

Quality child care makes a difference

by Dr Anne Kennedy

All children are influenced by the quality of the education and care they experience (Centre for Community Child Health, 2006).

The importance of providing quality care and education in child care as a fundamental right of children is recognised by those involved in the sector, including government, researchers, trainers, educators and families. Quality provision in child care is an ongoing, complex process, which is built and sustained collaboratively and with no fixed end point.

Defining quality

Defining quality in early and middle childhood settings is not easy, as the term can mean different things, in different contexts, to different people. Studies show that middle and early childhood child care coordinators and children provide diverse responses when asked to identify quality in their settings (Mooney & Blackburn, 2003; Rohacek, et al, 2010). To define quality in ways that recognise its complexity and the interrelatedness of all aspects of service provision, dimensions of quality have been developed. The key aspects of quality include:

- Educators facilitating children's achievement or progress towards identified outcomes
- The characteristics, content and intentions of the program
- Respectful, responsive relationships and interactions with and between children, families and staff



- Partnerships with families
- Educators adopting a planned approach to meeting children's health, safety, wellbeing and their learning needs, strengths and interests
- The physical environments and resources being appropriate to support and stimulate children's learning, wellbeing and play
- Educators' qualities, knowledge, skills, stability and their opportunities for ongoing professional learning and support
- Service leadership and management, characteristics, skills and practices
- Community connections and collaboration for supporting children, families, educators and staff.

These dimensions of quality, known as 'process' components, are inclusive of all aspects of child care service provision, including routines, interactions, environments and planned and spontaneous experiences for individuals and groups of children.

In addition to 'process' quality components, there are 'structural' components that also help to define and support quality in child care settings. The structural components of quality, which are easier to measure, include:

- Ratios of staff to children
- Staff training and qualifications
- Group size
- Time allocation for planning and preparation.

In many quality assurance systems, both sets of quality criteria, ie the process components and the structural components, are included. Research shows that both components influence each other in dynamic and interrelated ways (Korjenevitch & Dunifon, 2010).

Quality early experiences linked to present and life-long outcomes

Quality child care promotes social, language, emotional and cognitive development in children and these influences can be seen into adulthood (Korjenevitch & Dunifon, 2010).

Quality early experiences are connected with a range of positive developmental and learning outcomes for children across different curriculum

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areas such as numeracy and literacy. High quality early experiences for children with disadvantages or risk factors have been shown to provide protective factors which result in improved life chances for children well into their adult lives. Knowledge and skills gained in one period of childhood support children's learning in other periods of their life (Moreno, 2008).

Making a difference to quality of child care in Australia

The introduction of the first national Child Care Quality Assurance system in Australia in 1993 was a landmark event in the sector's history. It signalled a consistent, comprehensive approach and a commitment to quality improvement in the child care sector (NCAC, 2009).

Indicators of improvements in quality can be found in research, reports and anecdotal evidence which relate to:

- Raising public awareness
- Reducing disparity between individual child care services
- Increased confidence and a sense of professional satisfaction for staff
- Improved protection and outcomes for children.

Raising public awareness

National child care quality assurance systems make public the nature and complexity of the work of educators and the components that are necessary for quality provision. This can help to broaden community understanding and respect for the importance of the work and its ethical implications (Taylor, 2004; Flear & Kennedy, 2006).

Improved community awareness is supported at a local level when services work closely with families and community members when undertaking the self-study process. As one educator explained: 'QIAS allows parents to see what you are doing. Parents realise how much everyone works and how much training and knowledge they have. It educates parents a lot' (Fenech et al, 2006, p.52).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services have described how working through cultural differences to achieve Accreditation helped staff to feel more confident about their work and to engage in a more focussed way with families (Mundy, 2010).

Ongoing government commitment to policy development and funding to support quality



improvement measures is premised on community awareness and support for this investment as necessary for meeting children's learning, wellbeing, health and development needs and interests.

Reducing disparity between services

Quality assurance systems help to ensure consistency of quality across diverse settings. Reducing disparity is a matter of equity because it helps to ensure that children and families experience consistent quality standards in any child care setting throughout the country.

Increased confidence and sense of professional satisfaction for staff

When educators feel they are contributing to the provision of a high quality program for children and families, they have an increased sense of professional satisfaction which helps to sustain good practice and their retention in the sector. Educators whose work has been validated at high quality by Australia's current Child Care Quality Assurance systems have expressed professional satisfaction at this public recognition for their work (Fenech, 2006).

Improved protection and outcomes for children

Quality assurance systems improve protection for children and consequently provide reassurance for families using child care services. This was regarded as one of the most important benefits by educators in a study by Fenech et al (2006). Quality rating scales used in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in the UK also found that there was 'a significant link between higher quality and better intellectual and social/behavioural outcomes at entry to school' (Sylva et al, 2004, p. 3).

Nations can protect children and provide for, or promote, high standards in child care provision in different ways. Australia's new national quality assurance system, the National Quality Framework, to be implemented from January 2012, continues a commitment to the importance of self-study and external evaluation. The new system is combined with national regulations to ensure children are protected and that services provide quality programs as a precondition for funding. The National Quality Standard extends

and strengthens the existing quality assurance system by:

- Raising requirements for educators' qualifications and training
- Broadening the scope of the quality dimensions
- Improving the ratios of staff to children in different age groups.

In addition, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* and *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia*, will support educators and services participating in the new quality assurance system by linking closely to the National Quality Standard.

Conclusion

Educators are engaged in complex, important and ethical work with children, families and communities, which can make a positive difference for children's present and future lives. Maintaining commitment and enthusiasm for this work, with the support of a national quality assurance system, will help to ensure that children have quality early and middle childhood care and education experiences ■

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