

# Keeping up to date with current practice

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When child care professionals keep up to date with current practice, the outcomes for children, families and themselves are positive. These outcomes are further strengthened when there are opportunities for professional development that foster and improve caregiving, teaching and practical skills and knowledge. However, it can be confronting for child care professionals to assess and question the currency of their own skills as this may result in them being required to dismiss practices with which they are familiar and comfortable.

A commitment to continuing improvement and professional accountability requires child care professionals to evaluate their own practices and be able to sensitively challenge colleagues who are reluctant to update their practices because they 'have always done it this way'.

Opportunities for professional development and for child care professionals to reflect on their practice are important indicators of quality. Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) highlights the importance of self-reflection and encourages services to plan for opportunities which build on and strengthen the current skills and knowledge of child care professionals.

When a service keeps up to date with current practice, and this becomes part of their daily operations, it promotes a consistent approach to continuing improvement and ensures that children and families are provided with quality experiences. This involves child care professionals collaborating with colleagues, valuing and responding to feedback, responding to leadership, and managing change effectively.

When child care professionals engage in conversations about what constitutes current best practice it can encourage a constructive, and at times, critical discussion about why change may need to occur. It can also lead to investigating recommendations from recognised authorities and focusing on how personal beliefs and values influence the way child care professionals perform their role.

## Recognise strengths

Maintaining the cohesiveness, enthusiasm and morale of the team can keep child care professionals focussed on their quality practices. Adopting a strengths approach can encourage

### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 5.2 and 5.3

**OSHCQA Principle:** 8.5

**QIAS Principle:** 7.4

child care professionals to assess their practice from a positive perspective and help them to develop attainable goals and a confident attitude to change.

This is more likely to be achieved when management and child care professionals work together to establish frameworks that promote mutual respect, cooperative behaviours and shared responsibility about how people communicate with and treat one another.

The following strategies may assist services to recognise and build upon strengths:

- Listen to each other's needs and expectations and give individuals time to make decisions based on their knowledge, skills, experience and training. This can help to ensure that they take responsibility for their own actions, share their successes and recognise the potentially positive outcomes when change needs to occur in the future.
- Be sensitive to individual fears and anxieties. Understand that formal training can be confronting for child care professionals who have years of experience but have acquired no formal qualification. Seek ways in which to assist them to become an active and respected voice in the team.
- Develop strategies that promote open, honest and effective feedback about a colleague's professional skills and abilities, and help them to set achievable goals.

## Begin the process

While a rewarding experience, the process of evaluating practice can sometimes challenge what a child care professional believes to be best practice. Recognising that some child care professionals may be hesitant about changing their practice is an important step in the process of self-evaluation. Whether it is a child care professional beginning their career or a colleague who has been employed for several years,

services need to communicate the benefits of self-improvement and build a trusting rapport with all individuals.

When child care professionals recognise that they need to update their practices it can be helpful to plan for professional development that not only enhances the quality of child care experiences but also:

- strengthens the collaborative partnerships between stakeholders;
- improves the job satisfaction, morale and self-esteem of child care professionals;
- fosters conversations about what constitutes best practice; and
- encourages professionals to identify areas for improvement and to set achievable short and long term goals.

Child care professionals can refer to the list below to help identify the circumstances that may affect their ability to consistently evaluate their practices. When services work collaboratively with all stakeholders, they can develop strategies to overcome barriers and look for opportunities to improve practice.

### **Barriers to evaluating practice**

There are several factors which can create a barrier when services are attempting to keep up to date with practice. These barriers may include:

- Particular times of year.
- Attendance patterns of children throughout the day.
- Consistency of experienced and skilled child care professionals.
- Management of routines, schedules, tasks and responsibilities.
- The health and wellbeing of children.
- The physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of child care professionals.
- Cohesiveness of the child care team.
- Type of service management or structure, such as single staff models, vacation care or multiple service provision.
- Location of service, for example, city, town, rural or remote.
- The quality of resources and equipment.
- Access to support and training services and peak bodies.



### **Opportunities to reflect on practice**

There are situations and events which occur in services that provide opportune times for child care professionals to take stock of what they do and why they do it in a particular way. The following situations may prompt child care professionals to reflect upon their routines and practices:

- At the beginning of the year when new children and their families are orientating and settling into care, which may include learning and adjusting to individual family needs and values, including diverse family structures or parenting beliefs.
- When planning for experiences to meet and strengthen children's skills according to their age, abilities and interests. This can include children's cultural background, linguistic or additional needs, the length of time they have been in care and the types of care groups they may have experienced, such as multi-age settings.
- As children transition from one group or service setting to another. For example, for children enrolled in an outside school hours care and a primary school, child care professionals may need to work with the education system to develop consistent expectations and standards of practice, between the two settings.
- When changes or events at home affect children's wellbeing, such as parent separation, moving house, illness or death of a loved one or pet.
- The employment of, or changes to, the child care team which may bring new ideas and different practices.



- When students are on practicum they can introduce theories, values or ideas from learning institutions which services may be unaware of and may consider researching further.
- When changes occur to recommendations from recognised authorities which affect policies and procedures.

### Diversify training opportunities

There has often been a perception that to keep up to date with current practice, services need to plan for formal training opportunities such as inservices, workshops, seminars or conferences. It is important to understand that there are also valuable opportunities for professional development that occur every day and this requires child care professionals to take personal responsibility to improve their skills.

From participating in workshops, networking groups or mentoring programs to daily collaboration with peers and families, professional development filters through to every aspect of a service's operations and program delivery. Learning can be structured or fluid, planned or spontaneous and provided in numerous ways:

- Embrace the new knowledge and skills of colleagues who have attended training. Use their new knowledge and skills to facilitate an innovative and low-cost training session for other team members.
- Network with other services and encourage child care professionals to build supportive partnerships with their peers.
- Provide diverse opportunities for child care professionals to learn about and discuss new practices. For example, brainstorming at meetings, seeking support and advice from external agencies, keeping reflective journals and engaging in research projects.
- Seek opportunities every day to discuss practice through non-threatening and inclusive interactions. This may include during informal meetings at the end of the day or at team social gatherings.
- Support new ideas and encourage child care professionals to research their understanding of different practices. This can be achieved through the internet, online discussion forums or subscribing to professional newsletters, journals and publications.

When child care professionals review and evaluate their practices this can sometimes be challenging and confronting, yet an ultimately rewarding experience. While updating skills and knowledge is vital to maintaining quality, so too is nurturing the abilities of child care professionals to reach their full potential. When performed with empathy and with the best interests of stakeholders taken into consideration, the results can improve the quality of experiences for children and the status of the child care profession ■

### References and further reading

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