

# Developing a handbook for families

by Phillip Rowell

One of the most common ways child care services communicate with families is through a handbook. While this often provides families with their first impression of a service, the primary function of a handbook is to give families a resource they can use when they require clarification about the service's practices.

A handbook complements the service's enrolment procedure and is an important aspect of the orientation process. It creates a 'snapshot' of the service's character by reflecting the values and beliefs of stakeholders while condensing large amounts of information into readable and understandable text. For example, the handbook may replicate important sections from several different policies instead of printing the policies in full.

## Why are handbooks important?

For many families, enrolling in a service may be the first time they have entrusted the care of their child to people other than themselves or relatives. A well thought out handbook can foster a family's sense of belonging and a connection with the people who will care for and protect their child.

A comprehensive yet simply written handbook should reinforce the importance of open, transparent communication in the service. Handbooks need to be regularly updated to reflect the philosophy of the service and the needs of all its stakeholders.

Handbooks can also reflect how partnerships are developed and maintained between stakeholders. As such, the handbook may include information about how the service:

- caters for the individual needs, interests and wellbeing of children
- builds a sense of trust and security
- embraces diversity and inclusiveness
- promotes open and honest two way communication
- values the contribution, experience and skills of families
- recognises shared decision making
- networks with other services and agencies, such as local primary schools, child health services and local libraries.

This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.2, 1.3, 1.5 and 6.1-6.5

**OSHCQA Principles:** 3.1-3.3, 8.3 and 8.6

**QIAS Principles:** 2.1-2.3, 7.1 and 7.3

## What should be included in the handbook for families?

Every handbook is unique. Just as no two philosophy statements are the same, each service's handbook should reflect the unique characteristics of the service and its stakeholders. When services consult with families and child care professionals about the development and review of their handbook, it ensures that the information being communicated is meeting everyone's needs.

Information that may be provided in a handbook includes<sup>1</sup>:

- the service's operational information
- health and safety information
- managerial and administrative practices, such as fee payments and permission forms
- information about special activities or features of the service
- confidentiality guidelines
- child protection strategies. For example, signing in/out authorisation
- the service's participation in Child Care Quality Assurance and how families can be involved in the process.

A handbook should also provide families with information about the service's philosophy and identify key policies. It can discuss a service's understanding of quality early or middle childhood education and care and explain how children's experiences will be planned for and evaluated.

Importantly, the handbook should include procedures for managing grievances. Addressing complaints and resolving conflicts is a key to effectively communicating with families. The handbook should clearly state the service's procedures, outline the appropriate lines of

<sup>1</sup> This is not an exhaustive list and services should consult with their stakeholders to reach an agreement about what should be included in their handbook.

communication, and identify the possible courses of action which may arise from grievances and complaints.

### What should services consider when reviewing the handbook for families?

Handbooks need to reflect the current needs and interests of the service and its stakeholders. Reviewing the service's family handbook is similar to reviewing service policies as it is important to ensure that the information is up to date, agreed upon and, where appropriate, reflects recommendations from recognised authorities. For example, information about confidentiality needs to adhere to privacy legislation. As a guide, services should consider reviewing their handbook every 12-18 months or when changes occur to the procedures or practices outlined in the handbook.

When reviewing the family handbook, child care professionals can reflect upon the needs of families by considering the following questions:

- How effectively does information in the handbook explain the practices and policies that occur in our service?
- How can our service encourage families to inform us about their children's needs and interests?
- How does our family handbook promote an inclusive, non-judgemental approach to families?
- How do we communicate with families about our participation in Child Care Quality Assurance?
- How do we demonstrate that we value the role of families in their children's lives?
- How does the tone and language of our handbook encourage families to approach us?
- Does the handbook identify when and how changes to service practice or administration are communicated to families? For example, increases in fees, changes to staffing or children's routines.

By considering these questions, services can begin to understand why some families may feel overwhelmed when first reading the service handbook. As handbooks are often provided to families at the time of enrolment, services can draw upon their responses to recognise the feelings associated with enrolling a child, and how an effectively written handbook can build a positive and trusting rapport.

The following strategies may also assist services to promote and review their handbooks:

- provide a handbook to all new families at enrolment and orientation
- consider placing a full version of the handbook in the service library and developing an abridged version to distribute to families
- develop a family information package, which includes a handbook and other information such as NCAC *Family Factsheets*
- publish sections of the handbook in the service's newsletter and encourage families to provide feedback about the information and whether it meets their needs
- make the handbook available online or create a CD-Rom version of it for families
- translate the handbook into relevant community languages
- distribute the handbook to local councils, libraries and community centres
- ensure that families receive information about updated versions of the handbook following reviews.

Handbooks are a useful resource for families, especially when they are enrolling their children in a service and are learning about the service's practices and procedures. Ensuring that handbooks are up to date and reflect the needs of all stakeholders is an important step in fostering positive partnerships and building open lines of communication between services and families ■

### References and further reading:

- Bickley, M. (2008). *NCAC Family Factsheet: Building a partnership with your child care service*. NSW: NCAC.
- Keyser, J. (2006). *From parents to partners: Building a family-centered early childhood program*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Stonehouse, A., & Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2006). *Making links parent partner: A guide for parents about what matters in early childhood services*. Castle Hill, NSW: Pademelon Press.