

Collaborative partnerships and engaging families

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Each educator plays a vital role in building the foundations for quality and this is reinforced and strengthened no more so than through a collaborative approach.

Best practice and quality teaching and education go hand in hand but this doesn't just happen.

It requires work. It requires teamwork and commitment, especially when it comes to challenges and embracing changes.

Every educator is an important block in the care and education provided.

A collaborative approach does not just mean between educators. Through promoting a greater involvement with families and the community as well as the children enables all to work collaboratively in being active participants in creating a cohesive service that strives for quality and excellence.

A collaborative partnership is more than just words. It is more than just sharing information. It is about being available, listening, sharing, responding, engaging, communicating and being respectful. A collaborative partnership is key to the success of the care and education and ultimately the service as a whole. Working together means sharing the same goal, developing a bond and combining ideas, skills and knowledge which provides the opportunity to offer a greater capacity to not only succeed but to support each other.

Engaging families is no doubt paramount to successful relationships and harmony and facilitates the ability to achieve quality outcomes for children. Engaging families should be about empowering families and building a partnership made on trust and respect.

A byproduct of working collaboratively is that it will assist in Meeting and Exceeding the National Quality Standard as 59% of services who worked together collaboratively were assessed as Meeting or Exceeding in particular in relation to the Quality Areas 1, 2, 3 and 7. The National Quality Framework reminds us that to provide quality care and education is to engage with families about the learning and development of their child. The EYLF makes reference to the benefits of developing these genuine partnerships with families that value and acknowledge and respect roles and rich communication.

How do you engage families?

This is the first stage in building a collaborative partnership with families. Every family is different and what works for some may not be ideal for others therefore there needs to be a variety of strategies in place to engage all the families. It is also important to note that just because something worked last month is not a formula for success continually. Just as educators we should be constantly changing our approaches we need to change and be flexible and accommodating to the changing needs and wants of families.

The first step is to identify and understand where you are at. A good way to do this is by making a list of the ways the service has tried to engage families previously and how they go about it now.

Now evaluate the success of these ways and then build on the ones that have worked so far as well as look at reasons perhaps why the other ways were less effective or successful in engaging families. Question why such as is it the timing? Was it the delivery?

Then brainstorm ways to create excitement and foster the want for families on ways to promote engagement which is meaningful for all parties.

Here are some various ways to promote engagement:

- Follow up. If a child is new then establish what the families (and the child) are looking for and then follow up after a week and again periodically to check on the progress and allow the opportunity for sharing of information about the child's and the families journey.
- Look at the means of communication. Email is an instant communication tool so newsletters, photos of the child interacting within the environment, reminders, etc are a great way of information sharing. Social media is another way. You could post a question which allows families to answer at their own leisure, post photos and you can gauge the feedback through the likes (ie: photos of new environments), conduct surveys, etc.
- Send home, randomly, what we did on the weekend sheets. These can be invaluable to understanding the child and family's interests and current events in their lives.
- Develop parent committees. These are a perfect opportunity for a parent to provide feedback, offer suggestions and promote involvement.
- Conduct family: educator meetings. It is recommended to conduct no more than 2 per year. This provides individual conversations where they are away from the hustle of the drop off and pickup.
- Provide an open door policy whereby a family member feels comfortable and able to visit the service at any time.
- Hold parent workshops.
- Communicate warmly, respectfully and honestly.
- Be supportive and empathetic.
- Conduct surveys on the service and invite feedback which can be through a generic feedback form. This encourages not only feedback but if conducted correctly and followed through provides the opportunity for involvement in decision making and goal setting.
- Consider any barriers such a cultural or language and be accommodating and inclusive of these.

How does a service go about implementing change and establishing a collaborative partnership?

There are a number of ways to achieve best practice and provide quality teaching. You could use a checklist to benchmark against. This would be a good starting point as it would not only illustrate what you are already doing but it would enable you to explore what you would like and/or need to implement.

If we break-it-down into the Quality Areas this will help to demonstrate the effortlessness of measuring your service. Question in terms of already doing, to explore or completed- done and happy with.

Quality Area 1: Educational program and practice

- Host incursions and/or excursions that support and extend on children's learning?
- Are you part of forums?
- Do you seek learning and/or professional development to enhance the educational program?
- Do you work closely with the community to enhance outcomes for children?
- Do you work closely with surrounding schools to ensure a smooth transition into formal schooling?
- Do you educate families on the value of your program in particular reference to the value of play and the connection to their learning?
- Do you conduct family information sessions?
- Do you provide regular updates around a child's learning with connections to the EYLF and the services

pedagogy?

Quality Area 2: Children's health and safety

- Do you make the most of sourcing additional information through accessing material via websites to expand your knowledge?
- Do you share any new knowledge, information and relevant health topics with educators and families?
- Do you engage professionals for maintaining and regular inspections of the service?
- Do you seek information from professionals around topics regarding safety?
- Do you involve families in policy development and reviews?
- Do you conduct family information sessions and/or material on health related topics such as safe sleeping, healthy eating, toileting, sun safety, etc?
- Do you ensure all, including visitors, comply with your safety policies such as sun safety?
- Do you ensure that all meals provided or brought in by families conform to the Australian Dietary Guidelines?
- Do you seek feedback on input from families if you provide food?
- Do you provide families with information on suitable healthy food options if they provide their own food?

Quality Area 3: Physical environment

- Do you involve families with the services sustainable practices?
- Do you collaborate with families on service improvements?
- Do you collaborate with educators and stakeholders on service improvements?
- Do you utilize local and national resources to access a greater range of resources to enhance learning?
- Do you engage with professionals, specialists and resource agencies to support inclusion?

Quality Area 4: Staffing arrangements

- Do you truly work collaboratively as part of a team in approaches and completing daily tasks and routines?
- Do you have access to industry related materials such as journals and magazines to support professional growth?
- Do you have memberships at industry related organisations to access materials and resources to support professional growth?
- Do you mentor or provide access to mentoring services/strategies externally to enhance team work and partnerships?
- Do you as a service make the most of and encourage educator's skills sets and passion?
- Do you value and acknowledge educators knowledge, strengths and developmental needs?
- Do you access outside resources to enhance teamwork and collaboration?
- Do you promote and engage in professional development via various means such as webinars, forums, networking, training sessions, workshops and engaging the sharing of ideas?

Quality Area 5: Relationships with children

- Do you engage in children's play? Do you involve them in their learning?
- Do you ask questions to stimulate their learning?

- Do you reflect on the day/experience/routines?
- Do you seek the child's input into their environment, the routine, resources, and experiences?
- Do you engage in quality interactions and conversations with children at every opportunity?
- Do you ask what is important to the children? Do you ask and value responses and include them into the service goals?
- Do you involve the children in day to day matters such as the establishment of rules and how to support each other and manage their own behaviour?