

# Ask a Child Care Adviser - Positive Staff Interactions Benefit Children

*Angela Owens and Sonja Tansey answer frequently asked questions about building positive staff interactions and how staff interactions contribute to quality care for children*

## **Q: How do positive interactions between staff support children's development and wellbeing?**

**A:** Positive staff interactions between staff are essential in creating an environment and atmosphere in which children feel emotionally safe, secure and happy. It is in this environment that children are able to develop positive relationships and attachments with staff.

Staff who are sensitive, respectful, courteous and patient with each other will create an atmosphere that is relaxed and happy. When staff use calm and friendly voices and support one another in their work, they also contribute to creating a positive environment at the service. It is in this environment that children are encouraged to feel safe in communicating their needs and wants, to develop relationships with staff and to explore their environment. Children's emotional wellbeing and their ability to explore and play hinges on the attachments they develop with staff. "Secure, trusting relationships with carers provide children with the foundation for their successful exploration of the social and learning environment" (Harrison, 2003: p.15).

Staff members who communicate effectively and demonstrate respect and trust for each other are also role models for children in developing effective inclusive relationships. Staff who show they respect and value the beliefs and attitudes of their colleagues guide children in developing positive attitudes towards the different backgrounds and abilities of others. In this way staff also show children that they expect them to treat others with respect and fairness. "Much of what young children learn is accomplished by imitation. For example, children can learn by watching what others do and repeating what others say" (Arthur et al, 2005: p.77).

## **Q: How do negative or inappropriate interactions between staff impact on the children in their care?**

**A:** Just as positive relationships between staff model social behaviours and create an atmosphere for children's development, so too do negative and inappropriate interactions. For example, unresolved and poorly managed conflict between staff can cause stress and affect their morale, which in turn can affect the quality of their interactions and relationships with children.

### **This article relates to:**

**FDCQA:** Principles 1.1, 1.3, 1.6, 3.1, 3.4, 5.1, 6.2, 6.8

**OSHCQA:** Principles 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 8.2

**QIAS:** Principles 1.1, 1.2, 1.6, 4.2, 7.2

Staff working in a stressful work environment may find it difficult to communicate with children and to be responsive to children's needs and interests. They may also find it difficult to respond appropriately to distresses of children.

The emotional responsiveness of staff is of paramount importance for developing attachments with young children, particularly babies. "The quality of the earliest relationships, which depend on the carers' capacity to be emotionally available, sensitive and responsive to the baby's needs, is what determines the level of security and support the infant experiences" (Harrison, 2003: p.3).

## **Q: What strategies can staff use to model appropriate conflict resolution and positive interactions to children?**

**A:** The way in which staff interact with one another will be observed and imitated by children. When children see staff speak to each other respectfully and supportively and see them resolve differences fairly, the children will in turn begin to use these strategies to communicate and resolve conflict with their peers.

Staff who welcome and support new people into the service will also demonstrate and guide children in accepting and making new children feel at home. In addition, staff ability to model positive peer interactions will be enhanced when they maintain an awareness of the verbal language they use with each other and the body language they employ in their communications.

## **Q: How can staff support each other to build their skills in communicating with children?**

**A:** An important element of effective teamwork is the ability of staff to empathise with and support their colleagues. An effective team can actively work together to reflect on and improve their interactions and relationships with children.

Staff should discuss issues together and make decisions about the way they communicate with children after listening to each other.

By openly reflecting on and discussing the way in which staff communicate with children, areas for further self reflection or improvement can be identified. For example, staff could discuss their use of language and conversation with children and the impact of this on the children's developing sense of self. This could cause staff to strengthen or improve the language they use with children or to identify areas for professional development.

Mentoring programs are also useful for supporting staff in improving their communication practices with children. Staff could also consider how they can improve the program to maximise the time and opportunities for genuine, responsive and supportive communications with children.

### **Q: What are some of the signs that staff communication is ineffective or that there is unresolved conflict amongst staff?**

**A:** Communication breakdown and misunderstandings amongst staff may be shown in many different ways. Communication between staff that becomes difficult or negative can have a flow on effect to any area of the service operations and to the care and protection of the children. Issues with communication or conflict can result in misunderstandings about the service program and operation, poor supervision, disagreements between staff, and inconsistent, poor or dangerous practice. All have the potential to negatively affect the children either directly or indirectly.

In this environment, children's opportunity and ability to develop attachment relationships, to learn to communicate positively and to confidently explore through play can be hampered. Where poor or dangerous practices are apparent, children's immediate and long term health and safety may be compromised.

### **Q: What strategies or procedures can services develop to avoid or minimise poor staff interaction?**

**A:** Encouraging and enhancing positive communication between staff is the key to building effective teamwork, minimising poor communication and avoiding conflict. This can be achieved through the development of open, honest and supportive team communication. Conflict will also be minimised through sharing skills and knowledge with colleagues and through acknowledging the efforts and achievements of each other. As Faragher and MacNaughton (1998: p.2) state "...the staff must be able to communicate well with each other and develop good working relationships... They must be able to pool their ideas, resolve differences of opinion and conflicts and work out strategies for approaching their work."

Opportunities should be available for staff to meet regularly to openly discuss issues, develop common goals, solve problems and make joint decisions about the operations of the service that affect children, staff and families. This will enable staff to reflect upon, plan for and improve practice. Staff teams can also encourage individual members to continually reflect on and evaluate their own practice, and to consider their role in participating actively and equitably as a team member.

Policies and procedures that are consistently implemented are also central to supporting communication, avoiding conflict and solving problems. Clear policies and procedures for team communication, handling complaints and grievances, professional development, performance appraisal, and occupational health and safety will provide clear guidance and support to staff on service commitments and expectations in these areas.

Environmental considerations are also a factor when considering supporting staff communication. These include staff working conditions, access to training and resources, and facilities such as staff rooms and meeting areas. These factors underpin staff capacity and willingness to engage in developing a strong team culture that is characterised by open, supportive, positive communication.



## Q: What opportunities for available for informal staff communication?

**A:** In the busy day-to-day operations of children's services, opportunities for informal staff interactions can be limited. Staff communication and interpersonal relationships can be enhanced and supported through opportunities to socialise informally.

Non-work time social activities are an obvious way for staff to socialize informally, but such activities may not suit or be appropriate for all staff. Staff who are unable or unwilling to attend non-work time functions or activities should not be made to feel obligated to attend, and should not be penalised should they choose not to attend.

Other opportunities that may enhance the development of staff interpersonal and informal relationships include: celebrating special events with staff eg birthdays, graduations, special cultural events, implementing staff mentoring and inter-support programs and incorporating team building exercises into staff meetings. Management can also organise staff break times and routines in ways to maximise opportunities for informal staff communication. ■

### Do you have a question for a Child Care Adviser?

The September 2005 Issue of *Putting Children First* will focus on Health and Safety. If you have any questions about health, hygiene or safety in your child care service please e-mail your query to: [pcf@ncac.gov.au](mailto:pcf@ncac.gov.au)

Responses to common questions may be published in the next issue.

Please note: NCAC does not guarantee that all questions will be published, and questions may be edited for clarity and length.

## When reflecting on staff interactions in your service, you may wish to consider the following questions:

- What opportunities are available for staff/carers to communicate with each other?
- What opportunities are available for staff/carers to discuss and identify common goals?
- What strategies or procedures are in place to support daily communication, information sharing and task/duty allocation between staff/carers?
- Has the service developed procedures for managing staff conflict or grievance and are these effective?
- How are staff, carers or students who are experiencing difficulties supported by service management?
- How do staff/carers work together? For example, do staff/carers meet regularly as a whole group and/or in teams?
- How are staff/carers able and encouraged to share skills and knowledge with colleagues?
- How do management/staff acknowledge the efforts and achievements of other team members?
- How do staff/carers support and encourage each other to reflect on and improve their relationships with children?
- What opportunities are available for staff/carers to socialise or communicate informally?

## Further reading and references

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- Faragher, J., and MacNaughton, G. (1998). *Working with Young Children. Guidelines for Good Practice*. (2nd ed.). Melbourne: RMIT Publishing.
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