



Negotiating a Partnership Agreement: Wisdom From the Field

To ensure that families and children receive what they need from a partnership, partners must come to the negotiation table with a sincere interest in working together and drawing from one another's strengths. Program leaders must clearly articulate what they can bring to the partnership, as well as understand what their partners can offer.

Negotiating is a skill we all practice, but a craft in which few of us truly excel. Wisdom from the field has yielded the following 10 techniques that can help advance early education partnership negotiations and produce desired results—enhanced and more flexible full-day, full-year services for families.

Ten Points for Successful Negotiations

- 1. Honor the relationship.** The negotiation process involves partners you will work with over many years. If, in addition to the process of negotiating, your priorities include developing the relationship with your partners—for example, developing honest communication and trust—it can be easier to know when bending on a particular point may yield short-term gains but long-term costs.
- 2. Create a negotiation environment that encourages innovation.** Partners expand partnership options by engaging in brainstorming techniques and thinking “outside the box.” If both partners can respond to new ideas and be open to the unexpected, they will find unlimited opportunities to take a fresh look at their practices and beliefs about serving children.
- 3. Be realistic and fair.** Partners are more likely to follow up on their commitments and less likely to circumvent the negotiation process if they feel the agreement is fair. Sometimes a neutral, external facilitator (for example, a technical assistance provider) can help to ensure that the negotiations are realistic and fair to all. Partners should always consult with their programs' legal and financial advisors before finalizing the agreement.
- 4. Recognize that each partnership is unique.** Each partnership needs to be structured to meet the needs of the community and those involved. Although you may know of an interesting and successful early education partnership in a nearby community, the partnership you are designing need not, and most likely should not, be the same. Use community and family data and the partners' strengths and needs as the foundation for the partnership program you create.
- 5. Engage in active listening.** Focus on what others say, both on their actual words and the underlying meaning. This will help you understand the interests upon which agreement can be based. When your response makes it clear that you've really been listening, your partners, too, may be more prepared to listen. Active listening can produce better, more long-lasting relationships.
- 6. Know your bottom line.** We all enter negotiations knowing what we ideally want. Thinking through alternatives to the ideal outcome, however, allows you to understand your points of flexibility. Be clear about fallback positions and their consequences before you start to negotiate. Also, evaluate your partners' options beforehand. In negotiation, it is important to think several moves in advance and anticipate your partners' needs.





- 7. Know the difference between “positions” and “interests.”** When you focus on your motivation for partnering and your potential partners’ motivation, then you are looking at interests. When you get bogged down in achieving a particular goal, then you are distracted by positions. Interests form the building blocks of lasting agreements.
- 8. Come prepared to commit resources.** Any request to take on greater responsibility must be accompanied by an offer of resources. Approach this issue with an earnest commitment to supporting the goals and the needed change. Resources can take the form of funding, staff, materials, supplies, transportation, and facilities, often in combination. An adequate commitment of funds and other resources demonstrates your commitment to, and full support of, the partnership and enhanced programming for children and families.
- 9. Take a fresh look at practices and standards.** Use the negotiation process to address areas that need improvement, such as increased family support, staff development activities, and facilities. Challenge yourself to examine existing practice: Is this truly the practice that needs to be adopted by all, or is there a new way to meet standards? Set short-term, realistic goals, yet keep sight of where the partnership wants to be.
- 10. Allow sufficient time for partners to work out details.** Remember that the negotiation process is not a one-time meeting that results in a partnership agreement. Partners often need several, if not many, meetings to develop an agreement that reflects everyone’s needs and capacities and provides sufficient detail to ensure success and heightened services for children.

Last But Not Least

All partnership agreements should be put in writing, reviewed, and, if appropriate, revised annually. The agreement should contain sufficient detail to guide the partnership and serve as a mechanism by which partners assess the fulfillment of their commitments.

As a legal document, the agreement protects all partners’ best interests. To limit the number of pages in the partnership agreement, many partnership programs include an addendum (reviewed and revised annually or as needed) that describes how the partnership conducts business.

This addendum might specify who does what, when, how, with whom, and for what purpose. It may also contain specific outcome goals and a plan to measure achievement.

Photos courtesy of the Partnership Center.

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