



Nimmi Woods

**Early Intervention Educator, Connect Child and Family Services
Inc, Katoomba (NSW)**



Building relationships and working with families became a passion of mine early in my career. I remember when I first started teaching and was in my early twenties, I did my very first home visit to meet with a family. I realised in retrospect that I had gone along with preconceived ideas about who this family was and what life was like for them. It was during the visit, when I got chatting to the little boy's mum, that my understanding of the issues they were facing as a family started to change. From then on, I knew that we can't see children in isolation—to understand and empathise with a child, it is essential to be connected to and have an understanding of their family. And yet, this cannot be taken for granted. This connection takes time and needs to be worked at, you cannot assume a family will want that connection or perceive a 'need' for it. It is always a two-way reciprocal agreement.

I like a family-centred and community approach to building relationships with families, and programming in my teaching role is an important part of this. Programming, recording observations of children and sharing them with their families has always been important to me, both from the perspective of being an educator and perhaps more significantly as a means of sharing and exchanging information about a child with their family. Parents have always really enjoyed and appreciated receiving information about what their child does at childcare, what they are interested in and how they play and learn. I have always found that sharing these observations is a great springboard to making those all important connections with families. Programming also helps me to reflect on where a child is 'at' and I have often felt what may be best described as a 'joyous privilege' at being able to record their progress or their responses to their play and then share them with their families.

To build relationships with the families in my current workplace I need to allow for time and never expect that any aspect of this relationship building can be hurried. It's important that I attend playgroups and workshops on a regular basis so that families can identify me, know me by name and just 'see' me there each week or fortnight. I need to be approachable and accessible and this comes down to how I present myself. I try not to push lots of information onto families, and I need to be perceptive of their wants and needs. I often introduce myself to families as an early childhood resource person—and in this role, I hope I can be someone who can answer questions in a non-threatening way. I also talk about general things and I believe that it helps that I live and work in the community as it creates a sense of empathy as we are all in it together. It helps to have knowledge of what is happening in the community—events, issues like transport issues/local events and festivals and the never-ending road works! I find that I am often covering similar ground with the families as they are on a journey in early intervention. For all sorts of reasons, families don't always want to hear information so it's important to build the relationship over time and share the information as and when it's required or asked for. I try to build reciprocal relationships and listen to the parent about what they know about their child, their needs and wants. It involves lots of little but important steps. It is a role that needs you to be finely balanced with having realistic expectations and encouraging families to take on the support for their children.

We try to create a welcoming space, so we provide food (scones or a cake), a cuppa and comfortable

lounges for families to relax. This helps build the social networks and it is important to help families in linking up together. We can do this by pointing out similarities (e.g. going to the same school, living in the same neighbourhood, a shared interest in textiles). Not all families are receptive to intervention for many reasons. Some families are not aware of what is offered or for various reasons don't get to access the services. Geographical and social isolation play a part in this. Often in our community, families can live more than half an hour's walk from a local shop or transport. My role needs to be finely balanced with having realistic expectations of what families can, want and choose to do for themselves but at the same time, not doing too much for families.

Other challenges include having to chase families up in housekeeping tasks such as signing forms. This can be tricky as you are dealing with delicate situations that need to be discussed with families and often signing a form is understandably the last thing on their mind. I care about families and get concerned about how to best approach sensitive issues and how they may be received. I worry that families will say they are okay when they may not be feeling so good and be having a hard time about the issue at hand (e.g. their child's assessment). Inevitably I am always thinking of the families I work with—and for much of the time, it is in a positive and uplifting way but I don't stop thinking about families and the difficulties they may be having just because my working week is over. I do find it hard sometimes to maintain professional boundaries so that they don't overlap. The playgroup is small and intimate and over time we get to know the families really well. The families I work with are such great people that it would be easy to say let's get together socially. It is a real honour to know these families and be welcomed into their lives. In turn, it makes a big difference to my life and how I view and behave towards others in the world.