

Ask a Child Care Adviser: Managing change effectively in child care services

Angela Owens spoke with child care advisers Eulalia Verde and Lorna Hughes about strategies for successfully managing change in child care services.

What changes can cause child care professionals stress or anxiety?

All services experience change at some time. Change can apply to many aspects of a service's operations, including:

- management;
- staffing;
- administration;
- policies and practices;
- the families and children using the service; and/or
- the physical environment.

Change may occur as the result of a service or management decision, or it may be related to an external authority or circumstance, for example, a change to legislation. Regardless of whether it is instigated internally or externally, change can affect child care professionals significantly.

How can change affect child care professionals?

Child care professionals can experience fear, anxiety and stress as a result of change, particularly when they are faced with an 'unknown quantity' such as new management or new procedures. Negative reaction to change often occurs when people don't agree with the change or fear they will be unable to cope. However, the prospect of change often creates greater stress than the change itself, and people can discover that their preconceived concerns are unfounded.

Child care professionals may feel angry about impending change, especially when they have not had any input into planning the change, or when they consider that the change is being imposed upon them. They may also feel resentful of change when they believe that their ideas and opinions have been ignored by those who are implementing the change.

Why is change important?

Constant change can be detrimental not only to child care professionals, but also to children and families. However, well planned change is crucial to quality improvement.

Recommended practice, particularly in the areas of health and safety, can change rapidly in response to new expert knowledge, theories and research. Services need to review their procedures and practices regularly to ensure these are effective and reflective of current service needs and recommended practice.

Doing things a certain way because 'that's the way it's always been done' can result in child care professionals implementing ineffective, outmoded practice. A quality child care service engages in an ongoing process of self-evaluation and planning for change to improve practice.

How can services minimise the stress and anxiety due to change?

Adopting a transparent, collaborative approach to change is one of the most effective ways for services to reduce stress. It is important that, where possible, change be carefully planned and implemented gradually.

When involving child care professionals in implementing change, it can be beneficial to delegate tasks according to the strengths and skills of individuals. It is vital that staff, carers and management are provided with many opportunities to meet and support each other when planning for, implementing and evaluating change.

Meetings may occur more successfully by using a range of forums such as whole team, small group and one to one meetings. Using a range of meeting styles can assist the communication and support process by allowing for general debate and exchange of ideas in larger forums, as well as providing opportunities for more personal meetings to facilitate mentoring and peer support strategies.

It is important to recognise that change may not be immediately successful, and that any failures or difficulties should be managed as a team responsibility rather than individually.

The key to minimising staff and carers' negative reactions is through allowing all participants in the change to contribute to its planning and implementation in meaningful ways. Developing strategies to identify, acknowledge and respond to

individual staff and carers' reactions to change will also help services to manage change as a positive aspect of their ongoing improvement. Where change is particularly sensitive or challenging for child care professionals, services may find it useful to seek support through professional counselling services.

How does communication support change management?

Communication with all service stakeholders is central to managing change successfully. Communication should occur at every step of the change, including when it is being planned, implemented and evaluated. It is important that stakeholders are informed about:

- the reason for the change, for example, due to revised best practice recommendations or as the result of changes to legislation;
- when the change will occur, including any timelines for implementation;
- who will be affected by the change, and how it will affect them;
- how the change will be monitored, and its effectiveness assessed; and
- how stakeholders can provide feedback and/or participate in implementing the change.

To help ensure that individual communication needs are catered for, services should consider adopting a variety of communication strategies when communicating with child care professionals about change. Different approaches to communication might include meetings, presentations, training and written communication. It is essential that services develop strategies to ensure that what has been communicated about change has been correctly understood by child care professionals. One of the greatest causes of stress for child care professionals occurs when a misunderstanding of communication prompts rumour and misinformation. Actively listening to staff and carer feedback and comments, as well as observing their reaction to change, can help services gauge understanding of the change and what it will entail.

Tips for managing change

- Recognise the value of change to the ongoing process of self-study and continuing improvement
- Where possible, participate in planning for the change
- Actively engage in implementing the change
- Approach change as a learning opportunity
- Seek information about the reasons or motivation for the change. For example, from your service's management, from colleagues, through professional reading or networking with colleagues or other professionals
- Reflect upon the potential benefits of the change, particularly in relation to the quality of care experienced by children
- Discuss any difficulties you may have implementing or coping with the change with colleagues and/or management, and seek their support
- Approach change on a step-by-step basis by dealing with issues as they arise rather than anticipating difficulties of failures before they occur
- Seek professional development opportunities that will assist you to manage and implement the change

Conclusion

Effectively planned and managed change is central to the delivery of quality child care. However, change can be challenging, and may cause child care professionals to feel anxious. Services need to adopt a collaborative approach to planning for and implementing change. It is crucial that information about change is communicated clearly and transparently ■

References and further reading

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