Outside School Hours Care services do not exist in isolation from the surrounding community – the links that children, staff and families have with people, groups and organisations are important in helping to create a support network for the service and families alike.

Building community links is about developing relationships, working together, promoting communication, sharing, co-operating and interacting with others.

**DEFINING COMMUNITY**

Primarily a community is a group of people who have a common connection. This may be through the area they live in, those they live with, the laws they abide by, the work they do or common goals or culture. The community you link with can be local or it may extend beyond the borders of your suburb.

**YOUR COMMUNITY CAN INCLUDE:**

- Local schools
- Local clubs and organisations such as cultural, sporting, PCYC, YMCA, Scouting, service clubs etc.
- Churches and their various activities.
- Local Councils and all their services such as libraries, community buildings and facilities, parks and playing fields etc.
- Other Government agencies and operations, such as RTA, transport services, SES, fire and ambulance stations etc.
- Community service support agencies such as Inclusion support, parenting support groups, counselling services, health centres etc.
- Local artists, cultural groups, performers etc.
- Local activity groups, such as dance groups, gymnastics, art classes, walking groups etc.
- Local businesses
- Other OOSH and child care services

**Families and friends in and around the service**

**Your neighbourhood**

**STEPS TO BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY LINKS**

**Make sure that your community knows about you**

- Blow your own trumpet! People are more likely to want to get involved with your centre and help if they know who you are and what you are doing. Get the local press to cover any events or special activities at the centre and work at developing a relationship with the editor of your local newspaper to get as much free publicity as possible.

- Have printed information about your service available to hand out to prospective users, other community organisations/workers and local government departments etc.

- Organise a community fun-day, sausage sizzle, festival or concert to publicise your centre or get involved in ones that are being organised in your local area or school.

- Advertise your Vacation Care Programs on local radio/newspapers.
★ Have a large sign outside the centre so everyone knows where you are located, the contact details and operating hours

Find out what’s out there
★ Try looking in your local Yellow Pages or Community directory under Clubs and Societies, or even in the ‘what’s happening’ or ‘community events’ page in your local paper. You’ll be surprised at the kind of things that are happening in your area. Some clubs or groups may be interested in enlightening children on their area of interest and may offer interesting Vacation Care activity ideas (such as bushwalking, cultivating wildflowers, sports skills, photography, drawing etc.). Cultural clubs are also listed and may be very helpful when researching for international days
★ Speak to your nearest library as they will have a wealth of knowledge about local happenings, groups and events
★ Look on your local council website for community events and contacts

Create a database of local resources
Develop a folder of information on local excursions, performers, artists, storytellers, cultural groups etc. so that in the future there is a database to turn to for planning and programming. This could be done in conjunction with other community groups to share the knowledge and help everyone to get more out of their community.

Liaise with other organisations
Approach other community organisations in your area with information about your service to see if they are interested in getting involved in the centre activities.
★ They may have valuable resources to share, such as a minibus, big screen televisions, karaoke machines etc. Try your local community transport organisation if there is one, or clubs and councils in your area
★ The Centre for Volunteering has branches across the Sydney metropolitan area and rural NSW - they could put you in touch with talented people with time to offer
★ Service Clubs (Lions, Rotary, Apex etc.) may be useful fundraising partners for the centre

Network with other OOSH centres in your area
★ There are regional meetings happening all over the State that you could get involved with to share resources and ideas (call the OOSH Development desk for further information). If there is currently no group meeting in your area Network can help you to get one started
★ Get together to plan a special event such as a fun-day or festival. You could also team up to lower costs of excursions or having entertainers etc. visit the centre
★ Other centres may have resources that you do not and vice versa. Sharing these could be a good way of increasing the skills, tools, time and activities available to your centre
★ Have a staff swap for a day, you may find staff pick up valuable information and resources from each other, as well as stimulate the kids with new ideas

Involve the parents
★ Encouraging parents to get involved can bring a wealth of resources to the service. Bearing in mind that first impressions count, make sure that parents are made aware of how they can get involved.
★ Make communicating with parents a priority for staff – it is only possible to tap into what parents know and do if there are open channels of communication
★ Family members are also a useful resource for making up child/carer ratio on excursions, and inviting parents/families along is a fun way of increasing their involvement with the centre
★ Make families aware of what kind of resources the centre needs by distributing a newsletter or wish list prior to Christmas and other special days
★ Find out what special interests or hobbies they have and may want to share with the children
★ Don’t forget other generations, linking with grandparents; aunts, uncles, older siblings etc. can also develop interesting and more varied contacts

Involve the children
Being connected with the community encourages children to see the benefits of making positive contributions to the lives of others. For example, by participating in local fundraising events, children can see the value of their efforts in raising funds to assist groups or individuals in need. Consider the following questions:
★ What interests and needs do the children have that could be supported by local organisations or professionals in the community?
★ What community events are taking place that the children could participate in?
★ What council services are available that the service could utilise?
★ What special features of the surrounding environment could be used to enhance the children’s experience at the service? For example, parks and recreation facilities.

Involve local businesses
Many businesses are willing to provide assistance to local childcare services, but too often they are not given the opportunity. The tip is to get the courage to simply ask. Consider personal contact, carefully constructed formal requests - even letters from the
kids with pictures that may support your cause. Don’t just think ‘hand out’, consider various ways that you can utilise their skills or expertise or find other avenues for their support.

**Some ways local businesses may provide support:**

- Sponsoring the service by paying for t-shirts/rash vests to be printed with both their and the centre’s logo
- Donating equipment in exchange for advertising within the centre newsletter
- Donating prizes to help in fundraising
- Displaying or distributing centre publicity materials
- Offering low cost/free excursions. For example, a local restaurant might let the children make and eat pizza; a local factory, TV or radio station might organise a behind the scenes tour
- Donation of clean, safe industrial waste available for the centre to use as craft materials, for example, timber off cuts, picture framing cardboard, etc.
- Other donations depending on their business, for example, fruit, vegetables, bakeries, etc.

**MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION**

It is important to maintain communication with all your community contacts.

- Consider various advertising methods to increase general awareness
- Develop ongoing communication methods with the school, your parents and the kids. Consider meetings with the principal, family information nights, kids information sessions, centre newsletters (the older kids may like to get their teeth stuck into this one, get them to develop the format and content and lease a section for centre or coordinator news) Newsletters could be for families or even one just for the kids.
- Always follow up any support for the centre, attendance at the centre or excursions you have undertaken with a thankyou or appreciation certificate.
- Set up display and information boards.
- Provide an area for information relating to local resources, information flyers (local health centres have many good ones along with your local doctors) and upcoming community events. This doesn’t have to be expensive, clear hanging plastic shoe holders do the job well.

**CHECKLIST**

- What connections does the service already have?
- How does the service make information about itself available to the community? Is this information available in other languages?
- How does the service find out about and attempt to meet the needs of the local & surrounding community? For example, are the service’s hours of operation relevant to the local school hours and local transport times?
- Which people in the local community could be invited to have input to the service program, policies and practices?
- How are children encouraged to participate in local community activities?
- What local places could staff and children visit?
- What community events could the service participate in?
- How do staff network and collaborate with community organisations to meet the needs of families?
- What professional support groups are available for staff to participate in?
- Do staff know about and refer families to local professionals that can support children and families at the service?
- Do staff seek advice and work with other professionals to assist children with additional needs?
- Are other professionals invited to speak with children, staff and families about health and education?
- Are family members encouraged to participate in activities at the service?
- Are family members encouraged to provide feedback on the service’s program and policies?

**OTHER RELEVANT OOSH DEVELOPMENT FACTSHEETS**

- Family Handbooks
- Family Involvement
- Publicity
- Volunteers