

All children have the right to be treated equitably in our society. Outside school hours care (OSHC) services have an important role to play in upholding this fundamental right for children. An environment where children are treated equitably relies on staff that accept and respect similarities and differences in children's, families' and each other's culture, gender, sexuality, ability and beliefs.

OSHC staff can create an equitable environment for children and their families through ongoing self-reflection and through practices that are guided by a sound policy for minimising bias, prejudice and discrimination. Staff also have a role to play in respecting and valuing each child as unique. In this way differences amongst children are acknowledged and respected.

What is equity?

Australian society is diverse in its make up - it is characterised by differences in human culture, gender, sexuality, ability and beliefs. Equity means treating people fairly regardless of these differences and ensuring that they are not disadvantaged by these differences. In the OSHC setting this means that the diverse range of children's and families' customs, values and beliefs need to be accepted, respected and reflected.

Guiding legislation, conventions and standards for equity

Legislation, conventions and standards are currently in place to guide our society in providing equal opportunities for children. These direct us in creating a society that endeavours to be free from bias, prejudice and discrimination.

Australian States and Territories have licensing requirements and/or national standards that relate to equity for children in OSHC services. These detail the responsibilities of services in providing environments for children that uphold the individual rights of staff and children.

The *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance (OSHCQA) Quality Practices Guide* requires that, regardless of variations that may occur between States and/or Territories, services should ensure that all children are treated equitably.

In addition, Australia is a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Article 2 of this Convention states: "Parties shall respect and ensure the rights ...to each child ... without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status."

It also states that: "Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members."

Anti discrimination laws also exist that uphold equity and prevent unfair treatment or harassment because of a person's sex, race, age, marital status, homosexuality, transgender (transsexuality) or disability.

Self-reflection and communication for equity

To create an environment where children are treated equitably it is crucial that staff are aware of their own attitudes to differences in children's backgrounds, culture, gender and ability. By continually reflecting on personal biases and prejudices, staff can develop an awareness of how they feel about and interact with differences amongst children, families and each other. By being aware of their own biases and prejudices, staff can prevent situations where they misinterpret, misjudge or distrust the behaviour of others due to difference. This can be a challenging task for individual staff and staff teams.

Self-reflection by staff can be made easier in a supportive team environment that encourages communication and respect for differing views. The process of creating an equitable environment will also be enhanced if staff endeavour to become aware of and understand the similarities and differences between the children, families and each other. By understanding children's diverse cultural and linguistic needs and abilities, staff can also develop programs that accommodate children's needs equitably.

Communicating respectfully and sensitively with families and children about their diverse backgrounds and

experiences will help staff to become knowledgeable and insightful about their attitudes and experiences. Staff who communicate with families about their cultural and child rearing practices in a way that does not judge them or suggest they are not competent, help to build bridges between the service and the child's home. It is important that staff can communicate with each other if they are uncomfortable when interacting with someone from a different cultural background or who has a different ability level. Together they may explore what is causing the discomfort and work out how to overcome it.

Staff can communicate with children and families to create an equitable environment by:

- Examining their own beliefs and values
- Becoming knowledgeable about the similarities and differences in families at the service
- Gaining a commitment from each other to providing an equitable environment
- Developing a shared philosophy
- Examining service practice in light of a philosophy
- Developing a service policy for equity
- Continually evaluating service practices and policies for equity

Do we believe all differences are acceptable?

In the process of developing an understanding about differences in children and families, staff may need to explore whether they consider all differences to be acceptable. If staff believe some differences are unacceptable, the challenge lies in reaching common understandings with families and children about what is acceptable by law or according to service policies and practices. For example, where parenting practices such as methods of discipline are judged by law as abusive, staff must adhere to the law but be mindful of a possible conflict of cultures or attitudes.

Strategies for ensuring all children are treated equitably

- Be aware of personal biases and prejudices
- Be open to and respectful of difference
- Respect the uniqueness of others
- Reflect on current skills and become knowledgeable about diverse cultural, linguistic and ability difference
- Appreciate the variety of children's cultural backgrounds and abilities and respond respectfully
- Consider the learning opportunities for children and staff of understanding cultural difference

Creating an environment that promotes equity

Children notice difference. Bias and prejudice can be learnt through observation and imitation. Staff can create an environment that promotes equity by being proactive in openly and respectfully addressing differences and bias, and by giving children positive messages about diversity and the acceptance of difference.

An equitable environment will also be promoted through inclusive practices. Inclusion accommodates the needs and interests of every individual in society. For OSHC services inclusion is about creating a sense of belonging for all children, families and staff where their diverse identities, experiences, skills and interests are respected and reflected in the program.

Some of the ways staff can create an equitable environment include:

- Role modeling positive behaviours and attitudes that challenge discrimination and prejudice
- Providing a diverse range of images about the life styles of families, gender roles, cultural backgrounds and human ability
- Acknowledging and promoting the presence of diverse staff
- Developing an inclusive curriculum to help all children develop positive attitudes to diversity
- Challenging biases with children, for example, discussing evidence of bias and prejudice in children's play, interactions and relationships
- Avoiding negative comparisons between children
- Reviewing and providing resources in the environment that promote positive messages about difference and diversity
- Engaging in training to develop skills in treating children equitably

It is important that staff recognise that they may unintentionally foster bias by:

- Implying that there is only one right way to act
- Not addressing children's questions about difference
- Using biased or sexist language

Building relationships with children and families for equity

Staff will further promote an equitable environment by building respectful, trusting relationships with children and families. These relationships should be responsive and show

acceptance of diverse family structures and perspectives. It is important to get to know families and children as individuals and to avoid categorising them according to their cultural background. Getting to know each family's unique customs, values, life style choices and beliefs will assist staff to build genuine relationships and promote equity. Staff should recognise the power they hold in the relationship with families and be conscious of when they may be showing judgment of families' and children's behaviours. To build responsive relationships with children, staff need to listen attentively and show genuine interest in the children's experiences and ideas.

Staff can build relationships for equity by:

- Communicating and interacting respectfully, equally and responsively
- Being aware of situations where differences create misunderstandings or barriers
- Acknowledging family structures and lifestyle choices as valid

Gender equity

It is important for staff to be aware of the way in which gender may create unfair opportunities and experiences for children. Staff should reflect on the unspoken messages that can be conveyed to children when they have different experiences or are treated differently because of their gender. The challenge for staff is in helping children to understand how they can prevent gender from limiting their life experiences or identity.

To adopt practices that counteract bias and present equitable experiences for girls and boys staff can:

- Question with children the way in which gender influences their choices and experiences
- Find solutions with children to ensure their experiences are not limited by their gender
- Involve children in discussions about who uses what equipment and materials
- Encourage self reflection by children about the activities they are usually involved in
- Evaluate the service resources with children to identify any stereotypical images
- Ask children to reflect on when boys and girls play together and when they play separately

Gay and lesbian equity

A part of the diverse make up of children in OSHC will include those who have gay men and lesbians in their family and friendship network. These children have the right to see their families and friends as equally recognised and valued.

Staff can help children to develop inclusive views about same-sex relationships by:

- Using activities that stimulate discussions about the wide variety of family structures
- Questioning sexuality and gender stereotypes
- Resisting making assumptions about the sexuality of others
- Challenging discriminatory, stereotypical and derogatory comments and jokes
- Giving children honest, simple and factual answers to questions about sexuality
- Developing a policy that includes sexuality and family diversity



Equity for children with additional needs

Children with additional needs have the right to be treated equitably in OSHC. This will be achieved in an environment that respects and supports their needs and encourages their development. Staff should reflect on and be honest about their own attitudes and support one another in building relationships and working with children with additional needs. Staff will also need to address the attitudes of all children in OSHC towards children with additional needs. This involves encouraging children to feel comfortable about differences and to challenge unfair or stereotypical attitudes. Staff should also avoid discouraging children's questions or interest in children with additional needs.

Staff can support children with additional needs by:

- Becoming familiar with the impairment or condition
- Showing a positive, patient attitude towards the special equipment or care needed by the child
- Providing accessible play facilities
- Encouraging the child's efforts, not the outcome
- Being careful not to be overprotective
- Allowing the child some independence
- Giving the child honest, supportive feedback about their achievements

Incorporating equity into the program

To provide an equitable environment for children staff need to become aware of and knowledgeable about the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children in their care. Staff will be more sensitive to and supportive of the diverse backgrounds of others if they appreciate their own backgrounds. Staff can then play an active role in planning ways in which the children's cultural and linguistic background can be reflected and incorporated into the program. Staff also have a role to play in encouraging families and children to maintain their home languages.

Staff can provide experiences that promote cultural and linguistic equity by:

- Modeling inclusive behaviours that respect the range of children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- Developing an understanding of bilingualism and second language acquisition
- Incorporating each child's home language and literacy experiences in the program
- Actively supporting children in expanding their communication methods by learning sign language or diverse words and phrases used by children in the service

Developing a policy for equity

The development of a policy for equity can contribute to consistency of staff practice in OSHC services. This should be developed and regularly reviewed by staff and management. The involvement of these parties will assist the development of a common understanding and agreement about equity in the service. Families and children should also be invited to contribute to the policies to allow them to express their views about equity.

Further Information

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- Dau, E. (ed). (2001) *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*. 2nd Ed. Pearson Education: Australia.
- Faulkner, J. and Kyte, N. (2005) *Supporting Diversity Through Quality Assurance*. Paper presented to ECA Biennial Conference, Kaleidoscope of Listening, Brisbane.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J (2001) *Foundations, Early Childhood Education in a Diverse Society*. 2nd Ed. McGraw-Hill: New York.

Useful Websites

- Anti Discrimination Board of New South Wales - www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au
- Diversity in Child Care Queensland Inc - www.diversity.net.au.
- Ethnic Child Care Resource Unit - www.multicultural.online.wa.gov.au/eccru
- The Multicultural Resource Unit - www.fka.com.au



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