Program Evaluation

Program evaluation is a process of collecting information and making judgements about how the program is currently operating to guide decisions for future planning. It is an integral part of program planning and is the key to continuous improvement in outside school hours care services. The process of evaluation will be enhanced if it involves contributions from all stakeholders (children, families, staff and management) and staff can openly reflect on their practice, have a positive attitude to change and accept diverse points of view.

Evaluating the program

An ongoing process of reflection and review allows a service to identify strengths and weaknesses and target areas for improvement or change. Evaluation can determine whether the program is meeting the needs of all stakeholders and provides an understanding of whether the service philosophy is being reflected in the program.

Staff should reflect on the successes and challenges in evaluating the program content and process. Staff could discuss together and seek feedback from children and families about the program methods and the experiences being offered to children. In the process of reviewing the program, the stakeholders could consider whether the overall service philosophy and goals are being reflected. Staff could also consider if there are any educational theories or approaches that influence the service's assessment of children's experiences.

Questions to help evaluate the content of the program include:

- Are children's needs, interests and abilities used to plan experiences for the children?
- Does the program provide a variety of experiences suited to the development of the children?
- Are the experiences appropriate for the diverse cultures and abilities of children?
- What opportunities are there for children to pursue experiences of their own choosing, individually and in groups?
- Does the environment allow children to engage in experiences with others and on their own? For example, are there open and private spaces available to children?
- Is the environment organised and inviting with adequate space for the experiences offered?
- Are a variety of resources used?
- Are children encouraged to be involved in decision making and problem solving?

Questions to help evaluate the programming process and structure include:

- Are children's ideas and opinions listened to and acted on?
- How is feedback gathered from all stakeholders on the effectiveness of the program?
- Are issues raised by families, including complaints about the service, considered when evaluating and planning the program?
- How is feedback from all stakeholders used to inform future programming decisions?

Methods of evaluation

It is important that the service develop its own methods for evaluating the program. There is no one-size-fits-all system for evaluation. Services need to determine what will work for the service and all its stakeholders. Evaluation methods can be verbal (such as open discussions and feedback), or written (such as the use of documents that show the variety of experiences in which children have participated).

Questions to help find the best evaluation method for the service include:

- Does it allow staff to gather information for evaluation in a variety of ways?
- Does it guide and focus staff in making assessments and judgments about program outcomes?
- Are all aspects of the program considered in the evaluation process such as the content and process, routines, environment, staffing and resources?
- Does it encourage all stakeholders to be involved?
- Does it consider individual children's experiences and group experiences?
- Does it allow staff to assess whether the service philosophy is being reflected in the program?
- Does it allow future planning to be influenced and guided?

Identifying strengths and weaknesses

Observations and reflections on the program will guide staff in deciding what is working well and what may need to be changed or improved. In making an assessment of the program's strengths and weaknesses, staff need to actively seek and accept the views of others and be committed to making improvements. Open communication is the key to understanding each other's perspectives on the program.

The input of all stakeholders can be sought through written forms such as surveys, questionnaires, feedback forms and diary notes. Staff discussions with children, families and each other will also provide information about the program.

Evidence of evaluation

Evidence of program evaluation will vary according to the service's methods of documenting children's experiences and do not need to be recorded in any specific format. Staff do not need to do a lot of writing to show evidence of program evaluation. A variety of documents and materials can be used to indicate how staff have used past experiences to influence future and follow up planning for children. Types of evidence that can be used to show the program is evaluated include:

- Profiles of children's needs, interests and abilities. These can be gathered from staff observations, surveys, enrolment forms and discussions with children and families
- Documentation of the variety of experiences offered to children
- Notes, journal entries and/or observation records
- Information about programming decisions such as staff, parent and management meeting notes and minutes
- Photographs, examples of children's work and audio and visual recordings
- Records of children's and families' comments about the program

Using the evaluation

The information gained from program evaluations should guide staff in deciding what experiences could be offered to the children in the future. These evaluations can also influence other program decisions such as the resources needed, safety issues to be addressed and staff roles, responsibilities and training required. To decide how evaluations can influence the program consider the following:

- Use areas the children identified interest in to decide which experiences could be repeated or developed further
- Use feedback from families about their child to decide what experiences should be available
- Use staff observations of individual children's behaviour and group behaviour

Involving children

Involving children in program evaluation can help them to feel that they belong in the service and that they have rights and responsibilities within the program. Staff can help children to evaluate the program by asking children questions such as:

- What do you think about what just happened?
- What did you like/dislike about it?
- Do you think it would be a good thing to do again?

Staff can also observe children's responses to the experiences at the service to assist in understanding children's views about the program. The following guiding questions may be useful in this process:

- What do the children appear to find interesting?
- What do they seem to know and what don't they seem to understand?
- What do the children do with the materials and resources?
- What experiences do they create themselves in the environment?

Further Information

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