

## Essential ingredients of impactful partnership

### KEY CONCEPT

#### Safe space for learning

While help, challenge and possibility are essential, they have to occur in a safe space for learning. This safe space is made through the relationship helpers have with families, and is grounded in trust, openness and honesty. This is not just a relationship to be in for its own sake, but for *learning*. It has to be safe for parents, children and those helping them to learn together.

#### Summary

Help, challenge, and possibility are essential to impactful partnership. They were present in every example of change we studied. If any one of them is missing, lasting positive change is put at risk. They are also the essence of impactful partnership – they are what it is made of. All three of these ingredients are connected with partnership as mind-expanding: help, challenge and possibility all involve exploring new ways of understanding, responding to others, acting and relating to others.

### Help, challenge and possibility are essential to impactful partnership.

These essential ingredients have to occur in a relationally safe space. This is a space that makes it safe for parents, children, and the helpers working with them to *learn*.

#### Help

Impactful partnership requires helpers to assist parents in a number of ways. This is not about a rescue or helpers ‘carrying the baton’ for parents but about working with parents in a way that makes things possible. We found these kinds of help were often needed:

- Practical – appointments, providing transport, accessing other assistance
- Strategic – suggesting things to do (differently) as a parent
- Emotional – listening, being empathetic and not judging
- Relational – connecting families with others in the community and helping parents learn new ways of being in a relationship with others, including those helping them.

However, our findings show it isn’t just a question of offering the right kind of help. Help has to be acceptable to parents and affirming of them in positive ways.

Parents don’t always find asking for help or accepting help from others easy. It can make them feel needy or dependent on others. Help in impactful partnership has to be offered in a way that assists parents to feel comfortable. Normalising the idea of getting help is an effective way of doing this.

Sometimes help is obvious, meaning it is talked about in detail together. Offering referrals to other services, suggesting parenting strategies, or joining in activities with children are examples of obvious support.

“She’s helped me get him into speech because his pronunciation has always worried me...she’s rung them up and given me a lift down there.”

(Parent)

Help can also be subtle. This does not mean hidden or stealthy. It means that suggestions or assistance are presented quietly or as a part of obvious support.



For example, a Tasmanian Child and Family Centre used making a photo book as a way to help parents take a child’s perspective by suggesting they put words in speech or thought bubbles (see Page 23 for more about obvious and subtle intervention).

Acknowledging and affirming that parents have already done something positive by seeking help is powerful too.

#### Challenge

Impactful partnership means helpers need to go beyond being nice. It inevitably involves complex and layered challenge. Participants described this in terms of addressing the tough stuff, talking about the elephant in the room, sometimes needing to confront parents with difficult ideas, including being honest about the fact that they will be actively involved in bringing about change – it isn’t going to be done for them.

Challenge is delicate, because it can easily make parents feel overwhelmed, or confirm a (false) idea that they are failing at parenting.

Challenge goes the other way too: parents can challenge helpers, too. One example of challenge in both directions is in giving and receiving honest feedback. If the way of working together needs to be adjusted, it is crucial that this is explicitly discussed, but raising this can be difficult.

### Challenge works best when it is just ahead of what parents are already doing.

We found challenge works best when it is just ahead of what parents are already doing. In other words, it is achievable with the right support. Parents also need to understand why taking on a particular challenge is necessary in relation to something that matters to them.

Helpers in our study challenged parents in relation to aspects of parenting and change shown in the table below.

#### Challenge can focus on...

Technical understandings –  
eg. about children's sleep cycles

Parents' actions, responses,  
practices – eg. why shouting at a  
child may not help

Safety concerns – eg. objects in a cot that  
may pose a danger

Parents' understandings of themselves –  
eg. that they are not failing or hopeless

Parents' commitments to self care  
– eg. that it is okay to look after  
themselves properly

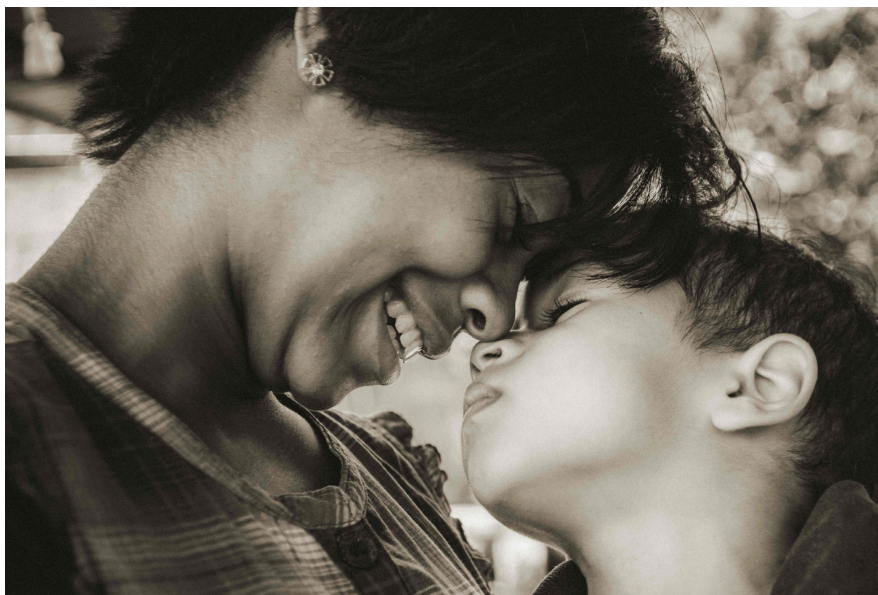
Parents' understanding of the change  
process – eg. that it will take time and  
have ups and downs along the way

The partnership itself – how the work  
together is going and what needs to  
change in the process.

Failure to address challenges in any of these aspects can undermine impactful partnership. Challenging parents in this way doesn't have to mean they feel judged or criticised. Section 3 (Pathways for expertise) gives a framework (Pages 42–43) that shows how challenge can affirm parents as positive agents of change.

#### Possibility

Impactful partnership needs to progress in a positive, jointly understood direction. We found that the most effective helpers often made sure this direction was full of possibility. Possibility is jointly imagined through partnership, it is not fixed at the start. In this way, possibilities can be mapped onto outcomes in terms of learning (see Section 4). Sometimes, parents' visions for what they want can be



constrained by their sense of what is impossible. Through careful questioning, and allowing the vision of possibility to evolve over time, some partnerships enabled families to end up in a space they wouldn't have considered at the outset.

Possibility works best when it has both the near and distant future in view. The near future gives an immediate focus for things to work on. The distant future puts these efforts in a context – why this all matters.

“Those little people are going to go to school one day. I think mum will be more confident to engage in their education ... she will feel okay about inviting people over and having play dates so that her kids can have the most rich and meaningful life that's available to them really. They can reach their potential ideally.”

(Helper)

We found many examples of parents describing changes they didn't think could be possible earlier on. One mother who had been scared to take her child out was later making friends and interacting with other parents and children in a park.

This shows how helpers sometimes need to encourage parents to be bold or open-minded in their sense of possibility. However, helpers also have a responsibility to manage expectations in terms of short-term concrete outcomes.

**Possibility works best when there is a dynamic balance between the achievable (soon) and the possible (in future).**

Re-imagining what is possible can relate to parents themselves, children, the family, and their relationship with the community.

#### Relationally safe space for learning

Help, challenge and possibility have to exist together in a relationally safe space. This means parents feel they can trust those helping them, and can be open and honest with them. From here, parents, children and helpers can venture into the unfamiliar and unknown territory that learning inevitably brings with it.

However, a safe space doesn't mean that parents feel comfortable all the time. We saw many instances where helpers had to ask difficult questions and take parents out of their comfort zone, for example by responding differently to children's cries or tantrums.

A safe space ultimately means protecting children. When there was a need to report safety concerns to other authorities, skilful practitioners did this in a way that was shared with parents, and addressed their emotional needs.

## FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

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

### Revision

Help, challenge and possibility are the essential ingredients of impactful partnership. It does not work without them. These have to exist together in a relationally safe space for learning, grounded in trust, openness and honesty. It has to be safe for parents, children and those helping them to learn together.

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/>

### 1. Key concepts – check your understanding

In your own words, explain what each of the three points of the triangle means, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

**H** Help:

**C** Challenge:

**P** Possibility:

### 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
Help	
Challenge	
Possibility	
Relationally safe space for learning	

### 3. Understanding the diagram

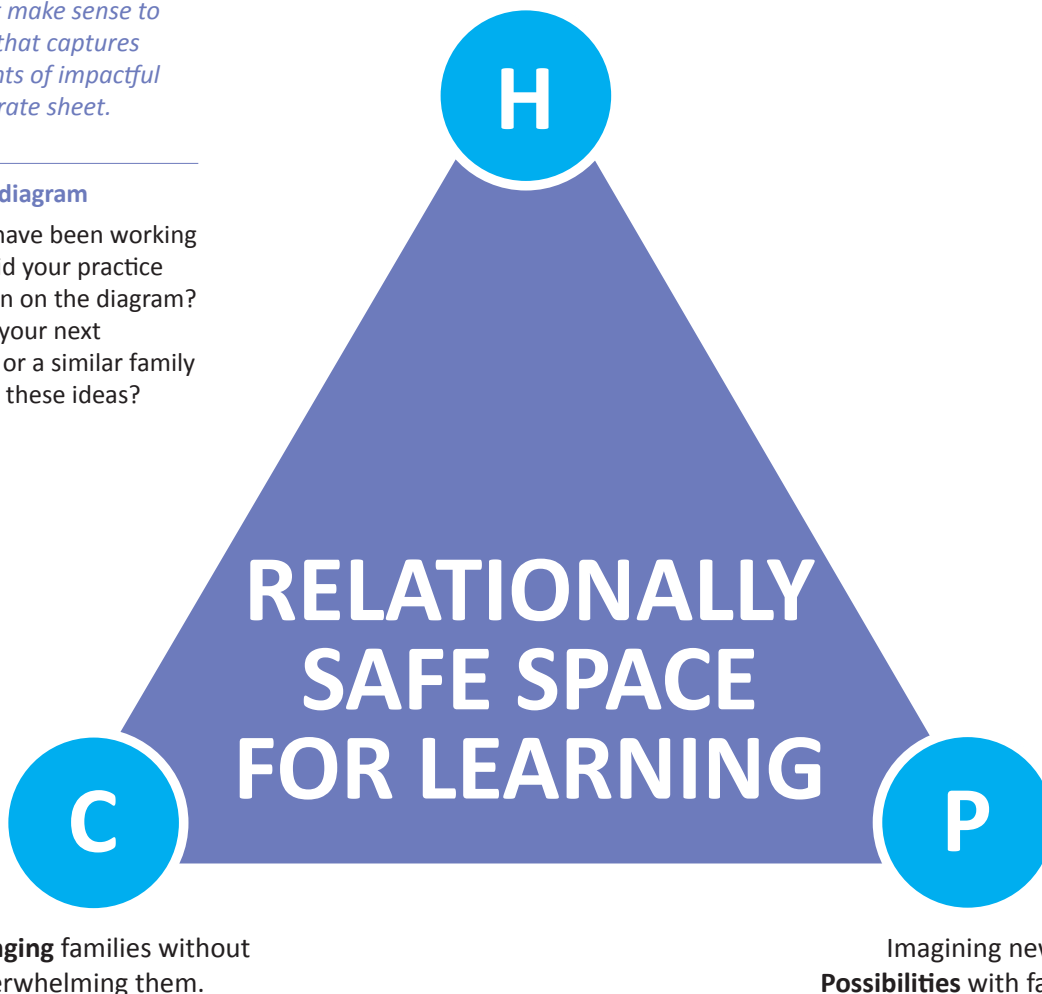
The three essential ingredients are shown as being part of the same single thing. If you took any one away, the triangle would collapse. They are connected to each other, and are inseparable from the relationally safe space for learning.

*If the diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the essential ingredients of impactful partnership on a separate sheet.*

**Helping** families in practical, strategic, emotional and relational ways.

### 4. Working with the diagram

Think of a family you have been working with recently – how did your practice relate to what is shown on the diagram? What could you do in your next interaction with them or a similar family in future in relation to these ideas?



### 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.

<b>QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE</b>	What have I done to support this family?
	What challenges have I presented?
	What possibilities are we working towards?
	What have I done well to create a safe space for this family?
	What worked well for me in creating support, challenge and possibilities with other families in the past?
	How can I help this family feel ready to take on further challenges?
	How can I anticipate the help the family might need in future?
	What would help in creating a shared vision of what is possible for this family, based on our work together?
	What has helped you the most in our work together?
	What has been hard about our work together?
<b>QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS</b>	What would be different if we achieved this?
	What you do need from me in order to feel safe and confident as we go on?
	In the past, what worked well when you needed to make a change or cope with something difficult?
	What would make you able to try this, even though it's hard?
	What do you think about...? (referring to an offer of help)
	If you waved a magic wand and this problem went away, what would be different?

## Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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# CREATING BETTER FUTURES

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