Developing a Policy

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Child 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. Policy development should include collaboration among all stakeholders and the collection of relevant information. Policies are 'living' documents that should be regularly reviewed to respond to the individual needs of those working with them to reflect new knowledge and to meet changing trends in the service and wider community.

The importance of policies

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

Policies developed for long day care services must be documented. Written policies provide a record of past decisions about a service's operations, the reasons for past decisions, and the sources of information that were used to make these decisions. Management and staff can use policy information to adopt practices and procedures which are based on current authoritative knowledge and which reflect the values of the service. Written, accessible policies also provide all stakeholders with information about what to expect from a service.

How are policies developed?

Developing a policy involves gathering information to draft the policy, drafting the policy and consulting with staff, families and children to refine and finalise the draft policy. It is often useful to first define the area that a policy will cover by looking at existing policies and identifying areas where there are 'gaps' or where policy is needed to guide practice. One way of organising policies could be by Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) Quality Area, though there are many other options. Services will also have policies on issues that are not included in the QIAS Quality Areas, such as a fee policy or late collection of children policy.

Even in the initial phases of gathering information, a group or committee who can share skills and perspectives is preferable to an individual working alone. Such a group might collect information including:

- Legal requirements
- Recommendations from recognised authorities
- The service's philosophy and related service policies such as the service's child protection policy
- Books or policy documents from other organisations
- Documented information such as 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. This will result in policies that are more likely to be accepted by stakeholders they affect. While there may be a small number of representatives for groups like families and staff who are directly involved in the policy's development, all stakeholders should have valid opportunities to contribute their ideas and views. This could be done by conducting surveys, interviews or general discussions, including those between staff and families during morning and afternoon routines. Talking about policies in meetings is another way of gaining a range of views.

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

What should a policy include?

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

- A statement of the service's philosophy
- A statement describing what the policy covers
- A rationale or the reasons for the policy which outlines some of the recent research or changes that influenced the development of the policy
- The goals or purpose of the policy
- Strategies and/or practices which explain how the general policy statements will translate into everyday actions
- The source and publication date of any information which was used to develop the policy
- The date the policy was implemented
- A reference to any other policies it complements. For example a food handling policy may refer to the hygiene policy

Reviewing policies

It is important that everyone knows a policy exists. Ensure new staff read and sign to acknowledge that they have read key policies before commencing work and discuss service policies at meetings attended by staff and/or families. Include information about policies in newsletters or other written communication with staff, families and other stakeholders.

Policies should be reviewed regularly to accommodate changes to families and staff, and to current information that contributed to the original policy development or previous review. Attending in-services, meetings and conferences, reading journals and newsletters, and making regular checks of recognised authorities' websites will ensure that changes in best practice are identified and used to inform policy development. 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 the reason for these
- Ideas from other services or organisations
- How practical the policy is
- Changes to the service, including the physical environment, staff, families and children

After a policy has been reviewed and the final policy implemented, it is best to make sure that previous versions are destroyed to avoid confusion. Regular reviews still need to be made even if some policies or parts of policies may remain stable for long periods. The date of the review and the sources consulted during the review process should be noted even if a policy review results in no policy changes. This helps the service to demonstrate accountability as its practices can be seen to be supported by a documented current policy statement.

Further Information

- Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd (NSW) (2001). 'Developing your centre's policy guidelines'. *Rattler*. Issue 58. Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd: NSW.

- Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd, NSW. (2005). *Managing a Child Care Service: 2005 Student Edition*. Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd: NSW.

- Faulkner, J., Hughes, L., and Swift, K. (2004). 'Child Care Adviser Q & A: Programming and Philosophy'. *Putting Children First*. Issue 9, 4-5. National Childcare Accreditation Council: 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.

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**