

# Communicating with new families

by Heather Barnes

At a time when many services will be enrolling new children to commence care next year, it is a good opportunity to reflect on the way that communication happens between the service and families.

The orientation and settling process can be an important basis for establishing the effective partnerships between families and child care professionals that are vital in promoting positive outcomes for children. Continuous, honest, open, two way communication during orientation is essential.

## Establishing effective partnerships with families

One of the keys to establishing an effective partnership is to demonstrate a supportive and accepting attitude towards families. This can be achieved by:

- recognising that their child beginning child care can be a major milestone for families and that it can be an anxious time for them
- being accepting and accommodating toward different cultural backgrounds, family lifestyles and child rearing practices
- acknowledging that some families will need more support than others.

The very first contact that a family has with the service may be via the telephone, so it is important that all people answering calls do so with a smile. This lifts the tone of the voice and promotes a warm and friendly atmosphere from the start. Smiling when greeting families and their children helps them to feel welcome and accepted.

The enrolment, orientation and settling procedures will vary according to the type of child care being offered as well as the community context of the service. However, in all circumstances, once a place has been offered, a relaxed and flexible approach to the child starting care is important.

## How families may be feeling about enrolling their child in care

Families are all different, but for most their primary concern is that their child will be happy at child care. If it is the first time their child has been enrolled in child care the family may be experiencing a range of feelings.

This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.2 and 1.3

**OSHCQA Principle:** 3.1

**QIAS Principles:** 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3

These may include:

- anxiety over how their child will separate from them and whether they will settle smoothly into care
- guilt about whether they have made the right decision to use the service
- apprehension about what the service will think about their child's behaviour and whether the service may judge them as parents
- concern about what the service will require them to do.

If the family is changing to a different type of care, such as moving from centre based care to outside school hours care, the primary goal is for their child to make the transition happily. The family will still need reassurance and support, as well as information about how the service differs from their previous experience. In most cases, if a child has experienced one type of care, the transition to another type of care is smoother and quicker than for children starting child care for the first time.

One of the best ways for child care professionals to foster strong partnerships with families is for them to try to put themselves in the parent's shoes and understand what commencing child care means for the whole family, not just the child. Not all families will have the ability or desire to communicate with the service in the same way. Accepting diversity in parents and tailoring enrolment, orientation and settling processes to meet their needs and that of their child will be beneficial for everyone.

## What families may need to know about the service

Once the family has accepted a place, offer them an opportunity to visit on a day that is convenient for them. Even if they have been to the service before, it may have been some time since they last visited. Consider sending

out information to the family that includes an invitation to visit, an orientation starting date and an appointment to meet with service management.

During the visit, give the family a tour of the service and introduce staff, if applicable to the setting. Take the opportunity to show them children engaged in child-focused routines such as eating, toileting and sleeping and ask the family about their child's particular needs. It is often a good chance to talk about the constraints of group care, such as not always being able to provide one to one attention. Families can be reassured by observing the way the child care professionals strive to meet the needs of all children by using calming, reassuring responses and smiles.

At the enrolment meeting, it is important to understand that some families will feel intimidated by a formal process, so try to make it as relaxed as possible. Having the meeting in the room while their child is playing, rather than in an office environment, can help to put the family at ease.

Information that families may find helpful to ease the enrolment and settling process will vary between individual families. Child care services have a lot of valuable information to give to families but it is important not to overload them with too much at once.

Usually the key things that families want to know initially are the practical details such as payment of fees and what they need to bring for their child, such as meals, bottles and nappies.

Always give them plenty of opportunities to ask questions and reassure them that if they think of questions later they are welcome to telephone to ask.

### **Supporting families who have minimal literacy skills or for whom English is a second language**

Some families will need extra support during enrolment due to low literacy levels or because English is not their first language. Review enrolment forms to eliminate any unnecessary questions and simplify the wording.

Families may need extra time for discussion or the assistance of an interpreter to ensure that they have a full understanding of how the service operates and how the transition to care will take place. Offer to provide the services of an interpreter or offer the family the option of bringing someone with whom they feel



comfortable and who may interpret for them. Having an interpreter provides the family with an opportunity to clearly communicate their own feelings and wishes.

For families with low literacy levels, giving them the enrolment form to take home before the enrolment interview allows them to seek help from a family member or friend and to think through the answers to the questions, even if they do not fill them out. If not completed beforehand, fill in the enrolment form with the family and closely observe their facial expressions and body language to check their level of understanding of the questions and why you are asking them.

Some services have found it useful to create an audio-tape of the parent handbook, both in English and other community languages. Additionally, using visual representations of procedures and programming can assist all families, regardless of their literacy level.

### **Developing a communication plan**

As part of the enrolment process, it is useful to establish a communication plan with families. A written document to which families can refer helps reinforce the image of a service seeking to share information with the family. It also encourages the family to continuously share information about their child with the service.

A communication plan outlines the ways in which the service will communicate with the family, as well as providing an opportunity for families to express their preferred ways for receiving information about their child. These may include verbal discussions, e-mail, phone calls or notes.



## Orientation

Orientation works best when it is child and family focussed. In some cases it is not possible to have a drawn out orientation period due to the family's circumstances. However, most services find that if the orientation is a gradual process, then children settle more easily in the long term. Having the family and child spend time in the service with the other children and child care professional helps to build trust and respect and allows the family to see the whole program.

Listen to the family's views about how long their child may need them to be present during the orientation period. It helps to convey that the service understands that the family knows their child best and regards the family's views as important.

Sometimes the family finds it more difficult to deal with the separation than the child. Be understanding and reassuring and consider using digital photography to show the family that the child was quite settled after they had gone. Reassurance that the child missed their family but was still able to have a happy day will help the parent to feel less concerned.

Giving the child a photograph of the child care professionals to take home with them will help to bridge the time between care and home and help families to understand that you want to form a bond with the whole family.

Always be honest with families and contact them if their child is distressed during the early days.

## What families may need to know about their child as they settle into care

Most families want reassurance that their child is happy and not missing them too much. Others will ask for more details about how their child spent the day, who they played with, how long they slept and other details. Some services give the family a telephone call during the first morning to tell them how their child is settling. Giving a 'First Day Feedback' note also acknowledges the family's need to know how the first day went. This could include information about the child's play experiences, including what they enjoyed most, and their eating, drinking and sleep details. Finish the note with a friendly, reassuring comment such as "We look forward to getting to know you and (child's name) better in the coming weeks. We value your feedback and want to make your family's time here as enjoyable as possible".

Some services follow this up with a similar note after the first week, and again after the first two weeks as well as offering families the option of a discussion time to discuss their child's progress after the first six weeks.

## Evaluating the effectiveness of communication with new families

Consider giving families an enrolment and orientation feedback form for them to provide suggestions that may assist new families in the future. This form could include questions such as:

- Was there anything you would have liked to have been told at the beginning that would have assisted you or your child?
- Did you receive enough information so that you understood how the service operated?
- Did you receive too much information?
- Was there anything else we could have done to help make your child and family's commencement at our service more enjoyable?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences during enrolment and orientation?

In some cases, families may feel more comfortable conveying their feedback in other ways such as through informal conversations, via e-mail or by putting their comments in a suggestion box.

## Further ways to foster effective partnerships that will result in increased opportunities for communication include:

- letting families know that they are welcome to visit the service at any time, to contribute to the program and to be involved in children's experiences in whatever way they feel comfortable
- conveying to families that their child is valued by child care professionals at the service
- supporting families in their parenting role and reassuring them that they are doing a great job
- always greeting children and their family warmly when they arrive and asking questions about the child's needs and the issues and experiences in their daily lives outside of the service
- having relaxed, friendly, informal conversations that are supportive of family culture
- being sensitive and professional, and ensuring that families' privacy is respected
- extending warmth and acceptance to all families equitably
- involving families in the regular updating of the service's philosophies, policies and procedures
- encouraging a two way flow of information about children's interests so that the program is interesting and relevant to the child
- documenting children's experiences in ways that are interesting and easy for families to understand.

Communicating effectively with families during enrolment, orientation and the settling in process assists in developing effective partnerships with families that result in positive outcomes for children ■

### Communicating with new families at Smithfield Child Care Centre

Kathy Lochlin, the director of Smithfield Child Care Centre in Cairns, believes that it is important to build a connection with families from the beginning. To support this the service implements a number of strategies to enhance communication with families:

- Providing families with a 'welcome pack' when their child starts care. The pack includes a 'We love reading at Smithfield Child Care' bookmark, a 'cuddle card', a fridge magnet with 'Welcome to \_\_\_ room' and the names of staff in the room, and information on separation anxiety.
- The cuddle card is a small laminated card that children can use to 'redeem' unlimited hugs from staff and families at the service. Kathy says that this device assists both children and families to feel that the child is welcome and nurtured at the centre.
- The centre also has a 'Wow Box' that is kept in the foyer on a child height table. Each week a new item of interest is placed in the box. Examples of the objects that have been placed in the box include stamp pads, Babushka dolls, photographs and some things that the children themselves have brought in to share. This strategy encourages families to spend time with their child on the way into their room.
- The foyer is a designated 'Go Slow Zone' and the centre is a 'No Phone Zone' to minimise barriers to communication between families, staff and children.
- Kathy also aims to meet with all new families after the third week to seek feedback about how they and their child are settling.

### References and further reading

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