

Managing staff changes positively

Whether it is the resignation of a long term staff member, or a sudden increase in staff turnover, it is important that services develop strategies to minimise the impact of staff changes on the quality of care they provide for children. In this article, Anne Stonehouse explores how services can approach staff changes creatively and positively.

Staff continuity is one of the most important contributors to quality in children's services (Centre for Community Child Health, 2006). Children's sense of wellbeing and security at the service depends largely on their ongoing relationships with the professionals who work with them and the trust that builds as they get to know one another and interact over time. Knowing their caregivers and being known by them is critical to positive outcomes for children.

Staff turnover is a fact of life in many children's services. Up to 60% of staff stop working in children's services every year¹. In addition, in some parts of Australia there are not enough suitably qualified applicants to fill positions. This results in these positions remaining vacant or being filled by a succession of casual staff.

Reasons for staff turnover and shortages are varied, but low status and remuneration are often cited. Outside school hours and vacation care services typically offer mostly part-time positions and therefore often attract people who are studying or seeking temporary employment and who may eventually move on to other jobs.

The implications for service operation, staff morale and job satisfaction and, most importantly, families and children make staff turnover a major concern for many services. It does not appear that the situation will ease significantly in the near future; therefore it is important that services develop strategies for minimising the potentially negative impact of staff changes.

Establishing and maintaining quality requires services to be prepared for staff changes and to have plans to manage these, rather than seeing them as a departure from the norm and dealing with them only when they occur. Alongside this acceptance is recognition that every decision needs to be based ultimately on what is in the best interests of children.

¹ Accessed on 27 June 2008 from www.lhmu.org.au/01_cms/details.asp?ID=670

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2 and 5.1

OSHCQA Principles: 3.1 and 8.2-8.4

QIAS Principles: 2.1 and 7.1-7.3

Although many of the strategies outlined in this article apply to all types of children's services, this article is most directly relevant to centre based and outside school hours care services, and therefore refers to 'staff'.

Challenges of staff changes

Changes in staff present several types of challenges that can have negative effects.

For children

Quality is based strongly on relationships and interactions between individual staff and children. Most importantly, children rely on ongoing personal relationships with known child care professionals to feel safe, secure and content, and the departure of a trusted adult undermines that. Continuity of staff is critical to consistent quality care for children. Forming a relationship requires spending time together to get to know one another. New or casual staff cannot have deep knowledge about individual children, as this takes a long time to build. Therefore staff changes almost inevitably mean that children cannot be cared for in ways that fit their individual temperaments, styles, needs and interests.

Awareness of individual differences in children relies not just on interacting with them but also on having robust partnerships with families, and these also take time to build. New and casual staff cannot be expected to have a thorough understanding of the child in the context of their family, culture and community.

Staff changes may also result in changes or disruptions to daily routines and the way the program operates, simply because different people have different ways of doing things. Young children thrive on routine and predictability, and disruption can cause them confusion or distress. For the sake of continuity and predictability in the relationship, it is particularly important to limit the number of different people who care for babies and toddlers.

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Filling a gap with a succession of casual staff is not in the best interests of children.

For families

Families rely on the relationship and communication with known staff to feel secure about their child's care. The departure of a trusted child care professional can cause them to feel anxious and insecure, and may interfere with effective information exchange between families and child care professionals.

Several staff departures or gaps, especially in quick succession, can lead families to wonder if there is something wrong with the service and they may lose confidence in the quality of care that is being offered. Similarly, staff changes can be disruptive to the flow of the service's operation and the daily program with which families have become familiar and comfortable, and they may react negatively to what is new and unfamiliar. Most importantly, if staff changes affect children's sense of security, contentment and wellbeing, then families can become unsettled too.

For staff

A range of feelings and reactions are common among remaining staff when colleagues leave. The departure of a colleague, for whatever reason, is usually disruptive. Even one staff member leaving can lower the morale of remaining staff. Frustration can also build when staff have invested time and energy into inducting a new staff member who then leaves and the process must start all over again. Staff departures can make current staff feel anxious, especially if the team has been working well. Change, even potentially positive change, can cause anxiety.

The process of hiring new staff and inducting them effectively takes considerable time and energy. Working with a new colleague or a succession of casual staff is also often demanding, and can be stressful and frustrating, especially if the new person is inexperienced, lacks skills or has different ideas and ways of doing things. It takes most new staff members, even when they are very competent, time to fit into a team and function at their best. A shortage of suitable applicants can sometimes place pressure on services to compromise and hire staff who may not be ideal for the service, the community or the position.



Minimising the negative impact of staff changes

The list above may give the impression that all is doom and gloom. Not so. There are ways to minimise or eliminate the negative impact of staff changes, and there can often be positive outcomes.

A staff change is a time to reflect, to think about what is really needed in the child care professional team. A reflective learning culture in a service means there is anticipation and acceptance of, and preparation for, change; and an acknowledgement that although change carries risks and usually requires extra effort, there can be benefits.

Rather than simply filling the vacant position, the departure of a staff member can be an opportunity to move current staff around, alter duties and responsibilities, and give someone a new challenge or a fresh start. Think innovatively about the professionals already in the team. Perhaps it would make good sense to move someone into the vacated slot. Of course, this must always be done with two things in mind: making the best use of staff skills and strengths and, as a priority, what is in the best interests of children.

A new staff member can add to the pool of skills and strengths among the team: for example, he or she may provide an additional cultural or language background, diversify the age range, or contribute to a healthier gender balance.

Some strategies that may help services to cope positively with staff changes include:

Before someone leaves:

- Prepare children and families for staff changes using age appropriate strategies. Let them know what is happening, and anticipate and acknowledge their feelings.
- Try to ensure that specific knowledge, skills or connections with other organisations are invested in more than one staff member, so that if any one staff member leaves, the overall impact is minimised.

In the recruitment process:

- Involve families and, where appropriate, children in identifying skills and qualities that they think a new staff member should have.
- Consider having a family representative on the interview panel.
- Prepare a job description that complements the strengths of current staff.
- Involve staff appropriately in the process of hiring a new child care professional. Get their views on the job description. Consider having a staff member on the interview panel.
- Keep all staff informed about recruitment processes and update them regularly on the progress of hiring a new staff member.

With systems and processes:

- Have clear systems and procedures in place for service operations and aspects of daily practice. Document these so that they are accessible to all staff, including both current and new employees, and ensure that practices in the service correspond with what is written. New and casual staff should have access to this information, ideally before they begin working with children.
- Provide a comprehensive handbook to new child care professionals, but have realistic expectations. They will need time to become familiar with the information - don't expect them to commit the whole document to memory instantly. Have an abbreviated version of the handbook for casual or short term staff and provide them with both verbal and written information.
- Consider what a new staff member needs to know immediately and what can wait to avoid overwhelming them with a large volume of new information.

- Have clear role definitions for positions, without being inflexible. Make sure that current and new employees know their own and others' responsibilities.
- Seek feedback from casual or new staff about their induction and orientation into the service. Ask them what would have been helpful for them to know to help them to work most effectively.
- Evaluate casual and new staff performance in a supportive and constructive way. Seek feedback from the people who work with them, and look at how successfully they work with children, families and the staff team.
- Have procedures for keeping children and families informed about both long and short term staff changes, including staff taking leave. Useful strategies might include having a notice about the shifts staff members work each day, including information about staff changes and new staff members in the newsletter, posting notices about new staff members when they begin and, most importantly, conversations about changes.

Once a new person starts:

- Remember the basics. Give new staff members a tour of the whole service. Introduce him or her to staff, children and families. Show them where supplies and equipment are kept, as well as facilities such as staff rooms, bathrooms and office areas.
- Remind other staff to do a running commentary on what they are doing throughout the day. Practices that are clear when they are familiar may not be obvious to someone new.
- Give the new person lots of positive feedback as well as suggestions for improvement or change if required. Use a constructive tone and demonstrate understanding that it can be hard to come into a new position, and that it can take time to settle in and work effectively.
- Encourage new staff to ask any questions that they have, and show that it is understood and appreciated that they are likely to have many questions.
- Find ways to let everyone, including families, know that a staff member is casual or new. Have all staff, including the new person, wear name tags and have signs or notices welcoming the new staff member.



- When a new staff member begins to work with children, especially young children, try to have them work alongside a familiar staff member until children get to know him or her. Having a familiar person nearby will help children to feel more comfortable with someone who is unfamiliar.
- Support new staff members to interact and establish relationships with children naturally and gradually. Encourage them to engage in activities where children are often very settled and inclined to enjoy adult participation, such as dramatic play, drawing or sand play. New staff may also be able to share a special talent or skill that may interest the children.
- Do everything you can to help the new or casual person work effectively. That will benefit you, the service, the employee and, most importantly, children and families.
- Be empathetic. Put yourself in the shoes of the new child care professional. Consider situations in which you've moved into an established team and the challenges you may have experienced.

Working with casual staff

- Develop a register of several preferred casual staff that you can use. Other child care services may also be able to recommend good casual staff.
- Try to use the same casual staff consistently to build familiarity and maintain continuity of care.
- Understand and acknowledge that using casual staff can place additional pressure on regular staff.
- Find out if a casual staff member has particular skills or talents they can share with the service.
- Seek ideas and feedback from casual staff as they have often had experience in a range of services, and may be able to offer some new and innovative insights and ideas.
- Remember that it can be challenging to be a casual staff member, going into many services that have different ways of doing things. Show casual staff that you recognise this and that you value their efforts.

Conclusion

In many ways the principles and practices that apply when a new child and family start at a service apply to new and casual staff. What matters most for all staff, including current and new employees, is that everyone feels welcomed, valued and is given a sense of belonging to a supportive community where their strengths and individuality will be acknowledged, nurtured and used.

Staff changes are definitely a challenge. However, when managed well, they also present valuable opportunities for growth and improvement ■

References and further reading

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