

Managing stress in child care services

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Despite the many rewards that working with young children brings, workplace stress is often experienced by child care professionals in children's services. Factors that lead to stress in child care include high turnover of personnel, challenging workloads and time constraints, lack of professional recognition and professional isolation. The demands of working with young children and their families can be physical, intellectual and emotional which requires flexibility, compassion and constant energy. Not surprisingly, even the most dedicated child care professional can be stretched to their limit and experience stress and eventually burnout.

By viewing workplace stress as a valuable opportunity to improve practice, services can reduce and manage stress and help child care professionals to enjoy their work and build long term career satisfaction. Services also have an occupational health and safety obligation to protect the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of their employees. Preventing and lowering stress in services helps employees to feel more positive and energetic, and can resolve the negative issues associated with high personnel turnover and recruitment difficulties. This in turn will have a positive effect on colleagues, children, families and the overall operations of the child care service.

How can stress affect child care professionals?

Each child care professional will respond to stressful situations differently and the symptoms of stress vary between people. Some child care professionals may feel energised by a stressful situation, and view it as a challenge and an opportunity to make change. For others a stressful situation can create negative feelings and adverse physical symptoms.

Ongoing exposure to difficult situations that are not addressed or resolved can lead to conflict and high stress levels, possibly resulting in 'burnout' where child care professionals may feel exhausted and unmotivated. Individuals experiencing burnout may require extended leave or they may leave the workplace altogether. High stress levels may also result in an increased susceptibility to workplace accidents.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.5, 5.1, 5.3, 5.4 and 6.4

OSHCQA Principles: 2.1, 7.3, 8.2, 8.4 and 8.5

QIAS Principles: 1.6, 5.5, 7.2 and 7.4

It is important to recognise that child care professionals who are new to the field may experience heightened stress levels. It can be challenging for new professionals to cope with the expectations they have of themselves and the service, and the reality of day-to-day work in child care. Supporting new employees through effective orientation and induction processes, as well as through 'buddy' or mentor programs, can help them to set realistic goals and adjust to working in child care.

Child care professionals can support one another by being mindful of others' stress symptoms and responding to these quickly and appropriately.

How can adult stress affect children?

One of the most disturbing results of child care professional stress is the negative effect it can have on children. When child care professionals are under excessive pressure they can become

Examples of possible stress symptoms include:

Social and emotional symptoms:

- depression
- anxiety
- feeling upset, angry, hopeless or overstretched
- destructive behaviours such as reliance on alcohol, excessive eating, smoking, drug abuse

Cognitive symptoms:

- poor judgement
- difficulty in making decisions
- inability to solve problems

Physical symptoms:

- muscle tension, headaches and dizziness
- high blood pressure
- reduced immunity and illness
- insomnia
- tiredness

insensitive and unresponsive to the needs of children and out of touch with their interests. Stress can also diminish the capacity of child care professionals to care for and educate young children, and affects the quality of their practices and relationships with children.

A lack of enthusiasm and focus can also impact on the quality of the program and experiences that are offered to children. Child care professionals may also become inattentive and careless about supervision and child safety which can lead to accidents occurring.

How can stress be prevented?

While it may not be possible to eliminate stress entirely, services can work toward minimising it by identifying stress symptoms early and dealing promptly with the causes. As with other areas of occupational health and safety, a risk management approach can be implemented. This involves a continuous process of identifying stress hazards, determining the risks, controlling the hazards and reviewing practices and environments. WorkCover Authorities in each state and territory provide useful support and guidelines for managing workplace stress in child care.

Good relationships are crucial

The development of trusting and supportive relationships between child care professionals is crucial for preventing or minimising stress in children's services. By being aware of the negative effects and symptoms of stress, child care professionals can stay in touch with each colleague's stress levels. A commitment by colleagues to respectful, honest and supportive communication with each other will help them to stay in tune with the issues that may create stress and assist them support those who are under pressure.

Team solutions

When problems are shared between child care professionals they may be resolved more easily. Regularly talking about issues and finding team solutions to problems can help to prevent stress. As a team, child care professionals can reflect on the factors that may contribute to stress, for example, roles and responsibilities, routines, and relationships with children, families and peers. Team building experiences such as finding opportunities to give colleagues positive feedback and making them feel special can help to lower stress. Laughter and humour are great

for preventing and relieving stress, so it can help to try to find the funny side of difficult situations and to enjoy the unexpected events that often happen when working with young children.

By staying in touch with the stress levels of colleagues and being willing to assist others, child care professionals can respond to and support peers who are under pressure. For example, team members can offer assistance and encourage a colleague to take a break if they appear to be struggling with a child's behaviour. Family day carers can be encouraged to contact coordination unit staff or another carer for support if they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

Improving the workplace

Identifying workplace issues that create stress and finding ways to improve the work environment is also important. Positive workplace changes can be achieved when management and child care professionals work together to address and improve working conditions. Workplace factors that may cause stress include high turnover of personnel, low pay rates, excessive work demands and poor communication. While it may be difficult to address issues such as salary levels in the short term, problems such as work overload could be addressed by reviewing and adjusting work shifts, routines and job responsibilities.

Preventing stress in the workplace

Management can:

- provide regular opportunities for child care professionals to meet with management to discuss issues that may contribute to workplace stress;
- allow and support team members to reflect on and debrief about challenging issues, events and conflicts;
- encourage child care professionals to take their leave entitlements;
- provide child care professionals with access to counsellors or support services;
- allow child care professionals to take short breaks when they are feeling stressed, for example, when they are working with a child whose behaviour is particularly challenging; and
- ensure that child care professionals are familiar with, and can implement, the service's policies and procedures, for example emergency evacuations or behaviour guidance strategies.

Child care professionals can:

- call upon colleagues for support or advice at difficult times;
- work with a 'buddy' or mentor to develop strategies to reduce stress;
- develop strong professional relationships and networks that will support their confidence and professional direction; and
- seek support, advice and training from external professionals and agencies.

Personal care

Individuals can help to prevent or manage stress on a personal level by taking care of their own health and wellbeing. Effective self-care will help to build individual child care professionals' resilience to stressful situations and assist them to seek positive solutions to issues that cause them stress. Reflecting on the demands of life, and being able to identify the things that cause personal stress are also important strategies that can be used to combat or reduce the incidence of stress.

Tips for stress prevention through personal wellbeing:

- try to adopt a positive attitude to life and work;
- set realistic goals for personal and professional life;

- find practical ways to release tension and increase health;
- eat nutritious foods and limit intake of fats and sugars;
- find positive ways to prevent stress that can be incorporated into daily life such as regular exercise;
- focus on all aspects of wellbeing including physical, spiritual and intellectual;
- manage stress through movement and relaxation such as physical exercise, yoga, breathing techniques, massage, Pilates, tai chi and meditation;
- regularly check your progress towards stress prevention and reduction; and
- seek support when needed from family, friends and health care professionals.

Conclusion

The effects of workplace stress and burnout can impact upon child care professionals and their colleagues, children, families and on the service's overall operations. By minimising and effectively managing workplace stress, services can improve the quality of care provided, and create a rewarding and supportive work environment that contributes to child care professionals' long term career satisfaction ■

References and further reading

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Useful contacts and websites

- Lifeline: www.lifeline.org.au (telephone 13 11 14)
- Beyond Blue: www.beyondblue.org.au