

# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

*Education and care services for children are designed primarily with children's needs in mind and can therefore pose hazards for the people who work in them.*

*WorkSafe Victoria's injury statistics show that between 2004 and 2008 nearly 900 workers were seriously injured in childcare centres and kindergartens in Victoria. Seventy per cent of these were musculo-skeletal injuries (sprains and strains, fractures and soft tissue injuries) caused by everyday activities (such as moving play equipment, lifting children and sitting on small chairs), slips, trips and falls (WorkSafe Victoria, 2011).*

Wherever possible, arrange the environment to meet the needs of both the children and adults in the service. Requirements of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 indicate that employers and employees have a legal responsibility to meet certain standards of health, safety and welfare. This duty extends to any person who may be affected by a service's activities. For example, other people who may be present at the workplace such as children, visitors or volunteers. These are the two fundamental principles that occupational health and safety (OHS) policy is built on:

- ▶ Employers must ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees
- ▶ Employees must cooperate with their employers to meet these requirements

## General health and safety

Training for health and safety officers can be sourced from the WorkSafe Victoria website <[www.worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au)>. This training ensures that workplace representatives are aware of employer and employee rights and obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

## Guidelines

The following guidelines should be considered when establishing safe work practices:

- ▶ Employers have an obligation under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 to have a written list of OHS representatives or key persons involved in safety either displayed in the service or readily accessible to all employees
- ▶ Communication and consultation (that is, discussing better ways of doing things) ensures everyone has a role in workplace health and safety. An employer, where reasonably practicable, must consult with employees who are likely to be directly affected by the employer's decisions

- ▶ Use a checklist to assess risk or hazard and record outcomes of risk assessment. This may be necessary to change work practices, systems or aspects of the work environment. All employees should continue to identify hazards and the solutions that have been put in place. Changes can then be monitored to ensure they are effective
- ▶ Develop a safety plan to monitor injuries, safety issues or hazards, and identify the person responsible and the actions required
- ▶ Designate a staff member to be the health and safety officer for your workplace
- ▶ Display posters about health and safety issues to raise awareness and offer guidance to staff
- ▶ Display WorkCover posters outlining the claim process
- ▶ Develop an OHS policy through consultation with all stakeholders
- ▶ Provide an OHS induction for all new staff and include OHS information in the service's staff handbook
- ▶ Place OHS discussions on the agenda of staff meetings and record the minutes accordingly

## Hazards

It is essential to identify, control or eliminate hazards (electrical, chemical and design) that could potentially harm life, health or property. The following guidelines will assist in hazard identification. This should involve all employees and visitors.

- ▶ Ensure good ventilation throughout the service
- ▶ Ensure pathways are clear (i.e. free from electrical cords and uncluttered by toys and equipment)
- ▶ Use non-slip surfaces, both on the inside and the outside of the building, and ensure that floor and ground surfaces are maintained
- ▶ Ensure fire-fighting equipment and training is maintained and that emergency evacuation procedures are clearly understood and documented. Ensure evacuation drills are conducted regularly
- ▶ Install smoke detectors. Test them every six months and replace the battery every twelve months
- ▶ Store chemicals and paints in a secure, well-ventilated place in appropriate containers with identifying labels
- ▶ Ensure educators and other staff understand the correct usage and known health risks of chemicals, disinfectants and other substances. It is important to have material safety data sheets available on file. A material safety data sheet is a document that provides health and safety information

about products, substances or chemicals that are classified as hazardous or dangerous

- ▶ Make sure filing cabinets and shelving have curved corners or, if this is not possible, use protective covers
- ▶ Have a sun protection policy and ensure that both the staff and children in the service adhere to it
- ▶ Ensure that there is adequate lighting and enough space to perform tasks
- ▶ Ensure the external lighting, particularly at entrances and exits, is adequate
- ▶ Ensure there is regular cleaning and maintenance of equipment
- ▶ Ensure benches and change tables are at the standard height
- ▶ Routinely conduct a walk-through inspection of the environment, using a hazard checklist to identify and resolve health and safety issues

### Infectious diseases

Employers are required to minimise any risk of illness as well as injury to staff in the course of their work. One risk to staff in services is that of exposure to a variety of infectious conditions. When educators and other staff are in a position where they may be exposed to illness at work, all reasonable measures must be applied to minimise the risk of that exposure. The best form of protection from a variety of common infectious diseases in education and care services is by adopting high standards of hygiene in the work environment.

*'All common diseases in education and care services are spread through person to person contact and contact with contaminated surfaces.'* (Guild Insurance, p. 27)

The following guidelines will assist in reducing the spread of infections:

- ▶ Use protective equipment such as disposable gloves when changing nappies, cleaning or carrying out first-aid procedures
- ▶ Establish hygiene procedures that staff and children can follow
- ▶ When cleaning hazardous materials such as blood and human waste, procedures for disposal must be understood and followed
- ▶ When cleaning up in the outdoor environment, staff should wear thick, disposable rubber gloves and protective clothing. Syringes should be disposed of in a rigid, unbreakable container
- ▶ Establish a protocol for informing and notifying others about infectious diseases
- ▶ Encourage staff to keep up to date with immunisation
- ▶ Provide information to staff about the risks of infectious illnesses – Including risks during pregnancy – as part of staff induction process.

Once any hazards have been identified through a risk assessment process, you can then make decisions about appropriate risk controls.

### Manual handling

Educators and other staff at work must be protected against musculoskeletal disorders caused by incorrect manual handling.

The following safety solutions will enable employers and employees to comply with safe practices:

- ▶ Use trolleys to help staff avoid heavy lifting or moving awkward items over distances
- ▶ Design and establish systems for manual handling through consultation with staff
- ▶ Establish a risk assessment of tasks that must be performed
- ▶ Ensure staff members are trained in manual-handling procedures, and that they follow through with the correct techniques
- ▶ Ensure staff kneel rather than bend down when working with the children
- ▶ Ensure that there are adult chairs – not just children's chairs – at the service
- ▶ Staff should not ignore back problems – they should report them and seek professional advice if necessary
- ▶ Provide appropriate storage, and do not store heavy objects or equipment above head height

### Stress

Work-related stress can be caused by a wide range of factors that can have physical, mental and emotional effects on educators and other staff. It is important to recognise stress as a serious OHS issue and to look for appropriate prevention strategies.

- ▶ Ensure regular communication through staff meetings and information sessions. Develop problem-solving skills to assist relationships in the workplace
- ▶ Openly discuss issues that cause stress to help recognise that it is a genuine concern
- ▶ Offer unpaid leave in cases of extreme stress as a further option in relieving stress among staff
- ▶ Permanency of employment helps relieve stress because it ensures staff members have access to annual leave and sick leave
- ▶ Stress can be alleviated through greater recognition of educators and other staff. This can be achieved through access to training, provision of adequate preparation and administration time, and payment for 'extra' work or time in lieu
- ▶ Make provision for counselling, if required
- ▶ Formulate a workplace behaviour policy that includes measures to prevent bullying

## References and further reading

Guild Insurance, Risk Management Guide for Child Care, viewed 20 August, 2012,

[http://www.risquequip.com.au/index.php?option=com\\_docman&Itemid=311](http://www.risquequip.com.au/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=311)

*Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (No. 107, 2004)

WorkSafe Victoria 2011, *Children's Service's Occupational Health and Safety Compliance Kit*, viewed 20 August 2012,

<https://www5.worksafe.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/wsinternet/worksafe/home/forms+and+publications/publications/childrens+services+-+occupational+health+and+safety+compliance+kit>

## Useful contacts

### Victorian WorkSafe advisory service

Phone: (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089

Email: [info@worksafe.gov.au](mailto:info@worksafe.gov.au)

[www.worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au)

### United Voice

(previously Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union)

Phone: (03) 9235 7777 or (country Victoria only) 1800 819 087

[www.unitedvoice.org.au](http://www.unitedvoice.org.au)

### OHS in Early Childhood Services

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) has been funded to support OHS in the early childhood services sector. This website provides an outline of OHS legislation and practical guidance for use in early childhood services.

Phone: (03) 9489 3500

[www.ohsinecservices.org.au](http://www.ohsinecservices.org.au)



*CCC provides leadership, advocacy and support to build the capacity of the children's services sector and promote public support for community owned, not for profit services.*

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