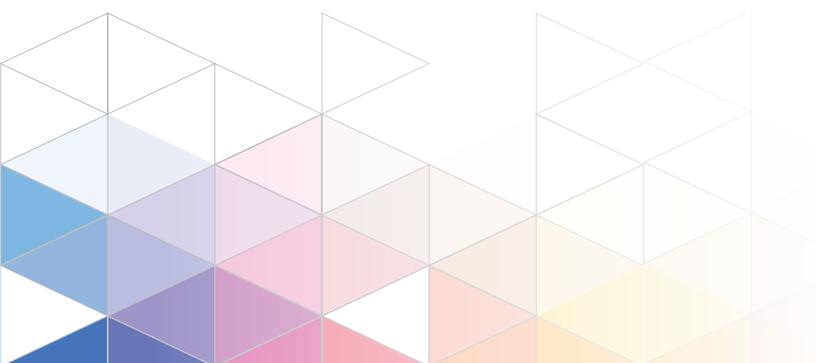


Regulating
for Quality



Guide for effective complaints management



Purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to support effective complaints management in education and care services in Queensland including how to create, or enhance, an effective, resolution-focused complaints management system.

Whilst this guide addresses services operating under the National Quality Framework, the principles and practices outlined apply equally to services operating under the *Education and Care Services Act 2013* (Qld) (ECS Act).

Most approved providers, nominated supervisors, educators and other staff do their best to provide quality education and care for children. When issues do occur, it's important that people can raise their concerns in a constructive and safe way.

This guide has been written to assist approved providers, nominated supervisors, educators and other staff in developing policies and procedures to respond efficiently and appropriately to all complaints and ensure that effective complaints management informs continuous quality improvement.

The information presented is based on the Australian/New Zealand Standard – Guidelines for complaints management in organisations (AS/NZ10002:2014) and on best practice complaints management approaches for Australian workplaces.



Introduction

Education and care services may receive complaints from various people about matters which relate to education and care, or other matters to do with the service.

Complaints are an indication that something is not working well for the person who is making the complaint. They might be dissatisfied with the service, worried about the quality of the care and education being offered or have an issue related to the management or operations of the service.

How complaints are managed can make a great deal of difference to the person making the complaint, the staff member who takes or manages the complaint and the operation of the service.

Who might make a complaint?

Complaints may be received from a range of people, usually family members of children attending the service, educators and students engaged in the sector, and members of the public such as neighbours and people from the local community.

Throughout this guide we refer to the person who makes a complaint as “the complainant”.

Types of complaints

The types of complaints in education and care services can vary. Common complaints include the quality of the educational program, fees, children’s safety, and matters relating to staffing including qualifications, skills and educator-to-child ratios.

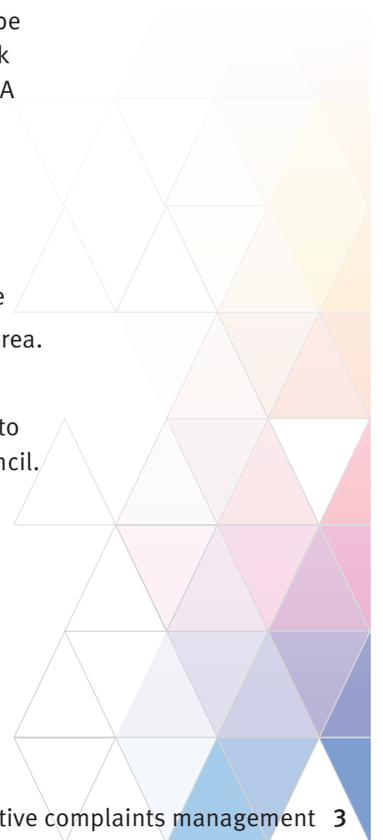
Some complaints must be notified to the Regulatory Authority within a specified timeframe.

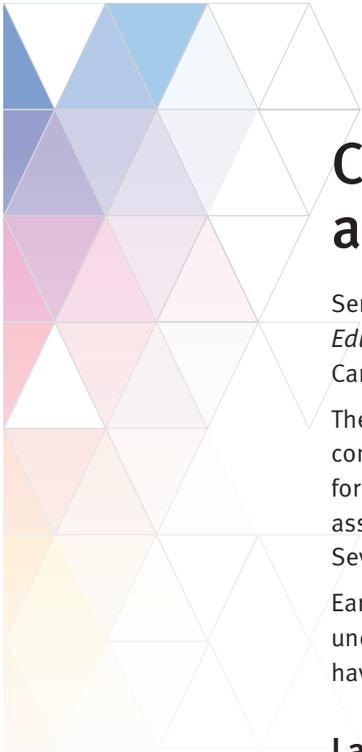
Recognising a complaint

Services receive complaints in several different ways. Sometimes they may not be clearly identified as a complaint. People may make comments, provide feedback or share concerns rather than directly stating that they are making a complaint. A complaint may be received by a service:

- in writing, such as on a complaint form, survey form or in an email or letter
- in person, such as during a verbal exchange with an educator
- indirectly via a third party, such as a friend or relative
- through social media, such as a comment written on a blog or Facebook page
- via the service’s management company, head office or other administrative area.
- via an exit survey completed by a family.

Some people may complain to another person or organisation, such as directly to the Regulatory Authority, or another government department or to the local council.





Complaints management and the law

Services operating under the National Quality Framework must comply with the *Education and Care Services National Law* (National Law) and the Education and Care Services National Regulations (National Regulations)¹.

There are a number of legislative requirements relating to the management of complaints under the National Law and Regulations². Having effective systems for managing a service, including managing complaints, and undertaking self-assessment to inform quality improvement are key components of Quality Area Seven of the National Quality Standard.

Early childhood education and care professionals have notification requirements under the National Law, and depending on the nature of the complaint, may also have mandatory reporting requirements. These requirements include:

Law and regulations at a glance

Approved providers have a range of responsibilities under the NQF and ECS Act with respect to complaints:	
You must have policies and procedures for dealing with complaints.	National Regulations r.168(2)(o), National Quality Standard's 7.1 and s7.2, ECS Act r.65(o)
You must take reasonable steps to ensure those policies and procedures are followed.	National Regulations r.170
You must ensure those policies and procedures are kept available and readily accessible to staff and for inspection.	National Regulations r.171
The name and telephone number of the person to whom complaints can be addressed must be displayed.	National Law s.172 National Regulation r.173(2)(b) ECS Act r.68
You must notify the regulatory authority of complaints in regard to serious incidents and breaches of the National Law.	National Law s.174(2)(b) ECS Act s.127
FDC educators must notify their approved provider of complaints in regard to serious incidents and breaches of the National Law.	National Law s.174A(b)

¹ Services operating under the Education and Care Services Act (Qld) 2013 (ECS Act) must comply with that law and Education and Care Services Regulation 2013.

² The ECS Act and Regulation contains similar obligations.

Requirement to have a complaints management policy and procedures

The approved provider must ensure the service has a well-documented policy and procedure in place in relation to dealing with complaints.

Management and staff should have appropriate knowledge and skills to implement the complaints management policy and procedures. This includes knowing which complaints are notifiable and immediately referring these upwards so the approved provider can notify the Regulatory Authority within the required timeframes. More information about effective complaints management policies and procedures is available later in this guide.

Information to display at the service

The approved provider must ensure there is a person at the service to whom complaints may be addressed. Their name and telephone number must be clearly visible at the service premises in a place that is accessible to families.

Notifications under the National Law and Regulations

The approved provider must report any complaints which allege that:

- a serious incident has occurred or is occurring while a child is being educated and cared for by a service; or
- the National Law and/or National Regulations have been contravened.

Notifications must be made within 24 hours and should be submitted to the Regulatory Authority through the NQA IT System (www.acecqa.gov.au/nqaits)⁶.

Family day care educators must also notify the approved provider in these circumstances.

Financial penalties may apply for failing to comply with the law.

More information:

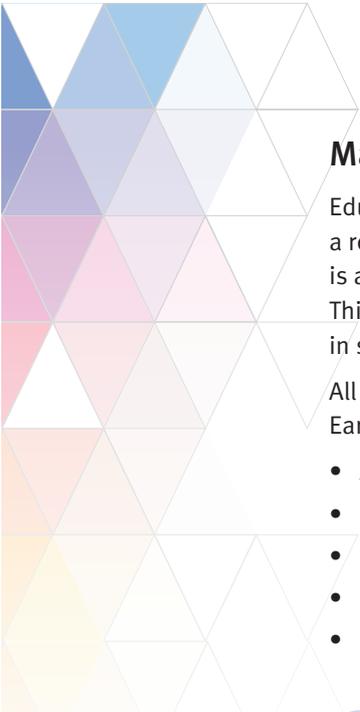
- Download the fact sheet: Key Changes to Notifications, Incidents and Complaints from the ACECQA website.
- Use the Notification Decision Tree at qld.gov.au/nqfnotifyregulator to find out when to notify the Regulatory Authority.
- Read a summary of notification types and timeframes on the ACECQA website.

³ Similar ECS Act provision is found in s.65(o) of the ECS Act Regulation 2013.

⁴ Similar ECS Act provision is found in r.68 of the ECS Act Regulations.

⁵ Similar ECS Act provision is found in s.127 of the ECS Act.

⁶ ECS Act services notify their local Regulatory Authority Office – <https://www.qld.gov.au/families/babies/childcare/contacts/regional>



Mandatory reporting requirements

Education and care professionals must report to Child Safety Services if they have a reason to suspect a child in Queensland is experiencing certain types of harm or is at risk of experiencing certain types of harm – either at the service or elsewhere. This information may come via a complaint or conversation, through observation or in some other way.

All relevant staff should be aware of their mandatory reporting responsibilities. Early childhood professionals who are mandatory reporters are:

- Approved providers who are individuals
- Nominated supervisors
- Supervisors including school age care supervisors
- Family day care coordinators and educators
- Educators including early childhood teachers.

A serious incident can include:

- the death of a child while that child is being educated and cared for at the service or following an incident while that child was being cared for by at the service
- a serious injury or trauma while the child is being educated and cared for, which:
 - required urgent medical attention from a registered medical practitioner; or
 - the child attended or should have attended a hospital (e.g. a broken limb)*
- any incident involving serious illness at the service, where the child attended, or should have attended a hospital (e.g. severe asthma attack, seizure or anaphylaxis)*
- any circumstance where a child appears to be missing or cannot be accounted for
- any circumstance where a child appears to have been taken or removed from the service premises by someone not authorised to do this
- any circumstance where a child is mistakenly locked in or locked out of the service premises or any part of the premises
- any emergency for which emergency services attended. NOTE: It does not mean an incident where emergency services attended as a precaution.

*NOTE: In some rural or remote locations a General Practitioner conducts consultations from a hospital site. Only treatment related to serious injury, trauma or illness is required to be notified.

More information

Visit the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women website for more information about mandatory reporting requirements.

A positive approach to complaints management

Having a transparent and accessible complaints management system is essential for education and care services and a key component of Quality Area Seven of the National Quality Standard.

Effective processes for managing complaints can help approved providers, nominated supervisors and educators to:

- address minor issues before they become more serious
- improve the quality of care being delivered
- gain insights into the needs and wants of families and children
- build positive relationships with children, their families and the community
- resolve a complaint within the service preventing issues from being raised with the Regulatory Authority unnecessarily.

Element 7.1.2 of the National Quality Standard requires education and care services to have systems in place to effectively manage the service; this includes complaints management.



Complaints help to improve the quality of education and care services

Complaints provide services with opportunities for learning and improving practices.

A continuous improvement approach to complaints:

- encourages regular, ongoing feedback from staff, children and families, and the community about the quality of the service
- uses a collaborative approach with complainants to find timely resolutions to complaints through open communication and transparent processes
- considers any learnings in the development of risk management processes, Quality Improvement Plans (QIP), service delivery and staff development.

Element 7.2.1 of the National Quality Standard requires effective self-assessment and quality improvement. How complaints are handled is an important component of achieving quality improvement in service delivery.

A positive attitude towards complainants and a commitment to resolving complaints confirms to staff, families and the community that complaints are taken seriously and investigated promptly, fairly and thoroughly.

More information

Download the Information sheet: Information sheet Using Complaints to Support Continuous Improvement from the ACECQA website (www.acecqa.gov.au)

Read more about Quality Area Seven in The Guide to the National Quality Framework – National Quality Standard and Assessment and Rating also from the ACECQA website (www.acecqa.gov.au).



Complaints management system

An effective complaints management system is fair, accessible, responsive, efficient and contributes to continuous improvement in service delivery.

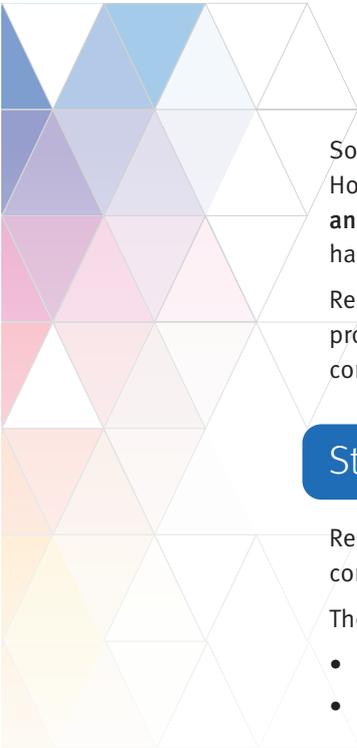
There are several distinct stages in a complaints management system.

The six steps outlined below assume that a person has complained directly to your service. If the person has complained to another source, such as directly to the Regulatory Authority, your service will be notified by the Regulatory Authority and may be required to provide information and evidence to support their investigation.

The six stages of complaints management

Many cases can be resolved by following these six steps:





Some complaints may require the service to **investigate** the issues involved. However, a simple complaint can be resolved using other means such as **making an apology and a quick change** at the service and advising the complainant action has been taken.

Regular contact with the complainant should be maintained throughout the process. It is especially important to keep the complainant informed if their complaint is taking longer to resolve than first advised.

Step 1: Acknowledge

Receipt of a complaint should be acknowledged quickly. This demonstrates to the complainant the matter is being taken seriously.

The acknowledgement should:

- outline the complaint process
- invite the complainant, and any representatives if they have them, to participate in the resolution process (if appropriate)
- provide contact details including the name of the contact person dealing with the complaint
- reassure that confidentiality will be respected during the process
- give an estimate of how long it is likely to take to resolve the complaint and when the contact person will next contact the complainant.

Written acknowledgement is recommended but is not always necessary. The service's complaints management policy and procedures should specify the preferred approach.

The details of all complaints should be documented in line with the service's policy and procedures.

Sometimes complaints arise due to the complainant not having a full understanding of the requirements of the National Law and Regulations or the National Quality Framework. Clear and consistent communication with families (for example via newsletters, a website, or your QIP) about how your service is compliant and continuously striving for quality improvement may help to minimise these kinds of complaints.

At times a complaint may relate to a personal view or like/dislike. To ensure this is identified and managed well, services need to have further conversation with the people involved (including the staff) to drill down to the real issue and then move forward to a resolution.

Step 2: Assess and assign priority

The nature of complaints differs widely.

Some complaints can be resolved quickly through open communication or an apology. Sometimes the scope of a complaint is not clear, and clarification is needed from the complainant.

More complex complaints may require approved providers, nominated supervisors and educators to conduct an investigation or make enquires to other organisations.

Early assessment of a complaint is essential for effective complaints management. The assessment should follow the service's policy and procedures for dealing with complaints and include:

- checking if the complaint is notifiable and alerting the approved provider, so they can notify the Regulatory Authority within required timeframes
- checking if the complaint should be reported to Child Safety Services under mandatory reporting requirements
- collecting relevant information from the complainant - name, contact details, details of concerns, dates of incidents, people involved, witnesses etc.

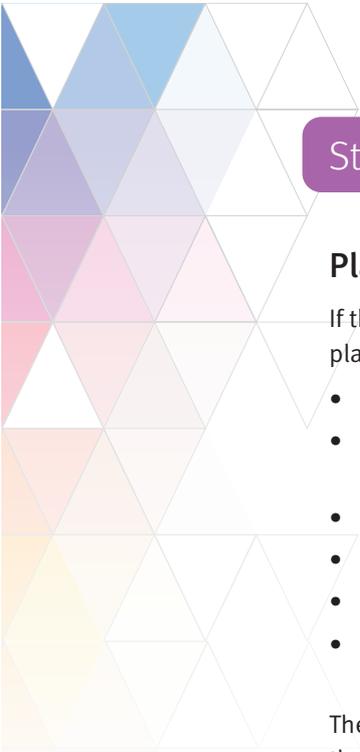
The best way to establish a complainant's expectation is to ask them what they would like the outcome to be. What would resolve this complaint for them? Understanding this may be key to managing a complaint well.

Some problems might not be easy to resolve, or the complainant may seek an inappropriate or disproportionate outcome. It's important to explain why a request cannot be met, and it's equally important to offer an alternative solution, if possible.

Staff should have the authority to resolve straightforward matters in line with the service's policy and procedures, and be adequately trained to do so. Staff must be trained to escalate matters that present risks or require more detailed examination.

Complaints that are straightforward with low risk to children can often be resolved on first contact, by apologising to the complainant and implementing a quick fix.





Step 3: Plan and investigate (if required)

Plan

If the complaint requires investigation, it can be useful to prepare a plan. The plan should:

- define the concerns needing examination
- identify the resolution the complainant is seeking and whether the service can meet this expectation
- list the possible source and types of information to gather
- identify people involved e.g. complainants, staff, witnesses
- provide an estimate of the time it will take to resolve the complaint
- note any special considerations that apply – for example, if there is sensitive or confidential information involved and how to store this securely.

The amount of detail in your plan should reflect the complexity and seriousness of the complaint.

A written plan will focus attention and ensure that you do not overlook important matters.

The plan should be flexible in case circumstances change or new information becomes available.

Investigate

The purpose of an investigation is to gather relevant information and evidence that can be used to substantiate the complaint, identify any breaches of the National Law or National Regulations, identify actions required to resolve the complaint and areas for improvement to minimise the risk of the issue re-occurring in future.

Principles of fair investigation include:

- **Impartiality** – approach each complaint with an open mind and ensure findings are objective
- **Confidentiality** – investigate a complaint in private. Respect the confidentiality of the complainant and child (if relevant), and share information on a ‘need to know’ basis only
- **Transparency** – tell the complainant about the steps in the complaint process. Maintain regular contact with all parties to the complaint
- **Timeliness** – conduct the investigation in a timely manner
- **Standing** – all stakeholders including the complainants should have a voice and be given the opportunity to present their point of view. This includes giving them an opportunity to comment on information or claims from other sources.

Maintain written records of any information or findings uncovered during the investigation. It’s reasonable and good practice to ask complainants to assist by providing any documentation they may have in relation to the complaint.

Step 4: Respond

Once a decision has been reached, communicate it clearly to the complainant. Your service's policy and procedures should specify how to communicate the outcome, for example in writing.

A written explanation is suitable for serious, complex or disputed matters. It might be appropriate to talk with the complainant first and to let them know that they will receive a more detailed written explanation.

In situations where the complaint has been notified to the Regulatory Authority, the Regulatory Authority may contact the complainant or other families at the service in the course of an investigation, to inform a complainant of the outcome of their investigation or if the approved provider has been found to have not upheld their responsibilities under the National Law and National Regulations.

Thought should be given to providing the complainant with an apology.

An apology can be an important step in achieving a successful outcome to a complaint and demonstrates empathy to the complainant. It has the power to positively enhance the ongoing relationship between the service provider and the complainant. When you make an apology, it can be effective to:

- propose the action you plan to take to satisfy the complainant
- communicate how the service is committed to ensuring the issue that caused the complaint, will not be repeated.

Step 5: Follow up

It's good practice to ask complainants for feedback on how their complaint was handled and resolved. Encourage complainants to consider providing feedback when responding to their complaint.

If a complainant is not happy with the outcome, consider other options.

Internal reviews should be carried out by staff who have not been involved previously in the complaint.

Mediation of an unresolved dispute between a complainant and a service provider is another option. A mediator can help clarify matters, provide an impartial perspective and propose solutions that both parties can agree to.

If a claim made by the complainant has not been accepted, services should note this and explain it to the complainant.

Outline any alternative options available to the complainant, including internal review and external complaint mechanisms such as making a complaint to the Regulatory Authority.

The follow up contributes to confidence in the service and is part of open disclosure and transparent practice.

Step 6: Reflect

All types of comments – positive and negative – should be recorded to provide an accurate picture of what is happening in a service. Looking at these altogether can show patterns and trends in a service and provide opportunities to make improvements to the service’s practices, policies and procedures.

Analysing trends

Analysing complaints can help services identify commonalities and trends. It can show why problems may be re-occurring and where the root cause of a problem may lie.

The approved provider and nominated supervisor typically have responsibility for systematic improvements however staff should be given opportunities to assist in trend and pattern analysis, to share observations and find and own the solutions. Regular team discussions about complaints also support a blame-free, resolution-focussed complaints culture within the service.

Improving service quality

Complaints can point to issues or problems that should be considered in the service’s Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). For example, a complaint could expose a need to improve the service’s record keeping or to proactively communicate with families about compliance and quality improvement. It could also indicate a need for better training or support for staff who have given unsatisfactory service.

Any changes made to the service’s practices, policies and procedures should be communicated to staff and families.



Complaints management policy and procedures

The service's complaints management policy and procedures should include sufficient detail to support staff and families to understand the process for dealing with complaints.

A good complaints management policy may include the following information:

- **Purpose** – the reasons your service has a complaints policy in place
- **Scope** – who the policy applies to (consider how the policy might apply to families, neighbouring households and businesses, contractors, staff members)
- **Service commitment** – a statement that indicates your service's commitment to complaints management and high-quality service provision. It is good practice to state that high quality service will not be compromised for families or their children when a complaint is made
- **Guiding principles** – a statement outlining the guiding principles which underpin the complaints management system at your service. This could include information about receiving, responding to and learning from complaints
- **Accessibility** – what your service does to ensure people can make a complaint in a way which is accessible and appropriate for their needs, skills and situation
- **Cost** – a statement that assures people there is no financial or personal cost for making a complaint
- **Limits of responsibility** – the key contact person/people who will handle a complaint and their limits of responsibility and authority. This section may include a chart or additional points of contact for referral if a complaint cannot be resolved at the initial level
- **Continuous improvement** – how the complaints policy will inform the QIP
- **Timeframe for resolution** – guidelines about the timeframe needed to provide solutions for complaints in the service
- **Reference documents** – the complaints policy should align closely to the complaints procedure. It may refer to other policies which are related to the complaints policy, such as a social media policy.

A clear complaints policy should be available to all staff, community members and families. The availability of policies within the service for families to read on request is a requirement under the National Regulations.

Your complaints management policy should be reviewed and updated regularly as part of your continuous improvement, with meaningful opportunities provided for families to be involved.

The policy should be supported by a complaints management procedure.

The procedure should set out the step by step system for managing a complaint at your service. It should be closely aligned to the complaints management policy and give details of how the policy will be put into practice.

Procedures are practical, informative documents which can be followed one step at a time. They should set out exactly what staff should do when responding to a complaint.

An important part of a procedure is the **mechanisms that support the procedure**, such as forms, template letters, brochures about the complaints management system and tracking tools.



An effective procedure provides:

- information on how the complaint system works
- the means of implementing the policy
- details of what must be done
- suggested timeframes
- definitions of terminology
- examples of how to apply the policy
- an outline of processes and mechanisms used in complaints management such as forms and tracking tools
- details of who is responsible for each part of the process.

Recording and documenting complaints

Complaints, comments, suggestions, problems and compliments need to be recorded and documented in line with the service's policies and procedures.

All types of complaints and comments can help identify areas for improvement.

Recording of complaints, comments, suggestions, problems and compliments does not have to be sophisticated or expensive. Approved providers and nominated supervisors can:

- use manual systems using template forms and tracking tools
- use standard spreadsheet or word processing software
- acquire off-the-shelf complaints management software

Whichever system is used in a service, it needs to be used consistently and staff need to be trained in its use. Staff training is an important part of managing the risks associated with complaints. An effective risk management program means being proactive in preventing complaints, problems and critical incidents from occurring.

Approved providers and nominated supervisors should consider the costs that may occur from poor complaints management by under-skilled staff – including financial costs, damage to service reputation, poor publicity and reduced staff morale.

Training is critical in helping staff handle complaints competently and effectively.

Communications and complaints management

The complaints management process – from the time the complaint is made through to resolution – generally involves dealing with and responding to the **emotions and feelings of:**

- the child, family or representative making the complaint
- staff members involved in what led to the complaint
- staff managing the complaint, and sometimes their colleagues.

This is especially the case for complaints about more serious matters.

Communicating with empathy, patience and respect can help resolve complaints quicker and enhance the ongoing relationship between the complainant and service provider.

“Sometimes a complainant just wants to feel heard. The acts of listening, looking into a concern, identifying a resolution, and following up, confirm to the complainant that they were taken seriously.”⁷

Effective communication skills

Open, regular communication is vital in effective complaints management.

Good communication practices can assist approved providers, nominated supervisors, educators and other staff in negotiating proportionate, timely resolutions to complaints.

There are many effective communication skills for complaints management:

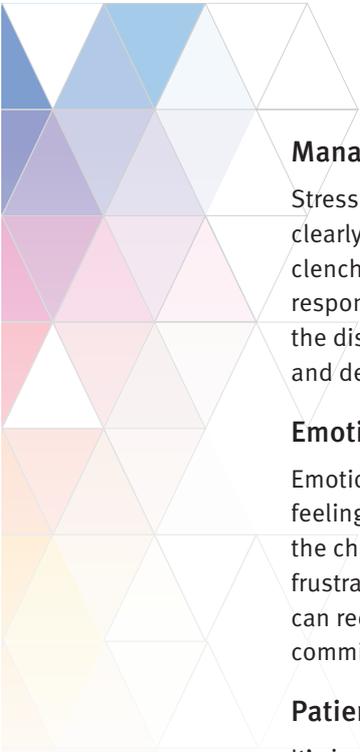
Listening

Focusing on the complainant without interrupting helps to build an understanding of the issues underlying the complaint and the feelings involved. Effective listening lets the complainant know that they have been heard. Confirming what you have heard by reflecting the complainant’s information in your own words is a good way of offering reassurance that you are taking a complaint seriously. This is known as active listening. It can also help complainants feel validated and respected.

Body language

An ability to understand and use nonverbal communication such as expressions, movement, gestures and eye contact can help you to better understand how a complainant feels and how they communicate. Most face-to-face communication occurs through body language. It helps to look at nonverbal communication cues broadly, rather than focusing on individual gestures or expressions. Awareness of the body language that you use with the complainant is also important as it impacts how the complainant responds to you. For instance, if you are crossing your arms across your body you could be seen by the complainant as not being open to their issue.

⁷ Aged Care Complaints Commission – Manager, aged care service provider cited in Department of Social Services Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling in Aged Care Services 2014 p. 13



Managing stress

Stress can hamper effective communication by disrupting the ability to think clearly. It often leads to misunderstandings. Signs of stress include sweating, clenched hands, tense muscles and shallow breathing. It can help for staff to respond to signs of stress in complainants and offer support or consider continuing the discussion later. Effective communicators also recognise stress in themselves and develop ways to deal with it.

Emotional awareness

Emotions affect how people understand each other. A lack of awareness of the feelings involved in a conversation, including a lack of self-awareness, increases the chance for misunderstandings, which can make complainants and staff frustrated and angry. Approved providers, nominated supervisors and educators can reduce anxiety complainants experience by validating their concerns and committing to a timely resolution.

Patience

It's important to give complainants enough time to express their concerns. Remaining focused and not interrupting shows an openness to listen to complaints and attempt resolution. Communication lines can be broken when complainants feel rushed, misunderstood or staff appear to want to get out of a conversation.

Not contacting the complainant can undermine confidence in the complaints management system. It is important to make the complainant aware of who they can contact for updates even when there may be no progress to report.

Staff require skills in many areas to help them handle complaints confidently and professionally including:

- interpersonal communication, active listening and reflective listening
- conflict resolution, mediation and negotiation
- consulting with complainants and children attending the service (where appropriate).

Approved providers and nominated supervisors can support staff by improving their understanding and capacity to deal with complaints. Practical strategies include:

- a good orientation program when new staff join the service
- providing staff with professional training
- using team meetings as a basis for running a discussion on complaint case studies and communication exercises
- introducing a buddy system to help new or existing staff members learn new complaints management skills
- sharing ideas with other approved providers, nominated supervisors, educators and other staff nearby by participating in network meetings
- getting involved with an education and care peak body.

Good communication skills can prevent minor issues from becoming more serious.

Positive approaches to complainants

There are many approaches you can try when interacting with complainants to create a positive, collaborative atmosphere.

Thank the complainant

Thank the complainant for bringing the problem to your attention. Let them know that you are pleased to help, and you want to fix the problem. Give them the impression you welcome their complaint. Show you care.

Identify the preferred result

Ask the complainant what outcome they are seeking. While a complainant may not be happy with a proposed resolution, they may come up with a solution you have not thought of.

Use empathy

Try to put yourself in the complainant's shoes and consider their point of view.

Ask the complainant to stop any unreasonable behaviours.

Offer an apology

Depending on the situation, be prepared to say, "I made a mistake", "I don't know, and I will find out", "What do you think?" and "Let's work together to resolve this problem".

Mirror the language

Mirror the language of your complainant (where the language is not abusive or threatening). This shows that you understand their level or degree of dissatisfaction.

Take notes

Taking notes can show the complainant that you are taking the complaint seriously. Explain that you are taking notes to ensure that the facts are correct for your records. The notes will also provide important documentation for your complaint file. You can also read your notes back to the complainant to confirm you have understood the complaint.

Respect the complainant

Respect the complainant's privacy and dignity and confirm with them whether they agree to you raising their issue with others if necessary.

Be honest

Tell the complainant what you can fix and what you cannot fix and why. Give the complainant realistic expectations about what can be done to address the problem. Do not make promises you cannot deliver.

Look for common ground

Look for common ground and mutual interests when trying to resolve a complaint. For example, "I know that we both want to sort out this issue to ensure your child gets the best level of education and care".

Provide reasons

State the reason before you say "no", e.g. when policies prevent you from fixing problems in the way a complainant wants you to.



Bring in help if needed

Bring in an external person or professional mediator to help provide some objectivity to the issue.

Offer other options

Where a complainant remains unhappy, offer an internal review or provide information on advocacy services, the Regulatory Authority or other relevant bodies.

Unhelpful approaches to complainants

When choosing your approach for communicating with a complainant, think about how you would like to be treated if you were making a complaint.

Avoid these unhelpful approaches when managing complaints:

- ✗ avoiding or ignoring complainants
- ✗ being defensive, blaming others or making excuses
- ✗ making assumptions
- ✗ passing the complainant from one staff member to another
- ✗ promising what you cannot deliver
- ✗ giving standard responses or offering standard solutions
- ✗ fighting with or interrupting the complainant
- ✗ getting caught up in irrelevant detail
- ✗ blaming or accusing the complainant or treating them adversely
- ✗ bombarding the complainant with endless questions, paperwork or intimidating forms
- ✗ taking complaints personally
- ✗ talking in negative terms to other staff or families of children attending the service about complainants.

Making a complaint should be easy

Complainants need to be informed that they have a right to complain and how they can complain. Approved providers, nominated supervisors and educators should ensure that their complaints policy is well publicised and freely available to families.

This can include:

- providing a ‘how to complain’ information sheet to families and their representatives
- advertising the complaints policy and relevant staff contact details on posters (in line with regulatory requirements provided in this guide’s Complaints management and the law section), publications and websites
- actively seeking feedback as part of ongoing conversations
- discussing the complaints policy during the initial enrolment process
- frequent reminders in different formats that complaints are welcome

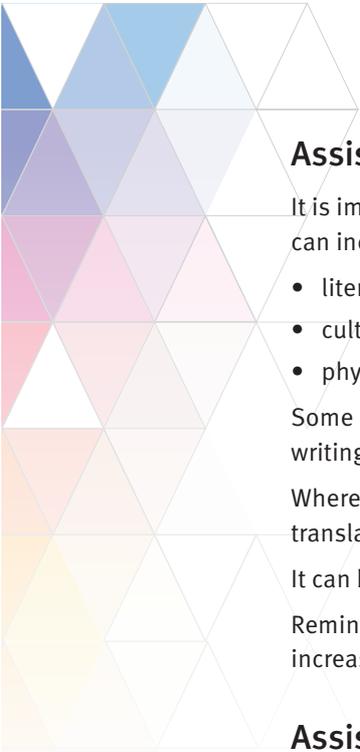
Families should be encouraged to raise concerns with:

- any staff member at any time (bearing in mind that if the place or time of the initial complaint is inappropriate, a more suitable time may need to be scheduled)
- a nominated staff member who handles complaints when the complaint cannot be resolved immediately
- the Regulatory Authority, if a resolution cannot be found within the service.

Complaints should be accepted in a variety of informal or formal ways including:

- using a suggestions box
- using a ‘Quick Fix’ complaints book where staff and families of children attending the service can write down simple problems and how they were fixed
- using forms to capture complaint details
- accepting anonymous complaints
- having an internal appeals system for dissatisfied complainants
- having a senior member of staff available to hear complaints at all times.

Meetings including advisory committee meetings and parent information sessions are great forums to enable families attending the service to raise concerns or give suggestions for changes to service delivery.



Assisting complainants

It is important to assist complainants with accessibility needs where required. This can include providing assistance related to:

- literacy and language skills
- cultural and linguistic backgrounds
- physical, mental, cognitive and sensory abilities.

Some complainants may have difficulty making a complaint either verbally or in writing and staff should offer help to communicate their concerns.

Where English is not the first language, a family member, friend or professional translation service can be used to facilitate complaints management.

It can be intimidating for complainants to complain to staff on their own.

Reminding people that it's okay to have support when making a complaint can increase their confidence and reduce anxiety.

Assisting complainants who engage in unreasonable behaviour

Some complainants' behaviours can be difficult to deal with.

Approved providers, nominated supervisors, educators and other staff sometimes receive complaints from family members who behave in ways that may be described as challenging. These behaviours may include being aggressive, making threats, swearing and using abusive language.

Like complainants, service staff and management have a right to be treated with respect and do not need to accept abuse, threats or harassment from complainants.

Steps that can be taken to minimise this and stay safe include:

- letting complainants know about expected standards of courtesy and behaviour (including verbally, and via the complaints policy)
- ending an abusive or threatening telephone call after warning the caller of that intention
- attempting to put a complainant at ease and calm them down; and ask the person to leave the premises if this doesn't work.⁸

⁸ Adapted from: Ombudsman Western Australia guidelines for dealing with unreasonable complaint conduct. 2018. Accessed at: <http://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/Publications/Documents/guidelines/Dealing-with-unreasonable-complainant-conduct.pdf>

Summary

Having an effective complaints management system benefits service providers and users alike. A well-managed and accessible system supports staff during situations that may be highly emotional.

Approved providers and nominated supervisors may wish to refer back to this guide when training staff and regularly reviewing complaints policies and procedures. Complaints should be seen as an opportunity for improvement in service delivery.

This guide, along with other useful resources for education and care services can be found on our website at www.earlychildhood.qld.gov.au.





This document has been adapted from Department of Social Services 2014, Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling in Aged Care Services which is available under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia licence. A 2019 update is available on the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission website.

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Your regional support team

The Department of Education’s authorised officers are here to help all services meet their legislative requirements. Contact your nearest regional office for assistance.

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Cairns	4037 3911
cairns.ecec@qed.qld.gov.au	
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Maryborough	4122 0814
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Metropolitan

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Metro West	3436 6204
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Darling Downs/South West Queensland

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Useful links

Our Future State: Advancing Queensland’s Priorities:
www.ourfuture.qld.gov.au

Department of Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023
<https://qed.qld.gov.au/publications/strategies/strategic-plan>

Regulating for Quality: Queensland’s risk-based approach to regulating early childhood education and care
<https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/about-us/publications-and-research/regulating-for-quality-policy-document>

Legislative Delegations and Authorisations Register:
<https://ppr.qed.qld.gov.au/delegations-and-authorisations>

Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority:
www.acecqa.gov.au

Compliments, suggestions and customer complaints:
www.qed.qld.gov.au/contact/customer-compliments-complaints

Department of Education – Early Childhood Education and Care
<https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au>