Early childhood

getting up to speed

on engaging with families

Digital
Business
Kit

Factsheet

Connect with parents and families

Earlier modules in the *Getting up to speed* series look at how and why getting connected makes sense for early childhood services. Module 4 explores how to make the most of a connected world. New communication technologies offer powerful ways to engage others. Use them to take control of your online presence and connect with families—the key stakeholders in any early childhood service. Choose who you connect with, and how best to do it, so that the message you want to give goes to the people you want to reach.

Social and smart online

Digital technologies offer extra tools for building collaborative partnerships with families and communities (Quality Area 6 of the *National Quality Standard*). They can reach families where distance, disability or disadvantage reduce inclusion.

Rather than leave it to chance, early education settings can choose the tools that will connect with their community. This can mean putting existing technologies to new uses or applying new tools to bolster the ways parents and educators exchange information.

Early childhood education and care services around Australia are already using a wide array of communication technologies. Websites, online surveys, text messages and group emails, along with social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest are making it easier than ever before to reach families and to 'take the temperature' within the community.

If an early childhood service is not already managing its online presence, chances are someone else is doing it for them. Most early education and care services appear in listings created by commercial or government agencies or in comments on social media posts made by colleagues, competitors, staff or parents. Take a moment to use a search engine and see how and where your early childhood practice is projecting to the world.

Making these interactions work well for an organisation, for educators and for parents takes a little dedication and a few decisions at the start.

Five things to know about getting started online

1. Build trust and professional reputation

▶ Online activity offers early childhood services opportunities for connecting although this can be hard to recognise in the social media language of sales, branding and building a customer base. Early childhood services already have a community—parents, families, educators, local businesses and colleagues. The aim is to build the trust of that community, present a professional face through online activity and enlarge the circle of people that know about the early childhood service. In other words—brand recognition. Helping families to recognise quality, connecting them to vital information and services, guiding responsible use of social media by parents and educators are all part of the *National Quality Standard* and doing business.

2. Understand legal obligations and consequences of online activity

▶ Creating a web address, offering online transactions such as enrolments, payment methods, commenting on Facebook or Twitter, storing data and sending group emails carry obligations. Take time to inform yourself about how laws covering defamation and offensive conduct, privacy, intellectual property and marketing affect online activity. For instance, unsolicited emails with commercial content can be considered spam. It can alienate your community (accounting for many unsubscribes to emails) but it may also trigger Spam laws. The Department of Communication's digital business site offers detailed advice, links and case studies: www.digitalbusiness.gov.au.

3. Choose tools that align with your education practice and values

▶ Attractive apps, devices and new options come onto the market every day. Look past gadgets, gimmicks and free offers. Consider the long term. Will it be easy to use? Does it match your current and future reporting requirements? Does it support quality education and care?

▶ Examine the tools you already use and talk to your software provider about add-ons to an existing system. In recent years many traditional early childhood education and care regulatory, payment and accounting systems have begun to add networking functions, while new products are constantly emerging. School bag, netbox.com, Kinderloop, Kindyhub, Hubworks, 2Simple, CELS and Quikkids are some of the numerous commercial applications available with functions that manage connections.

4. Match tools to family and parent preferences

▶ Go online where they go, offer information in formats they already use, listen to their concerns where they express them. Even if you 'don't do Facebook' or know about Pinterest now, these sites are where a significant number of communities and businesses are gathering.

▶ Statistics compiled by SocialMedia.com for May 2014 show the most popular tools in Australia that month. The top 10 had more than a million Australian users in the month of May. A simple survey can reveal how this fits with your parent community preferences. For instance, while Pinterest was ranked 12, it is popular among some family day care and long day care services.

TOP 20* SOCIAL MEDIA SITES IN AUSTRALIA FOR MAY 2014

Facebook
13 200 000
(steady, according to Ad tool)

YouTube
12 750 000
(unique Australian visitors)

WordPress.com
6 200 000

Tumblr
4 850 000

LinkedIn
3 650 000

Blogspot
2 900 000

Twitter
2 500 000
(active Australian users)

Instagram
1 600 000
(active Australian users)

TripAdvisor
1 600 000
(active Australian users)

Snapchat
1 070 000
(active Australian users)

Flickr
760 000

Pinterest
390 000

Yelp
185 000

MySpace
175 000

Reddit
170 000

Google Plus
approx 65 000
monthly active Australian users (estimated)

StumbleUpon
55 000

Foursquare
33 000

Digg
22 000

Delicious
20 000

From SocialMedia.com, May 2014 *(All figures represent the number of Unique Australian Visitors (UAVs) to that website over the monthly period unless otherwise stated.)*

* This is simply a snapshot—not a recommendation—of the most popular social media tools in Australia at May 2014.

▶ Offer options for all levels of connection: Excursions, picnics, concerts, meetings, conversations and parent forums are here to stay. Parents, educators and children want face-to-face contact and to socialise in real-time, real-world situations. Social media options do not replace favourite ways to link up. They give more opportunities.

DIGI-WORD

Analytics—refers to examining data, usually with software programs and statistics to find useful patterns. Using analytics helps to identify, predict or improve activities and outcomes. For instance, in early childhood services it may reveal which items on a website increased visitor numbers, whether family response rates are higher and faster to emails compared with text messages or how long families take to complete an online form. It can identify peak attendance times and days to manage staff rosters or risk patterns in reported incidents and accidents. There will be more on analytics and websites in later modules.

5. Analyse your efforts

▶ One advantage of digital tools that is yet to be fully harnessed by the early childhood sector is the rich data they offer about your community and the impact of your online activities. Analyse parent and educator demographics to learn more about their technology and other preferences.

▶ Online surveys and calendars can help do this. Unlike paper surveys, online forms don't get lost. Many options are free and simple to set up. They offer built-in analytics and automatic reminders that show when surveys were completed, who responded and when. Automatic prompts can save time and angst for administrative staff and increase response rates.

▶ Use analytics to reach families at the right time and in the best ways. Identify the interactions that attract the quickest and highest number of responses to tailor future online activities. Used wisely, a range of options help families sort through busy days and too much information to focus on the urgent and the important.

For Profiles about engaging families using social media and other tools click here

For a Tip sheet on social media click here

Top tools for early childhood networking

Match the tool to the message. Different types of technologies suit particular circumstances. While a website is now considered an essential by parents and other businesses, it works best when part of a mixed strategy as a hub for sharing content on social media. As well as a website to explain the services you offer (covered in a separate module in the DBK series) choose tools that work for you, the parents in your community and the families yet to find you.

▶ Text messages can be immediate and authoritative in an emergency. They can reach all parents, a targeted group or individual parents quickly. Use sparingly for reminders, alerts, updates and to point to more detailed information. Software and apps for bulk text messaging using a computer can streamline the administrative load.

You have new text messages
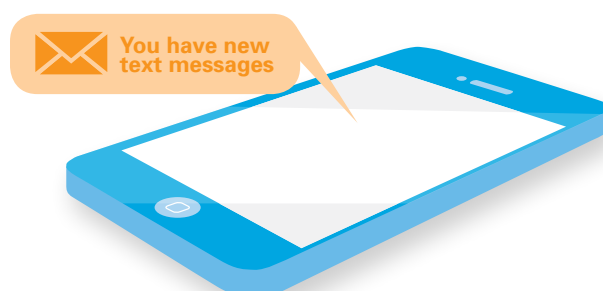
Email provides detail, a record for later and allows parents to read and respond at times to suit. Free 'campaign' or mass email tools like Mail Chimp can send design-rich, individualised email and provides analytics of emails opened. The list management feature also allows parents to update their email and contact details online at any time.

Electronic newsletters provide a more formal overview, summary, key dates and planning for online or print reading, now or later.

An intranet—a password-secured site for educators, staff and families in the early childhood service—allows members to log in, view or share information, ask questions, fill in or find essential forms, download stories, images and newsletters, view daily diaries and portfolios. An intranet is a unique space where the community can share images and information that it does not want to distribute more widely. It is a good solution where colleagues, families and governance bodies are widely dispersed—for instance in family day care, inclusion and support workers, mobile and out of school hours care—and can overcome limited opportunities afforded at drop-off and pick-up times (or where parents travel for work).

Finally, don't be afraid to let others drive occasionally. Not all early childhood services opt to manage social media interactions. Some inherit existing forums. For others, parents or staff suggest, create and manage networking or happily contribute to existing forums. Many parents and educators are adept at social media in their professional lives or at home. With broad agreements or guidelines about purpose and nature, early childhood settings can benefit from the skills in their community and evolve their online understanding without needing to have all the answers and expertise first.

It is wise to have some kind of guidance though. Almost every organisation, commercial or otherwise, has or is moving towards policies for social networking.

For a Tip sheet on social media, what to consider and how others go about it click here

Resources, sources and more information

The Department of Communication's digital business site—www.digitalbusiness.gov.au—is a key resource for going online. It offers a wide range of resources, tips and links on all kinds of online business including engaging with your community through social media.

Case studies and information on social networking are also available at the Australian Communications and Media Authority sites, www.acma.gov.au and www.cybersmart.gov.au.

For legal tips and obligations

The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission has information on legal and other obligations for businesses—www.accc.gov.au—and a good explanation of social media obligations for business: www.accc.gov.au/business/advertising-promoting-your-business/social-media.

Other business legal tips and resources can be found at:

Australian Securities & Investment Commission—click the small business link: www.asic.gov.au.

Australian Taxation Office: www.ato.gov.au.

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A voice for young children