

Quality Documentation in Casework

Children and families need us to make sure documentation and recording is correct, respectful and clear because of the influence what is written about them has on their lives. Few caseworkers are prepared for the quantity and complexity of documentation that the caseworker role in the Permanency Support Program (PSP) entails.

Many of us began our careers equipped for quality interpersonal work with people who are vulnerable. Yet the reality for PSP caseworkers is that we must excel at both the interpersonal work and documentation in order to achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

Words on the written page are powerful. They are in many ways' immortal – they outlive the circumstances in which they were written and often the authors who penned them.

Why Documenting the Work You Do is Important?

Your documentation can help a child understand their story and can strengthen their sense of identity and belonging - The documentation of your casework with a child a family forms part of their life story. Documentation helps children understand their identity, where and how they belong, the stories in their life (including very painful ones) and the role different people have played in shaping who they are. For very young children or young people who have lost connections with important people in their lives your case notes might become the only tangible memories they have for a point in time.

The words you write shape the perception readers will have of the child, family and carer for days and years to come.

Documentation and interpersonal work are connected. The way we write affects the way we speak (and vice versa) and the language we use with families is central to quality relationships with children, families and carers.

Your documentation is an important part of your organisation's ongoing accreditation. The Office of the Children's Guardian (OCG) relies on your documentation to confirm your organisation's practice is meeting the standard of care that vulnerable children should expect, and therefore meeting accreditation requirements.

Documenting your work also:

- honours a family's story so they do not have to unnecessarily repeat themselves
- keeps you and others accountable about the work done with children and families, what decisions were made and why they were made
- helps you and others to review and reflect on progress
- captures important information to help in writing assessments, referrals and analysis
- helps to identify any patterns in the stories of children and families, service provision and practice
- helps communication between service providers and makes sure families receive a coordinated, rather than fragmented service
- makes sure things are not forgotten or lost
- assists with handover between workers and services
- helps you notice strengths you can build on.

Knowing what to record can be challenging. Purposeful record keeping helps ensure notes have depth, analysis and a balanced view of children, families and carers.

Common Types of Documentation in PSP

Different PSP Service Providers will have different documentation requirements, but the following are commonly required by most providers:

- meeting records
- phone call records
- home visit records
- family action plans
- letters to children explaining their entry into care
- case plans
- cultural plans
- affidavits

- family time reports
- medical reports
- education learning plans and school reports
- assessments and
- Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) forms.

The Principles of Good Record Keeping in PSP

When thinking about what to record, general principles of relevance, purpose and ethics are valuable guides in deciding what to write down and how to write it.

Relevance - use professional judgement and consider how the information you write supports or undermines a child's safety and wellbeing and their story. Always capture the context of a statement or situation so that words are not taken out of context. If private or sensitive information is not relevant to a particular document, use professional judgement about whether it is needed (e.g. deeply personal information or detail in an affidavit).

Respect - record a family's private information with respect and sensitivity, while being clear about your worries and the role each family member plays regarding these concerns. Consider a child and families cultures and make sure your notes are easy to understand and free of jargon.

Role clarity - recording your practice helps you reflect why you are working with a child, their family or carer and what your role is.

Privacy - Think about a young person, parent or carer's fears and worries about the information they are sharing with you, what you are recording and the personal information you are collecting. It is important to understand their story and record it with empathy and sensitivity. Let them know what you are recording and why, especially if the information is going to be shared with other people.

Integrity - What you write can influence the way that other casework staff see, understand and work with a child and their family. Think about your personal biases and ensure you are writing in an accurate, fair and balanced way.

Quality Documentation in Casework: Key Messages

- We record our work with children, families and carers to evidence what we have done and what we want to happen. This supports change and helps us communicate with others.
- Our records provide a sense of a person and their story, their identity and a narrative of key events that shape their life.

- We are purposeful about the records we keep. We think about why we are writing them. We make good decisions about what is necessary, relevant and important to write about and the best way to do this.
- We write with balance, fairness, accuracy and relevance.
- We remember that our work with a family is a ‘point in time’. There was a before and there will be an after. Our words reflect what we know about a family’s past, what is happening for them now and what support they need for the future.
- We allow room for more than one version of a family’s story.
- We record in language that is respectful, accessible and allows people to fully participate. Our recording is clear about the family’s strengths, our worries, our plans and the rationale for decision making.
- We are clear about when we are recording facts, observations, feelings and opinions.
- We invest our energies in recording our assessments and analysis of a child’s experiences in their family. We notice parents’ efforts towards making change. We look beyond the step by step details and resist a sole focus on justifying our actions.
- Through quality case notes, we reflect on whether our work is effective. We have a documented rationale for decision making.

Frameworks for Record Keeping

NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care (‘The Standards’).

The Standards are enforced by the NSW Children’s Guardian. They aim to ensure children in out-of-home care receive services that meet their needs, protect their rights and promote their interests. The Standards are also used by the OCG to measure how organisations give children in care long-term, safe and stable care.

Documentation and record keeping - **Standard 17**

“Children and young people have a permanent record of their histories which contains all relevant documentation.”

The Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (the Care Act)

Section 160: Maintenance of records

Records about the development, history and identity of the child must be maintained and able to be accessed by them (when they reach adulthood).

Section 169: Entitlement to certain documents

This section explains that a child is entitled to review their records once they leave care (and after older than 18 years of ages).

Please see: [Quality Documentation in Casework- Tips and Examples](#) for more information.

References

Goodman, S. and Trowler, S. (eds.) (2012). 'Social work reclaimed: innovative frameworks for child and family social work practice'. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers