Assessing a service’s connection with community

National Quality Standard
- 6.3 The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children’s learning and wellbeing
- 6.3.4 The service builds relationships and engages with the local community

Learning Frameworks
- Partnerships, Secure reciprocal relationships, Diversity, Cultural competence, Continuity of learning and transitions

Two way engagement

Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities aims to strengthen community links and use resources to further support children and families’ needs. The focus is on developing and maintaining a reciprocal relationship where the community and the education and care service are enriched by mutual engagement, where community partnerships developed by the service benefit children’s learning and understanding of citizenship and stewardship.

A key requirement of meeting the National Quality Standard (NQS) in Quality Area 6 is the evidence of relationships between education and care services and their community. The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *Framework for School Age Care* (FSAC) encourage services to develop secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationships.

‘We need to remember that effective community engagement depends on the nature of the community with which we are working. What matters most is that our approach is genuine...community engagement needs to grow from, and respond to each context’ *(NQS PLP e-Newsletter No.47, 2012)*

A consideration when assessing a service against Standard 6.3 would be the ways that this reciprocity is evident in a two-way process of the service being visible and present in the community and the community being evident in the service’s programs, practices and operations. Collaborating with community may look very different depending on the service type, context and the needs of children and families attending the service. When assessing whether this Standard is being met it is important to focus on the approach each individual service takes to building and growing relationships that are regular and ongoing, based on supporting children’s learning and wellbeing.
This may involve community members coming into the service and offering a range of supports, such as health checks, vision screening, speech therapists and local school representatives and/or sharing information about children to support smooth transitions, including children with additional needs. It may also include community members sharing information about the role they play in the community or projects underway in the community that build on children’s learning at the service or are of interest/benefit to children and families.

An education and care service may participate in the community by building relationships with groups relevant to its particular community. For example, local businesses, libraries, schools and community groups, such as parent support groups, migrant services, refugee support groups, baby health clinics and other education and care services. Finding out about events being held in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and going along to those events strengthens services understanding of places ‘known’ within the community.

Community collaboration may also involve accessing support services such as speech therapists, working in partnerships with local playgroups or being involved in local health initiatives such as Munch and Move in NSW, Obesity Prevention and Lifestyle (OPAL) in South Australia, Move Well Eat Well in Tasmania or Active Kids in Queensland.

**Seeing the child as interconnected with community**

Each child’s development is influenced by the customs, laws and cultural values of the community (Australian Government, 2013). Community includes parents and other family members, support and allied health services, business and community organisations, local schools, and other education and care services. The approved learning frameworks give the following guidance around the significance of community and belonging in the lives of children:

- ‘Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. Belonging acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities.’ (EYLF, p7; FSAC, p5)
- ‘Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation.’ (EYLF, p26; FSAC p24)
- ‘Children’s connectedness and different ways of belonging with people, country and communities helps them to learn ways of being which reflect the values, traditions and practices of their families and communities. Over time this learning transforms the ways they interact with others.’ (EYLF, p26; FSAC, p24)

The aim of Standard 6.3 is to ensure every education and care service has an active presence within the community by strengthening community links and utilising resources that support children and families (including health and wellbeing and parenting support). The value of a service’s partnership with its community is highlighted by the enriched programs and learning opportunities that emerge as a result of these partnerships.
Community partnerships benefit children and families in education and care services in the following ways:

- The setting becomes a hub for families within the community
- Families can network and support each other through shared experiences and child-rearing practices
- Children can develop friendships with other children in their community
- This provides an opportunity to promote awareness of support services available to families.

(Adapted from Building Strong Partnerships)

Genuine collaboration

Collaboration is about working together towards common goals and can be represented in a range of service practices, projects and activities. An important indicator in assessing collaborative partnerships in a service is to consider how partnerships are working towards the end goal of enhancing children’s learning and wellbeing.

The NQS reminds us that community engagement is important because of its impact on ‘children’s wellbeing and learning’ (Standard 6.3). We therefore need to consider community engagement not just in terms of our own actions, but how it affects children’s experience. In other words, ‘how does our involvement with the community genuinely help to connect children (as well as ourselves) to the wider world?’ (NQS PLP e-Newsletter No.47, 2012)

An example of a genuine collaboration is a service that not only maintains a list of relevant referral support agencies but actively engages with those agencies to establish ongoing relationships with them. An education and care service may find out important information about a referral agency, such as wait lists, fees and other information that families may require. In true community partnerships, services:

- value each other’s knowledge and skill set
- value each other’s contributions to the common community good
- trust each other to communicate freely and respectfully with each other
- share insights and perspectives
- engage in shared decision-making with each family and child, and with each other.

Community knowledge

Services that form genuine connections tend to know the community well, including the cultural mix and community needs in terms of assistance and access to support services. They know how the community responds and are responsive to the community’s needs. Services may have a process of
consultation where feedback is actively sought, valued and utilised to inform program and practice. This information may be gathered informally or in a proactive strategy of gathering information from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). Information about the community is used by services in different ways, such as applying for grants, working with other groups in the community and taking action to support children’s learning around community participation.

It is important to note that the following practices provide a range of ways services can demonstrate connection with community. It is not expected that every service will be demonstrating all examples mentioned, but instead be adapting their practices in response to the particular community within which their service operates.

**Tailored approaches**

Meaningful engagement with families and the broader community will be different in each service context, however the process should reflect effective interactions and collaborations, where the value comes from the benefits to children.

Community engagement may vary depending on the needs of the community and the educational program of the service. It could include involvement in joint projects with local councils, resource development, sustainability projects, community planning consultation, library visits, and partnerships with local aged care facilities, bush care groups and community arts projects. Community involvement can be any connection that utilises expertise within the community to enrich children’s learning and participation within the community.

Some questions to consider when assessing a service against Standard 6.3 include:

- How is the self-assessment process used as an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of community engagements and where possibilities exist to improve outcomes for children and families?
- How are these quality improvements documented, actioned and reflected on?
- What (if any) are the limitations of the service being able to access community groups due to location or type of program and how is the service considering overcoming these limitations?

**Cultural diversity**

The National Quality Framework (NQF) is underpinned by principles of ‘Equity, inclusion and diversity’ (*Guide to the National Quality Standard*, p8). In considering the relationships that a service has with its community, it may be helpful to consider how the service reflects and values community diversity and what systems, strategies and processes are in place to support inclusion.

Some questions to consider when assessing a service against Standard 6.3 include:

- Does the service demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of the cultural context of its community and what consideration is given to how the service’s workforce reflects this?
- How does the service support children to learn about and contribute to the community?
• Does the service elicit support from interpreters or support agencies to include culturally and linguistically diverse families if required?
• Do the service’s resources cater for and reflect a range of different family structures (such as adoptive, foster or same sex families) and cultures?
• How do educators respond when children or families challenge traditional points of view?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

The NQF is also underpinned by a principle to ensure ‘Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) cultures are valued’ (Guide to the National Quality Standard p8). It is therefore very important when assessing Standard 6.3 to consider the ways a service is representing, honouring and celebrating ATSI culture.

• How are services engaging with questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture?
• ‘How do you know about the learning that is valued and expected for children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within their family and community local cultural context?’

(Educators Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework, p18)

Some questions to consider when assessing a service against Standard 6.3 include:

• Are services aware of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families and groups in the community and what efforts are made to include these local mobs in the service’s activities or celebrations?
• What language and celebrations are relevant in the local community? Can these be identified in the education and care service?
• Does the service know the traditional owners of the land? Has it made connection with the local land council?
• What cultural information is gathered and shared on enrolment and how is this information meaningfully used to promote inclusion at the service?

Supporting continuity of learning and transitions

The transitions children experience during their time in education and care services can be supported by effective partnerships with the agencies that contribute to their development. The outcome of the transition should be the sharing of information and knowledge that supports children’s wellbeing.

Transitions to school are opportunities for services to build community collaboration by forming relationships with schools and other services in order to create a holistic approach for children and families in the transition to school.

‘Partnerships with communities reflect the value of early childhood education and school age care within those communities. As a consequence, both communities and education and care services are regarded as valuable resources to be acknowledged, supported and
celebrated. Partnerships with communities incorporate more than family involvement; they extend to the incorporation of community values, aspirations and expectations within the educational contexts of prior-to-school, school and school age care settings.’  
*(Continuity of Learning, p29)*

Some questions to consider when assessing a service against Standard 6.3 include:

- How are transitions planned and supported?
- Are different transition types, both internal and external to the service, facilitated?
- Are children and families involved in the process?
- Do transitions involve partnerships with other organisations?

**Conclusion**

Education and care services that build effective relationships within the community achieve positive outcomes for children and families. They do this by fostering child friendly communities that are inclusive and reflective of the diversity within them, sharing relevant information and resources to support children’s learning and having an understanding of interdependence and active citizenship. Engaging with community will look different in every service context, however three common themes should emerge; collaboration, respect and partnerships.
References and Resources


