

Ask a Child Care Adviser: Helping families to understand the National Quality Framework

Jan McFarlane spoke with NCAC's Child Care Advisers, Karen Swift and Eulalia Verde, about working with families during the transition to the full implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF).

Many educators may be experiencing uncertainty about the transition from the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) systems to the National Quality Framework (NQF), and they may not yet have considered how to inform families about the changes that will occur. Many families may also have become aware of the impending changes via the media and may be asking educators about what is happening.

From 1 January 2012 all education and care services will be covered by the NQF. A new national body – the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) – will guide implementation of the NQF and the Regulatory Authority in each state and territory will be responsible for assessing and monitoring the quality of education and care in services.

For the first time all services in Australia will be working within the same national system and required to meet the same National Quality Standard (NQS). The NQS brings together the structural components of quality currently addressed by regulations in each state and territory with the process aspects of quality covered by the CCQA systems. The NQS is underpinned by the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)* and *Framework for School Age Care (Framework)*.

Where do we start?

Educators and families will be better equipped to manage the transition to the NQF if they have accurate information, clearly understand what is going to happen and have time to prepare for it.

A good starting point is to ensure that everyone, including educators, coordinators/directors, staff, and families have the opportunity to become as familiar as they can with the new documents and new processes that will be part of the NQF. Rather than relying on hearsay and media reports, services can download the factsheets for educators and families from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) website. Make them available in staff rooms and in areas accessed by families.

Encourage each team member to read as much as they can, remembering that some may want to read the documents from cover to cover while others may prefer the shorter summaries provided in the factsheets. Set aside a focused time to talk about the documents and demystify some of the terms that may be unfamiliar.

While many families will find the DEEWR factsheets helpful, it is more important for educators to keep families informed about the practical things your service is doing to make the transition to the NQF. Share the team's learning and progress in day-to-day conversations with families, and through regular updates in newsletters and via visual displays. Simply using the language of the *EYLF/ Framework* in conversations with families and in documentation of children's learning will send a clear message that educators are embracing these *Frameworks*.

What will the NQF mean for your service and families?

Much of what you already do will probably fit well within the requirements of the NQS. You may have already noticed the similarity between the seven Quality Areas in the NQS and the Quality Areas in the existing CCQA systems.

Despite these similarities, it is important not to take a superficial approach to meeting the requirements of the NQS. There are a number of new concepts and Standards that may be unfamiliar and not part of current practice at your service. For example, 'cultural competence', 'reflective practice', 'community partnerships' and 'sustainable practice'. Take some time to really explore what these terms mean in the context of your service.

The *Draft Guide to the National Quality Standard* is a useful resource for your team and can help you to begin to reflect on what you do and why you do it. There is no 'right' place to start but it is important that educators and families are on the journey together, working through the new requirements step by step. The following strategies may be helpful:

Issue 38 June 2011 (Pages 6-7)

- Find a 'champion' in your team – someone who is enthusiastic about the NQF and the changes it will bring. Provide them with opportunities to undertake research using the internet, professional journals and publications and ask them to share what they have learnt with the rest of the team and families.
- At each educators' meeting or visit to a family day care home, reflect on one Quality Area in the NQS. Think about what the Standards in this Quality Area say, and then about what you currently do, what might change, and what you might do differently. Use the reflective questions at the beginning of each Standard in the *Draft Guide to the National Quality Standard* to guide these discussions.
- Use a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard to record your reflections on a Quality Area in the NQS. Put it in a prominent place that is accessible to families, educators and children. You might use photographs to highlight current practice and encourage all stakeholders to add to the 'what might we do differently' area.
- Set up a small working group of educators and one or two families to help develop a change management plan. As you map current practice against the NQS, note any gaps and develop a plan to address these. Break the tasks down into small steps that can be achieved easily and give people a sense that you are making progress.

How do we maintain momentum?

If change appears to be negatively affecting educators then families will often also become unsettled.

On the other hand, optimism is contagious. Maintaining team enthusiasm and morale helps people to develop a confident attitude to

change. Communicating clearly and honestly to educators, staff and families about what will change and the opportunities it will bring to improve practices and experiences for children is the key to maintaining momentum during the transition to the NQF:

- Acknowledge that change takes time and reinforce that implementing the NQS is not about completely changing everything. Focusing on what works now, and adding to it, helps people to see potential rather than problems. It allows new possibilities to emerge.
- Become a learning community. Ensure educators, coordinators and staff have regular opportunities to meet, openly discuss their concerns, celebrate their achievements and pool their ideas.
- Network with other services and educators to learn about the strategies they are using to implement the NQF.
- Regularly visit the Professional Support Coordinator website for your state or territory. They will be developing resources and hosting information and training sessions to support services' transition to the NQF.

Conclusion

Families want to know their children are being well cared for, that they are safe, happy and being given opportunities to grow and learn each day. By talking confidently to families about the way the service is managing the transition to the NQF, you will demonstrate your team's ongoing commitment to quality improvement and reassure families that their children are having positive experiences during this time of change ■

References and further reading

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