

Ask a Child Care Adviser: Using information from families to plan for children

Angela Owens interviewed NCAC Child Care Advisers Mamta Bhathela and Karen Swift about seeking and using information from families to plan effectively for children's everyday routines and experiences.

Why is information from families valuable when planning for children?

Each family knows their child best. Parents and other family members have a lot of information to share about their child that can help educators to get to know the child well. Educators generally only see and know children within the context of the child care service. Parents and family members can help to 'round out' educators' understanding of children by painting a picture of their lives outside the service including their experiences, interests and family culture.

When educators understand children within the different contexts of their lives it helps them to plan experiences and routines that reflect children's interests and abilities. This also helps to maintain consistency between home and child care routines for younger children.

What useful information may families share with educators?

The information that families share about their child usually reflects the things that are a priority for them. For example, a parent whose child has special dietary requirements may tend to concentrate on talking about their child's health and wellbeing, whereas a family who is focused on preparing their child for school may be more

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, and 3.1

OSHCQA Principles: 1.2, 3.1, and 4.2

QIAS Principles: 1.4, 2.1, 3.2 and 3.3

inclined to share information about their child's learning experiences at home. The information that families are more likely to share may change over time as their child develops. Parents of babies and younger toddlers often discuss their child's routines and developmental milestones; parents of older children often share information about their child's activities and experiences outside of care. All of this information is valuable as the insights of the child it provides can assist educators to implement individualised routines and educational experiences.

Information about the family's structure and make-up, special family events and celebrations, cultural and linguistic background and the family's everyday activities can also contribute to planning for children.

Depending on the type of information that is provided, this may affect the way children's routines are planned to maintain consistency with their home routine or it may be used to build on children's interests at home. Understanding what is happening in children's lives outside of care can also help educators to understand why children may be responding to others or behaving in certain ways. This helps educators to adapt behaviour guidance strategies and their approaches to teaching and learning to best meet individual children's interests and abilities.

How can educators seek information about children from families?

First and foremost, educators need to be sensitive not only about the ways in which they seek information from families, but also about the type of information they request. Each family will have their own level of comfort about what they wish to share about their child and family, and families should not be made to feel obligated to divulge personal information about themselves or their child's home life. This is particularly important





to remember when a child exhibits a change in behaviour which educators may attribute to 'something going on at home'. It is never appropriate to ask a family if there are problems at home; however, it is acceptable to offer families support and genuine opportunities to share information if they wish to do so.

Daily informal conversations with families during drop-off and collection times are often the best way to obtain key insights into the lives and experiences of children outside of care. Not only do these conversations help to increase both parties' understanding of each child, they are also central to the process of building trusting two-way relationships with families, which in turn promotes effective information exchange.

A key way of engaging families in positive, genuine information exchange is to use active listening and open-ended questions. Asking a parent how their weekend was may more often than not elicit a fairly limited response, such as "good" or "busy". Alternatively, asking open-ended questions such as "what did you do over the weekend?", or "what did Clare enjoy on your trip to visit Grandma?" can help to start and maintain effective two-way conversations with families.

Families will also appreciate seeing and/or being told how the information they have shared with educators is used to support individual planning for their child, so it is important to make a concerted effort to demonstrate this to families. For example, if a family has told you about a farm visit experience that your child has enjoyed they will probably be pleased to see some farm-

focussed experiences being planned for their child. Similarly, a family who has told you that they are concerned that their child is not coping well with the arrival of a new sibling may feel supported if you can tell them about the ways you have worked with their child to assist them in this area.

How can educators overcome barriers to communication?

Having regular conversations in mornings and afternoons with some families may not be possible. Issues such as time constraints, having the minimal staff-child ratios required at these times, language and/or cultural barriers or children being conveyed between home and child care by a transport service can make verbal exchanges difficult or impossible.

Alternative ways to gather information from families to enhance planning for children include:

- Having a diary for families to make notes in about their child
- Using communication books for exchange of information between families and educators
- Using email to exchange information
- Having frequent, short meetings with families, for example by allocating regular 10 minute time slots at the beginning or end of the day to speak with families
- Arranging for short teleconferences with families
- Organising frequent social events where educators and families can have informal conversations.

It is essential to use methods that are not onerous or overwhelming for families to share information. Most families are likely to find a five or ten minute telephone or face-to-face conversation easier to manage than completing written surveys or questionnaires. Ideally, educators should ask families when they enrol what will work best for them in terms of regularly sharing information about their child. Educators may be able to offer two or three methods from which families can choose.

How can information received from families be documented?

Educators can often find the prospect of documenting information when planning for children daunting, particularly when they are responsible for a large group of children. However, it is helpful to remember that it is the quality rather than the quantity of documented information that is important.

Having simple dot points or statements, recorded directly in children's individual documentation is a good way of making it possible to regularly update the information that has been shared by families. Copies of email correspondence or families' entries in diaries or communication books can also be easily included in individual program records. The key is for educators to reflect on what information to record and how this can be used to enhance planning for children. Educators also need to consider how they can show how what they have documented from families is reflected in documented planning for children.

Conclusion

Having regular, easy opportunities for families to share information about their child assists educators to increase their understanding of each child's interests, backgrounds and everyday experiences outside of care. This assists educators to develop responsive programs that cater to individual children and that maintain consistency between the child's experiences at home and child care ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: **Children have a strong sense of identity**
- Outcome 2: **Children are confident and involved learners**

Sample scenario:

David brings his four-year old son, Jonah, to child care on Monday morning. David takes Jonah, who is holding a container full of plastic farm animal figures, to see Sarah (one of Jonah's educators). She greets them. "Hi Jonah, hi David. What have you got there Jonah?" "I've got lots of animals like on Nanna's farm," replies Jonah. "Did you guys go to the farm on the weekend? What did you do there?" asks Sarah. Jonah nods and his Dad says, "Yeah, we all went to my Mum's farm for the weekend – Jonah loved it. He helped to collect the eggs and watched the cows being milked. But his favourite bit was feeding the poddy calves." "Yeah, they were really dribbly!" adds Jonah. Sarah suggests that Jonah might like to build a farm for his animals in the block corner.

Throughout the day he and several other children build and rebuild their farm, adding props such as grass and containers for farm animal food. This interest continues for several weeks and eventually leads to Sarah arranging to have a chicken-hatching program at the service and organising a visit by a mobile animal farm.

Sarah's documentation of Jonah's farm interest begins with a brief note in his individual record: *Jonah went to Nanna's farm on the weekend. Dad said he had a great time:*

- *collected eggs*
- *watched cows being milked*
- *fed poddy calves.*

Sarah continues to document Jonah's experiences and learning during the farm project, and she regularly includes notes on the things that Jonah's parents tell her that he is doing and saying at home in relation to this interest. This helps her to plan for new experiences and it also helps her to talk with Jonah about his interest in farm animals.

References and further reading

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