

# THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK (NQF)

Universally, early childhood education and care focuses on children from birth to age 8. In Australia, early childhood education and care includes a range of programs and services for children in the years before compulsory schooling. These include centre-based services such as preschool and long day care, family day care, crèche and occasional care, and may also include mobile children's services for children living in rural and remote regions or living in socially disadvantaged areas or situations. Early childhood education and care also includes specialised services targeted at, for example, Indigenous children, children with disabilities, children from migrant or refugee families or children who have suffered serious trauma such as abuse.

The **National Quality Framework** (NQF), introduced in 2012, is designed to ensure a uniform and integrated approach to the regulation and quality assessment of education and care services across Australia. This includes centre-based services – long day care, preschool, kindergartens, out-of-school-hours care – and family day care.

## Objectives of the National Quality Framework

The NQF has six primary objectives:

- 1. to ensure the safety, health and wellbeing of children attending education and care services*
- 2. to improve the educational and developmental outcomes for children attending education and care services*
- 3. to promote continuous improvement in the provision of quality education and care services*
- 4. to establish a system of national integration and shared responsibility between participating jurisdictions and the Commonwealth in the administration of the National Quality*

## Framework

- 5. to improve public knowledge, and access to information, about the quality of education and care services*
- 6. to reduce the regulatory and administrative burden for education and care services by enabling information to be shared between participating jurisdictions and the Commonwealth.*

*(ACECQA, 2011b, p. 3. Reproduced under Creative Commons BY Licence 3.0.)*

## Guiding principles of the National Quality Framework

The guiding principles of the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011c, pp. 7–8) are as follows:

**Principle: The rights and best interests of the child are paramount.** In a wealthy country such as Australia these rights should include the right to be supported, nurtured and loved within the family unit; the right to experience the joy of childhood, including the right to play; the right to a decent

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Guiding Principles

standard of living free from poverty; the right to health care services; the right to a healthy lifestyle with access to healthy foods; the right to be feel safe and be protected from harm (within and outside of the family); the right to experience the religious and cultural values of the family; and the right to free, high-quality education, including early childhood education and care. This principle also reflects the belief that while children are resilient, their continued development is especially vulnerable to negative environmental factors such as poverty, abuse, racism and family violence.

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), Australia is committed to the needs, interests and rights of children, and this is reflected in the above principle.

Article 3 of the Convention can be summarised as follows:

*The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers. (UNICEF, 2005, p. 1)*

Childhood as a discrete and special time in the lifespan is a modern concept. Until a few generations ago, many children in Australian society had limited opportunities for education and were expected to work to help support the family. In many cultures, childhood is not a time for play and learning – children are subjected to war, poverty, hard labour, abuse and little or no access to education.

**Principle: Children are successful, competent and capable learners.** To reach their full potential each child needs the guidance and support of a loving family, and opportunities to be further nurtured in a quality early childhood learning environment supported by qualified early childhood educators.

The early years have been recognised as a unique period of **development**. This is supported by ongoing research into brain development that has identified the first 3 years of life as a critical period for brain development, the development of secure attachments and the development of **self-regulation**.

Central to early childhood education and care are fundamental principles of child development and learning, and the role of play as a primary learning tool through which children learn. Play-based learning is the key teaching practice used by early childhood educators to support and enhance development. In this approach, the child is viewed as a capable, resourceful learner who plays a critical role in directing their own learning.

**Principle: Equity, inclusion and diversity underpin the framework.** This requires the unique nature of each child to be valued and nurtured. It requires every child to have equal access to quality, affordable education and care services that best meet the needs of the child and the family. To achieve this guiding principle there must be:

- ❖❖ a strong commitment to ensuring early childhood educators can engage in ongoing professional development

- ❖❖ a commitment by governments to fund additional specialist educators so that services include all children without compromising the integrity of the program.

**Principle: Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued.** While there has been progress in recognising and addressing inequity and **bias** in relation to Indigenous Australians, we still have a very long way to go as a nation. Indigenous children and their families remain a significantly disadvantaged sector of the population:

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience higher death rates, including from injuries, than the national average. They [are] less likely to have achieved the reading and numeracy minimum standards, and [have] higher smoking rates than the general child population. (AIHW, 2012, p. ix)*

Early childhood programs recognise that learning occurs in a social context and that family, cultural and environmental factors impact significantly on learning opportunities and learning outcomes for young children. To be effective, programs must recognise the importance of working collaboratively with families and must embrace social and cultural diversity. This principle is also reflected in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 30 can be summarised as:

*Minority or indigenous children have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion. The right to practice one's own culture, language and religion applies to everyone; the Convention here highlights this right in instances where the practices are not shared by the majority of people in the country. (UNICEF, 2005, p. 4)*

**Principle: The role of parents and families is respected and supported.** Early childhood programs recognise the family, and relationships within the family, as critical to healthy child development.

Positive relationships between educators and children and between educators and families are key indicators of quality care. Strong, resilient families are the cornerstone of strong, resilient communities.

Early childhood education and care can contribute to the building of social capital by providing programs that strengthen family functioning. The long-term wellbeing of individuals and communities can be enhanced by promoting inclusive programs that value families as equal partners in early childhood programs.