

Inclusive practice: Working with families who are vulnerable

by Jean Andrews

Inclusive practice is a key aspect of quality child care service provision. Child care professionals need to ensure that they understand and are responsive to the complex issues that many families face in today's society. To do this, professionals need to use effective communication and collaboration to promote positive relationships and a genuinely inclusive environment.

Current research emphasises that early brain development is critical to lifelong health, wellbeing and intellectual development. This reinforces the importance of developing sound relationships with all families in order to help them to support the optimum development of their children.

This article will provide child care professionals with strategies to promote effective partnerships with families who are particularly vulnerable.

What are 'vulnerable circumstances' for families?

Families may be perceived as being vulnerable for a variety of reasons. They can be sole parents, teenage parents, have Indigenous or culturally diverse backgrounds, be in rural or remote communities, or be refugees. They can have social or economic difficulties and often have high levels of need and face complex problems or challenges. In some cases children and their families are referred to a service for inclusion in programs by a government authority. There may be conditions attached to the ongoing attendance of the child or children at the service, such as removal from the family by authorities. Some vulnerabilities are brief, others are ongoing.

It is important to remember that a child from a family with a characteristic of vulnerability is not automatically at risk of harm.

Issues families may have in accessing and using child care

Some families may previously have found it difficult to access child care because of isolation, their financial situation, limited language and communication skills, transport difficulties, lack of knowledge about community resources or lack of confidence.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1 – 1.3 and 1.5

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1 – 1.3, 2.1 – 2.3, 3.1 and 3.2

QIAS Principles: 1.1 – 1.5, 3.3 and 2.1 – 2.3

Some of these families may be nervous, may feel threatened and may resent the fact that they are required to be involved with the service. Other families may be relieved that they have found someone who can help them and support their parenting role. No matter what the issues and circumstances, all families need support and understanding.

Child care services can provide a safe and caring environment for families experiencing difficult life circumstances so that they can feel they are connected and are valuable members of the community.

Practical ways to build relationships

Strategies that can be used by child care professionals to support the development of partnerships with families include:

Respect: Demonstrating respect for all families is a cornerstone of good child care practice. Families who are vulnerable may not always have been treated with respect by those with whom they have been involved, whether within the family situation or through contact with other agencies or people. Value judgements may have been made about them based on their particular circumstances.

Simple actions such as friendly greetings, acknowledgement of their efforts and positive comments can help build rapport.

Child care professionals are encouraged to begin the relationship with families by engaging in a respectful dialogue that affirms the value of the family and demonstrates genuine interest and empathy.

Respecting families' roles as an expert on their own child and involving families when introducing new experiences and materials can be helpful.

Child care professionals need to demonstrate that families can depend on and trust them to help in the education of their children.

Acknowledging family strengths: 'Every family, regardless of their situation, has strengths that are unique to the individual family'. (Caldwell, 2008). Build on the strengths that are demonstrated by the family and their children. Acknowledge simple achievements: 'thank you for returning the library books/Jane shared toys so well today'. These simple statements promote positive self-esteem in parents and acknowledge the child's and family's strengths.

Remember that families are trying to do the best for their children, even if they are not sure how to go about it. When discussing their child, start by describing the child's strengths, interests and abilities. This establishes a positive, strengths-based approach and opens the door for further communication, collaboration and partnership between the family and professionals.

Primary contact person: Trusting relationships may take time to establish, especially if a family is vulnerable and defensive. In the initial stages it may be useful to ensure that there is a primary contact person on staff who can be available for the family. Over time, and with the development of confidence, the family may relate with assurance to other child care professionals at the service.

Communication: Child care professionals need to be aware that some families may have poor or limited literacy skills in English and/or their first language. Consider how information is provided. Avoid the use of jargon and present information in small chunks at a time. Investigate options to extend the forms of communication that are in use. Consider discussing the kind of communication method that suits each family, and accommodate their needs. Also, carefully consider the use of non-professional interpreter services such as family or friends, as this could lead to breaches of confidentiality, or inaccuracies in translated information.

It may help families to sit down with a staff member to discuss exactly what they want from the service. This could occur once the family has been to the service several times, and is familiar with the routine. Often such discussions at orientation can become confusing, as there is so much information to be conveyed at this time.

Listening: Families may not be able to articulate their needs clearly. Take time to listen to them



and to encourage them to voice their needs. Support staff and carers in listening, asking questions and clarifying the message to be able to address the issue.

Encourage families to ask for help. For example, a single father may not know how to remove nits from his child's hair, and may feel that he will be judged negatively if he admits this. Treat any requests for assistance seriously and thoughtfully.

Sensitivity: Be sensitive to individual families' differences, as each family has their own way of responding to and dealing with issues. Avoid making value judgements or assumptions about literacy, family commitment or how different values and cultural expectations are expressed.

Recognise different parenting styles and boundaries. Some families may not have had experience in setting boundaries and limits for their children. Child care professionals modelling positive behaviour guidance strategies can help families to understand that children can accept and respond positively to appropriate boundaries and limits.

Discuss each family's values and beliefs with them, and demonstrate how these are linked to the service's philosophy and practice.

Trust: Developing trusting relationships can take time and effort, as trust is both an emotional and logical act. This means giving respect and acknowledging worth which may be reciprocated over time by families. This is important because it reflects the fact that each family is unique and each child needs to be looked at in the context of his or her family.

Issue 31 September 2009 (Pages 18 – 20)

Be interested in the parent as much as their child. Some parents may wish to gain further education, or employment. Having secure child care arrangements in a trusted environment can facilitate these goals.

Support: Offer support that reflects each family's situation as the same approach does not work for all families. Use the range of services that are available and offer different ways to access them, so that families can learn about services that are available within the community, and which strategies are the most useful to help them gain access to help and information.

Authority figures

Child care professionals are sometimes identified by families as being the same as the staff at an authority with whom the family has had a negative experience. Some families may have a fear of negative judgements and their consequences, and of being watched by child care professionals. They may also have experienced intimidating, threatening and adversarial behaviour from authorities in the past. These fears can often be allayed by maintaining ongoing friendly, empathic and respectful communication with all families.

Conclusion

There are different strategies that can be implemented to help vulnerable families be connected to the service and the community. Understanding the needs of individual families can help child care professionals make appropriate decisions about the kinds of support required to achieve the best possible outcomes for families and children ■

Outcomes for children and families

Families and children in vulnerable circumstances can achieve positive outcomes through access to, and support from, quality child care services. Some of the improved outcomes possible for children and families include:

For families:

- Better access to valuable resources and support networks within the community
- Improved opportunities to participate in community life
- Heightened sense of self-esteem and confidence in their parenting role
- Increased sense of trust and ability to form positive relationships with others.

For children:

- Ability to engage with other children and form positive friendships
- Increased self-esteem and social and emotional confidence
- Opportunities to develop their skills
- Opportunities to participate in a range of activities and programs.

A Professional Support Coordinator can provide you with advice and assistance to help you to enhance accessibility and inclusion at your service. For the contact details for your state/territory Professional Support Coordinator, visit the 'Links' page on NCAC's website or telephone a NCAC Child Care Adviser on 1300 136 554.

References and further reading

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