



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Collaborative partnerships with families

Setting the scene

The *National Quality Framework* and the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) ask educators to go beyond traditional parent involvement activities to form 'respectful supportive relationships' with families (NQS Standard 6.1). Standard 6.2 requires educators to support families in their parenting role and to respect families' beliefs and values about child rearing. These requirements are based mainly on Principle 2: Partnerships in the EYLF.



What are the characteristics of a collaborative partnership with families?

The best experiences for children happen when there is a strong relationship between you and the child's family that is evident in your daily practice.

The relationship with each family will be unique in many ways, but all partnerships will share some features:

- Mutual trust
- Open, respectful communication
- Empathy
- Openness to others' views, values and perspectives
- Shared decision making
- Clarity about roles and responsibilities
- Appreciation of each other's knowledge and experience
- Willingness to negotiate and compromise
- Commitment to resolve tensions and conflicts
- Shared aims or goals—what is best for the child.

As the EYLF makes clear, partnerships between educators and families matter because:

- knowing that you respect their family strengthens a child's identity and sense of belonging and enhances their learning
- knowing children well also includes knowing the family and the cultural and community contexts of their lives
- families bring insights that offer a richer picture about their child.

Forming partnerships is not always easy, but always worth the effort.

Ann is an educator at Yooralla Narre Warren Central Children's Centre in Narre Warren Victoria, a community-based children's centre that actively includes children of all abilities. Ann spoke about her perspective on families:

From the beginning we pay attention to what families want. In our initial contacts we ask them to tell us about their child's interests and anything else they want us to know. We ask them to share any worries they have about their child coming to our service and what they wish for in their child's experience with us. This tells us a lot about their priorities. They might say something like 'I want her to have friends' or 'I want him to be able to play with others'. We take those wishes very seriously.

We have ongoing communication with families throughout their participation—via informal conversations, more formal planning meetings and the sharing of portfolios. When exploring why parents were not writing in their child's portfolio, we found that parents read it but didn't contribute when they saw that I had typed my contributions. They said they didn't want to mess it up! So now I hand write my entries—a bit messily—and parents write more.

We encourage families to stay as long as they want to. Some stay the whole session. Both the child and family need to trust us.

My focus is not just the child—it's the 'couple'. The child, the parent and their relationship matter most. I have a deep-seated belief that parents have their child's best interests at heart. It's just that things can get in the way of putting their child first.

I have to continually reflect on my values and beliefs and how they might affect the ways I work with families. I also have to make sure I don't see myself or come across to families as the 'expert'.

What practices establish and strengthen partnerships?

The service philosophy statement should highlight and give priority to partnerships with families. Policies, procedures and everyday practices should link directly to the philosophy.

Some examples of practices that underpin partnerships include the following:

1. Start building a sense of welcome and respect from the first interaction or conversation you have with families. Let them know that you are keen to know what they want for their child.
2. Ensure that your enrolment and orientation procedures communicate messages about partnership.
3. Offer a variety of ways for families to be involved in and contribute to the service if they choose to. Reflect on how those ways contribute to partnerships.



Janani, a family day care educator with the Glen Eira Scheme in Melbourne, spoke about beginnings of partnerships:

What happens in the initial interview, how we interact and the information I share and ask for, are the first 'baby steps' towards a collaborative partnership. If the family and child start to feel like they belong here, then we're on the road to a partnership. I keep in mind that families are the experts on their child.

I can't really know how a parent feels, what they know or think. Sometimes they don't know much about family day care so I need to tell them a lot, even when they don't have many questions. When they visit I tell them to think about whether my family day care is suitable for them and their child.

When I speak to parents on the phone before they visit, I ask what their child likes to play with and I have that play material out when they visit. I try to let them decide the best time to visit my home, rather than telling them what's best for me.

I do everything I can to make them feel welcome. I introduce the parent and child to everyone who is present, including the other children.

I have photos of each family on a family tree, and I ask new families to bring one to add.

I tell parents they should stay as long as they want to, in the beginning and at any other time. What has developed is that some parents stay and read to the children or play with them when they drop their child off. The children love it.

When I have celebrations all families are welcome. Once a year I organise a get-together for families.

I think the families feel a sense of community and belonging here. For example, recently I asked a parent where I could buy natural dye for playdough, because a child who has started attending is allergic to chemicals. When she came back in the afternoon she brought some vegetable dye. She said she happened to be passing a health food shop and thought she'd check. This was not for her child—she wanted to make a contribution to another child's experience. I want families to initiate contributing and to feel confident that anything they contribute will be welcomed.



Rukmini, Director of the Monash (Caulfield) Child Care Centre in Melbourne, emphasises empowerment through family involvement:

We value traditional parent involvement activities such as working bees and social events as ways of building and extending partnerships. We want families to feel comfortable here. We have many different kinds of social events at different times, to cater for all families—for example, morning or afternoon teas, picnics, a Christmas party, celebrations of cultural and religious events, excursions and incursions.

Working bees offer a chance for families to contribute to the centre. We want to share not only the space but also control and ownership. For example, parents know where the tools and supplies are kept and how to care for the sandpit.

We're currently asking families to sign up to contribute to the program. We've had an older sibling sing with children and play his guitar; a mother do art activities; and others read or help with morning tea. We can see benefits for everyone. An educator here said she hopes that one day there will be no need for an invitation because families will feel welcome to come in at any time and participate in the program.



4. Communicate with families in different ways—written, electronic, and verbal. Keep in mind that conversations are almost always the best way to communicate.
5. Reflect critically on any prejudices and biases that may interfere with partnerships.
6. Ensure that the physical environment is welcoming and has evidence of the families' lives.
7. Share with families anything positive about their child that you can. Think carefully about if, when and how to share concerns.
8. Encourage families to contribute to the curriculum.
9. Develop strong connections with other organisations and service providers and help families to access these when needed (Quality Standard 6.3).



Kirsty, an educator and team leader at the Early Learning Centre at Cornish College in Bangholme Victoria, shared a powerful example of negotiating the curriculum with families:

Having an authentic partnership with families is a crucial part of what we do every day. Developing a culture where families feel part of this community takes an investment of time and energy to build an atmosphere of trust and respect and therefore of dialogue and exchange. We have professional expertise about what we do, but we should always be open to, and mindful of, the perspectives of others. This is not always easy.

Recently a group of children, educators, some parents and grandparents were sitting around a campfire. Each week the three- to five-year olds spend a half-day outside. We often have a fire to cook on, or simply to gather around and 'be'. A grandfather remarked to me that in 15 years' time when there were a lot of pyromaniacs in the area he would know why! I responded by sharing my understanding of the research and thinking about allowing children to experience, with adult guidance, what fascinates them. We talked about how this allows them to explore what they are curious about—in this case fire—and in turn reduces the likelihood of unhealthy attitudes to fire later in life. I know that many years ago I would have been offended by his comment and possibly quite defensive. Instead, I saw it as an opportunity and felt heartened that he felt comfortable to share his concern.

Each year we have a research project that involves families. The project a few years ago focused on children's right to 'risky play'. This was a challenging topic for some families, but a positive outcome after much discussion was the concept of 'risky play with support'. Through this process we all ended up with a more informed view of risky play. I'm sure that having a culture of trust and open sharing of perspectives enabled this positive outcome.

We still use that term, and it weaves through our everyday approach.

Conclusion and questions

Ultimately, partnerships involve establishing a sense of community, where both children and families know that they belong and make a valuable contribution. What comes through strongly in each of the examples in this newsletter is the importance of empowering families, being welcoming, deep respect and a belief that families have their child's best interests at heart.

Reflecting on these examples, review how you and your colleagues establish and strengthen partnerships, the evidence of this that you can provide for NQS assessment and ways in which you might improve practice in this Quality Area.



References and resources

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Biography

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Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.

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