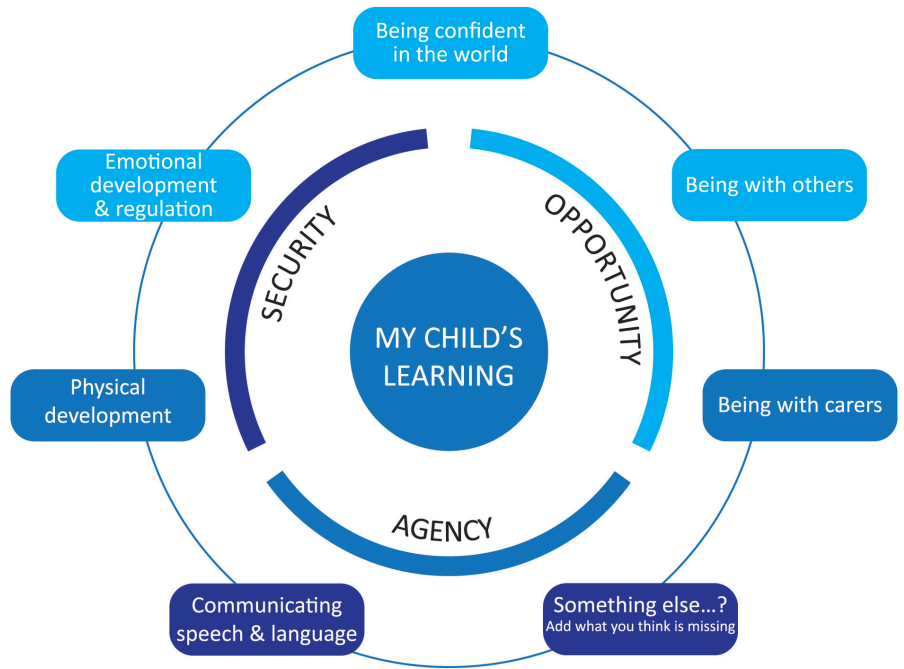




KEY CONCEPT

Children's agency

Agency is about how we can influence the world around us and move in a particular direction (see key concept box on Page 42). It may seem strange to think of young children or even newborn babies as having agency. However, the impactful partnerships we studied often worked on an implicit view that infants and children can have agency, and that parents play a crucial role in supporting the development and expression of this agency. Children's agency can relate to 'having a say', for example when parents follow a child's lead and have a break during a breastfeed: the child is child saying 'I need a pause'. Things children do to activate caregiving (like crying) can be seen as forms of agency because they are ways children arrange the world around them in order to meet their needs. Fostering children's agency is about enabling them to exert an influence on what happens around them, but it doesn't mean that parents never have to step in and take charge. Children are both agentic and dependent.



enabling parents to interpret aspects of parenting differently and then to act in new ways in response to those new meanings. The conditions of security, opportunity and agency are a key focus for these expansions.

Security, opportunity, and agency are crucial conditions for children's learning.

We traced outcomes relating to six interconnected domains of child learning:

- Being confident in the world
- Being with carers
- Being with others
- Communicating
- Physical development
- Emotional development and regulation.

Helping parents notice their children's learning in these domains can significantly boost their confidence, their positive sense of self as parents, and their readiness to take on challenges.

Helping parents support their children's learning often involved drawing their attention to small things that have big effects – things they can do day-to-day that don't have an immediate consequence, but over time make huge strides possible.

We expect many readers will have extensive knowledge of these aspects of children's development. In the examples we studied, parents' goals

did not always focus directly on an aspect of their child's learning, but nonetheless the partnership led to changes that fostered learning on one or more domains.

The six domains and the three conditions that enable learning across those domains can be used:

1. As a map to define future directions, identify priorities
2. As a way to solicit what matters to parents (see Pages 50–53 [working with what matters section])
3. As a way to help make progress visible to parents – signs of learning in these domains may be visible before a goal has been accomplished (and helper expertise is needed to recognise these signs)
4. As a way to chart outcomes of the partnership when it ends.

The three conditions of security, opportunity and agency can serve as mediating tools (see key concept box on Page 54). They redirect parents' attention towards things they can do that facilitate their child's learning. They can also attune helpers' attention to possibilities for intervention.

Security

By security, we mean safety, attachment, belonging, being understood, and having needs met.

The importance of secure attachment is a foundation of many approaches to helping parents with young children. We found that successful partnerships helped parents understand why learning certain things is hard for children, and

Children's learning

Summary

In the services we observed, overcoming difficulties always had an aspect that related to supporting children's learning.

All the helpers we studied helped parents understand childhood as a process of learning. Building on this, they helped parents understand what they can do to foster their child's learning. This and the next section (see Pages 62–65) focus primarily on the framing idea of diverse outcomes. However, this account of outcomes is consistent with the mind-expanding approach, as they rely on helpers

to know how and when to be there, and what support to offer. Circle of Security¹ ideas of safe and secure base were often effective regardless of the child's age.

Opportunity

Children's learning is not a passive process. It is linked to the opportunities they are given to try new things, explore, take risks, and relate to others.

Whether learning to breastfeed, link sleep cycles, eat solid foods, share play with others, or manage frustration, children have to have the chance to do these new things, even when it is likely they won't yet quite be able to do so. Impactful partnership involves supporting parents to create these opportunities, without expectation of immediate success.

Agency

Agency is about independence, making choices and having a say (see key concept box; see also Page 42 [agency definition in noticing]). It involves thinking of the child as being their own person, and giving them space to be this way.

“Pop him down, shush and leave the room, listen to the cry, he's going to escalate, like he should, it's good mental health for a child.”

(Helper)

We found examples of helpers supporting parents in fostering children's agency even just a few weeks after birth by, for example, giving a newborn a say in breastfeeding (when to change breasts, when to take a rest).

This can be a tricky idea, and feel risky for parents. It doesn't mean parents have no responsibility: security has to be there to keep children safe, and help them feel confident when they do develop and express their agency.

Being confident in the world

From the moment of birth, the world is an exciting, but also often daunting place for children. Many of the partnerships we studied included helping parents understand the world from the child's point of view, and to help the child develop confidence.

This can be confidence in falling asleep by themselves, separating from parents, exploring new textures in play and with food, climbing and balancing. These small things have the big effect of helping children grow up as confident learners in school, members of social groups and participants in physical activities.

Being with carers and others

Learning how to be with others is crucial for children. This starts with the transition from the womb to the world, and new kinds of relationships with parents in the 'fourth trimester'. Later, relationships with peers and perhaps siblings become important foci of children's learning.

Playgroups of various kinds (see Section 5) created opportunities not just for children to be with others, but for parents to help children develop their social skills.

Children need help learning how to be with others. They also learn by being with others. Helpers often enabled parents to understand how special time with them is to their children. We observed many cases where helpers pointed out things parents were already doing to help their children's learning.

“Those little stops, when you gaze together and wonder, they are like food for his brain. There's a big exciting world he's getting to know, and you're helping him connect all the stars together.”

(Helper)

The previous quote is one of many examples of how helpers explained to parents the small things they were doing could have a big effect on their child's learning.

Communicating

The partnerships we studied always seized opportunities to help children develop speech and language. It was often a surprise for parents when they learned how early this starts to happen, and when they learned the many things they can do to facilitate children's communication skills.

“They're very smart. They know mum is going to bang bang, bang on the mat, because she wants to put me to sleep.”

(Parent)

The approach often focused on small things like parents offering commentaries during routines like nappy changes, or older toddler's play. Singing songs together, linking words with actions, and regular reading together are also small things through which big changes happen. However these often required careful work on the part of helpers to enable parents to feel comfortable and confident doing these things. 'Small' does not necessarily mean 'easy' or 'obvious'.

Physical development

The most impactful helpers never took their eye off children's physical development. They often folded in ways to help parents foster fine and gross motor skills as part of working on other issues. Some used tummy time as a moment to help parents read the child's cues; others used dedicated play spaces to create physical challenges (like balancing and climbing) that children might not have access to at home.

Emotional development and regulation

Emotions are a key part of what makes the world hard to navigate for young children. Parents rarely explicitly sought help relating to their child's emotional development and regulation. However, the process of working on other issues often led to helpers supporting parents to implement small things that deliver big, positive changes on this front.

The idea of being with children when they are unsettled or having a meltdown was a common example of a small thing with a big effect. This shifts parents' attention from fixing a problem to helping the child process what is happening and sending a message there is always someone there for them when needed.

¹ 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.

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

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

Revision

Impactful partnership often if not always leads to children's learning on one or more domains. The study found that security, opportunity and children's agency were crucial conditions for this learning to take place. Therefore, a key role for the helper is to help ensure these conditions are in place, and to support parents in understanding why they matter and what they can do to bring them about. Explicitly discussing these conditions and the learning outcomes can serve multiple uses in partnership work.

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/>

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FUTURES**

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1. Key concepts – check your understanding

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

Security:

Opportunity:

Agency:

2. Linking ideas to practice

Now you have the concepts in mind, the next step is to connect them to your practice. When filling out the table below, make connections to the learning domains represented on the circle diagram where you can.

Concept	How it relates to my practice
Security	
Opportunity	
Agency	

3. Understanding the diagram

The diagram below represents children's learning outcomes when helpers establish the three conditions of security, opportunity and agency in impactful partnership by helping parents understand what they can do to foster their child's learning.

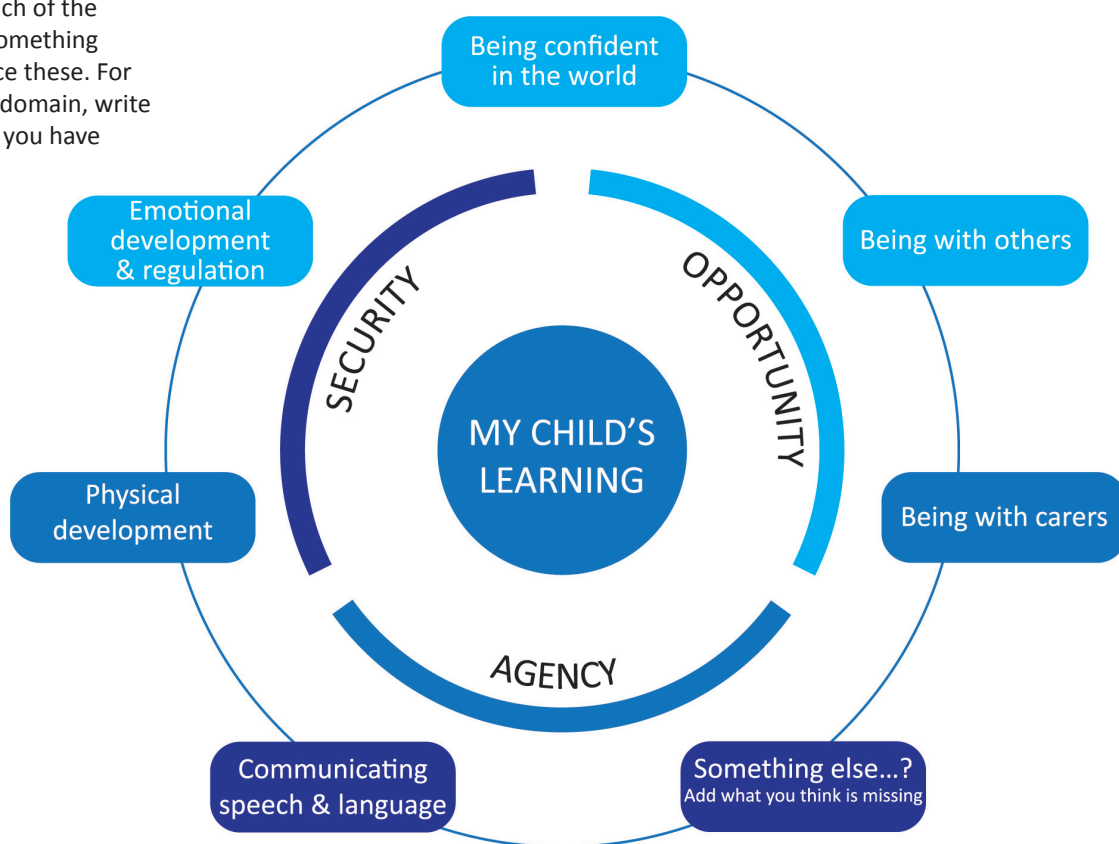
If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the ways in which parents' understanding of what their children are learning contributes to impactful partnership on a separate sheet.

Uses of the learning outcomes map:

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. As a map to define future directions, identify priorities 2. As a way to solicit what matters to parents (see Working with what matters to parents) 3. As a way to help make progress visible to parents – signs of 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. learning in these domains may be visible before a goal has been accomplished (and helper expertise is needed to recognise these signs) 4. As a way to chart outcomes of the partnership when it ends.
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4. Working with the diagram

Think of a family you are working with currently or have worked with in the recent past. For each of the three conditions, write something you have done to enhance these. For each applicable learning domain, write something concrete that you have noticed in the child.



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.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE	<p>What have I done to create conditions of security, opportunity and agency for the child?</p> <hr/> <p>What worked well in the past to foster the child's learning in relation to one or more of the seven domains?</p> <hr/> <p>What does my expertise tell me might be the most important domain or domains to focus on next?</p>
QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS	<p>What do you do to help your child feel safe, to help him or her try new things, and to give him or her a say?</p> <hr/> <p>What do you think it was that you did to help your child be so... (eg. confident, good with others, communicative...)</p> <hr/> <p>What should we focus on next so that you feel more confident helping your child learn?</p>

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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CREATING BETTER FUTURES

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