Making newcomers welcome

Children’s transitions into an OSHC service can be challenging for both the children and the service. Children may not know one another and are often not known by staff on the first day.

**Before and after school care**

It helps if you think of times when you were new to a situation – a new job or a new school, for example. Especially when others are familiar with each other and the setting, when you are the only new person, it can feel lonely, frightening, stressful and generally quite unpleasant. As OSHC staff, you want to make the experience of coming into the service as positive as possible for every child.

Some general suggestions follow.

- Meet the parents and the child before the first day. Get some information about the child ahead of time from the parents and directly from the child if possible. If possible, talk to the child ahead of time about how things work, what the routine is, what the rules are and what kinds of activities are offered. Give a tour of the service.

- Find out ahead of time what the child’s interests are, and try to build in at least one of those for the child’s first few days. This should be done unobtrusively, without calling attention to the new child unless you’re sure the child is comfortable about that.

- Be ready and welcoming. Be sure you know when a child is first coming. Greet him or her warmly.

- If there are children who are receptive to the role, ask a couple of children to look after the new child, not just the first day, but until he or she makes some new friends. Of course, if there are children in the service who already know the child and who are suitable, ask them. Forcing a child to be the ‘welcomer’ is likely to be unsuccessful.

- Consider assigning a particular staff member to pay particular attention to the new child and form the beginning of a relationship. Often one comfortable relationship is needed in a new situation to form a foundation for making others.

- Some children, just as is true with adults, may enjoy being singled out to the group as new, while others may feel very uncomfortable. Try to find out what the new child’s preferences would be. If a child is visibly different to most of the other children in some way, for example skin colour or because of a disability, the child may be even more reluctant to be singled out.

- Respect individual differences. Some children will move right into the group, while others will take some time. They may want to stand back and observe for a time instead of plunging right in enthusiastically. Some children are much more outgoing than others; some are more confident; some are more comfortable than others in large groups. Some children may react to being uncomfortable by being loud and inappropriately assertive or aggressive, or generally socially clumsy. If that’s what you think is happening, try to help the child find more acceptable ways to relate to others and become an accepted member of the group.

- Don’t stop paying attention once the child has been in the service for a day or a week. Behaviour and relationships can change once the novelty of the situation has worn off.

- Most importantly, work continually to establish and strengthen a sense of belonging and community in the service, where children respect and care for one another.

**Vacation care**

Vacation care presents considerable challenges:

- It may draw children from a broad geographic area, or different areas.

- Some children do not know anyone else when they begin. Some children will know one another, but it is unlikely that any child will know almost everyone.

- A vacation care program is brief in duration.

- Attendance in vacation care is often not continuous.

- Staff may commence their employment only very shortly before the program commences, leaving little or no time to even familiarise themselves with the children’s background.
Another significant issue is that often the program has to be partially planned before vacation care begins, in part because selections are made by children and their families on the basis of what is planned.

Vacation care:
• will be more activity focused than relationships focused
• will not revolve closely around specific interests of individual children
• can’t be as responsive to observations and insights gained during the time the program is running as before and after school care can.

Suggestions for personalising vacation care include the following:
• Make good use of enrolment forms. Think about what information to ask that can inform the service plans. Ask questions about favourite activities, sports and other interests. Read these before planning the program, and try to gain from them some general information about what is likely to be popular.
• In the beginning organise some games, activities and discussions where children talk about their interests and past experience. This is useful both for staff getting to know children and children getting to know one another.
• Think carefully about the trade-off between having definite plans in place beforehand and the benefits of leaving some openings that arise from children’s interests. A bit of both may be the best solution. Where there is some flexibility and choice it is wise to discuss possibilities with children and, where possible, accommodate their preferences.
• Provide choices and a variety of experiences, materials and equipment that will cater to a wide range of ages, interests, and individual preferences. A service that locks itself into activities being offered one at a time where everyone is expected to participate is less likely to cater well for children than one that offers choice most of the time.

The aim of any OSHC service is for children to feel comfortable, welcomed and engaged with what is happening. This takes time when a child or the group of children is new, but it can happen.

Links to Shared visions
Chapter 5: Relationships, p. 67-71
Links with families

Questions and reflections
1. Think about situations in your past when you were new to a group that already existed. How did you feel? What helped?
2. Similarly, think about a situation where you were with people and no one knew anyone else. How did you feel? What helped?
3. What are the most useful kinds of questions to ask on a vacation care enrolment form (other than the essential ones) that will give some guidance about planning an interesting program?
4. How much does vacation care have to be planned in advance, and what can be left until the program begins?