



In Practice: Code of Ethics for Parents? Dr Brenda Abbey

Introducing a Code of Conduct for Parents (CCP) is a hot topic in the early education and care sector at the moment. The CCP would set out the actions, behaviours and conduct expected of parents in their dealings with staff, students, volunteers, other parents and children while at the service.

The catalyst for a CCP appears to be the increasing number of educators who feel the need to be shielded from aggressive and verbally abusive parents. One educator summed up her service's CCP as "I can't remember all the ins and outs but it protects us from having to endure abusive parents".

Over the past weeks, I have read the CCPs of a number of services and have collated some of the most frequent inclusions below. Parents will:

- Communicate positively with educators (i.e. always speak in respectful tones and use positive language).
- Display respect for all people while at the service and never use raised voices or threatening language which might intimidate or humiliate staff, children or other visitors.
- Communicate positively with all children (i.e. do not discipline any child other than your own).
- Follow the grievance procedure when expressing concerns or complaints to educators.
- Pay accounts promptly.
- Report any hazard in the building or playground

that may cause injury.

- Respect the property of the service, and other people's property, privacy and confidentiality.
- Come to the service unaffected by drugs or alcohol.
- Notify the service of any absences due to illness within an acceptable time-frame.
- Work collaboratively with educators to resolve any behavioural issues as they arise.
- Read the parent notice-board, newsletters and flyers, and discuss them with your children when appropriate.
- Follow the service's absence and cancellation procedures.
- Be a positive role model to children at all times when at the service.
- Understand that the curriculum is play-based.
- Accept cultural differences, differing needs and differing personalities.

In addition, some services feel it necessary to accompany their CCP with strong statements such as: "A breach of this Code may have serious consequences including denial of service or a mandatory report to authorities"; or, "Aggressive and abusive behaviour towards staff or anyone else is unacceptable, will not be tolerated and is not something we want in our service".

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* NOTE: Conditions apply.

In Practice: *continued*

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I genuinely question whether a CCP alone, even when accompanied by strong directives, will result in all parties communicating to one another with respect and understanding at all times. The answer is more than just a CCP.

As I see it, we are more likely to achieve the desired outcome if educators possess the understanding, knowledge and practices required to confidently, and competently, manage difficult conversations with difficult parents. In addition, educators need to be able to manage these conversations when they are also: supervising children; greeting parents on arrival/ departure and exchanging pertinent information; ensuring children are only collected by an approved person; returning medications, and so on. In addition, and in all likelihood, these conversations will occur in front of other parents, other adults and children.

Rather than a CCP, services may like to consider a proactive approach to help their educators manage these conversations. Some elements of this approach would be:

- *Develop clear, concise policies and detailed procedures* on the topics identified as contentious issues within the service. Some issues we have all had experience with are: a parent demanding the service deny access to the other parent without a court order or to act outside of a court order; a parent disciplining a child other than their own; a parent seemingly intoxicated or otherwise unfit to collect their child; a parent told that their child has been bitten; an unwell child being brought to the service; parents arriving late to collect their child; and, late or non-payment of fees. When policies

and procedures follow best practice and comply with legislation and recognised guidelines, educators can be confident in their approach.

- *Develop factsheets* on the contentious topics, and store them where educators can readily access them when a parent raises any topic. The factsheets need to be empathic yet factual and consistent with the service's policies and procedures. Educators can refer to the pertinent factsheet during their discussion with a parent, and give the parent a copy to keep. Using a factsheet has a number of advantages because it: depersonalises the discussion by directing the focus onto the written word; provides the educator with words and a structure to the response at a time when it can be difficult to think on their feet; and, educates the parent about the centre's approach and the rationale, including regulatory requirements, for that approach.
- *Restructure Complaint Forms* so that parents write their concern(s) first then provide their name, address and contact details at the bottom. (We all know it can be irritating to be asked for these personal details before you have had your say.)

Most of us have witnessed how a skilful recipient manages an aggrieved person behaving badly. No Code of Practice, no matter how carefully and positively crafted, can achieve the same result – either in the short or the long term.

Implement a Code of Practice for Parents if it suits your circumstances. However, also proactively support your staff in managing difficult conversations with difficult parents no matter when and where they are held.



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