

# Building workplace relationships in early learning services



Most of us spend a considerable amount of our waking hours at work. We may spend more time with our work colleagues and customers than with our own families and loved ones. Therefore, our workplace relationships are a significant part of our lives.

Building healthy and effective relationships at work is not about making best friends. We can work well with people we aren't friends with. However, just like our personal relationships, building and maintaining work relationships is not easy. Yet when we manage to do so, there are many benefits.

## Important relationships in early learning

For an educator within an early learning service, there are three important relationships they need to build and nurture.

### 1. Colleagues

Working in an early learning service can be quite a demanding and busy job. For the service to function effectively it's necessary that all staff, not just the educators, work well together.

### 2. Parents and other family members

The parents of children are a very important element of an early learning service. They decide which service they will have their child attend and how often. A positive relationship with parents may make them more comfortable with leaving their children with the service.

### 3. Children

Obviously children are a key relationship for any early learning staff member. Whilst the children may not make the decision to attend the service, their happiness and contentment when at the service will be very important to their parents.

## Why building relationships can be difficult

A relationship is defined as a connection between two or more people. However sometimes the connection isn't by choice. For those of us who are not responsible for staff recruitment, we're expected to work with, and therefore spend a great deal of time with, people we have not chosen to have a connection with. Our work connections are forced connections and sometimes there is little more than work in common.

Some of these relationships can easily turn into meaningful and enjoyable relationships when we find ourselves getting along well with someone in the workplace. However this isn't always the case. Unfortunately, sometimes we just don't 'click' with the people we interact with at work.

Relationships in the workplace can also be challenging as we are often so busy when at work. We aren't there to primarily work on a relationship; we're there to do our jobs. And sometimes the pressures and demands of a busy job can add a strain to these relationships. We're also rarely taught how

to build a relationship. While it is something we can learn informally through life experiences, we usually only receive little, if any, formal training about the importance of relationships and how to develop them.

## Why effective workplace relationships are important

Effective workplace relationships serve a number of purposes. The more we get along with someone, the more we're likely to work well with them. Our teamwork and support for each other will improve and this can lead to our work being more productive and successful. Working well with someone is also likely to lead to us enjoying our work more. And when we're enjoying being at work, our performance and productivity can improve.

From a work health and safety perspective, respectful relationships in the workplace are related to greater job satisfaction, effective teamwork as well as reduced sick leave and staff turnover. Respectful relationships help prevent bullying and other negative behaviours in the workplace. An early learning service that is characterised as respectful creates a positive atmosphere for workers, parents and children.

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Even when there is a great working relationship with colleagues, we can still encounter problems or conflicts in the workplace. This is a normal part of any workplace; we can't expect to always agree and get along. However, having a sound relationship where staff feel they can be open and honest with each other will assist when trying to deal with issues. Guild Insurance sees many claims every year that relate to workplace issues. In some of these cases it appears that the staff members involved have not been able to, or tried to, sit down together to discuss the matter, understand the different perspectives and come to an agreement before taking it further.

Relationships with children who attend your service and their parents are vital to the success of your business as they're your customers; without them you don't have a business. Developing a relationship with both children and parents assists to develop their trust in and respect for you, something needed when leaving a child in the care of another person. It's also possible that good relationships between parents and staff may assist when there is an issue or problem at the service, such as a child injuring them self. The better the relationship, the more likely parents may be understanding if there was an incident involving their child.

## How to build effective relationships

There are many things which can contribute to building an effective relationship in the workplace. Most of us will agree that any relationship requires trust, honesty, open communication and support. Additionally, constructive feedback, positive role models, reliability, the promotion of diversity and equality, recognition of contributions, an agreement of shared goals and collaboration all contribute to positive working relationships.

However, these things don't just happen. People need to be committed to making time to develop and nurture their workplace relationships. This can be done in formal ways such as team meetings or staff development programs on topics such as teamwork or communication. It can also be done informally, such as by taking the time to chat to colleagues about non-work matters and getting to know each other better.

To build an effective relationship it's important to understand and appreciate each person for who they are. We know we're all different in so many ways, yet sometimes in our busy lives this can be forgotten. We can become frustrated when people don't see things the way we do. However, if we use these differences

as a positive by recognising and utilising our different strengths and ideas, we can become much more productive when working together. Differing opinions or disagreements within a working relationship doesn't have to be a bad thing. If used well it can become a positive for the relationship and the workplace.

Active listening is vital in your relationships with colleagues, families and children. Active listening is about not just hearing what the other person is saying but really understanding everything they're saying. You need to show the person that you're hearing them (use eye contact whilst they're talking, don't look away) and respond to them in ways that show you've heard them. You don't have to say you agree with them however by repeating what you've heard shows the person that you've understood them. This is particularly beneficial in situations where there is conflict or other type of challenging conversation.

And finally, don't take your workplace relationships for granted. Like any relationship, they need to be valued, nurtured and repaired if there are problems. Remember that when all is going well in the relationship, there can be significant benefits for you and your workplace.



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