

# *Family-centred practice and Kindy: Thinking outside the box*

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For early years educators, the involvement of families is a fundamental aspect to delivering a holistic and successful program (Porter, 2003). Family is a child's initial source of contact with a culture and learning environment, often instilling socially acceptable norms and values, as well as socially regulating patterns of behaviour including actions, language, non-verbal language, concepts of space, values of learning and education, and the role, rights and responsibilities of the child (Cartledge & Feng, 1996; Porter, 2003).

Family and community involvement is also a priority within all levels of legislation and curriculum, from ACECQA'S National Quality Standards, to the *Early Years Learning Framework*, the *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guideline* and C&K's curriculum *Building Waterfalls*. Quality Area 6 and sections 6.1 and 6.2 of the National Quality Standard, identify the importance of developing collaborative partnerships with families and communities by creating and maintaining respectful and supportive relationships that promote the beliefs, views and values of individual families (ACECQA, 2012). In addition to this, *Building Waterfalls* strongly advocates the involvement of families and community throughout its shared understandings based on connectedness to oneself, the community and the environment; enlargement and promotion of personal and social dignities and rights; listening and being open to new possibilities, perspectives, cultures, values and learning environments; and through

exploring one's ideas, experiences, learning and representation of knowledge and understanding (C&K, 2011).

At a personal pedagogical level, I strongly believe in the involvement of parents and the wider community within my kindergarten program. Underpinning my socio-cultural pedagogy is Vygotsky's belief that learning is socially, culturally and environmentally defined and that, through children's interactions within these discourses, the foundations for current and future learning and societal involvement are established (Bodrova & Leong, 1996).

Despite multiple ongoing initiatives, that utilised a variety of multi-modal mediums, to involve parents, families and caregivers in our community of learners, many were not engaging with the kindergarten program. I found myself taking on a new role in trying to organise and plan play-dates between families who had never met, often hearing myself identifying children to their friend's parents in the playground and saying 'I can't give you their parent's number, but would you like me to give them yours'. Through our discussions, it became apparent that many parents were feeling socially disconnected from friendship groups as a result of busy lifestyles, work commitments and changing family dynamics. They were also missing out on forming friendships with other families at Kindy, due to the varying times that parents were dropping off and picking up their children, and the rushed need in the morning to get to work, or in the afternoon, to start the night time routine. This also meant that families did

not necessarily have the time to look through our daily journal, wall displays or their child's portfolio.

*Upon reflection, I realised that my own parents still have close friends today that they met during my siblings' and my Kindy years and that whilst I was trying to foster involvement between the families and our kindergarten program, I was not fostering or scaffolding the evolution of a Kindergarten community.*

I started to think outside the box as to what I could do to promote a sense of community and, in collaboration with many parents, we arranged a Kindy play-date. The play-date was simple, it was held in the park behind Kindy on Saturday morning and everybody brought food to share. All family members and caregivers were invited. I also displayed our learning journal, some examples of the children's portfolios and NQF information, as well as providing the opportunity for parents to contribute to our centre's Quality Improvement Plan. The play-date was a big success! The children were so excited to play with their friends outside of Kindy and many of the parents met new families. The play-date also enabled families to discuss our Kindy curriculum and program as well as transitioning to Prep with me.

I have found that more parents now read our daily journal and look at our wall displays and portfolios. Parents are also staying longer in the morning and afternoon to talk to other parents, are involved and interested in our Kindy program and curriculum, and are more interested in volunteering for excursions and other centre



involvements such as our Parent Advisory Group. There are also significantly more play-dates between families outside of Kindy and whole group birthday party invitations as opposed to only inviting a select few. Another play-date is scheduled due to the positive comments and feedback from all families who attended.

*As an educator, I have reflected on my practice and have identified that, in order to establish a community of learners, I also needed to cater for the individual needs of my parents beyond educational and program involvement.*

My parents next year may have completely different needs but this journey has enabled me to become aware of the important role we have in all of our families' lives and how having a truly holistic approach to early years education and by thinking outside of the box can have such a positive impact on the daily implementation and involvement in an early years setting.

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