Developing a Policy

Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principle: 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6

By Kate Rowe for NCAC

Outside school hours care services need policies to guide the actions of everyone involved in the service's operations. Policies ensure that the wellbeing of children, families and staff is planned for, and that these plans are consistently implemented. Effective policies can provide security and peace of mind by creating common understandings and expectations about how things are done at the service.

Policies should be developed in consultation with all parties, including management, staff, families and children and, where appropriate, the wider community. Policy development also involves collecting information which will help ensure that the policy guidelines are consistent with current advice and accepted practice. Policies are 'living' documents which need to be regularly reviewed to make sure they meet the needs of those working with them, and that they reflect current knowledge and meet current trends in the service and wider community.

What are policies?

A policy is a plan of action. This plan will be influenced by what the person or group of people developing the policy know and believe. In other words, there will be reasons for what is included in the plan or policy. Policies are similar to 'guidelines' and offer more flexibility than set 'rules' as they can suggest a range of acceptable actions within agreed limits. For example, a behaviour support policy for children may outline a number of strategies that staff can use to guide children's behaviour. Within the boundaries of the policy staff can then decide which strategies will work best for a particular child in a certain situation. Health or safety policies, however, need to be more prescriptive as they outline 'best practice' for maintaining the wellbeing of individuals.

Why have written policies?

Policies and their related procedures should be clearly documented and regularly updated. Written policies provide a record of past decisions about a service's operations, the reasons for past decisions, and the sources of information used to make these decisions.

Ensuring that policies are both written and up to date will support the service's quality practices in the following ways:

- New, casual, part-time and volunteer staff can access the same information about the service's policies, procedures and expectations
- When unsure of the appropriate action to take in a situation staff can refer to written policy guidelines
- Written policies or sections of these can easily be included in information for staff and families. For example, enrolment, orientation and induction packs; newsletters, meeting agendas and minutes
- Written policies assist services to demonstrate accountability for their practices. For example, a parent who is concerned that children are required to wear hats during outdoor play can be referred to the service's sun protection policy, as well as to the expert advice or information that was used to develop the policy.

What policies are needed?

While the *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide* outlines certain policy requirements, each service must consider their own circumstances to decide what information their policies should include. The information that a service needs to include in their policies depends upon factors such as:

- The type of service being offered. For example:
  - before school care only
  - stand alone vacation care
  - before and after school care
- The number and age ranges of children using the service
- The service's physical location, premises and layout
- The service's philosophy
- Local, state, territory or Australian Government laws. For example, licensing requirements, occupational health and safety laws, anti discrimination laws, child protection laws, traffic laws
- The management type of the service. For example, a non-profit incorporated organisation may need different policies to those of a commercially managed service

It may also be useful to develop policies that relate to 'day-to-day' issues such as fees or late collection of children from the service.

How are policies developed?

Developing a policy involves:

- Gathering information to draft the policy
- Drafting the policy
- Consulting with staff, families and children to refine and finalise the draft policy

When developing a policy, it may be useful to begin by defining the area it will cover. This can be achieved by looking at existing policies and considering where there are 'gaps' or where policy is needed to guide practice.

It can be beneficial to have a group or committee who can share skills and perspectives in gathering information. Information that can be gathered to assist policy development might include:

- Information regarding legal requirements
- Information from recognised authorities. For example, state or territory public health authorities may be able to provide information regarding food handling or illness exclusion
- The service's philosophy
- Related service policies. For example, the service's child protection policy may be related to staff conduct and supervision of children policies
- Books or policy documents from other organisations
- Documented feedback received from families, staff and other stakeholders. For example, communication books, memos, written observations, initial family interviews, recorded conversations with families and children, grievance records, exit interviews, incident reports, letters and e-mails

The consultation phase of policy development should include genuine consideration of a range of views and all stakeholders should have real opportunities to contribute their ideas. Consultation may be undertaken by:

- Conducting surveys, written questionnaires, interviews or discussions
- Informing families about policy development through newsletters, notice boards, or other written communication
- Briefly documenting any information or feedback provided by families during daily formal and informal conversations that occur between staff and families
- Talking about policies in meetings with staff, management and/or families
- Sending copies of policies to families and/or the wider community requesting feedback

Reaching consensus with all parties may not be easy. There may be cases where current thinking in the field and the service's philosophy differs from the ideas or wishes of some families. Providing families with clear information about the policy and the reasons for it, may assist them to understand the service's point of view. However, it may also be possible to take families' views into account when developing the policy, even if these are not strictly in accordance with the service's beliefs. As policies generally set 'boundaries' in which to work, there may be room for negotiation of practice for individual families, children and staff within those boundaries.

What should a written policy look like?

Written policies should be easily understood and should be clearly set out with simple, jargon-free language. Translating policies into the home languages of families at the service is desirable, but it may be more practical to provide translations of key sections or a summary of the policy, rather than the policy as a whole.

A policy should include the following elements:

- A statement which describes what is covered by the policy
- A description of strategies and/or practices which explain how the policy statements will influence everyday actions
- The publication date of information used to develop the policy and where this information was found or sourced from. For example books, newsletters, professional publications or websites
- The date the policy was implemented

A policy might also include:

- A statement of the service's overall philosophy
- A rationale or reason for the policy. This section might outline some of the recent research or community changes that prompted the development or review of the policy

It may also be useful to include references to other policies which may complement or relate to the policy. For example, if information contained in the service's food handling and hygiene policies 'overlaps' it may be useful to refer to the related policy to show how hygiene and food handling in the service are related.

While there is no set definition of how a policy should look or be set out, the purpose of a policy is to clearly guide practice. It is unnecessary, and often unhelpful to have long, complicated or 'wordy' policies for their own sake. A set of clear, logical statements outlining who, what, why, when and how a policy will work is the most practical approach to policy development.

What happens once a policy has been developed?

It is important that everyone knows the policy exists. Ensure new staff read and sign to acknowledge that they have read key policies before commencing work and that there is a clear procedure for informing casual, part-time and volunteer staff of the service's key policies. Discuss service policies at meetings attended by staff and/or families. Include information about policies in newsletters or other written communication with staff and families, explaining how the policy relates to decisions and actions at the service.

Policies should be reviewed regularly to ensure that they reflect changes to current information and changes to staff, families and children at the service. 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 and review.

In outside school hours care services it may be possible to involve children and families in library or website research. Outside school hours care peak bodies throughout Australia produce regular newsletters or other resources which provide a range of information that is relevant to policy development and review.

Reviewing a policy

A major review of a policy will follow much the same process as the initial development of the policy. When reviewing a policy consider:

- Current information, advice and trends
- The effectiveness of current service practice
- Instances where there have been changes to service practice and why these changes have occurred
- Ideas from other services or organisations

- How practical the policy is for staff who implement it
- Changes to the service's circumstances, including the physical environment, staff, families and children

It may be necessary to make small adjustments to policies between scheduled, systematic reviews, depending on the circumstances of the service and current information.

When policies are developed or reviewed and the final policy instated, the service should keep a file copy of past policies to show how, why and when changes have been made. However, it is best to destroy additional copies of previous versions of the policy to avoid confusion.

Some policies or parts of policies may remain stable for long periods, however regular checks or reviews still need to be made. Even if a policy review results in no policy changes, the date of the review and the sources consulted during the review process should be noted. This helps the service to demonstrate accountability as its practices are supported by a documented and current policy statement.

Further Information

- Community Child Care Association. (2003). *Managing an Outside School Hours Care Service*. Community Child Care Association and Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services: ACT.
- Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd, NSW. (2005). *Managing a Child Care Service: 2005 Student Edition*. Community Childcare Co-operative Ltd: NSW.
- Hughes, L., and Tansey, S. (2004). 'What is a Recognised Authority?'. *Putting Children First*, Issue 12, 10-11. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.
- McLeod, P. (2005). 'Health and Safety Information on the Internet'. *Putting Children First*. Issue 15, 12-13. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.
- National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. (2003). 'Sun Safety – Developing a Sun Protection Policy'. *Putting Children First*. Issue 8, 4-5. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.
- National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. (2003). *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide*. (1st ed.) Surry Hills: NSW
- Tansey, S. (2005). *OSHCQA Factsheet #2 - Effective Supervision*. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.
- Tansey, S. (2005). *OSHCQA Factsheet #3 - Safety in Children's Services*. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.
- Tansey, S. (2005). *OSHCQA Factsheet #4 - Food Safety*. National Childcare Accreditation Council: NSW.

Useful Websites

- Better Health Channel - **www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au**
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand - **www.foodstandards.gov.au**
- Kidsafe - **www.kidsafe.com.au**
- National Health and Medical Research Council - **www.health.gov.au/nhmrc**
- Nutrition Australia - **www.nutritionaustralia.org**

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