



The unpredictability of an early learning centre

Early learning and childcare centres are dynamic, unpredictable, ever-changing environments. For some educators, it's this type of environment which makes it a fantastic place to work. However, this environment can also make it a hazardous place to work if the risks of an ever-changing environment aren't identified and managed.

All early learning centres have processes in place to be sure the centre is tidy and orderly at the beginning of the day with all furniture and equipment where it should be. However, this rarely lasts long and nor should it. Through the regular activities undertaken throughout the day, many pieces of equipment can end up being left in areas which may create a hazard and lead to an injury to staff and children. Also, it's possible for toys, play equipment and even furniture to become damaged over time and this also creates a hazard. The solution of course isn't to stop the children playing and using what's in the centre. The solution requires all staff who work in centres to be aware of the risks within their environment and what they can do to manage them.

Constant vigilance

Working in an early learning centre requires constant vigilance from all staff. This means staff are always looking around and scanning for risks and hazards which could lead to injuries.

Centres have processes in place where regular inspections are carried out. While these checks are important, they aren't enough. Staff need to be in a habit of being continually on the lookout for risks at all times and in all locations within a centre.

Risks aren't always obvious

There are some risks which will be obvious and that all staff would know to look out for and rectify, such as toys being left in walkways or spilled drinks on the floor. However, this is not the case with all risks. Some are harder to spot and may be unexpected, such as a poorly fitted baby gate closing on a staff member. This further emphasises the need for constant vigilance and not just looking for common risks. It means staff should be continually asking themselves 'What could happen?' and thinking outside the square when answering this.

Don't put it off

It's not uncommon for Guild Insurance to hear of an injury occurring in a centre due to a hazard which had previously been identified yet no action had been taken. This lack of action may be due to other competing priorities, lack of funds or the risk may have not been taken seriously. When a risk or hazard has been identified it's important that it's assessed immediately so the likelihood of an injury and the potential seriousness of that injury are both well understood. This will assist the centre in developing an action plan for what needs to happen to reduce or eliminate that risk and how urgent this is. Staff and children do suffer serious injuries in early learning centres which can affect them for a very long time. Hoping the risk won't eventuate isn't sufficient risk management, centres need to take action.

Risk register

Creating a risk register is an important process for dealing with identified risks and being sure they don't get forgotten about. The risk register should contain important details about each risk including the likelihood of the risk occurring, the potential consequence if it did occur, what actions or steps are required to mitigate or reduced that risk, who is responsible for doing this and by when this action needs to occur. This register should be made available to all staff and discussed regularly so there is constant monitoring of which risks have been actioned and which still needs actioning.

Whose job is it?

In every workplace, everyone has a responsibility to ensure it's a safe environment for all who attend or visit. This means that all staff, including the newest and least experienced right up to the most experienced, have a responsibility to continually be on the lookout for hazards and act on them when found. Leaving this to someone else is not acceptable. While some staff members may not have the ability to create the change necessary to reduce the risk, for example it's not their responsibility to book in maintenance staff, all staff have a responsibility to at least report the hazard to someone who can take action.

To ensure staff do speak up when they see a risk or hazard, it's important that a culture of speaking up is encouraged. This means making all staff aware of their responsibility but also listening to and taking on board the concerns raised by staff.

Regular safety discussions

To encourage and support staff to continually think about safety and identify risks, regular safety conversations in the workplace can be very beneficial. This can be done in a number of ways such as having safety as an agenda item at staff meetings or by including staff in discussions about how identified risks will be actioned. This continual conversation encourages safe thinking to become how people do their job, not an addition to it.



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