

# Community partnerships and the benefits of learning through play



**This month we hear from Nominated Supervisors, Ona Buckley and Daniel Betts, Preschool Supervisor, Michelle Williams and Early Childhood Teacher, Whitney Williams from Guliyali Preschool.**

**Recently awarded the Excellent rating by ACECQA, the NSW Central Coast based service shares learnings from their longstanding partnership with residents of a local retirement village, part of their Ageless Play Program.**

Partnerships are embedded in every aspect of our practice at Guliyali Preschool. Engaging meaningfully with our community promotes understanding and provides a genuine opportunity for relationship-building and collaboration. We have developed strong

partnerships with many different organisations, colleagues and community members to enhance educational programs for our children and our service as a whole. These reciprocal relationships provide an opportunity to learn from each other, share ideas and plan for continuous improvement.

At Guliyali Preschool, our community engagement programs are meaningful, authentic and mutually beneficial. Our longest running community partnership project has been with the Living Choice Deepwater Court retirement village residents who engage in our Ageless Play Program that has been running consistently for six years.

Our relationship with the Deep Water Court retirement village sprouted from a conversation with a new family over 10 years ago. The family had recently moved into our local area away from their support network. The mother mentioned to an educator that her child was finding the move challenging as he missed the interactions with his elderly neighbours and grandparents. To support this family the educator made contact with the local retirement village and organised a visit. To begin with, the visits were only once a term, however as the relationships grew the partnership organically grew into monthly and now weekly visits. Each year we reflect on the partnership and the feedback from our families and children overwhelmingly supports us continuing these beautiful weekly connections.

### **Mutual benefits**

‘We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.’

*George Bernard Shaw*

Our Ageless Play community members, many of them retired school teachers, have unique strengths that we draw on to create programs that are inspiring and rewarding for everyone involved. The project has mutual benefits for the children in our service, the residents in the village and for our wider community. Through this program children learn the importance of providing friendship and companionship to others, regardless of whether they are significantly older or younger than themselves. The program enables our children to develop positive attitudes towards the elderly and to feel comfortable around those with disabilities and impairments. The retirement village coordinator reports that these visits help the residents break up their everyday routine, reduce feelings of isolation associated with ageing, and allows participants to rekindle relationships with the broader community.

### **Reciprocal relationships**

Our programs evolve to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Our Ageless Play program seeks to bring together various generations through a range of play opportunities, supporting communities and nurturing relationships. All key stakeholders are empowered throughout the delivery of the program as their voices are respected and heard. Children and residents of the village contribute to decision making within the group by making decisions on what activities to participate in. Educators benefit from the residents’ expertise and residents gain an increase in self-esteem and emotional and social wellbeing, reconnecting them with their community. Our Ageless Play partnership evolved and endured despite the visitation and communication challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The program was strengthened during the pandemic, and we were able to break down the restriction barriers by using

technology to send video messages as well as traditional communication methods such as letter writing to maintain our relationships with the residents.

**Here are some strategies that we think could help services who are thinking about how to build their community engagement and partnerships:**

### **1. Build local knowledge**

Become familiar with your local community and the available resources and organisations with whom you can share experiences with. Take the time to visit places in the community that are easily accessible or invite members from local community groups into your service to share their knowledge and skills. Engage in authentic and respectful community celebrations that will build children's understanding of their community and their respect for diversity.

### **2. Get involved!**

Be a part of everything – become informed of community agencies in your area and reach out to local organisations that may also be looking to build a community partnership. Seeking the support and advice of community agencies such as libraries, Senior Citizen Associations, Rotary Clubs and Lions Clubs may assist in providing links that can be nurtured and developed into long lasting relationships.

### **3. Think broadly**

Consult with stakeholders. Many families, educators, teachers and/or staff have links to community groups that would be happy to form community connections with children's education and care services. There are a myriad of ways and opportunities for children to feel a sense of belonging in, contributing to, and influencing their world.

### **4. Critically reflect**

Spend time reflecting on your sense of community and think about how it has been informed. Reflecting on what community means to you and the service can enrich decision making, increase awareness of influences and bias and provide goals for continuous community improvement projects.

**What has helped guide and support your community partnerships?**

### **Living our values**

Our service philosophy and vision remind us daily of our role in the community, it inspires us and provides direction and purpose. Visual representations of our philosophy around our preschool outline the purpose and principles under which we operate. It's a tool to assist with the navigation towards our continuous improvement.

### **Communicate widely and effectively**

Effective means of communication aids in shared decision making for children. As educators, we must be givers of information but also receivers. Communication is integral in building relationships and engaging with others to create connected communities. We recognise that this comes in many forms: verbal, non-verbal, online, newsletters, informal and formal meetings and social media platforms. We are mindful of first languages and take a 'not a one size fits all approach' when communicating with our community.

## **Recognise the experts within**

Learn about your colleagues' hidden areas of expertise, your families' special skills and community resources that might benefit your program. Reach out to other children's education and care services in your community. Acknowledging and recognising these 'hidden experts' identifies opportunities to initiate and establish community connections and collaborations.

## **Interested in finding out more?**

The Ageless Play Program is just one of many community-based partnerships and exceptional practices recognised in the awarding of the Excellent rating to Gulyali Preschool. Read more about their practices on the ACECQA [Excellent Rating page](#).

Read more about [Gulyali Preschool](#), which is situated within the grounds of Woy Woy Public School. Gulyali Preschool invites interested children's education and care services to connect and share practice.

Looking to get involved with Ageless Play? Learn more about intergenerational programs [here](#).