



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Community engagement



A community is more than just a location, or a collection of individuals who happen to live or work in the same place. When we talk about a 'sense of community' we usually mean the quality of the relationships and connections that bind people together, rather than just the fact that they see each other regularly.

As early childhood educators, creating a 'sense of community' is an important part of what we do. It is integral to the core themes of belonging and identity that run through the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF):

'Children learn about themselves and construct their own identity within the context of their families and communities' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20).

While the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' may have become a cliché, the idea behind it—that children grow up as a part of a community—remains an important one. Children do grow up in the context of a community. How we acknowledge this and engage with our own local communities will have a significant impact on children and families, as well as on our own ways of working.

For children, a sense of community plays an important role in the development of their feelings of belonging and security. Children thrive in an environment of mutually supportive and caring relationships. For this reason developing a sense of community within a service is crucial. It is also valuable for children to feel part of a wider community that extends beyond the learning environment. As children grow and develop, connections to the outside world help them to find their place in the world, to develop understandings of how society works, and to recognise and understand the shared values that underpin our society.

For many families early childhood settings often provide their first contact with a wider community beyond the home. Because of this, early childhood services can act as an important point of connection for families. They can foster supportive relationships between families as well as connecting families to other organisations and services in the local community.

Strong links with the local community also provide educators with invaluable information and resources. By drawing on community knowledge and expertise,

educators are better able to understand the children and families with whom they work, and better able to provide children with learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant to their lives.

For all of these reasons the EYLF and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) both emphasise the importance of community engagement:

- Learning Outcome 2 of the EYLF focuses on children's connectedness with others and with the wider world (DEEWR, 2009, p. 25)
- Standard 6.3 of the NQS requires services to develop 'links with relevant community and support agencies' (NQS Element 6.3.1) and, more generally, to 'build relationships and engage with the local community' (NQS Element 6.3.2) (ACECQA, 2011, p. 159).

Finding ways to effectively engage with the community, and the time in which to do it can be challenging. Our tendency to imagine that whatever we do in relation to the community has to be 'big' is not helpful either—small is fine!

Community engagement looks different in different places

We need to remember that effective community engagement depends on the nature of the community with which we are working. What matters most is that our approach is genuine. As the examples in this newsletter demonstrate, community engagement needs to grow from and respond to each context.

Because of this, community engagement will not look the same in every service. While, for example, many services successfully participate in local festivals or events as a means of community engagement, this is by no means the only way to do so. Smaller connections can be just as important. The children who know the postman by name and run to fence each day to collect the mail are participating in the local community too. And from a child's point of view such day-to-day connections may be more important than the service's once-a-year participation in the local fete.

The NQS reminds us that community engagement is important because of its impact on 'children's wellbeing and learning' (NQS Standard 6.3). We therefore need to consider community engagement not just in terms of our own actions, but how it affects children's experience. In other words, 'how does our involvement with the community genuinely help to connect children (as well as ourselves) to the wider world?'

If we want children to learn about the value of community and connections with others, then we need to consider the example we set and the opportunities that we provide for such learning to occur. Highlighting the connections we have to the community, and making them visible for children, is an important way to do this—involving children wherever possible in such connections makes the experience meaningful in the child's eyes.

Local excursions, participating in and contributing to community events, inviting community members and organisations into our services—all help to connect children with the community. Beyond the specific learning that such experiences entail, what matters most is that such connections are regular and ongoing. Community engagement shouldn't be something we do once and then move on; it needs to become a part of our everyday experience.



Starting small—Engaging dads at C.a.F.E. Enfield Children's Centre, Adelaide, SA

At C.a.F.E. Enfield in Adelaide (an integrated early years service), community engagement has involved working more closely with fathers. From the small step of inviting two dads to join the Management Committee it has now grown to include the provision of a wider range of services to dads in the local community.

In 2009 our centre began a project aimed at engaging more effectively with fathers. We recognised that we were very good at offering services targeting families but in reality this predominantly meant mothers. The parenting groups, playgroups and other services that we offered operated Monday to Friday during normal business hours—times that precluded many dads from participating.

It seemed to us that the best and most efficient way to start engaging with dads was to start with those dads we were already seeing. There were already a number of dads who dropped off or picked up their children each day. Our annual general meeting was approaching





and, never having had a father on our Management Committee before, we approached two dads to see if they might be interested. They agreed and a few weeks later attended their first committee meeting.

Soon after that we held a working bee at the centre. One of the parents who attended was a father whose child had just started in the baby room. He spoke to our new committee members and by the end of the morning he had agreed to join the Committee too. We now had three dads on a committee that had never had a single dad before!

Later in the year when we were organising our annual Obstacle-a-thon we wondered whether the event would benefit from more parental input and deliberately included the dads from the Committee in our planning. They brought fresh ideas and perspectives to the types of physical challenges offered to the children. During the planning meetings there was lots of discussion about risk taking, challenge, the importance of physical development, and ways to involve more parents—particularly dads. As a result, on the night of the Obstacle-a-thon it was one of our



grandfathers who greeted families at the front door and many of the obstacle stations were run by a parent alongside an educator.

Since then we have continued to attract fathers to our Management Committee and we have run over 50 Saturday morning play-based workshops, parenting groups and playgroups specifically designed for dads to attend with their children. Our dads' groups now attract dads who have had no previous connection with the centre at all but who value the opportunity to be more involved with their own children and to meet other dads.

Lee Jones
Educator, C.a.F.E. Enfield Children's Centre, SA

Growing community relationships at Gamumbi, NSW

At Gamumbi Early Childhood Education Centre getting funding to create an edible garden provided a practical opportunity to engage with families and the wider community.

Sustainability has been at the heart of our philosophy for the past 10 years. As

a service we have regularly reflected on how we can better protect and care for the environment and sustainability has become an intrinsic part of our philosophy.

We have been fortunate to receive funding for a number of sustainability projects. Among other things we've installed water tanks and built a chicken coop. As well as their practical benefits, these projects have provided valuable discussions with children, families and the community about the importance of sustainability.

At Gamumbi, we believe in the importance of sharing food together as a way to build relationships and a sense of belonging. The children were already interested in gardening and we wanted to take a step further and directly involve them in the production and cultivation of some of the food that we eat each day. Inspired by the success of these initial projects, we applied for funding to enable us to establish an edible garden.

As news of the project spread a number of parents and other community members became involved. We invited the local Community Gardens coordinator to share some ideas with us. Other members of the community, including local businesses, were keen to be involved and before long

a working group was established with families and the community, working in partnership with children to design and create our edible garden. The final plan was for a variety of tropical fruit trees, vegetable and herb gardens to be established within the centre's outdoor learning environment.

On the day that work started we were overwhelmed with 15 families, eight friends of families and five community members joining with our 10 educators to help construct seven garden beds, relocate existing plants and plant new trees, seedlings and bushes. We are now in the process of gathering our harvest which has been used as ingredients in lunches and snacks. We are also preparing to sow crops for the next season.

It has been, and continues to be, a valuable learning experience for all involved. Importantly, we have been able to enrich our program for children, and also make new connections with parents and the wider community. The volunteers and businesses that contributed have maintained an interest in what we are doing. This has been valuable, not only for us but also for those who have been involved. As one participant commented:

It was great working with the community on the project. I met new people and was able to share my interest in gardening with others. And it is wonderful to see the children continue their interest in the garden when they are at Gamumbi.

Linda Ball
Director, Gamumbi Early Childhood Education Centre, NSW



Working with community at Forbes Preschool, NSW

At Forbes Preschool educators have made engaging with the local Aboriginal community a priority. As a result, enrolments of Aboriginal children have increased from just two in 2010 to 33 in 2012.

Three years ago there was almost no relationship between the preschool and the local Aboriginal community. There were lots of reasons why—cost, lack of transport, and the lack of proactive engagement on our part with the local community. We wanted to make a change in order to serve local Aboriginal families and children better.

We received funding for a Parent and Community Engagement (PaCE) project that allowed us to employ an Aboriginal educator, provide a health and nutrition program and begin to reach out to local families through home visits, information sessions and social events.

While all of these initiatives helped, the key factors in turning around our relationship with Aboriginal families were the relationships we were able to develop with the local Aboriginal community.

Through building partnerships with key community members, including the local Aboriginal Health Nurse and a local Aboriginal organisation—Yoorana Gunya—we were able to slowly develop a trusting relationship with the local community.

We have deliberately tried to be as accommodating, welcoming and open as we can, and the feedback that we have had is that this attitude has been the key to improving our relationship with Aboriginal families. Families now have a strong sense of belonging at the preschool and they will call in anytime for help to fill out forms or to have a chat about something concerning their child.

Amy Shine
Director, Forbes Preschool, NSW

A culture of engagement

While early childhood services are, in many ways, perfectly placed to play an important role in the local community, they can easily become cut off and isolated from that community. The busyness of the day, and the feeling that it may be safer and easier to stay inside the boundaries of the service rather than to venture out, can all limit how we connect with the outside world.

If however, we recognise that we are already part of the community, then our task becomes comparatively easy. Recognising and building on the connections that already exist within a service is one simple way to start engaging with the community. Ask yourself, who do we already know? And, importantly, who else do they know? Even within the smallest service the number of connections is likely to be surprisingly large—a parent who can play guitar or teaches yoga, an aunt who is a keen gardener, someone who has a contact at the local council. Making use of such existing connections helps to ensure that engagement is genuine. When we start with what we know, we are more likely to be successful. Effective engagement is based on building relationships, and relationships take time to develop. Even the most elaborate examples of community involvement usually started small.

Luke Touhill

Early childhood consultant and writer

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Biography

Luke Touhill is an early childhood consultant and writer. He has worked in early childhood for 20 years as a teacher, director, manager and trainer. As a teacher his interests include project-based learning and the integration of 'real' experiences such as cooking, woodworking and gardening, into early childhood programs.

Coordinating Editor

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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