

Building a partnership with your child care service

By Merise Bickley

Children's learning and wellbeing are enhanced when families and child care professionals work together in partnership to promote the best outcomes for children. Quality care occurs when child care professionals understand each child's family, culture and community, and when they use this knowledge to provide experiences in ways that are meaningful to the child.

What is a partnership?

A partnership between families and child care professionals involves sharing information, ideas, concerns and questions about the child. Developing an effective partnership requires families and child care professionals to take responsibility for providing information to each other, and to consider and respect each other's views and ideas.

Creating a partnership takes time and effort. Basically, a 'partnership' occurs where two parties share 'an influence' or 'a power'. In child care services this means that decisions about the child result from discussion and negotiation between families and professionals. This partnership is strengthened where each party is supportive and appreciative of each other's role and influence in the child's life.

It is important to remember that developing a partnerships does not require families to 'do things' in the service, such as joining a parent committee, or helping with fundraising activities. While family participation may be one way that a partnership between child care professionals and families can be promoted, 'partnership' is about relationships rather than activities.

What are the benefits of partnerships?

Families and child care professionals bring something different to the partnership. Families are the most important influence in their child's life, and they have a deep knowledge of their child as well as a lifelong commitment to their child's wellbeing. Child care professionals have experience and specialised skills in working with children in child care education settings, and they possess knowledge of the child from this perspective.

Working closely with families allows child care professionals to gain a clear picture of the child and their family background which supports them to plan experiences that are meaningful to



the child. The continuity of a child's experience between their family setting and the child care service is also reinforced when families are able to contribute to the care of their child and are made to feel that their input is valued.

When families and child care professionals work in partnership, their combined knowledge of the child leads to decision making that genuinely reflects the needs and interests of the child.

What is parent participation?

Participation can be an important way for families and child care services to build a relationship in which they are working toward mutual goals. Families are invited to contribute to the child care service in various ways. Each service will have its own way to encourage family involvement. For example, some families may be able to assume a role on the service's parent committee; others may contribute by offering resources, equipment or their time by taking part in the service's program.

At different times, the level and type of participation will depend on the family's personal commitments and interests. It is important that child care professionals accept and value each family's level of involvement.

How do services support partnerships with families?

All aspects of a service should show families that they are valued as partners in the care of their child. This is demonstrated when

- Families are given clear information about the care of their child in the service.
- Families are provided with regular information about their child's experiences and achievements while in care.
- Families are invited to share information about their child's experiences and interests outside of the service.
- Child care professionals seek advice and ideas from families about their child
- Families can participate in decision making about their child, as well as about practices in the service that will affect their child. For example, families are invited to contribute to the development and review of the service's behaviour guidance policy.
- Families are asked to provide feedback about the service, and this is acknowledged and valued. For example, the service may conduct verbal or written surveys of families. It is also important that the service show families how they have acted upon feedback.
- Families have opportunities to attend social events with other families and child care professionals.
- Families are encouraged to discuss any ideas, issues or concerns that they have with child care professionals, through daily discussions, formal or informal meetings or over the telephone.
- The service has an 'open door' policy, in which families are welcome to visit the service at any time.

How can families share information with the service about their child

It is important that families feel confident and welcome to work in partnership with the service to promote positive outcomes for their children. This is supported when families have opportunities to communicate with the service, and are given clear information about the service's philosophy and operations. This background information can assist them to feel confident to be involved in decision making about their child's care and education.

Opportunities for families to share information about their child should be a key part of enrolment and orientation processes. These processes are also crucial to the development of genuine, effective partnerships between families and professionals, as they represent the beginning

of a relationship in which each party needs to communicate and negotiate to support the child as they settle into care. The orientation and settling in process should therefore provide families with many opportunities to ask questions about their child and the service, to make suggestions and to receive sensitive feedback about how their child is settling.

Each family will have their preferred method of communication, and services need to be receptive to the individual styles and ways in which families will be involved and communicate.

How do services share information with families?

Effective partnerships are characterised by two way communication in which services and families are equally responsible for information exchange. As part of this two way communication, services need to provide families with information about the service in general. This may occur through:

- newsletters
- noticeboards
- meetings
- family resource libraries.
- family handbooks that include current information about the service's policies and procedures
- daily information exchange with families when children are dropped off and collected from the service
- organising family information sessions about issues such as nutrition or guiding children's behaviour





Each partnership between families and child care professionals will be unique, depending upon the interests and needs of individuals. The questions above may assist you consider the ways in which you would like to form a partnership with the child care professionals who work with your child.

Ultimately, families should be made to feel that their contribution to the partnership with child care professionals is sought and valued, regardless of the role that each family chooses to play. Families should never feel pressured or obligated to be involved in ways that are unsuitable to their needs and beliefs. All effective partnerships are characterised by mutual respect and understanding ■

The following questions may assist families to think about the effectiveness of their partnership with their child care service:

- Do I feel welcome to contribute to my child's care and experiences?
- Do I believe that the child care professionals listen to and understand my concerns or ideas?
- Do I feel that I can visit the service at any time?
- What opportunities do I have to provide the child care professionals with information about my child?
- How do I find out about my child's day, relationship and unusual circumstances/events?
- Does the service ask for my opinions or feedback about its operations and decisions that affect my child?
- Have I been given information about the service's philosophy, policies and procedures?
- Does the service provide me with timely, clear information about events and operations?
- How does the service support communication with families who have specific communication needs, for example speak English as a second language, or have literacy difficulties?

References and further reading

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For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance 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