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Community Partnerships in Child Care



by Melody Redbird-Post

Children laugh as they use the oversized toothbrush to scrub the large teeth of the silly horse puppet. The dental hygienist and assistants gladly hold up the puppet for the children to practice brushing on and share responses to children's questions. When the time is up and the children's teachers start to transition the children to get ready for lunch, the children say, "Awww." They want more! On their way out of the classroom, the dental hygienist and her assistant give the teachers enough goodie bags for each child to take home a new toothbrush, floss, and a mini toothpaste tube along with a brochure on dental care for preschool-aged children.

This experience would not be possible if it were not for strong community partnerships. The child care center and the dentist's office have collaborated over the years to bring this experience to children who attend the center during national children's dental health month in February.



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Children's voices float over the air as teachers count their students to make sure they have everyone. The parade begins and hundreds of children walk proudly forward, waving flags and carrying banners that signify their center, program, or school. After walking four blocks, the students form lines at the local high school gymnasium where each class is checked in and children are given canvas bags to carry their finds. Lining the inside of the gym are dozens of tables, each manned by volunteers, and each providing games, activities, and information about their various agencies and organizations. These events are part of the local Week of the Young Child activities and would not be possible without the collaborations between child care providers and their community partners.

A mother and toddler watch as the father buckles his infant snugly in the infant car seat in the backseat of their car, while a certified child passenger safety technician talks about ensuring the shoulder straps are secure and the chest plate is just below shoulder level. The father asks questions about the car's seatbelt and the technician explains how to ensure the car seat is secure. After verifying that the infant is properly strapped in, the technician praises the father on his newly honed car seat installation skills. As the mother and toddler join the father and infant in the car, the technician gives

the parents a brochure on the stages of car seat use according to weight and age so they know when to transition their toddler from a rear-facing car seat to a forward-facing car seat and when to move the infant from the infant carrier car seat into a rear-facing convertible car seat.

The child care facility where the family enrolled their infant and toddler has set up a free car seat check event where local certified child passenger safety technicians conduct car seat checks and support parents in properly installing their children's car seats. This opportunity is possible because the center director has established strong community partnerships with the local injury prevention coalition as well as their state Safe Kids coalition, so car seat events could be held free of charge to parents whose children attend the child care facility.

These three examples are just a few of the myriad of ways that child care providers can partner with local programs. The children who received visits from the dentist's office for dental health month loved the enrichment and unique lesson. The children who participated in the Week of the Young Child parade and community fair experienced firsthand the importance of community helpers and had some fun at the same time. The children who attend

Photo courtesy of the author

the child care center where the free car seat event was conducted now ride in their car seats safely while their parents have confidence that their children will be protected during car rides. Each demonstrate the power of partnerships as avenues to increase positive outcomes for children.

How did these partnerships first begin? Where can child care providers start? What can teachers do to enrich their classroom environment? What can family child care providers do to leverage their child care income? What can center directors do to meet the needs of the families and children who attend their center?

One place to start is to get to know the community where the child care provider is located. Child care providers do not operate in isolation; rather, they are an integral part of their community. Centers and homes alike benefit from exploring their community and getting to know the various agencies and services available to young children and their families. One way to get to know the community is through conducting a community needs assessment. While this might sound daunting, a community needs assessment is a way to get to know the child care provider's community. As part of the community needs assessment, child care providers can reach out to different community agencies and programs as they collect information on services provided, as well as how families can access those services.

Finding information on community resources can be as simple as conducting an internet search, exploring a website, or reading through the yellow pages of a local telephone directory. Once contact information is located, the child care provider can give the agency a call or drop in for a visit. After explaining the purpose for collecting information on local programs, the child care provider initiates the process of building a partnership. Over time, the child care

provider collects valuable information which can then be provided to families as a way to address needs that might arise.

Some states—including Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Alaska, Michigan, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Washington, Wisconsin, Delaware, New Mexico, Minnesota, and Oklahoma—require child care providers to develop and distribute local community resource directories to parents of children served. This requirement is usually part of the state's child care licensing requirements and Quality Rating and Improvement System. In order to demonstrate high-quality care, child care providers in these states must provide these community resource directories to enrolled families. The community resource directory can be developed as the community needs assessment process unfolds. As the provider reaches out to different agencies in the community, they can gather contact information, details on what services are provided, and information on how families can access services. Each community agency is then listed in a directory-style document that includes agency contact information and services provided. Many community resource directories are presented as a list and are separated by type of service, such as behavioral health services, dental services, and emergency assistance services. Once the directory is compiled, providers can place a copy in each child's cubby and display the directory in a prominent place where families can see it and grab a copy. For the families who receive the community resource directory, this information can be a bridge between the family and services that they need.

In addition to state child care licensing and state QRIS requirements, national accreditation agencies also include requirements around building strong community partnerships. The National Association for the Education of Young



Children's Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation, the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs, the National Association for Family Child Care Accreditation, the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation, and the Council on Accreditation Child and Youth Development Accreditation all require child care providers to establish partnerships with local community agencies.

For center directors and family home providers, building strong community partnerships can also be an effective way to leverage the child care dollars that the facility brings in. Additionally, some federally-funded programs, such as Head Start and Child Care Development Fund, include provisions that require grantees to build community partnerships as a means to leverage resources and support providers who serve the low-income children and families who qualify for these programs. Regardless of the requirement or funding stream, child care providers who build strong commu-

nity partnerships go above and beyond to meet the needs of all families and children served by connecting families to resources that they may not be aware of.

When thinking about getting started, child care providers can utilize the collaboration pyramid as a tool for proceeding in partnership building. The collaboration pyramid is a model promoted by both the federal Office of Head Start and Office of Child Care. In this model, the stages of partnership building are explained. Partnerships begin with cooperation; each partner gets to

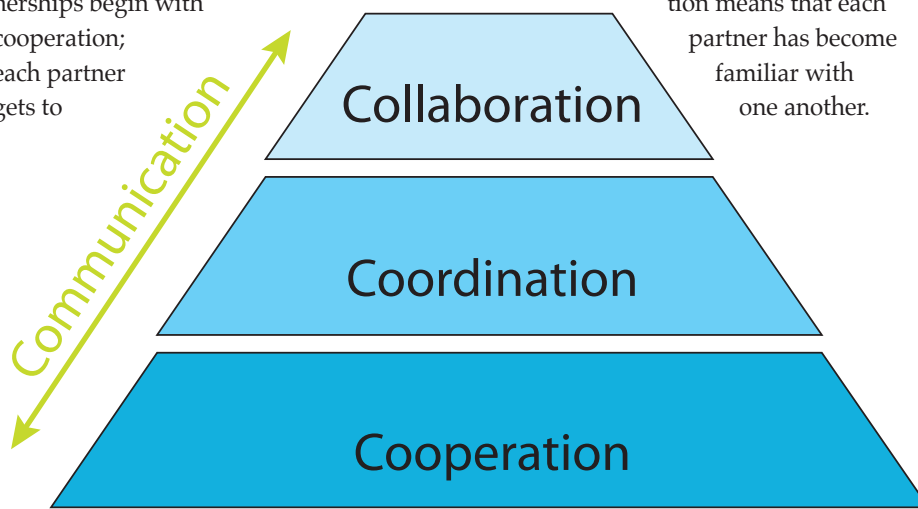
know the other and develops an understanding of services provided. After cooperation, the partnership might be formalized through a written partnership agreement, or it might remain informal, through verbal ties between child care provider and community agency.

Every partnership benefits from a strong foundation of communication and mutual understanding. Once the cooperation phase is in motion, the next phase begins. Coordination comes after

cooperation. Coordination means that each partner has become familiar with one another.

In the coordination phase, each partner works together to meet the needs of the community and families served. Examples of coordination include conducting a staff training with both provider and agency staff present or planning to host a community fair together.

Most partnerships remain in the coordination phase. However, in cases where there is a great need or where a more focused approach is needed, collaboration becomes necessary. As the third and highest stage in community partnership building, collaboration means that both partners develop a common vision and common purpose. Collaboration also means that each partner will share financial, legal, and leadership responsibilities. As collaboration unfolds, each partner will work together towards their common vision as they implement activities that help fulfill their common purpose. (More information and resources about the collaboration pyramid and building partnerships can be found on the Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance



Potential Community Partners

- Schools
- Libraries
- Parks and recreation services
- Cultural institutions
- Museums
- Local businesses
- Faith-based institutions
- After-school programs
- Public health nurses
- Mental health providers
- Emergency or crisis assistance services (food, housing, clothing, transportation)
- Child and family counseling agencies
- Services for at-risk families (substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence)
- Nutrition services
- Health care providers
- Local physicians
- Local dentists
- Other health professionals
- Agencies providing services to special needs children
- Child protective services agencies
- Adult education programs
- Employment services and training programs
- Local fire department
- Local police department
- Local health department (County/ State Health Department)
- Agencies that provide developmental screenings

System website located in the resources section.)

When deciding who to partner with, it is helpful to know the needs of the families and children served. Child care providers often learn about families' needs by observation or conversations with families when they drop off or pick up their children. Some child care providers even give families an annual parent survey to complete. The information gathered from informal conversations or from survey data can help child care providers identify the needs of their families, which can indicate a good place to start building partnerships. By demonstrating responsiveness to families' needs, child care providers are taking that extra step to improve child and family well-being. Once families' needs are identified, these needs can be matched up with the local community agencies identified in the community resource directory development process. Then, as community agencies and child care providers build partnerships, they can plan and conduct activities and events that will address the needs of children and families served. Whether they provide enriching learning experiences or much needed resources, strong community partnerships have the potential to strengthen positive outcomes for children and families.

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National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs.

Available at: www.earlylearningleaders.org/?page=accreditation

National Association for the Education of Young Children's Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation. Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/accreditation>

National Association for Family Child Care Accreditation. Available at: <https://www.nafcc.org/>

National Database of Child Care Licensing Regulations. Available at: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/licensing>

National Early Childhood Program Accreditation. Available at: <http://necpa.net/>

National Program Standards Crosswalk Tool. Available at: <https://qrisguide.acf.hhs.gov/crosswalk/>

The Collaboration Pyramid. Available at: https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/quilt_collaborationpyramid_0.pdf

Resources

Community Needs Assessment. Five Steps to Community Assessment. Available at: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/program-planning/article/five-steps-community-assessment-workbook-head-start-early-head-start>

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Quality Rating and Improvement System Resource Guide. Available at: <https://qrisguide.acf.hhs.gov/index.cfm?do=home>

Quality Compendium. Available at: <https://qualitycompendium.org/>

The Collaboration Pyramid. Available at: https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/quilt_collaborationpyramid_0.pdf

