

Encouraging positive relationships among children



One significant sign of an OSHC service of high quality is when positive relationships between children are being valued highly. A real positive for children who attend a good OSHC service is the opportunity to form relationships and friendships with others, including a multitude of ages. Staff can play a big role in supporting and promoting these relationships and ensuring that they are healthy and constructive. Positive relationships do not just happen, they need to be nurtured. It is easy for OSHC staff to fall into a habit of focusing more on organising the activities than on supporting positive relationships.

Some ways of actively supporting positive relationships include the following:

- Organise the program and the space so that children have a choice of individual and group work. Ironically, one of the most important things to remember about encouraging positive relationships is to avoid forcing or pressuring children to relate.
- Do everything you can to provide sufficient space so that children are not 'all in together' all of the time.
- Create small spaces within the larger space.
- At times allow the older and younger children to be with their own age groups.
- Create a relaxed atmosphere by providing choices.

- Provide some equipment, materials and experiences that encourage appropriate collaboration. One of the lessons that children can learn in OSHC is the power of working together to solve problems, be creative, accomplish something, or complete a task

Establish a culture that recognises positive relationships don't just happen. In addition to careful consideration of the service, it is crucial that children know what is valued and that they are supported in their interactions.

- Talk with children, individually and in groups, about what kinds of behaviour and comments make people feel good and what hurts. Talk about what is fair. Talk about the need for everyone to respect each other and to listen to what others say. Talk about how older children have a responsibility to help younger ones, how new children need to be welcomed and looked after. Talk about the joys and responsibilities of friendship, how good it feels to have a friend, how lonely it feels not to have a friend, how bad it feels to be excluded, or to be the last one chosen.
- Generate with children some rules and guidelines about relating to each other.
- Conflicts are inevitable whenever people relate closely, and OSHC is no exception. Rather than pretending that conflict shouldn't happen, acknowledge its inevitability, and work with children to figure out ways of resolving it constructively. Help children develop their skills of empathy by encouraging

them to try to see things from the other's perspective when there is a conflict. Let them know that you trust them to try to work things out when there is a conflict, but at the same time you are there to help if needed.

- Help children recognise and accept their feelings. Let them know that there's nothing bad about feelings, whatever they are. What has to be learned, and is hard sometimes, is after accepting your feeling to act on it responsibly. We want children to learn to use language to work out feelings, frustrations and to resolve conflicts in an appropriate way.
- In informal ways, find out about and acknowledge each child's strengths and talents. By doing this, you are building confidence and self-esteem, and helping others to appreciate the child, and develop a sense among the group that each person is unique, and that each person can make a constructive contribution to the wellbeing of all.
- Acknowledge acts of helpfulness, caring and kindness when they occur. Show appreciation of these, rather than taking them for granted; children will soon pick up messages that these kinds of behaviours are valued.

Children differ, just as adults do, in how social they are and how much they want to interact. It is important to distinguish between the child who chooses to spend time on their own and the one who is being excluded by others or who does not have the skills or confidence to interact with others. A child who is different from most or all of the other children in some obvious way – for example skin colour or a hearing impairment or in a wheelchair – may need extra support. Staff must be sensitive to any signs of prejudice or bias that children may be expressing and deal with that up front. Children who lack skills or confidence can sometimes be helped by being given a special role, such as time keeper or helper with the snacks.

Keep in mind the power of modelling. Children are much more likely to relate in respectful, caring and constructive ways with each other when adults relate to them in that way.

Links to *Shared visions*

Chapter 4: A profile of children five to twelve

Chapter 5: Relationships

Questions and reflections

1. Think about the negative interactions that occur between children in your service. Can you generalise about what these are usually about? Do the causes lie in the service or in the personalities and styles of particular children? What constructive action can you take?
2. What are the rules in your service about interactions between children? Are these explicit or implicit? Are the children aware of them? What role did they play in developing them?
3. Are there children in your service who do not appear to have many positive relationships? If so, do you have ideas about why? What can you do to help them?