

Helping families work through the challenges they may experience using child care

by Anne Stonehouse

Participating in child care is important in the lives of both children and their families. The majority of families end up having a positive child care experience. However, it is natural for concerns and issues to arise for families, particularly when they start using care. Some families of babies, toddlers and children with additional needs may have concerns about using care, partly because their child may not be able to tell them about their day-to-day experiences. Families from cultural, language and religious backgrounds that differ to those of most or all other families at the service may have concerns because of these differences. Families who are living in difficult circumstances may feel vulnerable and worry about being judged or labelled by child care professionals.

Awareness of these issues enables child care professionals to not only recognise them in particular families but to also communicate that they are common to many families. Talking about them in reassuring ways helps to promote a culture of transparency and openness with families.

This article outlines some of the concerns that families can have about using child care and suggests specific strategies that can be used to address these.



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2 and 1.3

OSHCQA Principles: 1 - 3.3

QIAS Principles: 2.1 - 2.3

Families' common concerns

Every family is unique and approaches the child care experience differently. However, some common concerns families can have include:

Have I done the right thing? Some families will be ambivalent or feel guilty about using child care. It may be a necessity but not their preference. Many families are exposed to a variety of strong opinions about child care and some will face criticism for using it, especially if their child is very young.

Is this child care service good quality? Some families may not have had a choice of child care services, and even when they have had, they may take time to feel comfortable and confident about the child care they are using. Even when a service has a very good reputation, families need to 'live' the experience and come to their own conclusions about the quality of care provided. The varying expectations that families have can also lead to concerns; individual families' ideas of quality child care can differ greatly.

How is child care going to affect my child?

The more hours the child attends care and the younger the child is, the more likely it is that families will worry about the impact that the child care experience will have on them. Some will worry that their child will form a close relationship with child care professionals at the expense of attachment to their family. Although most families understand that a warm caring relationship between child care professionals and their child is crucial, they certainly don't want it to affect their own relationship with their child.

Will my child find it hard to separate from me?

Some children show distress or reluctance to separate when arriving at child care, even when they have been attending care for a long time. These same children may also resist leaving at the end of the day. Families may not know what to do when this happens, thinking that there is

a 'right' way to handle the situation. Some may make the distress worse by showing uncertainty or anxiety themselves, or by leaving and then returning. At times, family members may have difficulty separating when their child does not.

Is my child's development normal? When children are in a group, especially a group of children of the same age, there is a ready-made basis for comparing children. Families may be sensitive to the fact that their child is not as highly developed as other children.

What do they think of my child? Families are eager to see signs that child care professionals really know and like their child. This may be especially true of a child who has additional needs or has challenging behaviour.

What do they think of me? Child care professionals often come to know a lot about families' child rearing practices and their lives. Some families may be uncertain or lack confidence about their child rearing skills. Others may live with such stresses and pressures that they cannot put their child's needs first. When a family is different in some way to most of the families who use the service - because of language, culture, religion, family structure or lifestyle - they may worry about being accepted and respected. Families are sensitive to messages that child care professionals feel they are or are not doing a good job raising their child.

What do they expect of me? Sometimes families are unsure about their rights and responsibilities in using child care. For example, they may be unsure of how much information they should share with child care professionals, whether or not to ask questions or how long they can stay with their child.

Who is in charge? Families may feel uncertain about who is responsible for managing their child's behaviour when they are dropping off or collecting their child from care, or visiting at the service.

Why does my child behave differently at home and child care? Children often behave differently at child care to the way they do at home because of the differences in the expectations and relationships they experience in each setting. When children behave more appropriately at care than at home, families can take this as a sign that they are doing something wrong in their parenting.

Are they being honest with me about my child?

Are they telling me everything? Some families want much more information about their child than others do. Some are more robust than others when it comes to hearing 'not so good' news about their child. Some will take time to accept that there is a concern about their child's behaviour or development.

Why may families be reluctant to voice their concerns?

Dealing with families' concerns constructively, and without making assumptions that all families have them, is challenging. This is partly because families may not discuss these concerns with child care professionals because they are embarrassed or unsure of how to raise them. They may not know that their concerns and perspectives are common, especially if they are using child care for the first time. Not wanting to seem critical, vulnerable or overly worried, they may keep their concerns to themselves rather than airing them. Some families may express their worries indirectly rather than openly, through appearing uninterested, reluctant to talk or ask questions, or even being uncooperative or demanding. This may be because they simply do not know what is expected.

Allaying concerns – steps to take

One of the most helpful ways to support families to feel confident and comfortable about the child care service is to be open about the common concerns that many families have. Talk about these concerns and acknowledge them with families during enrolment and orientation, and put information in the service's family handbook and in newsletters or on noticeboards. Let families know that these feelings are normal.

Generally, the key to families feeling secure and comfortable with child care is through them having a partnership with the child care professionals who care for their child. Each partnership will be unique because each family is unique, but all will involve ongoing, open and respectful communication that is motivated by a commitment to working together to provide the best possible experiences for the child.

Some specific strategies for addressing families' concerns include:

- having a thorough enrolment, orientation and settling in process for both the child and the family

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- giving written information to families as a back-up for information given verbally
- providing information more than once, and in different ways
- using interpreters to communicate with families in their home language. This may be a professional translator or a friend or family member who is bilingual.
- finding ways to connect families with other families to share experiences, especially when a family is just starting in the service
- individualising expectations and avoiding having stereotypes of the 'ideal' family
- making time to talk informally with families at arrival and departure times
- offering families opportunities to have more extended discussions about their child with their child's main carers at other times of the day or out of hours
- finding out what families want for their child and using that information to assist planning for their child's experience in ways that families can see
- adopting a 'why not' approach when families make requests. This does not mean agreeing to everything a family asks for, but rather encouraging them to ask, taking their requests seriously, and when you cannot do what they ask explaining why to them respectfully, without implying that they should not have asked.
- holding information evenings, social events and other opportunities to build a sense of community among families, child care professionals and children in the service
- showing families that you know and really like their child
- trying to see situations from the family's perspective
- communicating honestly and sensitively with families when their child has additional needs or



presents challenges and being positive about finding ways to work in the child's best interests. Sometimes this may require working with other professionals to assist the child and family.

Conclusion

To build successful partnerships with families, it is most important in your daily interactions and communication to demonstrate that you want to:

- work collaboratively with them
- share two-way information with them about their child
- make decisions with them about their child's experiences in care.

Strong relationships can weather tensions and conflicts and become stronger as a result of working through them respectfully and constructively. Everyone, especially children, benefits when child care professionals and families have strong, respectful relationships ■

References and further reading

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