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Family Day Care Quality Assurance in Australia

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Introduction

In this presentation I will provide you with an overview of the Family Day Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA) for Australian family day care schemes. Family day care schemes in Australia provide care for children aged 0-12 in a carer's home. A local administrative coordination unit recruits and resources carers, and organises the placement of children with carers.

Australia is the first country in the world to develop national Quality Assurance Systems for children's services, that are initiated, funded and supported by Government. These Quality Assurance (QA) Systems are administered by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC). In addition to FDCQA the NCAC also administers the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) for long day care centres and is currently developing Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA) for outside school hours care services.

Long day care centres in Australia provide care for children from 0-5 years of age in a child care centre. The centres operate for a minimum of eight hours each day. Some centres operate longer hours or provide for the needs of particular workers, eg shift workers. Outside school hours care services provide care for school age children before and after school and during school vacations. Care is provided on school premises or in local facilities. Where care is not provided on the premises of the school that the child attends the outside school hours care service puts into practice procedures for dropping off and/or collecting children.

In Australia, families on low and middle incomes receive help from the Commonwealth Government with child care fees. Child Care Benefit is paid directly to parents accessing care in services participating in the Quality Assurance Systems administered by NCAC. So while participation in the Quality Assurance Systems is not compulsory for services, due to the fact that most parents need to offset the cost of

child care with government assistance, most services need to participate in the Quality Assurance Systems in order to remain viable. Currently 4205 long day care centres and 326 family day care schemes are registered with the NCAC and approximately 3,000 outside school hours care services will register for Quality Assurance between July and September 2003.

Almost three hundred thousand Australian children aged nought to five are currently attending long day child care in Australia. (Department of Family and Community Services (1999). Over one hundred thousand children are currently cared for in family day care (Centrelink, September 2000 – unpublished). 161,000 children are currently attending outside school hours care services (Press and Hayes, 2000).

Quality Assurance Systems

There are three essential elements of effective Quality Assurance (QA) Systems:

- Public standards that have face validity
- Maximum reliability and validity of Accreditation Decisions
- Processes that promote continuing quality improvement

- **Face Validity**

It is essential that Quality Assurance Systems are based on a theoretically sound set of standards developed by a panel of experts. It is also essential that there is consultation with the field on these standards and that a level of agreement is reached on the appropriateness of the standards.

Once agreement is reached a standards document needs to be developed that clearly specifies these standards. FDCQA was developed by a working party with expertise in family day care service delivery and there was wide consultation with the field. The FDCQA standards document outlines the 6 Quality Elements of care. These are further defined by 32 Principles and underlying key concepts and indicators.

- **Maximum Reliability and Validity**

In order to make Accreditation Decisions that are reliable and consistent it is essential that measurement error is minimised. To minimise measurement error it is important that data on quality care provided by the service is collected from a variety of perspectives, that a confirmatory factor analysis is undertaken to ensure that the components or factors of quality as specified in the standards document (Quality Elements in FDCQA) are a good fit.

It is also important to undertake appropriate data analysis to calculate weightings that reflect the extent to which each standard (or Principle in FDCQA) contributes to its particular Quality Element. These weightings are used to calculate a *Composite Quality Profile* for each service.

In FDCQA data is collected from 6 perspectives: scheme, coordination unit staff, carers, families, Validation and Moderation. In November 2002 a confirmatory analysis and other measurement analysis was undertaken by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER). The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the data collected using the NCAC's processes has an excellent fit with the construct of Quality defined by the six (6) FDCQA Quality Elements and the 32 Principles underlying these Quality Elements. Indeed, this Quality construct accounts for 99.7% of the variance and co-variance in the data. The results of this measurement analysis were used to develop database protocols in relation to the weighting of each Principle, thus minimising measurement error. These protocols enable NCAC to calculate a reliable *Composite Quality Profile* for each service receiving an Accreditation decision.

- **Continuing Quality Improvement**

The standards document helps services engage in an on-going process of self-study and improvement of their practices. Services participating in FDCQA have access to timely training and advice on relevant resources to improve quality.

How does FDCQA work

Schemes participating in FDCQA are required to cycle through a five step process outlined below:

- Step 1: Registration
- Step 2: Self-study and Continuing Improvement
- Step 3: Validation
- Step 4: Moderation
- Step 5: Accreditation Decision

Step 1: Registration

New schemes that register with NCAC receive a *Certificate of Registration* and publications required for participation in FDCQA. New schemes are required to submit an initial *Self-study Report* 18 months from Registration. Registration is required for new schemes prior to funding approval by the Commonwealth for Child Care Benefit and Operational Assistance. An annual registration fee is payable each financial year.

Step 2 : Self-study and Continuing Improvement

The self-study process provides the scheme with the opportunity to undertake a thorough analysis of all practices and procedures, to identify strengths and weaknesses and to formulate plans for improvement. The more honest the analysis, the better, as it provides a true picture of the current situation. This forms the basis for decision making, in regard to strategies for improvement, and later review by an independent Validator.

Each scheme is required to implement systematic processes for continuing quality improvement. Each scheme can determine how this will best be achieved but all schemes must demonstrate that:

- a) they have on-going quality improvement processes
- b) these processes are informed by regular self-evaluation against the standards outlined in the *Quality Practices Guide*.

Each scheme is required to submit a *Self-study Report* to the NCAC at the specified time every 2.5 years. In the *Self-study Report* the scheme will need to provide a rating for each Principle and a *Continuing Improvement Plan* for each Quality Element.

The Australian Commonwealth Government funds a resource agency to assist schemes participating in the FDCQA. This may be in relation to self-study and continuing improvement and the delivery of quality services. This agency provides a range of services including telephone information and training courses.

Step 3: Validation

A peer Validator selected and trained by the NCAC, visits the scheme to validate its quality practices. Wherever possible, NCAC uses the preferred specialist knowledge areas indicated by the scheme in its *Self-study Report* when allocating a Validator to visit the scheme.

Prior to the visit taking place, the Validator and the scheme have an opportunity to advise NCAC where a conflict of interest involving the Validator selection may exist. When a Validator is selected, NCAC will send to the scheme *Validation Surveys* which must be completed by the coordination unit staff, carers and families during the few weeks prior to the visit.

Depending on the size of the scheme, the Validator will spend anywhere from two and a half days in a small scheme with up to 60 approved places, to five days in a scheme with over 601 places. In schemes with more than 431 places two Validators will undertake the visit.

The Validator does not make the accreditation decision. The Validator completes a *FDCQA Validation Report* based on observations of the scheme and its documentation against quality indicators outlined in the *Validation Report*. The indicators in the *Validation Report* are based on the standards outlined in the *FDCQA Quality Practices Guide*. At the conclusion of the Validation Visit the Validator collects the *Validation Surveys* and returns them to the NCAC together with the *Validation Report*.

Following the Validation Visit the scheme may complete a *Validation Evaluation Form* and return it to NCAC. This form allows the scheme to provide feedback to NCAC on the validation visit and to raise any concerns or issues for consideration by NCAC.

Step 4: Moderation

The process of Moderation helps to ensure that all schemes participating in the FDCQA are treated consistently on a national basis. Moderators assess the quality of the scheme's practice, guided by information in the *Self-study Report*, the *Validation Surveys* and the *Validation Report*. Moderators also consider information from the *Validation Evaluation Form*, when available.

Moderators look at each scheme as a whole, identifying patterns of quality care within the scheme. Moderators write a *Continuing Improvement Guide* for the scheme which focuses on quality improvement based on trends in the Quality Elements. The *Continuing Improvement Guide* is based on a *Composite Quality Profile (Profile)* (Refer to Appendix 1) of the service compiled from information in the scheme's *Self-study Report*, *Validation Surveys*, the *Validation Report* and the Moderation ratings. The Profile shows a composite of these various views of service performance across

the 6 Quality Elements using protocols developed for the NCAC by the Australian Council of Educational Research.

Step 5: Accreditation Decision

The Accreditation Decision is the final step in FDCQA. To be accredited, a scheme must achieve a rating of *Satisfactory* or higher in all 6 Quality Elements on the *Composite Quality Profile*.

Accredited schemes are required to prominently display *the Certificate of Accreditation*. Schemes are also provided with a *Quality Profile Certificate* showing the *Composite Quality Profile* and the names of coordination unit staff and carers who participated in the FDCQA process. This certificate is for display at the discretion of the scheme.

An accredited scheme is required to continue its self-study and continuing improvement cycle (see Step 2 above) until its next *Self-study Report* is due for submission. The accreditation period is 2.5 years between submission of *Self-study Reports*.

Schemes that do not meet the standards required for accreditation are required to submit another *Self-study Report* six months from the date of the NCAC Decision.

Provisional accreditation may be granted in instances where accreditation requirements can be met by minor adjustments. Provisionally accredited schemes are required to verify corrective action within three months, otherwise they will be registered as 'not accredited' and will be required to submit another *Self-study Report* within a further three months. Provisional accreditation may be offered by NCAC, schemes cannot apply for provisional accreditation. A service which is offered provisional accreditation and which adequately verifies corrective action within three months will have an accreditation period of 2.5 years between submission of *Self-study Reports*.

Publications and support for Schemes

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) produces a number of publications for schemes participating in FDCQA. These include:

FDCQA Handbook (2001) - contains background information on FDCQA, an overview of the steps involved in achieving accreditation and a summary of the 6 Quality Elements and Principles. The *Handbook* is targeted primarily at family day care carers, coordination unit staff, parents and management as well as students and others interested in the FDCQA. The *Handbook* is also available on the NCAC website in 13 community languages.

FDCQA Quality Practices Guide (2001) - is the main document to be used by family day care schemes progressing through the FDCQA and is targeted specifically at coordination unit staff, carers and parents who are participating in their scheme's accreditation process. The *Quality Practices Guide* details the 6 Quality Elements and Principles and gives examples of indicative practices. Schemes are responsible for designing their own self-study process against the standards outlined in the *Quality Practices Guide*. A scheme's quality of care is also validated against these standards.

FDCQA Self-study Report (2001) - is the working document to be used by the family day care schemes to rate each Principle, record evidence of practice and plans for continued improvement across the 6 Quality Elements. The *Self-study Report* will be completed by the coordination unit staff and is submitted to NCAC at the required time.

FDCQA Workbook (2001) – is an optional publication intended to assist schemes to conduct self-study and develop improvement plans. It is designed to be used by coordination unit staff and carers. Supplementary documents to the *Workbook* are also available on the NCAC website.

The NCAC support for schemes includes:

FDCQA Introductory Video (2001) - is designed to introduce the scheme to FDCQA. NCAC suggests that the coordination unit staff use the video to assist staff, carers and families to become familiar with the process and resources of FDCQA.

The NCAC has also developed a ***FDCQA Online Training Module*** that is now available on our website. This package provides training on the processes of the FDCQA and a direct link to the FDCQA documents available on the website. It is particularly useful to new staff and carers, students and interested family members.

NCAC's ***Choosing Quality Child Care*** brochure is a helpful resource for families seeking child care. It contains information on what to look for in a quality child care setting, what questions to ask, the role of families in care, as well as information about NCAC and the Quality Assurance Systems. These brochures and posters are available free of charge to services.

Putting Children First - quarterly newsletter distributed to all services registered with NCAC, to peak child care bodies, tertiary institutions, State and Territory governments and other interested parties. It contains information on the Quality Assurance Systems and practical suggestions for achieving quality.

NCAC website (www.ncac.gov.au) - is a valuable tool for early and middle childhood professionals. It makes a wide range of resources easily accessible and provides current information about the Quality Assurance (QA) Systems. The site contains:

- all NCAC publications
- a range of forms such as Registration, Change of Ownership/Sponsorship, and NCAC Book Order forms
- Online Training Modules
- support documents for each step of the QA Systems
- information on becoming a Validator or Moderator;
- Translations of the FDCQA and QIAS Handbooks into 13 community languages
- Easy access to NCAC's e-mail address qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
- Links to relevant external web sites including training organisations and State/Territory Licensing authorities
- An integrated search facility for children's services

Telephone support at national local call cost – NCAC has qualified Child Care Advisers with expertise in long day care, family day care, and outside school hours care service delivery. Child Care Advisers can provide information on the quality assurance processes.

E-mail support - qualitycare@ncac.gov.au – NCAC's central e-mail address receives dozens of e-mails daily from parents, educators and service providers with a variety of questions about the quality assurance systems. As part of NCAC's ongoing commitment to Customer Service, each e-mail is responded to in a timely fashion.

NCAC Validators

Validators are qualified and experienced early childhood professionals with recent experience in a family day care scheme.

To be a Validator an applicant must firstly, meet the selection criteria set by NCAC. Secondly, the applicant must undertake a 5-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required standard of competency as measured by assessment at the conclusion of the training program. Validators are required to undertake at least 10 days of Validation Visits each year. They are provided with regular support and performance feedback. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues an NCAC *Validator Bulletin* is published regularly and Validators attend annual refresher training courses.

Working as a Validator for the NCAC is a big commitment not only for the Validator, but also the Validator's scheme. There are benefits such as professional development, particularly in the areas of observation and communication, and development of a deep understanding of quality improvement and quality practices. However, it is difficult for Validators to be away from their own schemes even though they are replaced by relief staff. They may also need to travel and be away from their own families.

NCAC Moderators

Moderators are qualified professionals with considerable experience in the early childhood field. They have recent experience in family day care service delivery and/or in delivery of pre and post service training or in research.

To be a Moderator an applicant must firstly meet the selection criteria set by NCAC. Secondly, the applicant must undertake a 3 day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required competency standards.

Moderators are required to undertake five, 2 day Moderation Sessions each year. They are provided with regular support and performance feedback. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues an NCAC *Moderator Newsletter* is published regularly and annual refresher training is provided.

Conclusion

As educators and advocates for children, I feel that we should be justly proud of the quality of care and education we provide for children and our efforts to improve quality. I am proud of the quality standards in Australian children's services.

I would encourage you to continue to strive for continuous quality improvement – as quality improvement is a journey not a single destination.

References

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