

TIP SHEET: WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES

This tip sheet must be read in conjunction with the Residential Services Practice Manual instruction 4.2 **Decision making and choice** and the preface.

Families play a critical role in many residents' lives. Staff working in disability accommodation services should work collaboratively and constructively with families to ensure the best outcomes for residents. Staff should be professional, respectful, flexible and responsive in their interactions with family members. This tip sheet provides some ideas for staff to foster positive relationships with families.

Family relationships are important

For most people, whether they have a disability or not, family relationships and support are very important. Family relationships tend to be there for the long term while service providers and staff may change. Families can bring unconditional love, lifetime commitment, emotional closeness and deep connections. Positive family relationships can strengthen a resident's identity, create a sense of belonging and improve quality of life.

Disability Act 2006

The *Disability Act 2006* (s. 5) states that disability service providers acknowledge and respect the important role of families and carers in supporting the person with a disability and assisting them to build capacity.

What do families require?

Generally families want staff to:

- Respect and value their knowledge and understanding of their family member.
- Appreciate and support their lifelong commitment to, relationship with, and love for, their family member.
- Work in partnership to improve the quality of support to residents.
- Communicate in an open and respectful manner.

'We want to be respected and appreciated for our knowledge and understanding of our relative and for our deep and lasting love of him. We want our lifelong place in his life to be valued and supported. We want the journey we have shared so far to be treasured as part of his precious life experience, a part of who he is, and something those who care about him are interested in and help him to remember, share and cherish'.

Dr Jane Tracy, parent of an adult with a disability living in a group home

Tips for working effectively with families

Family and support staff have complementary roles in a resident's life. Establishing shared goals and expectations, building mutual trust and confidence, and agreeing to address differences of views openly and respectfully are all fundamental to establishing and maintaining positive relationships. The following are suggestions that may be considered for improving partnerships with families, after discussing with the resident and the family what level of involvement they would like:

- Acknowledge and reinforce resident's family relationships. Value the love and support family can provide.
- Value and respect families' knowledge, experience and understanding that come from sharing residents' lives for many years.
- Remember that families may have varying degrees of involvement, relating to other life demands, at different times.
- Greet families by name and welcome them when they visit or contact the group home.
- Schedule regular times to communicate with a resident's family. Share the positive stories or experiences regularly. Avoid communicating only when there is a problem.
- Some families have preferences for how services communicate with them. If this is the case, make sure all staff know and adhere to this.
- Always treat and speak to family members professionally, respectfully and courteously.
- Take family's concerns seriously. Listen to and value the perspective of family members, and check that you have understood their concerns.

- Apologise if a mistake has been made, and if possible advise what is being done or will be done to rectify the mistake.
- Follow through on agreed actions.
- Don't make promises that cannot be kept.
- Remember that staff and family share a common goal which is to support the resident to have a happy and fulfilling life.
- Remember that families' past experiences of using disability services might not be positive in some instances and may impact on how they interact with current staff.
- Express your commitment to do your best in supporting the resident, and follow through with actions.
- Build trust by being respectful, open, honest and professional.

Provide opportunities for families to be involved

The decision to seek and accept a place in supported accommodation for a family member is often a very challenging one. Providing opportunities for families to be involved in the life of the resident can help family members to deal with these challenges. Opportunities for family involvement could include:

- joint planning and communication
- the development and review of support and health plans
- attending medical appointments
- during times of change or transition to new accommodation option
- participation in recreation activities, holidays and overnight stays with the family
- invitations to community events
- invitations to celebrations such as birthdays, festivals, cultural and religious events
- assisting with meal times and menu planning.
- Support the resident to ring, email or send letters to their family to share news, achievements and experiences. Technology such as webcams can offer opportunities for families to see and hear their family member, even those with communication difficulties. Each family situation must be considered individually and attempts should be made to involve the family where possible and practicable.

Balancing person-centred with family-sensitive approaches

The relationship between adults with disability and their family can be complex as a resident may be less able to undertake the usual rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, such as separation from parents and independence. The issues of autonomy and independence can be challenging. Joint planning and communication with respect for everyone's contribution may assist in resolving any challenges. Consider support from advocacy groups for the resident if required.

If there are difficulties

If difficulty or conflict arises, include the family early in problem solving, and be respectful and sensitive to their needs. Understand they have had many experiences along the way that influence the way they see and understand their current experiences. Where there are difficulties with relationships between families and staff, staff should seek assistance from their line manager and take steps to try and repair the relationship which may include:

- Meeting with the resident and their family to discuss the issue and work through it together, focusing on the outcome for the resident.
- Discussing expectations and ensuring everyone has a clear understanding of what can be provided, and documenting this.
- Ensuring the resident and the family know how to make a complaint.
- Provide information to the resident and their family about the role of the Community Visitors program, the Office of the Public Advocate, advocacy organisations and the Disability Services Commissioner.
- Setting clear and reasonable boundaries if required and documenting these.
- Developing a plan together to proactively communicate and address issues as they arise.

Ensuring that all agreements, expectations, communication preferences are documented to ensure that services provided are consistent and clear. If issues cannot be resolved at the local level then seek assistance from your line manager, and consider encouraging the family to raise their issues through the complaints processes.

Where staff consider there may be occupational violence staff should follow RSPM 3.4 Occupational Violence.

Useful resources

Victorian Disability Services Commissioner released an occasional paper which outlines principles staff should follow to support families of adults with a disability and work constructively with them. The paper is titled: Learning from Complaints - Occasional Paper No. 2 - Families and service providers working together, and can be found at <http://www.odsc.vic.gov.au/occasional-papers>.