

Managing children's special health needs in child care

by Megan Shaw

Using child care when your child has special health needs can be daunting. There are a range of health issues that children can experience, including asthma, allergies and food intolerances and illnesses such as epilepsy, cystic fibrosis and diabetes that require specific care practices. It is important that child care services work with you and your family to ensure your child is safely and equitably included in the child care environment.

How can you support the service?

Providing clear and accurate information to the child care service is essential to making sure that your child is kept healthy and safe in child care. The following points will help you to work effectively with the service to support your child's health care:

- Explain your child's health needs at the time when you enrol them in child care. Most child care services will have a space on the enrolment form to include any specific health requirements. If you feel you need to discuss your child's needs in more detail, it may be worthwhile arranging a meeting with someone at the service, such as the coordinator, director and/or a professional who will work directly with your child. It is important to be up front with any specific health requirements that your child has. Being honest with the service will help to ensure your child's safety and wellbeing as soon as they start attending care.
- If there are any health professionals working with your child, such as a paediatrician, physiotherapist or occupational therapist, give their contact details to the child care service. The staff at the child care service may liaise with other professionals working with your child to assist with developing consistent care strategies. The information that health care professionals can provide may be able to be tailored specifically for the child care setting.
- Provide the service with any individualised health plans for your child such as an asthma management plan or anaphylaxis action plan. Ensure you provide the service with updated plans as soon as they become available.
- It may be beneficial to demonstrate to child care professionals at the service how to administer medications such as Ventolin® (or other medicated inhalants), insulin or an EpiPen® (adrenalin) for children experiencing an anaphylactic reaction so they are confident in doing so if required.
- If English is your second language, consider taking a friend or family member with you to help you to communicate your child's needs

to the service. If you do not have a friend or family member for support, you may consider contacting an interpreter service for assistance.

It is important that you do not feel intimidated or unsure about sharing information about your child's health requirements with the service as they need this to help keep your child safe. The information you provide about your child is kept confidential and will only be shared with the child care professionals who need it to support your child's health, safety and wellbeing.

How can the service support you?

Child care services have a duty of care to each child to ensure they are healthy and safe at all times. This means they have an obligation to support your child in every way to ensure they receive a high standard of care. Some of the ways that your service can do this include:

- Ensuring that the child care professionals who work with your child are informed about the individual health needs of your child.
- If necessary, undertaking specific training that may be needed to assist in the care of your child. This may include asthma management, managing anaphylaxis or emergency response training for conditions such as epilepsy or diabetes.
- Developing clear procedures for managing children's allergies. Most states and territories have guidelines for child care services to follow for children who have severe allergies. Ask your service about the procedures they have in place and where necessary provide them with feedback or information that will help them to improve their practices.
- Having open communication strategies to inform you about your child's care and experiences at the service and seeking information from you about your child's health status. Communication methods may include daily conversations, checklists detailing the food your child has eaten or a communication book or daily diary to share information between yourself, your service and, if relevant, other professionals working with your child.

Child care services may also have access to updated information about your child's type of health issues. If you have difficulty finding information you can ask your service for any assistance they can provide.

While your service should aim to meet the needs of all of the children in their care, some negotiation may be necessary to ensure that the strategies that are used both support and protect your child while being practical for implementation in the child care setting. For example, if your child has an anaphylactic reaction to certain food/s, it is the responsibility of the service to ensure that your child is not exposed to the allergen. However, it may not be possible to entirely eliminate the allergen from the service either due to the service's responsibility to meet all children's health and nutrition requirements or because families provide children's food, which may contain traces of the allergen. In these situations the service will need to develop clear procedures and guidelines for child care professionals to prevent your child being exposed to the food/s to which they are allergic.

Conclusion

To ensure your child's needs are met, it is essential to maintain open and honest communication with your child care service. Providing up to date information on any changes to your child's health needs will also assist the service to provide the best care for your child. The service can also assist you by providing detailed information about your child's progress and any issues that may arise at the service in relation to your child's health care ■

What external support is available for services to help manage children's special health requirements?

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 needs¹. 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).

There are organisations that can provide training to child care services about children's specific health needs. This may include asthma management training from the Asthma Foundation or training to manage anaphylaxis, including the administration of medication such as adrenalin using an EpiPen®, through first aid providers or Anaphylaxis Australia. The training may also include information about the signs a child may show when experiencing distress or symptoms of conditions such as anaphylactic shock, low or high blood sugar levels or at risk of seizure.

¹ This Factsheet focuses on children who have additional needs related to health issues. However, children may have other needs related to their learning, development and diagnosed conditions that may qualify for additional support. For further information about supporting children with other additional needs, please refer to NCAC's Factsheet for Families on *Including children with additional needs in child care*.

References and further reading

- Anaphylaxis Australia. (n.d.). *Parent 10-point plan for school*. Retrieved 4 May, 2009, from <http://www.allergyfacts.org.au/PDF/HS%20Parent%2010%20point%20plan.pdf>
- Anaphylaxis Australia. (n.d.). *Starting kinder or preschool with food allergies*. Retrieved 4 May, 2009, from <http://www.allergyfacts.org.au/PDF/AAI%20Starting%20preschool.pdf>
- 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>
- National Asthma Council Australia. (n.d.). *Written Asthma Action Plans*. Retrieved 4 May, 2009, from <http://www.nationalasthma.org.au/content/view/247/638/>
- Owens, A. (2007). Supporting children with additional needs. *Putting Children First*, 23, 6 - 8.

Useful websites

- Better Health Channel: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Centre for Community Child Health: www.rch.org.au/ccch
- Child and Youth Health: www.cyh.com
- 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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