

KEY CONCEPT

Agency

Agency relates to what we are able to do. It is not a skill or talent. It is about someone's capacity to influence the world around them and move in a particular direction. If someone is agentic, they can set goals to direct action, carry out relevant actions, and evaluate progress towards their goals¹. Agency is not exclusively a property of an individual, but concerns how they relate to and work with others¹. Being agentic is the opposite of being passive and helpless. Agency is not necessarily about 'big' moments that radically change things. Agency comes into play in how and why we use 'tools' including ideas, strategies and physical objects when working on a problem². When these tools help us focus on the nature of a solution, rather than being occupied with a problem, then our capacity to act in the world is transformed. Of relevance to the noticing sequences discussed here is what helpers to do to enable parents to recognise their own agency, to foster parents' sense of agency, and to facilitate further development and expression of that agency in the future. (See 'Agency of the child' on Page 58).



with significance and agency, parents' bases for interpreting and acting in the world are expanded.

Noticing creates a pathway for expertise to be used in partnership with parents. Noticing happens through sensory and reported channels – either relating to what is going on right now, or what parents say about their situation. Therefore, this process is a way to achieve the grounding and grounded characteristics that are part of the essence of impactful partnership (see Pages 14–17) [section on characteristics].

This sequence can be used to:

- Build on existing strengths
- Enhance impact of guided change
- Challenge parents

Using the notice-significance-attribution pathway makes practice responsive to what is happening in the moment and to what matters to parents. It also provides a constructive way in which to challenge parents.

In phases 1 and 2 of the study, when we observed helper-parent interactions, we saw this sequence over 1,500 times, in varied service contexts.

We refer to these steps as pedagogies of noticing. This highlights how the practitioner or volunteer helps parents learn (pedagogy), and that this is based on what the helper notices.

WHAT IS NOTICED**Child**

Actions – checking in with parent
 Gestures – turning head away
 Expressions – smiling
 States – tied, hungry, alert

Parent

Actions – using an alarm to wake a child
 Beliefs – that their child is broken

Parent-child interaction

Reading cues – parent thinks child is tired
 Accomplishment – parent soothes child
 Qualities – breastfeed is calm

Noticing

Expertise informs what is noticed in relation to Child / Parent / Parent-Child interaction

Noticing is the catalyst for these expansive and agency-building sequences. Without helpers noticing relevant things, there can be no follow-up.

There are two pools of things that could potentially be noticed. One is things happening live during interaction with families. The second is what parents say about other times and places.

What we fail to notice cannot be acted upon.

Therefore noticing happens through two channels:

- Sensory channel – embodied expertise, based on attuning, seeing, hearing, sensing; live events, happening here and now
- Reported channel – verbal communication, based on soliciting relevant detail from parents; parents' accounts, happened then and there.

Helpers' alertness through these channels affects the potential to kick-start these valuable sequences.

Using these channels effectively depends on different kinds of expertise. The sensory channel involves bodily attuning through multiple senses.

The reported channel relies on the ability to help parents provided sufficiently detailed accounts of what has been happening and/or their hopes for the future.

We found that helpers noticed things about children, parents, and parent-child interactions.

What helpers notice would often have been overlooked by parents, or understood as mundane, irrelevant, or a sign of failure.

Making noticing count**Summary**

What helpers notice is crucial. By adding two further steps, helpers can transform noticing into something that drives positive change forward. The sequence of noticing, explaining significance, and attributing agency to parents doesn't take long to complete. However each instance helps to empower parents, and contributes to larger change. This is another example of the 'small things, big effects' principle. It is also a means through which helpers' expertise is brought into productive entanglement with what parents know and do (see Pages 8–9).

Because what is noticed transforms ways of making sense of a particular action, behaviour or statement, this sequence also upholds the idea of partnership as a mind-expanding process (another key framing idea, see Pages 8–9). As a result of being coupled

Explaining significance

Helping parents understand why what is noticed matters

Making noticing count requires helpers to **explain the significance** of what has been noticed in relation the problem they are working on with parents.

In this step, helpers use their expertise to make connections between what they noticed and what matters to parents. To have any impact, these connections have to make sense to parents.

Accomplishing this is not just about stating facts. It is about making reasons clear. Because of this, then that.

“They can be happy playing on the floor. Then when we pick them up, they start to cry. You think, what have I missed? But you haven’t missed anything. Often they’re just letting you know, my needs need to be met now.”

(Helper)

Attributing agency

Building confidence and capacity by highlighting parents’ role in what has been or can be achieved

This third step is vital in making noticing count. It concludes the sequence by making clear:

- Parents’ role in accomplishing something positive
- Parents’ role in making change happen
- Potential for parents to make positive change happen.

This can have a huge impact on bigger change processes – it can produce helpful contagion as parents feel confident and capable to try other things and commit to new challenges. It can show parents that progress is being made even if the final goal is not yet reached. This can solidify the partnership relationship and boost parents’ commitment to the process.

Attributing agency can also build parents’ confidence and help them value themselves. This is important in making change happen (see Section 2, Pages 26–29). It also helps parents feel up to taking on challenges, avoiding the sense that they are not ready for change.

This can be a crucial focus in challenging parents (see also Pages 34–37). We found many examples when helpers used this three-step pathway to challenge parents’ judgements of themselves as failing, hopeless, and unable to do anything to make change happen.

“Really lovely strategies you’re doing to help her. You’re probably not realising all the wonderful things you’re doing.”

(Helper)

“He used to be unhappy, at mothers’ group, all the happy babies but he wasn’t. But now he’s delightful.”

(Parent)

“Sounds like you’re enjoying being a mum.”

(Helper)

Context matters

This pathway was used in all the settings we observed. However, there were differences between services in terms of how noticing was made to count.

In some services, helpers relied more on the reported channel (like in home visiting, where actual contact time is short), while in others the sensory channel was used more (as in playgroups, toddler clinics and day stays).

NOTES

COMPLETE SEQUENCE OF NOTICING	CONTEXT AND CHANNEL
Nurse: I like the way you’re feeding him upright – he can have more control over what comes out	Day stay, sensory channel, building on strengths
Mother: I’m taking her to listen to the tap running, whatever works Nurse: So you’re finding what you can do to ease her stress levels	Home visiting, reported channel, building on strengths
<i>Baby grizzles while on tummy</i> Nurse: That’s enough, we don’t want her getting upset	Home visiting, sensory channel, enhancing guided change
Mother: I set the alarm to feed, but both boys are screaming Nurse: How would you feel if you let them wake you?	Home visiting, reported channel, challenging parents

1 See Edwards, A. (2005). Relational agency: learning to be a resourceful practitioner. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 43(3), 168-182. doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2006.06.010

2 See Engeström, Y. (2011). From design experiments to formative interventions. *Theory & Psychology*, 21(5), 598-628. doi:10.1177/0959354311419252

FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

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

Revision

We cannot act on things we don't notice. What helps notice is crucial. Small, mundane things that may be overlooked or negatively evaluated can be transformed into significant, positive insights that are linked to parents' sense of agency.

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 step involves, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

Noticing:

Attaching significance:

Attributing agency:

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
Noticing	
Attaching significance	
Attributing agency	

3. Understanding the diagram

The diagram below represents the three steps in which helpers use their expertise to make noticing count in impactful partnership. The sequence of noticing, explaining significance and attributing agency to parents helps to empower parents and contributes to larger change.

If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the steps in which noticing can be made to count in impactful partnership on a separate sheet.



4. Working with the diagram

Think of your last interaction with a family.

1. Write down what happened in an instance where you completed the three steps.
2. If there was something you noticed but didn't develop through significance and attributing agency, write down what you could say next time this comes up, to complete the sequence.



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

What have I noticed in my work with this family, and how have I made this count?

What worked well in the past to build parents' confidence by attributing agency?

How could I enrich the pool of things to notice through both the sensory and reported channels?

What can I do to make sure the things I notice are made to count? (ie. not to forget significance and agency)

QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS

What small things do you pay attention to now that you maybe missed or thought were less important before?

What has helped you feel more positive about your parenting?

What has helped you take on challenges in the past?

What do you feel ready to take on now?

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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