

Dealing with a complaint about your service can be a difficult experience, particularly when the service's complaints handling procedures are ineffective or non-existent. Although there are strategies that will minimise the initial misunderstanding of service practice which can prompt complaints or grievances, most services will be required to manage complaints at some time.

Complaints about a service are often triggered by poor communication or lack of information sharing between management, staff and families. Services can reduce these types of complaints by ensuring that families receive clear information about all aspects of the service and their child's experiences at the service. It is also important to give families genuine and consistent opportunities to provide feedback and to raise issues about service practice. These strategies will help to avoid grievances that may arise when families feel that their ideas and perspectives are not sought or valued by the service.

Developing a complaints handling procedure

The most valuable strategy for managing complaints effectively is to ensure that the service has a current and practical grievance and complaints handling procedure which has been developed or reviewed in consultation with families. It is a satisfactory requirement of the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System that services have grievance and complaints handling policies and procedures. This may also be a requirement of state and territory licensing regulations.

While each service needs to develop complaints and grievance handling procedures that reflect the specific needs and circumstances of their service and families, all effective complaints handling procedures will include:

- Strategies to deal with issues quickly
- A clear outline of the steps that will be followed at each stage of managing the complaint
- Procedures for documenting discussions between families, staff and management
- Options for raising concerns with the relevant party. For example, many informal or simple concerns can be raised directly with and managed by the staff member or team involved
- Clear information about how a complainant can contact and raise their concerns with service management
- Procedures for keeping the complainant informed of the progress of the complaint
- Procedures for maintaining confidentiality

- Procedures for recording and evaluating the progress of the complaint
- Procedures for evaluating the outcomes of the complaint and for providing recommendations for future policy or practice at the service
- Details for external agencies for a complainant to contact if they feel the service has not resolved their concerns, for example the relevant licensing authority or NCAC

It is important to ensure that families can easily access information about the service's complaints handling procedures. This information should be included in the enrolment and orientation procedure, and families need to feel confident that any concerns or issues they may raise with the service will be handled promptly and professionally. Complaints and grievance handling will be made unnecessarily difficult when families feel anxious or unsure about raising their concerns. Families in this situation may put off stating their concerns until these have become far more emotional and complex than they originally were. Alternatively, families may opt to raise their concerns outside the service where their issues may not be successfully managed, or may choose to remove their child from the service, without ever mentioning their issues.

Understanding both sides

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 simply feel angry or upset about the

issue itself. Sometimes concerns are raised due to circumstances affecting a person that are outside the control of the service.

Effective complaints handling procedures and techniques encourage each party to empathise with the other's perspective, and promote a positive approach through which complaints or grievances are seen as an opportunity to improve practices and relationships. The following approaches may assist a service to understand the complainant's perspective:

- 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's day?'
- Ask the complainant if they have any strategies or solutions that they feel the service could put in place to resolve their issues

While adopting the above strategies may assist service personnel to understand a complainant's perspective, the following tips may also support the recipient of the 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 issues raised. If the issues are complex, or

there are a number of concerns 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 with a colleague or with service management, ensuring that professionalism and confidentiality is maintained
- If the complainant has approached you with their concerns at an inappropriate time or in an inappropriate place, advise them that you would like to discuss their concerns 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 service 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 clear reasons

Ensuring that the service has transparent, practical and effective complaints handling procedures in place will support services to manage concerns and grievances in ways that will benefit all stakeholders. It is essential that families and staff are familiar with the service's complaints handling process and that they have opportunities to contribute to the development and review of this.

Families will appreciate a proactive approach to complaints handling in which a service demonstrates a desire to be informed of concerns so that these can be promptly addressed and the service improved.

Further Information

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