Workplace bullying in early learning.

Bullying in the workplace is a serious work health and safety issue which affects all workplaces, including early learning services. Guild Insurance regularly manages workers compensation claims where there are allegations of staff members being bullied. Bullying negatively impacts both employees as well as the business they work for; therefore, it's something all businesses should be aware of and be consciously working towards eradicating.

What is and isn't bullying?

Bullying is repeated unreasonable behaviour directed towards workers. Bullying can occur in many forms; it may be physical or psychological, it can be direct and obvious or indirect and subtle. Examples of bullying are:

> Behaving aggressively
> Teasing or practical jokes
> Pressuring someone to behave inappropriately
> Excluding someone from work related activities or events
> Abusive or offensive comments
> Belittling or humiliating comments

Sometimes workers believe any behaviour or action in the workplace which makes them feel uncomfortable is bullying. However, this isn't the case. Actions carried out by management, such as disciplinary action or feedback about poor performance, isn't bullying when done reasonably. Disagreements are also generally not bullying when they're handled reasonably. There are other workplace behaviours, such as discrimination and sexual harassment, which while completely unacceptable, won't necessarily be considered bullying depending on the circumstances.

Bullying doesn't just occur in a face-to-face physical setting. More and more cases are being reported of bullying occurring online using social media. This online behaviour can be easier to hide and often won't occur during work hours, yet the consequences for employees and employers are just as severe.

Consequences of workplace bullying

There can be many consequences, both for individuals and the workplace, when bullying is taking place.

Firstly, it is the responsibility of all employers and employees to create and maintain a safe work environment. If a workplace isn't taking reasonable steps to prevent and manage bullying, this may be seen as a breach of WHS laws.

Bullying can lead to serious physical and psychological harm with people suffering from depression, stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion. It is well recognised that workers suffering from physical or psychological harm are more likely to take sick days and not be as productive as they would hope to be when at work. Bullying can also lead to a high number of staff resignations.

Preventing and dealing with bullying

There are numerous ways employees, employers and workplaces can reduce the likelihood of bullying occurring. There are also many resources available to support this.

1. Workplace culture

To create and maintain a workplace where bullying doesn't exist, it's important to start by addressing the culture of that early learning service. Managers and senior staff need to be sure they're leading by example in the behaviour they demonstrate and expect of their staff. All staff should be expected to treat their colleagues fairly and with respect, and this behaviour must start with those most senior.

It is also vital that a culture is created where staff feel comfortable speaking up if there is something they're unhappy about. If a staff member feels they're being bullied by a colleague, it's ideal that they speak to their manager first before considering making a formal complaint against the service. Yet for this to happen, this openness and willingness to discuss concerns needs to be supported and encouraged.

A key step an early learning service should take to prevent bullying occurring is to be sure no one thinks it won't happen in their workplace. Bullying behaviour unfortunately can occur in any workplace. However, if a manager thinks their service is immune, it's possible they won't put in place the necessary processes to prevent this which could place them at greater risk.

2. Business policies

Early learning services all have an extensive list of policies for their business. There are many policies which are required from a regulatory perspective. However, all services should consider what other areas they should develop policies for beyond those required; bullying is an example of this. A policy on workplace bullying should include information about what a staff member should do if they're experiencing bullying and how the service will respond to this. Workplaces should also have a social media policy which sets out appropriate social media behaviour for both personal and professional use.

The benefit of having a policy, rather than just stating what's required, is that it formally sets the standard that all staff are expected to abide by and can be continually referred to. However, for policies to be effective they need to be known about and be accessible for all staff. This means services need a process for making sure staff are aware of the policies they need to adhere to.

3. Performance management processes

Performance management discussions can unfortunately lead to staff confusing feedback with bullying. This confusion can often occur due to the way the performance appraisal is delivered. It's incredibly important that managers are undertaking their role in a reasonable manner so that it doesn't cross that line and become bullying.

Addressing poor performance shouldn't be put off until an official staff feedback or review discussion. Doing this means that a staff member's poor performance will continue for some time without them being aware. Receiving this unexpected feedback only at review time can be viewed as unfair and unreasonable by staff members.

When discussions are had regarding performance issues, staff should be encouraged to have a support person there with them. This person can provide them with moral support during the meeting as well as afterwards. A record of these discussions should be made so there is a history of what was said by all parties and what was agreed to.

The Fairwork Ombudsman provides resources to assist with managing underperforming staff members, this information can be found at: fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/managing-underperformance

4. Additional resources

Preventing and managing bullying is not easy; therefore there are resources available to assist workplaces with this challenge. For assistance with understanding what bullying is, how to prevent it and what both employees and employers should do if it does occur, refer to the following sites:

fairwork.gov.au/employment-conditions/bullying-sexual-harassment-and-discrimination-at-work

safeworkaustralia.gov.au/safety-topic/hazards/bullying

fwc.gov.au/issues-we-help/bullying

1800 810 213
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