Early Childhood
Flexibility Practices and Patterns

TIP SHEET: Extended hours

When opening hours and the needs of families align, this can support parents’ workforce participation and support children's best interests.

Many approved early childhood services actually have considerable discretion to open earlier or close later.

The maximum length of long day care sessions is 12 hours. However, services can be approved to operate for more than 12 hours by offering multiple sessions. Services can also be approved to offer 24 hour care.

‘Extended hours’ doesn’t just mean 24 hour care. It could mean offering later sessions, opening earlier to allow parents to commute long distances, or offering emergency care for children at risk. Each model depends on the service type and the needs of the community, and each has different risks that need to be managed.

Risks

Costs are a significant challenge in offering extended hours. Some policies covering centre-based services require two staff to be rostered at all times for safety reasons, even if the number of children only requires one educator.

Evening meals may also need to be prepared, requiring additional staff. Beyond 6.30 pm, penalty rates under the Children's Services Award may also apply, increasing staff costs. These costs may need to be reflected in increased fees, potentially reducing demand for these services.

For evening care, parents may also preference ‘home environments’, either in informal care arrangements, family day care or in-home care.

If there are only a small number of families using the service, or variable demand, extended hours can often be difficult to sustain in the long term.

Children’s interests

Children's interests must be paramount when considering extended hours early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Research shows that high intensity child care use—that is, more than 30 hours per week—may negatively affect children's behavioural outcomes (Datta Gupta & Simonsen, 2010, p. 1; NICHD, 2006, p. 17).

However, quality may act as a ‘protective factor’ mitigating the ‘risk burden’ which may accrue through flexible early childhood practices (Biddle & Seth-Purdie, 2014, p. 61).

Early childhood services can monitor children's time in care so that it is not excessive. Some services place caps on daily hours to ensure children are not in care for longer than certain periods, even if the centre is open late at night.

Centre-based services can also think about whether the centre-based environment is suitable for evening or overnight care arrangements—can a home-like environment be offered, with appropriate areas for rest and quiet evening play? Will children’s sleep be disrupted by a late pickup or other children?

Stable relationships between children and their educators, as well as their peers, is also important for children's development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Clasien De Schipper, Tavecchio & Van Ijzendoorn, 2003). Services can take this into account and maximise the continuity of staff and group arrangements. Extended hours services may also offer children greater stability, as parents might otherwise resort to using multiple care arrangements.
Early childhood staff

Another challenge for early childhood services in extending hours is staff. Some staff may be reluctant to work during the evening, especially if they have family responsibilities. However, other staff who have commitments during the day, such as study, may recognise the benefits of working later, or earlier. Shifts can be staggered so that educators have different starting times.

It is important to monitor staff to ensure that they maintain appropriate work/life balance and are supported. For example family day care educators who are caring for two groups of children, during the night and the day, are particularly susceptible to burnout.

Seven tips on flexible hours

1. Consider how the proposed extension of opening times will impact children. Thirty minutes may not be significant, but what if the extension goes well beyond standard hours?

2. Think about strategies that could protect children’s interests, e.g. restricting session length, reducing hours at the corresponding end of the day, minimising sleep disruption, and providing a ‘home environment’ and appropriate programming during evenings.

3. Ask parents about your operating hours, including if they would actually use the flexible service or whether they would commit to a short trial. Advertise the extended hours with groups of parents most likely to benefit, such as shift workers.

4. Understand the costs of delivering extended hours services, like penalty rates and the preparation of evening meals. Then ask if these costs are prohibitive, and whether flexibility would contribute to your philosophy and/or business plan.

5. Consider placing families wanting extended hours on a waiting list until there is enough interest—that is, a viable number of children to commence operating.

6. Check with the Commonwealth Department of Education about approval requirements to extend hours under Family Assistance Law. Also check whether planning regulations apply as many local governments place controls on opening hours.

7. Keep an eye on the work/life balance of staff working extended hours, e.g. appropriate breaks and rostered time off.

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

References


