

# Ask a Child Care Adviser: safety checks in child care services

*Angela Owens spoke with Child Care Advisers Lorna Hughes and Tanya Tregillgas about the practical strategies that child care services can use to create and maintain a safe environment.*

Every child care service has a duty of care in relation to Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) to promote the protection of the health, safety and wellbeing of children, families, child care professionals and other visitors to the service.

## What potential safety risks may be present in a service?

Some safety risks may occur as a result of the normal ageing and wear of buildings and equipment. Other safety issues may arise unexpectedly, due to incidents or events such as storms, bee swarms, vandalism or break ins. However, every service must be aware of the risks that are specifically related to their environment or circumstances. For example, a service located in an area prone to funnel web spiders will need a process to monitor this risk, whereas a service located in an area where there are high rates of illicit drug use may need to examine the premises daily for syringes or other drug related litter.

The frequency with which different types of safety checks need to be undertaken will depend upon the aspect of the environment that is being examined, and the potential safety risks that may be present.

Each service must have clear procedures for the daily monitoring of the environment. However, other safety checks, such as building and equipment maintenance checks, audits of chemicals and medications or pest inspections, will occur on different schedules, depending on the



### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 4.2, 4.6 and 5.4

**OSHCQA Principles:** 7.2 and 7.3

**QIAS Principles:** 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5

particular service and circumstances. Regardless of the timeframes allocated to various safety checks, it is essential that these are done systematically, and that any identified issues are documented and resolved swiftly and effectively.

It is useful for services to undertake a risk analysis of their environment to identify the safety checks that need to be undertaken in their service, and to ascertain how and when these should occur and who will undertake them.

## What is a safety risk analysis?

A risk analysis is a process in which services:

1. Identify the potential safety risks that exist or may occur in the service.
2. Analyse potential risks to determine the likelihood that they will occur.
3. Predict the severity of the impact of the risks on the health and wellbeing of stakeholders, if the risk were to eventuate.
4. Develop strategies to eliminate, minimise or control the risk.

Using information from their risk analysis, services can decide which safety checks they need to do, and how frequently these should be done. While most services will identify many similar safety risks, each service will need to implement individualised strategies to manage these. For example, while all services will have a process for checking buildings and equipment, an older service may need to do this more frequently or may need to check specific areas more closely than a newer service.

## What are daily safety checks?

Daily safety checks maintenance should include a procedure to check for any hazards that may have arisen overnight, over weekends or during closure periods. These checks should be written,

and include a space for child care professionals to date and sign off that an area has been inspected. There should also be adequate space to document any immediate or potential hazards that have been identified. Services need to ensure they have a clear procedure that details how risks will be managed when they are identified and who will be responsible.

Different risks require different levels of action. For example, a child care professional carrying out a daily check may be able to immediately rectify a hazard such as an unlatched chemical cupboard or the presence of animal faeces in the sandpit. Other risks may require a higher level of action. For example, a child care professional may notice that the front gate is not latching securely. In this instance they will be responsible for taking immediate, short term action to manage the risk, for example by putting up a notice and temporarily securing the gate. The service will then need to ensure that the gate is repaired quickly and permanently.

### Who is responsible for identifying safety risks?

It is important that child care services promote a culture in which everyone is aware of safety issues. While management and child care professionals will have specific roles to perform in conducting safety checks at certain times, it is helpful to encourage all stakeholders to take responsibility for identifying and reporting safety hazards. The best way to achieve this is to ensure that everyone knows who they should inform about a safety concern, and how they can do this. It is also important to communicate clearly with all stakeholders about how a hazard has been managed after the event.

### Why are clearly documented safety policies and procedures important?

Clear, written information about how to manage safety hazards supports stakeholders to understand and carry out their individual responsibilities for

maintaining a safe environment. Documenting how identified risks have been managed also provides services with a clear record of accountability for their actions, and can assist them to review and improve safety procedures on an ongoing basis.

It is important that written policies and procedures are reviewed regularly, in consultation with all stakeholders, to ensure that they are still relevant to the service's needs and reflect current information provided by recognised safety authorities. Safety policies and procedures must also reflect any relevant legislative requirements.

### What information can my service access to develop safety checklists?

Child care professionals may find it helpful to source and adapt safety information from external health and safety authorities. For example, organisations such as Kidsafe and children's hospitals often provide suggestions for home and playground safety checklists that may be incorporated into a service's procedures. Other specialist organisations such as transport authorities and the Poisons Information Centre may be able to provide specific information which can assist services to develop safety check procedures for particular aspects of their service.

Child care professionals can also find it helpful to network with other child care services. For example, family day care schemes often have comprehensive home safety checks that centre based services may be able to adapt when developing their own safety check procedures.

### Conclusion

Each service needs to develop procedures for monitoring safety in their environment which reflect their individual needs. Having clearly documented procedures for daily safety checks and for ongoing maintenance of buildings and equipment is essential. It is helpful to cultivate a culture in which all stakeholders are responsible for promoting safety ■

### References and further reading

- Australian Government. (n.d.). *Employer obligations in Your State or Territory*. Retrieved 25 February 2008 from <http://www.business.gov.au/Business+Entry+Point/Business+Topics/Occupational+health+and+safety/Employer+obligations+in+your+state+or+territory.htm>
- *The Children's Hospital at Westmead*. (n.d.). Retrieved 25 February 2008 from *Home Safety checklist* - access from <http://www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/safhomej.htm>

### Useful website

- Kidsafe Australia: [www.kidsafe.com.au](http://www.kidsafe.com.au)