

# Ask a Child Care Adviser: Including children's perspectives in the program

Lauren Boyle spoke with Child Care Advisers Lorna Hughes and Karen Swift about the benefits of seeking and using children's input in the development and evaluation of the program.

## Why is it important to include children's input in the program?

Encouraging children to express their interests and engaging them in various experiences can result in a responsive program that meets children's changing needs. By involving children in the programming cycle, child care professionals can make important decisions that take children's input into consideration.

When adults have respect for children's ideas and their voice, it increases children's self-confidence. Children can see that what they are saying and their interests are valued when these are incorporated into the service's program. If others see them as confident and capable, children will come to see themselves in the same way. This is an important life skill, giving them the confidence to explore and take on new challenges.

## What types of information do children contribute?

Services need to be respectful of the information they receive from children and record what they have learnt about each child's interests. Understanding young children, including babies and toddlers, requires the ability to see and use everyday opportunities to help children solve problems, explore new materials, and

### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.1, 2.2 and 3.1-3.7

**OSHCQA Principles:** 1.1, 1.3, 3.1-3.3 and 4.1-4.6

**QIAS Principles:** 1.1, 2.2, 4.1-4.4 and 5.1-5.4

find answers to questions. Services can set up the environment so that shelving for equipment and toys is easily accessible, allowing even very young children to make choices about their daily activities.

When working with babies, interacting with them meaningfully and physically moving to be on their level is important. Observing very young children's responses to other people and to the environment can enhance child care professionals' understanding of their interests and individual personalities.

Anecdotal records about a particular event or behaviour can capture observations about children's strengths, interests and needs as well as their reactions to particular activities. Samples of children's work also provide important information about children. Child care professionals can collect artwork and take photographs of children's constructions to assist them to reflect upon and understand each child's frame of mind, creativity and interests.

While there is a tendency to only consult children when they are older, gaining the perspectives of younger children is valuable and they are usually more than willing to share their ideas and opinions. Creating a safe environment where children's opinions are respected by child care professionals and other children is important. Child care professionals need to be conscious of not missing out on valuable input from children who aren't yet able to verbalise their ideas and interests. They need to consider innovative ways to find out about these children's perspectives.





### How can children be supported to make choices in the program?

Providing open ended resources is important as children can use these in diverse and creative ways. Rather than programming for an outcome, child care professionals can put out materials and see how children use and experiment with them. It is important to be responsive to these types of experiences and to observe how children use the resources to gauge children's interests. This can assist child care professionals to identify experiences or projects that children may want to do in the future.

Engaging and listening to their ideas provides opportunities for children to discover answers and to solve problems. Sometimes these opportunities can grow into large projects that other children can become involved in. At other times they may be small, individualised experiences. The role of the child care professional is not to distract children from what they want to learn, but to assist them to stimulate their curiosity and satisfy their interests.

### How can child care professionals gain children's input in the program?

Seeking children's input can inspire their enthusiasm for learning. When children are learning about something that they are familiar with and have a passion for they are more likely to actively participate in the program.

Being aware of children's responses and being flexible is important when communicating and generating children's interest about the service program. An activity that children were eager to participate in a few weeks ago may not be of interest to them now. Child care professionals should not see this as a 'failure' on their part, rather they should be excited as it reflects the growing and evolving interests and learning capacity of children.

The following strategies may be useful when involving children in the service program:

- Use 'what if?' questions, so that children who are old enough can problem solve for themselves. Supporting children to understand why some suggestions might work and why some might not can help to build this skill.
- Consider whether a program that is prepared one or two weeks in advance is likely to be truly responsive to the current needs and interests of the children.
- Be flexible with routines. This may be difficult with babies, as routines often govern the structure of the day. However, taking time to observe and understand what stimulates babies' interests is important.
- Develop resource catalogues for children to choose from.
- Provide visual cues such as flashcards or books for younger children to look at, and take time to observe the interests or curiosity that these children may express in response to these.
- Consider having children's meetings and allow children to raise issues and to become decision makers. Older children could interview other children about what they like and dislike doing at the service, or surveys could be provided for children to complete.
- As a child care professional team, reflect upon how open individuals are to seeking and responding to children's ideas and opinions. The NSW Commission for Children and Young People resource *Research and Resources about Participation*, examines a number of participation models that may guide services to evaluate how they currently seek children's input, and how this may be extended or improved.

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In outside school hours care where children's language is often well developed, children are often able to express complex ideas and opinions more clearly than younger children. Services might like to ask questions of children and let them write their responses on a graffiti style wall or on butcher's paper. Children may also like to create scrapbooks evaluating how they felt about what happened in their day and record their progress as it happens. Involving families in these types of activities can also provide additional information about children's interests, cultural diversity and traditions from home and the local community.

### How does children's input promote effective program evaluation?

Keeping children and child care professionals interested and excited can spur their desire to do more, learn more, keep busy and get involved. When the program offers something that children have no interest in, they are unlikely to be stimulated. An ongoing process of reflection and review allows child care professionals to identify strengths and weaknesses in the program, and target areas for improvement or change. Evaluation can determine whether the program is meeting children's needs and can help to determine whether the service philosophy is being reflected in the program.

Involving children in program evaluation can help them to feel that they belong in the service, and that they have rights and responsibilities within the program.

Child care professionals can help children to evaluate the program by asking them questions such as:

- What do you think about what just happened?
- What did you like/dislike about it?
- Do you think it would be a good thing to do again?
- How do you think we could make it better?

Child care professionals can also observe children's responses to the experiences at the service to assist them in understanding children's views about the program. The following guiding questions may be useful in this process:

- What do the children appear to find interesting?
- What do they seem to know and what don't they seem to understand?
- In what ways do children use the resources and materials available to them?
- What experiences do children create for themselves in the environment?

When all stakeholders become involved in the process of evaluation, the program can reflect what is happening and what stakeholders would like to see happen. Children and child care professionals begin to work as a team, resulting in a program that is reflective, responsive and caters to the interests and skill levels of all children ■

### References and further reading

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