Developing a service philosophy

by Phillip Rowell

A child care service philosophy should be a written statement of the values and beliefs that underpin all aspects of the service's operations. It should describe how service stakeholders think about children, childhood and how children learn and develop.

Child care professionals need to consider a range of approaches and issues in the development and review of the service philosophy to ensure that it truly represents the values and ideals of current service practice.

As a starting point in thinking about the service's philosophy, child care professionals may find it useful to reflect upon the following fundamental questions:

- What do we believe in?
- Why do we have these beliefs?
- How can we translate our beliefs into practice?

Answering these questions will help services to develop their service philosophy.

Inviting consultation with all stakeholders

Children, families and child care professionals often come from a range of backgrounds and lifestyles, which blend to produce a diverse group of stakeholders. The combination of differing beliefs will lead to a range of values and attitudes

> **This article relates to:**
> **FDCQA Principles:** 1.3, 5.1, 6.1 and 6.2
> **OSHCQA Principles:** 3.1, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 8.3 and 8.4
> **QIAS Principle:** 3.1

regarding how children should be cared for, the value of trained and experienced child care professionals, and the importance of child care and education. Considering the views of all stakeholders is essential when developing a philosophy.

A philosophy needs to state the agreed values and beliefs of its stakeholders, which can only be achieved if it is developed in collaboration with children, families and child care professionals. The philosophy should also be reflective of the broader community in which it exists and should identify the importance of social justice, inclusive practice and equity.

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Each service's philosophy will be unique and should address the individual circumstances of the service. For example, a service with access to minimal outdoor space may describe in their philosophy how they value innovative indoor play experiences and reflect upon the importance of supporting children's play and gross motor development in an indoor environment.

Services can access information to assist in developing or reviewing their philosophy through:

- networking with other services, child care professionals, peak bodies or similar professions such as education or aged care;
- considering *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which establishes minimal entitlements for children regardless of variations in legal systems, government structures or cultural traditions;
- accessing the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) *Code of Ethics*, which combine components of best practice, legislation and current theories of child development; and
- using information outlined in the CCQA *Quality Practices Guides*.

> ### Example of a service philosophy statement
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> At Happy Place Children's Centre we believe that:
> - *All children have the right to experience quality child care.*
> - *Each child is an individual, with unique abilities and interests.*
> - *All children should be treated equally, and each child's social and cultural background will be acknowledged and respected.*
> - *Children learn through their play, interests and meaningful interactions with others.*
> - *Each child's family knows their child best, and child care professionals will work in partnership with families to ensure the best outcomes for children.*

The service's philosophy is more than a mission statement or a set of broad goals as these tend to express what the service wants to achieve and rather than what it believes in. The philosophy should support the service's daily practices and provide a clear vision of its role in providing quality child care. Collaborating effectively with stakeholders to develop a written philosophy may involve child care professionals in:

- reflecting on individual beliefs and values;
- exploring how beliefs and values shape opinions;
- considering the unique way in which the service provides care for children and families. For example, having a family grouped setting, or providing care according to a particular religious, educational or cultural belief.
- participating in professional development opportunities; and
- recognising and promoting the importance of self evaluation and continuing improvement.

Collaborating with stakeholders

It is important for stakeholders to recognise that there are various beliefs and practices relating to the care of children. For example, how families define 'play' may be quite different to the theoretical concepts of play which child care professionals may value. While recognising that values can be a reflection of cultural or religious beliefs or family lifestyles, the philosophy also needs to reflect basic principles of quality including promoting children's health and safety, valuing the importance of the early and middle childhood years and respecting diversity. Acknowledging and listening to other points of view assists child care professionals to begin to discuss why some values are important and why they need to be included in the philosophy.

When developing their philosophy, services must bear in mind their obligation to meet the requirements of CCQA, as well as regulatory requirements and/or national standards. All stakeholders should be informed about their legislative and best practice responsibilities.

Children, families and child care professionals should take an active role in developing their service's philosophy. Stakeholders are more likely to value the philosophy if they have been invited to participate in its development or review.

Reflective questions to support philosophy development and review

To reach an agreed understanding with stakeholders, child care professionals can use reflective questions that may assist individuals to identify key words or concepts that are reflective of their collective values and beliefs. Questions which services may find useful include:

- Why is quality child care important?
- How do we advocate for children's rights?
- What do the terms 'diversity', 'equity' and 'inclusion' mean to me?
- How do we interact with, and build relationships with stakeholders?
- What is the role of child care professionals in the provision of quality child care?
- What do we believe about the way children learn and develop?
- What is the importance of children's play?
- How do we implement quality practice?
- What do the terms 'health', 'safety' and 'child protection' mean?
- Why is it important to involve stakeholders in planning for continuing improvement?
- How do we manage change and resolve conflicts?
- What does our local community require from a child care service?

Encouraging involvement can promote a sense of ownership in stakeholders, and can assist services to demonstrate that stakeholder opinions and ideas are valued.

The service's philosophy can be particularly useful in guiding practices that are 'value based', and/or where information cannot be easily sourced from recognised authorities. For example, practices relating to behaviour guidance and grievance management can be supported by the service's philosophy in relation to concepts such as children's rights and social justice.

Collaborating effectively with stakeholders helps to ensure that the service's philosophy is relevant to everyone, and can support the service to demonstrate transparency and accountability for its practices.

Reviewing the service philosophy

A service's philosophy should be a 'living' document that is reviewed regularly to ensure that it retains its currency and value. A current philosophy will also be more effective in guiding the service's decision making processes as it will be more relevant to the needs of the service and stakeholders. When stakeholders have a sense of ownership they may find it easier to use the values outlined in the philosophy to guide daily practice.

When reviewing and evaluating the service's philosophy, stakeholders may consider the following questions:

- How does the service philosophy reflect the type of child care experience the service aims to create?
- What opportunities are available for stakeholders to be involved in decision making?
- How do the service's policies and practices reflect the values in the philosophy ?
- What new understandings or ideas about children's learning have been gained and how should these influence the service's philosophy?

An effectively written philosophy shapes the identity of a service and creates a culture of self evaluation and continuing improvement. When developed successfully with stakeholders, a service's philosophy underpins the provision of quality child care ■

Strategies to encourage stakeholder involvement in philosophy development and review

- Use the service's newsletter, noticeboards, children's diaries or communication books to share ideas or to seek feedback from stakeholders.
- Identify and refer to the service's philosophy in relevant aspects of the service. For example, use key phrases or concepts from the philosophy in the service's newsletters, enrolment forms, handbooks, and recruitment and induction procedures.
- Refer to the philosophy in the service's policies and procedures.
- Involve stakeholders in decision making. This can lead to discussions about how particular practices reflect the service's values.
- Encourage children to write, draw and express how they feel the service should operate.
- Promote a common understanding of the philosophy for all families by translating it into community languages if required.
- Provide opportunities that encourage stakeholders to discuss their values and beliefs to help promote understanding and acceptance. For example, a family forum may be used to facilitate a discussion about expectations and ideas regarding behaviour guidance. This type of activity can be a good opportunity for child care professionals and children's families to become familiar with each other's knowledge, skills and values.

References and further reading

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- Faulkner, J. (2006). Developing a service philosophy. *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Factsheet #9*. NSW: National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc.
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- Faulkner, J., & Tansey, S. (2003). Quality assurance for all philosophies. *Putting Children First*, 8, 1.
- Martin, K. (2005). Reconsidering social justice or just social considerations? The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics. *Every Child*, 11(4), 30-31.

Useful websites

- Australian Early Childhood Association (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)
- St. James Ethics Centre - (www.ethics.org.au)
- UNICEF - (www.unicef.org)