Managing flexible sessions

Utilisation is a key issue when considering flexible sessions. Offering flexible sessions to families, such as shorter sessions, may adversely affect service utilisation. Services should be careful to ensure that children’s paid hours are closely matched with staffed hours. For example, if a short session is offered during the middle of the day, more staff will be required during that period.

Services can track children’s attendance during the day, and across different session types, to understand how many staff with particular qualifications are required at different times. This helps to reduce staffing costs, and ensures that utilisation is not compromised.

Flexible sessions may also help services to reduce overall staff costs and even improve the utilisation of services if they have places available.

The below table provides an example of a rostering system in a long day care service at the beginning of the day. Only two staff are required until 7.30 am, as the number of children in the services is low. Children of different age cohorts can be brought together in one room until 7.30 am to reduce the number of staff required for supervision. After 7.30 am more children arrive and more staff are brought on (consistent with ratio requirements). Children are then split into different rooms according to their age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Times</th>
<th>No. children</th>
<th>No. staff required</th>
<th>ECT</th>
<th>Dip (1)</th>
<th>Dip (2)</th>
<th>Dip (3)</th>
<th>Cert (1)</th>
<th>Cert (2)</th>
<th>Cert (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.30 am–7.00 am</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7.00 am–7.30 am</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7.30 am–8.00 am</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.00 am–8.30 am</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8.30 am–9.00 am</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
While the National Quality Framework does not specify that two staff members must be present as a minimum, many services have adopted policies which ensure that two staff are on duty at all times in centre-based services as this provides a greater level of supervision and support for staff.

Services with high occupancy may find it difficult to offer flexible sessions and enrolment where there are no spaces available to accommodate changes.

Early childhood services with economies of scale may also help in implementing flexible sessions. While it may not be financially viable to operate with small numbers during off-peak times at some services, other services can cross-subsidise, due to high numbers of children attending at peak times.

Larger services may also benefit from greater flexibility with staffing being able to stagger shifts more effectively. However, staff may also be reluctant to work shift patterns matching the children’s session times. Other staff may recognise the benefits of working different hours. Services offering flexible enrolment may also find it difficult to roster staff appropriately if there are changes at short notice.

Five tips on flexible sessions

1. Consult with families on whether they prefer, and would commit to, using short, long, or multiple sessions across the day.

2. Look at utilisation across the day and where staff are required (i.e. more staff at busy periods of the day and less at off-peak times).

3. Look at how children are placed in rooms in centre-based services. If small numbers of children are present during off-peak times, consider moving children into one room to maximise utilisation and reduce staff costs.

4. Investigate what rostering technologies are available to track and improve utilisation across the day.

5. Think about how quarantining spaces might enable greater flexibility in sessions and enrolment for families accessing the service. Also consider how keeping free spaces may impact on service utilisation overall.

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