

Building a Winning Team

Self-Guided Learning Package

This resource was developed by Community Child Care (CCC) with funding provided by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (2008-12).

The Inclusion and Professional Support Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email psc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Building a Winning Team

You have chosen to complete the Building a Winning Team package. The aim of this package is for children in care and education (LDC, FDC, IHC, and OSHC) to continue to be provided with quality programs, it is vital that the educators in any service work productively alongside each other. This package will cover the development of a successful team that generates energy and enthusiasm, strives and achieves, works together, supports each other and works to support the children and families.

Introduction

The ideal children's service environment is one where:

- Educators work as a team
- Educators have 'ownership' of their service and the quality of all the interactions with educators, parents and children
- There is effective communication between all educators
- The program is an active learning environment where critical reflection is practised and play-based learning and intentional teaching are occurring
- Approaches to teaching and learning are holistic and inclusive
- A commitment to quality and compliance is evident in all areas
- Educators follow the EYLF, FSAC and VEYLDF
- The environment is both aesthetically pleasing and safe for all children and adults
- Educators, parents and children work in partnership collaboratively to achieve a quality service

Children's services are professional services and the educators are individuals with specialised knowledge and skills in their positions. Families trust educators to provide a caring, safe and supportive environment for their children. Being professional involves continuously improving skills and knowledge. It means taking time to reflect upon and improve both your own practice and all aspects of your service's operation. Working together as a team can be a very rewarding experience for all involved. Job satisfaction and the quality of the service will increase if the educators work collaboratively and function successfully as a team

Self Help Question 1

What are some of the aspects of work you enjoy? Why?

What aspects of your work do you find frustrating? Why?

Working Cooperatively with Others

A team is a group of individuals who come together to work collaboratively towards a common vision. These individuals may have different backgrounds, experiences, values and beliefs, but recognise that this diversity contributes to the richness of the service.

Teamwork encourages learning and sharing between each other. Teams help to build self-esteem and confidence. As educators succeed in building a sense of team, their personal sense of commitment and respect is strengthened.

Early Childhood Educators need to be efficient and effective members of the team, working towards a common vision, encouraging and supporting each other and using their various skills and abilities to create an effective service. Without this contribution and support from every educator, the quality of both the team and the service may decline.

The following are some of the qualities members of effective teams need to possess:

- Accountable for their actions
- Accepting change
- Adaptable
- Approachable
- Caring
- Committed
- Good communicator
- Culturally competent
- Dedicated
- Efficient
- Empathetic
- Flexible
- Knowledgeable
- Open minded
- Optimistic
- Sense of Humour
- Sensitive
- Patient
- Punctual
- Tolerant
- Reflective
- Reliable
- Respectful
- Responsive

Self Help Question 2

Identify two of the qualities above that you possess

Give two examples of how you implement these qualities in your daily work with children and educators

Identify two qualities that you believe you would like to develop further

- Planning
- Getting to know one another professionally and personally
- Understanding each others roles and responsibilities and ways of working

Stage 2 – Storming - Working through Conflict in the Team

This stage involves dealing with differences and conflicts that are inevitable for brand new teams or for existing teams that are evolving as team members or roles change.

- Conflict and difference is inevitable, normal and healthy
- Ignoring conflict will hinder the team's progress
- In groups where conflict is present and not addressed, decision making and problem solving is poor and a higher level of stress is present

Stage 3 – Norming - Consensus and Cooperation in the Team

As each team moves through the previous stages, a sense of team spirit begins to emerge. This is evident when team members are:

- More open minded
- More willing to listen
- More willing to support each other
- More able to focus on group rather than individual needs
- More willing and able to deal with any problems or differences in the team
- Able to engage in shared decision making

Stage 4 – Performing - Effective Team Performance

At this stage, the team is energised and focused on working together towards a common vision.

- The team shares responsibility for the ongoing development of a rich and evolving quality service
- Regular cycles of reflection and inquiry ensure that all aspects of service policies and practices are evaluated to ensure ongoing improvement
- Relationships are based on mutual respect and support

Building a Team

How can I be an effective team member?

To be an effective team member you need to:

- Trust other team members and value their knowledge and contributions
- Understand the roles and responsibilities expected of you and of other educators
- Be flexible and supportive of other team members
- Notice when others are under pressure and share the load
- Understand the way the service operates
- Share information, experiences, knowledge and skills with other educators
- Understand the program's policies and procedures
- Be able to take on extra responsibilities where necessary
- Work in partnership with others
- Be involved in decision making
- Be professional at all times
- Communicate freely and respectfully with each other

A 'strengths based approach' is a way of working together that creates teams that are open to ongoing development. This approach is 'concerned with people's strengths and aspirations ... as opposed to concern with problems and what people are doing wrong' (McCashen, 2004, p11). Instead of a deficit focus, there is

a focus on capacities, insights, learning and hopefulness. A strengths based approach involves working with the following assumptions about yourself, other team members and the team as a whole.

- All people have strength and capacities
- People can change
- People are the experts on their own situation
- The problem is the problem; the person is not the problem
- Problems can blind people from noticing and appreciating their strength and their capacity to find solutions
- When people appreciate their strengths they are free to learn and grow

Top Tips for Building Your Strengths at Work

Tip Number 1 -Learn what your strengths are and cultivate them.

We are happier, healthier and far more productive when we are able to incorporate our strengths into our work and our lives on a daily basis. If you do not know what your strengths are or you would like some clarification, a good starting point is to do the (free) VIA Signature Strengths survey online www.viasurvey.org developed by Seligman and Peterson (2002). They have found through their research that people's most satisfying experiences (whether work or personal) come from drawing upon and utilising character strengths. We are most energised and engaged when we are playing to and/or finding new ways of using our strengths, rather than spending time and energy on things in which we are stifled.

For example, you may have a top strength of noticing and appreciating beauty: how do you express that in your influence over the look and feel of the environment you work in? How do you express that with the children you work with, for example, helping them notice the blossoms of spring or feeling the beat of an energetic song?

Others may have a strength of persistence – how do you use this and model this with your colleagues/staff and the children you work with? Demonstrating and verbalising the value of 'sticking at' a hard puzzle or persevering to uncover the strengths of a child with challenging behaviour?

Tip Number 2 – Find ways to use your strengths at work.

People want to be happy at work and to derive meaning from what they do. After family relationships and financial situation; work ranks number three as an influence on our level of happiness at any given time (Layard, 2005). Csikszentmihaly's (2002) work on 'moments of flow', (where people are 'in the zone', time disappears and they are completely engaged in what they are doing), found that we experience a majority of our 'flow' moments at work (over 70%). This is despite our deep-seated cultural associations of work with pain and leisure with pleasure.

Tip Number 3 – Help others recognise and cultivate their strengths.

Work with your colleagues to set goals and objectives that align with their strengths and values. An example is that if someone has 'kindness' in their top five strengths, they may grow and be empowered by mentoring a new or more junior staff member. Also ask your team members to think through how they employ their strengths in a work perspective (and this may take some reflection – it's not a question people are asked every day), and they will be able to give you some insights that you can build upon together.

Tip Number 4 - Give yourself (and others) permission to be human

We learn from painful emotions and experiences. We especially learn from our mistakes. Reflecting on the journey is a way of making our experiences and growth richer and stronger.

Self Help Question 3

What do you consider to be your strengths when working in your team?

Identify the strengths of 3 other team members

Mechanisms for Team Building

Building regular practices and activities that foster team work help to produce a work culture where individuals are able to contribute to the operation of the service and work with colleagues from a basis of mutual respect and effective communication. To have an effective and efficient team requires regular maintenance. Continuous building of strong respectful relationships between educators is vital and should be incorporated into service practise.

Effective and efficient teams recognise that everyone can contribute to decisions about what is done in the workplace and how it is done. Ensuring that educators are involved in decision-making and regularly encouraging all team members to discuss their ideas, challenges and suggestions is important.

'A lively culture of professional inquiry is established when early childhood educators and those with whom they work are all involved in an ongoing cycle of review through which current practices are examined, outcomes reviewed and new ideas generated' (Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2009, p13).

The more informal and structured opportunities for educators to collaborate together the better. Creative use of times and rosters may make it possible to arrange for regular gatherings of small groups of educators to work on something together. These groups may consist of people working on a service wide project, educators who work in the same room or with the same age group, or educators with a common interest such as all studying towards a qualification.

Educators' Meetings

Regular 'whole of staff' meetings are essential. Most services aim to have them monthly. Important principles to bear in mind during meetings include:

- Everyone has a right to be heard
- Everyone has a right to contribute
- Everyone deserves to be treated with respect
- Everyone has a right to confidentiality (McCashen, 2004, p40).

An agenda for the meeting should be available prior to the meeting and should be used to guide the meeting. All educators should have the opportunity to contribute items for the agenda. Each meeting needs a facilitator and a person to take minutes. These roles can be done regularly by the same people or rotated amongst the team. Minutes of key points, decisions and actions need to be recorded. At the start of each meeting, checking back through minutes of the last meeting ensures follow through. Discuss recorded actions and any business arising from these.

As time for discussion as a group is precious, it is important that the facilitator keeps the meeting on track, ensures that the group makes decisions and allows time for thorough discussion of important topics.

Meeting Warm Ups and Team Building Activities

Starting meetings with a warm up activity is a good way to help everyone focus on being together for the meeting and is a great way of building the team.

They can be as easy as going around the room and inviting everyone to share a highlight from their week, or a personal detail or interest – eg their favourite holiday spot, or something people may not know about them. For a large group or a group with members who are developing confidence speaking in a group it can work well to break into pairs or small groups for this part of the meeting. Have people pair up with educators they do not usually work together or do not know well, allow 5 minutes for sharing on a set topic. When the group gets back together, a quick discussion around the circle with everyone sharing one sentence about what they heard from their partner can be useful and fun.

These 'Getting to Know You' exercises are a wonderful way to introduce new educators to an established team and to deepen relationships. The content of the activities can be adapted to suit the level of familiarity and confidence of team members. Everyone will learn something different about the other person and this can help break down any barriers. These activities can also highlight particular strengths or talents of individuals in the team that may not have been seen before in a particular person. These exercises also create unity within a team.

Warm Up Activity Ideas

Make a line in order of...

Pick a topic and ask the team to get up and form a curvy line around the room in order based on a certain criteria. For example the criteria could be how many kilometres people live from the service – the person who lives closest to the service would be at the head of the line, with the next closest standing beside them etc and the last person would live the furthest away. Usually there are a few moments of happy chaos while everyone gets up and moves around talking to each other to figure out their place in the line. Once the line is formed go quickly along it with each person saying their name (if there are new team members in the group) and in this instance how many kilometres away they live. Other ideas for criteria could be how long team members have worked at the service, birthdays across the year, or distance from where they were born. When picking criteria be careful and make sure that you don't ask people to order themselves on potentially sensitive criteria like height.

Pick an object that sums up how you are feeling

Have a wide ranging and random collection of small objects on a tray (have more than the number of team members present). Objects could include shells, feathers, stationery, ornaments, toy animals, small kitchen items or jewellery. Ask each person to pick something that is a symbolic of a particular topic for example how their week has gone, what they appreciate about the team, what they want to achieve this year, or why they have chosen to work in children's services. Ask people to then share in pairs, small groups or with the whole group something about why they picked their item.

Professional Learning and Development

Professional learning and development opportunities are an important part of team building. It is important that all professional development opportunities are meaningful. Identifying professional support needs for individuals and the whole team can be done as part of annual service strategic planning or during the staff appraisal process. At other times they emerge in response to specific situations at the service. To support this, services are encouraged to look at their annual budget and allow an appropriate amount of funding. A recommendation is between 1.5% and 3% of total salary and allowances. This amount is to cover training fees and may also cover relief staff if required.

Training sessions offer fantastic professional development and learning opportunities focusing on specific topics and areas of learning. However, it is important to remember that professional development can go beyond this. Increasing knowledge and skills can be done through study, travel, research, workshops or courses, apprenticeships, mentoring, visiting other services and observation of others work practices and service operations.

Participating in professional learning together with other educators or as a whole team maximises the benefits and increases the likelihood that learnings will be applied in the service.

Social Events

Social events give people the chance to get to know each other outside of the work environment. People act differently outside work pressures and a social event is an easy way to get to know everyone better. It is important that while everyone feels welcome and included that these occasions are not seen as compulsory. Some activities or timing may not be suitable for all educators for a range of reasons so it is important to make sure that across the year at least some of the social activities that are arranged are acceptable for the diverse educators' group.

Some suggestions:

- Social dinners through the year
- Christmas dinners
- After work drinks
- Social functions with the committee members
- Birthday celebrations
- Day trips, excursions

Educator Surveys and Other Written Communication Tools

Some people will always be more comfortable expressing themselves in writing and it is important to build formal and informal opportunities for educators to communicate in this way.

Educator surveys can be a source of input into service operations. This feedback should be used constructively to ensure suggestions are taken into account and used to continually improve the service. This process also encourages people to be honest.

Using journals or diaries to document the thinking of educators on a particular topic over time is an interesting and rich way of capturing the team's journey. Journals can be about any area of interest for the team such as philosophy, sustainability, a curriculum area or a service project. They can include articles of interest, photographs, and the reflections and comments of educators. Have them available for all educators to read and contribute to.

Self Help Question 4

List two things your service already does that helps to build the team

Choose another team building mechanism that you would like to try at your service and explain why you think it would be helpful

When the Team is Struggling

Teamwork relies on every person to be committed. If this does not happen, the team becomes a group of individuals who are moving in different directions.

When mutual cooperation and support breaks down, people can often feel like this:

- I do not feel valued
- My goals are different from yours
- I work harder than anyone else
- I do not need to bother about it, someone else will do it
- Morale is low
- I do not treat others with respect
- I do not value other people's skills and knowledge
- I do not know my role and responsibilities
- Are people talking about me behind my back?
- I do not like coming to work
- I hate meetings, nothing is ever resolved
- I do not have a voice; I am not heard
- I do not like working with.....

Self Help Question 5

Have you said or thought any of the above statements recently?

What positive step can you take to address the problems underlying these statements?

When teams are struggling, individual team members can help address this by ensuring that they

- Treat each other with respect
- Listen to the views of other team members
- Share the day's responsibilities
- Are willing to pull their weight
- Communicate their ideas without dominating others
- Try resolving conflicts – not adding to them
- Are appreciative of the different abilities, values and backgrounds of other team members
- Are sensitive to the needs and demands of the team
- See the problem as the problem – not other team members

Read through the list below and across a week tick each time across that you do any of the following

- I discussed a pleasant, funny or happy event that happened at work with another team member.
- I was able to talk about a situation that made me feel frustrated or angry with another team member without blaming them
- I listened empathetically to a team member who was not having a good day
- I gave positive feedback to a team member
- Another team member was very busy so I willingly did one of their tasks
- I had a discussion with another team member about how we could build on something that is working really well at the service

If you managed to achieve any of these items during the week, then you probably made a positive difference to the team and made work more enjoyable and rewarding for yourself and for the whole team.

If you feel there is a significant problem that is impacting on the team, discuss your concerns with the Director / Coordinator /Field Worker and be prepared to work positively to help the situation. Communicating openly and respectfully with all other team members is part of everyone's professional responsibilities and is even more vital in times of team stress. Refer to the service's policies and procedures, which will include a basis for conflict resolution and grievance procedures, if the situation requires this.

Review and Develop Your Own Work Performance

Time is a central ingredient in your daily performance. Assessing how your time is presently used, setting priorities for the best use of your time and eliminating time wasting will further assist your team building skills.

How often have you said the following:

- No one will notice I'm not at the meeting
- It is almost my 'knock off' time, some else can clean that up
- Doing it the right way will take too long. I'll take the short cut instead
- That person looks busy but I really deserve to take things easy for a change
- I don't feel like doing anything today. I'll just do the bare minimum

By looking at your own work performance, you can take an honest look at the areas where you could work differently to support the team

Often work performance begins to decline when educators feel under extreme pressure or when boredom sets in. If you are finding either of these issues affecting you, talk to other team members and the Director/Coordinator/Field Worker. Perhaps the time you have been allocated for certain tasks is insufficient for you to carry it out in a professional and productive manner. Perhaps you have been working on the same set of tasks for too long that you really need a change. Be proactive in finding solutions.

There are many varieties of duties that need to be completed. Some are mundane tasks like washing dishes, tidying the play area, doing the washing etc and others require communication, reflection and problem solving. It is important that all these different components of work are valued, completed thoroughly and shared across the team, where possible.

Think about your performance across all your different work responsibilities. Are you participating enthusiastically and effectively in all these different areas?

Setting Personal Goals

Setting personal goals is a valuable tool in any aspect of our lives. They help us to realistically achieve our dreams. There are short-term and long-term goals that need to be set when we want to achieve something productive and positive in our lives. Your first priority is to set achievable goals. They should be easily attainable and completed in a designated time frame.

Short term goals can be as simple as:

- Being ready for work on time or 5 minutes earlier to calmly start the day
- Returning from breaks on time
- Writing a learning story each day
- Saying something positive to another educator every day

Long-term goals obviously take more time, and are focused on a more significant change; for example making your work place more environmentally sustainable or introducing portfolios into your documentation. Longer term goals can be achieved by breaking them up into smaller goals that lead you to complete the larger goals.

Self Help Question 6

Think of a long-term goal for the program or yourself.
Break the goal into smaller short-term goals and draw up a time line to achieve it.

Participate in Staff Appraisal Process

'Educators continually seek ways to build their professional knowledge and develop learning communities'
(Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2009, p13).

Annual appraisals are a positive tool to gain an understanding of strengths, challenges and professional learning needs. All educators should have the opportunity to take part in an annual appraisal with the Director/Coordinator of the service. They are an opportunity for reflection and professional goal setting. Usually the educator and the Director/Coordinator complete a simple written form ahead of time and then meet together to discuss the content. It is important to participate honestly and use the opportunity to plan specific strategies for ongoing professional learning and goals setting. These strategies' should include how the educator will be supported by the service to achieve these goals.

Communication

Children's services are busy work places with many things going on at once. It can be difficult to find the time or the way to pass on information to all educators. There needs to be effective communication methods employed, so that all educators are informed of the goings on at the workplace.

The key to good work place relations is communication:

- Meet with educators to discuss issues and problems in a non-blaming manner
- Listen to other educators
- Be mindful of confidentiality and consider where and when you have conversations about sensitive situations
- Never discuss issues about a child in front of other children or parents
- Have regular educator meetings
- Incorporate team building activities into meetings to introduce new educators to the regular team
- Introduce new educators and relief staff to the children and families
- Have a method of communication in place that will inform all educators about important events or information that needs to be shared. You could consider a whiteboard in the staff room or a communication book

Educator Meetings

As discussed earlier educator meetings are an important and integral part of a successful program and an essential communication tool

Meetings are an opportunity to:

- Share and discuss successes, ideas and challenges
- Share information
- Discuss programming and policy issues
- Discuss relevant information on children/families
- Debrief on any relevant issues that have occurred

Daily Communication Book

A Communication Book is useful for centre based services, for day to day information that needs to be passed on to all educators attending on that day.

Items can include:

- Educators' roster
- Messages for educators and children
- Reminders of upcoming events
- Changes to bookings

Everyday, when educators arrive at the program the first thing they need to do is to look at the Communication Book.

Notice Boards

Notice Boards are a great way to catch the attention of visitors, family members, educators or children. A good notice board is eye-catching, clear, bright and changed often, about every 2-3 weeks. If it is not changed regularly, people will lose interest in it very quickly.

Feedback

Make sure you ask for and give feedback that truly helps to build and grow strengths and encourages growth. Feedback can be an area fraught with anxiety. There are those who want 'brutal truth' – they want, value and expect to hear and receive warts and all, 'constructive' feedback. Saying, 'That was okay,' is not enough and may in fact be perceived as being weak. Then there is the other extreme: those who shirk from giving any feedback that could be perceived negatively at all. If stretched, they might use a 'sandwich' approach (a positive, a negative and another positive statement) but the only message the recipient is focusing on is the negative – or they leave the conversation feeling confused.

Think about how you would like to receive feedback, and how others around you do. Be very specific about what you want feedback on, and ask permission or at least give context before providing someone else with difficult feedback. Lose the word 'but' and use more of the word 'and ...' to build upon what someone is already doing well, e.g. "Kate, I like the way you managed your voice and tone in that difficult conversation **and** I think it would also be powerful if you used paraphrasing to show your understanding of the parents' concerns."

Conclusion

Early Childhood Education and Care services are rich, dynamic places where change is ever present. To continually provide inclusive environments that are responsive to children and families, educators need to be provided with the opportunity to continually learn and grow and to have their strengths and contributions acknowledged. Each individual team member can take responsibility for contributing to a strong team. Building mechanisms that support team dialogue and collaboration into service practices is a vital priority.

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Assessment Task

1. List at least three strengths of your team.
2. List at least three strengths you bring to the team (if completing this as a group each team member needs to do this – please attach).
3. Make a written entry in one of your service’s communication places about something positive that you have noticed that is new or different in the service or about what you have appreciated about working in this service. Rewrite it below or attach copies (if completing this as a group, each team member needs to do this).
4. Refer to the 4 Stages of Getting Together as a Team and reflect on where you think your team is at. Write a short paragraph outlining the stage you believe the team to be at and why. Give at least two concrete examples in your answer.
5. Suggest a project or idea that your team could work on together that would help build a cohesive and cooperative work environment.
6. Explain why you feel your idea could benefit you and your team.
7. Write a short paragraph describing your staff meetings – include what works well? How could they be changed to encourage discussion that is more meaningful?
8. What written communication strategies do your service use to communicate with each other? How effective are they?
9. Outline two specific professional learning activities you would like to do individually or as a team and why you would like to do them. Provide a plan for doing them – e.g. locate specific workshops to book into, organise a visit to another service etc.