



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Staffing for Quality

Setting the scene

'There is now a wide body of evidence showing that early childhood education and care affects a child's health, wellbeing and competence throughout their lives. The early years are critical in laying the foundation for children's achievement in schooling and into adulthood' (ACECQA, 2011a).

The *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (ACECQA, 2009) is an important early childhood reform designed to deliver a higher standard of care for children in Australia. The NQF is about ensuring services are of the highest possible quality for each child's optimum development and about supporting families to make informed choices about the best setting for their child.

The *National Quality Framework* sets a new *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (DEEWR, 2009b) for early childhood education and care and outside school hours care providers in Australia.

This newsletter focuses on aspects of staffing in early education and care settings that impact on the quality of experience for young children.

NQS Quality Area 4: *Staffing arrangements* is most obviously associated with this aspect of quality. However, 'staffing arrangements' also impact on educational programs and practice (QA 1), children's health, wellbeing and safety (QA 2), how the environment is set up and maintained (QA 3) and the quality of relationships with children and families (QA 5 & 6). Effective leadership (QA 7) 'promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community' (*Guide to the National Quality*

Standard, ACECQA 2011a, p. 11) and therefore is a key component in 'staffing for quality'.

The *National Quality Standard* has introduced several significant changes for improving quality.

Two key changes are:

- improved child to educator ratios to ensure each child receives more individual care and attention
- new educator qualification requirements to ensure educators have the skills to help children learn and develop.

Further detail on these requirements is available at: <http://acecqa.gov.au/early-childhood-in-australia/key-changes/>.

Research supports these changes

A literature review by Dr Leone Huntsman for the Centre for Parenting and Research in Ashfield, Sydney NSW titled *Determinants of quality in child care: A review of the research evidence* (Huntsman, 2008) supports the directions of the NQF—that child to educator ratios and educator qualifications support quality experiences for young children.

This literature review made the distinction between *structural quality*, which looked at 'quantitative' aspects of the childcare setting such as facilities and staff levels; and *process quality*—what actually happens in a childcare setting, especially child–adult and child–child interactions and children's



engagement with activities and materials made available for them.

The weight of evidence in this review favoured the following conclusions:

- Lower child–adult ratios (fewer children per caregiver) are associated with higher process quality; conversely, higher ratios are associated with lower process quality.
- The connection between the number of adults and the quality of care seems to be stronger for younger (i.e. infants) than older children (i.e. over three years).
- Larger group size is associated with lower process quality, but the connection is not as strong as for child–adult ratio.
- The most significant factor affecting quality appears to be caregiver education, qualifications, and training—which are aspects of structural quality—as well as the process aspect of caregiver non-authoritarian beliefs on child rearing.
- Stability of care, in the sense of low levels of staff turnover, is also associated with positive child outcomes.

It is important to note that *particular* child outcomes have been found to be associated with high-quality care:

- better language and cognitive development and maths readiness
- better cooperation and compliance, fewer behavioural problems.

These outcomes underpin learning success in school and wellbeing and fulfilment in life.



Leadership

Leadership in early care and education settings is fundamental to quality and is much more than management and administration. A study in NZ captured the essence of leadership in this way:

At its core is a deep knowledge of the field, a willingness to take risks, and a breadth of vision and thinking that transcends individual programmes, services or organisations. Leadership in early care and education is innovative, but sensitive to history, diversity and context, and it is collaborative yet bold (Scrivens et al., 1999, p. 1).

The NQF supports this view with all services being required to appoint an educational leader either within the service or by smaller services setting up formal access to an external educational leader. This educational leader as outlined in the National Law: Section 169, and National Regulations: Regulations 118, 148 (The *Guide to the National Law and Regulations*, ACECOA 2011b, p. 85) is an educator, coordinator or other individual who is suitably qualified and experienced and must be appointed to lead the development and implementation of the educational program (or curriculum) in the service. This person may have suitable qualifications and experience, as well as a thorough understanding of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009a) and/or the *Framework for School Age Care* (DEEWR, 2011) (or other approved learning framework) to be able to guide other educators in their planning and reflection, and mentor colleagues in their implementation practices.

Quality—What does it look like?

The EYLF and NQS demand that we focus our programs on the principles and practices as outlined in the EYLF, such as responsiveness to children, intentional teaching, continuity of learning, respect for diversity and reflective practices.

NQS, Quality Area 4: *Staffing arrangements*, focuses on the provision of qualified and experienced educators, coordinators and nominated supervisors who are able to develop warm, respectful relationships with children, create safe and predictable environments and encourage children's active engagement in the learning program (adapted from the *Guide* p. 109).

Responsive learning relationships are strengthened as educators and children learn together. Educators are more likely to be responsive, purposeful and thoughtful when staffing arrangements at the service allow them to direct their full attention to their work with children, and when they do not have to attend simultaneously to other tasks (adapted from the *Early Years Learning Framework* pp. 14–15).

Staffing for quality in practice

Example 1: Kingscliff Mini School increased their group size from 20 to 25 preschoolers so that they could increase their educator numbers from two to three. Lindy, the director, says:

'This has enabled us to provide a quality of care that we believed was required. It has allowed us to spend more one-on-one time with some children while the needs of others are met. We really value meal and snack times as opportunities for learning and this allows an educator to be with each group. We find educators can support each other in team teaching more readily for small and large group work, and the increased number of educators in the room allows more time to record and document children's learning as we teach.'



Example 4: Leo from Rainbow Children’s Centre in Ballina believes that staff employment arrangements can also strongly impact on the quality of interactions and experiences for children:

‘My experience is that we all talk about being child and family friendly but we forget that same principle when we deal with staff. A family-friendly workplace will allow staff to work part time if that is what they want or need to do, will allow them to vary hours of work (within reason) to respond to changing circumstances, move from part time to full time or vice versa from year to year, etc. Sure, rostering can be more difficult with a number of part-time staff but my experience is that it evens itself out across the team. As well, if staff feel supported by an employer and have work conditions that allow them to meet their own family and personal needs as well as work needs, they will put a lot into their job and often be flexible and willing to vary hours of work to meet the centre’s needs. I see it was a real win-win—you keep staff happy, you maintain a committed and satisfied staff team and you get less staff turnover. I also don’t see it as disruptive for children; if staff truly work as a team then the absence or presence of any one staff person should not be critical.’

Example 2: Sharon at Cherubs Preschool and Early Learning Centre explains why they focus on low child–staff ratios in each room:

‘This allows the educators to implement individualised care routines and educational learning programs for children.

We have recently made some significant changes to our centre routines to provide opportunities for quality interactions to occur between our educators and families. These changes include amending the roster so that families can access their primary care educators in the mornings and afternoons. We’ve also made changes to the physical environment and the way in which we group children, to create a more personalised and familiar space in which families can drop off and collect their child’.

Sharon also notes that educators need professional learning opportunities if their interactions with children are to be of the highest quality for learning.

Example 3: Northern Rivers Family Day Care in Tweed Heads have a selection and induction process for new educators that includes 8–10 training modules over a period of weeks as their approach to ‘staff for quality’.

Newly inducted educators have a weekly visit from a coordinator with all educators having a fortnightly visit or professional conversation with a coordinator. During these visits coordinators talk with educators about their needs, children’s needs and family needs; they observe interactions, ensure compliance with scheme policies, and model practice. The supported playgroup, led by a qualified educator, is another great opportunity for modelling to occur, with over 50% of educators regularly attending. A mentor system has recently been established where experienced or ‘fantastic’ educators, as described by Kym and Beck the coordinators, support less experienced educators.



In conclusion

Many education and care services are already meeting the new requirements for child–staff ratios and staffing qualifications. For others it will take the time the government has allowed, with an understanding that any reforms need to work on from where people and services start. The requirements might present particular challenges in our rural and remote communities, but there is a responsibility for service providers and educators to do all that they can to ensure all young children receive the education and care experiences that best support them, so that:

‘All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’ (EYLF, DEEWR 2009a, p. 5).

Professional learning opportunities are being rolled out by the professional support communities (PSC), training institutions and other providers to support educators to upgrade their qualifications, and/or provoke reflective thinking about their current skills, practices and knowledge.

The ECEC sector has many resources available to them. We all have a professional obligation to think hard about our current ‘ways of doing’. To do this successfully and manage the demands of change we will need to engage in professional networks, both locally and online, make time for professional conversations and reading to understand our new responsibilities to children and families and be enriched and inspired to continue the good work we are already doing. The NQS Professional Learning Program (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfplp) is a great place to begin. We all aspire to be the very best educator we can—we now have a government commitment underpinning this goal for our work.

Judy Radich

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Acknowledgements

- Lindy Andrews—Kingscliff Mini School Kingscliff, NSW.
- Sharon Martin—Cherubs Preschool & Early Learning Centre Banora Point, NSW.
- Beck Day and Kym Georgeson—Northern Rivers Family Day Care Tweed Heads, NSW.
- Leo Prendegast—Rainbow Children's Centre Inc. Ballina, NSW.

Biography

Judy Radich is an experienced early childhood teacher and currently the director of a long day care centre in Tweed Heads. Judy has been National President of ECA and undertakes research and writing on behalf of the organisation.

Coordinating Editor

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.



An Australian Government Initiative

The NQS Professional Learning Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.



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