

Not always as good as a holiday – managing change in child care

by Sonja Tansey

Change is an inevitable and necessary part of working in child care services and is essential for achieving growth and improvement in the quality of care for children and their families. Child care professionals will be well equipped to survive and thrive in child care by understanding the process of change, being prepared for change and implementing change in a manner that minimises stress and anxiety.

Change occurs on a day-to-day level in child care services requiring child care professionals to respond to individual children's and families' needs, staff issues, and environmental factors such as weather conditions and building constraints. Change also takes place in services as a response to broader issues such as legislative changes, emergencies or crises. Child care professionals can survive the demands of change by collaborating as a team and building a team culture of learning and receptiveness to new ideas. Effective team communication is also essential for making smooth transitions and implementing change effectively.

How does change affect child care professionals?

The way in which child care professionals respond to change can vary greatly. Some will see change as a positive opportunity to make improvements and move forward, others will be resistant and feel threatened, stressed or anxious. In some cases, change can have a positive and energising effect on individual child care professionals and teams. It can motivate professionals to engage in their work enthusiastically and with renewed purpose, providing opportunities to take a fresh approach and for teams to build and strengthen.

However, change can also have a negative effect on child care professionals by lowering self-esteem and undermining their confidence to carry out tasks. For example, if a change is introduced to the service's approach to guiding children's behaviour, child care professionals may feel uncertain about the way they should respond to children's challenging behaviours. In this situation child care professionals may become less confident in their interactions with children and question their capacity to fulfil their role.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.5, 5.4, 6.2 and 6.4

OSHCQA Principles: 2.1, 7.3, 8.2, 8.5 and 8.6

QIAS Principles: 1.6, 5.5, 7.2 and 7.4

If not managed effectively, change can also lead child care professionals to experience difficulty in coping resulting in low morale and poor outcomes for children. When people feel uncomfortable or threatened by change they may resist or avoid change and attempt to undermine new approaches or practices. They may also become complacent or disinterested in their work. This can have a negative impact on other staff through escalating team stress levels and conflict, and can affect children negatively.

How can change affect adults' interactions with children?

When child care professionals are under stress brought about by change this can have a negative effect on children. Professionals can become insensitive and unresponsive to the needs of children and out of touch with their interests. Stressed staff can have difficulty finding enthusiasm and motivation for caring for and educating young children which can in turn affect the bonds and relationships that are essential for quality child care. The stress of change can also cause professionals to become inattentive when supervising children, creating risks to children's safety.

Changes and disruptions in child care services can also upset the predictable routines and nurturing environment that young children need. Child care professionals should observe children closely in times of change to watch for signs of stress, withdrawal or anxiety. Children cope better when they can predict change so it is important to keep routines as steady as possible and to introduce changes to children gradually. Using simple, consistent words and repeating gestures to warn children of changes can help them to adapt happily and confidently.

Being prepared for change

To bring about positive and effective change, it is

useful for child care professionals in management or leadership positions to be aware of the different ways people may respond to change. It is important for leaders to show sensitivity to individual reactions and to assist child care professionals to overcome their resistance to change. This can effectively minimise the stress and anxiety that change can cause. It is also essential for leaders to, where possible, involve the team in planning and to implement change gradually.

To build a positive culture of change in the service, it will be helpful for leaders to identify people in their team who are enthusiastic about change and can become role models for others. By supporting and encouraging positive team members in the change process, leaders can build foundations for a positive team attitude. Team attitudes to change can also be strengthened by providing individual support and relevant professional development opportunities.

Strategies for leaders in planning and managing change:

- Communicate clearly and honestly about what the change is and what it will entail
- Develop a positive team attitude to change by communicating it as an opportunity to improve practices, working conditions and job satisfaction
- Assist individuals to understand the role of change in service survival and in ongoing improvements to the quality of care for children
- Educate and inform staff of the factors that have brought about the need for change
- Deal with resistance to change by allowing staff to express their frustration and anxieties
- Avoid 'taking over' the process of change and allow individuals to contribute to a joint process of decision making
- Collaborate with staff and negotiate to reach agreements about how changes could be implemented
- Convey confidence in individuals and teams and allow them to take responsibility for implementing change
- Manage any conflict early and effectively
- Anticipate and plan for disruptions to service routines caused by changes such as building improvements or legislative changes
- Involve the team in developing a change management plan with roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams clearly stated



- Revise and update policies and procedures to ensure changes are implemented effectively.

Minimising the stress of change

Feelings of fear, anger and resentment can develop when professionals feel that change has been forced upon them, they disagree with the change, or they feel unprepared or unsupported to implement change. However, stress symptoms can be reduced through a range of communication and planning measures.

The development of trusting and supportive relationships between child care professionals is crucial for preventing and minimising stress, as is participating in regular whole team, small group and one-to-one meetings. Providing positive feedback for what is working well as changes occur is also useful. It is important that professionals feel comfortable in calling upon colleagues for support or advice, and working with a 'buddy' or mentor can help to reduce stress. In family day care environments carers can be encouraged to contact coordination unit staff or another carer for support if they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed by the process of change.

By breaking down tasks for implementing change into manageable steps, professionals will be able to effectively carry out tasks and attain a sense of achievement. To ensure effective and ongoing implementation, any changes that are introduced should be included in the service policies and procedures. Child care professionals should become familiar with amendments to policies and procedures to facilitate the necessary changes.



Three steps for leaders to reduce the stress of change

1. Prepare people to be receptive to change
2. Take collaborative team action to implement change
3. Stabilise and consolidate change through positive attitudes and behaviours

Adapted from: Rodd, 2006, p.192.

Conclusion

Constant change is a reality of working in child care now and in the future. It is common for child care professionals to feel stressed and anxious in response to change as they try to manage the competing priorities of supporting children, families and colleagues. By taking a positive attitude, developing strategies for preparing and managing change, and managing stress effectively, services can bring about positive outcomes for children, staff and families ■

Stress management tips

- Provide regular opportunities for child care professionals to meet with management to discuss issues around change
- Allow and support team members to reflect on and debrief about the stress of change
- Offer positive feedback to colleagues as changes are implemented
- Encourage professionals to find ways in their personal lives to release tension and build health
- Stay in touch with each other's stress levels and offer assistance to colleagues showing stress symptoms
- Encourage the team to have a sense of humour in times of stress – laughter is an excellent stress release and can help build team bonds

References and further reading

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