

Meeting Quality Assurance Requirements with Minimal Resources

Angela Owens spoke with NCAC Child Care Advisers Lorna Hughes and Amanda Street about practical ways to meet Child Care Quality Assurance Requirements in services where resources are minimal or difficult to access.

All services can meet the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) standards even when they possess or have access to only minimal resources.

The CCQA standards have been developed with extensive consultation across the family day care, long day care and outside school hours care sectors and they describe what practices must be occurring in the service. However, it is the responsibility of each service to consult with all stakeholders to determine how practices can be implemented and improved upon using available resources.

Services need to continually evaluate and plan to improve their practices to ensure they reflect current needs and priorities as well as realistically taking into account the resources currently available. For example, a service that has planned to purchase new play equipment as part of its continuing improvement plans may need to re-evaluate this in circumstances where an unexpected event such as a hail storm requires the service to spend money on emergency repairs or maintenance.

Resources that children's services may find limited or difficult to access include:

- equipment and materials such as consumable items (art/craft material etc), children's play equipment, adult and child furniture, office equipment and supplies
- financial resources
- human resources, such as staff or carers, families, children, members of the wider community
- professional development resources and opportunities

Management, staff and carers may find it difficult and frustrating when one or more of these resources are in short supply. However, there are strategies that can either maximise the effectiveness of limited resources or increase resource accessibility.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 4.1, 5.3, 6.2, 6.5

OSHCQA Principles: 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 7.2, 8.5, 8.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 2.2, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.4, 7.4

Equipment and Materials

Quality equipment and materials to support children's learning and development can be expensive, particularly when the size of the service or the ages of the children necessitate a 'bulk buy' of items.

It is essential that all services have at least some basic resources in order to provide quality experiences for children. These resources may include writing/drawing materials, art/craft items such as paper, glue, brushes, paint, story and picture books, gross motor equipment such as climbing equipment, construction toys or activities and props for dramatic play.

While it is important to have access to at least a small quantity of these types of resources, services can also implement quality experiences for children by using innovative and natural resources as well as resources that can be acquired with little or no financial outlay. Services should ensure that resources are safe, appropriate, interesting and appealing. Some ways that services can access low or no cost equipment and materials include:

- setting up or joining toy or book libraries or lending programs
- networking with other services to share or swap resources
- asking families for donations of household items, for example, boxes, greeting cards and postcards, wrapping paper (it is a good idea to provide a concise list of what you require so that you don't receive unwanted items)
- making your own paints, glues and play dough with flour, cornflour and food dyes



- using everyday items such as photographs, kitchen utensils, blankets, mirrors
- using items from the natural environment, for example, sand, sticks, leaves, flowers, pebbles, water, mud

While physical resources can support activities that contribute to children's development, quality interactions are vital to children's learning. Experiences such as observing and talking about a snail munching through a leaf in the garden or exploring the shadows our bodies make in the light require no material resources but can be great opportunities to extend children's thinking and are important learning experiences. Imaginative play and role play, which generally require minimal resources, also develop children's understanding of the world, themselves and others.

Services also often require some basic equipment such as office furniture, office equipment and adult/child furniture. While some compromises can be made in relation to these resources, it is essential to ensure that staff and children have a safe and comfortable environment which includes appropriate seating and eating areas. It is also important that services possess the basic equipment required to operate a business, and that careful consideration is given to how records will be filed to maintain confidentiality and to support accountability.

Although items such as fridges, computers, filing cabinets, desks, tables, chairs and soft furnishings can be expensive to buy and maintain, services may be able to reduce costs by:

- purchasing or seeking good quality second hand items either from families or stores
- seeking assistance from family members who have expertise in computer maintenance
- seeking donations of quality items/goods from families
- pooling with other services to reduce costs by bulk purchasing

Financial Resources

While the level of financial resources can vary significantly from service to service, there would be very few services who feel that they have access to sufficient financial resources. One of the main strategies that many services use to bolster their financial revenue is through fundraising programs. While a carefully planned and managed fundraising program can be successful, families can find the burden of participating in or contributing to fundraising to be inconvenient or overwhelming. When planning fundraising activities, services need to carefully consider the needs and interests of the individuals who will be asked to conduct and/or contribute to fundraising ventures.

From time to time services may be able to access one-off grants or funding opportunities for particular projects. Federal, state and local governments often offer opportunities for services to access funds for particular projects or activities such as upgrading equipment or play spaces. The best way to access information about such grants is by monitoring newspapers and government department websites where funding opportunities and requests for expressions of interest are often advertised.

Human Resources

Staff and carers are crucial to the consistent implementation of quality practices for children. The care and education that staff and carers provide forms the basis of each service's daily operations. Some of the most common human resource issues that services can face include:

- high staff and carer turnover
- a shortage of staff and carers, including casual or relief staff

- inexperienced staff and carers
- unqualified or under qualified staff
- lack of staff or carer interest in participating in CCQA processes such as self-study, planning for improvement and Validation

Each of these issues can impact upon a service's ability to provide quality care for children. However, by questioning why these issues are affecting them, a service may be able to develop strategies to either increase their access to human resources or improve the effectiveness of the human resources they currently have. These strategies may include:

- improving working conditions. For example, increasing support for staff and carers or bolstering staff morale through better working conditions and team building exercises
- adopting innovative staffing practices. For example, employing additional 'floater' staff to cover staff absences rather than relying on relief staff
- making staff and carer meetings shorter
- investigating alternatives to meetings outside of work hours to facilitate information sharing

between staff and carers and to support participation in CCQA. For example, using e-mail, play sessions and home visits in family day care.

- networking with other services to develop a shared pool of relief staff
- where possible, allocating tasks for continuing improvement to staff or carers according to their particular skills, interests, needs or experiences

While staff and carers are key human resources in children's services, children and families are also an integral part of a service's resource pool. The ways that families and children support a service's operations and its participation in CCQA depends upon their skills, abilities, interests and backgrounds. For example, older children may be able to directly participate in policy development and research whereas younger children may inform aspects of policy development through staff and carers observing their conversations and interactions.

Services need to provide a range of options and strategies to enable families to contribute their resources to the service program and to CCQA,



and need to consider offering families options other than the regular 'face to face' meeting format. For example, a family where both parents work may find attending meetings in the evening difficult, but may be willing to provide feedback via e-mail or to attend weekend activities. Most importantly, services need to ensure that they don't exhaust the resources provided by families by asking them for too much too frequently. Requests for family involvement should be realistic, polite and considerate of the individual needs and interests of families.

Professional Development

Many staff and carers tend to think about professional development in terms of attendance at courses and seminars. While these can be valid and important aspects of professional development programs, they can also be costly or difficult to access. Professional development, however, also incorporates many other types of activities and experiences. It is important to recognise that during daily interactions with children, colleagues, families and other professionals, staff and carers are developing their skills and knowledge. Professional development is ongoing and can be extended with many low or no cost strategies. By using a range of strategies services can tailor professional development to suit the needs and skills of individual staff and carers.

Some low or no cost professional development resources and activities could include:

- Accessing professional reading material- available through professional journals, magazines and newsletters, including those that can be downloaded free of charge from the internet
- Use of training manuals and resource kits that are often available free of charge to services as part of government initiatives or as downloads from the websites of relevant authorities

- Membership of professional organisations
- Participation in 'in-house' projects such as developing policies, redesigning aspects of the service, conducting service based resource projects
- Mentoring and staff/carer support programs
- Working with and supporting students undertaking practical experience at the service
- Networking with other services to either share costs for formal professional development activities or tapping into the resources and skills available at other services
- Including topics for professional reflection and discussion in staff and carer meeting agendas

While some services may be concerned that they lack the necessary resources to participate successfully in CCQA, it is important to remember that the CCQA systems are not designed to measure a service's resources. The CCQA standards consider service resources in terms of how these are used, accessed and prioritised to promote quality outcomes for children.

The CCQA systems encourage each service to work with their stakeholders to identify the quality of their current practices and to plan for improvements according to their individual needs and the resources available to them. Where one or more resources are limited or difficult to access, services may need to prioritise or adjust their plans for continuing improvement to ensure that they are striving for realistically achievable goals. When developing any improvement plans, services must of course ensure that their first priority is to provide a consistently satisfactory standard of care across all of the CCQA Quality Areas. ■

Further reading

- **Fewster, C. & Strode-Penny, L. (2003)** Making the Most of Professional Development. *Putting Children First*, 7, 3-5
- **National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. (2004)**. *Family Day Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide (1st ed.)*. Surry Hills, NSW: Author
- **National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. (2003)**. *Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide (1st ed.)*. Surry Hills, NSW: Author
- **National Childcare Accreditation Council Inc. (2005)**. *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Quality Practices Guide (1st ed.)*. Surry Hills, NSW: Author