

Ask a Child Care Adviser: Managing challenging issues with families

Lauren Boyle spoke with Child Care Advisers Mamta Bhatela, Leisa Dunn and Tanya Tregillgas about strategies for minimising and working through challenging issues with families.

Families and child care professionals can experience misunderstandings and conflicts for a variety of reasons. Managing these positively creates opportunities for professionals and families to build relationships and improve practice.

What issues can affect partnerships between child care professionals and families?

Families often have beliefs and expectations about their child's experience in child care and what is appropriate service practice. Tension can mount when a family's requests contradict best child care practice and therefore cannot be met. The following situations can often lead to misunderstandings or conflict between child care professionals and families:

- Differing ideas about what are important experiences for children. For example, the service may provide many opportunities for learning through play while some families believe that more formal learning experiences are important.
- Staff changes or the way shifts are organised may mean that families do not get to see the people who have worked most directly with their child, which may affect the information sharing process. Families may also be concerned about their child's wellbeing due to staff changes.
- Lack of understanding or respect for the roles and priorities of each other. For example, when a service follows up on overdue fees with a family, or a family raises concerns about their child's care or education, tension may be created.
- Lack of time. At the beginning and end of the day services are typically very busy, and information sharing with families at these times may become rushed or ineffective.
- Families requesting practices that are not recommended. For example, families may want their child to have a rest time comforter which conflicts with the service's safe sleeping policy.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 6.2, 6.4 and 6.5

OSHCQA Principles: 3.1, 3.2 and 8.6

QIAS Principles: 2.1-2.3 and 7.1

- Policies not being communicated clearly to families.
- Lack of information for families about what has occurred during their child's day.

What challenges can families face when they start using child care?

Difficulties can often arise when families start using child care as their understanding and expectations may differ from what actually occurs in a service. Common challenges at this time include:

- Services may not receive all of the information they need from families about their child to ensure the child's needs are met effectively.
- Families experiencing difficulty separating from their child. For example, they may either draw out the time they spend leaving their child, or they may 'sneak away' when their child is engaged in an activity. These issues can make settling more difficult for children.
- Families wanting their child to receive ongoing one to one attention, which is not possible in a group care environment.
- Children becoming ill more frequently, especially when they commence child care.
- Differences that often exist between home and service routines, due to the different environments. For example, a child may have a day sleep at home, but have difficulty sleeping at child care due to distractions by other children.
- Uncertainty regarding whether the family or child care professionals are responsible for guiding a child's behaviour when their family is at the service. When this is not made clear by the service, families and services may have conflicting expectations.



Services can pre-empt these issues and address them with families during the enrolment and orientation process. By being proactive, and providing families with clear and practical information about starting child care, services can immediately start building a positive partnership with them. Ensuring that when they start care, families have information about policies on matters such as illness, fee and grievance handling can reduce instances of conflict occurring due to misunderstandings. While this information should be included in the service's family handbook, also explaining it during orientation can help to ensure that families are fully informed.

How can services promote effective communication with families?

Effective communication is essential to working collaboratively with families to minimise conflicts. When information is not readily accessible to families, they can become confused about what to expect from the service. Providing opportunities for families to express their concerns in a relaxed environment will also help to maintain effective relationships and, most importantly, a positive environment for children.

Services can put strategies into place to assist with communication with families at drop-off and collection times. For example, they might consider arranging shifts to increase the availability of child care professionals at these times, or ensure that the physical environment allows child care professionals to supervise children effectively while

speaking with families. At times families may need to be advised that an alternative time can be arranged for longer or more complex discussions.

Communication boards are another valuable way of sharing information with families. These may include information such as shifts, leave or other changes related to the child care professionals at the service. Displaying meal plans and activity programs and distributing these in the service newsletter also promotes consistent, effective information sharing.

Communication books or parent information sleeves can also help to keep families informed about their child's activities throughout the day. Families often find it helpful to know what their child has eaten or how much they slept, especially when they have younger children, or children with additional needs. Communication books can be an ideal way to share information with families who do not get to see the people who work most closely with their child, or who do not have time to engage in conversations at the start or end of the day. They may also support communication with families who find it easier to read rather than to speak English.

How can families be involved in decision making?

Providing opportunities for families to be involved in decision making is an important way of ensuring that their needs and expectations inform the way the service operates, which often prevents conflict from occurring in the first place. This also helps to ensure that families are kept up to date with changes and new policies. The following activities support families to have genuine input:

- Schedule parent meetings for times that will best suit families. Promote the benefits of families attending these to not only network socially, but also to engage with child care professionals at the service and contribute to planning and decision making.
- Invite families to provide feedback through surveys or questionnaires. Surveys should be simple and easy to complete, and it is beneficial to place them in an easily accessible area with an anonymous return option. Surveys can seek feedback on a wide range of topics, such as programs and menus for children or management practices.

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- Advise families of specific times when they can discuss concerns or issues with child care professionals. Allocating times when child care professionals are available to speak with families either face-to-face or over the phone can make it easier for families to provide feedback or raise concerns.
- Provide opportunities for families to contribute to decisions about the service's operations: for example, to policy development and review or to planning meetings and social occasions.
- Display meeting agendas and minutes so that families who are unable to attend can add a topic to the agenda, or find out what has been discussed at a meeting.

Daily conversations are one of the most important ways that services can gain family feedback and ideas. Child care professionals need to ensure that information received through daily interactions is acknowledged and acted upon.

How can services respond positively to challenging issues with families?

When confronted with a difficult situation or potential conflict with a family, it is important that child care professionals remain unbiased and use active listening to discuss issues raised. Genuinely considering family concerns, including those that question established policies or procedures, can offer valuable opportunities for improvement.

It is essential to take adequate time to consider families' concerns, and where possible to meet with them again to negotiate a solution that benefits both parties. If a family is requesting something that cannot be implemented, explain why and help them to understand the reasons behind this decision. Add an agenda item to team meetings where child care professionals can discuss issues raised by families. This will provide opportunities for child care professionals to share ideas on how to deal with the concerns

raised, to consider why they have been raised and to reduce the likelihood of the issue becoming a concern in the future.

Ensure families are aware of the service's grievance policy or customer feedback procedures. These should outline who families can contact if there is a concern and the grievance procedure that will be followed. It is important to remind child care professionals about maintaining confidentiality in relation to family concerns. New and casual staff should also be able to access information about the service's grievance procedures for families.

How can child care professionals manage family concerns effectively?

Complaints or grievance handling can become unnecessarily difficult when families feel anxious or unsure about raising their concerns. Listening and responding to families' concerns immediately demonstrates that the service is understanding and responsive to feedback, and is prepared to work collaboratively with families to reach a solution.

If child care professionals are unable to immediately attend to a request to discuss concerns, arrange a time that may be appropriate to contact the family later in the day. Alternatively, follow the conversation up by putting a note in their communication book or pocket inviting them to discuss their concerns further.

It is inevitable that child care professionals and families will experience friction at times, due to differences of opinion, miscommunication or misunderstandings. While these situations can be difficult, they are an important time for services to reflect upon and improve practice, and to strengthen understanding and the rapport between themselves and families ■

References and further reading

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