

Why are staff-family relationships important?

Next time you look at a family member in your aged care facility, pause for a moment and ask yourself; *how did this person come to be here?* It is worth remembering that every family member has a story to tell about their own journey to the aged care facility.

Many spent years looking after their family member, and often by themselves at home. For many this was a mixture of joy and wonderful memories combined with around the clock care; no longer being able to go out with friends or family; sleepless nights and sometimes stressful days. Although caring may have been difficult, this didn't necessarily make the decision to relocate their loved one to an aged care facility any easier. Speak to families and they will tell you that handing over the care to an aged care facility is often difficult and full of mixed emotions.

Many families want to continue to be involved in their loved one's life after they move into a residential facility. Sometimes families are unsure about how to maintain their caring role in a residential facility, so it is important that they are told about all of the many ways that they can still contribute to the wellbeing of their loved one. Each family will have different reasons for wanting to be involved, and different ways of maintaining this involvement.

You might be the first person the family get to meet when they come to look at the facility, or you may meet them for the first time after the resident has moved in. Can you imagine how much better a family would feel leaving their loved one in the care of staff who are friendly and genuinely interested in developing a relationship with them?

By establishing relationships with the family you are providing better care for the resident. Knowing how to develop a relationship with the family and how to encourage and support this relationship is important for *everyone* in the facility, from the care staff to the cleaners.

There are many benefits to good staff-family relationships. Residents can receive more person-centred care; families can have a more enjoyable and rewarding experience when they come to visit your facility and will want to get more involved in the life of the facility; staff will be happier working there; and there will be less tension and less conflict. When relationships between staff and families in a facility are strained on the other hand, families will feel more powerless, feel more alone and more upset. Where there is tension between staff and families, families experience more sorrow and distress because they feel even guiltier about placing their loved one into the facility.

The first steps to building good staff-family relationships are to make the facility a friendly and inviting place to be and to get to know the family, develop trust and respect and come to understand the family. The family are a valuable resource and they have intimate knowledge about a resident's needs and wishes.

Sometimes building relationships can be testing and there can be tensions, misunderstandings and unmet expectations. This can happen in any relationship. Sometimes families don't really understand what happens in dementia and they struggle to understand the changes they see in their loved one as the illness progresses. Such challenges however can be overcome.

This resource encourages you to think about how you interact with families, offers a range of strategies and resources for you and your facility to build better staff-family relationships and to explore ways to help you ultimately improve the quality of care you provide.