

FORMULATING A POLICY ABOUT BEHAVIOURAL GUIDANCE

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Busy people typically do not engage in reflection. They rarely treat themselves to reflective experiences, unless they are given some time, some structure, and the expectations to do so... Through reflection, we develop context-specific theories that further our own understanding of our work and generate knowledge to inform future practice.¹

BENEFITS OF FORMAL POLICIES

In general, policies are statements about what services you will offer and how you will deliver them. Although formulating policy is time consuming, the resulting statements can enshrine reasonable work demands, clarify educators' roles and responsibilities, improve coordination and communication across the centre, and harness support for teachers from management and parents.² It has the following additional advantages.

- The process of policy formulation is an opportunity to involve parents and staff collaboratively³ and gives them a forum to communicate their sense of shared purpose.⁴
- It offers caregivers/teachers and parents clear expectations of their roles, rights and responsibilities.⁵ Its procedures can guide action when there is a difference of opinion between staff, families or management.⁶
- The process of reviewing practice allows problems and grievances to be aired.⁷ This will be healthy as long as it shifts onto focusing on solutions and does not degenerate into gossip about particular children and families.
- The process of formulating a policy allows you to plan in advance how to respond to disruptiveness rather than having to make hasty reactive decisions.
- A policy can be the basis for planning staff development.⁸
- It clarifies how staff can obtain support to deal with demanding behaviours.
- Written documentation helps to familiarise new staff and parents with the philosophy and workings of the centre.
- Written policies assist with evaluation and accountability, enshrining safeguards for parents, children and staff.⁹
- Consultation with parents increases the likelihood that they will understand and support your practices.

By far the most important advantage, however, comes not from the policy document itself, but from the process of developing it. This gives staff and parents the opportunity to clarify their views.¹⁰ Therefore, you cannot simply adopt the policy of another centre or preschool, as a policy acquires its power from the process of clarifying the assumptions which underpin practices. This process also requires that any subsequent changes in practice become embedded in the culture of the setting.

PRE-PLANNING

A first step of drafting a discipline policy will be to motivate staff to review its present policy and practices. This will entail helping team members to identify the need for change by recognising the shortcomings of present practices, without assigning blame for these and thus inviting resistance or defensiveness, but instead exciting a sense of anticipation at the possibility that innovations will produce improvements.¹¹ Their commitment to change will depend on the quality of the information they can access, their sense of control (self-efficacy) over the changes, confidence so that they can ride out the early stages of uncertainty and level of support they receive.¹²

Next, an appointed staff member will collate your present policy and others that affect it. Third, you will gather resources to inform you of your options, or source some professional development training on discipline. The final step will be to discuss with staff and parents their views of present practices and suggested adaptations in order to meet their objectives for children's behaviour.

This information will be collated and discussed in a series of meetings on each of the elements of policy: philosophy, goals, theory and preventive and interventive practices. During these discussions, you will need to consider how to incorporate differences in individuals' views and whether you expect majority consensus or require 100 per cent endorsement by all staff. In instances where staff can use their own style without affecting the overall program, there can be some latitude in opinion, but where the tone of the setting is impeded by inappropriate practices, differences in style will need somehow to be resolved. At this stage, you will also need to give some thought to how you can sustain changes evoked by the new policy. Staff can feel awkward when employing new methods and therefore will need support until they become familiar and more comfortable with new approaches so that their sense of competency is restored.¹³

COMPONENTS OF A POLICY

Discipline is a process for helping children to learn and to gain personal skills: it is not an end in itself. Therefore, a policy statement about behaviour must include far more than statements about how staff will intervene with disruptive behaviour. It will specify the influences on your practices – namely, your theoretical knowledge of both education and discipline and identify the constraints imposed by your mandate and features of your setting. In light of these, your discipline policy will document preventive and interventive practices that align with your beliefs, values and goals.

Mandate

Any policy that you generate will need to be framed within guidelines such as the code of ethical conduct for early childhood professionals.¹⁴ In addition, your funding body might have its own sets of policies that your service is expected to observe. Typically, however, these general statements offer broad guidelines only, usually leaving day-to-day decisions about implementation to individual services. This is as it should be, as educators are more effective when they can exercise some professional discretion.¹⁵

Philosophical beliefs

This section of your policy needs to make explicit the following beliefs.

- Behavioural mistakes in children are as inevitable as developmental ones. If we punished children for making behavioural mistakes, we would be punishing them for being children.
- Although behavioural mistakes are normal and inevitable, we need to teach children ways of meeting their needs that do not violate the needs of others. That is, the strategies that they use must be considerate.
- Children's behaviours are an attempt to meet a need. They are not a response to external consequences.
- Children do well not because of consequences, rules, or a discipline policy. They do well because they can. When they are not behaving well, therefore, they need extra support to do so.

You will need to check that your practices section does not contradict this by detailing controlling methods.¹⁶

Values

A discipline policy will need to take account of staff members' personal and professional values. Although staff cannot be expected to reach consensus on these, individuals' values contribute to their goals, about which some agreement will be necessary.

Goals

In light of caregivers/teachers' professional values, your disciplinary policy must specify your educational goals for children's intellectual, social, emotional, physical and cultural growth. These might include, for example, facilitating children's competence across all developmental domains, encouraging their positive dispositions towards learning, providing emotional support for children, and building a supportive community.

Your second cluster of goals will be disciplinary. In general, your overall aim will probably be to create a well-disciplined environment in which the adults can work and children can learn. Beyond this, your specific behavioural goals will be to teach considerate behaviour (in contrast with ensuring behavioural compliance). Aiming to teach considerate behaviour requires the use of guidance practices and is more likely to align with your educational beliefs and goals.

Theory

The first part of your theory section will detail your educational theory. You can select from a top-down or teacher-directed model of education versus a constructivist, child-centred model.

The next section will give a brief overview of the theory of discipline that you endorse. Your choice broadly will be between a behaviourist view of the world which uses rewards and punishments to control children's behaviours, versus a guidance approach that uses acknowledgment (informative feedback) and teaching emotional self-control.

Given that your theory of discipline cannot contradict your educational beliefs, you will need to ensure that these two aspects of theory are consistent with each other. Children will not profit from the mixed messages that we see them as being active in forming their understandings of the world and aim to do things *with* them to further these understandings, when in contrast we revert to doing things *to* them when they behave in thoughtless ways.

Enabling and constraining aspects of your setting

Practitioners will need support to implement disciplinary methods. Therefore, you will need to conduct an audit to determine if the necessary resources and supports are indeed available. When constraints are unavoidable – such as a challenging physical environment, large group size or a socially disadvantaged community – you will need to plan ways to surmount these.

Practices

The next section of your policy will describe what practices are to be used and by whom. These procedures will focus on how you will organise your program so that most behavioural difficulties are prevented and those that do occur receive a constructive response.¹⁷ As prevention is far more powerful than intervention, that aspect will be the largest part of your practices section.

Monitoring and assessment methods

As a universal preventive measure, you will need to plan procedures to monitor children's behaviour so that you will know when problems are arising and can respond promptly.¹⁸ Secondary prevention will entail assessing individual children's learning needs and behaviour in order to judge if they need a more targeted intervention.

Recognition of considerate behaviour

In this section you will need to determine your collective view about the use of informative versus judgmental feedback (that is, acknowledgment versus praise) for children's achievements and prosocial behaviour.

Layered responses to disruptions

Your policy must incorporate three levels of responses to disciplinary issues: universal prevention, secondary prevention and solutions, in that order of magnitude. Primary or universal prevention strategies are supportive measures aimed at preventing disruptions by meeting children's needs. Your primary measures can also widen their focus to supporting parents and the wider community.

Your secondary or supportive interventions aimed at avoiding future disruptions include supporting children to practise assertiveness and emotional self-control. Secondary prevention will also entail gathering comprehensive assessments for children whose behavioural difficulties could be the expression of developmental or family difficulties. This may require recommending to parents that they consult relevant specialists.

The third level of practice comprises short- and long-term solutions to ongoing difficulties, such as aggression, separation distress or bullying. Given an emphasis on prevention, this section of your policy should be the smallest. Nevertheless, it must be explicit because vague recommendations – for example, advising staff to use 'positive measures' in response to disruptive behaviour – can mean different things to different people and generate confusion and ineffective practice.

Parental participation

The policy will need to declare an intention to seek parents' advice and support with any behavioural issues that arise with their children. It will also state how you will engage parents in the process of policy formulation.

Collegial support

Next, your policy needs to state the practical measures staff will use to support each other to empower their problem solving, to deal with a severe disturbance, to cope with its aftermath and to plan long-term solutions to chronically disruptive behaviour.¹⁹

Use of consultants

Your policy should include a statement about the use of consultants: when, how and to whom educators could recommend parents for child assessment and family support. To that end, it can be useful for each service to collate a list of relevant private practitioners social service agencies.

Special issues

Your discipline policy will need to refer to specific issues such as catering for children with additional learning needs, equity issues, and child protection and abuse.

EVALUATION OF THE POLICY

The final section of your policy will detail how, when and who will evaluate the effectiveness of its procedures. Once the practices have been in place for enough time to allow them to take effect, individual staff could keep a tally over a brief period of the number and type of disruptions they have responded to, and which interventions they used. Less formal means include discussions in staff meetings and impressions of workers' morale, stress levels or work satisfaction.

To guide your reflection, you could consider the following questions, negative answers to which will indicate a need to change practices.²⁰

- Is your discipline plan and its practices consistent with your philosophy, values, goals and theory?
- Are your recommendations realistic? Do they reflect actual practice, or are they a 'wish list'?
- Are the procedures being enacted as originally devised?

- Are the practices achieving what you set out to accomplish?
- Are there other, important, unanticipated outcomes?
- Are there children for whom the procedures are more or less successful than others?
- What additional resources (including materials and personnel) are needed to make practices more effective? Are these available?

As well as assessing these outcomes, you will need to evaluate the effectiveness of inputs – such as the resources being used, the efficient use of teachers' time and the involvement of parents.²¹ Conducting a critique of practices does not imply criticism or disapproval, but an effort to make practices and their underlying beliefs visible and open to scrutiny in order to question convention and instead discover what is possible.²²

CONCLUSION

Above all, the policy that you arrive at has to be a living document: one that is relevant, owned, communicated, practised and regularly reviewed.²³ It will need to be adjusted to reflect changes in your centre brought about by staff turnover and the enrolment of new children and families.²⁴ Although the process of planning and evaluating practices might appear burdensome, it can be professionally fulfilling and confidence building to have the opportunity to reflect on your practice and to demonstrate its positive outcomes.

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NOTES

- 1 Killion and Todnem (1991: 14)
- 2 Hart et al. 2000; Rutter 1983
- 3 Stonehouse 1991
- 4 Mathieson & Price 2002
- 5 Stonehouse 1991
- 6 Farmer 1995
- 7 Strain & Joseph 2004
- 8 Mathieson & Price 2002
- 9 Farmer 1995; Stonehouse 1991
- 10 Stonehouse 1991
- 11 Ebbeck & Waniganayake 2003; Rodd 2006
- 12 Ebbeck & Waniganayake 2003
- 13 Rodd 2006
- 14 See: Early Childhood Australia 2006; NAEYC 1989; NCAC 1993
- 15 Lewis 1997
- 16 Lewis 1997; Porter 1999
- 17 Cowin et al. 1990
- 18 Rutter & Maughan 2002
- 19 Gamman 2003
- 20 Borland 2003; Cowin et al. 1990; Sharp & Thompson 1994
- 21 Davis & Rimm 2004
- 22 Kilderry 2004
- 23 Drifte 2004; Roffey 2004
- 24 Mathieson & Price 2002