

Professional development for staff, carers and managers

By Sonja Tansey

What is professional development?

Professional development in child care services is the process by which staff, carers and management improve their skills and knowledge. The ultimate goal of professional development is to contribute to the quality of care for children and service operations. Professional development allows individuals to identify areas in which they require further knowledge and skills and helps them to target specific methods for developing these.

Professional development can occur through 'informal' experiences such as networking or professional reading, or through 'formal' experiences such as training, mentoring or coaching. It can be practical and skills based, including workshops and hands-on training, or it can be theory and knowledge based, including conferences, seminars and reading professional publications and websites.

Why is professional development important?

A commitment by child care professionals and services as a whole to ongoing professional development is the key to effective continuous improvement and the provision of quality child care. Engaging in self-study allows child care professionals to identify areas of strength and areas requiring improvement. Professional development allows individuals to build and improve their knowledge and skills. It also allows individuals to keep up to date with current research and recommended practice.

How can we identify areas for professional development?

There are many processes and tools that can be used to identify areas for the professional development of child care professionals. These include creating professional development plans that pinpoint areas for building each individual's skills and knowledge, and using the service's philosophy and goals to determine beneficial areas for professional development opportunities. It is useful to pursue a range of methods for targeting areas for professional development to give a complete picture of the needs of the service and individuals.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principle: 5.3

OSHCQA Principle: 8.5

QIAS Principle: 7.4

What is a professional development plan?

Professional development plans identify areas in which individuals require training, guidance and support. These plans can also outline the strategies for professional development, the provider or people involved, and timeframes for completion. Professional development plans can be developed by individuals in consultation with peers and/or management to support professional self-reflection and to include a variety of perspectives.

To meet the needs of the service, individual professional development plans should reflect overall directions for continuous improvement. For example, if the service's *Continuing Improvement Plan* aims to improve staff and/or carer communication, individual staff or carers could attend training on team building. Alternatively, in-house peer support and mentoring programs could be implemented.

When creating a professional development plan, consider the following questions:

- What do I need to know more about?
- What professional interests do I have?
- What skills do I have that need to be updated or improved?
- What is my learning style: do I prefer to learn through practical exercises, seminars, group discussions or through my own reading and research?
- What are the short and long term goals of the service?
- What resources are available? For example, access to training, guest speakers, networks, knowledgeable peers.

- What cost effective options could I consider?
- What new learning opportunities could I pursue? For example, mentoring or networking.

How can we identify individual professional development needs?

For it to be relevant and effective, child care professionals should be actively involved in making decisions about the direction of their professional development. An evaluation of each individual's strengths, interests and needs will help them to identify specific areas for development. Creating individual professional development plans can also help to identify the areas and methods that suit particular learning needs, styles and abilities. These plans allow staff and carers to align their individual professional development needs and interests with the overall needs of the service.

Areas for professional development can be identified through:

- The service's philosophy and goals
- Self-study
- The service's *Continuing Improvement Plans*
- Professional development surveys
- Program evaluations
- Meeting discussions
- Training needs analysis gathered from all service stakeholders
- Performance reviews

How can we accommodate individual learning styles and abilities?

Each individual has a stronger and preferred learning style that defines the most effective way for them to learn.

The main learning styles are:

- Visual – learning through seeing
- Auditory – learning through listening
- Kinesthetic/tactile – learning through moving, doing and touching

To accommodate individual learning styles and abilities, services can provide a range of professional development approaches and opportunities.



These may include formal, informal, practical and theory based methods. This will allow child care professionals to find a method for building their knowledge and skills that best suits their individual learning style.

For example, a kinesthetic learner may learn best when they can engage in physical activity or the practical application of new knowledge such as on-the-job training, coaching or learning from peers. Alternatively, auditory learners enjoy listening and discussion and will learn well through meetings, formal training and seminars. In the family day care setting, home visits and play sessions provide ideal opportunities for professional development for individual carers that can accommodate a range of learning styles and abilities.

Can professional development be cost effective?

Professional development does not need to be costly. By taking a close look at the resources available in the service and local community, services can find ways to provide professional development opportunities that are low cost. For example, community guest speakers, web-based reading and research, and in-house staff and carer support and mentoring programs can be accessed without large financial cost. Services can also collaborate with other services to share professional development costs.

It is important to remember that professional development can bring long term financial benefits to the service as it may result in lower staff turnover, higher enrolments and reduced health and safety risks.

What is the role of service managers in professional development?

Continuous improvement of service quality requires management to take a strong role in guiding service direction. To remain informed of current best practice in child care, managers also need to engage in ongoing professional development. This allows them to expand their knowledge, develop new skills and find support and encouragement from their peers in the child care profession.

Mentoring programs and management support networks are ideal sources of guidance and inspiration for service managers. Management will also provide a positive role model for carers and staff when they are actively involved in ongoing professional development.

How can we build a positive culture for professional development?

Services can encourage a positive culture for professional development by committing time and resources to enable all carers, staff and management to improve existing skills and to develop new skills and knowledge. A healthy culture for professional development also

requires individuals to have a positive attitude towards learning and a commitment to using new expertise to improve the quality of care provided at the service. To build a positive culture for professional development it can be useful for teams and individuals to reflect on their attitudes to learning and change.

The following questions may help child care professionals to reflect upon their attitudes to professional development:

- Am I open to new ideas?
- Do I accept responsibility for self-improvement?
- Am I committed to setting personal goals, planning, meeting targets and evaluating my professional development?
- Do I listen to and respect the views of others?
- Do I encourage others to consider options for quality improvement?
- Am I willing to help other child care professionals at the service?
- Am I accommodating toward colleagues who are undertaking professional development?

How do we make sure professional development is working at our service?

In the business of everyday life in child care services it can be easy to forget to apply new expertise and information gained through professional development. Old ways of working will continue unless an effort is made to use new skills and knowledge. When evaluating the success and relevance of professional development, try to observe whether the new knowledge and skills are being applied to care for children and to service operations.

Services should implement strategies to ensure that child care professionals make practical use of the information gained through professional development. For example, training in behaviour guidance may prompt the service to update its behaviour guidance policy, to provide new information about behaviour guidance to families and to introduce new strategies for managing challenging behaviours. These new policies and approaches should be reviewed periodically to monitor their effectiveness. When monitoring the application of new skills and knowledge gained through professional development it is important that services set timeframes to review and evaluate new activities or approaches ■



Examples of professional development resources and experiences:

- Networking with other services and professionals
- Learning and skill sharing between child care professionals within the service
- Mentoring and coaching programs
- In-house or external training such as workshops, seminars and short courses
- Self-paced training packages
- Sharing information gained from formal tertiary studies with colleagues
- Hands-on and on-the-job training
- Attendance at conferences
- Guest speakers and visitors from the local area
- Family members sharing expertise
- Meeting discussions
- Reading professional publications and websites
- Viewing professional videos and DVDs
- Family day care home visits and play sessions
- Engaging in professional reflection activities, such as keeping a reflective journal

References and further reading

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