

Linking Outside School Hours Care with the Community

Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principle: 3.2, 3.3

By Sonja Tansey for NCAC

When children feel connected with the community they live in, their sense of wellbeing is enhanced. Outside school hours care (OSHC) services have an important role to play in encouraging children to feel a part of their community and in supporting them to make a contribution to it. OSHC services will be well placed to meet the needs of children and families if they develop links, share information and work collaboratively with others in their community.

Children, families and staff in OSHC services bring a background of relationships with families, friends and their broader community. Their community can consist of people that they interact with and have relationships with regularly and can also include the broader associations they have with cultural, religious and sporting groups. These existing connections form the foundations for promoting links with the community in OSHC services.

What is the community?

OSHC services can view all the connections and relationships they have with people in their surrounding environment as links with the community. Central to the service's connections with community will be the staff, children and families of the service. Extending from these connections are links with local schools, organisations and groups in the wider community. Services can also view bodies that support, regulate and recommend practices in OSHC as being a part of their community. Your service will have connections with the community through:

- Children, staff and families
- Local school groups and organisations
- Other OSHC services and peak bodies
- Experts and regulating authorities

Why build links with the community?

OSHC services do not operate in isolation from the surrounding community. The links that children, families and staff already have, and continue to develop, with people, groups and organisations are crucial in creating a network of support.

Much has been written on the way in which children benefit from being connected with their community. Children's wellbeing through self-esteem, resilience and safety are improved when they experience a sense of connectedness with their community of family, friends, school and cultural, religious, sporting and activity groups.

Being connected with the community also encourages children to see the benefits of making positive contributions to the lives of others. For example, by participating in local fundraising events, children can see the value of their efforts in raising funds to assist groups or individuals in need.

OSHC services operate in a community that has constantly changing needs. The provision of flexible, responsive OSHC services will be achieved through connections with, and an understanding of, the community. For example, the surrounding population may change when a new housing development takes place in the area. This may affect the demand for OSHC places for families. A responsive program will consider how to accommodate the increased demand for places.

Staff in OSHC services will benefit from the support and advice of their OSHC colleagues, peak bodies and experts and authorities. By seeking out surrounding OSHC services and forming links with peak bodies, staff will gain invaluable guidance, skills and knowledge from others working in similar environments. The input and assistance of relevant experts and authorities will also help to keep staff up to date and informed of best practice in all areas of the service's operations.

By forging links and being connected with the community, staff will also find many opportunities for promoting the service. Staff will find that their interactions with the local and broader community will allow them to communicate the positive aspects of their service and advocate for the larger OSHC sector.

Finding out about the community

To find out who is in your community talk to the children, staff and families at the service. Asking about their lives and interests outside of the service will provide a valuable insight into the community in which each person lives and interacts.

Staff can also find out about the community that the service is involved in by reading local newspapers, community bulletins and information brochures. It will also be useful to find out what other OSHC and child care services are available in the area.

Consider seeking information from the local council and school about the demographics of the area including the socio-economic status, age range and cultural groups of people in the local area. This information can be crucial in making decisions about the service's operations. For example, understanding the socio-economic status of families using the service may help to determine the service's fees and the costs involved in providing excursions and vacation care activities. In some circumstances it may be necessary to provide affordable alternatives to costly activities.



Building links with our community

The process of building links with the community does not need to be a complex one. It may be useful to step back and consider the connections that the service already has and how these could be utilised to forge further links. OSHC staff should

view the many interactions and relationships that they already have with people associated with the service as opportunities for connecting with the community. Consider the people and places that are nearby the service and how they can be used to enhance the children's experience at the service. Think about the needs of the families using the service and who could be contacted to support them. Find out about other OSHC services and community organisations that staff could contact for professional support and for family referrals.

Consider the following questions:

- What connections does the service already have?
- How does the service make information about itself available to the community?
- Is this information available in community languages?
- How does the service find out about and attempt to meet the needs of the surrounding community? For example, are the service's hours of operation relevant to the local school hours and local transport times?
- Which people in the nearby environment could be invited to have input to the service program, policies or practices?
- How are children encouraged to participate in local community activities?
- What local places could be visited by staff and children?
- What community events could the service participate in?
- How do staff network and collaborate with community organisations to meet the needs of families?

Community resources and networks

There are many ways that community resources and networks can be utilised by OSHC services. The service's interaction with these will vary and will be determined by the needs and interests of the service as a whole and those of individual children, staff and families. Services can facilitate the use of community resources and networks by being knowledgeable about and referring people to individuals, groups, organisations or relevant experts and authorities in the community.

Consider the following questions:

- What interests and needs do the children have that could be supported by local organisations or professionals in the community?
- What community events are taking place that the children could participate in?
- What council services are available that the service could utilise?
- What special features of the surrounding environment could be used to enhance the children's experience at the service? For example, parks and recreation facilities.
- What professional support groups are available for staff to participate in?

Developing relationships with the community

OSHC services can develop mutually cooperative relationships with the community by seeking out opportunities to work with others and participating in local activities and events. OSHC services can also build relationships with people in the community by referring children and families to support services and groups. These may include, community health groups, counselling services and parent support groups. Some simple ways to connect with your community could include local excursions and walks, visits by sporting groups and coaches or participation in local environmental projects.

Consider the following questions:

- Do staff know about and refer families to local professionals that can support children and families at the service?
- Do staff seek advice and work with other professionals to assist children with additional needs?
- Are other professionals invited to speak with children, staff and families about health and education?
- Are family members encouraged to participate in activities at the service?
- Are family members encouraged to provide feedback on the service's program and policies?

How do we gain feedback from the community on our service's operation?

By interacting with and listening to the people that the service has contact with, information and feedback can be gained about a large range of issues associated with the running of the service – from the service hours of operation to the behaviour of the children. The key to gaining feedback is in listening to and observing the way in which people respond to your service. Try to be aware of the way in which people respond to the behaviour of the children during excursions. This may assist in evaluating behaviour guidance policies.

Services can also be proactive in obtaining information by communicating formally and informally with the relevant people in the community. Input on service policies and procedures could be gained through brief surveys or written responses. Feedback about the types of experiences offered to children may be best sought by verbally communicating with families at arrival and departure times.

When formulating service policies the service can also actively seek input from the broader community of experts and authorities. For example, when developing a policy on walking safely to school, the service could obtain safety information and recommendations from the relevant roads and traffic authority.

Try to be aware of how the service's hours of operation and the meals it provides cater to the needs of families in the community. It may be useful to know about the transport services that most families use. Local transport arrival and departure times may affect the hours that families need to use the service. This information could also assist the service in deciding if breakfast should be provided to children who arrive early as an additional support to the families.

The service can also use its complaints handling process to understand aspects of the service's operation that may be of concern to children, staff, families and the surrounding community. By responding and finding ways to address these concerns, services can make changes and improvements to its policies and practices.

Ideas for gaining feedback from the community

The following table provides some examples of service operations on which feedback could be obtained. It also shows who feedback could be obtained from and the type of action a service may take in response to the feedback. Please note, these are examples only and are not intended as a prescriptive or exhaustive list.

What could we gain feedback on?	Who in the community could feedback be obtained from?	What action could be taken as a result of the feedback?
Service drop off zones.	Children, families, school, local council.	Apply to the local council to have drop off zones changed or enforced.
Hours of operation.	Children, families, staff, school, local transport authorities.	Alter service hours of operation to meet families' needs.
The program of children's experiences.	Children, staff, families, school (for example the use of school equipment and space).	Incorporate into the program the suggestions and views of those consulted.
Provision of outdoor physical activities.	Children, staff, families, school, local sporting groups, neighbours (for example regarding noise levels and shared boundaries).	Incorporate suggestions of those consulted. Negotiate with neighbours about outdoor play times and areas. Invite local sporting groups to provide activities or speak with the children.
Behaviour management policy.	Children, staff, families, school, local community health agency and child protection authority.	Incorporate suggestions of those consulted. Invite experts from community health and child protection agencies to talk to staff and families.
Involvement in school and community events.	Children, staff, families, local schools and community groups.	Attend community/school events. Arrange a stall or information bay at local events.
The numbers of children using the service.	Staff, families, school and funding and licensing bodies.	Increase, decrease or maintain the licensed or enrolled number of children at the service as needed.
Additional needs children using the service.	Staff, families, school, funding bodies and additional needs support services.	Provide enrolment spaces for additional needs children according to need. Consult with funding bodies for additional funding support. Arrange staff and facilities to accommodate the additional needs of the children. Consult with families and additional needs support services regarding care needs.
Emergency care for children and families in need or at risk.	Staff, families, local community health organisations and child protection authority.	Provide emergency care enrolment spaces for children and families in need or at risk. Consult with funding bodies for additional funding support. Consult with families and support services regarding the care needs of the children.
Complaints handling procedure.	Staff, management, families, licensing authority, national standards, relevant fair trading authority.	Incorporate suggestions of those consulted. Utilise the information gained from complaints to improve service practice.

Further Information

- Community Child Care Association. (2004) *Fact Sheet 9 - Shared Visions for Outside School Hours Care. Connecting OSHC with the Community*. Department of Human Services, Victorian Government: Vic.
- Drug Education Section, Department of Education, Science and Training. (2003) *Creating Connectedness. A Report from the National School Drug Education Innovation and Good Practice Project*. Commonwealth of Australia: ACT.
- National Childcare Accreditation Council. (2003) *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide*. 1st Ed. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.



For more information on OSHCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
 E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
 Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
 Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au