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Building Collaborations Between Programs and Within the Community

There is no question that the concept of collaboration among programs serving children and families has value. Collaborations among individual child care providers or between child care and the public schools, child care and Head Start, providers and child health organizations, providers and training institutions, and among funders have repeatedly fulfilled their potential to leverage scarce resources, eliminate unnecessary duplications, reach larger markets, and increase families' access to a wider range of services than they might otherwise use or even know about. Collaborations are encouraged across the country by public and private funding sources alike. It appears that *plays well with others* is a measure on which early childhood professionals are still graded.

The question attached to the concept of collaboration is how to make it work. Business collaborations occur all the time. They're known as *strategic alliances, partnerships, joint ventures, cooperative agreements, consortia,* or similar terms. Why and how they work provides some useful guidelines.

Lessons From the Corporate World

Corporations collaborate when it will help them meet their own strategic objectives. There is something of measurable value in the collaboration for each partner . . . they're not collaborating to please someone else or just to be nice. Instead, they enter into a collaborative relationship in which they will share their resources with others in order for their own company to be able to do a better job — extend its reach, reduce inefficiencies, create a new product or service, acquire a new technology, earn new revenues, etc.

Case studies reveal that these collaborations work best among partners of equal strength who come together to complement each others' work. The partners may have unique products or services, serve different geographic areas, or offer distinctive functional strengths (finance, marketing, technology, for example). Collaborations are less likely to succeed if the partners overlap each others' products or services to a high degree or serve the same markets. Somebody will be asked to give up something they've worked hard to establish — not an easy way to launch a cooperative venture. If the partners are struggling to bridge the same gaps, collaborating is all but pointless. As one wag labeled the attempted recovery efforts of two ailing banks during that industry's turbulence in the 1980s, "It's the mortally wounded joining forces with the terminally ill."

When a weak organization collaborates with a substantially stronger partner in order to tap its strength or to gain new competencies, it is unlikely to be able to contribute sufficiently to the relationship, creating an imbalance which can result in failure. On the other hand, one partner may be seen as weaker than another — not because the organization is less competent but because it is smaller: has fewer facilities, fewer customers, fewer employees, less money. Collaborations involving partners with such perceived weaknesses work best when these partners assume responsibility for a vital function within the collaboration, thus assuring them equal stature.

Corporations collaborate around a specific purpose. Hotel chains, for example, have formed collaborations in which they share marketing and reservations systems. Airlines collaborate with each other to route passengers to destinations they don't serve themselves. A company

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with a specific technology may collaborate with another which has needed distribution channels. These companies don't give up their identities; they don't change their missions or their corporate cultures; they simply decide it is in their best interests to work together in a specific way.

Creating Proactive Collaborations in Your Own Community

Although many business collaborations have developed over the years when two or more companies decided that they each had resources that, combined, could meet a new market need, most collaborations in the early childhood field have occurred in response to decreased dollars or increased competition. Relatively few have originated as the result of entrepreneurial urges or strategic planning processes. Yet that's where most of the potential lies.

So in thinking about collaborations within your community, look first at your own strategic plan. What resources do you need to achieve your objectives that you don't have now? Who else has them? What could you bring to the table that is of value to the other parties? What would a collaboration achieve that the individual members could not accomplish on their own?

Again, most people would agree that collaboration is positive — it's nice to cooperate, to include others, to share, to extend a helping hand. But be careful not to confuse the virtues of collaboration with the reasons for doing it — reasons which must be clear and justifiable for each party. Collaborations require considerable effort if they are to succeed, so they must be perceived by the participants as being worth the work. *What's in it for me (my organization)?* — as crass as that may sound — has to be asked and answered. And while added and/or better services for children and their families should be the ultimate goal, the answer needs to be more immediate and measurable.

There are many ways to improve or expand services. Collaboration is often a good approach, but it's only one approach. Is it the right one for your organization?

In considering potential partners, think about the following:

- Which partner(s) will control access to the families who will be served?
- Who will determine eligibility, enroll families, represent the collaboration to the parents?
- What will the key positions be in the collaboration? Which partner(s) will staff more of these positions?
- What financial contribution will be required of each partner? Which partner is more able and willing to invest its funds?
- For which partner(s) is the collaboration truly strategic?

These are important considerations because they determine the value of each partner's bargaining chips. Even if each partner makes what is perceived as an equal contribution at the beginning of the collaboration, the balance of power may shift over time. One partner's funding could decrease, another's customer base could change, key players could move on, and so forth. The challenge for the collaboration is to decide whether to try to keep strengths and contributions always in balance or to accept that shifts in the balance of power are inevitable and plan accordingly.

Principles of Successful Collaborations

What makes collaborations within the community work?

1 The partners should commit to the collaboration for a set period of time. Five years is a good target as collaborations need time to mature. And they take time. Successful collaborations are high maintenance: more meetings, more minutes, more action items, more phone calls. Each partner must agree to spend the requisite hours.

2 Mutual trust is required not only between the partnering organizations but also between the individuals involved in the collaboration. The growth of this trust is the reason the collaboration needs time. Although the partnering organizations may already respect each other through direct experience or by reputation, all the people who do the work of the collaboration may not know each other when they first come together. They require time to build the relationships that are essential to achieving the collaboration's purposes.

3 Collaborations are most likely to succeed when the partners are like-minded and have a shared strategy or similar goals. There is agreement not only on what the collaboration is to accomplish but also how it will do it. Further, there are mutually accepted performance criteria or standards of quality. Everyone understands by what measures the collaboration's work will be evaluated.

4 The partners agree to share resources, strengths, and information. There are connections between the partners at key points in each organization. The financial people in each organization talk with each other; the

information systems people communicate; the program people meet regularly. What one partner knows that might affect the collaboration's work, all know. In addition, the people who represent their organizations within the collaboration are authorized to act on behalf of their organizations, or, if other decision-makers must be consulted, have quick access to these individuals.

5 The distinctive qualities brought by each partner (specialized expertise, access to specific markets, unique services) are what add value to the collaboration, not the size of the partner's budget, clientele, or workforce. As a result, each partner has an equal voice in the collaboration. There are as many reasons to collaborate as there are ways to do so. The key is in the value added by each partner — what each partner brings that another needs. When their strengths are combined, the collaboration becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Resources

The most visible collaborations across the country have been established between Head Start and child care programs in an effort to expand and improve services for low-income families. The Federal Child Care and Head Start Bureaus have themselves partnered in a new initiative called Quality in Linking Together: Early Education Partnerships (the QUILT), designed to support and foster early education partnerships on the local level.

Among the QUILT's services are: collecting, developing, and disseminating descriptive information on partnership structures and collaborative strategies; developing training materials and publications providing guidance and fiscal strategies to promote partnerships among early education programs; delivering on-site technical assistance for Head Start, child care, prekindergarten, and other early education providers; and conducting national and regional training, forums, and meetings for early education staffs that encourage and advance partnering. The QUILT can be accessed through its toll-free hotline — (877) to-QUILT (867-8458) — or at its web site (www.QUILT.org).

Children's Defense Fund (CDF) has published a book which includes glimpses of more than 20 collaborations across the country and samples of documents used by these programs (assessment tools, collaboration contracts, staffing charts, budgets, etc.). *Working Together for Children: Head Start and Child Care Partnerships*, by Nicole Oxendine Poersch and Helen Blank, is available from CDF at 25 E Street NW, Washington, DC 20001, (202) 628-8787, or through its web site (www.childrensdefense.org).

Your local child care resource and referral agency (CCR&R) may be another resource. Many CCR&Rs across the country are helping build partnerships in their communities. Because they tend to have a big-picture perspective along with good local information on child care supply and demand, they are often able to bring community partners together to fashion innovative solutions to systemic problems. Information on how to contact the child care resource and referral agency in your community can be obtained from the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) at 1319 F Street NW, Suite 810, Washington, DC 20004, (202) 393-5501, or through its web site (www.NACCRRA.org).

Finally, there are a variety of books on strategic alliances, written for business audiences but with principles that clearly apply to collaborations in child care. *Alliance Advantage: The Art of Creating Value Through Partnering*, by Yves L. Doz and Gary Hamel (published by Harvard Business School Press), is labeled by one reviewer as "a must-read book for anyone involved in or contemplating a strategic alliance." *The Power of Two: How Companies of All Sizes Can Build Alliance Networks That Generate Business Opportunities*, by John K. Conlon and Melissa Giovagnoli (Jossey-Bass Publishers), emphasizes the personal aspects of alliances which must focus on relationships rather than transactions. These kinds of resources can be useful; check with your local librarian, your internet or community book store, or the faculty of a nearby university business school for recommended reading.