

Supporting partnerships through family participation

by Anne Stonehouse

Families want to feel connected with their child's experience in child care. For many families, choosing from a variety of ways of participating in the child care service not only strengthens this connection but can also create a sense of community within the service. Families' participation can also benefit the service in many ways. Most importantly, participation can contribute to strong relationships between families and child care professionals.

Relationships between child care professionals and families, often referred to as partnerships, are an important indicator of the quality of any service. Partnerships involve collaborating with the aim of ensuring that the experiences offered in child care support each child's learning, development and wellbeing.

Participation and partnerships – what are the differences?

The distinction is often made between partnership and parent involvement, which has been a traditional feature of child care programs, with partnership being viewed as much more important and valuable. One major difference is that partnerships require professionals to share authority and power with families, with the result that the child's experience is a negotiated one.

Traditional parent involvement, however, usually consists of a number of ways, determined by professionals, that families can participate in and contribute to the child care service. These ways typically allow professionals to maintain their authority.

Partnership is a relationship, while family participation and involvement are ways families can contribute to the operation of the service and to their child's experiences in child care. The assertion is often made that involvement is optional in a quality service, but partnership is not, even though the partnership will be unique with each family. While this is true, family participation opportunities can also have an important place in quality child care services.

Some discussions about partnerships may imply that family involvement and participation are unimportant. This is not so. Having a variety of

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.2, 1.3 and 1.5
OSHCQA Principles:	1.2 and 3.1 – 3.3
QIAS Principles:	1.4 and 2.1 – 2.3

ways for families to participate is important and can contribute in significant ways to successful partnerships.

What are worthwhile family participation experiences?

The three overlapping types of typical family participation experiences in a service include:

Contributions to the operation of the service:

- Joining management or parent advisory committees
- Helping to develop and review policies
- Participating in working bees
- Conducting fundraising projects
- Organising projects and events
- Donating supplies and materials
- Donating professional expertise and/or skills
- Sharing talents or interests with children
- Helping in a variety of ways. For example, mending dolls' clothes, repairing equipment.
- Being an extra adult on an excursion.

Social events: Some families will enjoy participating in and/or helping to organise social events such as end-of-year parties, multicultural evenings and welcome functions for new families. These events can be excellent ways for families and child care professionals to spend time together in a relaxed and informal way and for families to get to know each other. It is critical that the nature of such social events and the times they occur respond to families' interests and needs.

Information sharing: In some communities families will appreciate the service organising sessions with speakers about aspects of children's learning, development and wellbeing, community resources for families and other issues related to parenting and family life. When child care professionals participate alongside families, issues and concerns of mutual interest can be

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discussed. This can build shared understanding. For these sessions to be successful, they must be offered in response to interest from families.

How can participation contribute to partnerships?

Creating a sense of community among children, families, staff and carers is an important component of a child care service. Participation allows professionals and family members to get to know each other and can create a sense of belonging. Through participation families can also:

- Learn more about how the service operates
- Get to know other children and families
- Experience their child in the child care setting and learn more about what their child does at child care.

All of these outcomes are likely to increase families' confidence in contributing to their child's learning and development both within and outside the service. Working alongside professionals can be one way of demonstrating partnership. Most family participation experiences occur in more relaxed, informal times than the busy drop-off and pick-up times, making them more conducive to having conversations and sharing information and insights.

What makes family participation experiences successful?

A successful family participation experience can be just about anything that flows from the values and philosophy of the service. Just as for experiences for children, how and why you do what you do matters as much as what you do. Within the service community there will be diverse interests and priorities and not all family participation experiences will suit all families. Some points to consider:

- Base the opportunities offered on what families want, not what professionals think they 'should' want. Invite families to suggest ways they would like to participate.
- Offer a variety of opportunities – one-off and ongoing, modest and substantial, simple and challenging
- Share authority and decision making with families

- As you learn about families' strengths, talents and interests, think of ways to tap into these
- Be sure that family participation is, and is seen to be, voluntary, not compulsory. Some families will not want to participate, or do not have the time to do so.
- Avoid tokenism – that is, having families spend their time doing jobs that don't really need doing
- Ensure that the ways families can participate are empowering and engender a sense of belonging
- Show genuine appreciation of all contributions
- Ensure that family participation experiences feel inclusive – that is, everyone is welcome
- Respect individual differences. Find ways to encourage families that don't currently participate without making them feel that it is compulsory. For example, place articles about participation opportunities in the service's newsletter, but clearly note that these are voluntary and that families are not obligated to be involved.

Why document family participation?

The documentation of family participation using photos, stories, notes in a newsletter or on a noticeboard can promote a sense of belonging. Acknowledging and documenting all contributions, both big and small, demonstrates appreciation and can encourage more participation.

Including family participation as one focus of ongoing evaluation involves getting feedback from families and acting on it. Evaluation that questions traditional ideas of family participation, and that focuses on the interests and needs of families will help to ensure the relevance of what is offered.

Conclusion

Invitations to participate in services in a variety of ways can contribute to establishing and strengthening relationships between professionals and families and to building a strong inclusive community within the service. However, keep in mind that the aim is to have a partnership with all families, regardless of whether they participate in service activities ■

References and further reading:

- Partnerships for Children: www.rch.org.au/ecconnections/publications/index.cfm?doc_id=11324.
- Raising Children Network. (2006). *Involving parents in school and child care*. Retrieved 29 July, 2009, from: http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/involving_parents_in_school_and_childcare.html