

Catering to diversity

Hopetoun Children’s Centre in Flemington, Melbourne, is a multicultural hub within the local community. The centre’s goals include developing the centre’s operations to embrace the different cultural beliefs, practices and needs of the families attending the centre, in order to create a collective sense of belonging. Toni Robb, Team Leader at Hopetoun Children’s Centre, provides a snapshot of how this is achieved.



How many different nationalities are present at Hopetoun Children’s Centre?

At the moment people from Somalia, Vietnam, China, Sudan, Ethiopia, India, Turkey, Spain and Italy come to our centre. I’m lucky to have a lot of staff who speak English as a second language; it helps when orientating families into the centre.

What’s your philosophy when it comes to cultural inclusion?

We’re part of Monee Valley City Council and we’re one of five centres. Our policy is to include multiculturalism in all our centres and this practice extends to our families. This centre attracts more multiculturalism because of the area that we’re situated in. We respect all families and, in return, they respect us. So it’s all about respecting one another and acknowledging their beliefs and their customs and then, in turn, they acknowledge ours. It’s also about listening to their needs, because everyone’s beliefs are different. That’s what inclusion is about.



In what ways are the families’ sense of inclusion and cultural representation encouraged?

We’re lucky enough to have a parent room here at the centre, where parents often bring in things from home. For example, one of the Somali families brought in a costume that they had at their special Ramadan, and she no longer wanted it so I put it up on the wall and I wrote about what it was.

Another parent wanted to do henna painting for the children. We took photos and we displayed that up on the wall. Another parent who is English/Spanish sings and plays the guitar. We always ask parents to participate and contribute to the program. We take photos to let parents know what they’ve done and to let them know that they are a part of the centre as well.

Sometimes children bring in things from home, which is great. For example, when it was the Chinese New Year, they brought in things that they had at the festival and decorated the learning environment. In the kindergarten some of the children frequently bring books and CDs from their culture to share in the room. The staff will read the books at story time and play the CDs at music time. All the children have the opportunity to learn about other cultures within their community.

It’s not just the children’s centre, it’s a centre for whole families, and a suggestion box is always out there because, as you know, parents have all got different talents and that’s great. It’s all about feeling included.

How is this reflected in the food that Hopetoun Children’s Centre prepares for the children?

Our cook is Vietnamese, her name is Nga. She makes foods from all around the world, but at our centre we also take cultural beliefs into consideration when choosing and preparing our food. For example, we have a lot of Muslim children, so we offer halal foods. When I first started, the Muslim children would have vegetarian, so then I put a survey out asking if it would be a problem if we served halal meat. The survey came back with great responses and since then, we have used halal so the Muslim families don’t miss out. As long as I explained it to the families, and got them to be a part of it by putting the survey out, that was fine.

Also, we have a display board that shows people what’s being offered on the menu. Someone might not know what the food written on the menu board is, or understand English, so we have the picture as well so that it gives them a better understanding.

In the kindergarten the children bring in their own lunch. It is wonderful to see all the different cultures reflected in the lunches they bring.

Do the different cultures present at the centre impact on the program?

Well, for example, a lot of my Somali families earlier in the year were a little bit concerned because their children were not going home with a painting or a pasting. And they kept saying to me, 'But, what are they learning? They're not doing anything; they're not coming home with a painting'. I then had to explain to the parents that they don't always have to come home with the end product; they are learning throughout the day, whether it's in the sandpit or at the puzzle table or even just being outside watering the garden. This was a beautiful experience because parents didn't understand how I was explaining it to them and I thought, 'How can I do this?'

The only way I could explain to them was to do a board display of the little saying that goes: 'I've been busy' by Joan Waters. It goes on to say, 'At kinder I played in the sandpit, I did cooking, I went on a bike, I dug up the mud and made a mud-pie'. And then at the end: 'Maybe tomorrow I'll do a painting'. I got it translated by a couple of my parents and I put that up and then I took pictures of the children doing different activities. I also got the children to sing a song about how a child sees the day at kindergarten and child care.

Every centre's needs are different because of the families that they have. What the families bring to the centre and how they communicate all play a role in how things are run.

Do the families at Hopetoun Children's Centre encourage the centre to be a part of cultural festivals and other events out in the wider community?

Yes, families always invite us to their community functions. I always put up posters out in the foyer to acknowledge what's going on in the community and to let parents know what's going on.

Community leaders in the area also inform the centre and our families about all the upcoming cultural events and programs, such as free dancing and story time in different languages at the library, and playgroups in the families' native tongues to encourage parental and family participation.

At the moment a lot of families are enrolling their children in school. Sometimes we might even go with them because they've got more confidence with us. I also help them to fill out enrolment forms because English is their second language and you've got to spend the time to help them to be included. Sometimes we also accompany families to the Maternal Child and Health Nurse in our building. It's all about working with the cultures that you've got in the community.

In what other ways do you overcome communication barriers?

Sometimes parents bringing in the kids are tired because they are fasting. That's fine, I respect that, it's their culture. If I need to communicate something really important, I will pick a time that suits them.

We also do written translations of information to send home, but because of the many different dialects, they would rather I explain it to them. I also have help from parents who are very fluent in English, who can translate and pass on information.

At enrolment time, we arrange interpreters and bilingual staff from the Council and Multicultural Resource Centre to assist and help families to make the process more friendly and respectful, and comfortable for them.

Toni Robb, Team Leader at Hopetoun Children's Centre, spoke with Sarah Cameron

