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**Development of Standards and Measurement Tools for  
Quality Assurance Systems in Australian Children's Services**

Denise Taylor

Chief Executive Officer of the National Childcare Accreditation Council (Australia)

## **Introduction**

In this presentation I will provide you with an overview of the development of quality standards and measurement tools for Quality Assurance systems in Australian children's services.

Australia is the first country in the world to develop national child care Quality Assurance systems that are initiated, funded and supported by Government. These are the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) for long day care centres, Family Day Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA) for family day care schemes and Outside School Hours Care (OSHCQA) for outside school hours care services.

Long day care centres in Australia provide formal care for children from 0-5 years of age. 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.

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.

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 operation procedures for dropping off and/or collecting children.

Changes in utilisation of, and attitudes towards, child care in Australia have been significant over the last 20 years. In the early 1980s "child care was widely viewed as a worthwhile way to amuse children for a few hours per week while introducing them to the routines they would encounter at school, where the real learning would begin" (NCAC 1993).

A number of factors set the stage for a change of attitude towards child care and provided an impetus for the development of Quality Assurance systems for children's services.

**First** of all, there has been an increase in the understanding of the significance of the early years in a child's life. Recent research on brain development has shown that quality child care enhances children's development and plays an important role in reducing criminal activity and poor health in later life. It is now widely accepted that we learn more in the first five years of life than in any other five-year period.

Much recent research and debate in the USA and now in Australia supports the belief that quality child care nurtures healthy brain development.

Research in the USA has found that:

*"In the early years, children's brains form twice as many synapses (brain connections) as they will eventually need. If these synapses are used repeatedly in a child's day-to-day life, they are reinforced and become part of the brain's permanent circuitry. If they are not used repeatedly, or often enough, they are eliminated. In this way, experience plays a crucial role in "wiring" a young child's brain" (R. Shore 1997: 17).*

The role of early childhood professionals in 'wiring' a child's brain is significant - and it must be done with positive interactions and activities appropriate to the child's level of development.

Research has also shown that quality child care contributes to successful later learning.

An example of this research is the Carolina Abecedarian Project, conducted in the US from 1972 to 1985 (Bowes and Hayes 1999). It was an experimental study of early childhood education intervention - for children and their low-income families. This included high-quality, full day child care for preschoolers. The program focused on language development and pre-literacy learning.

The study found that:

- Young children's development in high quality preschool programs had positive effects on intellectual development and academic achievement.
- At the age of 12, participating children had IQ scores that averaged 5.3 points higher than a comparison group of non-participants.
- At age 15, compared to the comparison group, participants showed higher achievement test scores and had 50 percent fewer special education placements.

Linked to this, the research also shows that quality child care reduces the costs to the community - monetary and otherwise - of crime.

In the US, the Federal Government has incorporated early childhood programs into its crime prevention strategies. Australia has also recognised the link between early childhood developmental learning and crime prevention, as evident in the *Pathways to Prevention* report by the Australian National Crime Prevention Authority (1999).

The **second** important impetus for the development of the Quality Assurance systems is that the number of Australian children being cared for outside their homes has greatly increased with the growth in the number of families in which both parents are working or, in the case of sole parents, where the parent is working.

Statistics show that almost half of all Australian women with children 0-4 years are in paid employment (Australian Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) 1999).

Over three hundred thousand Australian children aged nought to five are currently attending long day child care in Australia. Nearly ninety five thousand children are currently cared for in family day care. Over one hundred and thirty thousand children are currently attending outside school hours care services (FaCS, 2002).

Many Australian children are cared for across several settings in their early years of development. For example, some children may attend family day care three days a week and long day care on the other two days. Many children will move from long day care to outside of school hours care. Families of children in all service types need an assurance that their children are being cared for in a quality environment. Staff in those services also need recognition for the excellent work they do.

The **third** important impetus for the development of the Quality Assurance systems is that:

*The average amount of time an individual child spends in care has grown. A child can spend up to 12,500 hours in child care before starting school, (based on attendance of 50 hours per week for 5 years): that's only 500 hours less than the child will spend in lessons during the whole 13 years of schooling.*

*The growth in our knowledge about young children, the numbers of those children in care and the amount of time they spend in care have all combined to throw the issue of the quality of that care into sharp focus.*

(NCAC 1993)

These factors were significant enough to arouse interest in the provision of quality child care, where previously the quantity of places was the significant factor. This focus on quality developed the interest in quality improvement and accreditation, which came from within the child care field and gained support from the political sphere.

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) was established in 1993 to administer the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) for long day care. In July 2001 NCAC commenced the administration of Family Day Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA). The administration of Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance (OSHCQA) commenced in July 2003.

The aim of Quality Assurance (QA) in children's services is to ensure that children in care have positive experiences that foster all aspects of their development. QA focuses on quality outcomes for children and relationships between staff, children and their families. This is done by measuring the factors that determine quality to gauge the standard of care and education that actually exists in a particular service. QA is designed to build on and complement state and territory licensing regulations (where they exist), which generally provide a minimum standard of operation for services. Regulations cover a range of factors including space, equipment, staff : child ratios and staff qualifications.

The Quality Assurance systems define quality as positive outcomes for children's learning and development. A quality child care service:

- Has a clear philosophy and goals, agreed between the staff, carers, management and the families, which guide all activities at the service.
- Appreciates, respects and fosters the individuality and the interdependence of all children, including children from diverse backgrounds and children who have additional needs.
- Considers the appropriateness of all experiences and activities affecting the children in relation to their development.
- Encourages families to become involved in the service and fosters the relationship between staff, carers and families so that they can support one another in their complementary roles.

These determining aspects of quality are broken down into Quality Areas, Principles and Indicators of practice covering four main areas:

- Interactions and communications between staff, carers children and families
- Programs for day-to-day experiences and activities for children
- Nutrition, health, safety and child protection
- Service management and staff development

In Australia, families on low and middle incomes receive assistance with child care fees from the Australian Government. 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, as many 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 4,473 long day care centres, 320 family day care schemes and 2,656 outside school hours care services are registered with the NCAC.

## Development of 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 QA 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 relevant field or profession 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. Each of NCAC's QA systems were developed by a working party with expertise in service delivery in the relevant service type and involved wide consultation with the relevant child care field. The QA standards documents (QIAS *Source Book*, 2001; FDCQA *Quality Practices Guide*, Second edition 2004; and OSHCQA *Quality Practices Guide*, 2003) outline the Quality Areas, Principles and Indicators of quality child care.

- **Maximum Reliability and Validity**

In order to ensure that Accreditation Decisions are reliable and consistent it is essential that measurement error is minimised. To achieve this it is important that data on quality care provided by the service is collected from a variety of perspectives, and that a confirmatory factor analysis is undertaken to ensure that the components or factors of quality, as specified in the standards document, are a good fit. That is the indicators of Quality relate well to their respective Principles and the Principles relate well to their respective Quality Areas.

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

For example, in the QIAS, data is collected from 6 perspectives: centre, director, staff, families, Validation and Moderation. In June 2002 a confirmatory analysis was undertaken by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER). The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the data collected by the NCAC had an excellent fit with the construct of quality defined by the 10 QIAS Quality Areas and the 35 Principles underlying these Quality Areas. Indeed, this quality construct accounts for 99% of the variance and co-variance in the data. The results of the measurement analyses 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**

It is essential that continuing quality improvement is a focus for all services participating in QA systems. In the QIAS, FDCQA and OSHCQA the standards documents help services to engage in an on-going process of self-study and improvement of their practices. Services participating in the QA systems are required to submit a *Self-study Report* outlining current achievements against the QA standards, and plans for continuing improvement in each Quality Area. All participating services have access to timely training and advice on relevant resources to assist quality improvement.

## **How the Quality Assurance Systems Work**

All of the QA systems operate on a 5 step process. The steps are:

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

### **Step 1: Registration**

New services are required to register with the NCAC before their application for Child Care Benefit will be considered by the Australian Government. When a service changes ownership or management, the new owner must complete a change of registration. Registration and participation in QA is necessary if a service is to continue to offer Child Care Benefit to families attending the service.

### **Step 2: Self-study and Continuing Improvement**

On a regular and cyclical basis each service makes a self-assessment of the quality of its practice through consultation with all staff and families at their service. The service evaluates the quality of its practice for each of the Quality Areas and Principles against the standards outlined by the NCAC (refer to *QIAS Source Book, 2001*; *FDCQA Quality Practices Guide, Second edition 2004*; and *OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide, 2003*). From such ongoing self-assessment, the service develops and implements a continuing cycle of quality improvement plans.

The results of this self-assessment are summarised in a *Self-study Report* to be submitted to the NCAC by the due date. In completing the *Self-study Report* the service will provide a rating of its own performance against the QA Principles. The service will have the opportunity to document aspects of current practices and outline its *Continuing Improvement Plan*.

Accredited services are required to submit a *Self-study Report* to the NCAC every two-and-a-half years. An Accredited service's next *Self-study Report* is due by the end of the month specified on its *Certificate of Accreditation*.

The Australian Government funds a range of agencies to assist services participating in the QA systems. This may be in relation to self-study and continuing improvement and

the delivery of quality services. Services provided by these agencies include telephone information, visits to services, training courses, lending resources and bookshops.

### **Step 3: Validation**

A peer Validator, selected and trained by the NCAC, visits the service to validate its quality practices. Wherever possible, NCAC uses the preferred specialist knowledge areas indicated by the service in its *Self-study Report* when allocating a Validator to visit the service. Such specialist knowledge areas include indigenous children, community based services and rural services.

The Validator observes the service's care practices, sights any necessary service documentation and completes a *Validation Report*. Validators also collect the *Validation Surveys* completed by the director/staff/carers and families/children during the weeks prior to the Validation Visit, and return them to the NCAC together with the *Validation Report*.

Depending on the size of the service, the Validator will spend anywhere from one day in a small long day care service with up to and including 29 licensed places in regular use, to five days in a family day care scheme with over 601 equivalent full time places.

Following the Validation Visit the service may complete a *Validation Evaluation Form* and return it to NCAC. This form allows the service 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 services participating in the QA systems are treated consistently on a national basis. Moderators assess the quality of the service's practice, guided by information in the service's *Self-study Report*, the *Validation Surveys* and the *Validation Report*. Moderators also consider information from the service's *Validation Evaluation Form*, where available.

Moderators look at each service as a whole, identifying patterns of quality care within the service. A composite *Quality Profile* is compiled by NCAC from information in the service's *Self-study Report* and *Validation Surveys*, the *Validation Report* and the Moderation ratings. The *Profile* shows a composite of these various perspectives of service performance across the Quality Areas of the QA system using protocols developed for the NCAC by the Australian Council of Educational Research. Moderators write a *Continuing Improvement Guide* for the service which focuses on quality improvement, based on the trends evident in the service's composite *Quality Profile*.

## **Step 5: Accreditation Decision**

The Accreditation Decision is the final step in the QA systems and is determined by the NCAC. To be accredited a service must achieve a rating of Satisfactory or higher on all Quality Areas as detailed on the composite *Quality Profile* (refer to example in Appendix 1).

Accredited services are required to prominently display their *Certificate of Accreditation* in the service. Services are also provided with a second certificate showing the service's composite *Quality Profile* and the names of service staff who participated in the QIAS process. This *Quality Profile Certificate* is for display at the discretion of the service.

An Accredited service 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*.

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

## **Accreditation Decision Reviews**

Where a service is not satisfied with the Accreditation Decision made by the NCAC they may apply to the Accreditation Decisions Review Committee for a review of that Decision. The Accreditation Decisions Review Committee (ADRC) is an independent body, appointed under Section 16 of the Child Care Act 1972 to review Accreditation Decisions made by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) following the receipt of a service's application to have an accreditation decision reviewed.

## Achievements of the QA Systems – Measuring Success

### Progress of Services Through the QA Systems

#### QIAS

Progress of Services as at 1 July 2004

Accredited	3845	95.2%
Not Accredited	194	4.8%
Total through 5 Steps	4039	
New Services	434	
<b>Total Registered Services</b>	<b>4473</b>	

Of long day care centres that have progressed through the current QIAS 13% have achieved all 10 Quality Areas at a High Quality level (Refer to *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Quality Trends Report: For the period 1 January 2004 to 30 June 2004*, available on the NCAC website: ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)))

#### FDCQA

Progress of Services as at 1 July 2004

Accredited	299	99.7%
Not Accredited	1	0.3%
Total through 5 Steps	300	
New Services	20	
<b>Total Registered Services</b>	<b>320</b>	

Quality trends in the progress of family day care schemes through FDCQA will be available towards the end of 2005, following the introduction of the second edition of the FDCQA *Quality Practices Guide* (2004).

#### OSHCQA

**Services registered as at 1 July 2004: 2,656**

## Other Benefits of Implementing QA Systems

The fact that Australia has funded and supported QA systems in children's services has brought a number of benefits to the early/middle childhood field:

- ◆ Community awareness of the work and worth of the childcare profession has been raised.
- ◆ Many resources are now much more accessible on a national basis due to interstate networking and sharing of ideas.
- ◆ There has been a national exchange of ideas relating to good practice. This means that a child care service on one side of the country can now benefit from the experience of a service on the other side of the country. In this way, much duplication of effort has been eliminated and good practice has been enhanced.
- ◆ Agencies outside the early childhood field are now targeting child care services and adapting their resources, kits, information and so on to the needs of children's services. This is particularly evident in the health and safety area where a number of resources are now produced targeting child care services, including the publications: *Caring for Children*, *Plan It*, *Staying Healthy in Child Care*.
- ◆ Corporate sponsorship has also been gained by child health educators for the development of national health, safety and nutrition information for service staff and families, directly related to the QIAS and FDCQA Quality Areas. This is being developed by the Centre for Community Child Health.

## Community Response

Families and community members can use the NCAC hotline or website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)) to obtain the names of accredited services in their area or to make inquiries or comments about the QA. The majority of community related calls NCAC receives are from parents and these calls are steadily increasing. Most of the parents who contact NCAC are positive about QA and appreciate the information provided by NCAC as a guide for choosing quality child care.

## Administration of the Quality Assurance Systems

The National Childcare Accreditation Council is currently administering Quality Assurance systems for 7,500 child care services, providing care to 763,000 children and representing more than 540,000 families across Australia. Although the QIAS, FDCQA and OSHCQA may appear straightforward, it is certainly a challenge to administer them.

The QA systems are based on peer review, where early childhood professionals working in child care are trained by NCAC to undertake a review of service practice. NCAC continually trains Validators and Moderators and requires approximately 1000 Validators and 50 Moderators across the country to undertake more than 2,600 Validation Visits and Moderation sessions each year.

## **Validators**

Validators are qualified and experienced child care professionals with recent experience in a long day care, family day care or outside school hours care service.

To become a Validator an applicant must, firstly, meet the selection criteria set by NCAC (available on the NCAC website, [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). Secondly, the applicant must undertake a five-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required standard of competency in an 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 by members of NCAC's Validator Program. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues, an NCAC *Validator Bulletin* is published regularly and Validators attend annual update training sessions.

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

## **Moderators**

Moderators are qualified professionals with considerable experience in the early or middle child care field. They have recent experience in long day care, family day care or outside school hours care service delivery and/or in delivery of pre and post service training or in research.

To become a Moderator, an applicant must firstly meet the selection criteria set by NCAC (available on the NCAC website, [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). Secondly, the applicant must undertake a three-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required competency standards.

Moderators are required to undertake 5, two 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.

## **The Tyranny of Distance**

One difficulty we face in administering the QA systems is a uniquely Australian problem – vast distances and the distribution of the population across the continent.

To ensure there is no conflict of interest, NCAC requires that the Validator and child care service have no prior connection. When scheduling a Validation Visit for a rural or isolated service, it may be that the nearest eligible Validator, who does not pose a conflict of interest, is located hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away. This is especially difficult in the Northern Territory where distance, combined with a small population, usually means flying in a Validator from a neighbouring State/Territory. Even within States the distances involved can be great – to send a Validator from Brisbane to a service in Bamaga (both located in Queensland) - is a 5,000 kilometre round-trip.

## **Future Directions**

The Australian Government is investigating the viability of extending Quality Assurance to other forms of child care, including Indigenous and In-Home Care.

## **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.

## Publications and Support for Services

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) produces a number of publications for child care services participating in the QA systems. These include:

**QIAS Handbook (second edition 2001), FDCQA Handbook (second edition 2004) and OSHCQA Handbook (2003)** - contain background information on the specific QA systems, an overview of the steps involved in achieving accreditation and a summary of the Quality Areas and Principles. The *Handbooks* are targeted primarily at service management, staff, carers and parents as well as students and others interested in quality child care. The *Handbooks* are also available on the NCAC website in a variety of community languages.

**QIAS Source Book (2001), FDCQA Quality Practices Guide (2001) and OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide (2003)** - the main documents or standards to be used by children's services progressing through the QA systems and targeted specifically at management, staff, carers and parents who are participating in their service's accreditation process. The *Quality Practices Guides* and *Source Book* detail the Quality Areas and Principles and give examples of indicative practices. Services are responsible for designing their own self-study process against the standards outlined in the *Quality Practices Guides* or *Source Book*. A service's quality of care is also validated against these standards.

**QIAS Self-study Report (2001), FDCQA Self-study Report (second edition 2004) and OSHCQA Self-study Report (2003)** - the working documents to be used by services to rate each Principle, record evidence of practice and plan for continued improvement across the Quality Areas. The *Self-study Report* will be completed by the management and staff and submitted to NCAC at the required time.

**FDCQA Workbook (2001) and OSHCQA Workbook (2003)** –optional publications intended to assist services to conduct self-study and develop improvement plans. The *Workbooks* are designed to be used by management, staff and carers. Supplementary documents to the *Workbooks* are also available on the NCAC website.

NCAC support for services includes:

**QIAS Introductory Video (2001), FDCQA Introductory Video (2001) and OSHCQA Introductory Video (2003)** - designed to introduce the service to the relevant QA system. NCAC suggests that the service use the video to assist management, staff, carers and families to become familiar with the process and resources of QA.

NCAC has created an **Online Training Module** for each QA system, which is available on our website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). This package provides training on the processes of the QA systems and links to the QA documents available on the website. It is particularly useful to new management, 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, 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 to services free of charge.

**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](http://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 QA systems. The site contains:

- all NCAC publications
- a range of forms such as Registration, Change of Registration, 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 *Handbooks* into community languages
- Easy access to NCAC's e-mail address [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto: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 QA processes.

**E-mail support** - [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto: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.

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