Why have Policies?

By Phillip Rowell

Effective policies inform and guide daily practice. Policies need to be current, clearly written and accessible to all service stakeholders. Policies ensure that carers and staff are informed about appropriate practices and that they understand why these are necessary. Well developed policies can support new carers or new and relief staff and help to ensure consistency in daily practices and decision making.

Every service is unique and provides care and support to stakeholders with individual needs; therefore one service's policies and procedures will be different to another's. Including information in policies about how the policy will be implemented helps services to tailor policies to meet specific needs and circumstances.

Policies help to protect children, families, staff, carers, and management and they support effective two-way communication between stakeholders. They ensure that everyone has the same understanding and expectations about what happens in the service and they provide a record of accountability for decisions made by services.

Policies that are developed in collaboration with key stakeholders provide the foundation for consistent quality practice and they ensure that a service's policies reflect the needs of children, families, carers, staff and management.

Reviewing policies

A policy should be a 'living', written document that is regularly reviewed and, when necessary, changed. Seeking recommendations and information provided by recognised authorities can assist families and services to make objective and appropriate policy decisions.

Written policies provide a record of past decisions about a service's practices and the reasons for them. Reviewing policies is important because:

- It helps to ensure that current research and legislative or regulatory requirements are reflected in daily practice

- Information about recommended practice can quickly become outdated, particularly in the area of health and safety where new research and discoveries occur rapidly

- A system of ongoing policy review can facilitate genuine collaboration with stakeholders and can allow everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in the consultation process. This will also ensure that policies reflect and accommodate the needs of a service's current stakeholders

Collaboration and consultation

Time constraints and limited resources can make 'filling in the blanks' on generic policy templates a tempting option. Some services may simply 'cut and paste' information into an existing policy format, rather than developing a policy that specifically suits their service's individual needs and interests. However, if carers, staff and families are not involved in policy development then there is a high risk that policies may not reflect or support daily practices. As a result, stakeholders may not understand the practices they are required to adopt and why.

It can be a challenge to develop a new policy. However, it is important that all stakeholders, including visitors, students, licensing authorities and NCAC Validators, are able to understand the connection between what is practiced in the service and why the practices occur in certain ways.

Reflective questions

Questioning how and why certain practices occur is a useful strategy for examining their effectiveness. Asking reflective questions can assist services to identify and analyse which practices they currently have and how well these are meeting the needs of service stakeholders. Identifying what is working well and what needs to improve supports policy development and review.

Examining and evaluating service practice can occur in many ways, and it is important to ensure that all stakeholders have a variety of genuine opportunities to contribute to the policy development process and review.

By using reflective questions a service can consider how current practices might need to be changed, further developed or improved. This is the goal of continuing improvement.

Reflective questions may prompt each stakeholder to consider aspects of practice such as its:

- effectiveness;

- current relevance to the service as a whole and to individual staff, carers and management;

- affect on children, families or other stakeholders;

- rationale (the reason why the policy or practice is in place); and

- equity and fairness.

The Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) *Quality Practices Guide Supplementary Resources* include questions to assist services to reflect upon various aspects of their daily practices. Services are encouraged to use the *Quality Practices Guide Supplementary Resources* in conjunction with CCQA *Quality Practices Guides*.

It is beneficial to determine how service stakeholders can support the service to develop and review policies. Services need to be sensitive to individual stakeholder's needs and interests. Not all families, carers or staff can attend workshops or committee meetings, and some stakeholders may not possess the interest or skills to engage in all aspects of policy development or review. The key is to identify what best suits individual stakeholders and to adopt strategies to maximise participation and consultation.

With simple but effective strategies, services can collaborate and consult with stakeholders equally and fairly to develop and review policies that have value and are meaningful. ■

The following activities may assist services to collaborate successfully with stakeholders to develop and review policies:

- **Identify** the policies the service requires and allocate tasks in the policy development or review process in consultation with stakeholders. For example, place an article in the service's newsletter or ask families verbally how they may be interested in contributing.

- **Discuss** policies with stakeholders. Collaboration does not have to be confined to meetings with stakeholders. Services can seek ideas and feedback from families, carers and staff during daily interactions or e-mail draft policies to families or attach them to their newsletter to request feedback.

- **Use** the expertise and interests of individual stakeholders to allocate tasks for policy development or review. For example, a carer, staff member or family member may have an interest or expertise in a particular policy area, or they may have experience in drafting policies.

- **Invest** time and energy in policy development and review. Policies that have been effectively researched and written are the most useful in supporting service practice and demonstrating the professionalism of services, carers and staff.

FAQs about Dating and Sourcing Policies

NCAC's Child Care Advisers can provide advice and assistance on policy development and review. In the following article, they answer the most common questions asked by services about the importance of dating and sourcing policies.

Q. Why do policies need to include the date when they were developed or last reviewed?

A. This assists services and their stakeholders to easily identify how current the policy information is. A policy that has been developed or reviewed more than 12 to 18 months ago is likely to contain information which is out of date or may include information that is no longer relevant to the service and its current stakeholders.

Q. How often do we need to review our service's policies?

A. For some policies, the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) *Quality Practices Guides* outline clear timeframes for policy review. If you are uncertain about the timeframe for periods between policy reviews, 12 to 18 months between policy reviews should ensure that they are kept current. Some policies may need more frequent or one-off reviews where there is a significant change to the service or to practices recommended by recognised authorities.

Q. What does 'sourcing' a policy mean?

A. 'Sourcing' a policy is when a service identifies where they obtained or accessed the information that the policy is based on. Information used to write policies is usually retrieved from recognised authorities, especially when writing or reviewing health and safety policies. For example, when developing or reviewing a sun protection policy the service may source information from the Australian Cancer Council.

The source of information that was used to develop a policy may be noted anywhere on the policy, although most policies include this information at the end of the policy in a 'reference' section.

Q. What is a 'recognised authority'?

A. A recognised authority is an organisation that provides information or advice in specialised areas. They operate from particular areas of expertise, and are able to provide information and advice that is based on recent research, current thinking or relevant legislation. For example, Sids and Kids is an organisation that offers expert information about safe sleep practices, while Food Standards Australia New Zealand provides expert information about nutrition and food safety.

Q. Why does the information used to develop or review a policy need to be sourced from a recognised authority?

A. There is generally a large amount of information available about many topics, particularly on the internet. Some of this information may be inaccurate or out of date, so it is important that services seek information from recognised authorities who possess specialist knowledge. This will help to ensure that service policies reflect best practice and current knowledge.

Q. Is a State or Territory child care licensing agency a 'recognised authority' for the purpose of developing or reviewing a policy?

A. No. State and Territory licensing agencies are responsible for administering child care licensing regulations (where they exist). While services may refer to regulatory requirements in some policies where relevant, the information used to guide daily practice needs to be accessed from a recognised authority that provides information and advice in specialist area. For example, State or Territory regulations may require services to have a policy on nutrition, but to write the policy, the service would need to access information from a recognised authority such as Nutrition Australia or Food Standards Australia New Zealand. ■

This special feature relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3 and 6.4

OSHCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.3, 4.1, 6.1, 6.3, 6.4, 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, 8.4 and 8.6

QIAS Principles: .1.2, 1.5, 1.6, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 5.1, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 6.1, 6.2, 6.6, 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3

Using the *NCAC Policy Development Guide*

The *NCAC Policy Development Guide* can help a service reach the goal of developing, sourcing and writing a policy, assist with establishing a collaborative approach with stakeholders, and highlight the importance of reviewing policies on a regular basis.

Services can use the *NCAC Policy Development Guide* to create policy documents which reflect daily care practices and highlight areas of continuous improvement.

Services may find the *Developing a Policy Checklist* helpful when planning for and reviewing policies. The *Checklist* details the common steps associated with policy development, and can be found in the 'Additional Resources' section of the *NCAC Policy Development Guide*.

An initial policy template on smoke free environments is currently included in the *NCAC Policy Development Guide*, and policy templates for sun protection and food safety are currently in development.

The *NCAC Policy Development Guide* is available from the 'Resources' section on the NCAC website (www.ncac.gov.au).
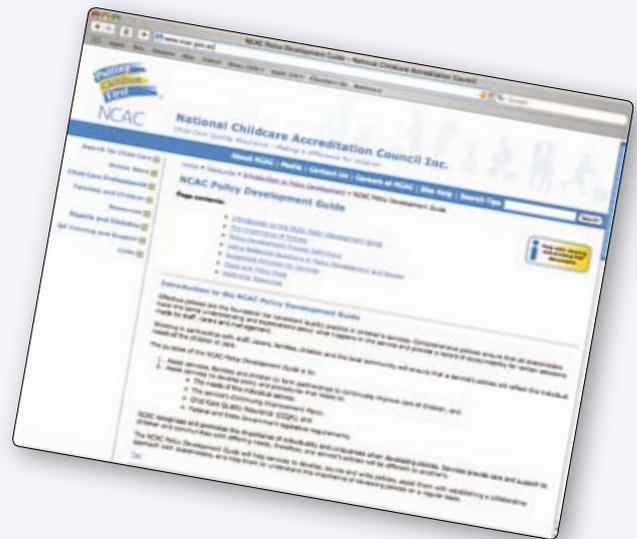
Further information about developing policies and adopting a collaborative approach to policy development with families and other stakeholders is available on NCAC's *Factsheets* for services. These can be accessed through NCAC's Online Store or by telephoning NCAC.

In addition, NCAC has introduced a 'Useful Links for Services' section on its website, which can assist services to access relevant information for policy development and review. ∎

Further reading

Developing and Reviewing Policies

• Hughes, L., & McFarlane, J. (2003). A Collaborative Approach to Achieving and Maintaining Quality. *Putting Children First, 5*, 4-6

• Hughes, L., & Tansey, S. (2004). What is a Recognised Authority? *Putting Children First, 12*, 10-11

• Child Care Challenges: Advice for services on meeting specific OSHCQA standards (2004). *Putting Children First, 14*, 12-13

• Owens, A. (2006). Ask a Child Care Adviser – Involving Families in Policy Development and Review. *Putting Children First, 17*, 4-6

• Wilson, L., & Hamilton, N. (2004). Getting Started with OSHCQA. *Putting Children First, 6*, 6-7

Dating and Sourcing Policies

• Hughes, L., & Tansey, S. (2004). What is a Recognised Authority? *Putting Children First, 12*, 10-11

• McFarlane, J., & Willett, L. (2006). Dating and Sourcing Policies. *Putting Children First, 17*, 4-6

• McLeod, P. (2005). Health and Safety Information on the Internet. *Putting Children First, 15*, 12-13

Past issues of *Putting Children First* can be accessed from NCAC's website or by telephoning NCAC.