



HANDS UP FOR QUALITY

A report by Early Childhood Australia calling for better quality in Early Childhood Education and Care services



Hands Up for Quality

Campaigning for better early
childhood education and care

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the peak organisation advocating for quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years of age.

Australian families are increasingly relying on early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to support their workforce participation, as well as to provide the more traditional 'preschool' experience for their older preschool children.

The ***Hands Up For Quality*** report highlights the urgent need for positive action by governments to make quality improvements for Australia's young children who attend ECEC services.

The report:

- ⇒ looks at quality in early childhood education and care services, what quality is and why it is important;
- ⇒ calls for decisive action by Australian Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to apply the growing body of research and expert advice, and commit now to improved standards of quality in fundamental areas; and
- ⇒ urges governments to address the realities many service providers and families will face in making these improvements by implementing a realistic staged plan for achieving goals without compromising the ultimate commitment to quality.¹

Early Childhood Australia is calling on:

COAG to commit to high quality in ECEC service through national evidence based standards for staff-to-child ratios, staff qualifications and a national rating system.

State, Territory and Federal Governments to consult with the sector and establish a plan for gradual implementation of the quality improvements.

State, Territory and Federal Governments to commit to sharing costs of improvements with parents and ensure that low income families can access high quality services.

Parents and Service Operators to support this call for improvements in quality.

¹ *Hands Up For Quality* focuses on standards in centre based ECEC services, but ECA believes that many of the principles apply equally to other service types.

WHY INVEST IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAMS?

International experts (Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead et al, 2009) identify various interconnected arguments for investment in ECEC.

- ⇒ Children are citizens and have rights to care, developmental opportunities and education. They have a right to the best possible start in life – this includes environments where they can be safe and happy and have the opportunity to reach their health, learning and social development potential.
- ⇒ Early childhood is a crucial period for development and learning. A child's experience during the first five years shapes their future, providing a foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter – self-confidence and sound mental health, motivation to learn, achievement in school and later in life, the ability to control aggressive impulses and resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways, knowing the difference between right and wrong, having the capacity to develop and sustain casual friendships and intimate relationships, and ultimately to be a successful parent oneself (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).
- ⇒ Providing high-quality care and learning experiences early in life, and reducing those that are detrimental to young children, are the most successful and least costly ways to promote early brain development and general healthy early childhood development (Shore, 1997). In the words of the OECD Education Committee (2006): “there is a growing recognition that early access to ECEC provides young children, particularly from low-income and second language groups, with a good start in life.”
- ⇒ Social justice and social inclusion goals require that all children should have equal access to opportunity and services (Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead, 2009). In ECEC services the practical evidence is that we cannot depend on market forces to achieve equity of access to high quality services for economically disadvantaged families. Special interventions are also needed to ensure full access for other groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with high support needs including children with disabilities.
- ⇒ ECEC programs, if they are of high quality, are known to help counteract the personal life effects and later economic costs of disadvantage in the early years, and economists and researchers argue strongly that they more than repay the initial dollar investment (Heckman, 2004).

From this base, it is predicted that high quality ECEC services also contribute in other ways to the nation's economy and overall productivity: in the short term, they support parents in successful participation in the workforce, and in the long term workers in the future will be more highly educated, less likely to be involved with the criminal justice and welfare systems, and generally more productive (RAND, 2005).

The arguments in this area are so strong that we cannot afford not to make the investment.

WHAT IS QUALITY?

The research and analyses all point to one conclusion – **early childhood matters**. For babies and young children attending ECEC services this means that standards in these services should be high.

Quality in ECEC services is about the enjoyment and engagement of the babies and young children who attend, about the warmth, trust and consistency of their relationships with the adults there, and about the interest and intentionality of the interactions and play experiences provided by those adults.

Two fundamental indicators underpin quality and practice in early childhood education and care, and these must be lifted for the quality of Australia's ECEC services to improve across all service types.

The two fundamental indicators of quality are:

- ⇒ Staff to child ratios and group sizes; and
- ⇒ Staff qualifications.

These two elements must be included in the National Quality Rating System, which itself, through implementation practices and a focus on ongoing quality improvement, should also make a contribution to the quality of the service.

HOW DOES AUSTRALIA MEASURE UP?

At present, Australian standards and regulations do not meet the standard for high quality early childhood education and care.

- ⇒ Regulations for early childhood education and care services are not based on research findings about standards of quality, and are inconsistent around the country. Regulations allow services to operate under conditions which make it impossible for staff, with the best will in the world, to do the best for babies and children.
- ⇒ We still have an artificial barrier between child care and early education. Young children *learn* in child care services, and of course they need *care* in preschools. Education is part of all interactions and care with babies and young children.
- ⇒ Staff who work in early childhood education and care services are often poorly paid, do not have good working conditions, and lack opportunities for proper professional practice, professional development, and career advancement. It is widely acknowledged that there is low morale and high turnover – both are bad for staff, for children and for families.

As COAG's own Consultation Regulation Impact Statement indicates, we cannot afford to ignore the evidence any longer if we value the wellbeing of our children, and the quality of education and care services available to them, and if we want to achieve good outcomes for them, for families and for the nation.

HOW TO IMPROVE QUALITY

“Quality” is a complex and values-based notion. Structural indicators provide the foundations of quality and it is almost impossible for other (process) indicators to be successfully achieved when these foundations are not present at a high level. The National Quality Rating System must include both structural and process elements and focus on quality improvement as well as achievements.

Staff-to-child Ratios and Group Size

Higher staff-to-child ratios and smaller group sizes allow early childhood teachers and carers to give more individual attention to children, and contribute to environments where children are relaxed, involved and happy. Adults can form the consistent, nurturing relationships with babies and young children and provide the focused interactions and intentional learning experiences that are needed.

In Australia at present, in most states and territories the regulations for most age groups do not meet the ratios the evidence says is necessary to achieve high quality.

Of course, for many services, improving ratios will have some practical challenges:

- ⇒ Attracting and retaining suitable staff is already an issue in many services, and will become more difficult in a situation of greater demand. Among other things, pay parity and career paths will need improving.
- ⇒ Space, resources and flexibility in the staffing arrangements may impact on the number of children a service can take in particular groups. Governments need to be aware of this and services and governments together need to plan to address it in going forward.

Early Childhood Australia supports (as minimum allowable standards) the following ratios and associated group sizes²

Infant/Child Age	Group Size	Staff-to-child Ratio
Birth to 24 months	6 babies/toddlers	1:3
25 to 35 months	10 children	1:5
36 months and older	20 children	1:10

Staff Qualifications

It is not enough to have more staff – we need staff who are well trained and skilled. Early childhood education specialists are equipped to deliver better outcomes for children in ECEC services, and staff should have early childhood qualifications which focus on the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and learning of babies and young children.

² It is important to note that these ratios apply to actual adult:child contact time. This means that staff hours/numbers will be greater to allow staff time away from children – whatever the purpose of this.

It is important that all staff have some level of qualification, and particularly important that there is leadership and program involvement by university qualified early childhood teachers who are committed to working with infants and young children age group.

Appropriately qualified staff lift the quality of ECEC services in various ways, including:

- ⇒ through the quality of their relationships and interactions with children;
- ⇒ through the appropriateness and intentionality of the experiences they provide for children;
- ⇒ through the behaviour they practice with their colleagues and model to children; and
- ⇒ through their interactions and partnerships with parents.

Improving qualifications helps staff and carers to provide the best experiences possible for the babies and children attending the service.

At present, Australia does not have a national mandatory qualification for all childcare workers. Up to 45 per cent of the early childhood education and care workforce have no formal childcare qualifications. We need to build a professional, high quality workforce so that children get the experiences they need to start school – and life – as optimistic people and confident learners.

ECA supports the following with regard to staff in ECEC services:

- ⇒ all staff should be qualified at least at the Certificate III in Children’s Services level;
- ⇒ 50 per cent of staff should have a Diploma of Children’s Services or higher qualification; and
- ⇒ there should be leadership and program delivery by a university qualified early childhood teacher for children of all ages, in proportion to the number of children.

Early Childhood Australia also calls for issues around the robustness of qualifications (both vocational certificate/diploma and university degrees) to be addressed, to ensure that graduates have been well prepared and well mentored during their training and study, and have been well assessed at its conclusion. This will ensure they are properly equipped to meet the demands of contemporary ECEC settings and have the knowledge and skills needed for working with infants and toddlers.

It is widely recognised that improved staff-to-child ratios, small group sizes and qualified staff cannot stand alone in achieving a high standard of service delivery. These basics set the scene for work on other indicators of high quality, including warm and consistent interactions and relationships with children, interesting experiences and play to promote their learning, open communication with families, and continuing improvement in all areas. However, it is difficult if not impossible to

achieve high standards without the basics in place.

NATIONAL QUALITY RATING SYSTEM

It is essential that the national quality rating system incorporates at the 'national quality standard level' both structural elements (such as ratios and qualifications) and practice elements that are at a sufficiently high level of quality to accurately reflect what the evidence demands is necessary for good outcomes for children, and indeed the goals of the National Quality Agenda.

It is important that the National Quality Rating System, through its implementation in services, makes a contribution to the quality of the services. It should be a process, which includes assessment against the standards and of progress made towards them. The system should support the development of a quality culture in services – a conscious and everyday focus on quality improvement.

GOVERNMENTS MUST COMMIT TO HIGH QUALITY NATIONALLY NOW

Standard setting and investment in early childhood education and care must be a priority for Australia's Commonwealth, State and Territory governments.

COAG must strongly commit to a national goal of high quality in early Childhood Education and Care services:

- ⇒ Allowing States and Territories to choose whether or not to make their own changes is no solution. This is essentially the status quo, and while some states have already individually committed to some quality improvement, the status quo has failed.
- ⇒ Compromising at this stage, by setting lower quality goals than those supported by the research and ECA will mean that we never achieve Prime Minister Rudd's and COAG's own stated goals for young children and our nation.
- ⇒ We can and must set the goal for ECEC standards where the evidence says it should be, and operate a quality rating system that supports this. No one says this will be easy to achieve, but there are services operating close to these standards already, and with commitment and proper planning it can be done in all services nationally.

HOW TO GET THERE

Having set the goal where it should be, governments and the sector can set about carefully planning a staged implementation over time, including ratios, qualifications, and practice through the Early Years Learning Framework and the national quality rating system without compromising the ultimate commitment to quality.

Such a plan needs to address the realities.

- ⇒ Service providers will face challenges including attracting and retaining enough appropriately qualified staff, perhaps adjusting group/enrollment sizes, and working with new quality standards of service delivery. These are complex issues and call for multiple strategies, regional, state and national, to address them. But it can be done – after all, planning for improvement in response to new knowledge and challenge is how we go forward in most areas.
- ⇒ Parents will face the challenge of meeting additional costs. It will be important that parents are fully informed at all stages, and that where cost increases are necessary to fund quality improvements these are gradual. It will also be important to maintain the long established practice of cost sharing between government and families, so that the whole increase does not fall to one party. It will be particularly important to make sure that additional subsidies are available to ensure that low-income families can access high quality services.

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