

KEY CONCEPT

Mediation

Mediation is a key concept in Vygotsky's original works<sup>1</sup> and in much contemporary research that is inspired by his ideas<sup>2</sup>. It helps to think first of someone working on a problem, like how to remember a set of related ideas. This could be the five features of special play that are an important part of parent-child interaction therapy<sup>3</sup>. Working directly on this is hard. However if a *mediating tool* is used then it becomes much easier. In this case the ideas are pulled together in an easy-to-remember mnemonic 'PRIDE' (standing for praise, reflection, imitation, description, enjoyment). The problem of remembering is redirected via 'PRIDE'. The parent's attention is less focused on the problem of remembering and more on the means to the solution. Mediation is the term used to describe processes where a tool is used in this way. The tool can be something physical or an idea.

Readers are encouraged to read the what matters (helper-parent) section before this one, as the idea of common knowledge and the distinction between what matters and goals are also highly relevant here.

### Working with what matters: parent-child

#### Summary

One way in which impactful partnership came about was by helping parents understand what matters to their child. In the process, what mattered to the parents often changed too. The motives of the parent and child were revealed in a way that meant the parents' actions could be refocused to better support the child.

Each time, the parent's attention shifted from a task focus to a focus on their relationship with the child and making the experience positive for the child.

The means of doing this vary depending on the age of the child, the issue in focus, and the kind of service. In all cases, helpers used their expertise to help parents understand what matters to the child. It is not always obvious or clear what matters to children: they can send mixed, confusing or even apparently contradictory messages. This is not just the case with pre-verbal children who don't have words. Making what matters to the child visible to parents can be the basis for significant changes in parents' capacity to provide the care and nurture they wish for their child.

This is a mind-expanding process (see Pages 8–9) in that the ways of making sense of the child are multiplied (expanding interpretations), and these then form a new basis for interacting with the child (expanding actions). The common knowledge (see Page 50 key concept box) between parent and child that emerges through this kind of intervention is both a tool used to work on immediate and recurrent parenting challenges, and an outcome of impactful partnership.

This common knowledge is itself a result of productive entanglement (see Pages 8–9) between the expertise of the helper and the knowledge, actions and situation of the family. It can be understood as a small thing with a big effect in the sense that a particular insight into what matters to a child can lead to significant changes in many parent-child interactions and in turn lead to changes in a child's developmental trajectory, parents' confidence, and broader family wellbeing.

## Making what matters to the child visible to parents can be the basis for significant changes in parents' capacity to provide the care and nurture they wish for their child.

#### How it works

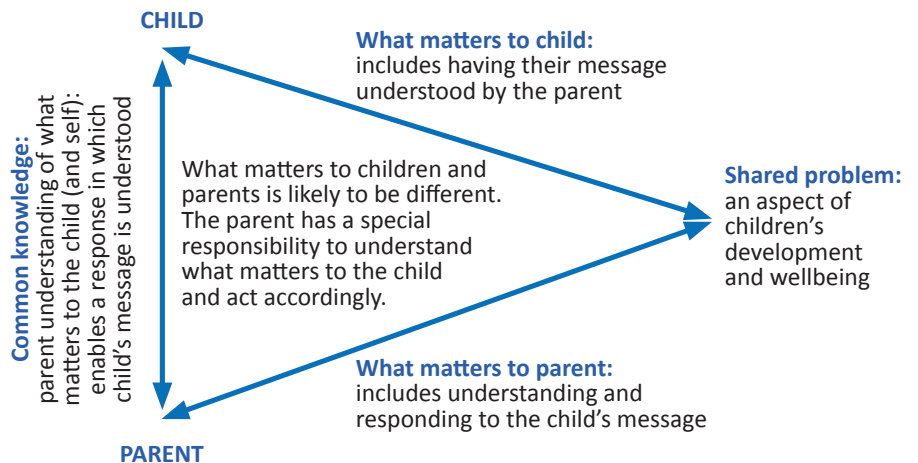
Just as in the case of what matters between helpers and parents (see Pages 50–53), this process works by creating a new resource (common knowledge) that changes the way in which two (or more) people work together on a complex problem. In this case it is the parent and the child working together on issues like sleep and settling, breastfeeding, transitions to solid foods, managing behaviour, and so on.

The process works on the assumption that key to supporting children when there is some difficulty is understanding what matters to them.

The diagram [below] illustrates the key ideas. A parent and child are working together on a shared problem, like learning to sleep or feed. What matters to each of them is not the same (hence they are shown separately on the diagram). If the parent understands what matters to the child, then common knowledge can emerge as a useful resource. It can enable the parent to interact with and respond to the child in a way that meets the needs of the child. In doing so the parent is showing the child that they are in tune with what matters to them.

#### How it is done

This particular aspect of impactful partnership requires a special set of knowledge and skills on the part of the helper. Helpers have to interpret a



<sup>1</sup> Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Wertsch, J. (2007). Mediation. In H. Daniels, M. Cole, & J. Wertsch (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky* (pp. 178–192). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Hembree-Kigin, T. L., & McNeil, C. B. (1995). *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy*. New York: Plenum Press.

<sup>4</sup> Powell, B., Cooper, G., Hoffman, K., & Marvin, R. S. (2016). *The Circle of Security intervention: enhancing attachment in early parent-child relationships*. London: The Guildford Press.

situation and consider possibilities for what matters to the child. They also need to find out what matters to the parent in this situation. Then, they have to help parents understand what matters to the child. This may involve some joint sense-making between the parent and helper, as the parent's knowledge of her child and her past experience in similar situations might provide crucial clues as to what matters to the child. This is an example of productive entanglement (see Pages 8–9).

Once a tentative and shared understanding of what matters to the child is reached, the helper needs to support the parent in using this as basis for acting differently. This may mean making new connections with familiar actions, or developing the parent's repertoire of ways of responding to and interacting with their child.

All the while, the helper needs to check in with the parent and ensure the whole process is proceeding in a way that is acceptable to them (see what matters: helper parent, Pages 50–53).

### Why this is so important

Parenting is always a matter of understanding and responding to this child in this situation. What matters to children is often hard to discern. A child may fuss and cry while breastfeeding even if she is still hungry; she may appear to resist sleep even though she is tired; she may push a parent away during a tantrum even though her preference is for a warm relationship and she needs help to calm down.

## Common knowledge between the parent and child helps shift parents' attention from the task or problem to the relationship, the child's experience, and the solution.

This is not just about parents being able to empathise with their children (although that is clearly important). The reason why common knowledge between parents and children functions as a small thing with big effects (see Pages 8–9) can be understood by connecting it with the Vygotskian idea of mediation (see key concept box).

In the initial situation, when parents experience struggle in some aspect,

their focus is often on the task (of breastfeeding, settling, controlling behaviour etc.), or on the problems associated with these tasks.

In the new situation when what matters to the child is made available as a basis for expanding interpretations and actions, parents' focus shifts onto the relationship with the child and the child's experience of a particular activity they do together. This redirected attention is oriented to the solution rather than fixed on the struggle.

As a result of this, what matters to the parents may change from aspects that elusive (like the amount a child sleeps) to things over which they much more control (like creating a safe sleep space). This can have further effects, building parents' confidence even more.

Enabling parents to understand what matters to the child enables a shift from the helper translating the child (meanings that were hidden in plain sight) to the parent being able to hear the message and understand where it comes from.

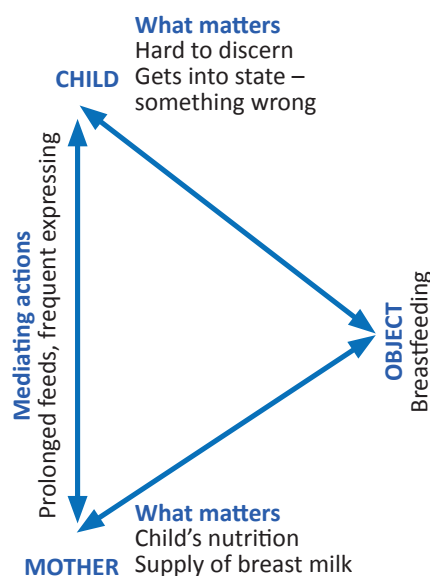
An example is provided below, accompanied by two versions of the diagram, representing the 'before' and 'after' situations. This is a novel but important way of understanding what happens in impactful partnership.

### Breastfeeding

"I'm worried, how much is she actually getting?"

(Parent, before)

BEFORE



Mary experienced significant problems feeding Siân, right from birth. She attended a day stay when her daughter was nine weeks old. What mattered to Mary was making sure Siân drank enough breast milk. What mattered to Siân was hard to discern. She gave confusing messages about being hungry and tired. Mary was feeding for long periods, and they were both becoming upset as this went on. This is represented in the 'before' diagram.

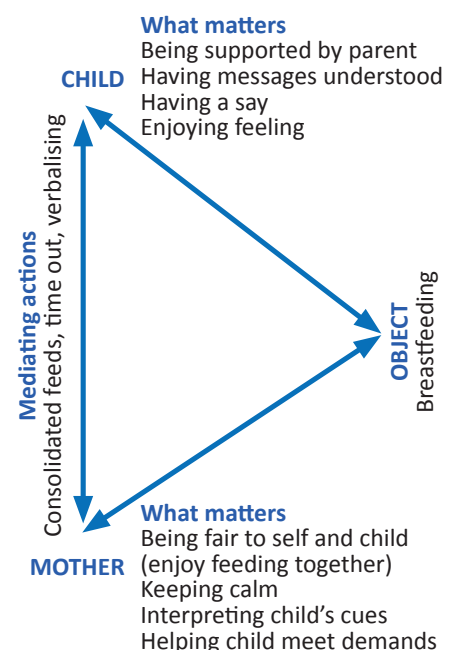
Hilary explained that Siân was having to cope with a transition from passive feeding in the womb to having to put in effort at the breast. She used her expertise to watch and listen during feeds, teaching Mary how to look out for signs Siân is getting tired or full. Hilary also suggested that being relaxed matters to Siân, so they set a time limit on each feed to stop it becoming too much for the child.

"Now if she gets stressed I just stop. I don't persist because it's not fair on her."

(Parent, after)

Breastfeeding became a positive and relaxed experience for mother and child. This successful change hinged on the nurse helping the mother understand what mattered to her child, and align her actions to that. This is represented in the 'after' diagram.

AFTER



## FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

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

### Revision

What matters to children isn't always obvious to parents. By making this explicit, helpers can enable parents to respond to their child in a way that meets the child's needs and shows that the child's message has been understood. In doing so, the helper facilitates the creation of common knowledge, a resource that is used by parents when they are interacting with their children. This can have many positive effects because it redirects parents' attention from a task or problem to their relationship with their child and the child's experience.

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 aspect of what matters between parents and children involves, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

What matters to parent:

What matters to child:

Common knowledge between parent and child about what matters to each:

### 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
What matters to parent	
What matters to child	
Common knowledge between parent and child about what matters to each	

**3. Understanding the diagram**

The diagram below represents common knowledge between parents and children. In impactful partnership, helpers use their expertise make what matters to a child visible to the parents. This shifts parents' attention from a particular task to focusing on the relationship by making the experience positive for their child.

*If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the ways in which parents' understanding of what matters to their children contributes to impactful partnership on a separate sheet.*

**Key concept: common knowledge (helper-parent)**

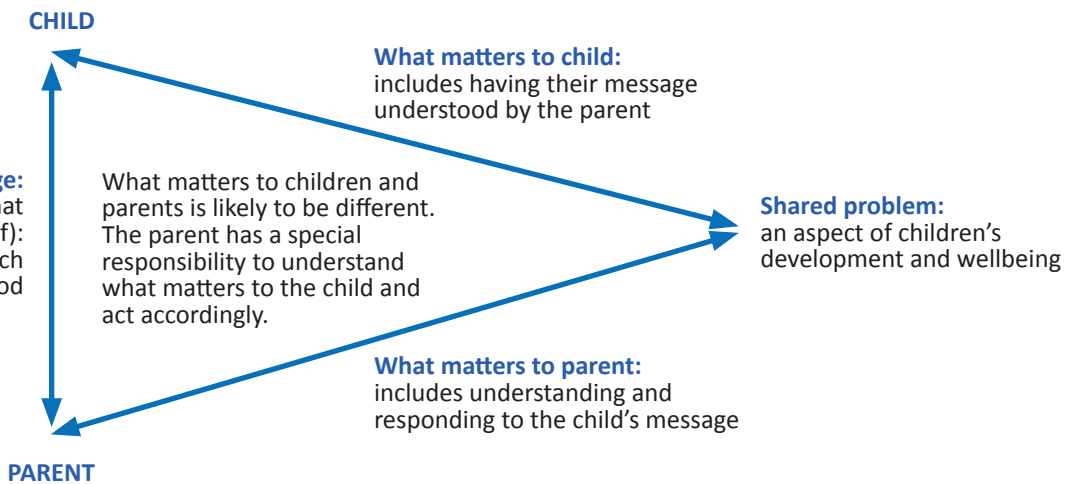
Common knowledge, in the sense used here, is made up of what matters to helpers, parents and children, the motives that shape and take impactful partnership practice forward. Put most simply, common knowledge is a respectful understanding of others' motives.

Common knowledge is important because it can represent differences between people working together, and enable them to consider the consequences of

these differences for how they should proceed.

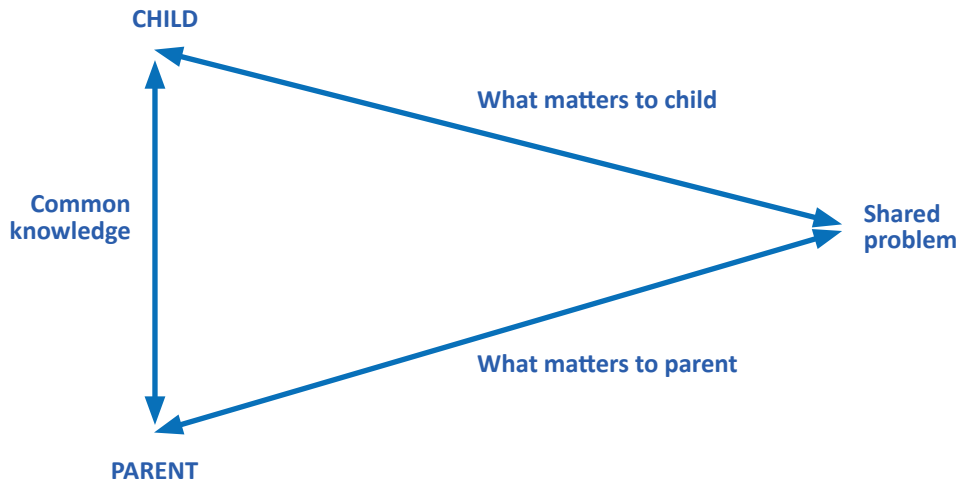
See (1) Edwards, A. (2017). *Revealing relational work*. In A. Edwards (Ed.), *Working relationally in and across practices: cultural-historical approaches to collaboration* (pp. 1–21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(2) Carlile, P. R. (2004). Transferring, translating and transforming: an integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries. *Organization Science*, 15(5), 555–568. doi:10.1287/orsc.1040.0094



**4. Working with the diagram**

Think of a family you are working with currently or have worked with in the recent past. Complete the blank diagram (see right) or use a separate sheet if you need more space, in relation to one key problem or issue that you helped the parent with – this is the 'shared problem'. Once you have written what mattered to the parent and the child in the relevant places, write what the 'common knowledge' made possible.



**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 make what matters to the child easier for the parent to understand?
	What worked well in the past to link parents' actions to new understandings of what mattered to the child?
	What aspect of what matters to the child will be most useful for us to focus on next?
<b>QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS</b>	What have you learned about what matters to your child?
	What do you do differently now you have learned this?
	What other situations come up when you're not sure what's going on for your child or how best to respond?

## Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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July 2018

# CREATING BETTER FUTURES

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### Suggested citation:

Hopwood N & Clerke T (2017) *Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership*. Sydney: University of Technology Sydney.

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### Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation upon whose ancestral lands the UTS campus now stands. We pay our respects to Elders past and present as traditional custodians of knowledge for this place.

The Creating Better Futures project was funded by the Australian Research Council through the Discovery Early Career Researcher Award scheme (Project Number DE150100365). Ethics approval was granted by South Western Sydney Local Health District Research and Ethics Office (Reference HREC/15/LPOOL/77) and ratified by the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Expedited Review Committee (Reference 2015000284).

We would like to thank our project partners for their support: Karitane, Tresillian, Northern Sydney Local Health District, the Women and Children's Health Network in South Australia, and Tasmania's Child and Family Centres (overseen by the Department of Education). We also acknowledge the contribution of participating professionals, volunteers and client families, and members of the Centre for Parent and Child Support in the UK.

We thank the families whose photos appear in this publication, and the Sinclair family with Kathy O'Donnell (pics: courtesy of Robyne Bamford).

Design: Teena Clerke



Australian Government  
Australian Research Council



Department of Education

