Parent/professional partnership builders:
Perceptions of parents and SLPs

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Introduction
With the advent of family-centered practice and legislative changes (IDEA) mandating family involvement in early intervention, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) have been working more closely with parents and families of pediatric clients (Crais et al., 2006; Watts Pappas et al., 2007). Consequently, the need to establish positive working relationships between parents and SLPs is of increasing importance. Whilst a number of studies have investigated parents’ views of their experience of SLP intervention (Andrews, 1989; Baxendale, Frankham & Hall; Callen, 1999; Callen, Frankham & Hall, 2004; Keilmann, Braun & Napontek, 2004; Mirabito & Armstrong, 2005) no previous studies have simultaneously investigated parent and SLP views of the parent/professional relationship. The current study explored the perspectives of both parents and SLPs regarding the factors they believed could have a positive or negative impact on the development of parent/professional partnerships.

Methodology
Participants: Participants were seven parents with children aged 3 - 5 years who were undertaking speech intervention and six SLPs, three of whom were working with the seven parent participants. The SLPs were not aware that the study was addressing parent/professional partnerships until the parent interviews were completed.

Procedure: Seven parents were interviewed three times over the course of a block of speech intervention for their child. Among other topics, they were asked about their relationship with their SLP and what they perceived as parent/professional partnership builders. After the interviews were completed, six SLPs participated in a focus group. The SLPs were asked to respond to the same question as the parents - what qualities or behaviours could act as either partnership builders or blockers between parents and professionals? The SLPs were also asked to discuss the themes that came from analysis of the parent interviews.

Data analysis: A thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data from both the parent interviews and SLP focus group.

Results
SLP perceptions
SLPs provided a number of qualities or behaviors that could act as either partnership builders or blockers between parents and professionals. These could be summarized into four major categories (see Figure 1):

**Approachability**
I think being able to have a laugh with them too, not being the total professional all the time (Susan)

**Professional competence**
I think blockers would be things like lack of timeliness with reports ... being really unprepared (Rachel)

**Respect for parents’ ideas and beliefs**
I try to approach my work where I have expertise in a certain area, the parents have expertise on their child and family and I try to sort of respect that (Leonie)

**Effective communicative skills**
I think being a good listener is a relationship builder (Fran)

Parent perceptions
Parents described six major relational competencies or skills that they felt contributed to the formation of a parent/professional partnership. These included two factors which were not suggested by the SLPs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Factors that enhance positive parent/professional partnerships identified by parents and SLPs

Red = characteristics valued by parents, blue = characteristics valued by SLPs

**Approachability**
You gain confidence in the therapist if you know that they are confident in what they’re doing (Jenna)

**Professional competence**
I appreciated the time spent going through the report and there wasn’t this: “I’m right – it doesn’t matter what you say, this is what I heard, and that’s what’s going to be put there” (Sarah)

**Respect for parents’ ideas and beliefs**
Just don’t expect that (the parents) are going to know what you (the SLP) are doing (Belinda)

**Rapport with child**
You definitely have to win the child over to get the parent’s trust (Kylie)

**Support of parental involvement**
And homework was like one sheet with 10 words on it ... I didn’t think it was necessarily helping (Andrea)

Conclusion
The identification of similar partnership builders and blockers by parents and SLPs is a positive indication that SLPs are in many ways responsive to parents’ needs and wishes in the formation of good working relationships. The common factors identified by both the parents and SLPs can be used by clinicians to guide successful interactions with parents. However, the existence of differences in perceptions also highlights the need for SLPs to re-evaluate some of their practices. The parents in this study identified feeling supported to be involved in their child’s intervention and the SLP establishing a positive rapport with their child as important components to their comfort in the parent/professional relationship. SLPs may need to consider these factors more closely when attempting to form positive relationships with parents.

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References


