

Supporting partnerships with families through parent committees

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The benefits of parent committees

Having a parent committee is one way for services to give families a say in what happens in the care of their child. Families should have genuine opportunities to work in partnership with child care professionals to make decisions about their child, as well as about the service's policies and practices. This helps to ensure that individual child and family needs are met, and that service operations are reflective of family backgrounds and interests.

Parent committee models

There are two types of parent committees: parent management committees and general parent committees which work alongside and in conjunction with service management. Within these two committee types there are many variations in the roles and responsibilities of individual committees, and in the ways they are conducted.

Parent management committees

Parent management committees usually form the basis of the management for community based, not for profit child care services. These committees may also include interested members of the community and representatives from the sponsoring body such as the local council or church organisation. Parent management committees may be responsible for aspects of the service's operations including:

- Compliance with CCQA and regulatory requirements
- Policy development and review
- Recruitment, employment and management of child care professionals
- Financial operations
- Marketing the service
- Enrolments

Depending upon the individual service, the parent committee may share all or some of these responsibilities with the service's sponsoring body.

Parent committees

General parent committees usually operate alongside a service management body, with varying levels and types of responsibilities,

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.5 and 6.2

OSHCQA Principles: 3.1-3.3

QIAS Principles: 2.1-2.3 and 7.1

depending on the service. Some parent committees may have opportunities to provide input into various aspects of the service's operations, and they may have similar roles to a management committee. Other parent committees may act in a more consultative role.

Parent committee tasks and responsibilities

While organising fundraising is often an important function that a parent committee performs, it is important that services recognise other potential ways that a parent committee can enhance the service's partnership with families. Family members who participate in the committee should be made to feel that their input is valued, and it is important that they are able to contribute in meaningful ways.

As discussed, the roles and responsibilities of parent committees vary according to the individual service. Examples of parent committee activities that will support the service's quality practices include:

Quality Assurance

Building effective partnerships with families is fundamental to the values of the CCQA systems. The service's parent committee is a great way to involve families in ongoing self-evaluation and this will assist services to plan for improvements that are relevant to all stakeholders. It is helpful for committee discussions about the service's practices and policies to be related directly back to the CCQA standards. This assists all stakeholders to become aware of CCQA as an everyday aspect of the service's operations, rather than as something extra that has to be 'done'.

Decision making and information sharing

Parent committees may be called upon to provide their suggestions about decisions in the service that will affect themselves and their child.

In this capacity, families should be able to offer their ideas and perspectives without feeling intimidated or disregarded. Having family input into decisions related to the program can assist child care professionals to understand what will work best for the families using the service. For example, while it may seem like a good idea to introduce weekly music lessons because many of the children show an interest in music, feedback from the parent committee may indicate that this is not likely to be affordable for most families. In this instance, child care professionals can then work with the parent committee to consider more suitable alternatives.

Services may also use committee meetings to inform families about trends and current issues in the early and middle childhood fields, as well as about general issues that affect the service's operations, children and families. Information may be shared about things such as community events or celebrations, for example Lunar New Year and Indian Diwali, as well as about current issues, for example, managing water restrictions or environmental sustainability practices.

Policy development and review

Parent committees are a useful arena for consulting with families during policy development and review. However, while involving parent committees in policy development is one way to seek family input, services should ensure that there are ways for all families to participate in this process. Services may also seek the support of parent committee members or attendees to gain input from other families using the service.

Networking and socialising

Depending on how the parent committee is structured, it can offer child care professionals and families opportunities to mix socially. Many services begin committee meeting nights with committee business and follow this with time for people to socialise. Other committees may adopt a less formal approach to the official meeting, combining it with time for general discussion and refreshments.

Parent committee meetings can also be used by the service to encourage networking with external organisations and the wider community. It is helpful to link these activities to an area of interest or an aspect of continuing improvement in the service. For example, a service may be reviewing the healthy eating policy. To support this process, the service may find it beneficial to invite a nutritionist to a committee meeting to



assist both families and child care professionals to gain a common understanding of children's dietary needs.

How can we establish a parent committee, or make our current committee more effective?

The key to setting up or improving a parent committee is to work with the stakeholders involved to ensure that there is a common understanding and agreement regarding the roles, responsibilities and structure of the committee. Services can also work with stakeholders to determine how the involvement of families who are not on the committee can be sought.

A useful way to begin this process is to gain feedback and ideas from families who use the service. One way to gain family input is to set up a white board where families can write their responses to questions such as:

- What do we want from our committee?
- What type of committee do we want?
- How can we make the committee useful and accessible to all families?

Services may also seek this information through written and/or verbal surveys, a general service meeting and through discussions with families during arrival and departure times.

Child care professionals can also network with other services regarding the structure of their committees.

Many parent committee meetings, particularly those with management responsibilities, have regular agenda items such as financial statements and reporting items. While these may be necessary, it is beneficial that each meeting also have a target or focus. This will support those involved to feel that the meetings they attend are purposeful, and will assist the committee to work more effectively toward particular goals.

It is important that services are understanding of, and responsive to, the needs of families. Families who may be interested in contributing to the committee may be unable to attend meetings due to other commitments or interests. To ensure that these families are still able to be involved, services should consider ways that they may allow for flexible participation in the committee. For example, the service may be able to use online agendas, e-mails or newsletters to keep families informed about committee activities, or provide families with the option to only attend meetings that have a focus of interest to them.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether they form part of the service's overall management model, or whether they work alongside service management, parent committees are a valuable way for services to develop strong partnerships with their stakeholders. Effective parent committees need to be responsive to stakeholder's needs, and should be viewed as *one* way of working with families, rather than as the *only* way to work with families ■

The following questions can be used to guide services when setting up or improving a parent committee:

- How will meetings be structured? Will they be formal, with standard meeting processes, or will they be conducted more informally?
- Will the committee be structured, with defined roles and responsibilities? If so, how often and in what way will these be reviewed?
- How will the committee involve the wider community? For example, inviting guest speakers and seeking community feedback
- How will stakeholders who do not attend meetings be informed of the discussion and outcomes of committee meetings? How will they have opportunities to raise ideas or suggestions with the committee?
- How will meeting agendas be set up? Are there any issues that would be on the agenda for all meetings, such as Quality Assurance, children's programs or health and safety issues?
- How frequently will meetings be held, and at what time of the day? Will child care be made available for attendees?
- How can children's views and perspectives be represented on the committee? Can we invite a child representative to attend meetings, or can a committee member liaise with children in the service to ensure their perspectives are considered?

References and further reading

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