

Ask a Child Care Adviser - Enrolment and Orientation

NCAC Child Care Adviser Angela Owens addresses common concerns about enrolment and orientation processes in children's services.

Enrolment and orientation is an exciting and emotional time for children and families, and often represents a family's first experience with child care. When managed sensitively and supportively, enrolment and orientation experiences can build the foundations for an ongoing partnership between the family and the service. Such partnerships enable services and families to work toward the common goal of promoting consistent quality outcomes for individual children and for the service as a whole.

Individualising Enrolment and Orientation

Flexibility and sensitivity are key factors in ensuring that children and families have positive enrolment and orientation experiences. It is important that staff and carers consider the individual needs of children and families at this time, as well as any previous experiences that they have had with children's services. Some issues that staff and carers may need to consider when 'personalising' enrolment and orientation include:

- The family's cultural and/or linguistic background for families from non-English speaking backgrounds. The service may need to seek external support to facilitate the enrolment and orientation process
- The family's needs in relation to work or other commitments. Some families may be limited in the amount of time they have available to participate in enrolment and orientation
- The family's previous knowledge or experience of children's services. Consider whether this was positive, or whether the care was of a different type to that offered by your service
- Whether the family is new to the service or whether there is a transition occurring within the service which requires an orientation procedure, for example a child is moving to another group, or is moving to another carer in the same scheme

This article relates to:

FDCQA:

Principles 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 4.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4

OSHCQA:

Principles 3.1, 6.4, 7.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4, 8.6

QIAS:

Principles 1.1, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 5.1, 6.5, 6.6, 7.1

- Any additional needs of the child and/or their family
- The child's age and abilities

A family friendly enrolment and orientation process that is well organised, flexible and intent on facilitating opportunities for successful information exchange between the service and family will benefit all stakeholders in this process

Orientation Procedures

There are many experiences or activities that services may consider incorporating into their orientation program. These may include:

- Holding an orientation breakfast, lunch, morning or afternoon tea at the service for children and families
- Holding an orientation evening to introduce new families and staff
- Holding an orientation barbeque or similar social event which includes new and current families and children as well as staff
- Scheduling a series of orientation sessions for new children in families within the regular program
- Inviting new families to visit the service and participate in the program at times mutually suitable to both parties before the child starts at the service
- Facilitating, where appropriate, opportunities for families to settle children into the service gradually, for example, increasing the period of attendance over a number of days or weeks

- Inviting current families to speak to new families at orientation events about their experiences at the service
- Introducing 'buddy' or mentor programs for new families and/or older children during the orientation process

To ensure that orientation programs are tailored to meet individual family needs, services need to consider how best they can provide a number of orientation options for new families and children without compromising the service's current program, children, families or staff.

Information Sharing

It is necessary for services to obtain basic information about children when completing enrolment – this information is not only essential to ensure children's health, safety and wellbeing while in the service, but is also often related to state/territory or federal legal requirements. However, enrolment and orientation is about more than simply gathering factual information about children. Families need to be provided with genuine opportunities to share information about their child and/or their family which they feel will assist their child's participation in, and orientation to, the service. Such information may include the family's hopes or expectations regarding their child and the service, as well as their personal beliefs and perspectives about child care and the role it should play in their family.

It is important to allow and encourage families to share the information that they feel will assist themselves and their child to settle in to the service. This empowers the family and provides staff and carers with an important insight into each family's perspective.

It is important that staff and carers impress upon families the importance of their contribution to two way communication, and to ensure that this is evidenced by the existence of family friendly



systems for information exchange. To ensure the relevance and success of enrolment and orientation procedures, staff and carers may find it beneficial to invite family feedback once they are settled into the service. Staff and carers should also consider suggestions or feedback received from families during enrolment and orientation, and need to be prepared to be flexible with what they had planned if this is not meeting a family's needs.

Informing Families about the Service

Providing families with practical, comprehensive information about the service and its operations during enrolment and orientation facilitates information sharing at the outset, and ensures that the service's policies and procedures are transparent. This may also help to prevent future misunderstandings or grievances. Staff and carers may consider strategies for sharing information about the following policies or procedures with families during orientation and enrolment:

- Fee policy including information about what happens when children are sick or absent, fee charges for public holidays, requirements for any bond or holding fee
- Grievance or complaints handling procedure
- Illness and exclusion policy
- Times and procedures for leaving and collecting children at the service

It is also beneficial to use enrolment and orientation processes to inform families about any procedures or policies that the service anticipates may be difficult or of concern to families. An example of a policy that families may find difficult to follow could be a policy based on currently recommended sleep practices which does not allow children to go to sleep with certain comfort items or with bottles. Ensuring that such information is provided initially may assist services and families to work together to reach a mutually suitable solution to any difficulties that arise.

Informing Families about Quality Assurance

A service's participation in Quality Assurance should underpin every aspect of its operations. Providing families with comprehensive and transparent information about Quality Assurance when they enrol at the service will not only support their understanding of this process, but will also help to consolidate their ideas about

the role they can or wish to play in this process. NCAC provides the following publications to assist services in informing families about Quality Assurance and the valuable role they can play in this:

- *Choosing Quality Child Care Brochure*
- *Choosing Quality Child Care Poster*
- *Pocket Guide for Families*
- *Quality Assurance in Family Day Care/ Long Day Care/Outside School Hours Care Brochures*

NCAC has recently developed a *Quality Assurance Communication Poster* to assist services communicate with families. These resources are available to purchase from NCAC's Online Store at www.ncac.gov.au or by telephoning NCAC on 1300 136 554.

It is important that services communicate openly with families about their participation in Quality Assurance, including the service's current Accreditation status and its plans and activities for continuing improvement. A family's confidence in, and sense of belonging to, the service will be reinforced when they are made to feel that they are trusted and valued partners in service's participation in Quality Assurance.

Accredited services are required to prominently display the *Certificate of Accreditation*. This *Certificate*, along with the service's *Quality Profile Certificate* which shows the standards of quality achieved by the service during their participation in Quality Assurance, can provide a useful introduction to Quality Assurance for new families at the service.

Ensuring that enrolment and orientation procedures are responsive to the needs, interests and perspectives of individual children and their families will greatly assist staff and carers to begin forging positive and collaborative partnerships with families at the outset. Such partnerships are characterised by open two way communication as well as a sense of striving toward the common goal of supporting quality outcomes for all children. ■

References and Further Reading

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