Embracing your community

For generations, an individual’s community served an important role by acting as a support system. With our society moving at a faster pace and its citizens becoming increasingly detached from each other due to advances in technology, busy schedules, and the frequency at which we move and change jobs, it is harder and harder to feel a sense of community. This is true for child care providers as well. It is easy for them to become isolated in their early learning programs.

Nobody understands a neighborhood better than the people who live or work there. Community partners possess insightful views on the neighborhoods, cultures, and people of the community where the children in child care live.

What is community?

According to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, community is defined as “a unified body of individuals; the people with common interests living in a particular area; an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location; or, a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.”

A strong community benefits individuals, the community itself, and the greater society. People of all ages who feel a sense of belonging tend to lead happier and healthier lives, and strong communities create a more stable and supportive society.

Since many early education programs use volunteers and rely on public funding, and on donated facilities and materials, it is important to have strong ties to the surrounding community in order to develop partnerships that benefit both the program and the community.

Engaging community partners in your child care program can add enthusiasm, expertise, and excitement to your program and the community. But know what your needs are for your program and why you want to partner before you contact an agency. Look at your current program and its doing mission statement. What are your goals and where would you like your program to be in the future?

By embracing and reaching out to the community, early education programs can benefit as well as the children and the families they serve. You can use a community resource file as a starting point to identify potential partners. As you work with community members, you can add them to the resource file to share with families. The “community” can be individuals from:

- Business
- Religious organizations
- Museums
- Libraries
- Human services agencies
- Colleges/Universities
- Local schools
- Cooperative Extension
- Hospitals or clinics
- Banks
- Mental health services
- Early intervention services

Community members bring gifts and life skills too numerous to mention – including resilience, knowledge of how to make the most out of limited resources, and 24-hour-a-day concern for the children living among them.

For example:

Partnering with a bank or someone who works in the banking industry can be beneficial to your program in many ways. The bank may be willing to offer a program on saving money or money management to children, their families or staff. The bank may offer a special incentive to open a savings account at their facility. A bank employee could provide financial expertise to your advisory board and assist your facility with financial questions or concerns.
By involving the community, your program may benefit from physical resources such as supplies or space, social resources including forming relationships with high risk youth, intellectual resources such as grant writing expertise or mentoring, or financial resources such as donations or other funding opportunities. (Child Trends 2008)

What are some strategies you can use to support you and your child care program as you create partnerships with your community?

- Educate the community about your program and the importance of early care and education.
- Look at existing partners and identify ways those partnerships might be developed further.
- Seek out community members and agency members that have similar goals.
- Seek out nontraditional community partners; they may be able to add a new perspective to your program.
- Communicate with and build trusting relationships with community members.
- Hire and train a community-focused staff.
- Build linkages with individuals and organizations by reaching out and making personal contacts with those you would like to partner with.

For example:
Partnering with a local martial arts studio may allow children and their families a chance to learn the history of the art and self-defense techniques. Your program may allow the studio to offer classes on-site at your facility for families and the public.

References:

Get off to a good start with community resources partners. Get to know the agencies within the community, what they do, where they are located, and services they offer. Hold an orientation meeting and invite the agencies’ staff and your own to learn about the resources. Make the community agencies feel welcome at your facility. Give them a space on a bulletin board for upcoming programs or events that can benefit children and families in your care. By posting resources in a public place and sharing the information with your families, you are doing a community service to the families you serve and are promoting the agencies in your community. Community partners can greatly expand the resources available to children.

What can child care providers and families do to embrace their community?

- Attend community events.
- Volunteer.
- Meet your neighbors.
- Buy from local merchants.
- Support local schools and their events.
- Organize or attend a neighborhood or community party.
- Make an effort to meet newcomers to your community.

The idea of embracing your community can be simple: Support and interact positively with other individuals who share an interest in early care and education.

Resources:

extension.psu.edu/youth/betterkidcare