

THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE: INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

Research shows that a child's experience in their first five years sets the course for the rest of their life.

In recognition of this, the Australian Government, in partnership with all state and territory governments, is making important changes to early childhood education and care in Australia. This will ensure that Australian children get the best possible start.

This is being done through the introduction of a National Quality Framework.

The National Quality Framework will put in place a new National Quality Standard to ensure high quality and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia. For more information on the new National Quality Standard, see the full standard online at deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood.

These changes will help providers to improve their services in the areas that impact on a child's development and empower families to make informed choices about which service is best for their child.

Why do we need a National Quality Framework?

The National Quality Framework will put in place national standards to ensure high quality and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia.

This important reform will deliver a higher standard of care for children in the critical areas of education, health, and safety and will provide clearer and comprehensive information for families so they can choose the best services for their child.

We know that the first five years of a child's life shapes their future—their health, learning and social development—and we want to make sure that their future is bright.

Early childhood experts and professionals maintain that quality is critical when it comes to early childhood education and care.

At the moment quality standards across early childhood education and care services vary across Australia and there is often limited information available to help families choose the best service for their children.

The National Quality Framework will require all providers to improve services in the areas that impact on a child's development and safety and to provide families with quality information to help them make informed choices about services.

Changes will be made in key areas

The National Quality Framework will set a new National Quality Standard for early childhood education and care providers in Australia.

The National Quality Standard will improve quality through:

- improved staff-to-child ratios to ensure each child gets more individual care and attention
- new staff qualification requirements to ensure staff have the skills to help children learn and develop

- a new quality rating system to ensure Australian families have access to transparent information relating to the quality of early childhood education and care services
- the establishment of a new national body to ensure early childhood education and care is of a high quality.

The new framework will cover long day care, family day care, outside school hours care and preschools.

National Quality Standard

The new National Quality Standard will help services to provide the best possible level of early childhood education and care by being clear about the factors that best support a child's development.

It will also give services and families confidence in understanding what distinguishes high quality or excellent services.

The new National Quality Standard is divided into seven areas that contribute to the quality of early childhood education and care. These areas have been identified by research and are:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements (including the number of staff looking after children)
5. Relationships with children
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Leadership and service management

Under each of these areas more detail is provided about what a service can do to provide the highest quality early childhood education and care for a child.

More staff to look after children

One of the key changes under the new National Quality Standard is that each staff member will have fewer children to look after.

This means that each child will get more individual care and attention, and when children have more time to learn from adults they develop more quickly.

The staff-to-child ratios, listed below, will be put in place across Australia.

	Age group	Staff-to-child ratio	Timeframe for compliance
Long Day Care and Preschool	Birth to 24 months	1 staff member to 4 children	1 January 2012
	25 to 35 months	1 staff member to 5 children	1 January 2016
	36 months to school age	1 staff member to 11 children	1 January 2016
	Mixed age groups	A proportional formula will be applied based on the above ratios	1 January 2012

Family Day Care	Mixed age groups of children	1 staff member to 7 children with a maximum of four children not yet attending school	1 January 2014
Outside School Hours Care	The National Quality Standard and ratings system will also apply to Outside School Hours Care but at this stage no changes to staff-to-child ratios or staff qualifications are proposed.		

The new framework will be in place by 1 January 2012, with changes to staff-to-child ratios and qualifications being phased in over a number of years.

More highly qualified staff

Another key change under the National Quality Standard is the introduction of new requirements for early childhood education and care services to have more highly qualified staff.

The following qualification requirements for staff will apply.

By 1 January 2014:

- An early childhood teacher will need to be in attendance all of the time when long day care and preschool services are being provided to 25 children or more.
- An early childhood teacher will need to be in attendance some of the time when long day care and preschool services are being provided to less than 25 children.
- Within each long day care centre or preschool, half of all staff will need to have (or to be actively working towards) a diploma-level early childhood education and care qualification or above, and the remaining staff will all be required to have (or be actively working towards) a Certificate III level early childhood education and care qualification, or equivalent.
- All family day care coordinators will need to have (or to be actively working towards) a diploma-level early childhood education and care qualification or above.
- All family day carers will be required to have (or be actively working towards) a Certificate III level early childhood education and care qualification, or equivalent.

By 1 January 2020:

- A second early childhood teacher, or another suitably qualified leader, will need to be in attendance all of the time when long day care and preschool services are being provided to more than 80 children.
- A second early childhood teacher, or another suitably qualified leader, will need to be in attendance at least half of the time when long day care and preschool services are being provided to 60 children or more.

Improving staff qualifications is important as the research shows that staff with higher qualifications are usually better able to get improved outcomes for children. More highly qualified staff means greater understanding of health and safety issues and that staff are more able to lead activities that inspire youngsters and help them learn and develop.

A new national rating system

A new rating system will be introduced with each service being rated on the quality of service they provide. Each service will be assessed on their performance across the seven quality areas that make up the new National Quality Standard and given one overall rating. This overall rating is determined by the rating for each of the seven quality areas. This will provide an overall picture of the quality of a service.

All services will need to display their approval and rating information. Ratings will also be available on the internet.

For the first time this will provide families with consistent information to help them compare services and work out which service is best for their child. It will also help services know where they need to improve.

There are five levels against which services across Australia will be assessed based on the National Quality Standard.

- **Unsatisfactory:** indicates that a service is not meeting the standard and the regulator is working closely with the service to immediately improve its quality. If there is no improvement the centre will be closed.
- **Operating Level:** indicates that a service is working towards meeting the standard. All new services will commence operation with an Operating Level rating.
- **National Quality Standard:** indicates that a service is meeting the standard.
- **High Quality:** indicates that a service is exceeding the National Quality Standard.
- **Excellent:** indicates that a service demonstrates excellence and is recognised as a leader in the sector. Services will need to apply to be assessed against this rating.

A new national body

There will be a new national body to oversee the National Quality Standard. It will oversee how the National Quality Standard is being applied across the country to ensure that services are meeting the new requirements.

There will be one organisation within each state and territory that will assess services, with oversight from the new national body. This replaces the current situation where many services have to deal with multiple regulators. This will mean less regulatory burden for services, so they have more time to spend providing high quality early childhood education and care.

When will the changes happen?

The changes will be put in place in a step by step approach. This will give early childhood education and care providers across Australia time to get ready and adjust to the new requirements, particularly those relating to staff-to-child ratios and qualifications.

The first changes start in July 2010 during a transition phase where services will begin to undergo assessment against the new National Quality Standard. From 1 January 2012, all services will be assessed against the new National Quality Standard.

The new framework will be in place by 1 January 2012, with changes to staff-to-child ratios and qualifications being phased in over a number of years.

Support for families

The Australian Government understands the effect of early childhood education and care on the family budget.

That is why the Australian Government provides Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate to help families with the cost of these services.

Because these changes will be put in place over a number of years, and services will have time to adjust, there should not be a sudden increase in the cost of services. Providers will continue to make their own business decisions about the level of service they provide.

The changes do not impact on families' current eligibility for Commonwealth child care payments.

Where can I find out more?

For more information on these changes you can:

Call: **1800 181 088**

Email: **ECECQualityReformEnquiries@deewr.gov.au**

Visit: **mychild.gov.au**