Teaching children is an exciting and rewarding profession, but it can also be challenging and exhausting. The goal in out of school hours care (OSHC) is the same as in early years settings: to support children to become their best selves, and to create a learning environment that enables them access, scope, creativity, opportunity and belonging.

While OSHCare hours are shorter, they still demand the same commitment to health and care routines, play, social interactions, reinforcement of expected behaviours, pastoral care, and the complex cycles of observation, reflection and analysis from which the program emerges. Add in the twice daily transitions to and from home and school, the children’s continually changing attendance patterns and the complexities of managing a more transient workforce, and a picture emerges about the challenges of motivating and keeping excellent staff.

Adults are no different from children in that when they feel good and are positive, motivated and content, they are more likely to be open and receptive—they expect things to go well and have the resilience to face and deal with problems and mistakes.

Having worked in schools, preschools, long day care and OSHC settings for over 30 years, I can attest that there are things in common with every teaching domain. One is that educators are often tired, overworked and undervalued.

Caring for staff caring for children

When Primary OSHCare commenced its own version of out of school hours care in 2004, it was out of a sense of commitment not only to children and families, but, equally importantly, to the staff who were going to create this environment.

The staff and I wanted our workplace to be somewhere where efforts and experience were valued and appreciated; where staff felt they could actively contribute to the team, families and children, and that they could grow professionally and personally. I also wanted to ensure that staff felt respected and cared for within the organisation.

In the early days, with only a couple of centres and few staff to look after, Primary OSHCare achieved these aims by offering its own personal supervision and support, opportunities for training, acknowledgement and payback for extra work or stressful periods. Tying in performance appraisals and weekly or monthly meetings with a lunch or social event was also effective. However, as the centres grew in number, I realised that one person could not effectively provide the required levels of recognition and reinforcement.

Developing a values-led culture

The staff and I recognised that my personal care of educators, my empathy and understanding of the job and the demands made on educators every day was a crucial part of our professional culture. In order to sustain and embed this culture in our workplace, we developed a set of values to clearly articulate this approach.

In 2012, we undertook a comprehensive project, which invited staff to express:
• what things they enjoyed about their work
• some words to describe our centres
• the things that were most important in their job.

From here, we developed a set of values, which are actively promoted and upheld today.

Acknowledgements, rewards and recognition

These values were later used to formulate the Staff Reward and Recognition Program: a monthly peer-nomination system out of which an ‘Employee of the Month’ and a runner up is selected. This initiative both underpins the expectations Primary OSHCare has of its staff and demonstrates a commitment to their wellbeing. These peer-nominated awards ask educators to look daily within their centre and identify educators who demonstrate workplace values. The desired professional attitudes and behaviours are actively promoted through the process, and peer and management nomination demonstrate educators’ thinking and reflection around the values’ statements and their implementation.
In addition, we have embedded a program of recognition that facilitates growth opportunities and career progression; for example, the Future Leaders Program. This is an annual intake process of self-selected participants from any level of the organisation. It offers a program of leadership experiences, goal setting and participation in broad initiatives.

Not every educator is destined to become a coordinator or manager—some are superb practitioners on the floor, some have wonderful programming skills, and some are creative with the set-up and maintenance of the centre environment. Our Future Leaders Program is one way in which educators at centre level can participate in, and benefit from, additional opportunities.

Both Employee of the Month and Future Leaders are part of the comprehensive program we offer at Primary OSHCare to ensure the continued development and appreciation of valued team members. These programs build professionalism in our team, encourage loyalty and aim to redress staff turnover challenges.

**Staff wellness generates staff happiness**

Ensuring staff feel supported, encouraged to participate and happy in their work enables them to offer their best selves to the children they care for. Simple gestures go a long way to achieve this, but Primary OSHCare’s sophisticated structures have proven that loyalty and connectivity within the organisation leads to longevity of service and continuity of care.

Recognising that our educators work extremely hard and do not often prioritise time ‘for themselves’, Primary OSHCare considered many ways in which to encourage this important practice. Starting with the children in 2014, we introduced a comprehensive Health and Wellbeing Program.

This initiative is designed to directly impact children’s lives through the provision of health and wellbeing programs within the centres—growing, cooking and eating healthy food; professional coaching in a range of indoor and outdoor active sports; and wellbeing sessions.

The staff are invited to participate in group fitness training, are offered regular personal development training opportunities and have access to individual and team supervision with a professional psychologist. In 2017, we joined the New South Wales government-funded ‘Get healthy at work’ campaign, with free health checks and simple and sustainable workplace health programming.

**Why you matter**

Primary OSHCare’s annual conferences focus on ways our own wellbeing and resilience affects both work and personal relationships. The work done here informs planning for ongoing support, training and development. A workshop entitled ‘Why You Matter’ was delivered by one of our presenters in 2016, and has subsequently been rolled out to all centres and educators with great effect.

Not only does the provision of these resources demonstrate a commitment to educators, but it promotes a philosophical view of personal development and self-reflection.

**Part of a team**

The work of an educator is so much easier when you belong to an effective team. Our teams are supported by extensive and detailed policy and procedure, which promotes autonomy and supports them in their capacity to make confident decisions.

Primary OSHCare supports our centre teams with highly experienced Regional Managers (Educational Leaders) who offer daily access to their knowledge, expertise and guidance. The Regional Manager also leads a larger team—five centres in each team are treated as a collegial cluster.

Extensive support and networking systems of this kind enable educators to share their experience and ideas with their Regional Manager. In addition, regular cluster and coordinator meetings address policy and procedural issues, and invite individuals to present their own initiatives, successes and difficulties. The Regional Manager team is, in turn, supported by a trio of Senior Managers. There is also a wide range of other supports available at the head office, for all staff: human resources; IT; regulation and compliance; marketing; and family communications.

It is often said that it takes a community to raise a child. It is our belief here at Primary OSHCare that the health and prosperity of any community relies heavily on a shared set of values and objectives, and that the individuals within it must be treated fairly and with respect. We regard our organisation as a community of people who share common aims and beliefs, and that the work we do must proactively engage with, support and maintain this culture.

By caring for, respecting and acknowledging each and every individual, we have the best chance of raising children who are equipped to do the same.

**Suzanne Blythin**  
Approved Provider  
Primary OSHCare  

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