

*We have all heard the old saying that it “takes a village to rear a child.” This article looks at ways of involving our village, whatever and wherever that village may be.*

Each and every childcare service exists in a community... it may be urban or rural, it may be in a residential development or a commercial business park location, it may be in a workplace or school or college. The community within which your service is located is your village.

It is important for the children and staff in the childcare service to feel part of that broader community and it is also important for the community to know that childcare service is there, so that both can mutually support each other and give a sense of connectedness. This will help give children and the importance of childhood visibility in the community and reinforce to everyone the importance of high quality early childhood experiences.

Siolta Standard 16 is devoted to Community Involvement, saying “promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adults and children’s engagement with the wider community”.

Similarly Aistear, in the Exploring and Thinking Theme, Aim 1 Learning Goal 2 says “In partnership with the adult the child will demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community.”

In the Identity and Belonging Theme Aim 2 says “Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended. Learning Goal 5 suggests that children need to “see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area including some of its places features and people.” The Learning Goal 6 of the same Aim says that children should “understand the different roles of people in the community.”

So looking at practical ways in which these goals and standards can be achieved.

Outings are a key way of children seeing their community. Outings can be simple walks or more adventurous trips. It is vital to have a clear detailed policy and procedure outlining where walks and trips will occur, the destinations, the ratios that will be in place and agreements for first aid and mobile phones etc. It is also essential that your insurance company is aware of outings. As it is obviously important that there is a low adult: child ratio when you are leaving the service, consider having walks at quiet times where ratios are lower, ask parents to be involved and also students. The National Standards for Preschools 5.17 accepts that students may be included in the ratios for outings (but not within the service). A general rule is 1:3 and it is a good idea to have an extra adult to oversee head counts, administer first aid if needed and to be there an extra pair of hands. However, it is important to tailor the ratio to the age and temperament of the children taking part. In some instances, with older children, e.g. school age children it may be possible to have a higher ratio, once your insurance company has agreed to this. Also, in a case where a playground is adjacent to the preschool service and no roads have to be crossed it may be

possible to have a higher ratio, but in all instances it is important to ensure that the health and safety of the children is the paramount concern.

Walks can take place to the local library, to a nearby park, to a building site (to observe through the safety railing) or to a local school. The destinations depend on distance. In a rural area it may be to see newly born calves or lambs, if the local roads are safe and suitable for the children. In a college or school setting it may be to look at an art exhibition or to a concert.

Other ideas for walks to link with the community are to local places of interest: the Town Hall, the Courthouse, a local bakery (at quiet times when ovens are cool), the Garda station, local places of worship etc. Parents may be very happy to have their child and some friends visit their workplace, if it is close enough to walk to.

A walk in the dusk can be exciting for children, if you are located in a well lit area with footpaths, even a short walk to the end of the road can provide a wealth of discussion. Have high visibility jackets for adults and staff. On summer evenings when numbers drop a similar walk can be fun also.

When walking and afterwards ask the children what they saw, what they thought and provide for their learning to be extended by providing equipment relevant to the destination in your role play or construction area. For example, if you go to see new calves ensure there are some toy calves and photos in the farm area. Take lots of photographs and display them afterwards, describing to parents what children learned and discussed on the walk. Laminate the photos and bind as a book and put in the book area. These displays and books help to stimulate discussion, aid reflection and retention of new thoughts and also help children recall afterwards where they went and what they saw. These are all vital skills in learning.

In recognising the benefit of walks from the service to explore the community, we acknowledge that for some services this can be challenging, perhaps due to difficulties with ratios, suitability of the road network etc. In these instances, you need to investigate how you can bring the community in!

Ask parents to visit to talk about their job, very simply and to bring whatever props etc the children may enjoy. This could be anything ranging from a Nurse, a Hairdresser, a Garda, a Farmer, a Baker, a Doctor, a Chef. These experiences really enhance children's learning and also promote a great sense of Identity and Belonging. Other parents may like to read a story (especially in other languages), prepare food for tasting, play a musical instrument or demonstrate a skill e.g. knitting or drawing.

Ask the local Garda to call in, support children to develop friendships with the refuse collectors, people delivering food and other supplies or other visitors to the centre. If there is building work going on in or near your service ask the tradespeople to call, with their tools and explain to children what they do. Local Youth Groups might be interested in doing a collaborative project on

a craft activity, gardening or music. A local theatre group might do a mini panto or do some face painting with the children. Local Doctors and Nurses could bring equipment, leaflets and so on. The local Fire Brigade is always a big hit, as is a tractor or lorry. Obviously when bringing big equipment to your service you need to ensure that there is a large place to park where children are safe from traffic and that children are safely escorted, in small numbers to and from the Fire Engine

When you have events such as parent's evenings, Christmas Concerts ask local papers to cover these events. This can serve a promotional purpose also.

Remember Child Protection Guidelines by never allowing any visitor unsupervised access to children and ensuring that volunteers are vetted.

These suggestions apply to all ages, not just preschool and should be adapted to ensure that all children can participate, in a developmentally appropriate way.

Máire Corbett

Advisory Team Leader