Building and Supporting Teamwork

By Sonja Tansey

Most staff and carers working in a child care service work with at least one other person. Even carers in family day care settings work in collaboration with other scheme staff and carers. It is necessary for carers and staff to be able to work with others as a team for child care environments to operate effectively.

Effective teams support the achievement of common goals for improving the quality of care and education at services. When carers and staff function well as a team they are respectful and supportive of each other. Positive carer and staff relationships and collaboration are crucial in creating an environment where children feel safe, secure and happy. Teamwork is also essential for building positive relationships with families.

The potential for conflict is high where a common purpose cannot be agreed upon and where debate does not take place to make mutual decisions. Individuals within a team do not have to think the same way. However, they do need to respect each other's values, skills and experiences. Respect for diverse viewpoints and backgrounds enriches the team by bringing together different perspectives and ideas.

Why is teamwork important?

A stable team is important in creating positive outcomes for children's development and the provision of quality care as team stability is essential to the development of strong attachments and relationships between children, carers and staff. Effective teamwork contributes to stability in child care services by improving the self-esteem, job satisfaction and morale of carers and staff and can reduce stress and burnout. It is also crucial to achieving goals and accomplishing tasks.

What makes a successful team?

In successful teams individuals realise that group goals and directions are more important than individual aims. The potential for conflict arises when different philosophies, values and ideas within a group are not listened to and respected. The ability of a group of people to listen to different view points, to resolve differences and to reach common solutions to problems allows a successful team to emerge.

Reflecting upon the following questions may assist teams to work successfully together:

- Are group goals seen as more important than individual interests?

- Do we communicate openly and honestly?
- Do we have support systems such as buddies, mentors and a conflict resolution process?
- Are we committed to sharing responsibilities?
- Do we seek to find common ideas and values?
- Are we dedicated to solving problems?

How can we build a successful team?

Most child care services are limited in the time they can dedicate to team building exercises. Establishing trusting relationships and good communication with colleagues can be challenging when the primary role of carers and staff is to care for and educate children. Building a successful team requires an ongoing commitment to working towards common goals. It also requires individuals to have a positive attitude towards change and openness to new ways of working. It can be useful for carers and staff to engage in team building exercises that are focussed on implementing change and quality improvements.

The following five step process for team building may be helpful:

1. Set achievable goals
2. Clarify roles
3. Build supportive relationships
4. Encourage active participation
5. Monitor team effectiveness

(Neugebauer, 1997)

What are the key elements of successful teamwork?

Teamwork requires individuals to commit to working as part of a group and to welcoming new team members as they arrive. Team building can be a challenge in services such as vacation care or in services in which there is a high staff turnover. Family day care schemes, especially where there are significant physical distances between carers and between carers and coordination unit facilities, may find team building to be particularly difficult. In these situations clear written procedures and effective information sharing can assist carers and staff to adopt a consistent approach to their practices and to support each other.

For established teams the challenge lies in continuing to build and support the team. Individuals need to be committed to regularly reviewing policies and procedures and to engaging in professional development and team

Five stages of team development:

1. Connecting - when a new group of people come together to begin working as a team
2. Confronting conflict in the team – conflict resolution is used to move people towards greater acceptance, increased trust and commitment to the task
3. Cooperating as a team – individuals participate in tasks and make positive contributions
4. Collaborating as an effective team – all members make unique but equal contributions towards common goals
5. Closure – an end point where the team can reflect on and celebrate their achievements before moving forward

(Adapted from Rodd, 2006, p. 126)

building. These activities will assist carers and staff to build on current practices and further strengthen the team.

Effective communication is a key element of successful teamwork. To communicate well within a team individuals need to:

- Engage in active listening
- Seek to understand each other's feelings and points of view
- Share information
- Respect and appreciate the values, knowledge and skills of others
- Solve problems collaboratively
- Resolve conflict positively

How can the team resolve conflicts and solve problems?

The potential for conflict can arise within a team when there a varying points of view and philosophies. However this conflict can be overcome when individuals try to identify the strengths in the various ideas and use these to reach agreements. It is useful to view conflict as an opportunity to openly debate issues and to generate new ideas and solutions.

Tips for resolving conflict:

- Identify common goals
- Search for agreement
- Consider the range of solutions and possibilities
- Question our beliefs
- Commit to resolving issues and problems as a group

Conflict resolution and problem solving requires carers and staff to look critically at practices and to avoid assigning blame. Being open, honest

and offering suggestions for improvement will also create a positive environment for resolving conflict and solving problems.

How do we progress as a team?

As teams develop they will experience different levels of success in working equally and closely together to achieve common goals. In the early stages of team development there may be a commitment to working together but there may be difficulties in dealing with conflict. There may also be barriers to truly working towards common goals, for example, not respecting the points of view of others.

How can leaders build and support teamwork?

Team leaders who communicate well and are honest, respectful and good decision makers help individuals within teams to feel supported and valued. The leader's role in a successful team is one of role model and facilitator rather than of supervisor. Poor leaders can undermine teamwork by creating competition, resentment and lack of respect.

Team leaders can play an important role in resolving conflicts and solving problems by giving individuals an opportunity to air their grievances and assisting them to reach a solution. It is important that team leaders are seen as experienced, trusted and independent when facilitating resolutions to problems and conflict within the team. Positive communication, negotiation and problem solving techniques are useful tools for leaders when resolving conflicts. The following questions suggested by Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003, p. 198) are useful for leaders when working with carers and staff to solve conflicts and problems:

• What is the cause of the problem?
• How can we solve this problem?
• What is the best way to satisfy all parties involved in the dispute?

Steps for resolving conflicts and problem solving:

1. Clarify the problem. What is the real issue? What does each person think about the issue?
2. Gather necessary facts and information
3. Develop a number of alternatives
4. Create solutions by considering all alternatives
5. Plan to evaluate the adopted solution
6. If the first solution does not work, return to the first step and begin the process again

(Adapted from Rodd, 2006, p. 126)

Team leaders can also play an active role in guiding team development by using specific strategies for building and supporting teams.

Strategies for building and supporting teams

Child care service managers and team leaders can build effective teams by:

• Providing clear orientation and induction processes for new carers and staff
• Clearly defining job descriptions, responsibilities and expectations
• Regularly arranging team building exercises such as social events, team meetings and professional development opportunities
• Encouraging carers and staff to contribute to meetings
• Providing opportunities for shared decision making
• Developing clear conflict resolution procedures
• Encouraging carers and staff to work together on projects such as policy development and improvements to the environment
• Encouraging carers and staff to share skills and knowledge gained from professional development activities ■

Further reading

• Bush, T., & Middlewood, D. (2005). *Leading and Managing People in Education*. London: Sage Publications Limited

• Ebbeck, M., & Waniganayake, M. (2003). *Early Childhood Professionals: Leading Today and Tomorrow*. Eastgarden, NSW: MacLennan and Petty Pty Ltd

• Neugebauer, R. (1997). Step-by-Step Guide to Team Building. In Neugebauer, R. (Ed.), *Does Your Team Work? Ideas for Bringing Your Staff Together. The Best of Exchange Reprint Collection #10*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, Inc

• Rodd, J. (2006) *Leadership in Early Childhood* (3rd ed). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin

• Victorian Government Department of Human Services. (2004). *Shared Visions – Resources Kit for Outside School Hours Care*. Melbourne: Victorian Government Department of Human Services