Having a warm, positive relationship with the families of children in OSHC increases the possibility that you may make a long-lasting difference in the life of the child. Just as is true of schools and early childhood services, an OSHC service can support parents and family members in their job of rearing a child. This doesn't mean adding on a special program or component, or doing a lot of things that are in addition to working well with the child. Rather, it just means doing what you do with the idea in mind that sharing information and perspectives with family members can support them.

When OSHC staff and families communicate respectfully, staff benefit by knowing the child better and developing a picture of the child in the context of family and community.

Following are some suggestions for creating and strengthening partnerships with families.

• From the beginning, give families the message that you want a relationship with them, that you appreciate that they have a lot of information about their child. This can include particular things that they think are important in that child’s experience in OSHC, and maybe some concerns and questions. Let them know that you are interested to learn these things.

• Demonstrate to families on an ongoing basis that you value the child, know him or her as a unique individual, and are concerned about that child’s wellbeing. How do you do that? By sharing stories about the child’s strengths, accomplishments, and experiences in the service and greeting and farewelling the child warmly. Most parents are very interested in how others see their child, and most will welcome anything you have to say.

Be empathetic. When you need to talk to parents about a worry, concern, or problem with their child, put yourself in their place. When you find yourself thinking critical thoughts about a parent, put yourself in their place. Many families live with multiple stresses, few supports and many demands on them. Try to avoid being judgmental. When a conflict arises or a parent makes what appears to be an unreasonable request or criticism, try to see things from their point of view. Some parents will be so preoccupied with other issues in their lives that they may not be able to give the highest priority to the wellbeing of the child in your OSHC service.

• Accept individual differences. Some families will be more interested than others in the details of their child’s experience in OSHC. Some will be more comfortable sharing information than others. Some will be more confident as parents than others. Try to learn about the cultural backgrounds of families using your service, but take care not to lapse into stereotypes. Use information about culture and religion as a backdrop to relating to individual families, but don’t let it interfere with hearing what each individual family has to tell you.

• Use lots of different ways to let families in on what’s happening, to let them know that their child’s experience in OSHC is their business. For example, when you display information there are often two messages. One is about the events of the OSHC service; the other is that you want families to know what is going on. Some families will need to be convinced that you are serious about wanting to have a partnership with open communication.

• Find ways to communicate with families who have limited English. Access interpreters if necessary.

• Keep in mind that although newsletters, notes to individual families, meetings, more formal scheduled interviews and family social occasions are all good ways to communicate, none of them substitutes for face-to-face informal conversation. It can’t happen every day, and it certainly can’t be a long conversation, but brief positive friendly encounters over time cement the relationship.

• Give the message to families that you are open to communication and available, even when it can’t be on the spot, right then and there. Even when you are busy you can demonstrate to families that you want to talk and listen at a mutually appropriate time.
• Take care when you decide to share concerns about the child or other sensitive information. Pick your time and think about how to share it in such a way that it doesn’t alarm parents or make them think you don’t like their child. Think carefully about when a problem with a child is the service’s problem and needs to be dealt with by the service. That doesn’t mean you don’t share it with the parents, but when you do, try to avoid making parents feel responsible or guilty.

• When there are several staff members who talk to parents, make sure they are telling the same story. If one staff member tells the parent of a new child that she settled right in and had a great time and another says she was hesitant to get involved, kept to herself, and seemed a bit sad, who does the parent believe?

• Don’t talk about the child in her or his presence unless you’ve made a deliberate decision to do so and include the child as a participant in the conversation. That is, don’t talk about a child as if he or she wasn’t there.

• Know when specialised help beyond what the OSHC service can provide is needed. There are many families in our communities that are struggling with issues that go way beyond the expertise that exists within the OSHC service. Hopefully the service will have strong links with other services and professionals in the community that can provide specialist help for families.

Partnership should be focused on the child. In addition, some families will want to be involved with the service – for example through participating in management; engaging in fundraising; coming to working bees; contributing their time, energy, talents, or resources; or coming to social events organised by the service. These are valuable ways for families to connect with the service, but they are not the same thing as having a collaborative relationship or partnership on behalf of their child, and involvement doesn’t substitute for partnership.

Positive warm professional relationships at all levels, including relationships between families and OSHC staff, are the key to quality in OSHC.

Links to Shared visions
Chapter 5: Relationships, p. 67-71
Links with families

Questions and reflections
1. How much of a priority do you and the people you work with place on communicating informally with families? Is it sufficient? What can you do to improve the quantity and quality of communication?

2. How does your service deal with situations where there needs to be discussion with parents about a problem or a concern with a child?

3. What are some ways that you use information, ideas and suggestions given by family members in your service?