

# Managing complaints

By Angela Owens

Outside school hours care services may need to manage a complaint raised by families, children or child care professionals. The issues can range from being a minor concern to a major problem. Dealing with a complaint about your service 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, child care professionals and service management. Complaints can arise when people feel that their ideas and perspectives are not sought or valued by the service. Services can reduce these types of complaints by ensuring that all stakeholders receive clear information about the service, 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 service practice.

Complaints often occur during periods of change, for example, when a service 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 services to ensure that change processes are transparent and clearly explained, and 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 services to become aware of potential concerns before they turn into formal grievances or complaints. Using effective communication strategies can help services to reduce the number of complaints that may arise due to misunderstandings of service practice or anxiety about change.

## Developing a complaints handling procedure

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 policy and procedures. It is a Satisfactory requirement of Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance that services have complaints handling policies and procedures for children, families and child care professionals.

While each service 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 child care professional or team involved. To avoid over complicating the process, it is always preferable to resolve the issue as close to the source as possible.





## How can complaints handling procedures be developed for children?

It is important that children have opportunities to voice their concerns, and that these are acknowledged, respected and acted upon.

To develop procedures that reflect the group's needs, child care professionals need to 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 service'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 child care professional who they would prefer to raise their concerns with, or they may like to choose a peer representative who they can speak with about their concerns or feedback. It may also be helpful to provide avenues for children to raise their concerns anonymously, for example, through a suggestion box or a confidential complaint form.

It is important to have written complaints procedures for children so that child care professionals and families can understand and access the service's current processes. However, services also need to ensure that children are provided with frequent opportunities to discuss what they should do if they are upset or have concerns, as many children, including those who have diverse language and literacy skills, may find written procedures difficult to understand or follow. Services may also consider developing a pictorial procedure to support children to understand and access the service's complaints process.

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 service will help them to decide if they have any issues to raise.

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

- 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 service.
- Information about how a complainant can contact and raise their concerns with service 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 service.
- Details of external agencies for a complainant to contact if they feel the service has not resolved their concerns. These contacts might include the relevant licensing authority or the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC).

It is also a good idea to include information in the service'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 stakeholders be informed about the service's complaints handling procedures?

Stakeholders need to feel confident that any concerns they may raise with the service 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 service's complaints handling procedures and can easily access this information. Information about complaints handling procedures can be included in the service's enrolment and orientation processes for families and children, as well as in the employee orientation package for child care professionals. Complaints handling policies and procedures are also a valuable inclusion in the service's handbooks for families, children and child care professionals.

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 service to ensure that its complaints handling procedures are simple, transparent and easy to access.

## How does an empathetic approach support positive complaints handling procedures?

Both parties often experience strong emotions during the process of raising and responding to complaints. A person receiving a complaint about themselves or the service 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 service, 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.

## The following tips may assist the recipient of a complaint to respond positively to the issues raised:

- 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 service'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.



## 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 service to share with you about your child?'
- Ask the complainant if they have any strategies or solutions that they feel the service could put in place to resolve their issues.

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

Children, families and child care professionals will appreciate a proactive approach to complaints handling where a service demonstrates a desire to be informed of concerns so that these can be promptly addressed and service practice improved ■

### Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance

Principle: 8.6

## References and further information

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