Interactions with School Age Children in Long Day Care

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

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The quality of the interactions between staff and school age children attending long day care contributes to how children experience the service and influences their sense of belonging and developing sense of self. Meaningful relationships are developed through positive, genuine interactions between staff and older children as well as between children themselves.

Meaningful relationships are crucial in making children feel welcome, connected and respected at the service. Staff can use positive behaviour guidance and promote cohesive groups to further contribute to the quality of the interactions experienced by children at the service.

It is important that staff possess some knowledge of children's development, characteristics and needs in middle childhood. Specific training or professional development to gain an understanding and knowledge of children in middle childhood will assist staff to engage in positive interactions and develop meaningful relationships with individual children.

Developing relationships

Children sense when adults are being sincere in their communication with them. Staff who convey a genuine interest in children by interacting with them responsively and inclusively will encourage children to feel respected and valued. Making time to communicate with children individually allows staff to develop an understanding of children's lives, thoughts and feelings. It is this communication that provides the foundation for the development of real relationships between staff and children.

It is useful for staff to arrange the environment and experiences so they can have frequent conversations with and observe individual children. For example, staff should be available to give children their full attention when they arrive after a day at school. Children are often bursting with news about their day and need the attention of adults that are genuinely interested in what they have to say. This also gives staff valuable information to assist in planning experiences and communicating with families.

Staff can gather further information to build relationships with individual children by observing them and their verbal and non-verbal communication. This can provide staff with a further understanding of how children think and feel. For example, watching the way children respond in large group games as well as in small friendship groups can reveal how they communicate their feelings and ideas in a variety of situations.

Staff can develop inclusive relationships with school age children by showing respect for their differences. By sensitively and positively responding to diversity in culture, gender, family structure, language and religion, staff show children they respect and value differences between individual children. Staff can also show children that differences are both tolerated and embraced by allowing and supporting children to express different view points.

Guiding the behaviour of older children

Taking a positive approach when guiding the behaviour of school age children can build their self-esteem and confidence and promote cooperative and harmonious relationships with their peers.

The behaviour guidance approach used by staff should focus on understanding children and encouraging appropriate behaviour, rather than on control and punishment. This will assist children to develop a positive sense of self and to take responsibility for their actions. By using a positive approach to guiding children's behaviour, staff can minimise conflict between children and assist them to find constructive solutions to disagreements.

When developing a behaviour guidance policy and strategies, staff should reflect on the characteristics of older children and on their individual observations of those in care. This will help to ensure that the guidance methods used are appropriate for and respectful of the specific needs of the children. For example, older children will often seek and be capable of greater independence. They may also challenge authority and the limits and rules of the service. Providing children with the scope for independence and involving them in setting the

rules of the service can help to engage them and promote positive behaviours. It can also encourage a sense of belonging and willingness to participate in the service.

Staff can guide children's behaviour by:

- Being aware of individual children's relationships, interests and needs

- Involving children in discussions about desirable behaviour and in setting limits and rules

- Modelling positive communication and behaviour

- Discussing emotions with children and acknowledging their feelings

- Having appropriate expectations of children's behaviour

- Giving explanations to children when limits are enforced

- Preventing conflicts and inappropriate behaviour rather than punishing them

- Allowing children to make decisions and involving them in planning the experiences at the service

- Encouraging children to negotiate and find solutions during disagreements

- Providing adequate equipment and space, and organising the environment to promote harmonious play

Staff can encourage children to:

- Express their feelings in a way that respects others and positively communicates their thoughts and emotions

- Use words and discussion to express thoughts and feelings rather than physical and verbal aggression

- Listen to the views of others and try to compromise during disputes

- Find solutions to problems

- Empathise with and support other children who are experiencing difficulties

- Challenge unfair or inappropriate behaviour in a positive way

Dealing with sensitive issues

School age children are exposed to a variety of messages, images and trends in the community through the media, the school environment, extra curricular activities and their relationships with friends and family. They can show a keen interest in and be influenced by peers, popular culture and family It is important to provide an environment in which children feel safe when trying to make sense of the vast range of information in the world around them.

Staff can take an active role in making children feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts and feelings by being available and accessible and responding positively to children's communications and behaviours. The development of service policies that promote equity and inclusion will provide important foundations that support staff in their responses and approaches to children. Staff need to put their biases aside, listen attentively and respond calmly when dealing with sensitive issues of culture, gender, family structure, language and religion.

It is natural for older children to use and experiment with language and behaviours they have observed in the media and their community. This can create challenges for staff as older children will often express views and behaviours that may be at odds with service expectations for behaviour. The interests and conversations of older children can also be adult-like in content and therefore may be inappropriate for younger children. Where these are inappropriate, staff should reinforce service limits and rules for behaviour, emphasising respect for others and encouraging children to take responsibility for their actions.

Issues 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. It is important to avoid making children feel that they should not talk about matters that are troubling them. 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.

Promoting positive group interactions

Positive group interactions by children are characterised by cooperative behaviours in which they respect each other, take responsibility for their own actions and seek to find solutions to problems with others. To promote cooperative behaviours, staff can encourage children to work with others to achieve common goals, respect the views of others and communicate openly and positively.

To promote positive and cohesive groups of older children staff can:

- Talk about limits for behaviour

- Encourage children to set rules and limits for play with each other

- Invite children to reflect on the feelings of others. For example, talk about when new children arrive, good and bad friendships, bullying and how it feels when you are left out and excluded from groups and games

- Foster friendships between children. For example, allow children to participate freely in the friendship groups of their choosing and encourage children to invite new comers into their play

- Allow older and younger children to play separately at least some of the time

- Provide experiences that allow children to collaborate and solve problems together e.g. cooking experiences, large constructions, team games

- Encourage children to listen to others and see things from their perspective

- Encourage children to appreciate and acknowledge the strengths and talents of others

References and Further Information

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