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Early Head Start - Child Care Partnerships

Making Connections: The Partnership Newsletter

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Negotiating a Partnership Agreement: Wisdom from the Field

An EHS-CC Partnership brings together two early childhood programs that differ in some significant ways, Early Head Start (EHS) and child care. The partnership agreement is a critical tool to enable administrators and staff from these two programs to work together to deliver high-quality, comprehensive services to low-income infants, toddlers, and their families. The formal, written agreement you negotiate as partners becomes the tool you use to ensure your partnership is successful. It guides the relationship. As such, it should be reviewed and revised on a regular basis, preferably more than once a year.

You may be just beginning a relationship with your EHS grantee or child care partner, working on developing a partnership agreement, or considering revisions to an existing agreement. Regardless of where you are in the process, the work you do to build a strong relationship with your partners is critical for success.

Developing a partnership agreement requires open, honest, and genuine communication between partners. It is critical that the agreement is based on an accurate assessment of the strengths and needs of all those involved. Only when all of the information is available can partners begin to effectively negotiate a path forward that meets the needs of everyone, and most importantly, ensures the highest quality of care for young children and families. This is not simple or easy work. Each must come to the negotiation with a curiosity about the other's strengths and sincere interest in working together and drawing from those strengths.

Negotiating is a skill we practice in our personal and professional lives, but it is a craft in which few of us truly excel, especially when we must share typically confidential information like finances and policies. Wisdom from the field has yielded the following 10 points that can help advance early education partnership negotiations and produce desired results: enhanced and more flexible full-day/full-year services for infants, toddlers, and their families.

10 Points for Successful Negotiations

1. **Honor the relationship.** Since the EHS-CC Partnerships grant is multi-year, the partnership agreement between the EHS grantee and each child care partner will need review and revision over a five-year period. The better the relationship between the EHS grantee staff and the child care staff, the easier these negotiations will be. This means the process of building the relationship is as important as the partnership agreement. Take time to get to know each other and make sure you have the same vision and goals for the program. Take time to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of each program. As you work on the relationship and agreement, figure out together ways to build on each other's strengths and consider each other's needs. Make sure you grow an environment of open communication. Doing this early and making it an ongoing priority can make it easier to come to agreement on a challenging issue now and in the future.

2. **Create a negotiation environment that encourages innovation.** Partners expand their options for achieving their goals by engaging in brainstorming techniques and thinking creatively. If both partners can respond to new ideas and be open to the unexpected, they will find unlimited opportunities to take a fresh look at their practices and beliefs about serving children. Many times, such negotiations are best facilitated by an outside party, such as a training and technical assistance (T/TA) provider, an implementation planner or fiscal consultant, or some other facilitator. A third party can go a long way toward alleviating potential roadblocks to collaboration, such as a perceived power differential or competition between partners.
3. **Be realistic and fair.** Partners are more likely to have buy-in and meet their commitments when their issues have been considered and they feel the agreement is fair. Sometimes a neutral, external facilitator can help to ensure that the negotiations are realistic and fair to all. Partners should always consult with their programs' legal and financial advisors before finalizing the agreement. When a partner does not have access to such advisors, ask a consultant for a list of referrals so their needs can be adequately considered.
4. **Recognize that each partnership is unique.** Each partnership and its formal agreement need to be structured to meet the goals of the program and the needs of the people involved. Although you may know of an interesting and successful EHS-CC Partnership in a nearby community, the partnership you are designing need not, and most likely should not, be the same. Use community and family data and each partner's strengths, needs, and resources as the foundation for the partnership program you create. Don't forget to consider the resources or requirements of other systems, initiatives, and organizations to which each partner is connected.
5. **Engage in active listening.** Using effective communication techniques can help the negotiation proceed more effectively. These include focusing on the speaker, asking probing, open-ended questions, restating in slightly different terms, and validating what the other person has said. Focus on what others say, both on their actual words and the underlying meaning. This will help you understand the interests upon which the agreement can be based. When your response makes it clear that you've really been listening, your partners may be more prepared to listen. Active listening can produce better, longer-lasting relationships.
6. **Know your bottom line.** We all enter negotiations knowing what we ideally want. Thinking through alternatives to the ideal outcome, however, allows you to understand your points of flexibility. Be clear about fallback positions and their consequences before you start to negotiate. Also, evaluate your partners' options beforehand. In negotiation, it is important to think several moves in advance and anticipate your partners' needs.
7. **Know the difference between "positions" and "interests."** When you focus on yours and your partners' motivation for partnering, you are looking at the interests of the two parties. When you get stuck on a particular issue, the negotiation comes to an impasse. Typically, in this situation, one or both parties' position becomes inflexible. When this happens, it is best to move on to another issue. When you go back to negotiating the challenging issue, encourage each other to look at the interests you have in common rather than focusing on the positions each of you were discussing in the initial conversation. This also may be a topic for which you recruit a third party to help move the negotiations forward. Individual positions get in the way of negotiations. Common interests form the building blocks of lasting agreements.
8. **Come prepared to commit resources.** Any request to take on greater responsibility must be accompanied by an offer of resources. Approach this issue with an earnest commitment to supporting the goals and the needed change. Resources can take the form of funding, staff, materials, supplies, transportation, and facilities, often in combination. An adequate commitment of funds and other resources demonstrates your commitment to and full support of the partnership and enhanced programming for children and families. In addition, it is equally important to come to the negotiation knowing what you need to take on the new work

and be successful.

9. **Take a fresh look at practices and standards.** Use this negotiation process to address areas that need improvement, such as increased family engagement, staff development activities, facilities, etc. Each partner should examine their own and each other's existing practices. Sometimes it's easier to consider changes to current practices when you are sharing them with others who can provide constructive feedback. Ask: Is this truly the practice that needs to be adopted by all, or is there a new way to meet standards? Set short-term, realistic goals, yet keep sight of where the partnership wants to be.
10. **Allow sufficient time for partners to work out details.** Remember that the negotiation process is not a one-time meeting that results in a partnership agreement. Partners often need several, if not many, meetings to develop an agreement that reflects everyone's needs and capacities and provides sufficient detail to ensure success and heightened services for children.

Last but Not Least

All partnership agreements should be put in writing, signed, reviewed, and if appropriate, revised at least annually. The agreement should contain sufficient detail to guide the partnership and serve as a mechanism by which partners assess the fulfillment of their commitments.

As a legal document, the agreement protects both partners' best interests. To limit the number of pages in the partnership agreement, many partnership programs include an addendum that describes how the partnership conducts business. It also should be reviewed and revised at least annually. This addendum might specify who does what, when, how, with whom, and for what purpose. It may also contain specific outcome goals and a plan to measure achievement.

For information on topics to include in a partnership agreement, see **[A Checklist for Developing a Partnership Agreement or Contract](#)**.

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