

A Collaborative Approach to Achieving and Maintaining Quality

By Lorna Hughes and Jan McFarlane

In striving for quality in child care services we often talk about working collaboratively to provide the best outcomes for children. Valuing and including all stakeholders in the decisions that affect them is also woven throughout all of the Quality Areas / Elements of the Quality Assurance Systems.*

While our service philosophies and policies often include references to management, staff, carers and families working together, in practice this is a really challenging thing to do. So how do we ensure that we actually turn rhetoric into practice so that it becomes a normal part of our daily work?

Unity of Purpose

As a team of people, committed to the notion of quality care for young children, we must first come together to establish a unity of purpose in order to provide the best possible outcomes for children.

Establishing what unites people is not easy. The diversity that exists in the wider community is also reflected in a child care service. Management, staff, carers and the families will each bring to the partnership a set of expectations about what is best for the child. It is inevitable that, when such diverse ideas are brought together, there are going to be different points of view.

In building any relationship, it takes time to get to know and understand where the other person is coming from. By listening and talking with each

other and clarifying what we don't understand, we can learn about the other's perspective. We will also discover a great deal of common ground - a unity of purpose.

The enrolment interview is a valuable opportunity to get the dialogue started; to begin to learn what it is that makes this child and his/her family unique and to lay the foundations for the partnership. During the interview and orientation process you can empower families by:

- Listening more and talking less
- Engaging families in conversation about their child rather than simply concentrating on filling in an enrolment form. Most people will provide much more information verbally than they are prepared to put in writing
- Using the interview as an opportunity to ask parents about their child rearing beliefs, experiences at home and the expectations they have for their child in care, rather than just an opportunity to explain about "the way we do things here"

Keeping the lines of communication open

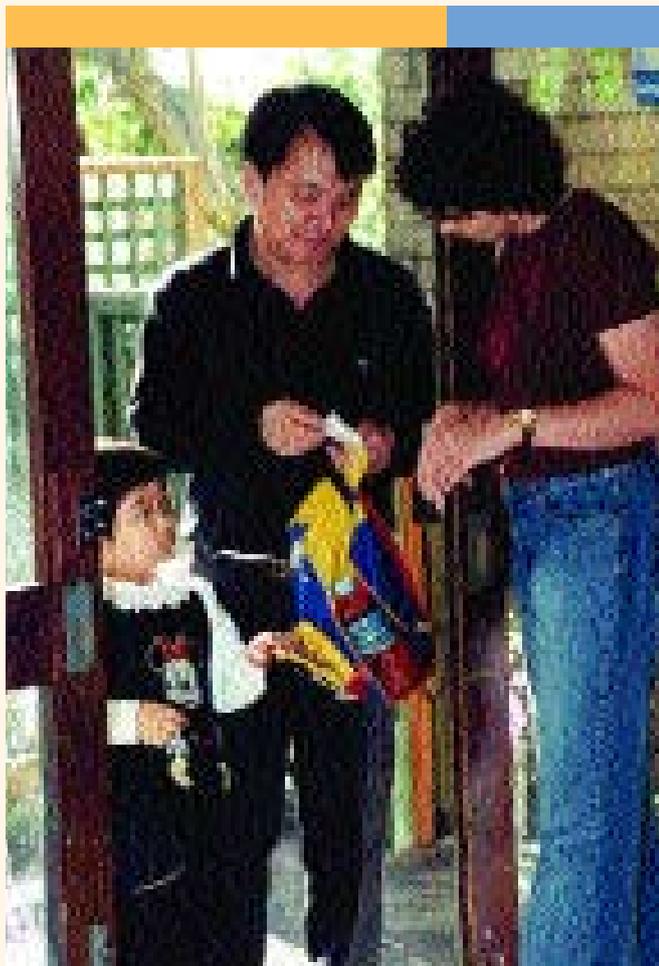
An important strategy in maintaining an effective partnership once it is established is to regularly evaluate the communications methods used in the service to assess their effectiveness.

All of us lead busy lives outside the child care service. It is a fact of life that not all families or care providers will read a newsletter, come to meetings, complete a survey, or even notice the most strategically placed sign. We cannot make the assumption that a poor response to a survey or low attendance at a meeting indicate that families and care providers are either satisfied with what is currently happening or not interested in communicating with us.

Talking with families and other team players about



* Quality Improvement and Accreditation Systems for long day care centres, Family Day Care Quality Assurance for family day care schemes and Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance for outside school hours services.



the sort of communication strategies that work best for them can alleviate a lot of frustration and will strengthen the partnership. If they have nominated particular forms of communication they will have a sense of ownership of those communications and are more likely to respond to them.

We often find it challenging to talk about those issues that are culturally based or that have to do with subtle family or individual differences and lifestyle choices. Differences in expectations about mealtimes, toileting, sleeping and guiding children's behaviour are often the source of the greatest tension and conflict in children's services which can make us feel extremely uncomfortable.

In reality, there are many different, acceptable and successful child-rearing practices. An openness to new perspectives - ones that are different from our own, means more than just accommodating those practices that fit with our own thinking and ignoring or denying those that don't. If we are committed to forming real partnerships, it is crucial that we don't let our own values and beliefs limit our perception of what is possible.

This is not to say that we should uncritically condone or adopt every practice that differs from our own, particularly if there are safety or legal issues involved. Real partnerships are about people truly knowing and appreciating each other's point of view. This can only happen if there is some sort of dialogue about the topic causing concern. Engaging

in ongoing, open communication at all times will make it easier to discuss differences when they do occur.

Family day care schemes have the additional challenge of trying to form effective partnerships across two or more physical locations and with few opportunities to come together. The coordination unit will need to seek ideas from carers and families on the best methods for clear and honest 'three way' communication. Establishing effective communication early in the relationship will help avoid any partners feeling that the other two may be forming an alliance against them. Finding a way to have open clear and honest 'three way' communication can be challenging and time consuming but it is well worth taking up the challenge, learning as we go.

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communications
methods used

“Partnership is not the same as involvement” (Stonehouse, 1994)

Families are often encouraged to become involved in fundraising activities or working bees and to help out with excursions or with special activities at the child care service. While these activities provide good opportunities for families and care providers to get to know more about each other, they do not contribute much to a partnership because the power in the relationship remains firmly with the service.

In a true partnership, the power is shared with families and is not reliant on them being involved in the day to day operation of the service. Families need to be involved in making decisions that have to do with the wellbeing of their child; the service philosophy, the program, care giving routines, the environment and the way funds raised should be spent.

If all parties are to feel valued and consider themselves to be equal partners, we need to approach the relationship from the perspective 'You know as much as I do, we're all in this together' (Stonehouse, 1994).

As child care providers, we should never underestimate the level of trust a parent gives to us when they place their child in our care. Establishing trust may take time and will rely on open and honest communication between all parties. A service that takes the lead in opening communication, empowering parents and promoting trust, will be rewarded with strong, supportive relationships, new and innovative ideas and positive outcomes for the children, carers, families and staff.

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“Acceptance of diversity and working in partnership – you can’t have one without the other” (Anne Stonehouse, 2001)

Cultural differences encompass far more than our country of birth and the languages we speak. Our individuality, our culture, is influenced by such things

as the home we live in, the people in our lives, our educational opportunities, spiritual beliefs, family customs and traditions and the events which have touched our lives.

There are cultural differences in even the most simple things families do. Daily routines such as meal times demonstrate this quite clearly. For example,

- A family may set the table and eat their evening meal together while another may sit on the lounge watching the TV
- In some families the children may eat first and parents eat separately later
- If the family includes teenagers, they may be used to a passing parade of family members eating on the run in the kitchen between social and sporting engagements
- A short prayer may precede a family meal time

difference is not a question of right or wrong, better or worse

As adults we can often feel uncomfortable when we eat with an unfamiliar family because we don’t know what will be expected of us during mealtimes; we are unfamiliar with this family’s way of doing things. Imagine then the confusion that must surround the mealtime rituals for children settling into a child care service and for their families.

Acknowledging and discussing even such subtle differences is important if we are to view the child in the context of the family and are committed to a partnership approach to providing care. When differences are openly discussed rather than ignored, everyone will feel more comfortable:

- Ask about what you don’t understand and encourage the other person to do the same.
- Reflect on the experiences, values, beliefs, customs and traditions that have influenced each perspective.
- Acknowledge your own biases.
- Ask yourself “why not do it differently?”
- Negotiate an acceptable solution

Only when we begin to see difference as no more than that – not a question of right or wrong, better or worse – can we begin to truly honour diversity in our child care service and achieve the best outcome for each child.

Further Reading

- *Partnerships for Children – Parents and Community Together*. Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne, 2001
- *The Cornerstone of Quality in Family Day Care and Child Care Centres – Parent Professional Partnerships*. Anne Stonehouse, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne, 2001
- *The Heart of the Partnership in Family Day Care – Carer –Parent Communication*. Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne, 2001
- “Enrolment and Orientation – The First Step Towards Real Family Partnerships in Children’s Services.” *Putting Children First*, Issue Four, December 2002
- “We are all the same here, We treat everyone the same.” *Putting Children First*, Issue Three, September 2002
- *How does it feel? – Child Care from a Parent’s Perspective*. Anne Stonehouse, Australian Early Childhood Association, 1994