Children at risk

*Risk* implies a situation that may impact on a child’s safety, health, or emotional or psychological state, adversely affecting their present or future success and wellbeing.

Categories of risk

Risk factors fall into three categories:

- **environmental**, which may include poverty/income, parental style, number/quality of parents/carers, housing, family circumstances and lifestyle, non-English speaking or dual language families, rural and remote communities
- **physical**, which may include diet, nutrition, safety, health and neglect
- **emotional**, which may include verbal abuse, resilience, social literacy and psychological health.

Responsibility of services

Early recognition of risks and provision of intervention and/or support is essential. Any identified or suspected risk must be assessed as to whether there is a need for intervention and if there is, by whom and how.

Where the risk is not of a legal nature, teachers should discuss the type and level of support needed, work with families to reduce the risk and review on an ongoing basis.

If the situation involves notifying and reporting to government authorities, then teachers should follow appropriate steps as defined in the *Child Protection Act 1999.*

Every child has the right to live a full and productive life in an environment that builds confidence, friendship, security and happiness, irrespective of their family circumstances and background. Children and families have a right to access the various safety systems that exist to support them.

Some strategies for creating a supportive environment include:

- open discussion with families to invite sharing
- gathering evidence and raising concerns with your centre board or management
- sharing information about government and other support agencies.

Implications for educators

Research¹ suggests that using various profiling strategies to gather data about a child’s risk factors helps to create a picture of risk based on evidence. This information identifies areas for teachers to undertake appropriate training and initiate discussions about likely issues in their community.

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Teachers who form strong, positive relationships with children and families allow issues such as nutrition, clothing, parenting skills, welfare, family support and early intervention to be more readily discussed and addressed. Where positive relationships are developed between staff, children and families, without fear of judgment, signs of at risk behaviours and situations may be easier to recognise and address. Establishing an open, communicative environment without judgment allows trust to develop.

Partnerships

Creating a supportive environment is a major step towards identifying and supporting children and families in need. Using enrolment data and additional information is also crucial. It is through discussions with families and observing children that evidence of children at risk will emerge. Additional information can also be gathered by examining socio-economic and demographic data relevant to their local area, such as education, housing, educational levels, second language, or extended family support.

Useful links

All links were accessed at 4 May 2012.

- Kids in Focus: www.kidsinfofocusqld.org.au/
- Brisbane Youth Service — Young Families Support Services: www.brisyouth.org/our_services/young_families_support_services/
- Queensland Department of Communities: www.communities.qld.gov.au/gateway/
- St Vincent de Paul: www.vinnies.org.au/child-and-family-program
- Centacare — Catholic Family and Community Services: www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/content.php/family-support
- Uniting Care Community — Child and Family Care: www.uccommunity.org.au/children-and-families