Developing a Policy

Child care services need policies to guide the actions of everyone involved in caring for children. These policies will ensure that the wellbeing of children, families and staff is planned for, and that these plans are consistently implemented. Clear policies can provide security and peace of mind by creating common expectations and understandings about how things are done.

Policy development should include a process of collaboration and gathering information to formulate the best plan of action. Policies are living documents that are tested, modified and changed over time to respond to the experiences of those working with them, to new knowledge and to changing trends in the community or the scheme itself.

What are policies, and why have them?

A policy is a plan of action that a person or group decides to take. The plan will be influenced by what the person or group knows and believes. In other words, there will be reasons for what is decided. Policies are like rules, but more flexible like 'guidelines'. They may suggest a range of appropriate actions within agreed limits. In everyday speech, we might talk about a personal policy of 'never drinking coffee after eight o'clock at night', or a family policy of 'eating dinner together on Sunday nights' or a government policy.

Policies for organisations like family day care schemes must be documented. Written policies provide a record of past decisions about how a scheme operates, the reasons for decisions, and the sources of information that were used in making decisions. Carers and staff can use policies to adopt practices and procedures that are based on current authoritative knowledge and reflect the values of everyone involved in the scheme. Written, accessible policies also provide families, carers and staff with information on what to expect from a scheme.

How are policies developed?

Developing a policy for a family day care scheme is a process of:

- gathering information
- consultation between relevant people, including management, carers, families, coordination unit staff and children

It may be necessary to first define the area that a policy will cover by looking at existing policies and analysing areas where policy is needed to guide practice. One way of organising policies could be by Quality Area, though there are many other possibilities. Schemes will also have policies on issues that are not Quality Areas, such as a fees policy. Even in the initial phases of gathering information, a group or committee who can share skills and perspectives is preferable to an individual working alone.

This group might gather information such as:

- legal requirements, such as State or Territory regulations

- information from recognised authorities on the area for the policy. It is important that policies, and the practices that follow them reflect current understandings and values. Government departments or independent organisations with specialist expertise can provide recommendations based on research findings and expert knowledge

- the scheme's philosophy, which is a broad statement of values underlying all the operations of the scheme, and has been developed and reviewed in a consultative process. If there is no current philosophy, a review of philosophy may have to come before the development of the policy

- the current scheme policy in the area under consideration and other related policies

- books or policy documents from other organisations, and documented information from families, carers and others that might inform the process of developing the policy. Written material such as comments in communication books, memos, written observations, initial interviews, recorded conversations with families or children, grievances, exit interviews, incident reports, letters and e-mails, help give a picture of what has happened in the past, and what a variety of stakeholders feel about the area

The collaboration or consultation phase of policy development ideally includes genuine consideration of a range of views. This will lead to policies that are more likely to be accepted by those affected by them. While there may be a small number of representatives for groups like families and carers directly involved in the policy development, all interested parties should have an opportunity to contribute. This could be done by conducting surveys in the form of a written questionnaire, interviews or discussion. Including some discussion of the policy under development in regular meetings is another way of gaining a range of views.

Reaching consensus may not be easy. There may be cases where current thinking in the field and the philosophy of carers and coordination unit staff differ from the ideas of some families. Providing families with more information may serve to change their opinion, but it may also be possible to take the families' views into account in the policy. As the policy only sets boundaries to work within, there would still be room for negotiation of practice for individual families, children and carers.

What should a written policy look like?

Written policies should be understood by anyone who reads them. They should be clearly set out with simple, jargon-free language. Translations into home languages of families are desirable, but it may be practical to provide this for key areas or summaries rather than the whole policy.

Policies might include the following elements:

• a statement of the overall philosophy of the scheme

• a policy statement which describes what is covered in the policy

• a rationale or the reasons for the policy. This section might outline some of the recent research information or community changes that guided the development of the policy

• goals or the purpose of the policy

• strategies and/or practices which explain how the general statements above will translate into everyday actions

• the source and publication date of any information which contributed to the policy whether in a book, a newsletter or from a website

• the date of the policy statement

Since the policy may complement other policies, it may also be useful to include a statement suggesting other policies to refer to.

What happens once a policy has been developed?

It is important that everyone knows the policy exists. Ensure new staff/carers read and sign off on key policies before commencing work and discuss key policies at meetings. Include useful information about policies in regular newletters or communications. To help everyone understand the policy and its application include policy information in regular interactions and communications and explain why decisions are made and actions are taken.

Policies should be reviewed regularly to accommodate changes to the mix of families or staff, new research findings, new community concerns or societal norms or issues in health and child development. Reading journals and newsletters, attending in-services, meetings and conferences, and making regular checks of the websites of recognised authorities will ensure that changes in best practice are identified and used to inform policy development. A major review of a policy will follow much the same process as the initial development of the policy.

When reviewing a policy:

• reflect on the effectiveness of practices and keep notes of issues and changes

• successful practices and strategies can be shared to assist policy development

• carers' practical experiences can be used to assist the process of review and adjustment of the policy

• small adjustments to policy may be needed between scheduled, systematic reviews

Some policies or parts of policies may remain stable for longer periods, however regular checks or reviews still need to be made. Even if a policy review results in no changes being made, this should be noted and dated, and sources referred to should also be noted. When a policy is reviewed, it is best to ask users to discard older versions to avoid confusion.

Further Information

• Hughes, L., and Tansey, S. (2004). 'What is a Recognised Authority?' in *Putting Children First*, Issue 12, 10-11. National Childcare Accreditation Council, Sydney, New South Wales.

• Faulkner, J., Hughes, L., and Swift, K. (2004). 'Child Care Advisor Q & A: Programming and Philosophy' in *Putting Children First*, Issue 9, 4-5. National Childcare Accreditation Council, Sydney, New South Wales.

• Hughes, L., and McFarlane, J. (2003). 'A Collaborative Approach to Achieving and Maintaining Quality' in *Putting Children First*, Issue 5, 4-6. National Childcare Accreditation Council, Sydney, New South Wales.

• National Childcare Accreditation Council (2003). 'Sun Safety – Developing a Sun Protection Policy' in *Putting Children First*, Issue 8, 4-5. National Childcare Accreditation Council, Sydney, New South Wales.