

COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES – QUALITY AREA 6

By Dr Brenda Abbey

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.

1. Clarify what the NQS means by 'collaborative partnerships'
2. Build on your existing relationships with parents
3. Ensure the physical environment supports the message of collaborative partnerships
4. Glean ideas from examples of effective collaborative partnerships in other services
5. Construct your service's vision for collaborative partnerships

1. Clarify what the NQS means by 'collaborative partnerships'

Take the time to ensure every member of the team clearly 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 on a common project with a common aim. However, in the context of the NQS, collaborative partnerships:

1. Are authentic, genuine and meaningful
2. Embrace more than simple contribution and involvement
3. Accommodate preferred ways of communication
4. Reflect what families want, not what educators think families need
5. Acknowledge parents as children's first and most enduring educators
6. Provide opportunity to participate in short and long term, simple and complex projects
7. Include a range of avenues (e.g. practical, written, technical), and offer flexible timing for participation
8. Seek all perspectives and opinions, and allow for shared decision-making
9. Draw upon all strengths, talents and interests of families

10. Provide verbal and written feedback when parents' ideas are included. (DVD: *Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities*. 2012. Abbey and Maclean).

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

2. Build on your existing relationships with parents

Most of your parents are already 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 how the service functions
- Build positive relationships between parents and educators
- Form the stepping stones to collaborative partnerships.



3. 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 also struggle to find a sense of belonging in such 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, greenery and other means throughout 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 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 signs and directions bluntly worded and displayed in areas used by parents and visitors. These detract from the much-preferred message 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 is it more like 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 – perhaps with some 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.

4. Glean ideas from examples of effective collaborative partnerships in other services

Emulate successful examples of collaborative partnerships in other services. The following example meets a number of elements of the NQS and reflects the characteristics of collaborative partnerships listed earlier.

Parents Supporting Parents

The service is situated in a community with a large number of

families of non-English speaking background. 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 of children enrolled in the service 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 incoming parents.

The parents then suggested that they record a DVD covering specific aspects of the orientation that lent to being communicated in this way. 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.

5. 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 QA 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 far 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.

Author Dr Brenda Abbey based this article on the DVD Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities she produced with Pam Maclean. Further information about this DVD and other NQS related resources can be obtained from Brenda 0419 661 921 info@childcarebydesign.com.au or www.childcarebydesign.com.au