

# Childcare and children's health

HEALTH CARE INFORMATION FOR CHILDCARE STAFF AND FAMILIES  
FROM THE ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, MELBOURNE

## Inclusion

**Child care provides high quality educational and social experiences for all children. It is the responsibility of child care staff/carers to provide appropriate and stimulating opportunities to meet the developmental needs of all children. Increasingly child care staff/carers are required to meet the specific needs of children with additional needs.**

Government policies and initiatives raise the awareness of the needs and rights of all people and continue the push towards more inclusive approaches. However, do we really understand what constitutes effective inclusion?

### What does inclusion mean?

Inclusion is a continuous process that enables each individual opportunities for acceptance and participation in their community. It means more than just "being there", it means "being with" ie: learning with, playing with, communicating with and socializing with peers.

Inclusion means belonging.

### Why is it important for all children?

Children learn from being with other children. Children's values and attitudes begin to form at a very early age so they need to be given every opportunity to understand and value differences.

An inclusive environment provides opportunities for children to have positive experiences of difference and to learn that we are not all the same and that difference is to be valued and appreciated.

Children begin to see themselves and their peers as valued, worthy individuals because of the positive and responsive interactions that occur within the child care environment. The opportunity to play and learn alongside children with very diverse needs impacts favourably on the children's increased understanding of both difference and acceptance. An inclusive environment allows children



LISTEN TO PARENTS – ASK QUESTIONS. THEY KNOW THEIR CHILD BEST.

to feel good about themselves and to care about the needs and rights of others.

An inclusive environment can lead to life long positive attitudes being formed as a result of these early childhood experiences.

### Inclusion involves these factors:

#### Attitudes-

- Respect the individuality of all children.
- Be positive and sensitive. Provide models for other children, other staff, parents and visitors to the service and reflect the goal of providing a sharing, caring, inclusive environment with experiences that encourage all children to learn, extend their skills and have fun!

#### Working with parents-

- Listen to parents – ask questions. They know their child best.

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- Develop a positive, collaborative relationship with parents.
- Offer **all** parents the opportunity to be involved in service activities.

#### **Adapting the environment-**

- Have adequate clear, uncluttered space for children to safely move around and to use facilities such as toilets, wash basins, outside areas.
- Provide storage space for extra equipment when not in use.
- Ensure that all children are able to access experiences together at the same physical level eg: floor and table experiences, mealtimes.

#### **Programming-**

- Ensure that the individual developmental needs of all children are met.
- Provide a well-rounded program.

- Ensure that all children are able to participate, learn and experience success.
- Provide opportunities for spontaneous fun and positive social interactions.

#### **Staffing-**

- Ensure all staff access relevant training opportunities.
- Regularly discuss inclusive practices at staff meetings.
- Work together as a team. Support each other.
- Establish strong working relationships with other community agencies.

*QIAS – Principles: 1.1 - 1.2, 2.1 - 2.4, 3.1 - 3.3, 4.1, 5.1, 5.3, 6.1 - 6.6, 8.1, 10.1, 10.3, 10.4.*

*FDCQA – Principles: 1.1, 1.7, 3.1 - 3.7, 2.1 - 2.2.*

*Vicki Lock and Trish Phillips*

*Inclusion SA.*

## **Role of childcare staff in making connections with families**

Relationships are “life enhancing” and should underpin early childhood practice (Stonehouse, 2001.), so what is the role of staff in developing relationships and making connections with families?

### **Opportunities for making connections with families**

Opportunities for staff and parents to make meaningful connections with one another occur from the first phone call or visit the parent makes to enquire about a place for their child. Waiting list application visits, enrolment and orientation visits, parent information sessions and daily interactions are all important opportunities for creating an environment that is open to communication and connection.

As time goes by interactions between staff and parents become more complex as people invest themselves and show an interest in each other. Trust and respect grow through the sharing of experiences and information, community life and personal stories. Through these exchanges staff and parents begin to connect, blend and meld diverse views, opinions, understandings and expectations. Sharing stories allows us to acknowledge the grounded experience of nurturance, caring and connectedness.

Informal and spontaneous conversations between parents and staff should not be over-looked or underestimated. Rather they should be considered vital and dynamic elements of parent partnerships. The ease of sharing

information in these informal situations affords opportunities for connecting and really getting to know one another or simply finding out about a common interest. Each connection that is made will be different. Respecting and accepting these differences adds to the richness of each relationship.

The traditional methods for communicating with parents such as formal parent meetings, newsletters and questionnaires are often considered to be appropriate but they are not always successful. Meetings might be poorly attended, newsletters and policies sometimes not read and questionnaires are time consuming for families. In contrast, informal, spontaneous discussions and exchanges can provide a rich resource for planning a meaningful program which takes into account the child’s family and community context. For staff to feel valued and supported in the planning process there is a need for reciprocal honesty and openness in discussions between them and parents.

Acknowledging that parents, like staff have work and family commitments, difficulties and workloads is helpful when rethinking strategies for communication. Deciding to cancel a meeting may just be the sensible thing to do. Replace the meeting, revise the newsletter format, ask the parents what they would find useful and be open to their suggestions.

What might an authentic, accepting relationship look like from a parent’s point of view? A parent describes a respectful relationship as the ability for staff to have, “the willingness to listen and learn from everyone and

everything, the readiness to change and adapt, the desire to ascribe to each person, regardless of his or her role, with an equally important potential for contribution” (Hunter, 2001.).

### **Nurturing of connections with families by early childhood professionals**

To nurture parent staff connections in children’s services consider the following:

- move beyond what is perceived to be the traditional and formal ‘parent as partner’ model
- promote exchanges about family life and life in the community in addition to discussing the necessary information about development, health, nutrition and safety
- consider parents for *their* potential for contribution
- be accepting of the diverse views that parents have for their level of involvement in service life
- use the Australian Early Childhood Association Code of Ethics, the Privacy Act and codes of conduct, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (long day care) or Family Day Care Quality Assurance to guide and support staff in sharing stories and engaging in dialogue with parents to share the rich context of a child’s life
- take into account, in planning and daily routines, the information entrusted to staff for a program that is

- meaningful for the children within the service
- maintain a sense of appropriateness and an open, comfortable, respectful and tender approach to each interaction with parents
- consider the ordinary aspects of everyday life as an essential source of information to ensure the connections made with parents are real and valued.

Relationships should be nurtured between the child, parents, extended family members and staff. Value, document, reflect and evaluate exchanges and interactions. Informal sharing of information provides daily guidelines for communicating sensitively with a particular child, for supporting a parent or a staff member or celebrating a happy event. Time is an issue for many staff in children’s services, however, a heartfelt welcome and a genuine interest in the other person, is the first step towards making a connection with another.

*QIAS – Principles: 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 10.1.*

*FDCQA – Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 6.3.*

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## **It’s a stressful life**

Stress is a part of life for people of all ages. When our well-being is in some way threatened, our bodies react with what we call a stress response—we feel anxious or stressed out!

Babies are no exception. When their basic needs for food, touch, and loving care are neglected, infants show signs of a stress response.

Too much stress, may affect babies’ physical and mental health, not only now but later in life. During the early months and years of life, some researchers think that babies develop the foundations of their stress response system. The way this system develops may shape how these children react to stressful situations for years to come. Too many stressful situations early on may set a pattern for the way we respond to stress in later years.

### **You know it when you feel it**

Stress is very complex. What’s stressful to one person may not be stressful to another. Much of the leading scientific work on stress so far has been conducted with animals, but these results, though informative, can’t be directly

applied to humans. Some research has been done with adults, and even less with children and infants. Even so, scientists are beginning to come up with clues that may help us understand stress in ways that may help improve the health of our children.

To understand how stress affects us, it’s helpful to have an idea of how we respond to threatening situations.

### **Fight or flight**

When we feel threatened. The brain directs the release of several stress hormones in the body, including one called cortisol. As a result, we might experience some combination of:

- Sweaty palms
- Pounding heart rate
- Rapid or shallow breathing
- Loss of appetite

This is not always a bad thing. In fact, it’s essential to survival. In the short term, high levels of stress hormones not only get us ready to fight or run away, they may improve certain types of memory, so we’ll recognize similar threats in the future.

We seem to handle short-term episodes of stress well. It’s

when stress hormone levels are high for a long time that health problems begin to occur. Chronic stress and high cortisol levels have been linked to changes in nerve cells and the brain, to problems with memory and learning skills, to the suppression of the immune system, and to behavioral problems.

### Studying babies, neglect, and stress

When it comes to stress and babies, the stakes may be even higher. Studies with rats and monkeys show that neglectful care early in life and a lack of parental support when an infant is distressed has a powerful influence on the ways their stress response systems develop. If stressful conditions like these continue during early development, they may set in place a lifelong pattern for higher levels of stress hormones. Also, these studies show that living in a deprived environment with little personal contact and few things to see or touch can result in higher stress hormone levels. On the other hand, when little ones receive consistent, nurturing attention from caregivers and the opportunity to explore their world, they are more likely to develop healthy stress response systems.

It's hard to conduct stress experiments on humans—especially children. Subjecting babies to parental neglect and threatening situations and then measuring the levels of their stress hormones is unthinkable. But a study of children adopted from Romanian orphanages found that the longer a child lived under extreme conditions, the higher his or her stress hormones measured, even six and a half years after adoption.

More research is needed before scientists can say for sure that living in stressful situations early in life causes children to have higher levels of stress hormones later on, or even that increased hormone levels always lead to health problems.

How parents and other caregivers treat infants may in fact help lessen the impact of early stress. Keep in mind that

the brain is more resilient than many of us realize. Chronic stress may have a bad short-term effect on the brain, but there's evidence that only extreme conditions cause permanent change or damage.

### What can parents and caregivers do?

You can't shield babies from everything that might cause stress. But you can help the baby through stressful times, often just by doing what comes naturally.

- Get to know the baby and try different ways to soothe him/her. One baby may be soothed by baths, another may like to be cuddled, and some prefer rocking.
- Try to identify stressful situations for the baby.
- Don't assume that letting a baby deal with stressful situations on his/her own will make him/her a "tougher" adult.
- Attend to the baby's needs by providing a warm and supportive environment and responding to the baby when he/she needs you.
- There is no such thing as spoiling babies with love and attention.
- Encourage the baby to experience new and exciting things, but be there to provide a calm, supportive presence so that the child experiences success in his/her exploration of the world.
- Recognize serious traumatic experiences when they happen, and don't ignore them. There's some evidence that help given soon after trauma may be effective in preventing brain changes that may be harder to treat later in life.

*QIAS – Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 6.1, 6.4.*

*FDCQA – Principles: 1.1, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1 - 3.7.*

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*[www.talaris.org/spotlight\\_stressfullife.htm](http://www.talaris.org/spotlight_stressfullife.htm)*

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