

# Ask a Child Care Adviser: Collaborating with families to implement quality practice

*NCAC Child Care Advisers discuss strategies for working collaboratively with families to meet their individual needs while maintaining positive relationships and promoting quality care practices for all children.*

One of the most challenging dilemmas that child care professionals often face is maintaining a balance between the needs of families and best or appropriate practice. A key aspect in the provision of quality child care is meeting the individual needs of children and their families. However, there may be times when a family's requests conflict with currently accepted child care practice.

## When may conflict between quality practice and family requirements occur?

Where a family's care giving practices are based on values or beliefs that conflict with current and accepted child care practices, families may ask child care professionals to implement practices for their child that are unsafe or inappropriate. For example, families may request that:

- their child be smacked or physically isolated in 'time out' if they behave inappropriately
- the service use 'control crying' or 'teach to sleep' strategies for their child
- their child be prevented from sleeping, or be forced to rest
- their child be offered food rewards for achievements, or be denied certain foods as punishment
- their child sleep using sleep positions or comfort items that contradict safe sleep recommendations
- their child be forced to eat at mealtimes.

While some families may believe that such requests are quite acceptable, meeting these in a child care service will potentially compromise the quality of care provided for children in the service. It may also result in the service not meeting Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) and/or regulatory requirements.

When working with families to meet their needs and requests within acceptable practice parameters, services need to adopt a professional and sensitive approach. It is

### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.2 and 1.3

**OSHCQA Principle:** 3.1

**QIAS Principle:** 2.1

important that child care professionals avoid making negative judgements about families, and recognise that there may be a range of factors that have led the family to request a practice that the service cannot accommodate.

## How can child care professionals negotiate appropriate care practices with families?

Effective communication is essential to negotiating with families regarding the practices that will be implemented in child care services. It is helpful to ask families about why they want certain practices used with their children. This information may assist child care professionals to develop an understanding of individual family's values, issues and concerns regarding their children.

Understanding the perspective of families may help child care professionals to suggest alternative, acceptable strategies that will support positive outcomes for children and families in the service. For example, a family may explain that, at home, placing their child in 'time out' has been the way they have prevented their child from engaging in inappropriate behaviour. In this instance, a child care professional can explain that the use of 'time out' is not considered to be appropriate practice in child care services, however, they can redirect the child to a choice of quiet, alternative activities, as part of their behaviour guidance strategy.

When explaining why a practice is not suitable in the child care setting, child care professionals should provide families with clear reasons. It may be helpful to provide families with written information, including research information, to

support their position. This will also help to keep the tone of the conversation focussed on the potentially negative outcomes for children in general, rather than focussing on individual children and can prevent families from feeling that they are being negatively judged. Where a requested practice will compromise the service's ability to meet regulatory or CCQA requirements, it may also be beneficial to explain this to the family.

### How can child care professionals support families?

Child care professionals play a valuable role in providing families with support and information to promote positive experiences for children in the home environment. Explaining the professional thinking and research that has guided the service's decisions about quality practice may help families to consider alternative practices for use in the home. Child care professionals may also be able to provide families with practical suggestions regarding strategies or practices that the family had not previously considered. However, it is important that suggestions or advice are provided to families sensitively and tactfully.

### How do written policies support child care professionals to negotiate and promote quality practice with families?

Written policies and procedures are the most effective tools that services can use to support their negotiations with families in the implementation of appropriate practice. Policies should be current, based on the recommendations of recognised authorities, and should be developed in consultation with families. Effective policies provide clear information about why and how a service implements certain practices and not others, and they demonstrate an agreed consensus between all stakeholders about what these practices are.



Using the scope of the service's policies, child care professionals may be able to negotiate practices with families that will meet their needs without compromising quality practice. Written policies can also support child care professionals to verify that their concerns or difficulties in meeting a family's stated needs are genuine, and not the result of disinterest or apathy on the part of the service.

When considering a family's request for certain practices or strategies to be implemented for their child, it is important that child care professionals carefully think about how this will affect the individual child, as well as other children in care. Families usually know their child best, and should have opportunities to negotiate care practices to ensure that their child's needs are met. However, it is important that child care professionals adopt strategies to develop and maintain an appropriate balance between family needs and quality practice ■

### References and further reading

- Hughes, P. & McNaughton, G. (1999). *Communication in Early Childhood Services - a practical guide*. Melbourne: RMIT Publishing.
- Stonehouse, A. (1994). *How Does it Feel. Child Care from a Parent's Perspective*. Canberra: The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.

### Useful websites

- Community Child Care Association ([www.pscvic.org.au](http://www.pscvic.org.au))