Understanding quality in early childhood education

A guide to the National Quality Standards for parents and carers of young children
Foreword

The National Quality Framework is the most major, single reform to occur in early childhood education across Australia for many decades. It gives significant recognition to the importance of the quality of experiences for children in their early years to ensure their present and future health, development and wellbeing.

The National Quality Framework aims to raise the quality of early childhood education and care in long day care, preschool, occasional care, outside school hours care and vacation care services and came into effect on 1 January 2012. An important component of the reform is the National Quality Standards and the requirement for early childhood services to develop an ongoing Quality Improvement Plan.

KU has long had a commitment to the provision of high quality early childhood education and care services and as such, wholly supports these quality improvements. We know it will provide positive outcomes for Australian children, and as an organisation we are well under way with implementing many of these requirements.

This booklet is designed to help families gain a better understanding of each of the quality areas in the National Quality Standards, while providing some practical ideas on what to look for, and what to ask when visiting or selecting an early childhood service for their child.

By understanding the changes that are happening within the early childhood education sector, and the often confusing terminology, we believe that families will be better positioned to make an informed assessment of the quality of the early childhood service they choose for their child.

We hope you find this booklet useful and look forward to meeting you at one of our high quality early childhood education services soon.

Christine Legg
CEO, KU Children’s Services

What are the National Quality Standards

Under the National Quality Framework, each early childhood education service in Australia will be assessed and given a rating against a set of National Quality Standards (NQS).

The National Quality Standards are separated into seven Quality Areas:
- Educational program and practice
- Children’s health and safety
- The physical environment
- Staffing arrangements
- Relationships with children
- Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- Leadership and service management

Each early childhood service will receive a rating based on their assessment against these Quality Areas and these ratings will be published, providing families with comprehensive information so they can make informed choices about services for their child.

While the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is the national body overseeing early childhood education and care and school aged care throughout Australia, state and territory regulatory authorities are responsible for undertaking the assessment and rating of services.

As part of this process, each early childhood service is required to develop and implement an ongoing Quality Improvement Plan, ensuring they are continually improving the service they provide.

For more information, visit acecqa.gov.au.

The National Quality Standards have been developed based on research and early childhood best practice. They are designed to ensure positive outcomes will be achieved for all children.
While schools adhere to a curriculum, early childhood education programs are guided by the National ‘Early Years Learning Framework’ for long day care and preschool services, and the ‘My Time, our Place’ framework for before and after school care and vacation care services. Additionally, some states and territories have their own specific frameworks. Each of these frameworks recognise the importance of play-based learning and intentional teaching in the development of young children. They place a particular emphasis on the development of relationships and skills such as cooperation, problem solving, curiosity and independence.

Educators within high quality early childhood services use these frameworks, along with feedback from families, to develop programs that acknowledge the individual strengths and interests of the children within their service. These programs include a range of individual and small group experiences designed to challenge young children and promote learning.

High quality early childhood services also provide programs that build relationships with the children and their families, and acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of the local community. By incorporating the unique aspects of each family and the local community within the program, high quality services help children to develop an understanding of the world around them and their place in it.

Enrolling in an early childhood service with a high quality education program, will ensure your child’s individual needs are being met, and that they will be challenged to grow and develop.

**Quality Area 1: Educational Program and Practice**

At KU Killarney Heights Preschool we discuss each child’s learning with their family to ensure the education experience is unique and caters to their child’s individual needs. From their very first visit, we speak with families about what they want for their child and work to ensure they feel safe and about what they want for their child and work to ensure they feel safe and supported. We then organise follow up surveys and interviews throughout the year to discuss children’s emerging interests and any possible concerns. This feedback, combined with educator’s observations and interactions with the child, ensures we develop a program where each child’s needs are met and they feel like they belong.

“Things to look for:
- Does the early childhood service offer a program that includes both individual and group experiences?
- Do the staff at the service make you and your child feel welcome?
- Is the educational program displayed?

**Things to ask:**
- What is the orientation process for new children?
- How will your child’s development and learning be recorded? Are you able to access these records?
- How are your child’s interests included in the program?
- Are there any opportunities to share your home culture at the service?
- What is the transition to school program at the service?

**Quality Checklist Educational Program and Practice**

Enrolling in an early childhood service with a high quality education program, will ensure your child’s individual needs are being met, and that they will be challenged to grow and develop.
Children’s health and safety are essential components of any high quality early childhood service. Appropriate supervision and a focus on health and safety ensures that children are kept safe and protected from avoidable injuries and illness. Along with providing safe environments, high quality early childhood services provide children with frequent opportunities to learn about and practice healthy lifestyles, including:

- Personal safety and wellbeing
- Health and hygiene
- Nutrition

High quality services will also have plans in place for any unexpected accidents and emergencies, and will ensure that evacuation drills and procedures are practiced regularly, and communicated clearly to the children and families. Above all, quality early childhood services have an obligation to protect children from the risk of harm and to ensure that any accidents or incidents are dealt with quickly and appropriately to ensure that each child’s wellbeing is maintained.

Educators within high quality services work with families to incorporate the individual requirements of each child into the routines and experiences they offer. This ensures each child remains healthy and develops confidence and a sense of wellbeing.

"Our daughter was the first Type 1 diabetic at our preschool. Within one training session by hospital educators and only one day of overseeing by myself, the staff had understood about the disease and its effects, learnt how to manage our daughter and administer her medication. Their level of care and professionalism will never cease to amaze me!" 

Parent, KU Preschool
A safe and welcoming physical environment plays an important role in enhancing children’s learning and development. Physical environments include:
- Indoor and outdoor play areas
- The equipment available at the service
- The resources that are provided for the children

High quality early childhood services offer environments that are safe, clean, suitable for the age and ability of the children, and that encourage exploration, experimentation and creativity.

These opportunities may include planned areas set up for dramatic play, block building and construction; quiet spaces for reading, art and creativity; or room set aside for children to experiment with music and movement.

Whilst not all early childhood services have vast amounts of room or natural areas for play, high quality services will also provide opportunities for children to learn from nature and the world around them.

High quality services offer children more than just the opportunity to play in open spaces or with a range of equipment, they offer a variety of opportunities for learning and discovery through play.

These opportunities may include water or sand play, the use of natural found objects instead of plastic toys, exploration of sustainable activities such as gardening, recycling and worm farms, or the opportunity to play and explore in the outdoors.

By providing a fun and welcoming physical environment, high quality services support children’s growth and promote the development of confidence and a sense of belonging.

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Quality Area 3: The Physical Environment

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My son and daughter both love the new playground at KU Chester Hill. My son loves the garden where they learn about sustainability and growing vegies, just like we do at home, while my daughter loves the garden and climbing on the natural stones and logs.

Parent, KU Chester Hill

Quality Checklist

Things to look for:
- Does the environment look and feel safe and secure?
- Are there experiences set up for children to explore and learn about nature and sustainability?
- Are there enough resources for all of the children to be involved in play?
- Does the environment provide opportunities for both indoor and outdoor experiences?
- Is there a range of equipment that is suitable for both younger and older children?

Things to ask:
- What opportunities does the service provide for children to learn about the outdoors?
- How does the service allow for the inclusion of children with additional needs?
Quality Area 4: Staffing Arrangements

Qualified and experienced educators play an important role in developing and maintaining high quality early childhood services.

Having consistent early childhood staff helps to create an environment of trust and cooperation, where staff work together with families to meet the needs of the children.

Under the National Quality Standards all early childhood services are required to meet specific regulations, including the ratios of staff to children across various age groups, and minimum levels of staff qualifications.

From January 2014, all early childhood services will be required to have access to a university qualified Early Childhood Teacher.

Research has shown that qualified and experienced early childhood staff are able to produce better social and cognitive outcomes for children. They can create safe, well-planned play environments for children to enjoy.

Things to look for:
- Do the staff seem to be working as a team and have a good relationship with each other?
- Are the qualifications and experience of all staff available and on display?

Things to ask:
- How many staff are there in each of the rooms at any time?
- Does the service have a university qualified Early Childhood Teacher?
- Is there a consistent staff roster so children get to spend time with the same people each day?
- Does the current staffing meet the requirements of the National Quality Framework? If not, what are the service’s plans for meeting the new requirements?

Quality Checklist Staffing Arrangements

The National Quality Framework requires the following staff-to-child ratios:

**Long Day Care and Preschool**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Ratio of Staff:children</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>1:4</td>
<td>By 1 January 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>1:5</td>
<td>By 1 January 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ years</td>
<td>1:11</td>
<td>By 1 January 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. A staff-to-child ratio of 1:4 for children 25 to 35 months will be retained in Victoria where this ratio currently applies, instead of 1:5 under the National Quality Standard.
2. A staff-to-child ratio of 1:10 for children aged 36 months to school age will be retained in NSW, Western Australia and Tasmania where this ratio currently applies, instead of 1:11 under the National Quality Standards.

**Family Day Care**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Ratio of Staff:children</th>
<th>Timeframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixed age groups</td>
<td>1:7 with a maximum of four children not attending school</td>
<td>By 1 January 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Outside School Hours Care**

The National Quality Standards will apply to Outside of School Hours Care but at this stage no changes to staff-to-child ratios or staff qualifications are proposed.

For more information visit www.acecqa.gov.au
Relationships with educators and the other children help to provide a secure platform for children to explore and learn. These relationships are built on mutual respect, and help to enhance children’s wellbeing, self-esteem and feelings of security. Strong relationships also help children to develop a sense of belonging, while acknowledging their individuality and ability to contribute to their community.

High quality early childhood services support children to develop positive relationships by providing frequent opportunities for group interactions, one on one activities with educators, and interactions with other children through open-ended play. By establishing strong and positive relationships, young children will be more likely to:
- Develop confidence
- Work cooperatively
- Learn new skills
- Take calculated risks
- Express themselves

Children will also develop the social skills necessary to succeed at school and for years to come.

Safe, secure relationships between children and educators provide an ideal platform for children’s growth and learning.

Quality Area 5: Relationships with Children

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Quality Checklist

Relationships with Children

Things to look for:
- Do the staff welcome and interact with your child?
- Are the educators communicating with the children in a respectful way that they can understand?
- Do the educators take time to listen to the children?
- Are the educators encouraging the children to play cooperatively and participate well together?

Things to ask:
- What opportunities are there for your child to share their interests with the other children and the educators?
- What happens if your child finds it difficult to fit in and make friends?
- What is the service’s procedure for managing children’s behaviour?
Quality Area 6: Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities

Sound early childhood education relies on strong partnerships between educators, families and the broader community. By combining the insight, support and consistency offered by the family with the expertise of qualified, experienced educators, high quality services acknowledge and reinforce the important role that families play in their child’s ongoing learning and development.

Through collaborative partnerships, high quality services are also able to develop an understanding of each family’s expectations and can address any concerns in an open and supportive way.

For successful partnerships to occur, families and educators must share information with each other. This may include:
- Sharing information about the child’s experiences and interests from home
- Providing opportunities for family input into the learning program
- Formal feedback through daily journals, regular developmental updates or meetings with educators

Quality early childhood services will also provide families with information on local schools, support agencies and services, where appropriate. By encouraging regular visits to, or from, local community groups and performers, quality services acknowledge the important role that culture and community plays in the development of positive, happy children.

At KU Union we regularly visit the local university, museums, cafes and sport centre. This helps extend the children’s learning and allows us to develop strong links with families and the local community.

Early Childhood Teacher, KU Union

Things to look for:
- Do you feel welcome within the service?
- Do you see aspects of different cultures and the local community reflected at the service?

Things to ask:
- What opportunities are there for families to be involved in the program?
- How will you find out what happens during your child’s day?
- How can you share information about your child with the educators?
- Does the service have a Parent Group or Committee?
- Does the service have links with local schools?
- Will your child have opportunities to go on excursions or will there be any special visitors to the service?
Quality Area 7: Leadership and Service Management

The demands on educators within early childhood services are complex and diverse. Depending on the type of service, educators are often expected to be business managers, policy writers, accountants, and managers of staff, all while delivering a high quality educational program.

The key to high quality early childhood education services is providing effective support structures to ensure the education and wellbeing of children are the primary focus.

There are a number of different models for the management and governance of early childhood services, including services run by parent committees, those run by larger not-for-profit organisations, and those operated by an individual or company for profit.

Regardless of the model, it is important that the service complies with government legislation and has a commitment to ongoing improvement.

It is also important that the educators are encouraged to continue growing and developing in their role as educational leaders.

Services with strong leadership and management structures provide a stable learning environment for children, while offering well-planned and resourced programs.

High quality services have a clear educational vision and philosophy. These are developed and shared between the families and educators.

Things to look for:
- Does the service have a good reputation in the local area?
- Is information about the management structure of the service on display?

Things to ask:
- What is the service’s educational philosophy?
- What opportunities are there for you to provide feedback to the service?
- Have the service’s policies and procedures been updated to reflect the National Quality Standards?
- What happens to any profits that the service generates?
- What ongoing professional development opportunities are there for the educators?
Established in 1895, KU is Australia’s most experienced early childhood education provider. We provide high quality, play-based learning experiences based on the Early Years Learning Framework. KU meets the early childhood needs of more than 14,500 children and their families each year. We manage over 150 children’s services across ACT, NSW, VIC and QLD. We have a strong commitment to staff’s professional development and learning. KU has led the way in employing university qualified Early Childhood Teachers within its services. We offer a full range of service types including occasional care, long day care, preschool, out of school hours care, vacation care, mobile services, work based child care, early intervention services and family programs. KU manages work based child care centres on behalf of a range of corporate clients.

KU provides child care for the children of new migrants through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in partnership with Navitas. Our services are supported by professional early childhood and administrative teams. We have a dedicated Child Wellbeing Manager. We provide professional, ongoing support for children with additional needs through a team of qualified Education Support Managers. We encourage parent and family involvement in our centres and services. KU is a trusted adviser on early childhood education and care issues. We are proudly a not for profit organisation, governed by a volunteer Board of Directors.

Quick Facts
KU Children’s Services is the recognised leader in early childhood education

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KU’s Quality Assessment Profile

Educational Program and Practice
- Children acknowledged as capable learners
- Play-based learning programs catering to children’s individual needs

Children’s Health and Safety
- Educators prioritise children’s health and physical wellbeing
- Checks completed regularly to ensure children’s safety

The Physical Environment
- Sustainable, natural learning environments
- Indoor and outdoor environments offering challenges to extend children

Staffing Arrangements
- University qualified Early Childhood Teachers
- 1:4 staff ratio for children aged 0-2 years

Relationships with Children
- Passionate educators who take time to listen to children
- Educators work well as a team and have a good relationship with each other

Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities
- Families acknowledged as the experts in their child’s life
- Each service is a unique reflection of the local community

Leadership and Service Management
- An ongoing commitment to professional development for staff
- A not for profit organisation, with children as its focus

Visit www.ku.com.au to find your nearest centre and experience the KU difference for yourself!

KU is proudly a not for profit organisation

www.ku.com.au