Three-way talk
Early years practitioners and parents are all adults, but the friendly working relationship that you aim to develop would never start if not for the children. Early years settings strive to maintain positive relationships with parents and other family carers such as grandparents. But is it important never to overlook the very young members of the partnership.

The specialist Elinor Goldschmied described the triangular relationship that needs to develop among an early years practitioner (primarily the key worker), a child's parent(s) and the young child. She chose the image of the triangle deliberately because each part of that shape is equally important and contributes to the strength of the whole. If anybody in the practitioner--parent-child triangle feels anxious, unhappy or under emotional threat, then everyone else will be affected.

When families first make contact with your setting, the parents already have a relationship with their baby or very young child. Parents are making a change in family life to share their child's care with you as an early years practitioner. They are reassured when they can see that the practitioner who will be the key worker wants to make a warm relationship with their child, but will not cut parents out of the circuit. Parents will also feel more able to separate from their young child when they feel that you are ready to give a parent time as a person who matters and not someone who just needs to be got out of the door.

The key worker and other early years practitioners in the room need to form a warm and affectionate relationship with babies and very young children as individuals. The children need to feel secure with you, but they also benefit from seeing that you communicate with their parents in a friendly way. Young children need to see the social connections between their important adults, rather than getting the idea that their lives operate as separate compartments.

Feelings count
It is important for teams who work with very young children to think through how they build and sustain relationships within their early years setting. But as well as thinking through, you need to feel through the relationship.

Feelings are part of staff-parent relations, but we sometimes overlook the emotional underpinning of our rational steps and sensible ideas in policy and procedures.

The three-way relationship among key worker, parent and child needs to continue through friendly communication which acknowledges that parents have their own expertise and that the child has a life at home as well as in the centre.

- Let parents know early on who is the child's key worker and let everyone get to know each other as individuals.
- When the time comes for a child to be settled, the key worker should be fully involved. Of course, parents and child will get to know the other members of the room, but it is important that one familiar face stands out when the centre still seems unfamiliar.
- Let parents, as well as children, know when the key worker will be absent for any reason. Such information communicates to parents that they are part of your setting, so of course you have the courtesy to tell them what is happening.
- Look for simple ways to help parents, as well as the children, feel that they are
noticed and welcomed when they arrive and have a proper goodbye when they leave at the end of the day.

- Communication that supports staff-parent relations is not technically complicated. It includes a friendly smile, a question about the weekend or sharing something that happened with their child that day (see also 'Shared care', Nursery World, 12 October 2000.)
- Your friendly communication can help parents feel that they belong in your centre. Not all parents will want or be able to spend time there after their child is settled in. But some parents and other family members will be pleased to become involved in some way in the life of your centre.

**Avoid labelling**

It is essential that early years practitioners avoid labelling any parents as 'difficult' and do not generalise from uncomfortable relations with a few parents to criticisms about 'the parents' as a whole. Early years practitioners would be rightly offended if parents made sweeping criticisms of the whole nursery team because of the poor practice of one individual. However, some early years and school teams do develop bad habits of talking about the parent group as being awkward or a problem.

Of course, communication will not always go smoothly. Parents may be concerned about some aspect of their child's care or be unclear about how you approach early learning. Some time and courteous listening to parents will clear up most minor problems, as well as making it more likely that they will be pleased to listen to you in your turn (see 'A quiet word', Nursery World, 2 August 2001).