



Maria Pender

Retired as Director, Clovelly Child Care Centre, Sydney (NSW)



As a director of a long day program and having an Aboriginal family, being a single mother and being aware that parents needed support helped me to find resources that were out there to be used. In the 1980s we had many mothers going out to work and a number of new services opening up. I thought it was important to share my knowledge with other centres so I helped set up the Eastern Suburbs Early Childhood group. Meeting with like-minded people was inspiring and we all bounced things off one another so all felt supported in our roles. Over the years I documented a resource list of many agencies in the area and shared this with all of the services. Our network group was able to provide two full-day conferences for over 100 participants at a reasonable price. Both community-based and private centres were welcome at our meetings held regularly for many years. We now have a group that meets every term to have guest speakers and share information. For three years we have had a coordinator funded through Families New South Wales and employed by SDN Children's Services to share masses of information and bring all of the agencies together.

The priority of access guidelines to long day programs was really important to me and I felt that those families must have a place in the centres. Being part of the Early Childhood Australia, Lady Gowrie and Community Child Care Cooperative NSW organisations was my way of gathering information to support my practice. I spoke at many conferences and lectured at TAFE on a variety of topics. I was especially concerned that children got the best from the program in any centre. Also working with the Independent Education Union I was able to speak at the Arbitration Court to support the issue of teachers in long day care programs having rostered days off as a compensation for the long hours worked each day. I worked closely with ECA when we did the pilot study in accreditation using the American model and working with the National Childcare Accreditation Council and Community Childcare I did lots of training with staff in the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). The Lady Gowrie organisation paid me to take the QIAS to Aboriginal Services (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services) all over New South Wales.

Making these connections was really important to me and I was enthused to keep improving practice, fine-tuning and balancing my work with children, staff, parents and the community. My program benefited with me being well informed and motivated to support all the staff and families. For instance, over the years I was able to make capital improvements with Minor Capital Grants from the Commonwealth government. I sought permission from the licensing body to increase the centre enrolments from 40 to 55 in a renovated scout hall with a new kitchen, air-conditioning and water tanks. Randwick Council gave us a new roof in the last year after many letters and my speaking to the right people. With strong parent support we received a grant for solar panels and they have been installed this year. Such community interest has ensured we have a large waiting list and full utilisation.

I have always wanted to keep up to date with current research. I also saw my staff as learners and used them (with their permission) as participants in my Degree. While giving them readings and asking for written responses we used the information to inform each other and improve our practice in the centre. I was also able to use this work in my university assignments. I would be saying you need a life balance—don't be too obsessed about your work. I know I was. Attend management training, work with a strengths-based philosophy and look for the strengths in your staff. Be aware of current research, attend conferences and give staff lots of opportunities to study and attend workshops that they may be interested in. Spend time brainstorming with colleagues and mentors.