Social media: an open and closed book

At Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning in Griffith, NSW four Facebook pages operate. Unlike some early childhood services though, the site for current and former staff is the closed community while a second Facebook page for the community and families is open to the public. Director, Neville Dwyer, is careful about what is posted and how it is managed. Images of children, names and other identifying details are not posted to the website or Facebook pages. He is active online so monitors what happens. The other pages are for its Family Support program, Griffith Connections, and preschool program, Griffith Central Preschool.

Underpinning all the operations at Dorothy Waide are a set of online policies covering everything from asthma and cultural competency to privacy and blogging.

The social networking policy begins with a positive note and emphasises respect. It is clear and specific, brief without being simplistic. It places policy in context: making overt links to real-world behaviours, to the *National Quality Standards*, the Early Childhood Australia *Code of Ethics* and other centre policies on communication, blogs, websites, permission to use images and privacy obligations. The language is direct and not legalistic.

The social media site recently featured a room makeover at the centre allowing parents and educators to follow progress and stay up to date. It also attracted comments, likes and following from others outside the Dorothy Waide community.

Facebook is just one of the tools Neville uses in his education practice. The website, blogs, Twitter and videos also help capture what Neville describes as 'what made us go "wow" during the day'.

For more details or the social media and other policies at the Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning, go to: www.dotwaidecentre.org.au/DWC/Policies.html.

Click here to see a video of Neville Dwyer discussing online networking in his education practice.

Meet the need at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands

Separations and arrivals at either end of the day can be fraught and it is not uncommon to hear an educator, teacher or manager lament that despite providing all the information in the room, some families miss out or never seem to engage.

One long day care service in inner city Melbourne has been smart about technology. Parents and educators have pooled their talents to better connect with families and build community. They are not replacing the usual methods—paper features when needed—but are finding great benefits in going with the technology flow.

Manager, Michelle Gujer—a self-professed learner on the technology road—is supported by an active and skilled Family Representative Group to identify and solve networking.

By analysing simple data about families already available through existing systems, they have been able to target how to seek and manage information and meet family preferences too.

Using a combination of text messaging, web and email as well as fine tuning permissions for communication, they are putting information in the pocket of parents—on their smartphones—at a time and format that best suits. Experimenting with text messages and grouped call-outs has reaped benefits already.

One example is a phone outage at the Carlton site, where an automated text message to all parents during the day was able to advise and reassure about the problem and provide an alternative contact.

Karl Hessian, a software specialist and member of the Family Representative Group at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands, said even simple text messages such as 'check your email' have had a dramatic impact on response rates.

David Thompson, Chair of the Family Representative Group, agrees. Families are already using the kinds of tools early childhood education and care services are starting to move towards, he says, and they want help sifting through too much information. It is clear from the analytics when parents are logging on to read information.

Giving families online capacity to nominate preferred sessions for the coming year was another time-saving option. As Karl noted, it broke down a demanding task that had previously taken a skilled person up to three weeks to finalise, enabling it to be largely completed in three days. Michelle agrees that it reduced stress on a tedious task. It freed up educators to be in the room with the children doing what they want to do and do best.

Michelle, Karl and David think the next steps will be refining online surveys and options so that families have access to the information they need when and where they need it. They also plan more sophisticated 'opting in' that allows families not only to identify their preferred contact arrangements but to be part of 'circles of interest', nominating the times and the type of content they wish to receive. This can minimise the irritation and intrusion while maximising usefulness. For instance a service may hesitate to send a text at 7.00 am but families who have agreed might welcome a timely reminder that the nappy supply is running low and to bring more.

Another example, Michelle said, is avoiding inconvenience to parents on centre closure days. Until automated text messages were sent to remind about professional development days after the Christmas period, there was always one family, sometimes more, that would turn up to find the centre closed and then had to scramble arrangements on a work day.

Using technology wisely means not always using it. Gowrie Victoria, Docklands—originally intended to be paperless—responded to family requests to reintroduce information pockets. This assisted families to pass notes, party invitations and other information to each other. The centre is also thinking about an internet-enabled laptop in the foyer so that families without easy internet access can transact business there.

They plan to continue experimenting, seeking family agreement about contact channels and trialling options.

Click here for a video to see more Gowrie discussion of strategies and challenges for engaging families.

Michelle's top tips on engaging families

▶ Chat to your family community—an untapped resource and support.

▶ Try email and MailChimp software to extend ways to communicate with families.

▶ Find champions within your service, who understand technology more than you do, and learn from them.

▶ Don't be afraid to try. Research, download and give it a go. It becomes easier.

Return to factsheet