

Interview with the Manager of ECKA

We interviewed Jo Geurts the Manager of Eureka Community Kindergarten Association Inc. (ECKA) a cluster management organisation in the Grampians region. Jo told us about how they implemented OHS policy and procedures for the use of chemicals across their services.

1 Tell with about what led you to assess the use of chemicals at your services?

ECKA established as a Cluster Manager in 2003, and the number of kindergartens grew quickly from 6 to 16 within a two year period. The rapid expansion did not allow much time to focus on areas like OHS, as we were so busy and just managing to cope with the day to day workload. During this time ECKA had a number of DHS Inspection findings detailing chemicals in unmarked bottles, and even coke bottles, and after a quick visit to each kindergarten it became obvious that there were many different chemicals being used. There were a number of safety concerns about the type of chemicals, how they were being stored, and how they were being used. There was no safety information available on most of the chemicals. At the time my colleague and I had just completed an OHS certificate and were focusing on safety in the workplace. We identified that the issues we were uncovering were of major importance and needed to be addressed urgently.

2 How did you go about determining your services needs?

The Board of ECKA drove the focus on OHS by establishing a provision of several thousand dollars to be used to improve safety standards at each service. ECKA engaged an independent health and safety consultant and together developed a list of areas that the consultant would undertake an audit at each kindergarten. The consultant provided a report of his findings at each kindergarten which enabled ECKA to produce a risk assessment of each issue, and initially focus on the areas of higher need to make changes to improve safety. The issue of chemicals was again highlighted which prompted us to seek assistance and look for some solutions to the chemical issues.

3 What did you take into account when deciding which chemicals to use?

With the assistance of a consultant we were able to look at limiting the number of chemicals that each service would need by looking at each product and what it could be used for. We contacted our local Council and DHS for information about the types of chemicals that were safe for use in Children's Services. This was an interesting exercise as it highlighted the need to keep the cleaning products to a minimum and to ensure that the chemicals were being used at the correct dilution levels, as well as ensuring staff followed the manufacturer's instructions.

For example we found a kindergarten that was using a cleaning product on the children's tables before and after the children ate their lunch. The correct dilution of the chemical would mean that the liquid in the spray bottle would appear clear, but at this service we noticed that the contents of the spray bottle appeared to be pink and not to manufacturers specifications. As well as incorrect dilution we also discovered that the manufacturer's instructions said that the chemical must be wiped off with paper towel and then discarded. If the area was to be used for food a further step had to be taken and the chemical had to be washed off with clean water. ECKA was very concerned about the use of this chemical around children, and in particular, where children were eating.

4 What solutions did you come up with?

The consultant developed a range of posters and material safety data sheets to go with each product that detailed the correct use, dilution rates of the products and the safety requirements when using the products. The consultant also provided clearly marked spray bottles and containers so that any chemicals being decanted from larger containers were easily identified. All staff are trained in the

safe use of chemicals, and the importance of correct use and dilution. ECKA developed a policy for the use of chemicals and other hazards. Although ECKA does not force kindergarten staff to only purchase chemicals through the consultant, we require staff to have material safety data sheets for every product they introduce into the kindergarten. ECKA conducts a yearly audit on chemicals in the kindergartens.

5 Are there still any other concerns that need addressing?

ECKA continues to look for better products. We make recommendations to staff for products that we identify as safer and more environmentally friendly.

The annual audits conducted by ECKA each year continue to highlight problems with staff not being serious enough about safety and minimizing the number of chemicals in their kindergarten. Many staff will still purchase chemicals at the supermarkets but have not thought about the contents of the chemical or the need for material safety data sheets. Ongoing staff training and support needs to be provided.

ECKA has also identified that there is work to be done in respect to those kindergartens where external cleaners are contracted. In 2011 ECKA will conduct an audit of contract cleaners to ensure that the safety of contractors is also documented and that the chemicals they use are safe.

