‘The biggest hurdle a lot of people potentially have from the beginning is “this is the way we’ve always done it, so this is the way we should keep doing it.” If you are of that mindset you are not really likely to succeed.’

Ranges Early Learning in Adelaide is currently in the process of implementing flexible hours and sessions as well as establishing a dedicated long day care service for younger children.

Michael French operates The Ranges Early Learning and Care Centres across two sites in the leafy suburb of Stirling in the Adelaide Hills. Stirling is an affluent community located around 20 minutes from the Adelaide CBD with a local group centre.

Michael recently moved his second long day care centre from nearby Aldgate into Stirling as a new infant toddler centre dedicated to providing early childhood education and care for children from birth to three years old. The existing other Stirling based service is now dedicated to the older group of children up to school age as an early learning centre meeting preschool needs.

Michael said the decision to focus on the younger cohort was strongly influenced by the research on children’s development in the first three years, and a concern that many centres may not be providing enough focus on development at this age and how to best meet its needs.

The goal of the new centre is to improve quality for very young children led by degree qualified teachers.

As a result of the new centre opening, Michael also hopes to offer several new flexible models of care.

Firstly, the preschool centre will transport children a short distance between the two services to make it easier for parents to pick up siblings of different ages from the one centre.

Secondly, the preschool centre will offer an outside school hours care program for children attending other standalone preschools in the area. While The Ranges offers its own Universal Access funded preschool for this age, the long day care centre has vacancies before and after preschool, so Michael says it makes sense to make this service available to families at these times.

The new infant toddler centre for young children has been set up to provide an central access point for community services with a drop in clinic room for speech pathologists, parenting and child health services and child and mental health services.

The centre also offers short term casual arrangements or ‘occasional care’ (as a long day care provider). Parents can access a minimum of a two hour session with a maximum of five hours. Fees are charged on an hourly basis and are slightly higher than the hourly rate for a full day. Michael reports that families typically use these ‘occasional care’ places every day of the week to some degree. This would not be possible if the centre was full. As a result, the service deliberately limits permanent bookings below capacity to allow families more flexibility around sessions.
When ECA first spoke to Michael, he was also planning to embark on a three month trial of extended hours ECEC. He planned to open the centre from 6.00 am to 10.00 pm seven days per week to attract shift workers, as well as families looking for short term casual arrangements.

The rationale for this was that although staff have to be paid overtime rates, there were few other ongoing costs. To cover wage costs, the centre plans to pass the cost of overtime rates on to parents during the extended hours sessions.

Michael sees the addition of more flexible services as complimentary opportunities to strengthen both business models, as well as providing benefits for families. He does not expect that the weekend service or extended hours will be full but hopes to break even, and, by utilising the afterhours, even create efficiencies.

‘A lot of what we are doing in flexibility, aside from meeting what parents’ need, is how we can make the business model more efficient,’ Michael says.

The children using the evening session will be undertaking appropriate activities for the time of night, including having dinner and participating in quieter activities before going to bed.

Unless there is an emergency, the centre does not allow children to be in care for more than 11 hours per day, regardless of the time of day in which the care occurs.

‘We are not going to have a child here from 6.30 in the morning until 10.00 at night … it’s not good for the child,’ Michael says.

Tips

- Improve professional development in business management and gain an understanding of the economics of the business to find where the opportunities are.
- Think about how flexible services can both strengthen the overall business as well as better meet the needs of families.
- Research the demographic of families in your area, and the potential demand for flexible early childhood services.
- Assess the demand for flexible options. If there are small numbers of children utilising services outside of standard hours this still may be viable.
- Trial the flexible services for a period to test the demand from families and better understand the costs involved.
- If your service is at full capacity, consider the trade-off of operating under capacity to deliver more flexible and better quality services for the families.

For more information and resources on flexibility in early childhood services, please visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/early-childhood-flexibility-practices-patterns/.

This publication was funded in partnership through the Australian Government’s Child Care Flexibility Fund.