

Engaging with families at Canning Vale Prekindy

The following case study has been created by the [Canning Vale Prekindy](#) team to demonstrate how they engage with families and the benefits of this interaction for children's education outcomes.

Summary

Our service found that engaging with families early on and connecting in a variety of ways had a positive impact on the quality of relationships that lead to long-lasting partnerships and ongoing community connections. We now have a community of families that have stayed with us well after their children transitioned to school. They assist our new families, engage with and comment on our pages, return for all our events, and even ask us when our next one will be! Once a CVPK family – Always a CVPK family.

Early Years Learning Framework – Principle 2: Partnerships

Partnerships are based on the foundation of understanding each other's expectations and attitudes and build on the strengths of each other's knowledge.

National Quality Standard – Quality Area 6

This quality area recognises (among other things) that collaborative partnerships with families contribute to building a strong, inclusive community within the service.

Overview

Canning Vale Prekindy, located in Western Australia, is a community-based prekindergarten for 3-year-olds to attend in the year prior to attending kindergarten. We are both independent and not-for-profit and can cater for up to 18 children. We began in 2008 as an initiative of families with young children who lived in the local area, who were looking for a sessional program for their 3-year-olds. Children are enrolled in a group that attends one or two 3-hour morning sessions each week on set days. The prekindy is managed by a committee of parents, staff and community members.



Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

We find that engaging in an interactive, fun way not only interests the children, but is also highly valued among families. We focus on shared passions and love for 'nature and nurture'. For example, each year we plant seed potatoes as part of our food cycle project. Every child receives a seed potato to take home and plant, along with simple documentation on how to grow the potato at home (even without a garden). We take regular photos of the growth of the plants at our service and invite families to do the same and share theirs. Together we problem solve, share our inquiries, experiment, brainstorm through any issues that arise and celebrate achievements along the way. After harvest, we share potato recipes, particularly focusing on recipes children can take part in, and recipes that reflect the diverse range of family cultures. Harvested potatoes are shared with any families who either did not take part or did not have success with their batch.

Another example of family engagement and learning at home is the 'grower's basket', shared among families. We add food from our own garden to the basket, and families are also encouraged to contribute, particularly when they produce more than they can use. We also harvest and add to the basket from our bush tucker garden to encourage families to try something new. We have had many fruits and herbs from families' gardens that we have never heard of or seen before!

Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning and development

We focus on building early relationships with families before they even begin their enrolment. From the moment they join our waitlist, they are invited to be part of our family and participate in community events, information sessions and workshops. By following us on social media, prospective families can access important information about children's learning and development, and share individual experiences and community updates with us. Prospective families are also able to connect with our existing families, receive advice, ask questions and collaborate. It works much like a 'buddy system' for families and their children, with input from us as educators. Through all of this, we share our passion for play-based learning and connection to nature and environment.

We have found that we need to use a range of different methods of communication, as there is no one way that works for all families. Through our various communication platforms, we share details of what the children have been engaging with and what their current interests are. We include ideas and simple ways for families to continue the learning in these areas at home. We share recipes we have cooked with the children, words and expressions we are exploring, and even voice recordings and videos



to help really bring the experiences to life. Parents have been enthusiastic about learning songs and words in Noongar, the local First Nations language. Through this learning, parents and children are beginning to understand more of what they are hearing when Elders speak at local community events.

We have also noticed that more and more families are sharing the ways they are incorporating sustainability practices at home. Social media is one popular way that learning at home is communicated to the service. It is a delight seeing families using this information and continuing the learning at home; for example, by collecting soft plastics from recycling and re-using water from washing the dishes.

Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

Knowing how important it is that children's home environment is literacy-rich, we brainstormed ways for us to support that. Many families do not drive, so do not regularly visit the local library. To address this, we introduced a 'book swap' with the idea children and parents donate a book from home that they have finished enjoying and take home one someone else has left. It is run as an honour system, and we simply provide the box/basket and a few books to get the system started. From time to time, more books are taken than are given, but just as often families bring in more than one book to share. Overall, the project has been a great success. The children get excited when they see another child selecting a book they



have donated, leading to discussions between children about that book. Something we did not expect to come from this project was the sharing of culture. One family donated a favourite book that the children were all very familiar with (Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*) that was written in their home language. This book became one that was returned and reshared many times, with children and families being fascinated to experience a favourite in a new language.

Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

We recognise that the COVID lockdown period has been difficult for many families. During lockdown we discussed with families the idea of a home learning program and invited them to share their thoughts based on their individual situations and needs. We identified two aims for the program:

1. Ensuring children continue to engage in valuable learning experiences during lockdowns.
2. Keeping families and children connected with educators, the service and each other.

The program consisted of videos, individual engagement ideas for children and 'family challenges.' Some families also asked for live interaction sessions a few times a week through a virtual platform. Families provided feedback along the way of what they found most useful, what else they needed and also shared their own ideas. One of the most popular tasks that continued through the whole 8-week lockdown was the 'tower challenge'. Who knew you build a tower from so many different things? Blocks, cushions, bananas, paper cups and people! Stacks on! There were many conversations about which items were the easiest or most difficult to build into towers and why, and which were the most fun!

We have recently revived the program into a group of resources that are readily available on our digital platform for families, should they isolate. The program includes a series of recordings, videos and a range of simple and practical experiences that are built into daily routines, both at home and at a service. We've found that families are accessing it even when they are not isolating. They are now

asking us to add ideas, recipes, songs and stories that we are using in our sessions, so that they can follow up and incorporate these at home! Resources parents particularly asked for were the song we sing to acknowledge Country and the 'goodbye song', which is every child's favourite. The song we sing to acknowledge Country is sung in Noongar language with 4 words used in Welcome to Country ceremonies. We have had many families share their excitement at recognising these words at community events.

Where next?

Feedback from families in our yearly survey has changed since we made family engagement a focus of our quality improvement plan. Rather than simply focusing on the strengths and areas for improvement in relation to their child or administrative processes, they are commenting on the impact the service has had on them, without having been asked that question: 'A strength of the service is the sense of community of all families involved'; 'Coming from a different family background we were welcomed beautifully'.

This has motivated us to continue to seek more ways to continue to foster this. We are currently setting up teams of parents with interests or expertise to help with various projects that do not require huge time commitments but contribute building connections between families, and between families and our service. Our Recycling and Sustainability team is particularly eager to get going with their ideas.

'A strength of the service is the sense of community of all families involved'

Our tip

Notice which families engage the least and focus on reaching them. Use a mixture of platforms. We find that families with languages other than English as their home language have their own translation applications and prefer digital communication. Other families have limited time for logging into apps or do not engage with social media and prefer posters and printed copies.



Reflection questions

Educators and teachers

- What opportunities do you provide for families to network and support each other?
- How do you incorporate shared values and beliefs in your service?

Service leaders

- What strategies do you use to communicate and engage with individual families?