

Early Childhood Flexibility Practices and Patterns

TIP SHEET: Flexible partnerships with families and communities

The concept of flexibility is far broader than just extending opening hours. Thinking 'flexibility' also means reflecting on how the needs of children and families are being met holistically.

Children's and their family's needs are much broader than early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Early childhood services can support families in their parenting role by providing them with information, making connections or arranging for the delivery of additional services, rather than working in isolation.

Forming partnerships with health services, professionals, family support agencies, social and early intervention services, links with schools and other early childhood services may all help to provide families with greater flexibility.

Why should early childhood services form partnerships?

Early childhood services are important community hubs, and can provide a point of referral or 'soft entry' for hard to reach families with children in care.

While formal 'integrated early childhood services' have been established in some jurisdictions, all early childhood services can have a role in building partnerships to better meet the needs of families.

As described in the ecological model of child development, access to a range of appropriate services in the community has a significant influence on children's development (Sanson et al., 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The benefits for children of building a collaborative approach are also reflected in the *National Quality Standard*—Collaborative partnerships with families and communities (NQS Quality Area 6).

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) can provide a basis for childhood services to engage and discuss the needs of young children with their local schools and community organisations. If local communities are showing a vulnerability in a particular domain of child development, this can often act as a catalyst for services and organisations to work together with families to improve children's outcomes in that area.

Six tips on flexible partnerships with families and communities

1. Find out what services would benefit families in your area and ask parents what services they would use.
2. Review your AEDC Community Profile (www.aedc.gov.au/resources/community-profiles). The data is a good place to start in helping to inform where children's developmental outcomes can be improved.
3. Look out for local networks, organisations or services to form partnerships with to improve flexibility for families and improve children's outcomes. If no early childhood network exists, why not take the lead in establishing one?
4. Some organisations may be able to offer services at your centre/coordination unit free of charge for parents as they may already be funded to deliver these services in other locations.



5. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities can help to inform your services' Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) in areas of strength, or areas for improvement.
6. Read about community engagement from the *National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program (NQS PLP)* at www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/NQS_PLP_E-Newsletter_No47.pdf.

For more information and resources on flexibility in early childhood services, please visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/early-childhood-flexibility-practices-patterns/

Information on the Australian Early Development Census can be found at www.aedc.gov.au

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