve *better educational outcomes*.
2. Children achieve *better life outcomes*.
3. *More resources* are brought to the table.
4. *Allies are created* to work together towards common goals.
5. People are *valued and supported*.
6. *New strategies and processes* for achieving results can be created.
7. *Energy is multiplied* and goals are accomplished.
8. There is *increased capacity* to get the job done.
9. People are more *forgiving of mistakes* because loyalty is created through partnerships.
10. A *safe environment exists* for risk taking and thinking outside the box.

"I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow."

President Woodrow Wilson



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Phases of Partnerships

Building a partnership takes time and occurs in phases. These phases are marked by distinct and recognizable attitudes and behaviors. Recognizing the phase in the development of a particular partnership can be helpful to reduce stress and irritation. Be aware that times of stress, transitions, changes in personnel, etc. can bring a return to an earlier partnership phase and sometimes partnerships get stuck in one phase.

In the beginning...

Colliding and campaigning:

- No trust
- No dialogue
- No listening to each other
- Personal agendas are promoted
- Hope and possibilities are elusive

In the middle...

Coordinating, cooperating and compromising:

- Willingness to compromise
- Apprehension and frustration may alternate with hope
- Sense of reliability develops
- Genuine consideration of other perspectives
- Emerging sense of respect for each other
- Suspension of personal agendas and exploration for common ground
- Turn taking

In the end...

Collaborating and creative partnering

- Questioning for understanding
- Real listening
- Open sharing of interest, fears, concerns and dreams
- Power and decision making are balanced
- Common goals are developed
- Conflict is not a threat—resolution through understanding
- Good and satisfying relationship—excitement and promise

Each partnership will be unique and reach a different phase. This is not unusual. It is important to keep moving forward and focus on the journey not the destination.



Barriers, Approaches and Strategies: Building Partnerships

A partnership involves commitment, conscious effort and ongoing work. One's personal style has significant impact, so it is important to understand our own innate tendencies. Extroverts gain energy from other people. Introverts lose energy from being around other people, so gaining partnership skills will require deliberate choice and effort. Explore these common pitfalls to identify personal barriers and begin the process to develop and use partnership approaches in order to improve partnership skills:

- 1. Barrier: *Being competitive***
Approach: *Choose to learn to collaborate*
- 2. Barrier: *Carrying past baggage***
Approach: *Use a past/future orientation*
- 3. Barrier: *Wanting to maintain the status quo***
Approach: *Embrace change*
- 4. Barrier: *Withholding information***
Approach: *Trust and be trustworthy*
- 5. Barrier: *Keeping a distance***
Approach: *Open up*
- 6. Barrier: *Going it alone***
Approach: *Enlist the help of others*
- 7. Barrier: *Lacking personal confidence***
Approach: *Gain personal confidence*
- 8. Barrier: *Keeping the upper hand***
Approach: *Share decision-making*
- 9. Barrier: *Believing that change only comes through conflict***
Approach: *Learn to negotiate*



1. Barrier: *Being Competitive*

A competitive attitude may help an individual succeed, but does not work well in creating partnerships. Competitiveness sets up a win-lose dynamic.

Approach: *Choose to learn to collaborate.*

Skilled collaboration occurs only after time and practice. Work to understand and learn to genuinely consider the perspectives of others in order to find areas of common ground. Choose to look at the bigger picture and use the perspective of both sides of a situation to craft win-win solutions.

Strategies:

- Identify specific “big picture” goals and write them down.
 - for a child, for example: learn to read, have friends, be independent, follow a daily living routine, occupy his/her time with hobbies or interests, develop problem solving skills, be able to take notes, etc.
 - for a committee or group, for example: better transition process, community child care for children with disabilities, etc.
- Articulate those goals. This may seem obvious but it is often overlooked. This can be significant and provide critical information, especially during times of crisis or stress.
- Prioritize those goals. Sort out what is critically important and what, in part, may be negotiable.
- Find common ground with the goals and priorities of the partners. Give the perspective and goals of others genuine consideration – not minimizing, ridiculing or writing them off. Break down everyone’s priorities into smaller components until some areas of common ground emerge.
- Actively discuss possibilities and work together. Craft solutions that creatively attempt to get everyone’s needs met at some level.

Questions to consider:

How important is winning to me?

Am I willing to work for the good of both sides?

Have I identified, written down, articulated and prioritized my “big picture” goals?

What are areas of common ground between my partner and me?

It’s easy to get good players. Gettin’ ‘em to play together, that’s the hard part. – Casey Stengel



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2. Barrier: *Carrying past baggage*

We typically do business based on past history or experience because that feels natural and comfortable for us. Using only past information and long held assumptions to make decisions demonstrates an unwillingness to move forward.

Approach: *Use a past/future orientation*

It is important to use the wisdom of lessons learned over time. Let go of old limiting ways of thinking and develop new ones. Look to the future to make decisions.

Strategies:

- Start with self knowledge. We are often trapped by our own biases and prejudices. Make the effort to identify, name and understand personal weaknesses, biases and prejudices – things like intolerance of people who smoke, who live in a certain neighborhood, who have a certain stature or physical appearance. Next, step away and look from an outside perspective to see those biases in an objective light.
- Know the biases, pressures and assumptions that influence the operating procedure of your system (family, agency, school district, etc.) This might be pressures about finances, etc. The environment – the culture in which we work and live – has a good deal to do with how we think and, therefore, what we end up accomplishing. It is important for an organization to have that same self knowledge, because it influences our ability to create and sustain partnerships.
- Open yourself to the future. *Welcome the potential, the unexpected, the new.* In order to increase the potential of our partnerships, we can choose to let go of old assumptions and build a new set of beliefs. Be open and share information in order to dispel the myths that make up many of our old assumptions.

Questions to Consider:

What biases or prejudices are limiting my ability to work effectively as a partner?

What biases and assumptions in our working system are keeping us stuck in the past?

What changes can I make in my attitudes and beliefs that will make me a more effective?

Do I look ahead with an open mind and optimism?

Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future.

- John F. Kennedy



3. Barrier: *Wanting to maintain the status quo.*

People like to do familiar tasks. Predictability reduces risk. Common obstacles to change include fears about:

- Loss of control
- Uncertainty about the future
- Loss of competence
- Loss of familiarity
- Surprises

Approach: *Embrace change*

Partnerships require change and change can be uncomfortable. We cannot control that things change. We can, however, control how we respond to it. Understanding that change is a major cause of partnership stress, at least we can learn to recognize what might cause us stress in a partnership and develop a plan to deal with those stressors.

Strategies:

- Plan together to address fears about loss of control.
- Reestablish and communicate the vision to minimize uncertainty about the future.
- Learn new skills as needed to address loss of competence.
- Link and build on the past while transitioning into the future to address loss of familiarity.
- Allow time for people to adjust to new situations and partners. Be honest and share whatever information is available to avoid surprises.

Questions to consider:

Are all partners involved in the planning?

What specifically can I do to make this change go smoothly?

What can I expect from my partner?

What differences will occur because of this change? What will be gained? Lost?

What new skills will be needed?

What do I already know that will make our progress stronger?

Do I have information to share that will make my partner informed enough that we can avoid unpleasant surprises later?

Just when you think you've graduated from the school of experience, someone thinks up a new course.

-Mary H. Waldrip



4. Barrier: *Withholding information*

Keeping information from others leads to mistrust.

Approach: *Trust and be trustworthy*

Trust, openness and honesty are essential to partnerships.

Strategies:

- Care about others on a one-to-one basis. Be genuine. Others can sense when this isn't real.
- Trust others until given a reason not to do so.
- Take the time to know each other's needs. Get to know one another.
- Keep giving opportunities for others to rebuild lost trust in small ongoing ways.
- Openly work through differences and conflict to build a win-win situation, in order to grow stronger.
- Tell the truth.
 - Don't distort or put a spin on things.
 - Don't exaggerate potential personal actions or contributions.
- Stay in touch.
 - Talk to each other regularly.
 - Listen. Seek the opinions of others and use them.
 - Ask question to provide more complete information and give clarity. Be sure to really understand the meaning. Don't assume to understand.
- Accept responsibility.
- Follow up.
- Be accountable.

Questions to consider:

Do I share what I know (my priorities, beliefs and hopes)?

Do I keep essential information hidden?

Who do I trust?

Who could I grow to trust if I took the time and effort?

Who trusts me?

How can I be more trustworthy?

To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved. – George MacDonald, Scottish novelist and poet



5. Barrier: *Keeping a Distance*

The lack of willingness to self-disclose indicates a lack of trust in the partnership and also inhibits people's willingness to be open and honest with each other.

Approach: *Open up*

Share enough personal information to become 'real' to others. That openness creates a powerful bond between people.

Strategies:

- Share some information about family, interests, hobbies, etc.
- Build a bridge through common experience – aging parents, parenting teenagers, etc.

Questions to consider:

Do I guard against sharing personal information?

Am I willing to share information about myself?

What do my partners know about me?

If you don't give people information, they'll make up something to fill the void.

–Carla O'Dell, President, O'Dell & Associates



6. Barrier: *Going it Alone*

People who are independent choose to work alone, and rely only on themselves to get the job done. This approach may get the job done more quickly and efficiently in the short term, but leads to burnout, frustration and martyrdom long-range.

Approach: *Enlist the help of others*

Taking the time to work together builds capacity and increases the benefits for everyone.

Strategies:

- Acknowledge that other people have competence and bring valuable and valid contributions.
- Choose the process of working with others.
- Share the workload.
- Be sure everyone has a task.

Questions to consider:

Do I have a strong need for independence?

Am I willing to seek out and rely on others?

Who will I seek out and rely on?

No one person can accomplish much if they don't work with others.

– Daniel Levinson, Chief Justice, U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board



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7. Barrier: *Lacking personal confidence*

A lack of confidence or undervaluing one's own opinions does not lead to an equal partnership.

Approach: *Gain personal confidence.*

Developing genuine confidence about oneself is a process that occurs over time and grows as competence increases. It is not about learning to 'hype' or sell oneself. It begins with the deep self-knowledge that acknowledges one's worth and value. Acknowledge the importance and value of these insights. Share them with self assurance.

Strategies:

- Recognize personal skills, attributes, experiences and perspectives.
- Learn from mistakes and keep moving.
 - Our mistakes do not define who we are.
 - Carve some space, a little slack, for self learning.
 - Understand that everyone begins at a level of 'minimum competence' and we are all learning.
- Work to become knowledgeable and keep learning.
 - Don't hide behind 'professionalization' or a specific role.
- Help others feel safe enough to grow.

Questions to consider:

Do I wonder if what I have to offer is worthwhile?

What are my skills and experiences that make my perspective important to this partnership?

What have I learned from past mistakes that has helped me grow in confidence?

Do I share my ideas and opinions with the confidence that they are important to my partners?

To be a champ you have to believe in yourself when nobody else will. –Sugar Ray Robinson



8. Barrier: *Keeping the upper hand*

Assuming the role of 'expert' or needing to have all the answers limits the role of others to be a partner and prevents personal growth.

Approach: *Share decision-making*

No one is the boss in a partnership. Support the growth of others.

Strategies:

- Avoid making decisions in isolation.
- Build and share leadership roles with others.
 - Communicate as partners – for example, “He didn’t come home last night.”
 - Come to agreement recognizing that opinions in the partnership may often vary.
 - Strive for consistency between home and school
- Support one another in the growth of leadership skills

Questions to consider:

Do I need to be in charge or control?

Do I participate in shared decision-making?

Do we work together to craft good decisions, considering all the factors and all the options?

Nothing creates more self-respect among workers than being included in the process of making decisions.

-Judith M. Bardwick, University of California, San Diego



9. Barrier: *Believing that change only comes through conflict*

Occasionally there are individuals who are ready to 'go to battle' over every issue. This attitude and resulting behaviors promote skepticism and a wariness on the part of potential partners.

Approach: *Learn to negotiate*

Look at what is important in the 'big picture' and don't get sidetracked by the urgency of the moment. Work to understand the priorities of others.

Strategies:

- Focus on desired outcomes.
- Put aside blame. Stop arguing about who is right – a behavior that only leads to a no-win quagmire.
- Choose to adopt and learn a positive attitude.
- Keep the ongoing relationship a high priority.
- Communicate about what is personally important.
- Be willing to actively problem solve.
- Identify and focus on bottom line interests.
- Work the process in every situation.

Questions to consider:

Do I believe fighting is the only way to get things done?

Is conflict how I typically do business?

Am I willing to negotiate?

Can I communicate what is important to me?

Do I choose the process of negotiation before defaulting to conflict and confrontation?

Do I have the skills I need to negotiate successfully?

What would improve my ability to negotiate successfully?

You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run.

- Kenny Rogers



Healing Damaged Relationships

It would be wonderful if ongoing relationships were always positive. Over time some relationships are strengthened and others are damaged. If an existing relationship is damaged, moving forward means either healing or abandoning that relationship. In most situations abandonment is not a real option. Choosing to actively repair a damaged relationship makes more sense than trying to live with it.

There are several approaches that can be used to speed the healing process. It usually helps to use these in combination. When relationships are damaged, they can take time to heal. Don't expect instant repair, followed by the relationship resuming as if nothing had happened. Here are some options for healing damaged relationships:

- **Apologize**
- **Don't avoid the person**
- **Induce empathy**
- **Hold out an olive branch/Make the peace**

1. Apologize

An apology is the simplest of all techniques, yet it is the single most important thing to begin healing a damaged relationship. Making an apology admits that something has happened that could threaten the relationship and acknowledges a role in what happened.

Types of apologies

Consider which type of apology is appropriate for each situation.

- a. Statements that take all the blame:
 - *"I messed up."*
 - *"Obviously I wasn't thinking."*
 - *"I shouldn't have done or said that."*
 - *"I was wrong."*
- b. Statements that don't take all the blame but show a willingness to share the blame:
 - *"I should have seen this coming."*
 - *"I wasn't paying enough attention."*
- c. Statements that take none of the blame, but express a desire to preserve the relationship, and invite a statement in return and may lead to talking again:
 - *"I wish I could have done something to prevent this."*
 - *"It is really difficult when these things happen."*



What to include in an Apology

Express Regret

An important component of an apology is the *expression of regret*. It signals sadness or distress about the strain on the relationship. Expressions of regret can be about personal behaviors or situations. Personal statements should include a statement about feelings, such as “I feel awful about it”. Regrets that focus on the situation take the form of statements like, “I feel terrible about this whole situation”.

Personalize It

At one end of the spectrum, a person can be singled out and a private apology can be delivered. At the other end of the spectrum an apology can be made by issuing an impersonal “official apology” by posting a memo for whoever might happen to read it. In general, *the more personal the apology, the greater it’s impact, and as a result, the greater the healing power it has.*

Apologies may be necessary because:

- Assuming or being certain that the other person is responsible for what happened can sometimes be wrong. Defenses or biases can flaw a person’s perspective and make them unaware of personal responsibility.
- Even if the other person actually is responsible, it is very hard to heal a relationship when that other person is defensive. It may be necessary to make a choice to be the one who initiates the apology process if the goal is to restore the relationship.

Apologies can restore a relationship by:

- Modeling conciliatory behavior--- setting an example
- Setting up pressure for reciprocal behavior---having made the first effort the other person may feel the need to respond in a positive manner also
- Taking some of the sting out of the other person’s role in the situation

People who are experiencing anger, frustration and other emotions are likely to generate revenge fantasies, not contrite behavior. They are likely to want someone to suffer as much as possible, go through some self-abasement, to “rub their noses in it”. If the other person is defensive, it is unlikely they will engage in any act of contrition. There is a choice: either take the initiative to heal the relationship, or accept permanent relationship damage. It’s not fair, but it is realistic. This is about being mature in making decisions which create the best outcomes for the child and family.



2. Don't Avoid the Person

Wanting to avoid someone after an unpleasant experience or encounter is a common reaction. Interacting with the person tends to rekindle the negative emotions. In the short run it is easier to find ways to avoid contact, but in the long run, avoiding the person makes the situation more difficult as time goes by. Avoidance can have very high relationship costs for two reasons.

- a. The encounter people most vividly recall is the most recent one. ***It is important to keep interacting, even if it is stressful at first, so the most recent encounter won't be the unpleasant one.*** There may have been lots of good encounters, but if the last one was not positive and is straining the relationship, the unpleasant or negative encounter is what will tend to dominate.
- b. Emotions shape the meanings we give to events. ***A negative picture in a person's mind remains as long as there are no other interactions.*** No one is all bad or all good, and by continuing to have good or positive interactions it will dispel the negative picture or stereotyping that has been done. The person's day-to-day observations will not match the negative picture they have in their heads and over time they will adjust their extreme negative view to a more positive one.
- c. Statements for interaction at the grocery store, gas station, a school event, concert, etc.
 - *"It's good to see you again."*
 - *"How are you?"*
 - *"Where are you off to?"*
 - *"Enjoy your outing."*

3. Induce Empathy

When a person messes up or makes a mistake, the other person is most likely focused on what was done to them, how it hurt, inconvenienced or disappointed them and not likely to be aware of the circumstances that existed. Sharing information about the circumstances may reduce the tension between those involved.

- a. Approaches to induce empathy;
 - Share the circumstances surrounding the situation
 - Ask the other person to understand a dilemma that existed
 - Ask what the other person may have done in the same situation
 - Talk about what the alternative might have been
 - Point out that the other person may have done the same thing



- b. Honest explanations to induce empathy;
 - *“My uncle had a heart attack.”*
 - *“My husband had surgery and my mind was on him.”*
 - *“My child was sick and I had to take him to the emergency room”*
 - *“The situation demanded it be a priority. I hope you understand.”*

Inducing empathy makes it less likely the other person will remain angry and opens the door to communication. Everyone’s life is bigger and more complicated than what we typically see. Making people aware of situations and challenges can alleviate tensions and create understanding. The relationship may be shaken, but can remain intact.

4. Hold out an Olive Branch/Make the peace

People think about relationship problems. They assign meanings to words, gestures and behaviors. They mull them over until a new understanding emerges that makes sense. Healing therefore takes time. It is very helpful, during this period to have made a positive gesture.

Offering an olive branch

- a. A positive gesture can:
 - Signal the relationship has not been abandoned
 - Show a wish or desire to restore the relationship
 - Motivate the other person to participate in the healing process
 - Communicate a willingness to be a partner in the healing process whenever the other person is ready to make an effort

- b. Statements or gestures that indicate the offering of an olive branch:
 - *“Our relationship is important to me”*
 - *“It is important that we are able to work together”*
 - *“We have a common goal”*
 - *“I miss connecting with you”*
 - A small token or remembrance such as a note, bookmark, etc.

When offering an olive branch, it is easy to become frustrated or resentful while waiting for the other person to do their share of the healing work. The other person may still be angry, ashamed or intimidated. It may be easier to avoid an exchange rather than make the investment in fixing the problem. Given time, most people will participate in the healing process. Once an olive branch has been offered, it dramatically increases the possibility that healing will take place.



PERSONAL PARTNERSHIPS WORKSHEET

This personal worksheet is designed as a means to explore, improve and enhance existing or new partnerships in your life.

1. A team I work with is: _____
2. An existing partnership or a potential partnership in my life is:

3. Some potential benefits I might gain from forming or improving a partnership are:

4. The behaviors I need to change to make my partnerships successful are:
5. The new skills I will work on building are:
6. Is there a partnership that I have been in that has gone sour?
7. The steps I can take to heal the damaged relationship are:



Partnerships Resource List

A Checklist for an Effective Parent-School Partnership, Project Appleseed, The Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, Publications, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

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