

Recruiting child care professionals

By Phillip Rowell

Children, families and child care professionals can develop trusting and respectful partnerships when services are able to successfully recruit and retain appropriate staff. Experienced, skilled and knowledgeable child care professionals strengthen relationships between stakeholders by encouraging two-way communication and providing quality care.

The recruitment of child care professionals should be recognised as an ongoing process and an important opportunity to employ people with qualities that reflect the service's values.

An effective recruitment, selection and induction process ensures that the best possible child care professionals are attracted to, and retained by, the service. This improves quality outcomes for all stakeholders and supports continuing improvement.

Understanding why the service needs to recruit

High staff turnover affects services in many ways. Changes in staffing disrupt the continuity of care provided for children and families, the cohesiveness and morale of the team can be challenged and management tasks such as interviews and staff inductions can become repetitive and begin to lose value. In this situation, recruitment can become a set of isolated processes that attempt to resolve the immediate problem of replacing employees, with little focus on retaining and supporting child care professionals when there are staff shortages.

The alternative is to consider recruitment as a long-term, continuous process and to create management practices which aim to retain the expertise of child care professionals. A key element to successful recruitment is anticipating the employment needs of the service and ensuring staff are supported. By 'acting' on, rather than 'reacting' to, periods of high staff turnover, the service can implement practices which support stakeholders during times of instability.

For example, by recording when staff use their sick leave, services can identify if there are patterns of staff illness. By reviewing the availability of relief staff in advance, services can be prepared for periods where unexpected staff leave tends to be higher than normal. This strategy can assist services to:

- ensure the provision of consistent quality child care;
- recruit relief staff who can begin to form trusting partnerships with permanent staff, which strengthens the team's cohesiveness; and
- reduce the guilt and stress often felt by child care professionals when they use sick leave when there is inadequate relief staff.



Identifying the service's needs

It is important that the service and its stakeholders reflect upon their values and beliefs during the recruitment process. However, the service will also need to comply with legislation and national standards or licensing requirements, which can include staff qualifications and child protection checks. Services may need to recruit child care professionals when:

- staff resign or retire;
- relief staff contact lists are reviewed;
- specialised skills and knowledge are needed. For example, experience in caring for children with additional needs;
- tasks require higher adult/child ratios, such as mealtimes or excursions; or
- licensing or regulations change.

Networking with other services, peak bodies, or education and training institutions can also provide services with an opportunity to exchange information about recruitment trends, the availability of child care professionals seeking employment, and the possibility of sharing staff.

Developing a recruitment policy

The recruitment process encompasses many different procedures from identifying a service's staffing needs and determining selection criteria, to interviewing and inducting child care professionals.

A recruitment policy should reflect Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) practices, current legislation or licensing requirements. By creating an environment that guides and supports the successful recruitment of child care professionals, services can establish practices that:

- adhere to EEO legislation, which defines the right of individuals to be treated fairly and without prejudice or discrimination;
- attracts qualified and/or experienced staff from diverse and varied backgrounds;
- ensures continuity and quality of care for children and families; and
- encourages the retention of child care professionals.

Creating position descriptions

In the past, personal traits ('Do you like looking after children?') and the ability to carry out traditional tasks ('Can you change a nappy?') questioned an individual's competency in child care. Today, there is an additional focus on how the values, beliefs and knowledge of child care professionals affects their decision making and ability to interact with others to reach the best outcomes for children, families and colleagues. This reflects a commitment to their professional accountability.

A position description should clearly identify an employee's role and responsibilities which can be measured against a set of outcomes. Identifying the specific qualities required can also assist the service to develop position descriptions which reflect a

combination of personal skills, knowledge and experience, which can help to promote a more holistic approach to recruitment.

These qualities may include the ability to:

- understand the needs of children and families;
- develop and sustain positive partnerships with all stakeholders;
- demonstrate empathy and equitable, fair decision making;
- set goals, manage time efficiently and be innovative, creative and flexible;
- advocate for the importance of quality assurance; and
- promote the importance of the child care profession.

It is also important to consider how children and families can be involved in developing position descriptions and how their input can identify the qualities an applicant may require.

The service can also consider the following questions when developing a position description:

- What does the position description outline? For example, staff responsibilities or who the position is accountable to.
- How is the role described? Does the position description reflect the skills and responsibilities of the person who previously held the position?
- How does the language reflect diversity and inclusion?
- How does the position description identify the uniqueness of the service? For example, service location, age range of children or management structure?

Determining the selection criteria

Selection criteria are a list of statements which characterise the skills and knowledge required to successfully undertake the role. It should complement the job description and also inform applicants about what is expected of them.

Selection criteria should use 'strengths' based approach, which encourages applicants to consider their skills and knowledge from a performance based perspective and to respond using examples of practice.

For example, the selection criteria may state that the applicant:

- Creates plans to meet the individual needs of children and families.
- Engages in professional development opportunities.
- Applies training outcomes to daily practice.





A regular review of the service's recruitment needs can help to identify specific selection criteria needed for the role. For example, a service with a number of inexperienced staff may decide that future selection criteria needs to reflect a high level of knowledge and experience in long day care delivery. Services can consider the following questions:

- How does each criteria reflect the service's needs?
- Which criteria require documented proof? For example, certified copies of qualifications.
- How do criteria meet legislative or licensing requirements?

Advertising for child care professionals

Services will need an effective advertising strategy aimed at the most appropriate audience. An employment advertisement could include the position title, outline of the role and responsibilities, the service's philosophy and contact details, and application closure date.

Services should also remember that 'word of mouth' and networking with other services or peak bodies is one of the most useful ways to communicate employment needs and opportunities. Advertising opportunities can include:

- employment sections in child care publications, newsletters, newspapers or local community publications;
- online discussion boards and websites;
- networking at in-services and conferences;
- notice boards at educational institutions or local council amenities, such as libraries or community centres; and
- employment agencies.

Employing temporary or casual staff

The use of employment agencies when recruiting child care professionals, especially for temporary or casual positions, can be a necessity for some services. Agency based or casual employees require a unique approach to recruitment and induction. They are often required to care for children the moment they arrive at a service, with limited time to orientate themselves to a service's environment, policies and practices.

Services should consider the information that casual staff need to be made immediately aware of, such as evacuation procedures and the location of dangerous products. It is also beneficial for the service to enquire about the agencies' selection criteria to ensure it meets the service's requirements.

Selecting child care professionals

Many selection procedures are governed by EEO and anti-discrimination legislation, which stipulates the acceptable language to be used during an interview, the way the interview is conducted, and how the successful applicant is chosen. Selection procedures can also detail how and for what purpose certain information is required, such as referee and working with children checks.

The structure and role of an interview panel is also important. Interviewers should have access to the applicants' responses to the selection criteria prior to the interview. They also need to have an understanding of their legal obligations and be reminded of the importance of remaining unbiased and objective.

Services can consider the following questions when developing selection procedures:

- How can the service's current philosophy, policies and practices assist in developing interview questions?
- How are different forms of questioning used during in the interview process? For example, "Can you identify the recommended practices for changing a child's nappy?" or "Two children are in conflict over the same toy. Can you describe your behaviour guidance strategies?"
- How does the service verify qualifications and employment history?
- How, and at what point, does the service undertake a referee check?
- How does the service decide upon the successful applicant?
- How are successful and unsuccessful applicants informed of the service's decision?
- What is the procedure when no applicant is successful?

Inducting child care professionals

Child care professionals require an induction to the service. This encourages consistent and accurate communication about a service's practices and standards. An induction procedure should:

- introduce new staff to children, families and colleagues prior to commencing employment;
- identify the service's practices and routines;
- explain how play and learning experiences are planned and evaluated;
- clarify roles and responsibilities; and
- communicate the service's progress through Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA).

An induction procedure can also identify potential professional development opportunities. Services should also induct unpaid stakeholders such as students and volunteers to the service's practices and operations.

Retaining child care professionals

Being prepared to develop a continuous recruitment process, which considers how services can retain child care professionals, is an important step in alleviating the issues of recruiting staff. Performance appraisals and continued professional development opportunities acknowledge the skills and expertise of staff and reflect how these are valued by the service.

Appraisals are an opportunity to assess and review the performance, abilities and skills of child care professionals, and they allow achievements, strengths and challenges to be recognised.

When conducted in a respectful and positive manner, performance appraisals can instill pride, self-esteem and encourage child care professionals to take ownership of their practices as measured against their job description and selection criteria. This acknowledgement contributes to a sense of worth and places a value on the important role child care professionals perform every day, which can help to retain staff.

Recruitment and induction should be a continuous process of review, reflection and evaluation to employ and retain skilled and experienced child care professionals. Successfully implemented, recruitment processes can assist services to provide quality outcomes for children, families and child care professionals, and promote a commitment to continuing improvement ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

Principles: 1.6, 2.1 and 7.2 – 7.4

References and further information

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