As safe as houses: Occupational Health and Safety in child care

by Phillip Rowell

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) laws and regulations aim to protect people from harm, injury and illness. They are designed to assist employers and employees to work together to ensure that health and safety is everyone's first priority. Child care services must comply with OHS laws and any relevant licensing regulations to ensure children, families, educators and visitors to the service are kept safe.

It is important to acknowledge that educators and other staff are responsible for health and safety in a child care setting. While a service's owner, director and/or licensee may have a legal responsibility to provide a duty of care to employees, educators and staff have a professional and ethical duty to ensure children, families and colleagues are kept safe, healthy and protected. Therefore, OHS is a shared responsibility.

Services need to consult with educators and families when developing or reviewing OHS policies and procedures. Consultation helps ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of what is expected of them, how to implement quality practices and be accountable for their actions. Policies also need to be clearly written, up-to-date and based on current recommendations from recognised authorities.

Adopting a risk management approach to OHS

Using a risk management approach to health and safety is not a difficult process. However, it takes time to develop a plan to eliminate or minimise the potential for hazards or incidents occurring. Services also need to keep in mind their legal OHS obligations for their state or territory. To assist in developing a risk management approach, the following may be helpful:

- Identify potential or actual hazards in the service, including when and how they may occur or when they may be more prevalent
- Assess the potential risk of incident, injury, harm or illness to children and adults

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.5, 5.3 and 5.4
OSHCQA Principles:	2.1, 7.1, 7.2, 8.1 and 8.5
QIAS Principles:	1.6, 5.4, 5.5 and 7.4

- Develop strategies to eliminate or minimise risks and hazards from occurring, or to control hazards when they happen
- Inform stakeholders about when, why and how to implement OHS strategies
- Develop a reporting system to document incidents, near misses, injuries and illnesses
- Regularly review, evaluate and, if necessary, improve OHS strategies.

Regardless of the service type, size, location, number of educators or children, every service will benefit from developing a risk management approach to OHS. While some hazards such as fire are a risk for all services, there may be unique circumstances that define the approach to managing the hazard in particular settings. For example, in rural or remote areas, services may need to develop emergency procedures to deal with bushfires, while services located in high rise buildings may have to follow emergency procedures that comply with building codes.

Potential OHS risks and strategies to manage them

The table on the following page identifies common risks in child care and the approaches to minimising them. This list is not exhaustive, and each service will need to consider their own context to identify potential risks that may be specific to them ∎

Useful resources

- Kidsafe Australia: www.kidsafe.com.au
- McLeod, P. (2005). Health and safety information on the internet. *Putting Children First*, 15, 12-13.
- NCAC Occupational Health and Safety Policy Template (version 2, September 2010): www.ncac.gov.au/policy_development/policy_templates.asp
- Safe Work Australia: www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au
- SIDS and Kids: www.sidsandkids.org

Potential risk	Risk management strategies
Skeletal or muscular injury due to poor manual handling	• Provide opportunities for manual handling training – talk with educators about their everyday practices such as lifting children onto nappy change benches, carrying babies and toddlers, moving furniture, reaching for objects stored above shoulder height and bending to interact with children at their level • Ensure equipment and furniture is appropriate for adult use – for example, educators should sit on chairs designed for adults • Provide equipment such as step ladders or trolleys
Slips, trips and falls	• Conduct daily safety checks of buildings, equipment and toys • Display warning signs and reminders in hazardous areas • Fix damaged floor coverings like ripped carpet or broken tiles immediately • Ensure toys, books and other resources are packed away when children are no longer playing with them • Clear all thoroughfares, entrances and exits • Regularly review incident, near miss and injury reports
Scalding and burns	• Provide an opportunity for food safety training for key educators and staff, who can then share this training with colleagues • Prepare and serve food at the appropriate temperature • Check the temperature of milk in bottles before feeding babies • Wear appropriate hats and clothing, apply sunscreen and set up children's experiences under shade when outdoors • When planning children's cooking experiences, consider the age of children, group size, location of experience and the type of heat required for the activity, such as flame or electricity
Exposure to dangerous products (including poisoning, inhalation or swallowing or irritation to the skin and eyes)	• Conduct regular safety checks of buildings and premises • Ensure all dangerous products are clearly labelled and not stored in containers which may be mistaken by children as food or drink • Ensure dangerous products are inaccessible and out of children's reach such as in locked cupboards or storerooms • Display warning signs where dangerous products are stored • Make sure there are Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for all products used or stored in the service or family day care home • Develop first aid action plans based on advice from the MSDS • Display the Poisons Information telephone number – **13 11 26**
Emergencies	• Display emergency evacuation plans and conduct regular drills • Have smoke alarms and fire extinguishers checked regularly • Ensure that there is a fire blanket in kitchen areas • Train educators to use firefighting equipment
Stress and burn out	• Provide educators with information about healthy work/life balance • Ensure educators take regular breaks each day and take their annual leave entitlements • Provide educators with information about bullying in the workplace, how to identify it and who to report it to • Develop conflict resolution and grievance policies/procedures