

Supervision in children's services

Effective supervision is one of the most basic and important priorities in children's services. It is so important that the requirement for adequate supervision is in the *Children's Services Act 1996* (the Act) in section 27.

A duty to take reasonable care of a child exists at all times the child is in the care of the service. One part of this reasonable level of care is that the proprietor and each staff member are responsible for ensuring that children are adequately supervised at all times the children are in the service's care. This includes when the children are indoors or outdoors on the premises, as well as when they are on an excursion or routine outing away from the premises.

What is adequate supervision?

Supervision is an integral part of the whole care and education experience. At its most basic level, supervision helps to protect children from hazards or harm that may arise in their daily experiences in play, interactions with others, and daily routines. Adequate supervision means that an adult can respond immediately including when a child is distressed or is in a hazardous situation.

Supervision is constantly observing and relating to individual children and groups of children to contribute to their safety and wellbeing.

Supervision involves more than preventing or responding to potential or actual hazards or harm. It requires the staff member to be actively involved with children and have knowledge of what each child is doing at any given time of the day. Through supervision staff member get to know each child and develop essential understandings about them in the social setting of the children's service.

Thoughtful supervision of children creates opportunities to assess each child's strengths and interests and ways of relating to other children and adults. These assessments are valuable contributions to planning the program. Sharing assessments with families, with others responsible for the child and with the children themselves is

important (for example, in school holiday care services with school staff). This helps to build partnerships and increase understanding of children.

Supervision can contribute to building positive relationships between staff member and children. When children are being supervised adequately, there will be evidence of strong, mutually respectful relationships between staff member and children.

What does adequate supervision look like?

Although the provision of adequate supervision depends somewhat on the children's ages and abilities, every child at the service should always be monitored actively and diligently. It means knowing where children are at all times.

Children of different ages and abilities will need different levels of supervision. Younger children will always need to be in sight of an adult whereas older children may not. In general, the younger children are, the more they may need an adult to be physically present and close by to support and help them.

Adequate supervision is therefore likely to be different in some ways for different services. For example, in a centre-based service for young children, adequate supervision will mean that the children remain in close proximity to the adult who is supervising them. In contrast, in a school holiday care service, in which children are older, knowing where each child is and ensuring that staff members are in a position to respond may be considered adequate supervision.

Whenever children are being cared for, staff will need to make decisions throughout the day about where they are best placed to adequately supervise each child.

In a group of children of the same age there will be some children who need more supervision than others. Staff members learn about this as they get to know children.

Child/staff ratios and adequate supervision

For centre-based services and school holiday care services, the child/staff ratios (regulations 53, 54, 55 and 56) describe the minimum number of staff members required to care for or educate children. However, meeting these ratios may not always be sufficient to provide adequate supervision in all children's services.

For all service types, the adequacy of supervision is determined by a range of factors, including the following:

- number of children
- ages of children
- abilities of children
- number and positioning of adults
- each child's current activity, for example, physical activities, art activities and playing with others
- areas where the children are engaging in the activities, in particular the visibility and accessibility of these areas
- adults' knowledge of each child and each group of children
- experience, knowledge and skill of each staff member
- need for staff members to move between areas

Planning for supervision

For centre-based services and school age care services, several factors affect decisions about how many staff members are needed for supervision and where they should be placed. The number of staff members and/or other adults needed in each area of the service for adequate supervision will need to be carefully considered. It will depend on the number of children and the different areas in which the children are located at any one time during the day. A flexible approach to staff placement throughout the day will be required to ensure adequate supervision.

Adequate supervision requires teamwork and constant communication among all staff members.

All areas available to children in all service types must be supervised. All staff members must be alert to and aware of what is going on around them. Staff members must be alert to the potential for accidents, injuries and other harmful incidents throughout the whole service, not just within their own immediate area.

Excursions and routine outings

Undertaking a risk assessment is part of planning a routine outing or an excursion. The risk assessment will need to take into account the levels of supervision and number of adults needed for the entire time the children are out of the service.

At certain times it may be necessary to undertake an additional assessment of how many adults are needed to supervise the children. This assessment of where and how the children are supervised must be carefully planned and communicated with other staff and/or any other adults who may be caring for or educating the children.

Adequate supervision relies on adults always knowing the whereabouts of each child being cared for or educated by the service, responding quickly and sensitively to all children's needs and intervening in positive ways with children when appropriate or necessary.

Sleeping Children

When considering the supervision requirements of sleeping children, an assessment of each child's circumstance and needs should be undertaken to determine any risk factors. This will ensure adequate supervision practices are put in place to minimise any potential risks.

This includes assessing how to respond quickly and sensitively to children's needs whenever children are sleeping, either in a children's room or in a separate sleeping area.

For example, a higher risk may be associated with small babies or children with colds or chronic lung disorders, therefore the child may require someone to stay beside them when they are sleeping to minimise any potential risk to the child. Rooms that are dark and have music playing may not provide adequate supervision of sleeping children.

Staff members must be able to demonstrate that they have an understanding of safe sleep practices and have identified and considered any risk factors and acted accordingly to address these factors.

Nappy Change

Preparing for a nappy change is fundamental to maintaining an adequate level of supervision of children. This may involve ensuring that all of the required equipment is available and within reach prior to undertaking a nappy change. In preparing for a nappy change, staff members may consider:

- Is there a sufficient supply of nappies within reach?
- Are there cleaning products within reach?
- Is the bin for the disposal of nappies close by?
- Is the change bench next to running water to clean the child or are there sufficient baby wipes close by for this purpose?

Staff members may develop a procedure to ensure that the nappy change area is cleaned and restocked during the day to ensure that equipment required for nappy changing is available at all times.

Preparation and constant contact with the child are key in ensuring that children are adequately supervised during a nappy change. Making sure that all of the necessary equipment is easily accessible prior to undertaking a nappy change will ensure that the child has the staff member's full attention during the nappy change.

While undertaking a nappy change **the child should never be left alone on the change table** and physical contact should always be maintained with the child. In some cases this may require the staff member to position themselves so that they can safely change a child's nappy while maintaining adequate supervision of the other children.

Staff members may need to consider alternative arrangements for changing nappies in order to maintain this awareness; this would be part of the assessment of risk the staff member has undertaken for that group of children. This may involve ensuring that another staff member is available to supervise the other children.

Responsibility of proprietors and staff members

The proprietor and all staff members must ensure that every child at the service is adequately supervised (section 27). Adequate supervision relies on always being in a position to:

- respond to each child's individual needs in a timely manner that adequately meets that need
- intervene if necessary.

This will support your service to achieve and deliver a high quality program that engages with children and their families to get the best possible outcomes for children.

Related practice note

Excursions and routine outings