



Planning and programming for children's learning and development

Educational program and practice is the focus of Quality Area 1 of the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). The precise way that each early childhood service plans and implements its program depends on a range of factors, but looking at other educators' practices is always an opportunity for reflection. Continuing our series on programming and planning for children's learning and development, we visit a small service in Tasmania.

Case study No.2

Bagdad Childcare and Early Learning Centre

Mixed-age long daycare centre
Bagdad, Tasmania

'There's no point programming for a child when you don't know where they are at in their journey.'

The childcare centre in Bagdad, a suburb 40 km from the middle of Hobart, opened its doors in 2010 on the site of a long-standing occasional care centre that had lost its government funding. Tammy Bennett had been on the parent committee of the occasional care centre and is now the Manager and Approved Provider of the new long daycare centre. With just 16 places, the centre offers a mixed-age setting and continues to employ educators from the occasional care service.

Tammy says the advent of the NQS 'wasn't a massive change for us, because we already had such a steep learning curve going from occasional care to long daycare'. In fact, the NQS turned out to be instrumental in shifting the philosophy in Bagdad. 'I was really, really happy that the new framework empowered us a little bit more to say this is the direction we need to be going, we need to be more educational, we need to offer more stimulating experiences—not just offering children activities to keep them busy,' Tammy explains.

In terms of programming, some of the team initially found the NQS and *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) 'a bit vague', because of the lack of firm instruction. 'The EYLF doesn't lay it all out for you,' Tammy says, 'it's so much more organic than that, it's not so prescribed. And that's really good'. The educators and management

at Bagdad spent around 18 months examining their educational program and policies, constantly reflecting on their performance in relation to the NQS and EYLF. One of the biggest challenges was moving away from thematic programming, which had characterised the previous occasional care environment, and thinking deeply about the meaning of special annual events. For example, instead of the children making paper bunnies and baskets every Easter, the educators talked about approaching it differently, for example bringing in an incubator with eggs, hatching chicks and talking about the cycle of life instead.

'It really involved pulling apart a lot of these events,' Tammy explains. 'Even Anzac Day, how do we talk to children about that? We don't want to talk about dying soldiers, but maybe you want to talk about bravery and when have the children been brave in their lives or shown courage.'

The centre also adopted a primary carer model to help the educators get to know each of the children and their interests. 'We'd found we just kept programming for the same children, and the quieter, less verbal ones went under the radar,' says Tammy. 'So what we did was divide up the children between the educators. We told the educators to find out where each child "is at" by starting with the EYLF Developmental Milestones document and closely observing them—there's no point programming for a child when you don't know where they are at in their journey. We also made sure we incorporated the parents' goals.'





Programming at the centre now takes its cues from the children's interests. 'We try not to be overly structured,' says Tammy. 'I think the key thing is going back to that primary care model and just understanding where each child is at. It doesn't mean that every child has to have something magical happen every week. But if you don't know the child, you won't be able to recognise and respond to those significant moments.'

There is also room for intentional teaching in the program, which is planned through constant communication between the educators—there are always three on the floor in the one-room setting—and an A3 sheet of paper on the wall, where educators write suggestions for the week that emerge from their interactions with the children to extend on later.

The program at the Bagdad centre is shaped by the mixed-age setting. 'It can be really challenging when you've got babies in the same room as five-year-olds,' Tammy explains. 'But what we do find is that it can bring out some really lovely behaviours in the older children. They tend to nurture the babies, play with them and pick up their toys when they drop them, so you do tend to see a lot of that empathy and sharing, those nurturing qualities.'

The program provides for the different age groups to undertake separate activities, but the children often take the lead. 'We don't limit the little ones—if they want to be involved with the bigger children's pre-kinder activities, then we will let them be involved,' Tammy says. 'So the little ones get exposed to more challenging experiences, too!'

When it comes to linking programming to observations, the educators at Bagdad have done a lot of work around how to recognise children's learning. 'Probably like a lot of centres, we went through that phase of 'take a photo of everything', and we ended up with hundreds of photos that were irrelevant,' explains Tammy. However, the educators now stay focused on knowing the child. 'If you know the children really, really well, then you know when to notice those moments and write something up about them for their parents.'



Tammy identifies three strategies her educators use for planning and programming:

- getting to know families well
- sharing responsibility and accountability for each child's learning, so that all educators are able to recognise significant moments for each child
- learning from the experiences of others.

'I'd really encourage educators to read the information that comes out from Early Childhood Australia and other organisations, because a lot of the booklets and newsletters that come out are based on real-life experiences that other educators are going through, and you can often pick out a good idea,' she says. 'Also by networking and visiting other services. We often all have the same problems, but nobody talks about it. By sharing our experiences, everyone benefits.'

The final article in this series will visit the YMCA Butler Outside School Hours Care service in the northern suburbs of Perth.



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