

Including children with additional needs in child care

by Angela Owens

Using child care, especially for the first time, can be overwhelming for many families. For families who have children with additional needs, this can be intensified by concerns about how their child will 'fit in' to a mainstream child care setting, and how well their child's specific needs will be met by the service. This *Factsheet* will provide you with information about what you can expect from a service in relation to your child's needs, as well as useful strategies for promoting the best outcomes for your child.

What are 'additional needs'?

The term 'additional needs' defines and categorises a range of conditions and circumstances that can result in children requiring specialist support. While additional needs can include health conditions, welfare issues and challenging life circumstances, this *Factsheet* focuses on children who have additional needs related to their learning and physical development and wellbeing¹. These may include children who have:

- a physical disability such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy or amputation
- an intellectual disability or developmental delay
- communication problems or disorders
- a diagnosed condition such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down Syndrome or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- challenging behaviours.

What are the advantages of including children who have additional needs?

Children who have additional needs can benefit greatly from attending quality child care. It can enrich children's lives and provide them with opportunities and the support to extend their skills, experiences and development. For families, using child care can help them to meet work or study commitments, or provide them with respite from the care of their child which can benefit the child and family as a whole.

Including children with additional needs in care is also valuable for other children and child care professionals. The world is made up of diverse individuals who have a range of skills, abilities and understandings. Genuinely inclusive programs help children and adults learn to appreciate and value the similarities and differences between individuals, and to learn to see each person as a whole, rather than defining them according to their additional needs.

Working with children who have additional needs can also increase the knowledge and skills of child care professionals, which can also support them in their work with all children. For example, the skills they develop to work with children who have challenging behaviour or communication difficulties may be adapted for everyday use with all children.

What should services do?

For your child to be effectively included, the service needs to demonstrate a genuine desire and ability to work with your child, family and, where relevant, other professionals and support services. This collaborative approach will help the service to develop effective strategies for including your child in daily life at the service, including everyday routines and experiences. Some other things that child care professionals should do to promote your child's inclusion involve:

- demonstrating acceptance of and respect for your child
- showing that they value and perceive your child as a whole person, rather than seeing them only in terms of their needs
- taking time to get to know your child, their strengths and particular interests, as well as their areas of need
- using your child's interests and strengths as a basis for planning learning experiences for them
- seeking information from your family and other relevant sources about your child's specific needs or condition and how these can be supported
- where possible, adapting planned activities and daily routines to support your child's participation
- supporting other children and adults at the service to understand your child's needs and to include your child in daily experiences and activities. This should be done sensitively, and your family's and child's rights to confidentiality must be respected.
- providing you with regular information about your child's progress and experiences at care,

¹ For information about using child care when your child has special health needs, see NCAC's *Factsheet for Families on Managing children's special health needs in child care*.

as well as any concerns or issues as they arise. This may be done through daily written and/or verbal information exchange, as well as through scheduled meetings.

- recording daily information that may relate to the care of your child's specific needs. For example, details relating to toileting, eating, their behaviour or interactions with others. A daily diary or communication book may be used for this purpose.

Child care services should do their best to meet your child's needs. However, some strategies may need to be negotiated or adapted to ensure they are practical for use in child care, comply with best practice and child care legislative requirements and do not impact upon the quality of care provided for all children.

What can you do to promote your child's inclusion in care?

The key to supporting your child's inclusion in care when they have additional needs is having honest, detailed communication with the service. It is important to tell the child care professionals about your child's needs and to clearly describe your expectations about your child's participation in care, and what outcomes you would like to see for your child. Important information to provide includes:

- what your child's main needs are and how these affect their daily lives and experiences
- the things that your child is interested in and the things that they do well
- the strategies that you use to support your child at home and elsewhere. For example, behaviour guidance strategies or ways to calm or distract your child when they are upset.
- situations or routines that may present either physical or emotional challenges for your child

- how to recognise signs that may indicate that your child is becoming distressed or is having difficulty coping
- information about the support or therapies that your child is receiving from other agencies or professionals. It is helpful to promote contact between the child care service and others involved in the care of your child and, where relevant, to give external parties permission to work with your child in the child care setting.

You may feel embarrassed or unsure about what to share with the service about your child's needs. However, it is important to remember that the child care professionals will use this information to ensure the best possible care of your child.

What assistance can services seek?

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funds the Inclusion and Professional Support Program to assist eligible child care services to include children who have additional needs. To apply for support, services need to contact their Inclusion Support Agency for assistance with the application process. Contact details and information about the Inclusion and Professional Support Program are available on the DEEWR website (www.deewr.gov.au).

Conclusion

Genuine inclusion relies strongly on the partnership and communication between yourself, the child care service and any other professionals or agencies that work with your child. A quality child care service would work with you to support your child's inclusion in daily routines and experiences. This will benefit not only you and your child, but the children, professionals and other adults at the service ■

References and further reading

- Care for Kids. (n.d.). *Choosing child care for special needs children*. Retrieved 25 May, 2009, from <http://www.careforkids.com.au/articlesv2/article.asp?ID=65>
- The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (n.d.). *Inclusion and Professional Support Program*. Retrieved 25 May, 2009, from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/programs/Pages/InclusionandProfessionalSupportProgram.aspx>
- Lindon, J. (2006). *Equality in early childhood – linking theory and practice*. Great Britain: Hodder Education.
- Palmer, A. (1998). *Young children with additional needs*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association.

Useful websites

- Inclusive Directions: www.directions.org.au
- Raising Children Network: raisingchildren.net.au



For more information on Child Care Quality Assurance please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

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