

Ask a Child Care Adviser - Building links with your community

Lauren Boyle spoke with NCAC's Child Care Advisers about the rewards, challenges and strategies for child care services when building links with the local and wider community.

How can my service improve outcomes for children and families through community links?

When children feel connected with the community they live in, their sense of wellbeing is enhanced. Services play an important role in encouraging children to feel part of their community and in supporting families by providing access to community resources. By developing links, sharing information and working collaboratively with others in the community, services have an opportunity to better meet the needs of children and their families. This can improve outcomes for children such as health, learning, safety and lifestyle.

What is meant by the term community?

'Community' can be defined as the connections and relationships that child care services, families and children have with people in their surrounding environment. The immediate community of a service includes the child care professionals who work there and the children and families who use it. This definition can be expanded to include the broader community such as the local greengrocer, schools, health care professionals, child health centres, playgroups and community organisations that support families and children in the local area.

The professional networks and training institutions with which child care professionals have access to also form part of the service's community, and they assist child care professionals to keep in touch with current practice.

Community can be thought of on a national and international level. Services can interact with these communities through activities such as fundraising opportunities, programs that increase community awareness or 'sister city' programs through their local council. These experiences allow children and families to make positive contributions to the lives of others while learning about diverse lifestyles, cultures, histories and traditions.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.3 and 6.5

OSHCQA Principles: 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3

QIAS Principle: 2.2

Why is forming community partnerships important?

Developing effective and dynamic community links assist a service's stakeholders to access useful resources and can help to create a network of local support.

Children

Building links can help children to develop a sense of ownership, pride and appreciation for their local area. Developing a sense of connection with family, friends and cultural, religious, sporting and activity groups supports children's self-esteem, resilience, safety and sense of belonging.

Families

Collaboration with others in the local community, helps to create a coordinated network of family centred services. By developing these partnerships, child care professionals can ensure children and their families have access to a range of services in their local community. Services should ideally be located in surrounding areas, to promote the sharing of resources and to increase the support provided to families. Services that may be accessed include parenting groups, playgroups, social networks, health and wellbeing classes and early childhood intervention and support.

Child Care Professionals

Seeking out and forming links with local community organisations provides child care professionals with opportunities to gain invaluable guidance, skills and knowledge from colleagues, peak bodies, experts, resource agencies, training institutions and local authorities. The input and assistance of relevant people and organisations will also help to keep child care professionals up to date and informed about recommended practices.



Child care professionals can use their links with the local community to promote their service, and to provide information about their philosophy and practices. Advocating for the service benefits the local community by making it more accessible to families and other professionals, and will assist the service to gain support from the community when necessary.

How can I find out about what is available in my community?

As a first step services can talk to children, families and child care professionals about their lives and interests outside of the service. This offers a valuable insight into the community in which each person lives and interacts. Understanding where families live and work can provide services with ideas about the resources that are available in their local area.

Services can also find out about their neighbourhood community by reading local newspapers, community bulletins and information brochures. Local councils often have information directories and pamphlets with listings of organisations in the local area which can provide inspiration for excursions, special visitors, support networks or opportunities for professional development.

Hosting informal social functions with families and people from the local community can also provide child care professionals with opportunities to gain a genuine understanding of children's, families' and community members' needs and interests outside of the service.

How can my service build links with the community?

The process of building links with the community does not need to be complex and it may be something that services are already doing. Reviewing the partnerships that services already have and identifying how these could be used to forge further links, can provide new opportunities for the service to connect with other community organisations.

Child care services promote the use of community resources and networks most effectively when they are knowledgeable about what is available, and are proactive in referring stakeholders to relevant services and organisations.

Services often find that engaging in one community focused activity opens up further opportunities for connecting with local resources. For example, participating in a fun run for a local charity may lead a service to explore with children the importance of health and fitness, which could then involve local services and businesses such as gyms, recreation centres and health care professionals.

Conducting excursions or inviting visitors to the service can build valuable links between the service and the community, particularly when these are more than 'one-off' experiences. Linking excursions and visits to other experiences for children reinforces children's learning outcomes and strengthens their connection with, and understanding of, their community.

Services may also consider offering space at their service for out of care hour activities such as meetings, education courses or creating a community garden. Depending on their resources and the needs of families and the local

To learn about local community demographics and needs, services may find it helpful to :

- Contact their local council for information
- Attend community meetings and forums
- Invite community members, including potential clients, to service events and activities such as fetes and social gatherings
- Talk to families about their local communities
- Circulate surveys in the local area to find out about family needs and interests in relation to child care

community, child care services may also be able to promote complementary activities to operate in conjunction with their regular program. For example, parenting or language classes.

Child care services can also play a pivotal role in referring families to other services within the local community, such as early intervention and health services.

How can children participate in building links with the community?

For many children, particularly younger children, their house, their street and the places they visit with their families are what they consider to be their community. Children often feel a great deal of pride in where they come from and enjoy sharing their 'personal' community with child care professionals and peers. Child care services can tap into children's sense of community pride by using strategies such as:

- Inviting children to share information about their experiences with extra curricular activities such as scouts, sports or music
- Taking small groups of children to local shops and services such as the post office, library, park
- Placing children's art and displays in local businesses such as cafés, shop fronts or council noticeboards
- Where appropriate, having a home visit program where children can take turns in 'hosting' morning or afternoon tea in their own home for their peers and child care professionals at the service

How can the community be involved in my service's operations and plans for improvement?

It is helpful to know what is happening in the community and to be aware of the leaders and representatives of community organisations when seeking community involvement in the service.

Building links with the community - where do I start?

The following reflective questions may be useful for services beginning to build community links:

- 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 children could participate in?
- What council services are available that the service could use?
- What are the special features of the surrounding environment which could be used to enhance children's experiences? For example, parks and recreation facilities.
- What professional support groups or organisations are available for child care professionals?

Services can obtain useful information and feedback from local community representatives by using both informal and formal communication methods. Through the use of surveys, meetings and informal conversations, valuable information can be gathered to assist services when they are developing or reviewing their policies and procedures, and when they are developing their business plans.

Each service's relationships and interactions with their community will vary. To build effective community links, services need to maintain a good understanding of the needs and interests of stakeholders, as well as a thorough knowledge of what their community offers ■

References and further reading

- Gonzalez-Mena, J., & Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Making Links: A collaborative approach to planning and practice in early childhood services*. New South Wales: Pademelon Press.
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