

Managing complaints

By Angela Owens

Family day care schemes may need to manage a complaint raised by families, children, carers or carers' families. The issues can range from being a minor concern to a major problem. Dealing with a complaint about your scheme can be a difficult experience. However, effective complaints handling procedures can help to resolve issues promptly and turn the situation into an opportunity to improve practice.

Why do complaints occur?

Complaints are often triggered by poor communication or lack of information sharing between stakeholders, who include children, families, carers and their families, coordination unit staff and service management. They can arise when people feel that their ideas and perspectives are not sought or valued by the scheme. Schemes can reduce these types of complaints by ensuring that all stakeholders receive clear information about the scheme, including its policies and procedures, and specific activities such as children's excursions or social functions. It is also important to give stakeholders genuine and consistent opportunities to provide feedback and to raise issues about scheme practice.

Complaints often occur during periods of change, for example, when a scheme is undergoing a change of management or is implementing new procedures. This is because people can experience fear, anxiety and stress in response to change, particularly when they are faced with an 'unknown quantity' such as new management or new procedures. Negative reaction to change often occurs when people have different views or when they fear they will be unable to cope. It

is important for schemes to ensure that change processes are transparent and clearly explained, and to be prepared to respond constructively to everyone's concerns.

It is beneficial to encourage a culture of open and positive communication between stakeholders. Maintaining an awareness of stakeholders' thoughts, needs and ideas on a daily basis allows schemes to become aware of potential concerns before they turn into formal grievances or complaints. Using effective communication strategies can help schemes to reduce the number of complaints that may arise due to misunderstandings of scheme practice or anxiety about change.

Developing a complaints handling policy and procedures

The most effective strategy for managing complaints is to have a current policy and procedures that have been developed or reviewed in consultation with stakeholders. Stakeholders should be aware of and able to access the scheme's policy and procedures. It is a Satisfactory requirement of Family Day Care Quality Assurance that services have documented complaints handling policies and procedures. The source(s) of the information used to develop the complaints handling policy should be clearly written in the policy, and the date it was developed or reviewed.

While each scheme needs to develop procedures that reflect their specific needs and circumstances, all effective complaints handling procedures include:

- Strategies to deal with the issue quickly and professionally.
- Encouragement to raise concerns directly with the relevant party wherever possible. For example, many concerns can be raised directly with and managed by the carer or coordination unit staff member involved. To avoid over complicating the process, it is always preferable to resolve the issue as close to the source as possible.



- A clear outline of the steps that will be followed at each stage of managing the complaint.
- Procedures for maintaining confidentiality.
- Processes for documenting discussions between the complainant and the scheme.
- Information about how a complainant can contact and raise their concerns with scheme management if they need to.
- Procedures for keeping the complainant informed of the progress of the complaint.
- Methods for recording and evaluating the progress of the complaint.
- A process for evaluating the outcomes of the complaint and for providing recommendations for future policy or practice at the scheme.
- Information about the right of carer's and coordination unit staff to seek assistance from a support person when responding to a complaint about them, for example, an interpreter.
- Details of external agencies for a complainant to contact if they feel the scheme has not resolved their concerns. These contacts might include the relevant licensing authority or the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC).

Carers and coordination unit staff should be informed about any complaints made about them, and be given the opportunity to respond.

It is also a good idea to include information in the scheme's complaints handling procedures about what is appropriate and acceptable conduct when concerns are being raised and responded to. A person who is making a complaint may be very angry about the issue, or the recipient of the complaint may be upset by the concerns being raised. However, it is important that all stakeholders are aware that any type of unfair treatment, bias, aggressive behaviour or harassment is unacceptable.

How can complaints handling procedures be developed for children?

Where schemes provide care for older children, and in particular school aged children, it is important that children have opportunities to voice their concerns, and for these to be acknowledged, respected and acted upon.

To develop procedures that reflect the group's needs, carers and coordination unit staff can work in partnership with children to develop processes that are suitable to them. As the children in the group will change over time, it is important to revisit the children's complaints handling procedures regularly and to ensure that all children are aware of these.

Just as for the scheme's complaints handling procedures for adults, it is important that children are provided with clear information about who to raise concerns with and what will happen when they do this. Children may wish to nominate a peer representative who they can speak with about their concerns or feedback. It is also helpful to provide avenues for children to raise their concerns anonymously, for example, through a suggestion box or a confidential complaint form.

Play sessions and home visits may also be used to provide children with opportunities to provide feedback and to raise issues or concerns with coordination unit staff.

Carers and staff need to ensure that children are provided with frequent opportunities to discuss what they should do if they are upset or have concerns. Children should be made to feel that the issues they have are considered to be important and will be taken seriously. Encouraging children to reflect upon what they don't like or don't agree with in the scheme will help them to decide if they have any issues to raise.

Working with children to develop complaints procedures, and discussing these regularly, provides carers and staff with great opportunities to talk about and role model positive negotiation and problem solving skills with children.

How can stakeholders be informed about the scheme's complaints handling procedures?

Stakeholders need to feel confident that any concerns they may raise with the scheme will be handled promptly and professionally. This is supported when they understand the complaints handling process, and know who they can speak to about their concerns.

It is therefore important that all stakeholders are aware of the scheme's complaints handling procedures and can easily access this information. Complaints handling policies and procedures need to be included in the scheme's handbooks for families, carers and coordination unit staff. This information can also be included in the scheme's enrolment and orientation processes for families and children, as well as in the orientation packages for carers and coordination unit staff.

Handling complaints can be made unnecessarily difficult when individuals feel anxious or unsure about raising their concerns. People in this situation may put off raising their concerns until these have become far more troubling or complex than they were originally. It is in the best interests of all stakeholders for the scheme to ensure that its complaints handling procedures are simple, transparent and easy to access.

Approaching complaints positively

Both parties often experience strong emotions during the process of raising and responding to complaints. A person receiving a complaint about themselves or the scheme may feel resentful, unappreciated or misunderstood. A complainant, however, may feel nervous or apprehensive about raising their concern, or feel angry or upset about the issue itself. Sometimes concerns are raised due to circumstances that are outside the control of the scheme, for example personal issues such as illness, grief, depression or family breakdown.

Effective complaints handling techniques and procedures encourage each party to empathise with the other's perspective. It is helpful to promote a positive approach through which complaints or grievances are seen as an opportunity to improve practices and relationships at the service.

How can coordination unit staff support carers to handle complaints effectively?

Carers can often experience a sense of isolation and anxiety when a complaint about their practice is raised because they may not have another professional immediately available to offer advice and support. Coordination unit staff can support carers to effectively manage and respond to complaints by:

- ensuring that carers are familiar with and able to access the scheme's complaints handling procedures;
- using home visits and playgroup sessions to talk with carers about any concerns that have been raised either with the carer or about the carer;
- encouraging carers to approach complaints positively by viewing them as opportunities to understand the needs and attitudes of children and families and to improve practice;
- modelling a constructive and professional approach to responding to any complaints raised by carers or families
- informing families about the scheme's complaints handling procedures, and reiterating the importance of raising any concerns they may have appropriately and respectfully with carers and staff;
- giving carers opportunities to extend their interpersonal and conflict management skills through professional development; and
- providing carers with contact details to access a coordination unit representative at all times, including during times when care is provided outside of coordination unit hours.



To understand a complainant's perspective:

- Allow the person to talk through their concerns without interruption.
- Attempt to diffuse emotions by acknowledging what they are feeling, and state positively that you wish to seek a solution to the issue that is causing their concern.
- Ask questions to help identify or clarify their concerns. For example, the statement 'I never know what is happening with my child' may be further clarified by asking questions such as 'What things would you like our scheme to share with you about your child?'
- Ask the complainant if they have any strategies or solutions that they feel the scheme could put in place to resolve their issues.

Ensuring that they have transparent, practical and effective complaints handling procedures in place will support schemes to manage issues in ways that will benefit all stakeholders. It is essential that families, carers and staff are familiar with the scheme's complaints handling processes and that they have opportunities to contribute to the development and review of these.

Children, families, carers and staff will appreciate a proactive approach to complaints handling where a scheme demonstrates a desire to be informed of concerns so that these can be promptly addressed and scheme practice improved.

Tips for carers raising concerns with coordination unit staff

Carers often feel hesitant about raising a concern with their coordination unit. However, this can be approached by both carers and staff as an opportunity to work collaboratively to improve a situation or practice in the scheme. To promote the best possible outcomes for both parties, carers may find it helpful to consider the following suggestions:

- consider the matter to be raised carefully to identify the key issue or concerns;
- discuss the issue with others to clarify the concerns before raising them;
- if there are a number of issues, prioritise these, and only raise one or two concerns at a time. This may assist these to be resolved more effectively, and can reduce the likelihood of the recipient of the complaint responding defensively;
- write down the main points of the concern to help plan how to raise these. It may also be helpful to use written notes when speaking with a staff member about the complaint;
- avoid becoming angry or upset when raising a concern; and
- aim to provide some suggestions for managing or resolving the issue, as this may help both parties to begin working toward a solution together.

The following strategies can support a positive approach to resolving complaints

- Actively listen to the complainant, and ask questions to clarify or improve your understanding of the issues.
- Avoid responding immediately and defensively to the concerns raised. If the issues are complex, or there are a number of matters being raised at once, it may be beneficial to take notes or to ask the complainant to put their concerns in writing.
- Discuss the issues raised with a colleague or with service management, ensuring that professionalism and confidentiality is maintained.
- If the complainant has approached you at an inappropriate time or place, advise them that you want to discuss their concerns with them and that you will need to organise a suitable time/and or place in which to do this. It is important to ensure that this is followed up promptly.
- If you are unable to manage the issues raised because they are out of your control, or because the scheme's practice cannot be changed for ethical, legal or business reasons, it is important to advise the complainant that this is the case, and to provide them with clear reasons.
- Always ensure that the complainant is informed about how their concerns have been followed up ■

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principle: 6.4

References and further information

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