



Collaborative partnerships with families and communities

BY DR BRENDA ABBEY

How is your service meeting the needs of families and communities?

Many educators are unsure about the changes they need to make to their practices to meet the National Quality Standard (NQS) Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

This article suggests five steps to help your service meet these requirements. Although the steps are simple, the result is that parents are more likely to feel they belong (as well as their children), are cared about, and that their opinions matter – and that translates to collaborative partnerships. The five steps:

- Clarify what the NQS means by 'collaborative partnerships'.
- Build upon your service's current relationships with parents.
- Ensure the physical environment supports the message of collaborative partnerships.
- Glean ideas from examples of effective collaborative partnerships in other services.
- Construct your service's vision for collaborative partnerships.

Educators may well recognise that they are already working collaboratively with parents, and only need to increase the quantity and quality of these collaborations to meet, even exceed, the NQS.

Clarify what the NQS means by 'collaborative partnerships'

Take the time to ensure every team member understands the NQS definition of collaborative partnerships. Outside the world of early education and care, they are defined as those where people with diverse skills and knowledge work closely together to fulfil a common goal. However, in the context of the NQS, collaborative partnerships:

- are authentic, genuine and meaningful
- embrace more than simple contribution and involvement
- accommodate preferred ways of communication
- reflect what families want, not what educators think families need
- acknowledge parents as children's first and most enduring educators
- provide opportunities to participate in short- and long-term, simple and complex projects
- include a range of avenues (practical, written, technical), and offer flexible timing for participation
- seek all perspectives and opinions, and allow for shared decision-making
- draw upon all strengths, talents and interests of families
- provide verbal and written feedback when parents' ideas are included.

This list on page 32 is not prioritised, nor is it exhaustive. You may well reorder it and/or extend it.

“Do (your policies) convey to parents that it is their right to be involved in all decisions about their child?”

Build on existing relationships with parents

Most of your parents are involved in and contribute to the service in some way. They share information about their children with educators at arrival and departure, attend special events organised by the service, and perhaps contribute items to the program and/or share their special skills and interests with the children. Parents' involvement and contribution are important because they:

- increase parents' comfort and confidence levels
- promote parents' understanding of the service's functions
- build positive relationships between parents and educators
- form the stepping stones to collaborative partnerships
- ensure the physical environment supports the message of collaborative partnerships.

Look closely at your service's physical environment through parents' eyes. Does it convey the message that they, and not just their children, belong? Research has shown that if the service's physical environment reflects only children's needs and interests, parents are likely to feel uncertain about what is expected of them and are less likely to become involved. Parents may also struggle to find a sense of belonging in an exclusively child and educator space.

A few simple changes are all it takes. First impressions count, so the approach to the service needs to be welcoming. Perhaps add thoughtful touches, such as a large urn with spare umbrellas for parents to use on rainy days.

Ensure the entrance is inviting and warm to all who

come into the service, so that parents and children feel they belong. Incorporate familiar items such as cane baskets, intriguing objects, and greenery to create a homelike, relaxed atmosphere for parents, and meet the EYLF requirements at the same time. Remember to include adult-friendly furniture in the playground such as a wooden bench. The children and educators will also appreciate it.

Take a critical look at the signs in your service and, once again, put yourself in the parents' shoes. How do they make you feel? Would you feel you were considered to be a competent parent with valuable opinions? We are all familiar with bluntly-worded signs and directions displayed in areas used by parents and visitors. These detract from the much-preferred messages of welcome and partnership that we would ideally like to convey. Reword signs so that they communicate their messages respectfully.

Is your service's family handbook a good read or does it resemble an instruction manual? Is the language respectful, inclusive and empowering?

Have a close look through your service's policies and procedures. Are they written clearly and concisely? Are photographs and illustrations included, so that they are more reader-friendly? Do they convey to parents that it is their right to be involved in all decisions about their child?

If the goal is collaborative partnerships with parents, the overriding message that parents should receive throughout the service is that they count.





Emulate successful examples of collaborative partnerships in other services. The following two examples could be translated to other services. They also meet a number of elements of the NQS and reflect the characteristics of collaborative partnerships listed earlier.

Example 1: parents supporting parents

The service is situated in a community with a large number of families of non-English speaking backgrounds. The educators identified that its orientation for incoming families did not result in the exchange of information required to ensure the needs of all parties were met, especially those of the children.

The nominated supervisor invited a small number of parents to meet with her to consider the problem. The parents agreed to work closely with the service to develop an orientation more suited to the needs of these incoming parents.

The parents then suggested that they record a DVD covering specific aspects of the orientation. They added that the benefit of the DVD was that it could be viewed by other family members who were unable to attend the orientation. In addition, parents suggested that orientations be timetabled so that, wherever possible, one of them could be present to facilitate communication.

Over time, the educators and parents refined the orientation until the service is now justifiably proud of the positive outcomes it brings to all parties. The DVD has been an outstanding success.

This example meets NQS 6.1.2, 6.2.1, 6.3.1 and 6.3.4. It also reflects characteristics of collaborative partnerships 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Example 2: nature nurtured.

This second example of a successful collaborative partnership between educators, families and the community illustrates what can happen when parents can choose a project, and time-manage it within their work and family commitments.

Two parents approached the service with an offer to design and coordinate a nature area in a small part of the outdoor play space. The service agreed and the project began. The two parents canvassed the ideas of other parents, the educators, children and the community (particularly its local artists). They were especially interested in what educators would like to see in the space and how it would be used to further children's learning.

As with the planning process, everyone was involved in its construction. The older children 'spread' the tanbark, and the artists installed their creations – the reading chair, wooden xylophone and nesting box. The result is a much-loved and used space that reflects everyone's commitment to sustainability.

This example meets NQS 6.1.2, 6.2.1, 6.3.1 and 6.3.4. It also reflects characteristics of collaborative partnerships 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Construct your service's vision for collaborative partnerships

As a team, brainstorm what your service would look like if it was meeting the requirements of Quality Area 6. Use a Y-chart to document what the service would look like, feel like and sound like if it had collaborative partnerships with families and the community. Display the completed chart as a reminder for your team.

Educators who use these five steps will find the NQS requirements for collaborative partnerships easier to meet than they might have expected. As well as better outcomes for children, educators and parents experience the pleasure and satisfaction that accompanies true collaborative partnerships. 📖

Dr Brenda Abbey is the owner of consultancy service, Childcare By Design, www.childcarebydesign.com.au. Dr Abbey based this article on the DVD *Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities*, produced with Pam Maclean in 2012. For further information about NQS-related resources, phone 0419 661 921 or email: info@childcarebydesign.com.au.