

# Ask a Child Care Adviser: Preparing for a Spot Check

All child care services are eligible to receive Spot Checks during 2011. This change in NCAC policy is part of the transition from the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) systems to the National Quality Framework (NQF). Phillip Rowell spoke with NCAC's Child Care Advisers, Karen Swift and Eulalia Verde, about what services need to know about Spot Checks and why it is important to maintain their quality practices.

## What is a Spot Check?

A Spot Check is an unannounced visit to a child care service of up to three hours. The intent of a Spot Check is to ensure that the service is meeting the Satisfactory standards required for Accreditation. These standards are outlined in the relevant CCQA *Quality Practices Guide*.

## What occurs during a Spot Check?

When the Validator arrives they will give a letter to the Service Representative. The letter states the name of the Validator, confirms the date of the Spot Check and provides information about what will happen during the visit. It is a good idea to introduce the Validator to the educators and staff in the service at the beginning of the Spot Check.

The Validator will:

- Briefly tour the service and observe the service's practices
- View any supporting documentation
- Ask educators or staff members questions about their practices
- Make a record of their observations in the *Spot Check Report*.

In the *Spot Check Report*, the Validator will write comments about the service's Satisfactory practices. Validators may focus on specific areas of practice/documentation while conducting a Spot Check. These specific areas may result from complaints, *Quality Trends Reports*, previous Accreditation Decisions or Spot Check issues.

Validators will document any Unsatisfactory practice they witness. If this practice can be rectified immediately, then the Validator will sign the *Report* acknowledging that the issue has been addressed. For example, if the Validator notes that a dangerous product is not clearly labelled, then the service has the opportunity to label the product correctly and the Validator will acknowledge the action taken by the service in the *Report*.

However, the original comment about the Unsatisfactory practice will remain in the *Report*.

The Validator will also ask about the service's continuing improvement plans and the strategies in place to ensure that practices are maintained and improved on. This encourages all services to continually reflect on practice to meet the standards in the relevant *Quality Practices Guide*. It also serves as a good reminder about the value of continuing improvement as services begin preparation for the commencement of the NQF from January 2012.

## What about new services registered with NCAC?

New services may not have experienced a Validation Visit and educators may still be working through the standards in the *Quality Practices Guide*. The thought of a Validator arriving at the service and conducting a Spot Check may be daunting – especially if educators are unfamiliar with the types of questions a Validator may ask.

The fact these services are 'new' means that there is already a great deal of learning and improving happening every day. For example, new services are often developing policies and procedures, working with families to find effective ways to communicate, scheduling regular meetings between educators to discuss practice and deciding on ways to observe, plan for and document children's learning. Showing the Validator how the service is establishing itself is one way to illustrate the continuing improvement process.

## What is the role of the service?

Spot Checks support the process of continuing improvement. Service owners, managers, educators and staff have a professional obligation to welcome the Validator to the service, answer their questions and provide requested documentation. As NCAC's Chairperson, June McLoughlin, stated in the

December 2010 issue of *Putting Children First*, 'Services continue to have a professional responsibility to ensure positive experiences and outcomes for children in child care. Services that engage in ongoing improvement are likely to experience a smoother transition to the NQF' (p.2).

During a Spot Check, the following strategies can help to ensure that there is minimal disruption to the service:

- Continue interacting with children, carrying out the service's routines and maintaining quality practices. For example, if the Validator arrives at morning tea, then morning tea should go ahead as planned. This applies to all routines and experiences including planned excursions, outings or home visits.
- Answer the Validator's questions honestly. If it is not convenient to respond to a question, for example, during a nappy change, then ask the Validator to wait until you have finished what you're doing. Validators are prepared to wait for educators and staff to finish interactions, conversations and tasks, especially when they directly involve children.
- Request a time to read and sign the *Spot Check Report* and to address any Unsatisfactory practices which may be addressed immediately during the visit.

### Practical strategies for maintaining quality practice

Educators often ask how they can prepare for a Spot Check. It is important to remember that there is no need to do something special or different on the day of the Spot Check. Quality practices should be happening every day for every child – regardless of whether a Validator is visiting the service or not. The Validator should be observing practices which are meeting Satisfactory standards of care, which should be no different during a Spot Check than on any other day.

There is only one way to be 'prepared' for a Spot Check and that is to continually and consistently maintain quality practices every day. The following strategies can assist services to maintain quality practices:

- Use the relevant *Quality Practices Guide* to



understand the indicators of quality practice which the Validator will be looking for during the visit

- At each staff meeting, read a different Preamble in the relevant *Quality Practices Guide*. Ask educators to describe the types of practices which support the Preamble and what those practices currently look like in the service
- Make sure the service's practices are consistently meeting the practices written in the service's policies and procedures
- Keep up to date with current best practice by researching recommendations from experts and recognised authorities
- Continue planning for professional development and training opportunities
- Read NCAC's *Quality Trends Reports* which identify where many services are not consistently meeting the Satisfactory standards required for Accreditation. Educators can discuss how they are meeting each standard, and how the service can maintain or improve its current practices.

Educators are encouraged to contact their state or territory Professional Support Coordinator (PSC) for professional development opportunities. NCAC lists the contact details list for PSCs on the 'Links' page of the NCAC website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)).

There is also a range of resources located on NCAC's website which can help services maintain quality practices. For further information contact NCAC's Child Care Advisers by telephone on 1300 136 554 or email [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au) ■

### References

- NCAC. (2010). The Child Care Quality Assurance systems – maintaining momentum. *Putting Children First*, 35, 8.
- McLoughlin, J. (2010). NCAC – supporting services through change. *Putting Children First*, 36, 2.