

IT'S ALL ABOUT MEANING: HOW MUCH DOCUMENTATION DO I NEED AND WHAT IS IT MEANT TO LOOK LIKE?

Early childhood education and care at its best offers children multiple opportunities to grow and learn. Children learn about themselves and the world around them; they learn to navigate relationships; they develop new skills and grow in confidence. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) puts it like this:

.....
Children's learning is dynamic, complex and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated. Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities. (DEEWR 2009, p. 9)
.....

It is with a clear purpose and with the words of the EYLF in mind that we consider the question many educators have been asking. How much documentation do I need and what is it meant to look like?

Those who are looking for formulas or straightforward recipes providing easy answers will be disappointed. There is no prescribed answer to this question. There is no one equation that multiplies the number of children by how many observations you must take in order to be compliant. The opposite is closer to the truth. **Effective recording of information about children's learning and development, in either groups or as individuals, requires educators to make local decisions for themselves.**

Educators need to think about the context of where they are and with whom they are working. They need to consider what is helpful to record in order to get to know and understand the children, assess their needs and interests, and plan effectively to progress learning across the five learning outcomes.

If the very notion of deciding everything yourself seems overwhelming, keep reading, there is some help at hand! Underpinning the idea that educators must make local decisions are some parameters, or perhaps to use an aquatic analogy, there are some flags that helps us decide where to swim!

The first flag must always be to determine **what is actually asked of us**. Rumours abound about what should or should not be in place – these are mostly untrue and we must become better at knowing what is actually required, rather than what someone reported to be the case.

The Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 (r. 75, 76) requires that:

Information about the educational program must be displayed at the service in a place that is easily accessible to parents.

The following information must be given to a child's parents when requested:

- a. *the content and operation of the educational program as it relates to that child*
- b. *information about that child's participation in the program*
- c. *a copy of assessments or evaluations in relation to that child.*
(ACECQA 2011, p. 54)

The Early Years Learning Framework asks us to do the following:

Educators use a variety of strategies to collect, document, organise, synthesise and interpret the information that they gather to assess children's learning. They search for appropriate ways to collect rich and meaningful information that depicts children's learning in context, describes their progress and identifies their strengths, skills and understandings. More recent approaches to assessment also examine the learning strategies that children use and reflect ways in which learning is co-constructed through interactions between the educator and each child. Used effectively, these approaches to assessment become powerful ways to make the process of learning visible to children and their families, educators and other professionals. (DEEWR 2009, p. 17)

The Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework elaborates:

Developing meaningful curriculum involves interactive decision making by children, parents and families, educators and the broader community with the aim of fostering children's learning. Curriculum decision making is guided by a combination of principles, practices and outcomes to promote children's learning. (DEEWR 2010, p.10)



These statements help educators establish the parameters of planning and documenting. They do not tell us how many documents are required and they steer clear of specifying particular types or templates. What they do make clear is the need for a cycle of planning that makes the experience of early childhood education and care an opportunity for learning for all children and asks that this be made visible to families. In other words the documents we record should help make the planning and documentation of children's learning and development a reality.

The second flag in our aquatic analogy is **context**. Understanding the place and people the service works with, helps educators determine the nature and amount of documentation that is recorded about children and how it is used. For example, if a child is in a family day care service two days per week, the amount of material recorded should reflect this. Likewise, a service that has a significant number of children attending full time would have a substantial amount of documentation that records the learning and development of these children.

Having established where the flags are, it's time to take the plunge and start swimming. Surprisingly, it's in the doing that we start to make sense of what works and what doesn't. Defining what's what helps but is no substitute for trial and error. So with this in mind, try out some of these ideas:

- ▶ Consider ways to record information about specific aspects of children's learning and development – arrival times, meal times, group times and develop a simple table to record information about each child's participation. Use this data to decide which children need further support and scaffolding.

- ▶ Instead of writing down every conversation with a parent, have a diary or notebook where important comments or feedback can be recorded. These should then be reviewed and a decision made about how to respond and what action may be required next.
- ▶ Enrolment forms are an important source of information and one of the most important pieces of documentation – make sure they are meaningful and tell more than just the basics.
- ▶ **At regular intervals, invite children to talk about their experience. This form of direct interviewing can reveal much about what children know, can do and understand about themselves and their world.**
- ▶ Invite the children to help create some stories about their experiences and include their ideas and opinions combined with the voice of the educator.
- ▶ Individual records should be created (starting with an enrolment form). The material gathered in these will vary with individual circumstances.
- ▶ If possible, display children's work or images from an event with some explanation of what they were doing and learning about, ensuring the children's voice is present – this is also a rich form of documentation.
- ▶ Tried and tested forms of recording information such as anecdotal records and running records, should not be forgotten.

Knowing the expectations, or being clear about the location of the flags, enables educators to decide how far to swim. It allows us to answer question for ourselves. As information is collected and documents are recorded, the most helpful question remains – *is this meaningful and does it help plan an engaging program where all children can participate?*

REFERENCES

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) 2011, *Guide to the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations*, viewed 12 July 2012, www.acecqa.gov.au > Resources and templates

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, ACT.

DEEWR 2010, *Educators' Belonging, Being & Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, ACT. 

