

Working with other professionals

by Angela Owens

In quality child care settings child care professionals ensure that the daily program and experiences cater to the needs and interests of all children, including those who have additional needs. The term 'additional needs' is used to identify a range of conditions that require and qualify for special support, and it may include children who have behaviour, learning or speech difficulties, giftedness, physical disability or health issues such as allergies or chronic illness. Children with additional needs also frequently receive support or therapy from other professionals such as social workers, psychologists, occupational or speech therapists or health care professionals.

It is important that whenever possible, child care professionals work in collaboration with other practitioners who are supporting a child who has additional needs. The programs devised by other professionals may be central to supporting the child's inclusion in child care and, for maximum effect, these often need to be followed through consistently in all aspects of the child's life, including in the child care setting.

What strategies can child care professionals use to support children who have additional needs?

Depending on the nature of a child's additional needs, there are a range of strategies that may be recommended by other professionals who are working with the child. Examples of these include:

- using visual aids or signing systems such as Makaton to support a child's expressive and/or receptive communication skills
- doing speech or occupational therapy exercises
- implementing specific behaviour management strategies
- engaging a child in specific experiences or activities. For example, group games, fine or gross motor activities or reading.
- administering medications for the treatment of conditions such as asthma, allergies, epilepsy or behavioural disorders
- following a child's individualised eating/nutrition plan.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.5 and 3.1 – 3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 3.1 and 5.1 - 5.4

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.4, 1.5, 2.1 and 4.1 – 4.6

Some professionals who work with children with additional needs may wish to work with the child in the child care setting. In this situation it is essential that child care professionals consider how they will effectively supervise the child and any other children who may engage with the visiting professional and the appropriateness of other children participating in the therapy sessions or activities. Child care professionals need to consult with families to ensure they are happy for their child to participate in these experiences without disclosing confidential information about the child who has additional needs.

Communication strategies

Effective communication between the service and other professionals who are working with a child with additional needs is integral to promoting the best possible outcomes for the child. Family members often act as the intermediary between the service and the other professionals working with their child. While this can be a very effective way to share information between the service and the external agency, it is often helpful to also use some more direct communication strategies between the service and other professionals. These strategies may include:

- telephone contact
- using communication books or diaries
- inviting the professional to visit the child at the service if they have not already done so
- attending training or information sessions provided by the external professional
- attending one off or regular meetings. Where possible these meetings should also include the child's family.

When communicating with other professionals who are supporting a child with additional needs, child care professionals need to be aware of confidentiality issues relating not only to the child and their family, but also to other children, staff and families in the service. Child care

professionals must always seek permission from the child's family before contacting or speaking with a third party about their child's needs.

When discussing a child's needs or issues with other professionals, child care professionals need to maintain a respectful and sensitive approach. It is important to remember that the child's family will often be experiencing concern and anxiety about their child's additional needs, and while honest communication is important, this must be approached thoughtfully.

It is important to recognise that some external professionals may have limited understanding of child care and what is accepted as quality care and education in these settings. As a result, child care professionals may at times be asked by another professional to implement a strategy or activity that is either unrealistic or not appropriate for child care. For example, they may be asked to use a behaviour management strategy such as 'time out' that conflicts with what is understood to be best child care practice. In this situation, the service needs to clearly explain why it is not possible to implement the suggested strategy, and to collaborate with the other professional to develop strategies that can be used in the service.

Developing a cooperative team to care for a child with additional needs

While communication and collaboration between the service and other professionals is important, the best outcomes for children are usually achieved when families are also engaged in this partnership. Each party in this 'team' will have a unique perspective of the child and his or her needs, and these perspectives when combined may provide everyone with a holistic understanding of the child. Families generally know their child best, and when they share their insights they can assist child care and other professionals to customise therapies, activities and strategies in ways that will most effectively cater to their child's interests and needs.



Helping families to access support for their child

In some instances child care professionals may be the first to identify concerns about an aspect of a child's health, development or wellbeing. When this occurs, child care professionals should communicate honestly and sensitively with the child's family about their concerns or observations and, if appropriate, provide the family with practical guidance about how they might contact other professionals for further support or assistance.

When discussing a child's needs with their family, it is essential that child care professionals provide clear, unbiased information and avoid speculating about the possible cause or offering a diagnosis. Only health care or other relevantly qualified professionals should be involved in diagnosing or identifying a child's condition.

Child care professionals play an important role in integrating the strategies that are used to support a child who has additional needs into the daily life of a child care service. This is not only beneficial to the child's wellbeing, development and inclusion in care, it also assists child care professionals to ensure that the program is responsive to the child's needs and interests ■

References and further reading

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- Petriwskyj, A. (1992). Integrating Children with Special Needs into Early Childhood Centres. *Australian Early Childhood Association Resource Booklet*, (3). ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association.