Why is this so important?

Connecting with and forming genuine partnerships with families is fundamental to the quality of education and care a child receives.

Families are the primary influence in their child’s life and have strong beliefs and values about their education and care.

Families can provide valuable information about their child and feedback about the service. Families have differing areas of expertise and experience that can enhance an education and care service. However, connecting with families involves more than just information exchanges.

Provocations

- How do we encourage ALL families to feel comfortable and welcome at the service?
- What strategies are in place for information sharing during orientation, settling in, as well as on an on-going basis?
What role do families play in the service? How can we connect with the diverse families that make up our service?

How can we connect with busy people?

Do we inform families or do we involve them?

A ‘Culture’ of Connecting

Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena (2004) assert that connecting with families requires more than planning a set list of activities that invite involvement in the service.

“Working collaboratively with families is a culture or way of working that runs through every part of the operation of the service”.

While social events, surveys, and requests for information are important, genuine collaboration involves continual relationship building and an establishment of trust and respect.

The belief that families should be involved in decision making and have a powerful role in the service is paramount to connecting with families.

Get to Know All Your Families

Who are the main people in a child’s life?

What is their home environment like?

What are the expectations each family has for their child?

What are the main influences that affect the family eg. culture, religion, lifestyle choices, stressors, pastimes etc.

Truly knowing families assists us to engage with them in appropriate and respectful ways.

Make Families Feel Welcome

How do families feel a sense of belonging in our environment? What images and messages promote this?

Do our attitudes always reflect a sense of welcome or are there times where this may not be the case?

Consider the analogy of a red carpet event. Each family is a VIP in their own right and should be greeted and treated accordingly.

Try and Try Again

Opportunities for connecting must be initiated by the staff regularly and consistently. If one method doesn’t work, then try another.

Families are diverse so our strategies should be too.
Stonehouse (1994) states “A partnership must be built on frequent, sometimes brief, interchanges backed up with written communication and an atmosphere of openness and respect” (p. 30).

Suggestions

Enrolment and Orientation

Consider the balance of information sharing.

This is an opportune time to ask families about their child, family, background, and objectives for their child.

Provide them with important information about the service but don’t overload them, perhaps provide written information which can be read slowly and followed up on at a later date.

HINT: Who is interviewing who? Often we focus on service information during orientation when really we should be focusing on the child and their family. Have you considered how you cater for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?

Routines and Programming

Consider involving family in the planning process rather than asking for feedback after an experience eg. set goals with families quarterly, discuss routines and caregiving practices prior to settling in, and involve them in brainstorming sessions or projects.

HINT: Families often provide verbal feedback so it is important to devise systems to capture this and record it for planning purposes. Educators need to listen for this and make it visible in their documentation.

Self Assessment and Quality Improvement Plan

This is such an important process for families to be involved in. Their ideas and opinions provide new insights and can really capture what is and isn’t working in terms of service delivery.

HINT: Families are busy and need information condensed and the important facts highlighted.

Email reflective questions rather than whole policies to comment on.

Display examples of practice eg. projects the children have engaged in and ask “What did your child enjoy best?”

List forms of communication and ask families to rate the most effective.

Often being asked to comment on specifics elicits a greater response than being asked to digest a whole gamut of information.