On 7 December 2009, Council of Australian Governments (COAG) will decide the future for quality in Australia’s early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. ECA believes this is the most important opportunity for Australia’s young children in a generation, and COAG needs to hear what you think about this – now!

What can you do?

**Send an e-card**
Urge the Prime Minister and deputy Prime Minister, and your Premier or Chief Minister, to stand firm and make a long-term commitment to quality. Send them an e-card to show your support. Visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/ecard – it only takes a few moments.

**Stay up-to-date**
Subscribe to ECA WebWatch to stay in touch with the campaign. Send an email with ‘subscribe’ in the subject line to: subscribe@earlychildhood.org.au. You can also follow campaign happenings on Twitter: http://twitter.com/handsup4quality.

**Get parents and families involved**
Encourage parents and families to join this campaign – the voices of parents will carry the greatest weight. Print and hand out an information sheet for parents and families at www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/hands_up_parent_info.pdf, and show that you care about their future.

**Let your colleagues know**
Give this information to your colleagues – the more people who join the campaign, the greater chance we have of having our message heard.

We have an opportunity to make a real difference to future of Australian children and families. Put your hands up for quality and let COAG hear your voice!

Margaret Young
Early Childhood Australia

Over the past 20 years or so many services around Australia have been following the research that shows qualified staff and high staff–child ratios are fundamental to ensuring quality services for children. Gradually they have been doing what they can to continually improve standards to help young children get the best possible start in life, supported by parents using these services.

COAG must stand firm and make a national commitment for:
- improved regulated staff-to-child ratios of 1:3 for babies up to two years, 1:5 for two- to three-year-olds, and 1:10 for three- to five-year-olds in centres
- all services to have well-trained and qualified staff including degree-qualified early childhood teachers
- a quality rating system (‘accreditation’) that requires these standards in ratios and qualifications, and high standards in practice as well.

For children, we need COAG to:
- commit to high quality up front
- make a staged plan for gradual improvement so that services can get there over time
- be open about addressing cost increases. Quality improvement is needed for our children, which costs money. Governments need to bear some of this cost increase, and parents will bear some. Governments also need to make sure that low income families can afford high quality services.

**ECA values**
- The rights of children
- Leadership
- Excellence
- Respect
- Courage
- Honesty
- Openness
- Collaboration
- Diversity
- Justice
- Social inclusion of children

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**EYLF DEVELOPMENTS AND DIRECTIONS**

Starting to work with the Early Years Learning Framework

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments on 2 July this year and copies have been distributed to 26,000 early childhood settings across Australia. It is a key element of COAG’s National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care.

The EYLF is a golden opportunity for practitioners in all early childhood education and care services to reflect, enrich their practice and improve outcomes for Australia’s young children. While it is very early days for most of us, services which trialled the earlier version and whose work informed the final EYLF document presented their experience as ‘case studies’ to a recent research network meeting convened by Professor Jennifer Sumison and Associate Professor Linda Harrison and supported by the Australian Alliance for Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and the Faculty of Education at Charles Sturt University. They have kindly allowed us to present their experience to ECA Voice readers.

**Shared language, starting slowly, using mentors**

While the authors of the EYLF aimed to make it as ‘jargon-free’ as possible, they did use terms such as ‘pedagogy’ and ‘child agency’ when they saw them as essential professional knowledge and the best way to capture complex ideas.

As a result, several case study participants noted the need for staff leaders to spend time understanding the language of the document so they can ‘translate’ it further to support staff and families.

**ECA President’s comment:**

A positive decision from COAG on December 7 is essential for reaping the full potential of the EYLF

Each pilot site, naturally, took its own approach to helping staff to engage with, understand and use the EYLF, and of course into the future all services will need to work individually with the EYLF. However, some common threads emerged.

Evelyn at the Deakin School for Early Learning, ACT spoke about senior staff holding weekly meetings to discuss the EYLF and the need to proceed slowly, so that practitioners “earn” the right to say they’re “working with the EYLF”.

Jane, at Clare Valley Children’s Centre in SA, echoed these sentiments and advised that having a mentor who can explain things and lead staff to ‘map’ existing practice against the EYLF is essential for successful engagement with the Framework.

Others, including Sarah from Family Day Care in Darwin, Julia from Tagai State College in the Torres Strait and Sue from Camboon Primary School in WA, reinforced the value of a ‘critical friend’ who can start with ideas and issues important to staff in their context and help them to start from areas where they “feel safe” to review what they already do and reflect on what could be improved.

Professional Support Coordinators (PSCs) in each State and Territory and Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs) will obviously play a vital role in leading professional reflection as the EYLF is implemented in its very varied locations.
Making the learning of very young children visible

With regard to the question ‘how to make the learning of infants and toddlers visible’ the EYLF authors deliberately decided that an age based distinction, such as ‘birth–3’ and ‘3–5’, had the potential to focus on the vulnerabilities of infants and toddlers, while the EYLF focuses on children’s capabilities from birth (Sumsion et al, 2009). The case study of early childhood professionals noted both success and challenges in this area.

Andi, from The Infants Home, NSW noted that while staff were able to identify how the EYLF applies to very young children, they wondered if everyone could easily do this. Staff at Pedder Patter Child Care in Tasmania, have commented that ‘very young children can be observed waiting their turn, being gentle with each other and being concerned about another baby’s distress, but staff have to find the time to talk with each other about what they see and plan to support this growing sense of connectedness and social responsibility’.

The network meeting concluded that if some aspects of the EYLF – for example Outcome 2: active community participation; responding to diversity; becoming aware of fairness and becoming socially responsible – challenge educators to see their relevance for very young children, it suggests that ‘Infant learning’ could be an area for further research as implementation progresses.

Belonging, Being and Becoming

The ‘three Bs’ supported the use of the EYLF by the early childhood educators in the case studies. The idea that young children have the right to be considered as they are in the here and now, and not seen merely as economically productive future citizens, resonates strongly with early childhood educators. The notion of ‘Belonging’ has received attention in recent years, as the significance of infant attachment for long-term social and emotional health has been evidenced by research.

Julia from Queensland reported that the Torres Strait Islander communities with which she works believe that security, connection to each other and to family, culture and community are central to the wellbeing of their children.

Anna, in Geeveston, Tasmania took ‘belonging’ as a key element when reflecting on the values and beliefs that drive her practices. She sees communicating and collaborating with families as vital to supporting early learning. She tries to create a sense of belonging for families as they visit the centre, using simple ways such as remembering birthdays and knowing how people take their tea or coffee, to make people feel they belong and are valued.

ECA President’s comment:
We need high calibre, qualified leaders to inspire and support change in services

Children’s Services resources CHC08

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives

Both Julia in the Torres Strait and Helen in regional NSW commented that ‘the focus on belonging has proved powerful with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families they’ve worked with so far’. Julia noted that ‘the biggest challenge is not to implement the EYLF in tokenist ways with respect to diversity; it’s important to get community ideas about the EYLF and how they see it as relating to them and their children’.

Helen described a cross-cultural partnerships project operating in three regional cities in NSW which focuses on helping ‘mainstream centres’ to be genuinely inclusive of Aboriginal children by working together on interpreting and implementing the EYLF. In the project, two teachers from a mainstream centre are carefully ‘matched’ with two teachers at an Aboriginal centre and they spend time at each other’s location.

Staff from both centres attend shared professional learning and reflect on their practice in a spaced learning model. The goal is to develop an ongoing partnership with mutual respect and benefit, to build on existing leadership and to support children in transitions across settings. IPSU personnel act as convenors, presenters and critical friends. These examples offer models for future research and publications which clarify and disseminate approaches that work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings.

ECA President’s comment:
Sensitive and qualified staff will be needed to do this well

The EYLF in an Integrated Service

‘The Homestead Child and Family Centre is an integrated Hume City Council children’s service on the outskirts of metropolitan Melbourne. It comprises a sixty place long day care, including two preschools and a Maternal and Child Health Centre (Broderick, 2009). Michelle from Homestead explained that their approach integrates a number of elements – partnerships with the local school, ‘staff swapping’ to build cross-sectoral understanding and professional conversations focused on the relationship between the Victorian curriculum framework (VELS) and the EYLF.

The EYLF Learning Outcomes provided a common language for staff to talk with children, families and peer educators as they worked on service innovations such as:

- ensuring that children’s voices can be heard
- changing the room design to create permanent play spaces to provide predictability and a sense of belonging (Broderick, 2009)
- establishing a ‘Notice, Recognise and Respond’ method of observing children and documenting learning which involves children in interpreting and assessing their own learning
- a meeting space in each room where adults and children converse about interests and strengths and plan for new learning around digital photos of children’s work and scanned learning stories.

Educators are encouraged to use a daily journal for professional reflection and staff have engaged in a rich professional development program.

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For more resources please visit www.playtimeproductions.com.au
Looking to the future

The Early Years Learning Framework carries a lot of hopes for improved experiences and outcomes for Australian children, for increasing professionalism within early childhood education and care and for promoting a culture of learning and continuous improvement (Sumsion, 2009).

Many in the early childhood community also hope that the EYLF will lead educators into reflecting on what they do and what more they could do to foster genuine and substantial respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being and knowing and to promote reconciliation.

On its own, no document can achieve these aspirational dreams.

The experience of ECEC professionals in the trials highlighted the need for

- Regular professional reflection
- Time for staff to hold rich conversations about children’s learning
- Mentoring and support
- Professional learning and development

Further, the EYLF implementation processes and impacts on daily practice must be rigorously researched and documented, so that lessons can be learned and successes celebrated.

Keeping information flowing to the early childhood community clearly has the potential to share and enhance practice.

ECA President’s comment:

To realise the potential of the EYLF will require high-quality leadership, improved operating standards and resourcing in many services, and enormous goodwill and commitment from the profession itself.

Early Childhood Australia is making its contribution through themed editions of Every Child and the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood Research Into Practice issue. Other early childhood publications such as Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood and Gowrie Reflections also plan to communicate developments. At the meeting, major book publications were mooted as possible outcomes in the longer term.

Jenni Connor
Consortium Member and ECA representative at the ARACY Early Years Learning Framework Network Meeting

References:


For more than 70 years, Early Childhood Australia’s main focus has been advocacy, influencing many significant issues relevant to the care, wellbeing and education of young children.

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—Margaret Young, National President

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