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# Exploring professional learning

A guide to evidence-based  
and quality-assured  
professional learning

When we hear the term ‘professional learning’, most educators agree that it is an important feature of quality education and care settings. But we don’t all have the same understanding of what effective professional learning looks like. In this article, **Early Childhood Australia (ECA)** offers guidance on your professional learning.

There are many different types of professional learning on offer such as workshops, conferences, webinars, modules, publications and printed resources, just to name a few.

However, research tells us that there are common aspects that underpin approaches to effective professional learning—approaches that create opportunities to deeply investigate new learning and thinking and ultimately transform pedagogical practice.

Professional learning is important for all educators and is inherently linked to quality outcomes for children. As adults, we all learn differently, so it is important to consider a breadth of resources to ensure professional learning is beneficial for every member of the team.



Photo: Andrew Sikorski

## Tips for effective professional learning

**Tip one: Develop a Professional Learning Plan with clear goals aligned with priorities.**

To be intentional about professional learning, it is important to have a clear plan outlining how it will be implemented. This plan should link to your personal, room or service goals for professional learning, encompassing priorities across:

- onboarding new employees with induction/orientation training
- compliance training on topics such as mandatory reporting and Workplace Health and Safety
- individual professional development, which may be linked to work roles such as teacher registration or individual performance appraisal goals
- team or service development, which may be based on the Quality Improvement Plan or commitments made in a Reconciliation Action Plan
- leadership development to ensure you are developing future leaders in your team and staying up to date with good management practices.

ECA has developed a Professional Learning Plan template, including attachments, to engage your team in completing individual skills audits and team-level professional development priorities. These documents can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/ecaproflearning21>.

It is important to engage staff in decision-making about their own learning to build ownership.

When developing your Professional Learning Plan, you might consult with your team on how they think decisions should be made. Some services provide employees with an annual budget or an allocation of paid time to spend on approved training; others take a team-based approach with agreement on shared learning areas. There is no ‘right way’ and your approach might change over time, but shared understanding and team input will help to build enthusiasm for professional learning, enhance ownership and engagement and flow through to practice.





Once your plan and budget are set, ensure every member of the team understands how decisions will be made about team/group learning and individual opportunities. It can be helpful to provide team members with a summary of the Professional Learning Plan and specifically address frequently asked questions such as:

- Can an individual ask to do a course or attend an event?
- Will everyone have access to the same publications or online learning?
- Who will approve or manage the process of paying for a course or an event?
- What are the expectations about reporting back?

**Tip two: Allocate a realistic budget to achieve the goals you have set.**

As a general guide, ECA recommends that early childhood services allocate between 1 per cent (minimum) and 2 per cent (good practice) of the annual expenditure on wages/salaries to professional development.

Another way to develop a budget is to identify the professional learning activities you would like everyone to do, then calculate the cost of the training, participation (e.g. time and travel) and staffing backfill.

Look for opportunities to augment your professional learning budget by applying for training grants/subsidies, event scholarships, or sponsored places—and don't forget to make use of any membership discounts.

**Tip three: Offer a variety of learning opportunities using multiple forms and approaches.**

People learn in different ways; individuals may be at different starting points and changing practice can be difficult to achieve. Whether your aim is to build consistency across your team, or to support individuals to flourish in specialised areas, offering a variety of professional learning opportunities will be beneficial for all. This could include the following:

- Professional reading—provide dedicated paid time and access to a library or journal/book series. E-books, audio books and podcasts are also becoming an important source for sharing new ideas, exploring controversies and staying up to date.
- Professional conversations can be incorporated into regular team meetings and supervision; you might also establish communities of practice or learning circles within your service and/or participate in professional networks and events that foster dialogue.
- Inquiry-based learning can be supported by collaborative projects and opportunities to present to the team or lead a professional conversation.
- Online learning can help build common or shared knowledge across a team, particularly when combined with professional reading and conversations.
- Courses and programs enable individuals to build their skills in areas of interest or need. They can be individual self-paced or in a group learning setting.

- Conferences and events provide individuals with the opportunity to be immersed in professional learning and build a network beyond their workplace.
- Mentoring and coaching is particularly useful for leadership development and specialist learning.
- Cultural immersion experiences, led by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people on Country, can provide a greater depth of understanding.
- Bringing in an expert or consultant to work with the whole team on a shared learning goal can build a sense of being on a journey together.
- Study tours that involve visiting other services, centres of excellence or specialist programs to learn about different approaches to pedagogy or programming can be transformative experiences.
- Learning in the flow of work builds on the notion of being a 'learning organisation' where team members are encouraged to learn on a day-to-day basis. Teams that do this well support each other to be curious, talk about their practice, share interesting resources and participate in professional networks.

**Tip four: Evaluate and sustain professional learning to create a culture of continuous improvement.**

To create a culture of continuous improvement and encouragement it is important to regularly discuss professional learning and evaluate its impact. Inviting staff members to report on their professional learning experiences and share what they have learned not only reinforces their learning but extends the benefits to others.

Keep a record of time and resources invested in learning activities or provide a regular update on progress against the Professional Learning Plan to your governing body. Staff satisfaction surveys can also be useful for assessing the effectiveness of professional learning.

**Further reading**

Bersin, J., & Zao-Sanders, M. (2019). Making learning a part of everyday work. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2019/02/making-learning-a-part-of-everyday-work>.

Fleming, J. (2015). Seven questions to ask when building a teacher professional development plan. *NWEA Teach. Learn. Grow*. Retrieved from [www.nwea.org/blog/2015/seven-questions-ask-building-teacher-professional-development-plan/](http://www.nwea.org/blog/2015/seven-questions-ask-building-teacher-professional-development-plan/).

Livingstone, R. (2015). Professional development planning. *ACECQA: We Hear You*. Retrieved from <https://wehearyou.acecqa.gov.au/2015/04/28/professional-development-planning/>.



**At ECA we believe that professional learning should meet your needs as an educator.**

This includes face-to-face events and conferences, live online events, printed publications and online modules, webinars and webcasts. All content produced by ECA is reviewed and undergoes rigorous quality-assurance processes, ensuring you will have evidence-based tools and resources that inspire quality. As you consider these ECA resources, we encourage you to develop a Professional Learning Plan for yourself, your room or your service. We will provide you with practical tips, as well as helpful planning tools for leading professional learning, for yourself and your teams.

Find Professional Learning Plan templates and the range of professional learning options here: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-professional-learning](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eca-professional-learning). Alternatively, call us on 02 6242 1800 and we can assist you.