

# Supporting children with additional needs

By Angela Owens

Including children who have additional needs requires child care professionals to extend upon the strategies they already use in providing quality care for children. The key to providing quality care for children lies in child care professionals developing a thorough understanding of each child's interests and abilities, and implementing a program and environment that is responsive to their needs.

It is often necessary to support children with additional needs by using specialised strategies that cater for their specific needs or circumstances. However, it is important that child care professionals view all children in a balanced way by focusing on their competencies and interests, as well as upon their needs.

## What are additional needs?

The term 'additional needs' encompasses a range of conditions and circumstances that require particular or specialised support. For example, additional needs may encompass children who:

- have physical disabilities
- have learning or speech difficulties
- have a diagnosed condition such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- speak English as a second language
- have a health condition such as asthma, epilepsy, eczema, allergies
- are at risk of abuse and neglect
- demonstrate challenging behaviour
- are gifted and talented
- are experiencing an emotional trauma such as grief, separation or divorce

While some additional needs may be ongoing, others may be the result of a particular issue or circumstance, for example difficulty at a specific stage of a child's development. Regardless of the nature of the additional needs a child has, it is important that child care professionals continually monitor and review the support strategies they are implementing ensure they are meeting children's current needs.

### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.2, 1.5, 2.1, 2.3, 3.1- 3.7 and 6.5

**OSHCQA Principles:** 1.2, 1.3, 2.1- 2.3, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1- 4.4, 5.1- 5.4, 8.2, 8.3 and 8.5

**QIAS Principles:** 1.4, 1.5, 2.1, 3.1- 3.3, 4.1- 4.6 and 7.4

## Planning experiences for children with additional needs

When planning learning experiences for children who have additional needs, it is important that child care professionals promote children's development by focussing on their abilities and interests. As is the case for all children, it is essential that the experiences are flexible, allowing children to engage in ways that are meaningful for them. For example, implementing an experience for a child who has speech difficulties in which the child is required to verbally identify indiscriminate objects may be less meaningful and effective than inviting them to participate in singing a favourite song or reading a preferred storybook.

## Sharing information with families and other professionals

To plan effective learning experiences for children, it is important that child care professionals incorporate information provided by families and other professionals who are working with the child, including psychologists, early intervention specialists, child welfare workers and speech or occupational therapists. Depending on a child's needs, other professionals may be able to suggest specific strategies to support and enhance the child's learning. For example, a child with ASD may benefit from the use of visual aids such as photographs, signs, and sequence pictures to support their expressive and receptive communication skills. This can also support their understanding of the service's daily routines and activities.

Families can also offer valuable information about the strategies that support their child's learning in the home environment. It is important that child care professionals exchange information with families on an ongoing basis,

and that families have genuine opportunities to contribute ideas and information to the planning of experiences for children with additional needs.

There are a range of strategies that services can use to promote communication with families, and to encourage their participation in daily planning for children. Useful strategies include:

- daily verbal information exchange
- using communication books to record and exchange important information about children's interests, experiences, routines, as well as the strategies that effectively support the child in the home and child care setting
- meetings between families and child care professionals. These may also include other professionals working with the child
- providing families with written plans and evaluations of children's learning experiences and providing spaces on these for families to comment/make suggestions
- inviting families to visit and to participate in planned experiences
- requesting that families share any relevant reports or assessments on the child that have been conducted by other professionals
- inviting families to participate in relevant information seminars, conferences or training and sharing with them relevant written or audio-visual resources.

## Arranging positive learning environments

The physical environment is integral to the quality of care and experiences provided for children in child care settings. Children who have additional needs often require the environment to be adapted to maximise their participation in the planned experiences. For example, children with physical disabilities may need the environment to be organised to enable accessibility and freedom of movement for wheelchairs or other mobility support equipment. Child care professionals may also need to arrange resources and activities to make them more easily and independently accessible to children with physical disabilities.

However, it is important to consider ways that the environment can be set up to support children who have additional needs other than a physical disability. Some examples to consider include:



- Using picture and word signs to label different areas in the room such as the book corner, the art/craft area and the dramatic play area. Visual aids can also be used to explain what is happening next and to provide a sequence of events for the day's activities. These strategies may be useful for supporting children who have language difficulties or who have English as a second language, as well as children with ASD or a general learning delay.
- Providing quiet spaces where children who have difficulties socialising, or who demonstrate challenging behaviour, can be alone to engage in quiet play or have time for reflection.
- Placing resources, toys and equipment on low shelves to allow children with language difficulties or physical difficulties to access these independently, and to encourage children to make choices in their play.

## Encouraging children to support the inclusion of peers who have additional needs

Child care professionals play a pivotal role in supporting all children to value and accept each other, and in helping them to recognise the differences and similarities between themselves and their peers.

Child care professionals can promote children's acceptance and understanding of others by:

- ensuring that the service's resources depict information and visual images of people with diverse needs and abilities

- talking with children honestly and sensitively about the similarities and differences between themselves, as well as between people in the wider community
- encouraging and supporting children to include others who have additional needs in their play, experiences and interactions
- modelling inclusive practice through their interactions with children and adults
- encouraging children to understand and to demonstrate empathy for others
- where appropriate, involving children in implementing the support strategies that are used with children who have additional needs. For example, using visual aids to support communication with peers who have additional needs, or assisting peers who have mobility difficulties to move about the environment
- information from the internet. There are many organisations that have informative websites related to including children with additional needs and to specific conditions such as asthma, anaphylaxis, hearing impairment, ASD and ADHD. Many of these organisations may also be contacted in writing or by telephone to provide information about children with additional needs
- viewing relevant videos/DVDs
- attending relevant conferences, seminars and professional development courses
- networking with other child care professionals who work with children who have additional needs
- accessing Australian government funded Inclusion Support Agencies through Professional Support Coordinators (PSC). (See page nine for PSC contact details throughout Australia).

### How can child care professionals access support when working with children who have additional needs?

Aside from families and other professionals, child care professionals who are supporting children with additional needs can seek assistance and information from a range of other sources. These include:

- books, journals and magazines that often include articles and information on general strategies for including children with additional needs. Information about supporting children with specific conditions or needs can also be accessed through professional reading opportunities

Inclusive child care services value diversity and respect all children as individuals who have a range of interests, experiences and needs. Including children who have additional needs is fundamental to every service's commitment to promoting respect for all people, both within the service and the wider community ■

### References and further reading

- Odom, S.L. (Ed.). (2002). *Widening the Circle- including children with disabilities in preschool programs*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Petriwskyj, A. (1992). *Integrating Children with Special Needs into Early Childhood Centres*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
- Porter, L. (2005). *Young Gifted Children: Meeting their needs*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
- Roe, D. (2001). *Autism Spectrum Disorder and Young Children*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
- Slee, J. (2003). *Managing Difficult Behaviour in Young Children*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.

### Useful websites

- Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) ([www.aspect.org.au](http://www.aspect.org.au))
- Centre for Community Child Health ([www.rch.org.au/ccch](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch))
- CP Australia ([www.cpaustralia.com.au](http://www.cpaustralia.com.au))
- Early Childhood Australia ([www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au))
- Inclusive Directions ([www.directions.org.au](http://www.directions.org.au))
- Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children ([www.ridbc.org.au](http://www.ridbc.org.au))