

Managing complaints in early learning



Receiving a complaint is often an unexpected part of running any business, including a child care or early learning service. No business is immune from receiving a complaint, regardless of how successful it is or how customer focused staff are. There can be a tendency to see a complaint as a personal criticism rather than constructive feedback. However, there can be positive outcomes when the situation is managed appropriately.

Why do people complain?

There are many reasons why parents might complain about an early learning centre and the service they've received. Sometimes a complaint will almost be expected following an incident; sometimes it will take you by complete surprise. Understanding why people may complain can assist with managing a complaint if it occurs and potentially reducing the likelihood of further complaints. The following are some of the reasons why people may feel the need to complain.

High expectations – consumer expectations are increasingly high when engaging professional services. This is particularly for early learning services.

When a parent leaves their child with a service, they will have understandably high expectations regarding the level of care and supervision that will be provided to their child.

Unrealistic expectations – it is also possible that at times parents may have slightly unrealistic expectations about what they can expect from an early learning service. It's therefore important that a service assists their parents to be clear and fully informed about the types of care and education they provide to children. Having this information documented and readily available to parents, for example on your website or in brochures provided before children enroll, can be beneficial. Encourage parents to ask questions so that expectations can be discussed and appropriately managed.

Emotional motives – some parents may struggle with separation anxiety as much as their child. Some may even feel a sense of guilt when leaving their child with an educator who is initially a stranger. This level of emotion may contribute to the level of expectation they have regarding the quality of care provided.

To inform and be heard – parents may wish to make a complaint about an incident simply so they are sure you and your staff are aware of what has occurred and how they feel. They may complain so they're listened to and acknowledged, especially if their child has been impacted. Not all complaints will lead to a formal demand for compensation; sometimes people want to receive information about how the incident is being managed to ensure it doesn't arise again.

Belief that someone is responsible – when something goes wrong we often try to determine who's responsible. Sometimes someone is obviously responsible, sometimes it's hard to determine who's responsible and other times there is no one person responsible but it's just an unfortunate set of circumstances. However, if a parent thought something had gone wrong and this might have led to a poor outcome, such as an injury to their child, it's quite possible they may complain with the intention of holding someone responsible and possibly liable.

The importance of managing complaints

There may sometimes be a temptation to ignore a complaint and hope it'll just go away. Maybe the parent won't follow up. Maybe the incident won't occur again. This is a very short-sighted way to run any business as there are clear benefits to appropriately managing complaints.

Parents would understandably expect to see their complaint dealt with quickly and fairly. When this doesn't happen it's possible that further complaints will follow, and the issue or concern could become a much greater one. Complaints may also escalate to other people or organisations, such as your Regulatory Authority.

Managing complaints should be seen as good 'customer service'. You rely on parents and families to keep your business afloat. When customers are unhappy with a service they can talk with their feet by not returning to the service. Keeping parents happy and satisfied is more likely to see them continue to use your service and recommend you to others.

Complaints can provide an early learning service with an opportunity to review and improve their service. Receiving a complaint may highlight an issue which the service had not been aware of. When investigating and dealing with the complaint, the service may wish to consider a change in a procedure to avoid that issue arising again in the future.

How to manage complaints

It's advisable that all early learning services have a complaints policy. This means that the service will have an agreed-to process which allows for all complaints to be dealt with in a fair and consistent manner. It also means staff know what to do which is important as managing complaints can be a challenging.

A key aspect in dealing with any complaint is listening to the person. Where possible, make time to sit down in a quiet space and give them time to express their concerns. Make the effort to hear what they have to say and take on board what they have told you. You may not agree with all they are saying, however it helps if you can try to understand the situation from their

perspective. You may wish to ask them to document their concerns so you both have an accurate record of the matter. Avoid being defensive or taking the complaint personally as this may inflame the situation.

With low level complaints you may be able to offer a solution there and then. However, this won't always be the case. With more serious complaints you should provide the person with an assurance that you'll investigate the matter and get back to them with a response at a later date.

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