

Partnership between Families and ECEC services in the Post-Covid Era

Parents' experiences of reconnecting in the past two years

What were parents' experiences of partnership with Early Childhood Education and Care services during the Covid-19 restrictions? How did services maintain a partnership approach, or did it cease to exist when they were advised by government not to let parents enter the premises? This article gives an insight into what parents' experiences were and offers ideas on how ECEC services can reconnect effectively with parents in the post-Covid era.



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Introduction

Partnership with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services is important for families. The national framework for quality in ECEC, Síolta, standard 3, says that having successful and meaningful engagement with parents is fundamental to successful participation and learning outcomes for children (CECDE, 2006).

This article explores the impact of Covid-19, the public health measures imposed on ECEC services, and how these might affect partnerships with families if services do not make a concerted effort to reconnect. It looks at some of the experiences of parents as reported to the author in a focus group and three semi-structured interviews during a research project as part of a master's degree in Child, Family and Community Studies with Technical University Dublin.

Since March 2020, ECEC services have been challenged by an onslaught of restrictions imposed by public health guidelines during the global pandemic. Additional measures after a period of lockdown included infection control, increased cleaning and sanitation, and the separation of children into individual pods. There were struggles to keep classrooms open, and in some cases services had to close during periods of Covid infection.

The guidelines issued by the government suggested that ECEC services should not allow parents inside the facility (Government of Ireland, 2021). Managers' and educators' stress levels increased significantly as a result of Covid (Matson, 2020). Face-to-face contact and conversation with parents ceased in many circumstances, with communication taking place instead by phone, email, or text message. For the main part, parents were relieved that their ECEC service remained open and their children could continue to attend, whether it

was to enable parents to work or for children to attend for their preschool sessional service.

Partnership with families

The importance of effective partnership between families and ECEC services is well documented. Many studies highlight the impact of positive reciprocal relationships between ECEC services and parents as being beneficial to the service, the families, and the children who attend the service (Knight-McKenna et al., 2019; Uusimäki et al., 2019).

The restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 era may have prevented effective engagement with families and parents, and services may need to rethink their partnership strategy in order to re-establish this key area of practice.

Parents' lived experiences

Parents reported that they could not have informal chats at drop-off or collection and instead were recommended to email or phone the ECEC service. There were few opportunities for parents to have face-to-face meetings to discuss concerns about their child or to share anecdotes from home. Christmas nativity plays, carol services, and family meet days were cancelled. In many cases, end-of-year graduations were cancelled. Open days and face-to-face parent introductory meetings either moved online or did not happen at all.

These planned events are important for families. It is during these events that relationships are built, families get to meet their child's educators, children get to meet other children, and families get to meet other families. Many lost out on these opportunities. Some parents said they had never seen inside their child's classroom and so had no sense of familiarity with the ECEC service, even though their child spent more waking hours there than at home. They said they did not know the other parents or children in their child's class.

Parents were complimentary about their child's ECEC services, however, and believed that the services were doing all they could in the circumstances. Parents were invited to Zoom story-time and circle-time meetings for their children during lockdown periods and were sent information and activity ideas for their children. Communication was effective, with parents being kept up to date with information about the service and about the current Covid situation in their service at the time.

All parents expressed feeling anxious and worried about their child while they attended their ECEC service during Covid-19. But it is notable that they said they trusted the service to keep their child safe and had confidence in the service. Parents said that their ECEC setting cared about their child. This shows that despite the lack of face-to-face contact, relationships were built and these relationships were positive, meaningful, and important.

Moving on and reconnecting

When recognising the importance of relationships and partnership with families, it is important to note that parents reported positive experiences even during the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Trust was upheld and parents were happy with their child's service. This is testament to the hard work of managers and educators throughout the sector. ECEC services worked hard to support positive relationships with parents and showed leadership in their innovation in engaging parents by establishing Zoom story times and sending suggestions for learning at home during the lockdown periods.

It would be useful to think about how ECEC services could now work towards reconnecting with families to result in effective partnership in the post-Covid era. Will services keep the 'parent at the door' practice, or are the doors now completely open? Can some of the lessons learned from Covid be continued in practice?

Zoom became an effective communication medium. This method can be used in partnership with parents. By using Zoom and similar platforms, parents can be brought into the setting virtually during events they are physically unable to attend. Parents and family members could be encouraged to use such media to engage with the service in a meaningful way, such as sharing family life experiences.

Perhaps not having congested hallways at drop-off and collection times is a positive outcome from Covid restrictions, instead having parents inside the ECEC setting in a more structured way. Ideas for building effective and stable relationships with families are parent 'Stay and Play' days and having an open-door policy for discussion and meetings.

Covid-19 taught us that we can endure and that we are creative and innovative. We now need to embrace the learnings, reconnect, and come up with innovative ideas for partnership with families, ideas that will endure and continue to benefit all of the stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care.

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