

Caring for School Age Children in Long Day Care

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

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Caring for school age children in long day care environments provides a unique opportunity for services to provide holistic care for children and their families in the community. The home-like aesthetic and group care facilities and resources that are present in long day care services can be readily adapted to care for older children.

Caring for school age children in long day care should not be seen as an 'add on' service to families and children but a crucial aspect of the care and education of children in our community. Consideration needs to be given to school age children as a separate and unique group that is afforded the same priority as children in long day care. Perspectives about children in middle childhood and the recreational aspects of vacation and before and after school care should also be considered.

To provide care for school age children staff should have some knowledge and understanding of children's development and needs in middle childhood. The essential elements of the program such as the relationships, the environment and the activities children have access to should reflect this knowledge. It is important that staff understand the unique characteristics of older children and not view them as older preschoolers.

Understanding school age children

One of the challenges of working with children aged from 5 to 12 years is that they display a wide range of development across all areas. There are broad stages or characteristics that older children move through and it is important for staff to have an understanding of what these are. From the social and moral to the cognitive and physical areas of development, children will exhibit a great variety of behaviours, interests and abilities. For example, the needs and interests of a 5 year old who has just started school will be vastly different to those of an 11 or 12 year old child in their final year of primary school. The differences in their interests, needs and physical development will require very different interactions and resources.

However, it is important to note that individual children's development within these broad stages and characteristics can vary dramatically. For example two children in any given age group may have very different cognitive abilities but may display similar physical development. Staff observation of individual children will help them to understand each child's unique qualities.

Staff knowledge and expertise in the development of school age children can be gained through professional development, resources and through their observations and interactions with this age group.

Characteristics of school age children

In a broad sense, there are some characteristics that set school age children and younger children apart. These can create challenges in long day care services that cater for older children, particularly in mixed age settings. These challenges can be met if staff are aware of the differing needs of older children and cater for these appropriately.





The following are broad characteristics that older children may display:

- Older children can show a keen interest in and be influenced by peer and popular culture. This can be at odds with the activities and experiences that are appropriate for younger children. For example, some music and films and the language and conversations of older children may be adult-like in content and therefore be inappropriate for younger children.
- Issues that are beyond the understandings of younger children such as drugs, sex and personal development may be raised by older children. Staff may find themselves having difficult but important conversations with children about these issues. Staff can be supported in these conversations by staying in touch with the personal development courses and messages that are being taught in the school environment and by seeking the support of other staff and health professionals.
- Older children will often seek and be capable of greater independence. They may also challenge authority and the limits and rules of the service. Some children resent being in care and would prefer to be at home or spending time with their friends after school. Providing children with scope for independence and special privileges that younger children do not have can help to

engage them and make them feel welcome at the service. Environments and experiences especially arranged for older children can also encourage a sense of belonging and willingness to participate in the service.

- The physical development of older children will mean they require more space and some resources specifically suited to their physical size and abilities.
- Children in the primary school age group can be entering puberty and therefore require staff to have an understanding of and be sensitive to the physical and emotional needs that this may bring. For example, school age children will require privacy when toileting. Girls of primary school age can be menstruating and therefore require facilities for the hygienic and private disposal of blood products. It is not appropriate to expect school age children to toilet in open plan toilets designed for young children.
- Spending time with friends is of great importance to older children especially as they prepare for a day at school and to unwind at the end of the day. A relaxed environment that allows children to choose their own experiences and who they interact with, will allow them the freedom to spend time and develop relationships with their friends.

Developing relationships with older children

Developing meaningful relationships with older children can be immensely rewarding for staff and can guide them in planning experiences suited to the needs of individual children. Genuine interactions and conversations between staff and children are the key to developing meaningful relationships. Staff should arrange the environment and experiences so that they have opportunities to talk freely with and listen attentively to older children. As children arrive after a day at school, they will often need to talk about their day and openly express their feelings about their experiences. It is useful for staff to make sure they are available at this time to show that they are interested and value what the children have to say.

Staff should consider older children as equal conversation partners. Listening to children and honestly acknowledging their feelings and thoughts will assist to build relationships where children feel respected and cared for. These relationships are crucial in gaining an understanding of individual children.

Planning experiences and environments for older children

Before attending a full day at school, older children will need an environment that is relaxed and provides opportunities to play freely. Similarly, after school they will need spaces and experiences that allow them to relax and to unwind. For some children this will be through vigorous physical activity, others will be ready for something to eat and some space to focus on quiet activities or homework.

Staff should plan a range of open ended, flexible and adaptable experiences specifically designed for older children that emphasise recreation and having fun. A balance of active and passive activities should also be provided. Keep in mind that physical activity after school is an important way to keep children fit and to avoid the development of health problems such as obesity.

When planning for older children, the focus should be based on children's interests and should be recreational rather than academic. Provide opportunities for them to play individually as well as within a group to encourage a balance of independence, collaboration and cooperation. Older children enjoy opportunities to take on leadership roles and they benefit from and enjoy challenges within safe boundaries. This allows them the autonomy they need to develop life skills in a supportive and safe environment. The emphasis should be on life skills and supporting the growing independence of children.



When planning for older children, it is important that the experiences provided are consistent with the service philosophy and policies for care and education. It is useful to engage in a regular process of reviewing the service's philosophy and policies to ensure they accommodate the needs of school age children and their families. For example, consider whether the service philosophy is broad enough to accommodate the needs and behaviours of older as well as younger children.

There is no 'one size fits all' way of planning for older children. Taking time to think about children's needs and interests and making considered decisions about future experiences will allow staff to focus on the specific needs of older children. Observing individuals and groups of children will also give staff vital information for planning experiences and the environment.

Involving children in planning

Older children enjoy being involved in the planning process and are more likely to actively participate and engage in experiences if they are genuinely involved in making planning decisions. This also assists when setting rules and limits for children's behaviour at the service.

Consider asking older children to plan specific activities or larger events for the whole group. For example, small groups of children could make decisions about and plan the resources needed for cooking muffins. Alternatively they could plan a special dress up day or picnic activity for children at the service.

It is important that older children have opportunities to inform staff about their current interests and their ideas for planning. This can occur through one to one staff conversations with children, or through staff interactions with small groups of children.

Planning for mixed age groups and shared environments

Environments that allow older and younger children to mix and play together provide rich opportunities for children's development and learning. Older children can learn and develop a strong sense of self-worth by caring for and helping young children, and younger children can gain from the support of school age children. Mixed age grouping also provides valuable opportunities for siblings to spend time together and share experiences. However staff should avoid burdening older children with the responsibility of caring for younger children.

When planning environments for mixed age groups, think about the needs and interests of the individual children in the group and try to arrange the environment so that there are few instances where everyone is expected to do the same thing at the same time. The physical space and resources of the services should be provided in a way that meets the needs of all children and does not disadvantage one age group against the other. There will be times when the interests of older children are not appropriate for younger children such as some music, television programs and particular sport and play activities. Therefore in mixed group environments staff should provide times for older and younger children to play separately.



References and Further Information

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