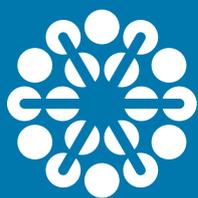


RESEARCH TO ACTION

>> Bridging the
gap between
what we know
and what we do



Centre for
Applied Disability
Research

An Initiative of National Disability Services

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Disability
Services

GUIDE TO GOOD GROUP HOMES

What to look for and
things to ask





INTRODUCTION

People with disability have the right to live anywhere in the community. People can live on their own, with family and friends, or share with others.

Many people with disability – especially people with intellectual disability – live with other people with disability in group homes. The quality of group homes can be very different from home to home.

Choosing where to live is an important decision. It can be fun but it can also be difficult. For people with disability and families, choosing where to live can be a stressful time. It can mean big changes.

This guide will help you think about what makes a good group home. It has some ideas of things to look for when you visit a group home and questions to ask staff. It is useful for people with disability, family, advocates and even disability staff.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

It is important to visit a group home to see what happens there. Websites, adverts and brochures can help you think about different group homes, but it is best to look for yourself before you make any decisions.

Everyone involved in the decision should try and visit, especially the person considering living in the group home. Visit several times, on different days and at different times of the day. Ask the permission of the people who live in the home if you can visit, and take care not to invade their privacy.

Spend some time seeing what happens. Watch how staff interact with the people who live there. Are they helping people make choices? Does it feel like a home where everyone is taking part? Are staff are doing things with people, or is it like a hotel where people are sitting around and staff do everything for them.

ASK QUESTIONS

Not all aspects of quality are easy to see. Asking staff and managers questions can help you find out what is important to them in the way they work with the people who live there.

It can be hard asking tricky questions. It might help to take someone else with you who knows the person who is thinking about living there, or someone who has experience of group homes.

WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

This guide is based on research about what makes the most difference to the quality of group homes². You can read a summary of this research here www.cadr.org.au/about-cadr/research-to-action-guides. The research tells us that the things that make the most difference are:

- Practice of frontline staff and managers (how they act)
- Culture (expectations about how things are done in the home)
- Policy and procedures (how the organisation organises itself)
- Design (physical aspects, how many people, and who lives there)

Table 1. What makes the most difference to quality?

<p>Practice of frontline staff and managers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff do things with people rather than for them. (This is called Active Support.) • Staff adapt their communication and support for each individual. • Staff use positive behaviour support – to promote quality of life for the individual. • Frontline managers watch how staff work; demonstrate good practice; coach staff; lead the team; and supervise individual staff
<p>Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service culture is enabling for the people supported; motivating for staff; and respectful of the people supported – regarding them as equal human beings and recognising their need for support. All staff are on the same page about how they support people and what is expected of them.
<p>Policy and procedures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organisation hires staff who put the quality of life of people who live there first. • There are strong policies around recruitment of staff and holding staff responsible for the quality of their support. • Staff are trained in Active Support. They have had classroom as well as on-the-job training.
<p>Design and resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group home is small, housing no more than six people. • The house looks similar to other houses in the local area. • There are enough staff for the people who live there. • People in the house have different support needs. • Not everyone has challenging behaviour (e.g. aggressive or destructive behaviours).



THINGS TO LOOK FOR – QUESTIONS TO ASK

PRACTICE OF FRONTLINE STAFF AND CULTURE

HOW DO THE STAFF INTERACT WITH YOU AND THE PEOPLE THEY SUPPORT?

All communication in the house by staff should be warm and respectful. Here are some examples of respectful and not-so-respectful behaviour.

Respectful	Not Respectful
Staff introduce you to the people who live there.	Staff talk about people in front of them.
Staff talk about people as adults who can make choices and decisions about their own lives.	Staff use derogatory terms when talking about the people who live in the house.
Staff see people as individuals and use their names.	Staff regard people as part of a group – they simply say ‘the guys’, ‘our guys’ or ‘the residents’.
Staff knock on bedroom doors before they enter.	Staff talk about people as objects – for example, ‘loading the bus’; ‘doing personal care’; ‘feeding’; ‘showering’.
For people who use wheelchairs, staff check with the person and let them know what is happening before they start to wheel them somewhere.	Staff seem to be talking to each other more than the people they are supporting.

COMMUNICATION STYLES

You should see staff using different ways of communicating with each person they support. This should be right for each person’s level of understanding and ways of communicating.

If people do not use or understand words to communicate, staff should use communication aids to talk with people. Examples include electronic devices, pictures, pointing, symbols and chat books.

HOW DO STAFF ACT AND WHAT TYPE OF SUPPORT DO THEY PROVIDE – WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Do you see staff do things with people so they can be involved in meaningful activities around the house – e.g. washing up or cooking? This is called Active Support.

Here are some examples that staff are using Active Support:

- Someone who lives in the house opens the front door to you.
- People are not sitting doing nothing for long periods of time.
- Staff talk with the people who live there – they do not only respond when people ask for attention, perhaps through their behaviour.

- All people are getting similar attention from staff – staff are not spending more time with people who are more able, have lower support needs and communicate using words.
- Staff are attentive – they notice when a person is trying to communicate with them and respond to them.
- Staff are responsive – they take notice and act on the choices or preferences that people express rather than ignore or override them.
- Staff offer choices to people they support. This means not everyone eats the same meal or does the same thing at the same time. Everyone spends time doing the things that they choose.
- People get the type and amount of support they need to successfully take part in activities – this may be anything from hand over hand assistance from staff to a verbal prompt depending on the person’s needs.
- When people are invited to participate in an activity, it is clear from visual or non-verbal cues what they are being invited to do.
- Staff rarely do household tasks on their own. They are not likely to be in the kitchen or laundry on their own.

QUESTIONS TO ASK STAFF ABOUT THEIR WORK

Asking questions can help you get to know staff and the way they work. Some questions may be harder to answer because staff must respect the privacy of people who live there.

Some examples of questions you could ask are:

- Do you know what people like and do not like?
- Do people all go to bed at the same time, or do they have individual routines according to their preferences?
- Do you know about the friends and relatives of people you support? How do you ensure they stay in regular contact?
- Are families welcome to visit the group home?
- Do families play any other roles in relation to the group home?
- How often do you offer new choices so people can try out new things?
- Do the people who live in the home know people in their neighbourhood?
- Do you know about the needs of each person you support – for example, their health, age, communication style or any challenging behaviours?
- Does each person have a support plan, including a behaviour support plan where necessary?
- Is anyone ever locked in a room or prevented from accessing a part of the house?
- Is anyone ever restrained, and what guidance is there about if and when you restrain a person?
- Are staff open to doing things differently and new ideas about support? For example, what do they know about the changes happening in the disability sector?
- Did staff share confidential information about the people in the house with you? Did they talk about people in front of them without including them in the conversation?

PRACTICE OF FRONTLINE MANAGERS – WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Is there strong practice leadership in the house? Is there a motivating culture for staff? If so, you should see evidence that there is a manager or senior staff member – who is the leader in the house – who:

- Has confidence and is respected by all staff;
- Often spends time in the house;
- Is skilled at Active Support and sets a good example to staff about what is expected of them;
- Leads team meetings that all staff attend and in which practice, rather than housekeeping, is the main thing on the agenda;
- Often meets to provide supervision to each staff member; and
- Makes sure each staff member working in the house knows what they are going to be doing.

You should expect to see:

- Staff who are organised;
- A plan for what staff are going to do in the house each day;
- A plan for each person who lives in the house for what they are doing today;
- A plan that is accessible in pictures or easy words;
- The frontline manager supports people who live in the house or works alongside staff, rather than sitting in the office for most of the time; and
- Flexible routines or plans for the day that allow people living in the house to change what they want to do if they choose.

WHAT TO ASK STAFF ABOUT PRACTICE LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE:

- When was their last supervision session with their frontline manager? What did they talk about?
- How do they know what they are expected to do in the house each day?
- When did they last attend a staff meeting? Did the staff share experiences with each other about supporting the people who live in the house?
- How does the frontline manager know about what happens in the house and the quality of staff practice?
- How often is the frontline manager at the house? When the manager is in the house, where do they spend most of their time?
- Does the frontline manager regularly observe you working with people in the house, and do they give you feedback?
- What have you learned about good practice from the frontline manager?
- How are decisions made about which staff work at which times? Decisions should reflect the preferences and needs of the people who live in the house rather than those of staff.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES – WHAT TO EXPECT AND ASK ABOUT

Organisations will have policies and procedures about what should happen in the group home and how staff are expected to behave.

Some policies make a difference to the quality of a group home, especially ones that help create expectations about staff behaviour. These include:

- Recruiting staff with values that are respectful of people with intellectual disability and their human rights.
- Staff skills – All staff have training in Active Support. That this training is both a workshop in a classroom and on-the-job training by an experienced trainer.
- Staff accountability – Staff are clear about the quality of support they are expected to provide and that they will be held responsible for it by their managers.
- Staff are known by the people they support. There are procedures to ensure new staff work alongside more experienced staff and staff who know the people being supported well.

DESIGN AND RESOURCES – WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Good group homes should look and feel like any other home in the community as much as possible. Things to look out for include:

- The house is like any other house in the neighbourhood.
- The house is close to transport and public amenities.
- The house is close to the family of the person who is thinking about living there.
- There are no signs at the gate or front door with the logo of the organisation or other things that might suggest this home is different from any other in the street.
- There are no more than six people living in the house.
- The people living in the house have differing support needs.
- There is private space – at least one bedroom for every person who lives there. Everyone can go into all other places in the house.
- The décor reflects the people who live there, including people's photos or personal possessions in different parts of the house.
- You may see some specialist equipment to support people to engage in activities or be more independent. For example, a large switch that can be pressed to turn on a blender, a device that holds and tips water from a hot kettle, small jugs or containers for liquids so people can pour their own drinks.
- There is no separate crockery or cutlery for staff.
- There is no separate staff toilet or bathroom.

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