

Skills and knowledge to support quality

By Angela Owens

The quality of care experienced by children in child care depends significantly upon the skills and knowledge of the child care professionals who work in the service.

Updating and maintaining knowledge about current theories, trends and practices in child care is important on a number of levels. It helps to ensure that professionals are implementing best practice at all times, and contributes significantly to each service's continuing improvement efforts. It is also advantageous in promoting child care professionals' sense of job satisfaction and perception of their role as being a valuable and expert one.

The importance of professional development

When child care professionals build on their knowledge of current child care theory and practice through a range of professional development opportunities, and implement what they have learnt, they add value to the experiences of children and families at the service. All service stakeholders benefit when practices across the service are reviewed regularly, and updated in light of current research and recommended practice. Service management also has a responsibility to keep up to date with child care information, as well as best management practice.

It is important to recognise that professional development is not limited to attendance at courses or training activities. Professional reading, networking with other organisations and daily conversations with colleagues, children and families are also key ways that child care professionals improve their knowledge and extend their skills.

Professional development in daily practice

The daily reflections, observations and conversations that child care professionals have with colleagues, families and children are important aspects of professional learning. For example, a child care professional may observe a child's interest in water play and consider how this interest may be used to support further learning experiences for the child. This is a valuable way for the child care professional to increase their knowledge and understanding of the child, while at the same time expanding their own skills of reflection and analysis. Similarly, a child care professional who reads an article, and then considers what it might mean for their own or their service's practice, or discusses it with a colleague, is engaging in constructive professional development.

Daily professional learning can also occur when more experienced child care professionals mentor and support their colleagues by sharing their expertise, model best practice, provide feedback or lead discussions in meetings. Services can also regularly network with other services to exchange information and discuss common issues.

To support daily professional development experiences, service management can organise regular opportunities where child care professionals can talk with each other, with families and with other professionals.

Management's role in promoting professional development

It is beneficial for management to collaborate with child care professionals to identify and plan professional development strategies that meet both service and individual priorities. Services can provide child care professionals with access to relevant websites, videos, journal articles and other professional publications and resources. These may be used independently by individuals, or shared and discussed in meetings with colleagues.

Evaluating professional development experiences will assist services to prioritise and plan for future development activities. Child care professionals can provide management with useful feedback about professional development experiences, including the relevance of their content, and the quality of the experience.

Overcoming barriers to accessing resources and information

Researchers and practitioners in child care are continually researching and theorising about the ways that children are best supported to develop, learn and thrive in child care settings. Services often need to be quite astute when seeking relevant current information and resources to support their practices. They will often need to consider a number of issues when deciding what will be of most benefit to the service and its stakeholders.

Some issues and potential solutions to consider include:

Access to technology. Some services find it difficult to obtain information that is available through computers and the internet¹ due to lack of access and/or time constraints. Some strategies to combat these barriers include:

- Seeking support and assistance from families who have access to the internet at home.
- Using internet facilities that are available for a minimal cost through many libraries and commercial internet access points.
- Networking with other child care services that have access to the internet.
- Contacting organisations to request hard copies of information they provide as downloads from their website.

Financial outlay. The cost of subscriptions to journals/magazines and purchasing books and other printed resources can be prohibitive for some services. However, services may be able to reduce the costs associated with these by:

- Researching the available professional publications and subscribing to only one or two of these that will offer the best information to support the service's practices. Services may also be able to collaborate with other child care services to develop a 'swap' library where each service subscribes to a different resource, and then shares this with the other services. Similarly, a few services might be able to pool their finances for subscriptions or to purchase books.
- Joining the libraries of the local council, training institutions and hospitals who may have useful resources for child care professionals.

¹ While all child care services need to have access to the internet as part of the Child Care Management System, individual staff members, directors, coordinators and carers may have limited or no access to the internet for the purposes of professional reading or research.

- Seeking free or low cost information and resources. Many peak organisations also produce regular publications such as newsletters and resource sheets that are often free of charge, or available to purchase for minimal cost. It is often simply a matter of subscribing to their publication through their website. State and territory government agencies also often make their printed publications available as free downloads from the internet.
- Pooling the resources of stakeholders in the service. For example, families who have purchased resources about aspects of raising children may be willing to share these with the services. Similarly, recently qualified professionals may be prepared to share textbooks from the course or training they have completed.

Outdated and/or inaccurate information. Child care professionals can sometimes find the wealth of information and advice available to be overwhelming and confusing. Aside from the huge amount of information available through the world wide web, there are also many individuals and organisations who produce 'expert' resources for people who work with children, who may be profit rather than quality focussed. Child care professionals need to carefully consider the information that they use to inform their practices and policy development to ensure that they are promoting positive outcomes for children.

The use of current information and resources to support the professional development, and therefore the quality practices of child care professionals, is an essential aspect of quality care. However, accessing current appropriate information can present some challenges for services, so it is helpful to adopt innovative and considered approaches to seeking and using external resources ■

Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principle: 8.5

References and further information

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For more information on OSHCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au