CASE STUDY

Contacting inclusion support services

Background

The Inclusion Support Program is a government funded, fee-free service.[7] There are Inclusion Agencies in each state and territory, and support is accessible to all eligible Australian ECEC services to address inclusion barriers.[7]

Inclusion Agencies offer mentoring and coaching of ECEC staff as their main service. This means that ECEC services, rather than individual children or families, are their main clients.[7]

A common assumption about inclusion agencies is that they exist only to provide funding for extra staff to increase ratios. In reality, the focus of inclusion support is to provide mentoring to ECEC staff to build their capacity to provide appropriate and inclusive support to children with diverse needs in their services. This is achieved through guiding staff through self-reflection in order to build practices that are child-centred, inclusive and tailored to the service.

Why support capacity building?

Supporting capacity building for inclusive practices allows ECEC staff to:

- Build their personal and collective skill base.
- Create and build on inclusive practices at the service in the immediate, short and long term.
- Ensure children can participate and engage meaningfully within the service.

Identifying support

Inclusion professionals (IPs) help identify the support needs of services through conversations and mentoring with service leaders and staff. IPs are most often asked to come into services via contact from service leaders who have gained permission from a child's family to engage their services. The service leader would have spoken with the child's family after educators noticed that:

- A child/children may need extra support. In a mealtime context, this may look like:
  - Support with physical and medical needs during mealtimes, social support or support to access specialised training and/or specialist equipment
- The service environment needs modification for greater inclusivity. In a mealtime context, this may look like:
  - Alterations to seating arrangements, reducing noise in the meal area or reflecting on practices and transition needs

Support needs can be tailored to the whole service, the environment or the child, and can also be created in collaboration with families and allied health professionals.

Providing support

IPs provide support to services via in-person, telephone or online mentoring sessions. In these sessions:

- The IP speaks with the service leader or staff to find out more about what is happening at the service, and why they were called for support.
- The IP then poses reflective questions and prompts to assist the staff to think about what is happening with the child/children/environment, why it may be happening, and what possible solutions could be.

In a mealtime context, questions and prompts could be:

- What would you hope a mealtime would look like for this child/environment?
- Are mealtimes fun, engaging and well-paced?
- What are the current experience and needs of the educators?
- The children's families may have different practices at mealtimes at home – consider speaking with the families and see what is working at home.
  - Consider whether it will be possible to mirror practices from home at the service.
- Consider whether the mealtime environment could be changed to make it more accommodating to sensory diversity. For example:
  - How many children are sitting at the table? Is this too many/too few?
  - Is the eating area very noisy or does it have a lot of echo? If it is very noisy, how could the noise level be reduced?
  - Do the children have autonomy in serving themselves food?
- The IP will make suggestions and support implementation of these suggestions by the staff. This may look like:
  - On the ground mentoring and coaching.
  - Directing services to the free, self-guided training available on the inclusion support website for the relevant state or territory.
  - Giving suggestions for alterations or additions to the physical environment.
  - For example, different sized chairs, resistance bands – some of these may also be available to borrow from the inclusion support agency's specialist equipment library.
  - If the child is seeing an allied health practitioner – suggesting that they observe the child while they are at the service.
  - Providing access to funding for extra staff if the previous mentoring and training have been completed, but extra support may still be needed.

Follow-up on support implementation varies depending on the service. Even when an IP has finished working with a service, the service is still able to re-engage with them whenever needed.

The Inclusion Support Program is an important resource to assist ECEC staff to build their capacity to support children in ways that are child-centred and inclusive, and that help children to thrive.