



IT'S ALL ABOUT MEANING ... RECORDING EFFECTIVELY IN SCHOOL AGE CARE

School-age care (SAC), at its best offers children multiple opportunities to grow and learn. Children learn about themselves and how to navigate relationships with those around them. They learn to pursue things that interest them, and grow in confidence developing new skills. The *Framework for School Age Care* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2011, p.6) puts it like this:

'In school-age care settings educators collaborate with children to provide play and leisure opportunities that are meaningful to children and support their wellbeing, learning and development. School-age care settings pay attention to the needs and interests of individual children within a context that promotes collaboration and active citizenship. Children in school-age care settings have choice and control over their learning as they collaborate with educators to extend their life skills and develop dispositions towards citizenship.'

It is with a clear purpose and with the words of the framework 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 single 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 in either groups or as individuals requires educators to make local decisions. Educators need to think about where they are and with whom they work. They should consider what must be recorded in order to get to know the children, assess their needs and interests, and plan effectively for their active participation.

If the very notion of deciding everything yourself seems overwhelming, keep reading – help is at hand! There are guidelines that underpin the idea that educators must make local decisions or to use an aquatic analogy – there are some flags that show us where to swim!

The first 'flag' says that we must first determine what is actually asked of us as SAC service-providers. Rumours abound about what should or should not be in place – these are often untrue, and we need to be adept at knowing what is actually required, rather than relying upon what someone thinks to be the case.

The National Regulations state 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:

- *the content and operation of the educational program as it relates to that child*
- *information about that child's participation in the program*
- *a copy of assessments or evaluations in relation to that child.'*

(Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) 2011, p. 54)

The *Framework for School Age Care* (DEEWR 2011 p. 16) asks us to do the following:

'Educators gather knowledge about children's wellbeing and learning as they reflect and engage in processes such as scanning, monitoring, gathering and analysing information about how children feel and what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children's wellbeing, development and learning.'

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The *Educators' Guide to the Framework for School Age Care in Australia* recently released by DEEWR (2012 p. 12), elaborates:

'As the Framework suggests, the program encompasses far more than just a list of planned experiences. So when program planning, educators need to consider such things as the environment, the routines, the everyday resources, and even the skills and knowledge of the educators who work with the children.'

'Planning is therefore an ongoing cycle underpinned by reflective practice. Effective forward planning will enable the success of any service. It operates as a continuous 'cycle of inquiry ...'

These statements help educators establish the parameters of planning and documenting in school-age care. 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 school-age care an opportunity for learning and wellbeing for all children and asks that this be made visible to families. In other words the documents we record should help make this a reality.

(To access the *Educators' Guide to the Framework for School Age Care in Australia* go to DEEWR's website www.deewr.gov.au and follow the pathway Childhood > Policy Agenda > Framework for School Age Care).

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 school-age care service runs for an hour and a half each morning during term time with the majority of children coming one or two days per week, the amount of material recorded should reflect this. Conversely, a service that works with children before and after school, with most attending full-time would have a more substantial amount of documentation that records children's learning.

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 it is no substitute for trial and error. With this in mind, try out some of these ideas ...

- ▶ Instead of writing down every conversation you have with a parent, have a diary or notebook where parents can record their own comments or feedback. These should then be reviewed and a decision made about how to respond.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Encourage the children to complete information sheets about themselves – what they like and don't like, and what they want out of the service. A vacation-care service, for example, might collect this information well in advance and use it to shape the experiences offered.
- ▶ At regular intervals, or at the end of programs, educators may invite some children to complete child-friendly surveys or interview a cross-section of children about their experience. Better still – ask the children to interview each other.
- ▶ Devise a simple template where educators can record important conversations with children. It should include space where you can write about what will happen next. This document can be shared with families and the children to help them know that their ideas and concerns are taken seriously.
- ▶ Have an ideas book or graffiti space where children and families can write their own ideas or comments.
- ▶ Invite the children to help create some stories about their experiences and include the voice of the educator.
- ▶ Individual records should be created, starting with an enrolment form and perhaps a form completed by children. The material gathered will change with individual circumstances. For example, children with additional needs will require educators to gather more information to support their needs.
- ▶ If possible display children's work or images from an event with some explanation of what they were doing and learning about – this is also a rich form of documentation.

Knowing the expectations – being clear about the location of the flags – enables educators to decide how far to swim. It allows us to answer question for ourselves. And as information is collected and documentation recorded into the future, 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 7 February 2012 <http://acecqa.gov.au/links-and-resources/national-quality-framework-resources>

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2011, *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, ACT.

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