

# Positive pathways to managing staffing changes in your service

by Sonja Tansey

Most child care services will be affected by changes to staffing at some time, whether it is for a short period when educators take leave, or permanently when they resign or retire. It is widely accepted that stable, caring staffing arrangements are essential for creating a predictable environment for children and for developing warm, supportive relationships where children feel safe, secure and happy. It is therefore easy to see why disruptions to staffing can have a negative impact on the quality of care that children receive. Families can also experience difficulties in communication and confidence in the service when changes occur.

## The challenge of changes to educator teams

Changes to educator teams may be frequent or occur only occasionally. Frequent changes will have a greater negative impact on children and families as relationships and routines are more likely to break down. It is worth noting that services with staff teams that are supported and rewarded often experience lower staff turnover than services with a high degree of conflict and low morale.

The challenge for child care services is to accept staffing changes as a fact of life and to minimise the disruptive and negative impact they can have. Careful planning and clear, open communication with children and their families,

### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.2 and 5.1
OSHCQA Principles:	2.1 and 7.1-7.3
QIAS Principles:	3.1 and 8.2-8.4

along with an effective staff recruitment and induction process, can ease transitions when changes occur and create a positive experience for all involved.

## Changes beyond service control

Educator changes in child care services are caused by a range of factors, some of which will be beyond the service's control, while others can be predicted and planned for. The child care profession as a whole faces challenges that cause frequent staff turnover. Services can have difficulties in recruiting new graduates from universities and vocational courses of study due to comparatively poor working conditions, limited career paths, low status and low pay. These factors often deter people from pursuing a child care career or from staying in the profession for a long period of time. This compounds the difficulty that some services have, particularly in rural and remote areas, in recruiting suitably qualified educators from the limited pool available. Service types with irregular hours such as outside school hours care and vacation care are also often challenged by high turnover and a transitory work environment.

## Predictable educator changes

At a service level, educator changes are caused by a range of more predictable factors. Short term changes can occur frequently in services due to leave taken for illness, holidays or study breaks. Whilst short periods of educator leave may have the least impact on children, their frequency means that these need to be managed well and become a part of the service's routine. Parental leave and long-service leave will last for longer but in these cases educators can remain connected with the children and the service, and efforts can be made to find a consistent replacement. Permanent educator changes due to resignation or retirement require services to



engage in a thorough process of staff recruitment and induction with a commitment to helping children cope with the change.

### Emotional impact on children

There is no doubt that when changes to staffing arrangements are poorly managed, this can upset children's routines and create feelings of loss and separation. Babies and toddlers are particularly vulnerable when a primary caregiver is absent. When educators leave the service, with them goes the relationships they had with children and their knowledge of individual routines and service policies. It is difficult for casual, temporary and newly employed educators to instantly understand service routines and to connect with the children in a short time. This can disrupt the bonds, relationships and stability that are crucial for children's emotional wellbeing and can negatively impact on their behaviour, '...children who repeatedly experience high turnover of their primary caregiver engage in less social play and show less age-appropriate play behaviours. They also spend more time wandering aimlessly and develop vocabulary more slowly' (Albrecht, 2002 p.6).

### Affect on families and educators

Families may experience a breakdown in communication that is crucial for daily arrival and departure transitions, and may feel uncertain or disillusioned about the quality of care their child is being provided. Existing educators can also experience stress, frustration, isolation and a lack of motivation when changes are poorly managed. Despite the range of possible negative effects that staffing changes can have, services can minimise the impact on children and their

families through careful planning and clear communication with all involved.

### Reducing the impact of changes to staffing arrangements

If advanced warning is received of an educator's departure, there are a range of organisational strategies that services can use to ease the negative impact this may have. Thorough staff recruitment and induction processes are essential for ensuring that candidates for new positions are well-assessed and matched to the needs of the children and the service. Newly employed educators need a thorough and supportive orientation so they can ease into service routines and adopt policies and procedures quickly. Make sure there is a comprehensive handover between primary caregivers to exchange information about individual children. This is especially important for carers of children with additional needs, health and behavioural issues, and toddlers and babies. In the early stages it is also important to give new employees plenty of time to play with and get to know individual children without being over-burdened by administrative and organisational tasks.

### Helping children cope

Children can cope well with changes to staffing arrangements when they are supported by sensitive, responsive adults who spend time with them, prepare them and give them some control over what happens. Educators should be available to reassure, listen to and accept the feelings of children, be honest with them and prepare them for what will happen.

At a practical level, educators should keep children informed of who will be replacing the outgoing educator, and allow them time to welcome and get to know the new person. It is also essential to observe children closely and respond to signs of stress that show they may not be coping or may be overwhelmed by the change. Signs may include crying, sadness, repetitive play, withdrawal, dissociation or they may simply 'switch off'.

### Importance of casual educators

To manage routine changes to educator teams through short periods of leave, it is essential to have a regular, stable pool of casual educators. Regular casuals can minimise the negative impact of absenteeism as they can develop strong relationships with children and become welcome members of the educator team.





Services can develop a loyal pool of casual educators by offering them consistent work opportunities (where possible), including them in service functions and events, and recognising their efforts in similar ways to permanent educators.

## Conclusion

Changes to staffing in child care services create challenges, whether they are caused by issues beyond the service's control or they are a predictable part of service operations. The negative impact that these changes have on children and families can be reduced when services put strategies in place to create organisational stability and to help children cope. Positive outcomes as a result of these changes can occur with careful planning and clear, open communication with children and families and with thorough recruitment and induction processes ■

## Goodbyes and hellos

Children's and families' relationships and bonds with outgoing and incoming educators can be supported by farewelling one educator and welcoming another in a genuinely warm, positive manner. The following is a list of suggested strategies for preparing for departures and arrivals:

- Arrange cross-over time between educators who are leaving and starting
- Let the children know in advance of the change of educators – but not too far in advance as it may cause prolonged stress
- Read stories about people coming and going
- Invite the new educator to attend the service and interact whilst the outgoing educator is still there
- Have a farewell party for the educator who is leaving
- Arrange for the outgoing educator to keep up some contact for a while with letters, photos or visits
- Have a welcome event such as a special morning tea for the new educator with children and families
- Have a 'getting to know you' session with the new educator so they can tell the children about themselves and what they like to do
- Arrange for the new educator to have one-on-one time with each child in their care and their family.

(Adapted from Linke, 2006, p.11)

## References and further reading

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