Establish and Maintain Community Links

Self-Guided Learning Package

About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email psc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Establish & Maintain Community Links

You have chosen to complete the 'Establish and maintain links with the community' self guided learning package. The aim of this package is to support educators in the provision of education and care for children in licensed children's services to reflect and review how they establish and maintain community links. An inclusive approach that acknowledges all aspects of diversity is supported throughout this package.

Establishing and strengthening links with the community is central to providing quality care. Through this partnership, educators in children's services are better placed to be responsive to the needs and interests of all children and families; actively encouraging their participation with the children's service, and the wider community. Maintaining positive links is of mutual benefit to all involved.

The community can provide supports, resources and opportunities for families and for children's services. Educators in a children's service must be aware of the wider community context and know how to access additional supports. Furthermore, educators need to connect with the local community in order to better meet the needs of all children and families. Working within a community is also part of being aware of the wider circle and being knowledgeable about the family's expectations contributing to their child's daily experience. Knowing elements of the community's context and the types of experiences children and families participate in can provide an educator with important information and help to create appropriate links for the child and family between the children's service and the community at large.

Equity, inclusion and diversity

In a fair and just society the intrinsic worth of all children and their families, their strengths and their right to equitable access and participation in the community is clearly visible in all aspects of service delivery.

Programs for the care, education and recreation of children have a unique opportunity to include children from all family circumstances, cultural backgrounds and levels of ability. In particular, a commitment to the full participation of children with additional needs and their families involves enabling their initial access as well as supporting their day-to-day participation in the program. It requires capturing and maximising resources to support each child's participation in and engagement with the program. By providing nurturing environments and supportive relationships they ensure that each child is valued for who they are and has opportunities to reach their full potential.

One of Australia's greatest strengths lies in its unique history and diverse heritage. The many different cultures, contexts and values of families and communities contribute to the richness of contemporary Australian society and inform plans for meaningful learning experiences for children.

DEEWR, 2009, p.10

Children, Community and Collaboration

'When the major aspects of their lives intersect through strong connections and understandings, and these understanding are incorporated into planning for children's learning, children are much more likely to succeed and have a strong sense of belonging'
-The Educators Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework (p. 18)

Children's Services can provide the opportunity for building social connections and a feeling of belonging to the community. The approved national frameworks for learning and development are built on the concept of how aspects of children's lives can intersect to assist in maintain positive relationships and achieving goals:

- The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia *'Belonging, Being & Becoming'*, recognises that children's lives are characterised by knowing where and with whom they belong, acknowledging the significance of the here and now, and becoming aware of and learning how to participate fully and actively in society. (EYLF, 2009, p. 7)
- The Draft Framework for School Age Care 'My Time, Our Place' acknowledges the importance of play and leisure in children's learning and development and that this is not linked to any particular time or place. (FSAC, 2010, p. 3)

The following diagram, adapted from page 18 of the *Educators Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework*, shows you the influential relationships - the circles demonstrate the synergy between these relationships.
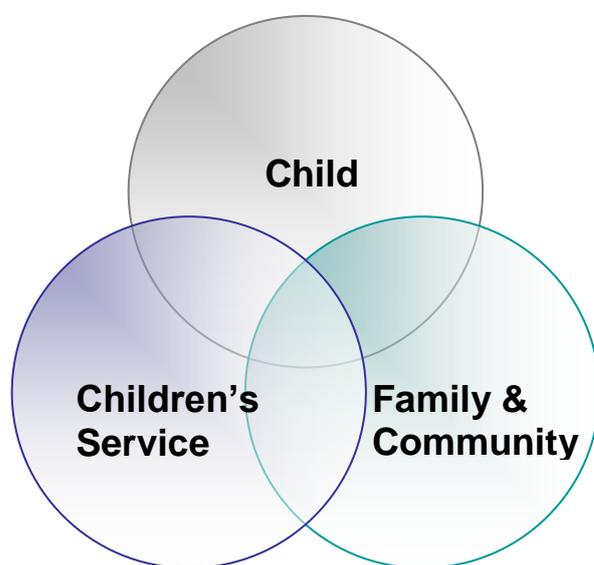
What Does 'Community' Mean to You?

The word 'Community' has different meanings to different people. The Oxford Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2011) defines 'community' in the following ways:

- *group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common;*
- *a group of people living together and practising common ownership;*
- *a particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants;*
- *a body of nations or states unified by common interests;*
- *the people of a district or country considered collectively, especially in the context of social values and responsibilities; society;*
- *denoting a worker or resource designed to serve the people of a particular area;*
- *the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common;*
- *a similarity or identity;*
- *joint ownership or liability;*
- *group of interdependent plants or animals growing or living together in natural conditions or occupying a specified habitat;*

Self Help Question 1

What does the word 'community' mean to you in a personal context?

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What does the word 'community' mean to you in the context of your children's service?

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Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory

'*Development is defined as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties*' *(Bronfenbrenner 1949, p.9)*

Urie Bronfenbrenner (April 29, 1917–September 25, 2005) was a Russian American psychologist, known for developing his Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner's work focused on interactions with others and the environment as the key to development, and how individuals experience more than one type of environment, often multi-layered and ever-changing. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory organises the contexts of child development into five environmental systems with bi-directional influences within and between systems. (*Bronfenbrenner, 1989*)

1. The **microsystem** refers to immediate environments and relationships such as family members, friends from a children's service, and the neighbourhood in which the child interacts with daily.

2. The **mesosystem** is comprised of relationships with and between these immediate environments, such as the relationship and communication strategies between the family and the children's service, and how deliberate and meaningful collaboration influence the child's learning and development.

3. The **exosystem** includes environmental settings that indirectly affect development as they do not have an active role in the child's immediate context, such as social or political unrest, temporary or long term change to a family environment, or routine.

4. The **macrosystem** reflects overarching social ideologies and cultural values related to where and how the child lives, such as ethnicity, socio-ecomonic status and government laws.

5. The **chronosystem** highlights the effect of time on all systems and development

The child is at the centre of the Ecological System Theory, and factors that will influence the child's development are gradually built around them. Family, community supports, external influences and other services are all part of and influential upon the child and family.
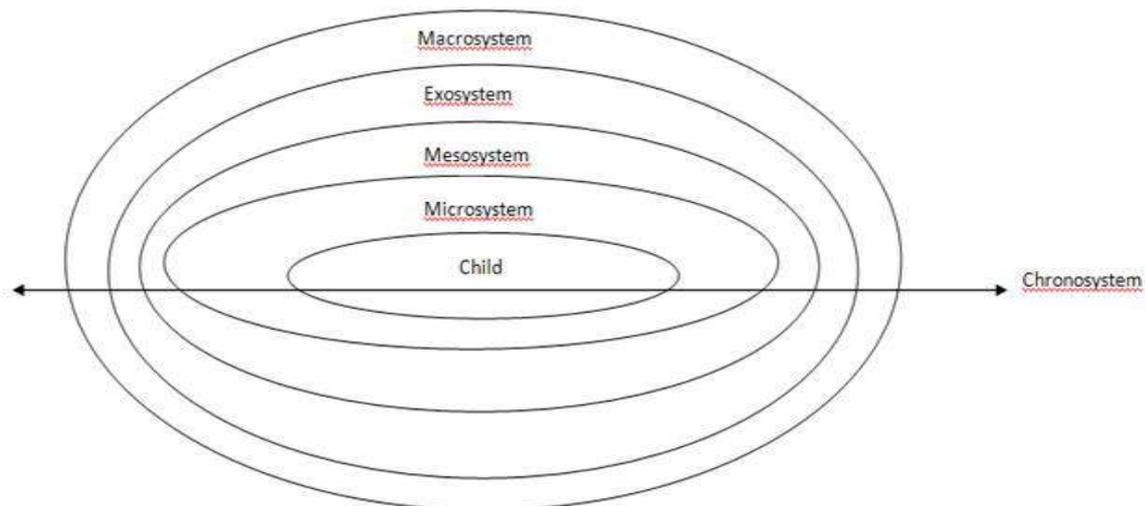
Example: Pia's Ecological System

Pia is at the centre of this example of the Ecological System Theory, used to demonstrate the factors that are all are part of and influential upon Pia and her family, and that will influence Pia's lifelong development.

⟹ Pia is 4 years old and lives in a house with her Mum and her Oma (her maternal grandmother) and a rabbit called Charlie. Pia's friend Jessica lives next door with her Mum, Dad, and baby brother Sam. Pia and Jessica play together almost every day. Pia attends a long day care service with a preschool program 5 days a week *(**Pia's microsystem**)*

⟹ Sometimes Pia's Mum brings in her sewing machine and helps make things there. Pia's Mum often talks to the educators about Pia's learning and development, and Pia sometimes helps with this, talking about what she likes and what she wants the educators to know about her. Pia knows that her Mum and her educators are making a report of these things to give to her school next year so that the school teachers know these things too *(**Pia's mesosystem**)*

⟹ When Pia's Dad moved away, her Oma moved in, and Pia got a new bedroom. Pia's Mum got a new job where she sometimes has to work overnight, so on those days her Oma picks her up from the Long Day Care Service and they walk home together. If it's raining Pia's Oma takes her home on the bus. When Charlie died, Pia and her Oma buried him in the backyard. Jessica came to see and brought some flowers from her garden *(**Pia's exosystem**)*

⟹ Pia's Oma talks to her about when she was a little girl in Germany, and teaches Pia some of the songs she used to sing with her own Oma. Pia will be going to school next year, and although her

Mum said she can go to School with Jessica, her Oma says she must go to the Deutsche Schule (German School) instead. Pia's Mum and her Oma talk about this often, but Pia doesn't always understand what they are saying. Pia's Oma says if Pia goes to the Deutsche Schule she will learn how to understand what they talk about. ***(Pia's macrosystem)***

⇒ These experiences will shape Pia's own values and ideals and influence the way she learns and develops. Already she has experienced various growth and change of friendship, family, grief and loss, biculturalism, identity, environment, a sense of agency and curiosity. Over time, Pia will gradually become much more aware of the outside world, so Pia's primary contact points, such as the children's service in Pia's microsystem and its links to the wider community, will support Pia and her family see the children's service as being a part of a wider community made up of many different services and experiences that contribute to connecting with community. ***(Pia's chronosystem)***

Self Help Question 1

Think about yourself for a moment. Using the points on page 8 as a reference, can you identify two characteristics for each layer of your own ecological system?
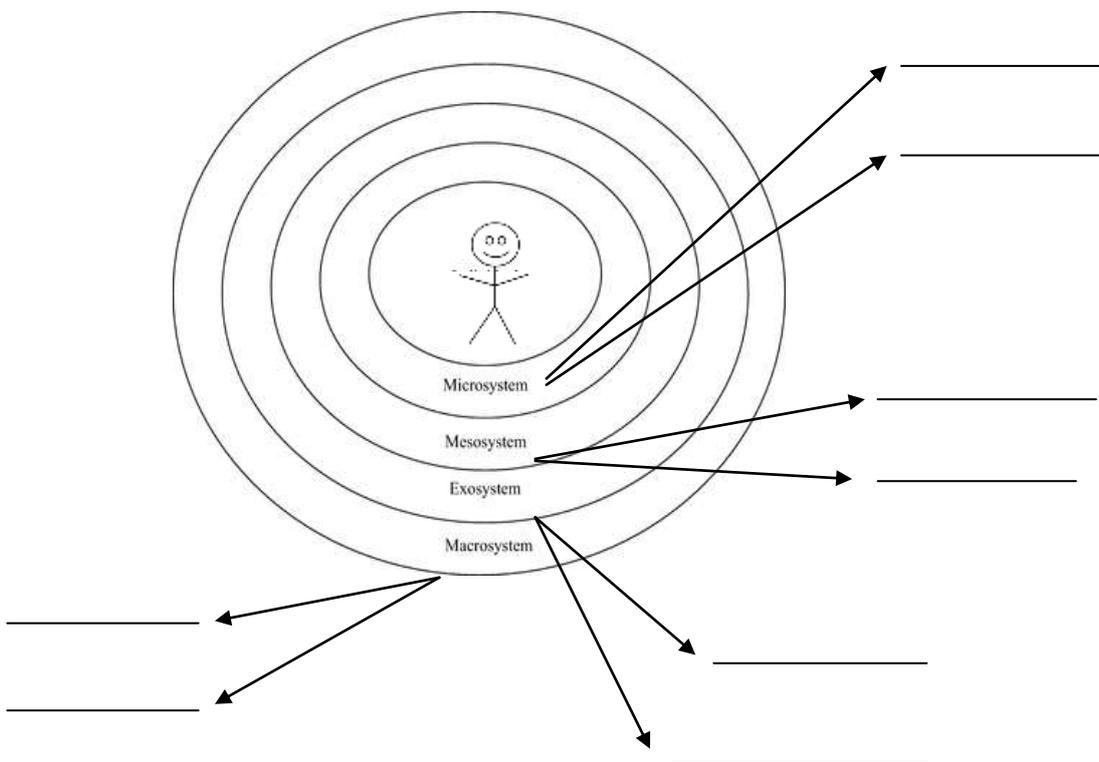
Partnerships & Participation

'Community partnerships that focus on active communication, consultation and collaboration contribute to children's learning and wellbeing'

(National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care, 2009, p. 26)

Children's Services are regarded as having particular potential in sustaining links with the community at large, including the connection with strong and respectful relationships between non-Aboriginal Australians and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians and across the diverse groups in the community. These relationships will look slightly different within each service due to its own context in the community, demographic and the motivation and professionalism of the educators.

It is important to avoid working in isolation or viewing the children's service as an entire entity by itself. All professionals in all fields of work need to work in what is known as a cross-disciplinary manner. This means that each professional within a community needs to know a little about other local programs and services and what they offer. This means educators can inform and support families as they move from one program/service to another, or if they have one family member in one program and another in a different program. For example, one child may attend a child care centre, another child may attend the local school and OSHC service and another child may participate in a sports club. Supporting families and working with them in partnership requires educators to both understand and make links with their local community. It is not appropriate to say, 'I don't work in that area, so I don't need to know anything about it.' It requires more than simply having a range of brochures about community programs and happenings, although this is one of the strategies that can support communication about events and services within a community.

The National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care stipulates that *'Information is available to families about community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing'* (NQS, 2009, p.26).
The following list provides some examples of links within the local community that may be important. The list is not exhaustive, can you think of more?

- maternal and child health centres
- local councils
- sports clubs and gyms
- parks, playgrounds and gardens
- cultural groups
- child care centres
- kindergartens
- counselling services
- disability services
- public transport
- arts and music facilities
- health services e.g. doctors, hospitals, dentists
- schools
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Beyond the immediate community, educators need to be aware of the range of services and programs that exist in the immediate neighbourhood and wider community. Such services or programs may be utilised to support staff and families when particular needs or requirements are identified and building links with them is essential.

Providing some time for educators to meet with and share ideas with the wider community is viewed as an integral part of working in partnerships with families and community.

Some suggested strategies include:

- Educators may attempt to meet up once a term with other children's services Educators and teachers from nearby kindergartens and schools, so that a local community culture develops between these education professionals. Often at these times, valuable information can be shared between different services that are helpful to each other and the children and families within these services.

- Children and families all have particular cultural identities. These need to be supported, encouraged and acknowledged as an integral part of the child's identity. Accessing supports within the community that reflect awareness of particular cultural issues can strengthen the service and what is offered to children and families through the service. For example, a newly-arrived child and family may need some initial bilingual support to access information about the service operation, support networks and cultural groups within the service.

- Children and families may have additional needs that require accessing further support. For example, a child may develop a speech difficulty, a particular family health problem may impact upon the child, and unemployment or family issues may all require additional awareness and support. Working in isolation and not knowing about local supports places great strain upon educators working within a service and in addition, does not help support the child and family.

Listing additional supports or services and accessing specialist professionals is an integral part of the role of the educator. It is also important to remember that educators cannot be expected to know all the relevant services within a community. Local government children's services and the major state and federal government children's services departments are helpful starting points to access further information.

Self Help Question 2

How do you make information available to families about community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing? What type of information does this include?

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How do you collaborate with other organisations and service providers to enhance children's learning and wellbeing? What are the organisations?

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Has the service been involved in any community projects and/or events?
If so, what were the events/projects the service participated in and why?
If not, what community projects/events might you be able to participate in and why?

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Being responsive to community needs:

Demonstrating respect for families and community through community participation can be done in a variety of ways. Sometimes this is through the relationships you have with support networks and agencies, where you either facilitate the relationship or make the referral.

Responsive to community needs

- Ensure the service flyer is in languages commonly used in the community
- Gather feedback on the current hours of operation of the service to make sure the hours reflect the need
- Some services (particularly rural services) are able to provide transport to and/or from the service. This is usually organised in conjunction with a local council or community bus service
- Ensure food provided takes cultural needs into consideration
- Seek community feedback on the operation of the service – either through surveys or informal discussions, and scheduled meetings

High expectations for children, educators and service providers

The best interests of children and their right to learn and develop in a safe and nurturing environment is the primary consideration in all decision making at the service and is visible in the actions, interactions and daily work with children.

Programs that reflect best practice in the care, education and recreation of children set high standards and expectations for all those responsible for the delivery of the service. They have an open and accountable organisational culture that is flexible and responsive to the local community. They continually reflect on their practice to find ways to improve outcomes for children in their service.

DEEWR, 2009, p.10

Linking the Children's Service and the Community

Utilising external resources, people and experiences can be a bonus for curriculum decision making, and helps to engage the local community in the service.

Some children's services have actively engaged people from the local community such as:
- A local vet to share information and knowledge with children about different animals and the care required, including responsible pet ownership
- A local retired carpenter to help on particular projects such as, building a billy cart or a shed
- A tutor that is available for children who may require help with their school work
- A local person with gardening skills and interests to work with the children and service and to maintain gardens and vegetable patches
- Local sporting club representative to share skills and expertise or introduce a new games
- A local wildlife group to work with the service to build nest boxes, identify local wildlife or advise on appropriate planting for wildlife
- Guides or scouts from local troops to share some of their skills e.g. setting up tents, rope work

For people who are retired or who have time to donate, becoming part of the children's service may assist them to feel assured that their role in the community is valued. The additional help they provide is valuable for all educators, children and families. Furthermore, the relationships that other adults from the community build with the children in the service provide a range of age and social interaction experiences for children. This social interaction may have unique benefits, particularly for children who do not have grandparents or limited contact with grandparents, and helps to build a community of respect and trust across all ages.

Self Help Question 3

Identify five services or programs in your community, other than child care centres or kindergartens, that families may access or need to access.

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List three strategies that would assist educators to find out about the local community.

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How could educators access adults in the local community who may be interested in contributing their time or skills to the service?

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Acknowledging diversity and supporting families with additional needs

For many people Australia is a rich and broad cultural experience. Whilst some areas of Australia may not actually have children or families from other cultures all families reflect a diversity of values and cultures of their own. To foster positive relationships between services and families, and between educators working within the same service, it is important that culture is acknowledged, understood, celebrated and accepted as being integral to each individual's identity.

A narrow view of culture is defined simply by ethnic origin or a particular language spoken by a family. Culture is much more complex than this. religion, dress style, artistic expression, child rearing practices, language, songs and stories, food and dietary patterns, beliefs and interests are all part of who we are. These need to be viewed as the essence of what helps to make each child, family member and educator unique and worthy of respect. Misunderstandings can occur and may be the result of a lack of understanding or acknowledgement of a particular cultural aspect of an individual.

Valuing Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures

An approach that recognises and respects the strengths and contribution each individual and group makes to the Australian community and challenges bias, builds positive relationships and responds sensitively to the particular needs of each child and their family.

Such an approach values Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as a core part of the nation's history, present and future. This is relevant for all services, not only services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children and families enrolled in the service.

DEEWR, 2009, p.10

It is important that diversity of culture and values in any children's service is actively embraced. This active engagement is not just about displaying different implements or celebrating different festivals, although this may be part of demonstrating and reflecting an interest. Embracing diversity is more involved and should include a range of strategies.

Respecting and embracing diversity in an inclusive way requires all educators to revisit their own values, prejudices and ensure that their own stereotyped images of culture or religion are considered carefully. The children's service should have a policy of inclusion to inform and support educators and on-going discussion or training may assist in clarifying individual values that educators in the service have.

Self Help Question 4

Consider some of your own perceptions about particular cultures. What are those ideas based on? What do you really know about people from a particular culture? Why do you think stereotyped images become part of a community's thinking?

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List three strategies that you think could help educators to accept and respect each other more consistently

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List five strategies to promote a proactive approach to cultural inclusion.

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Conclusion

Promoting effective partnerships with the community requires a professional approach and awareness that working with families is not just about helping children to settle into the children's service. An educator's role extends to consideration of the child in relation to the family and the family in relation to the community. Consideration of family and child partnerships also recognises that each child and family will at times present with additional needs, concerns or ideas that require responsive and supportive educators. Active promotion of the service and inviting the community in is an important part of the children's services/educators role.

It is vital to recognise that links with the immediate and wider community are an integral part of the service's program planning and delivery. Educators should work actively to promote connections with the community, invite others to share their interests and expertise and demonstrate inclusive practice in all respects.

The rights of the child are paramount

Each child has the right to be an active member of the community in which they live; to have their individual and cultural identity recognised and respected; to express their opinions and have their views considered in any decisions that may affect them.

The National Quality Standard reflects Australia's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the obligation of all those who work with children to protect children from harm, respect their dignity and privacy and safeguard and promote every child's wellbeing.

DEEWR, 2009, p.10

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Assessment Task

1. Describe four strategies on how you have been able to, or might be able to support a family with a child with additional needs.

2. Write a paragraph giving three examples of how your service has worked, or could work closely with the wider community.

3. This question has two parts. If you do not have similar arrangements in place at your service to complete this question, you may need to undertake additional research in your community.

   Part A: Provide the contact details for 3 services in the community that you or your service has established links with to support children and their families. Briefly discuss what strategies you used to develop these links and relationships with these support agencies, and why they were selected, and describe what the process is for taking or making a referral to other services/agencies. Briefly describe how you would promote these links at your service.

   Part B: Choose one of the services/agencies identified in Discuss one example of collaboration with other professionals working in one of the services/agencies in developing compatible support strategies for a family.