

Supporting leaders in child care services

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Successful leaders in child care services bring people together to decide on and achieve organisational goals and directions. To guide decision making processes, successful leaders focus on building positive relationships with colleagues and encourage their input. Effective leaders take a genuine interest in the people they work with and are responsive to the issues, ideas and suggestions they raise. By developing positive relationships, leaders can create an enjoyable work environment and retain staff. This in turn motivates staff to perform their best for the sake of the children and families they care for.

Who can be a leader?

The term 'leader' often conjures up images of successful politicians, business people or heads of organisations and we may not perceive the 'average' person who is carrying out everyday tasks to be a leader. In child care settings it is often the service owner, director or coordinator who is considered to be the leader.

However, many child care professionals undertake a range of tasks and responsibilities that require leadership qualities. A child care professional in charge of setting up the outdoor environment may use some of the leadership skills that a director or coordinator uses to manage the overall service. Both are required to collaborate with others to make decisions, be organised, call upon their professional knowledge and commit to doing the job well. Regardless of the tasks they perform all child care professionals will benefit from developing good leadership skills.



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.5, 5.1 and 5.3

OSHCQA Principles: 8.4 and 8.5

QIAS Principle: 7.4

What tasks do leaders perform?

Leaders in child care services work in many areas. They may be responsible for routine tasks such as keeping records of babies' sleep and rest patterns or accurately administering children's medications. They may be required to develop the program and monitor children's development or they may use leadership skills when undertaking safety audits or organising staff or committee meetings.

The service director or coordinator is generally required to take the lead in tasks such as ensuring service compliance with legal and ethical standards. Some of the leadership tasks directors and coordinators perform include:

- upholding duty of care responsibilities, state/territory child care legislation, funding requirements and Child Care Quality Assurance standards
- ensuring compliance with relevant industrial awards and agreements
- developing and reviewing policies and procedures and making sure they are understood, agreed upon and implemented
- recruiting and inducting new staff
- guiding the professional development of team members and monitoring their performance
- building and supporting team work
- handling conflicts, grievances and complaints.

Effective leadership

Effective leadership is essential for the provision of quality child care programs. The leadership style of a person also relates directly to the quality of relationships at the service. The best leaders foster team work and joint decision making, as well as being supports and role models for their colleagues. Involving all team members in making decisions increases their levels of trust, motivation and dedication towards achieving common goals. This style of leadership is often referred to

as 'transformational leadership' and is believed to be highly effective in supporting quality service provision.

Building supportive relationships with child care professionals through open communication and joint decision making is an essential leadership tool for achieving goals and directions. '... [S]uccessful leaders focus most strongly on motivating and developing people rather than establishing and maintaining systems and structure. The latter is important but should always be a second-order priority' (Bush and Middlewood, 2005, p.10). Working collaboratively and cooperatively rather than taking control will help to ensure that service policies and practices are appropriate and implemented consistently.

By building strong teams, leaders encourage their colleagues to value group goals and directions over personal and individual interests. Teamwork also encourages child care professionals to respect each other's values, skills and experiences, and reduces incidents of conflict.

Leaders as relationship builders

An effective leader is a 'people person' who relates well to others and can communicate openly and supportively. A recent study by the Center for Creating Leadership (CCL) into everyday attitudes and approaches to leadership revealed that the ability to develop positive personal relationships was a key quality of an effective leader. '...[I]nterpersonal openness and building relationships are key skills for everyday leaders' (CCL, 2007, p.3).

Developing positive relationships is also a key factor in combating high staff turnover, which is one of the biggest factors currently affecting the quality of care for children. Losing child care professionals and continually needing to recruit new members is costly and has a negative impact on children. 'How well leaders connect with the people in their organisations has enormous consequences for the contributions these people make and the likelihood they will choose to stay' (Mai and Anderson, 2003, p.1).

The challenges of leadership

Leaders in child care services often find themselves juggling the dual roles of team member and leader. It can be challenging to inspire and guide people while simultaneously maintaining equal peer relationships. For example, it may be difficult for a leader to

Practical leadership strategies

Effective leadership involves using good communication to:

- clarify each team member's roles and responsibilities
- listen to the views and opinions of all team members
- value the work of each person by providing regular recognition and praise for good work
- show genuine and equal interest in all team members
- encourage professional growth and development
- allow and encourage team friendships
- make decisions by facilitating team input rather than by taking control
- give regular feedback on work performance
- involve all stakeholders in service changes to improve quality.

encourage colleagues to modify their approach to programming and to then work successfully with them as a peer, particularly if some child care professionals disagree with the changes. However, when child care professionals are given genuine opportunities to be involved in planning and decision making and are allowed to take on leadership roles, team members and leaders are more likely to feel at ease working together as equal peers to implement changes.

By delegating responsibilities, leaders can work toward breaking down barriers between leaders and peers. Delegation is an effective tool for equitably allocating tasks and for valuing and developing the skills and knowledge of all team members. This also allows individuals to take responsibility for specific areas of service practice and to therefore gain their own leadership experience.

Management responsibilities can also be streamlined through the process of delegation. For example, it may be more time efficient for a service director or coordinator to assign responsibility for developing occupational health and safety (OH&S) policies and practices to a small team, rather than holding onto this role themselves. A specific OH&S team may also be more effective in ensuring that safe and hygienic practices are implemented consistently across

the service as this will be its primary area of focus, rather than being one of the many areas of focus that a director or coordinator is likely to have.

New leaders

It is common for child care professionals who are new to a service to be placed into leadership positions when they have had minimal professional experience. The challenge of taking the lead in these circumstances can be daunting, particularly when working with colleagues who are older or more experienced. When placed in a leadership position for the first time, it is important for the individual to spend time getting to know colleagues and listening to their suggestions and concerns. It can be damaging and counterproductive to make quick decisions and changes without first listening to the views of others and involving them in the decision making process.

By taking a collaborative approach to leadership, building positive relationships and showing respect for others, new leaders will be more effective in guiding and inspiring team members. Consequently, organisational goals and directions are more likely to be created and implemented and conflicts minimised.

Support for leaders

In high quality child care services it is important that organisations nurture and value their leaders. By acknowledging and supporting child care professionals who take on a variety of leadership roles, services will motivate and inspire them to implement quality practice.

Services can support their leaders by:

- taking opportunities to acknowledge the work they do through newsletters and staff and management meetings
- supporting them to devise individual professional development plans



- providing opportunities to develop leadership skills
- providing regular constructive feedback and systematic performance appraisals
- encouraging them to seek support and guidance from external child care professionals and mentors.

Conclusion

Effective leaders in child care services use good communication, team development and management skills to involve all team members in developing goals and directions. They facilitate and value the input of others rather than taking control. By delegating responsibilities and encouraging the development of leadership skills in all child care professionals, management tasks can be streamlined and the barriers between peers and leaders can be minimised. This approach to leadership increases the commitment of child care professionals to providing quality care and motivates them to do their best for children and families ■

References and further reading

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