

FAMILIES RESEARCH PROJECT

Knowledge and Meaning of National Quality Standards Ratings
Pilot Study

A report for

**Australian Children's Education & Care Quality
Authority**

7th March 2014



Contact:

info@hpopenmind.com.au

+61 (0)3 9662 9200

Hall & Partners

OPENMIND

Table of Contents

- 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS 3
 - Study aim and methodology 3
 - Findings: the context – existing parental considerations of quality 3
 - Findings: awareness of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings 5
 - Findings: National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings: response to terminology and descriptions 5
 - Conclusions: Implications for engaging parents with the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings and survey design:..... 7
- 2. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY 9
 - Background to the research..... 9
 - Study methodology 11
- 3. CONTEXT: CURRENT PARENTAL CONSIDERATIONS OF QUALITY 13
 - How parents approach the idea of quality..... 13
 - Choosing a service, and the specific role of quality in decision making 17
 - Quality as it relates to role of service 19
 - Using language that drives engagement 23
 - Case studies: Indigenous Australian parents..... 24
- 4. NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK, STANDARD AND RATINGS 27
 - Awareness and initial response to naming terminology 27
 - Response to the details of the National Quality Framework 28
 - Response to the details of the seven quality areas..... 31
 - Response to the ratings..... 34
 - The National Quality Framework, Ratings and choice 36
- 5. PARENTAL RESPONSE TO THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT 38
 - Overall response..... 38
 - Specific areas of information or questioning explored 38
- 6. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGAGING PARENTS AND SURVEY DESIGN 41
 - Communicating with and engaging parents..... 41
 - Survey design..... 44
- APPENDIX 1: DISCUSSION GUIDE 47
- APPENDIX 2: POST-GROUP INDIVIDUAL CAPTURE TASK..... 50

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Study aim and methodology

This report outlines the findings and recommendations arising from Stage 1 of the Families Research Project. The overall aim of the Families Research Project is to enable the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority to report on the proportion of parents who indicate that they know their service's rating and understand its meaning (and if the survey is repeated, to report longitudinally on the level of engagement of families with the National Quality Standard moving forward). The aims of Stage 1 (a pilot study) were to:

- provide some immediate, preliminary advice on understanding and engagement of families;
- feed into design of the research instrument for Stage 2 (a proposed quantitative survey with families accessing relevant services);;
- provide advice about how to communicate with parents on the topic of the National Quality Framework, including optimal language to use; and
- provide deep and rich qualitative findings to complement, and provide context to, the findings of the quantitative survey.

Stage 1 employed a qualitative research methodology comprising 14 group discussions conducted with parents of children attending relevant services between 4 and 13 February 2014. The study also included a post-group individual task to capture feedback on the information search process (on the mychild website) as well as any impact on understanding of, and engagement with, the National Quality Standard and ratings at an individual level.

Findings: the context – existing parental considerations of quality

Quality: parents have an intuitive and emotional way of framing the concept of quality.

Prior to specific investigation of parental understanding and attitudes towards the National Quality Framework, moderators explored general views and attitudes around early childhood education and care. The aim was to establish how parents think about and assess quality in order to be able to context and explain their response to the framework, standard and ratings. It emerged that on the whole, parents tend not to view quality in systematic or objective terms: nor do they think in broader, more abstract terms of the 'early childhood education and care sector' as a whole. Instead they focus on the particular service or services they are using or considering. In addition, the way parents frame quality is intuitive and 'felt': with the key indicator of service quality being the observed happiness of their child.

- ***Implication for parental engagement with the National Quality Framework: Parents' intuitive and emotional framing of quality means that they are not primed to seek out or***

accept the very formal idea of quality promoted under the framework. The communications requirement is to reach out to parents rather than relying on them engaging on their own.

Service choice process: ad hoc and lacking reference to external advice

Parents were also asked to describe the process they had gone through in choosing the service(s) they are currently using, including the factors, information and advice taken into account, and the relevant importance of each. It became evident that the main factors parents weigh up with respect to this choice are accessibility (ability to get a place), the observed 'feel' of a service (feels 'right'), convenience (close to home, work or school) and affordability. They do not tend to access external indicators of quality or advice to assist in evaluating different services – for instance, there were no mentions of use of the 'mychild' or Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority websites, or assistance by way of government communications in this area, including in relation to the National Quality Framework.

- ***Implication for parental use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings in selecting a service:*** *If parents are to be encouraged to use the quality concepts ratings system when choosing a service then they will need to be 'nudged' to incorporate external advice into their choice. Significantly, parents would need to know about the National Quality Framework and Ratings before their child attends a service, noting that there are currently limited opportunities in the choice trajectory to interrupt decision making. However, this will still be of little use to those parents (a high proportion in this study) who say that service shortages made the idea of choice irrelevant.*

Ideas of quality are also influenced by the age of the child and the service context

In group discussions, parents were further encouraged to talk about the relative role of different services in a child's life. It became apparent that parental understandings of what a service is expected to deliver (and hence their judgement of quality as it is defined by this factor) is very much contextual. For younger children the emphasis is on care and nurturing and meeting developmental milestones: whereas as children approach school years parents begin to think of the skills and behaviours required to make a successful transition to a more formal schooling environment. Out of school hours care is the odd service in this category – in particular it is not seen in the context of the early years, which implies pre school age children. During the course of parents' discussion of their own ideas of quality, a number of key terms emerged as either engaging or dividing parents. While the term 'education' could be divisive when used in relation to children under three years of age, other terms or phrases were considerably more engaging, including 'development', 'play-based learning', 'learning through play', and 'socialisation'.

- ***Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings:*** *Parents actively push back against language and concepts that appear to force formal education (i.e. literacy and numeracy in a preschool context) on young children. There is a clear opportunity to use parents' natural language as outlined*

above to ensure their engagement when communicating about the framework, standard and ratings.

Findings: awareness of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings

There was little to no awareness across this qualitative sample of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings. In addition to this widespread failure to recognise the framework, standard and ratings, parental response to the naming terminology suggests that the somewhat generic language does not adequately distinguish them from other, already existing systems or regimes, either to do with children, such as NAPLAN or quality regimes more generally (including occupational health and safety). Hence the language does not contribute to either cut-through or engagement with parents.

- ***Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings as well as quantitative measurement of awareness:*** *Current low levels of awareness means that a significant investment in communications will need to be made to ensure parental engagement with the quality framework, standard and ratings. In addition, parental tendency to misinterpret the names of the framework, standard and ratings means that careful consideration will need to be given to framing these in communications and for the purposes of measuring awareness with precision in any future surveys undertaken by the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority.*

Findings: National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings: response to terminology and descriptions

Once unprompted awareness of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings had been explored, short descriptions of each (based on existing communication materials prepared for parents) were put to respondents to understand how they responded to both the concepts and language used.

There is currently little in the description of the **National Quality Framework** that implies a new approach or particularly large departure from existing quality standards. If anything, it implies an initiative to ensure that services meet the minimum standard (more of interest to those who feel their current service is lacking) rather than an initiative aiming to promote the pursuit of excellence. In addition, once a definition of the new approach had been presented to them, parents raised concerns about: how the assessment will be conducted; resourcing for the new framework and rating system; as well as their appropriateness in different care settings and subsequent use to evaluate care by families.

- ***Implication for parental engagement with the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings:*** *The real opportunity here is to reframe the way in which the framework, standard and ratings is described, from its current service-centred focus to be child and family-centred. In addition, there is a chance to inject a sense of innovation and excitement,*

and to persuade parents that this is not just about meeting the minimum (which they tend to assume is happening anyway) but to reach new standards of excellence. This is the best chance of engaging parents and persuading them to use it in relation to their own choice of services.

A disconnect also exists between parental framing of quality and the terminology and descriptions used for the seven quality areas under the **National Quality Standard**. Neither the titles for the different quality areas nor the descriptions provided in the current communications materials communicate the true intent of the quality areas to parents.

- ***Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings as well as quantitative measurement of awareness:*** *As with the current name of the framework, standard and ratings, naming and description of the seven quality areas will need to be given careful review with respect to framing these in communications and for the purposes of measuring awareness with precision in any future surveys undertaken by the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority.*

Parents found the language used to describe the **National Quality Ratings** bureaucratic, and difficult to engage with... they didn’t feel it was written to them as parents, but to other bureaucrats or people operating centres. Parents have no real yardstick by which to understand what the ratings would look like in practice (overall and against each of the seven quality areas). Having considered the ratings, parents said the ratings would be useful when first selecting a service (new to the area, or first child in care) where they have a choice of services. Assuming they knew to check, parents were inclined to feel that in this situation (which no longer applied to any of this sample), they would look for the ‘highest rated’ service, use this to frame the interviews with service providers, and then add their own criteria (convenience, cost and feel and affinity with the centre and staff). In relation to existing service use, parents said they would weigh their own personal experience and judgement over what they perceive as a potentially irrelevant bureaucratic process (which may not take their values into account). They would be prompted to take action in the instance of an outright fail (‘requires significant improvement’) and could be induced to ask their service director *why* they hadn’t received a top rating.

- ***Implication for parental use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings in selecting a service:*** *The real opportunity for promoting use of the ratings appears to be at the stage of initial service selection for a first child. However, given its ad hoc nature, there is currently no point during the choice process where parents can be naturally engaged. Targeting those in the process of selecting a service will require careful consideration, and may require mass media communications to cut through.*

Conclusions: Implications for engaging parents with the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings and survey design:

- **Summary of recommendations for engaging with parents:** Given existing parental views and attitudes around quality and low awareness and engagement with the framework, standard and ratings it is clear that changes will need to be made to communication practices to effectively engage parents so that they understand the ratings and why they are important, help them make informed choices, and to help educate them on what they should be looking for in a quality service if a service has not been rated. This includes the overall positioning of the framework, as well as the language used in communications and practical tools and channel selection for intervening in service choice.
 1. **Positioning the National Quality Framework:** *Seize the opportunity to inject a sense of innovation and excitement, and to persuade parents that this is not just about meeting the minimum but a revolutionary reform that will help achieve new standards of excellence. The key positioning here is ‘striving for excellence’. If the terminology, ‘National Quality Framework’, ‘National Quality Standard’ and ‘National Quality Ratings’ cannot change, we would suggest a plain English tagline to accompany them on all parent-focussed communications (for instance along the lines of ‘a new benchmark for excellence for children in child care, family day care, preschool’ etc.)*
 2. **Language:** *In addition, ensure that the language used in communications successfully ‘translates’ the ideas behind the framework, standard and ratings by using parents natural language, including terms such as ‘play-based learning’, ‘becoming school ready’ and ‘development’.*
 3. **Intervening in service choice:** *We are suggesting the adoption of a practical checklist tool as well as appropriate communication channels to help ensure that parents are best equipped to take the framework, standard and ratings into account when selecting services. These include:*
 - *Developing a checklist that gives parents a tangible set of criteria to evaluate new services against (based on the seven quality areas).*
 - *Requiring services to provide parents with their ratings on first contact (i.e. on joining a waiting list or first visual scoping).*
 - *Or, if services will not proactively provide ratings to prospective parents, consider the merits of a mass media campaign to raise parental awareness of the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority and mychild websites and availability of ratings and quality checklists.*

- **Recommendations for survey design:** *At this early stage of the roll out of the ‘National Quality Framework’, ‘National Quality Standard’ and ‘National Quality Ratings’ there are two possible roles for a quantitative survey measuring parental awareness and understanding of their service’s rating. These are:*

Option 1: Benchmarking awareness and understanding: *Given the overall low awareness of the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority and the framework, any survey conducted in the near future would act as a benchmark of parent’s awareness of the areas. Such a survey would then act as a baseline measure against which to measure the efficacy of future communication to parents.*

- **Implications for survey design:** *Unless the survey is very specifically couched the risk is that parents may simply guess the response to answers, given their limited knowledge and propensity to misunderstand the terminology in use. The survey could measure parental awareness and understanding of ratings as per Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority’s remit, however the language used and concepts measured would need to reflect parents’ generalist understanding. For instance, they could include:*
 - Type of service
 - Name of service (to enable verification of answer)
 - Whether service rated and (if rated) what rating service has received
 - Source of awareness
 - Understanding of the ratings (i.e. perhaps through a self-rating of how knowledgeable parents feel about rating or an open-ended question asking parents to describe what the rating means)
 - Demographics: location, parental education and income, age and position of child in care.

Option 2: Tracking awareness and understanding: *The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority could decide to delay the survey until after further investment has been made in communicating to parents. Assuming that communications are successful, increased awareness would allow measurement of the above, as well as how greater awareness has translated into use the ratings and awareness of the exact nomenclature used to describe the framework, standard and ratings.*

2. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Background to the research

Research demonstrates that positive educational experiences in early childhood years can have life-long impacts on learning, behaviour and health¹, making investments in good quality early childhood education and care a matter of critical importance. The Australian Government and all state and territory governments share responsibility for early childhood learning and care. The **National Quality Framework**, which began on 1 January 2012, is the result of an agreement between all Australian governments to work together to provide better educational and developmental outcomes for children using education and care services. The National Quality Framework introduces a new quality standard to provide transparency and accountability and to ultimately improve education and care across:

- long day care;
- family day care;
- preschool/kindergarten; and
- outside school hours care.

The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority is responsible for providing guidance for the implementation of the new standard, and for ensuring consistency of approach.

The **National Quality Standard** is a key aspect of the National Quality Framework and sets a national benchmark for early childhood education and care, and outside school hours care services, in Australia. As the National Quality Framework progresses, every service in the country will be assessed to make sure it meets the new quality standard. As at the end of September 2013, a total of 3,441, or 25% of these services, had a current rating against the National Quality Standard. Each service receives an overall rating, as well as rating in each of seven quality areas (including: education program and practice; children’s health and safety; physical environment; staffing arrangements; relationships with children; collaborative partnerships with families and communities; and leadership and service management). There are five rating levels including:

- Excellent rating;
- Exceeding National Quality Standard;
- Meeting National Quality Standard;
- Working Towards National Quality Standard; and
- Significant Improvement Required.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009). Preschool Attendance. *Australian Social Trends* (Cat No. 4102.0).

The need for research

The National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care, signed 7 December 2009, sets out several performance measures to track the implementation of the NQF. One of these performance measures is: **“the proportion of parents who indicate that they know their service’s rating and understand its meaning”**. The Implementation Plan for this national partnership agreement attributes responsibility to the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority to report on this measure to the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood.

To enable it to report on this measure, the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority proposes commissioning research among families accessing the relevant services (both those using rated services and those not yet assessed) to gauge their understanding of the quality ratings. This will need to occur after sufficient time has elapsed for families to have built awareness and understanding of the ratings, including as a result of the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority’s communication strategy. The ‘Families Research Project’ will comprise three stages including:

- a pilot study;
- a quantitative survey; and
- separate research with audiences that may be hard to reach through the quantitative study (including Indigenous families and those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse – CALD – backgrounds).

In November 2013, Hall & Partners | Open Mind was commissioned to conduct the first stage of the Families Research Project – the pilot study. Subsequent stages are to be commissioned at a later time.

Objectives of the pilot study

The quantitative study – a large-scale survey measuring the knowledge and understanding of a broad population of families – will be the ‘core’ of the Families Research Project. If repeated, it will enable the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority to report longitudinally on the level of engagement of families with the National Quality Standard moving forward. The pilot study, however, is a crucial precursor to this important quantitative study. Specifically, the aims of the pilot study were to:

- provide some immediate, preliminary advice on understanding and engagement of families, including so that the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority can report to the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood on this measure;
- feed into the design of the survey instrument for the quantitative survey – this includes scope of the survey, specific formulation of questions, and language to be used;
- feed into other aspects of the quantitative survey, including sampling; and to

- provide advice about communications, including how best to engage with parents and other care givers about the National Quality Framework and the rating standard with language that resonates and is understood and appreciated across all audiences; and
- provide deep and rich qualitative findings to complement, and provide context to, the findings of the quantitative survey and enhance the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority’s overall knowledge and understanding of the parental response to National Quality Standard ratings.

Study methodology

The pilot study employed a qualitative research methodology comprising 14 group discussions with parents of children attending relevant services, who were a primary decision maker with respect to choice of care for their children. The discussion guide used in the group discussions (modified version developed after the initial two ‘pilot’ groups) is included in this report as Appendix 1. The group discussions were segmented primarily by service type and the overall sample structure (see sample frame below) ensured good representation, and an ability to compare and contrast findings, across several key variables predicted to impact on awareness, understanding and conceptualisations. These variables included: whether or not the service attended was rated; family socio-economic status (SES); location (metropolitan versus regional with representation across five states/territories operating under different regulatory environments and with different population densities); and Indigenous/CALD (non-English speaking, or NES) background.

Group no.	Location	Service program	Rated	SES	Indigenous Australian / NESB
1	Sydney inner city	OSHC	Mix	Mid-high	N/A
2		Long day care	No	Mid-high	
3	Sydney outer West	Family day care	No	Low-mid	
4		As falls			
5	Melbourne mid suburbs	Mix			NESB (non-European)
6		Family day care	Yes	Mid-high	N/A
7	Victoria regional (Shepparton)	As falls			Indigenous Australian
8		Long day care	Mix	Low-mid	N/A
9	Alice Springs	Preschool/ kindergarten	Mix	Low-mid	
10		Long day care	Mix	Low-mid	
11	Gold Coast	OSHC	Mix	Low-mid	
12		Preschool/ kindergarten	Mix	Mid-high	
13	South Australia regional (Mount Gambier)	Preschool/ kindergarten	Mix	Low-mid	
14		Long day care	No	Mid-high	

Each group discussion lasted 90 minutes and included between five and eight research participants. The fieldwork dates were 4 to 13 February 2014. Participants received cash incentives. With the exception of the Indigenous groups, recruitment was conducted by professional recruiters using pre-established panels and cold-calling; peak bodies and/or individual service providers were not approached to aid with recruitment to avoid skewing or biasing of the sample (e.g. toward services who had agreed to help us recruit for this project) and to reduce the amount of ‘priming’ participants received (about the topic of the discussion) prior to the research.

Twelve of the group discussions (all but those with Indigenous families) were followed by an at-home, **post-group individual capture task**. It was predicted, prior to commencing the research, that some, if not many, parents would not be aware of the ratings standard nor the quality rating for the particular service that they use. The idea was to allow parents to go away and find out more about their service and whether it has a rating, and then provide feedback on what they think about this on consideration. This task sought to capture feedback on the information search process as well as any impact on understanding of, and engagement with, the National Quality Standard and ratings at an individual level. Specifically, participants were tasked with logging on to the www.mychild.gov.au website and searching for service that they use (to explore the information search process and ascertain whether or not their own service was rated) and then answering four simple questions. The instructions provided and questions asked are included in this report as Appendix 2.

3. CONTEXT: CURRENT PARENTAL CONSIDERATIONS OF QUALITY

How parents approach the idea of quality

Prior to specific investigation of parental understanding and attitudes towards the National Quality Framework, moderators explored in as flexible and unprompted a way as possible, general views and attitudes around early childhood education and care. The aim was to establish how parents think about and assess quality, and how top of mind, and indeed important, quality is for them, in order to be able to context and explain their response to the framework, standard and ratings.

To this aim, the discussion opened with parents considering how well they felt the service type they were accessing was helping to provide children with a good start in life. The topic was raised in this broad fashion to enable parents' natural understanding of the idea of quality in early childhood education and care to emerge.

On the whole, parents tended not to view the concept of 'quality' in any systematic or objective way: nor did they think in inclusive terms about the early childhood education and care sector as a whole (as for instance they might think about the school system): instead they focussed narrowly on the particular service(s) they are using.

When asked to describe the attributes and characteristics of a 'quality' service, the parents who participated in these discussions tended to talk about basic safety, and then to focus on qualitative factors: caring and engaged staff and happy, thriving children. Quality was not a term they naturally used and a more objective set of quality indicators was not top of mind.

This is not to say that parents are not deeply interested about the care their child is receiving. **However, it appears that judgements of quality are being made on a more emotional and intuitive level – based on the ongoing, observed safety and happiness of the child and the quality of interaction between child and care giver.**

Across the spectrum (of service types and age of children attending), **the extent to which a child 'enjoys' the experience is seen as a key marker of quality.** A quality service is one with a happy environment that a child loves to attend (or at least does not dislike attending). The possible exception to this is out of school hours care, where a child (especially an older one) may not be happy about attending, but a parent who doesn't feel they have much choice will say that their child *"just has to put up with it for a few hours"*.

We note that the experience of service quality is easier to express for those parents who have felt the care their child has been receiving is not sufficient (perhaps to the extent that it has required some discussion with management or even removal of a child) or for those parents who have had experience of more than one service by dint of moving or having different children attend separate services.

Across these group discussions, parents also appeared to struggle with the idea of assessing the performance or quality of Australian early childhood education and care services at an overall or macro level. They have little or no concept of whether the services in their state or territory are better or worse than the rest of Australia, whether Australian services are performing better or worse than the rest of world, or whether or not service quality is changing or improving over time. Saying all this, however, when pushed to make a call, parents assume that early childhood education and care services in Australia are, overall, quite good. They say this is a heavily and well regulated industry (with lots of “laws”, “rules and regulations”), and that “high [minimum] standards” were ensured through “accreditation” of individual providers who are regularly “audited”.

Summary take out: *On the whole, parents tend to have their own, qualitative concept of ‘quality’ rather than applying any systematic or objective criteria: they do not view the early childhood education and care sector as a whole or think beyond the particular service they are using. Instead, parents’ current formulation of quality is intuitive and felt, with the key indicator of service quality being the perceived enjoyment of their child. In addition, parents’ commonly held view is that the Australian early childhood education and care sector is on the whole well run and regulated.*

Implication for parental engagement with the National Quality Framework: *This intuitive and emotional framing of quality means that parents are not primed to seek out or accept the very formal idea of quality promoted under the framework. The communications requirement is to reach out to parents rather than relying on them engaging on their own.*

In order to flesh out this more intuitive and ‘felt’ understanding of quality, moderators prompted for lists of quality features and also specifically probed for ideas of quality as they relate to choice of service and role of service in a child’s life. They prompted for lists of service attributes so as to better compare parents’ existing ideas of choice with the seven quality areas identified in the National Quality Standard. This is discussed fully below.

Prompted lists of service attributes

When parents were asked to list out service attributes that denoted quality their responses were remarkable consistency across service type – we have noted exceptions below.

- Built and natural environment:
 - Safety from hazards and harms and cleanliness/hygiene.
 - Quality and variety of equipment/environmental experiences on offer – what parents are looking for here does depend on age, for instance a range of toys for younger children and sports courts, craft tables in an out of school hours care setting.
 - Space (especially to keep older children away from younger ones).

- Qualities to do with staff/staffing:
 - Good physical care of child: managing illnesses, hygiene, eating (nutritious food) and toileting and sleeping for younger children (continuing home routines).
 - Extent to which service staff act lovingly towards (but not to the extent that they usurp the role of the parent), and meet the needs of very young children who aren't yet able to walk or talk.
 - Approachable staff and good communication with parents is seen as vital, particularly as it involves health and physical care (eating, sleeping, toileting, medicines taken etc.) but also to communicate how a child has spent their time. More isolated parents also appear to value services for the way in which they can create a social and support network.

“It’s good when they write wees and poos, what they’ve eaten, how long they’ve slept on the wall”
 - (Higher) staff: child ratios.
 - Over time, consistency and continuity of staff and warmth of staff relationships with children (i.e. being greeted by a known carer at drop off) as well as children’s response to being dropped off/when picked up (enjoyment, emotional wellbeing) appear to be the key indicator of quality. (Consistency was a significant issue in Alice Springs given the transience of the population.)

“In Adelaide we were allocated a primary carer which is a really good model... here it is a free for all.”

For younger children, evidence of staff ability to manage difficult behaviour also mattered (i.e. biting, bullying, tantrums).

- Qualities of care:
 - Assistance with development especially in areas that may have been worrying such as “excessive shyness”, motor skill delays or milestones that are seen as difficult to achieve by parents (such as toilet training)².

² We note that this represents a continuation of the trend of services ‘co-parenting’

- (At the older end of the pre school age range) assisting children to become more independent (childcare being their space to shine / separate from their siblings) and able to undertake small tasks (i.e. taking plate to sink after meals).
- Some parents looked to three and four year old preschool/kindergarten³ to ‘entertain’ or ‘occupy’ children in a way that they felt unable to (or were not willing to) do at home and could in fact resent that stand alone services occupied a shorter amount of their time than day care.

“My son was in childcare 2½ years full time, he needs more stimulation, I’m not the most creative parent.”/ “If you don’t have family members or resources you have to do something with the kids.”

- Perceptions around whether a child’s individual needs are being met, whether that be for a more or less formally-oriented education program or extra staff support required because of special health and development needs such as allergies or autism.

*“She’s one of those children who needs more book learning.”
My son’s not ready for book work.”*

A program that does not cater to these needs is harshly judged and parental response was mostly to withdraw from the service.

- Note that below we discuss what parents see as the role of education in each of the different types of care.
 - Good English language ability (the lack of this was particularly an issue in Alice Springs).
- Affordability (including provision of food, costs for special programs in out of school hours care).
 - Convenient (for parent and child) – in the younger years refers to proximity to home/parents work, however, for preschool and out of school hours care in particular association with a particular school can be preferred.

³ We would note that the competing terminology for three and four year old preschool/kindergarten, which in some jurisdictions overlaps with the nomenclature for the first year of school is highly confusing for parents and does not assist in clearly formulating a survey instrument. To avoid misinterpretation for the purposes of this report we will use the term ‘three and four year old preschool/kindergarten’ throughout to refer to early childhood education and care services rather than primary school settings.

Choosing a service, and the specific role of quality in decision making

Parents were asked to describe the process they had gone through in choosing the service(s) they are currently using, including the factors, information and advice taken into account, and the relevant importance of each.

A great many parents, particularly those in the inner city and some regional areas, indicated that they had had **very limited – if any choice** – in where they could send their children. In some city areas, problems with care shortages and long waiting lists (particularly for long day care and to a lesser extent for out of school hours care) meant parents had to take whatever they could get, whenever they could get it, with informal care arrangements with family and friends ‘plugging the gaps’ (e.g. parents taking it in turns to mind children after school, until space in the school’s out of school hours care program became available).

Other ‘practical’ considerations, rather than considerations relating specifically to ‘quality’, regularly mentioned included:

- **Convenience...** Parents prioritised, to varying degrees, convenience. Most often, this related to parents seeking a service in close proximity to their home or work (particularly important for breastfeeding mothers), or in the case of out of school hours care, a service connected to the primary school the child was attending. Others mentioned choosing services offering hours of care that matched their own working hours (a reason for choosing long day care over preschool, or a service with particular days available).
- **Affordability...** This was sometimes given as a reason for choosing family day care over long day care, or choosing between different providers (including the offer of extra inclusions within the set price such as food and nappies). The Indigenous Australian parents included within the research, who were also mostly very low income families, appeared to be particularly price sensitive, sometimes choosing services *exclusively* on cost, delaying using a service until their child was preschool age because of the unaffordability of day care services which would exceed what they would be earning, and looking for value-adds, such as services providing transport for children to the centre.

Outside of practical considerations – accessibility, convenience and affordability – the most commonly mentioned factors in decision making related to **the ‘feel’ parents developed for the service upon visiting it.**

“We felt comfortable and liked the people... We got a good feeling so we didn’t shop around.”

The ‘feel’ was based on factors parents could easily observe in a short visit, including:

-
- **Aspects of the physical environment...** Items mentioned included: presence of an outdoor area, amount of space (children not being crowded, but also separate areas, for example to keep older children away from younger ones in long day care), newness of furniture and equipment, range of toys, cleanliness, and amount of light. While for many the safety and security of the service seemed to be a given (while considered highly important, upon direct prompting, it tended not to be raised spontaneously, even in the context of prompting on what a quality service may look like), for others it was of great importance, including those living in 'rougher' areas where some facilities are situated near housing commission flats and have had such things as used syringes found in or near their grounds.
 - **Staff...** Aspects mentioned included: staff who were approachable and friendly, and observed relationship between staff and children (staff who appeared to be caring and nurturing towards the children, carers bending down to talk to children etcetera). More general evidence of child-centricity was also mentioned, such as paintings on the wall. The professionalism, including qualifications, of the director was also mentioned. Some parents were more attracted to 1:1 care environments (i.e. family day care) or where staff were already known to them (to illustrate, parents in Alice Springs had followed particular staff to different centres).

To a far lesser extent factors such as food provision (some parents wanted nutritious food to be provided, while others preferred services where they could provide their own food) and availability of a particular philosophy (i.e. Steiner or Montessori) appear to have an impact.

Generally speaking, parents had only really become aware of what the service they had chosen actually offered, (by way of, for example, of an educational program) once their child had started there. This finding is perhaps not surprising given the context, namely **a cohort of parents who predominantly had had little 'assistance' in choosing a service**. It became increasingly apparent, through the course of the groups that many parents did not access external indicators of quality to assist in evaluating different services. Some parents indicated they had selected a service based on recommendations of other parents or general reputation within the community. For many, however, research into available options had been limited to internet searches using 'google' or websites such as www.careforkids.com.au (which although featuring some reviews, mainly provides simple listings) to isolate service options in their local area to visit. There were no mentions of use of the 'mychild' or 'ACECQA' websites, or assistance by way of government communications in this area, including in relation to the National Quality Framework.

Not all parents were even aware of the different types of services available, for example, some of the Indigenous parents had never heard of 'family day care' or had any notion of what this was about. Parents who had moved interstate could also be confused by a change in system (and so "miss out")

and parents in Queensland appeared to still be adjusting to the idea of three and four year old preschool/kindergarten.

The exception to this characterisation of ‘decision-making in a vacuum’ is where there is broader community involvement. The preference for a service to be associated with, or linked to, the local community was particularly strongly articulated in the two Indigenous Australian groups. Their chosen services were familiar within their community and they often knew staff working in the services or had friends and family with children already attending the service. Across the sample more broadly, parents expressed a preference for choosing a service somehow linked to the primary school their child would eventually attend was also mentioned.

Summary take out: *Parents’ choice of service is based on three main factors: accessibility (i.e. lack of shortages) the observed ‘feel’ of a service (feels ‘right’), convenience and affordability. However, where there is no access, feel, convenience and affordability can take a lesser role (and they essentially feel that they don’t have a choice). Overall, the practice of service choice is currently quite ad hoc, with no uniform process undertaken by parents. In addition, parents do not seem to be accessing available external guidance to help make decisions (i.e. the mychild or ACECQA websites).*

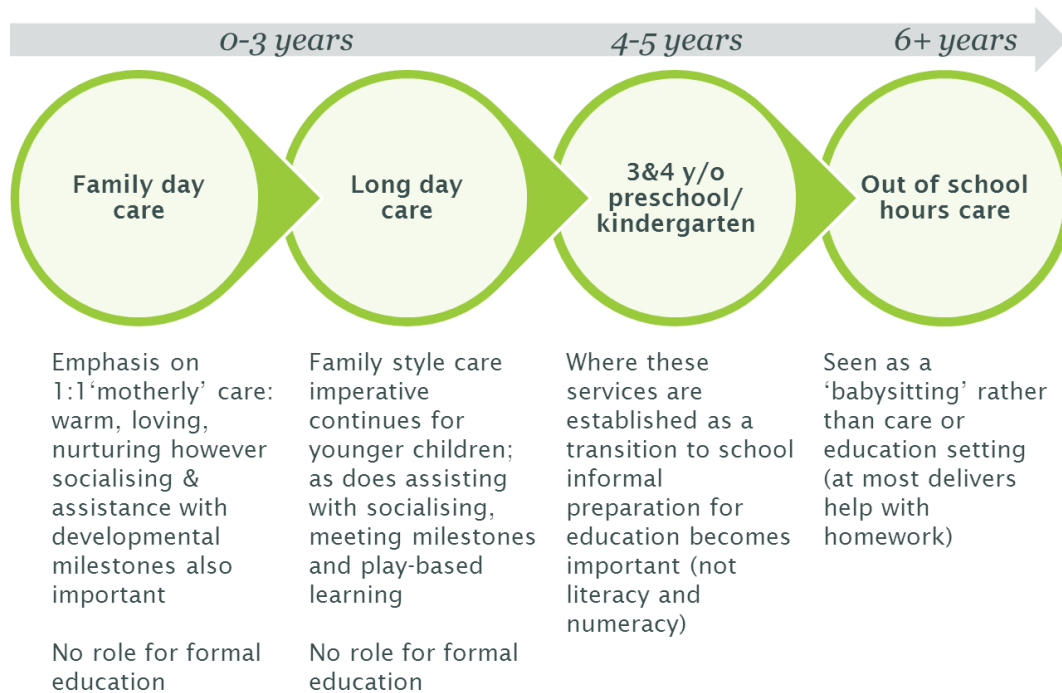
Implication for parental use of the National Quality Framework, System and Ratings in selecting a service: *The ad hoc and intuitive approach adopted by parents, and lack of external resource-seeking, means that if families are to be encouraged to use the quality concepts and ratings system when choosing a service then they will need to be ‘nudged’ to do so. However, this will still be of little use to those parents (a high proportion in this study) who said that service shortages meant choice was not an option.*

Quality as it relates to role of service

In group discussions, parents were also encouraged to talk about the relative role of services in a child’s life to understand how the context of different services (i.e. family day care vs long day care vs three and four year old preschool/kindergarten and out of school hours care) impacted on what they assume a service will deliver. Overall, it emerged that parents do have very different expectations as to the **appropriate balance to be struck between ‘care’ and ‘education’ depending on service type and age of child.**

Understanding how parents view this is particularly important given the way in which parents’ perception about the role of the service influences their response to more formal statements about quality (as contained in the National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard). For instance, in a three and four year old preschool/kindergarten context (whether stand alone or part of

a long day care setting) that role is to prepare children for the transition to school. In a long day care context the primary role is to look after a child while parents are at work (and hence provide a substitute family, a facsimile of the loving care and attention that a child might expect to find in the home environment).



As illustrated in the above diagram, **at the younger end of the age spectrum (0-3 years), caring and nurturing and even, for some, co-parenting** (helping to toilet train, assisting with children with complex problems such as ADHD or autism) **were important service delivery items.**

The precise role of **family or long day care** does vary depending on the circumstances of the family at hand... For instance, within just one group in this study circumstances varied from the single mother of three who put her youngest in long day care for a day a week for a “break” to the mothers who worked part and full time (and variously had 1-2 children in care, with a range of starting ages, the youngest at 6 months). The role of care (and hence definition of quality) can also be clouded by ‘guilt’ (in some an underlying sense that they should not be using a formal care service, or not using this service to the extent that they are or for children as young as theirs). Unlike three and four year old preschool/kindergarten there is not a clear cut outcome for long or family day care, but rather a number of factors or areas that parents take into account when judging the success of a service (some of which are seen as more difficult to acquire in a home environment):

“There’s a lot of skills that they don’t learn at home or without other kids”

“In childcare they learn to relate to adults and other children, it’s a good stepping stone.”

Unlike three and four year old preschool/kindergarten, with the exception of a play-based learning approach most parents saw little room for a formal educational ‘philosophy’ in day care, and certainly not a place for more formal learning skills such as reading, writing and numeracy (although older children learning to recognise and write their own name was seen as desirable).

“It’s not about English and maths thank god.”

Having said this, we would note that in this study there seemed to be a lot more tolerance of terms such as ‘learning and development’ than in previous studies undertaken by Hall & Partners | Open Mind on this topic. For example, in some groups (particularly in Victoria and South Australia) parents consistently referred to carers as ‘educators’ and there was a strong sense that parents have been trained through use of documentation such as profile books to think more broadly about what terms such as ‘learning and development’ apply to (i.e. interpreting everyday behaviour as learning)⁴:

“It’s not just about painting, the educators are looking at what they are doing, the motor skill development and write that down.”

“In the profile book they write about your child doing x and how that is a milestone – it is reassuring to know they are taking note.”

“It helps you understand what is a learning outcome.”

“Like saying Haydon initiated play and he and another child worked together and that is showing responsibility, there’s a learning code for everything that helps you understand how they are developing.”

“They write down simple things like throwing leaves out of a wheelbarrow, he does that stuff all the time at home and I don’t pay attention but here they say he is showing hand eye coordination.”

“It shows the carers really know what they are talking about.”

Examples of stimulating and enjoyable, age-appropriate activities that would aid development in long day care/family day care nominated by parents in this study included:

- Songs and stories
- Colours
- Maybe recognising/writing own name etc.

In contrast, when talking about those more closely approach school age – and particularly those enrolled in **three and four year old preschool/kindergarten** (rather than day care), **a more structured program of planned activities focussed on learning was welcomed and considered appropriate**. Here we would note that regardless of service type, parents preferred some sort of

⁴ In this study profile books were kept by some but not all long day care services. From what parents say they act as a record of a child’s day and can include anecdotes, photographs and staff observations about the extent to which children are meeting their time at centre – including photos, developmental milestones and stories. Staff appear to share the books with parents as way of communicating about a child.

system to be in place to ensure transparency (information accessible to parents) around what activities have been planned and implemented. What did vary by age of child, however, were parents' views on the appropriate amount of time dedicated specifically to formal learning, and the extent to which school readiness was a tangible outcome of attending a service. General preparation for the transition to school was also valued for older children, particularly those in three and four year old preschool/kindergarten.

“There’s three steps, child care or home, then kindy then reception...” / “So that school doesn’t come as a shock.”

To be successful, parents felt successful transition to school would include children:

- taking part in a structured environment and ‘program’ (i.e. following instructions, undertaking certain activities at certain times as part of a group)
- being socialised and learning to deal with issues such as bullying
- developing, especially in areas that have been worrying: *“my daughter was very shy, after a few weeks she was picking up language and speaking better in sentences and I think it was because of the other kids”*
- becoming more independent and able to undertake small tasks (i.e. opening a lunch box, going to a ‘big toilet’ alone) for themselves.

While parents of older children in **out of school hours care** felt there should be time allocated to homework and a good balance between study and care, the latter was most important given this was time outside of school for kids to unwind, relax and hopefully have fun. In contrast, holiday programs were seen by those using them as more important when it comes to learning and expanding a child’s experiences. The key difference is the amount of time they spend in this type of care.

Summary take out: *Parents’ understanding of what a service is expected to deliver (and hence their judgement of quality as it is defined by this factor) is very much contextual. For younger children the emphasis is on care and nurturing and meeting developmental milestones whereas as children approach school years parents begin to think of the skills and behaviours required to make a successful transition to a more formal schooling environment. Out of school hours care is the odd service in this category... it is not seen as early years and is more about ‘babysitting’ than either care or education.*

Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings: *Parents actively push back against language and concepts that appear to force formal education (i.e. literacy and numeracy in a pre school context) on young children. Communication that engages reflects their values and language.*

Using language that drives engagement

During the course of parents' discussion of their own ideas of quality, a number of key terms emerged as either engaging or dividing parents. These are discussed below.

Use of the term 'education'. In the initial evening of fieldwork (the two 'pilot' focus group discussions), moderator prompts for these early topics included questioning around how well parents felt services were doing with child 'development and education'. In this context, the term 'education' opened up a can of worms. Many parents felt education was something that applied to primary and high school and was not something that happened, or perhaps should even happen prior to formal schooling. The reasons parents felt 'education' was not appropriate at these early ages included that things inappropriately taught may need to be re-learned at school, and because prior to school, kids should be allowed to simply "be kids".

"I have four kids and the youngest is three: she is enrolled for kindy two half days a week but I seldom take her. I imagine it as 'education' and I think she is better off with me."

"On the Gold Coast there is this culture of doing extra curricula activities – swimming, dance, soccer... (But) kids need to just relax and play."

At the same time, it became apparent during other discussions that parents did want these services to provide something more than simply care (or "babysitting services"). They indicated that they wanted to see some sort of structure to their child's day / time at the service, and that they valued their children being exposed to different experiences, being stimulated, and ultimately learning some new, basic skills. It should be noted that '**socialisation**' was seen as an important outcome of attending these services (particularly for younger children, including who may not have siblings) but the development of social skills and the building of relationships with other children was not something easily seen as fitting within 'education'.

While they did not identify with the term 'education', many did, on the other hand, identify with '**play-based learning**' or '**learning through play**' (as evident either in unprompted mention of this concept, or in prompted reaction when raised – in the stimulus – near the end of the group discussions).

The term and associated concept of '**development**' also proved less controversial than 'education'. Familiar in the context, for example, of children needing to achieve key developmental milestones in their early years, this was something most parents could relate to and feel positive about.

Summary take out: *During the course of parents’ discussion of their own ideas of quality, a number of key terms emerged as either engaging or dividing parents. While the term ‘education’ could be divisive when used in relation to children under 3 years of age, other terms or phrases were considerably more engaging, including ‘development’, ‘play-based learning’, ‘learning through play’, and ‘socialisation’.*

Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings: *There is a clear opportunity to use parents’ natural language to ensure their engagement when communicating about the framework, standard and ratings.*

Case studies: Indigenous Australian parents

Case Study 1: Metropolitan

One of the Indigenous Australian group discussions was held at, and primarily with parents with children attending, a long day care centre advertised as an Indigenous ‘community and child care centre’. Several indicated they saw this service as a “community” or “family-based” day care, and indicated they did not believe it fitted under the definition ‘long day care’ (also, in part, because the service closes at 5pm and does not take children under the age of two years). This service was certainly seen as a community hub, and was seen to a good reputation generally. Staff were trusted individuals who had been part of the community for years, and often were very long-standing (one had been employed at the service for 18 years). Most parents knew children who had attended or were attending the service, and in many cases child after child within the family was enrolled there.

Amongst the parents, there was a skew toward very low socio-economic status. Several parents were unemployed or had very low paid jobs (for example, working in a factory). Several indicated they had waited to put their child into care until they were two or three years of age, expressly so that child could attend this low-cost service (long day care, for example, would have been too expensive and would not have warranted them returning to work). Cost was certainly a key factor in parents’ decision to send their child to the service, alongside the reputation and place of the service within the community.

The other key factor was lack of alternative options. This service was described as the only decent option in the local area. The other readily available service was described as operating adjacent to housing commission flats, with used syringes routinely found within or close to the its grounds. These were clearly parents who needed to focus, most fundamentally, on basic requirements along the lines of children’s health and safety, with anything else quite clearly ‘optional extras’ or ‘nice-to-haves’. Other characteristics valued more unique to the Indigenous setting included a bus service to pick up the children, and personalised care to children with special needs (see below). Although this service has been rated as ‘working towards National Quality Standard’ for its physical environment,

and only ‘meeting’ the standard for children’s health and safety (with an overall rating of ‘working towards’) parents unanimously had an extremely positive view of all aspects of the service and, in the absence of any knowledge of the service’s rating, indicated that they supposed it would have received a rating of *at least* ‘exceeding National Quality Standard’. These parents have clearly little to compare their service to and in comparison to a lot of the services and facilities in their local community, this service to them at least seems of excellent quality. When it came to their attention near the end of the focus group discussion that the service had actually been rated as ‘working towards National Quality Standard’ participants were at first disbelieving and then became almost dismissive, arguing that the rating must be due to extremely insignificant and unimportant factors and was of no consequence. This was in the context of prior discussions where some parents had indicated that they would never send their child to a service that achieved less than ‘meeting National Quality Standard’.

It should also be noted that in addition to being of low socio-economic status, most parents participating in the research had a large number of children (up to six), and several had children with complex problems; for example, one parent indicated she had a child who had been diagnosed with ADHD, ODD, epilepsy and sleep apnea, while two others mentioned having a child with autism. Caring and personalised attention for their children with a component of co-parenting (not necessarily explicitly recognised as such by the participants) were clearly highly valued by these parents, who in some cases greatly relied on the service and staff to help them. One parent even indicated that her child had actually been ‘diagnosed’ by the director of the centre, who had indicated she felt the child had various issues and had encouraged her to seek medical advice.

Literacy and/or an ability/willingness to focus on written communications (such as the stimuli used) was very much issue amongst these parents. It seems likely that unless tailored to this audience (at minimum simplified) communications will not be absorbed.

Case Study 1: Regional

The other Indigenous Australian group was held in a local Indigenous Australian community centre in a large regional town. The centre provided a number of services to the community, including in-home support for families with young children and drop in support groups for mothers. All mothers in the groups had some connection to the centre, and had children that were a range of ages, from very young babies to high school age. There were a range of socio-economic and literacy levels, with some mothers having completed diplomas and courses, and others having obvious difficulty with some of the communication materials tested in this study.

A range of childcare services were used, including long day care, out of school hours care and kindergarten services, as well as drop-in play groups. Often the services were sourced via the community centre, and in some cases were also subsidised by the centre. Some mothers has a limited understanding of childcare services overall.

“Childcare, or kindergarten, or whatever it is.”

Mothers felt most comfortable using services that they were familiar with, either because they knew other families that had children at the services, they knew the staff or had other children that had gone there. Mothers spoke about how child care services were important in building connections with other kids, and socialising them, to help make them ‘school ready’.

“That’s the whole idea of it, that’s why you send them”

The mothers in the groups felt that their experience of childcare as part of the Indigenous community was different from the mainstream. They say Indigenous childcare is subsidised, and therefore relatively cheaper than mainstream services. They are also able to access transport for themselves and children so they can be picked up and dropped off at the centres.

Overall many of these mothers were reluctant to use mainstream services. They commented on how they felt judged walking into mainstream services, simply on the basis of how they looked.

“I walked in there (a non-indigenous service) and it was like they were trying to read a book by its cover.”

This contrasted with the Indigenous Australian services they used, where they were much more comfortable with.

“It has Indigenous faces, and you might have an auntie or cousin that works there, and that’s all it takes and you feel comfortable.”

“At the Indigenous centres, all the staff are ‘auntie’ just out of respect”

Although these women acknowledged the advantages of having services subsidised, they also felt that this was recognised and sometimes manipulated by main stream services. They spoke about how they could feel ‘used’ by schools or care who encouraged their children attending as the school would then receive particular additional funding directly from government.

“It makes you feel used.”

These women suggested more culturally appropriate communications, such as Indigenous specific communications, as they widely acknowledged that they would not relate to, and therefore engage with the communication as it stands. They suggested including Aboriginal artwork and pictures of indigenous children and caregivers, as they would be more likely to take notice of this.

“Oh that’s family...that looks like someone we know”.

4. NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK, STANDARD AND RATINGS

Awareness and initial response to naming terminology

Following initial discussions with parents about quality in the context of early education and care, parents were specifically asked whether they had previously heard of the National Quality Framework, Standard or Ratings. Responses suggest that there is currently very little or no awareness of these items.

None of these parents really knew about the standards being progressively applied to early learning and care settings, though at some point later in the conversation one or two did decide that their centre may have sent home communications about the process of applying for the quality rating, and one vaguely recalled having seen the poster. However, it was clear that these communications had failed to engage with these parents. The reason communications about the standards or framework, even when this has been attempted by services, has failed to stick would seem to reflect two key barriers:

- The key names (National Quality Framework/Standard) are terms very widely heard in connection to all sorts of industries and contexts.
 - “(National Quality Framework/ National Quality Ratings?) I work in quality standards and health and safety. I know all about this” (works in building industry)*
 - “(National Quality Framework/National Quality Ratings?) Anna Bligh introduced the school accreditation for schools. You can look up the rating of your school on a website”*
- The terms are not just overly familiar but they suggest a narrow range of physical safety parameters that fails to capture attention or interest because it doesn’t immediately suggest improving the experience for children. The confusion here is with health and safety standards needed to achieve accreditation or a licence to operate (which all parents assume are already in place before any service is allowed to open its doors) rather than ‘quality’ to do with the child (and its parent’s) broader experience with the service. This is a critical confusion to address in any quantitative survey.

Thus, it is language which busy parents can ignore, even when their service specifically includes details of the process in their communications home.

“Why I haven’t noticed? My scale of caring, to be frank. I am happy with the Centre, it’s linked to the school he will go to, and it doesn’t matter to me what the government bureaucracy asks them to do on

some quality assurance thing. I assume this is all that stuff about how many millimetres between posts and all that.”

“It’s to weed out the bad ones that aren’t safe. You have to have these standards but it doesn’t affect me.”

“If the child is happy then you know (the service) is okay.”

Summary take out: *There was little to no awareness in this qualitative study of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings. In addition to this widespread failure to recognise the framework, system and ratings, parental response to the naming terminology suggests that the somewhat generic language does not adequately distinguish them from existing systems or regimes. For instance, parents saw them as interchangeable with other quality systems including to do with children (NAPLAN) and more general quality regimes (including occupational health and safety). Hence the language does not contribute to either cut-through or engagement with parents.*

Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings as well as quantitative measurement of awareness: *Current low levels of awareness means that a significant investment in communications will need to be made to ensure parental engagement with the quality framework, system and ratings. In addition, parental tendency to misinterpret the names of the framework, system and ratings means that careful consideration will need to be given to framing these in communications and for the purposes of measuring awareness with precision in any future surveys undertaken by the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority.*

Response to the details of the National Quality Framework

A poster providing a snap-shot summary of the National Quality Framework provided by the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority was presented at this point within the focus group discussions. Each section of the poster was then worked through and discussed.

The overwhelming response to the details provided around the framework was that this is ‘a good thing’ in principle but of little interest to these parents themselves. In fact the energy of discussion groups dipped significantly in response to the stimuli. Parents found the language well-meaning but bureaucratic and hard to associate with anything that mattered to them with respect to their child, and their own service.

What the NQF means for you

The National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care helps ensure your child is given the best possible start in life.

The NQF has new quality standards to improve education and care across long day care, family day care, preschools, kindergartens and outside school hours care services.

Benefits for families

- greater individual care and attention for children
- better support for children's learning and development
- educators with increased skills and qualifications
- improved educator to child ratios in most services
- a new rating system of education and care services.

What the National Quality Framework means for you (stimulus at left): This comes across as a generic statement – nothing to disagree with but nothing to suggest anything new or worthy of their attention either.

Benefits for families (stimulus above left):

here parents tended to concentrate on, and approve of, the more tangible benefits (commenting spontaneously on staff qualifications and staff ratios). We note that there was some confusion in groups as to whether the National Quality Framework is already being implemented or is going to be implemented in the future – clarifying this would be helpful in setting parents expectations.

New quality rating system

The National Quality Standard is part of the NQF. It sets a higher benchmark for all children's education and care services across Australia.

Your service will be given a rating for each of these seven quality areas, and an overall rating.

New quality ratings system (stimulus at left): the fact that a 'higher benchmark is being sought' was a point of relevance and excitement for some parents in this study. It suggested '*improvement*' to the services, not just the meeting of bureaucratic benchmarks. The fact that their own service was being rated also got an immediate response from parents: they all of course, wanted to know how their own service would be rated.

Whilst many parents welcomed the idea of the framework a range of concerns, doubts, and questions were raised. These were chiefly to do with how the assessment will be conducted, resourcing the new framework and rating system as well as the appropriateness in different care settings and subsequent valuation of care by families and included:

- Who will conduct the rating and how they will do so (appropriateness of the regulating body, measurement system etc.)
- Will the system be open to manipulation like NAPLAN (or like NAPLAN discriminate against children with developmental delays – or mark down services that those children attend)?
- Will the additional resourcing requirements (i.e. greater staff:child ratios and higher staff qualifications) associated with implementing requirements of the framework incur increased costs to families?
- How will the new framework impact already overstretched staff (who tend to be very warmly regarded by the parents) and hence whether the framework will take staff away from their core task of caring for children to instead have to focus on paperwork?

- Whether adequately qualified staff will be able to be found and the subsequent ramifications for services (for instance parents of children in out of school hours and long day care cited the current shortage of carers leading to employment of staff with very poor English language skills).
- Whether this means inappropriately apply an education rating and focus to services such as long day care, family day care and out of school hours care (and to a lesser extent three and four year old preschool/kindergarten).
- Will the need for qualifications shut out and devalue the role of families (and more informal activities) in services (i.e. no more volunteers / making pancakes / fun family activities)?
- What happens to families if their service is poorly rated: i.e. will we lose a good teacher on a bad rating, will my service shut down, what if I don't believe rating, will people look down on my/my childcare centre etc.

“When I first looked I was happy with my care provider’s rating until I checked other child care’s and found they are all doing better than mine. It does make me feel a bit uncomfortable now about my care provider. As much as I understand this information and rating system can be necessary I do not agree with it being public, I feel it creates judgement among peers regarding where you send your child to care, particular in an environment where child care is extremely hard to come by and after waiting over 12 months to even get my position I didn’t really have a lot of choice.” (Rating –Working towards)

Summary take out: *There is currently little in the language used to describe the National Quality Framework that implies a new or highly engaging departure from existing measures to ensure quality. For those parents who see it as a change it implies a new initiative to ensure that services will have meet the minimum criteria (more of interest to those who feel their current service is lacking) rather than all services being brought up to a standard of excellence.*

Implication for parental engagement with the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings: *The real opportunity here is to reframe the way in which the framework, system and ratings is described, from its current service-centred focus to be child and family-centred. In addition, there is a chance to inject a sense of innovation and excitement, and to persuade parents that this is not just about meeting the minimum (which they tend to assume is happening anyway) but to reach new standards of excellence.*

Response to the details of the seven quality areas

When introduced, the seven quality areas (either as names or descriptions) do not immediately communicate the full extent of the system’s intent. This prompts parents to guess or hypothesise what each area might be about. While some of their suppositions align fully with the full description of each rating area there is inevitably something of a disconnect between what parents estimate might be involved and the fuller, formal meaning.

Response to the titles

The titles of the different quality areas were explored to understand how parents might interpret these if they came across them as part of a survey instrument. Response to the titles was as follows (stimulus at right):



- Educational program and practice:** While parents welcome the idea of a systematic approach to the organisation of their child’s activities, this name is very much associated with the language of formal schooling. The terminology can be linked to ‘teaching programs’ related to ‘readiness for school’ but this is restricted to the formal three and four year old preschool/kindergarten programs, rather than the broader care experience. While there did seem to be growing (at least relative to research we carried out in 2008) acceptance of the idea of ‘school readiness’ and the gentle progression involved in getting little children to the point where they will deal easily and well with school. the language used to convey this area of quality did not connect with this emergent thinking.

“That’s school rather than kindy”

“It lacks meaning. Big words for little kids”

“Learn and develop are more the words that fit here... it’s not education.

That’s too formal and stilted for little kids”

“Practice? What does that mean? On our kids?”

- Children’s health and safety:** This is clearly of paramount importance to parents, but they assume any service that is licenced to accept children must be regularly checked to ensure it meets health and safety standards. So while agreeing that this is critically important, it doesn’t sound like anything new or additional to what they assume has always been in place. In addition, parents don’t tend to think – from the name – that this category might refer to nutrition and physical activity, rest/sleep or reporting of kids at risk.

“Security, gates, locks... all that sort of stuff is stringently controlled.”

-
- **Physical environment:** Again parents considered this to be very important quality factor but can assume it falls under the previous banner and also that it is already well controlled. With further discussion they added the idea of “*room to run around*”, separate areas for older kids (including in out of school care), lots of toys and good quality play equipment. Parents place considerable importance on the look and feel of the ‘place’ when it comes to selecting a service for their child and agree that this is very important – but they weren’t necessarily convinced that this was anything new that wasn’t already carefully controlled and monitored. In addition, parents don’t tend to guess that this indicator will also cover safety, feeding into learning and development, environmental indicator as formally nominated under the framework.

“Isn’t physical safety the same as the one above?”

- **Staff arrangements:** This wording could be hard to interpret for parents. It implies ratios of staff to children, but doesn’t quite say so. It could mean hours working, meal times, flexible work arrangements, days off...It further doesn’t convey the idea of qualifications at all or internal staff working relationships.
- **Relationships with children:** This suggested to parents a mixture of protective measures to keep children safe as well as staff being well-trained in behaviour management with little children. The more formal aspects of the quality area were not referenced by parents (i.e. child dignity, contribution to learning and development). In addition, unlike the National Quality Standard, parents did not include socialisation and children learning to manage their own behaviour in this area but did tend to include their own relationship with the service under this category.
- **Partnerships with families and communities:** This category was understood to be talking about dealing with various multicultural communities or different bodies within the community (such as emergency services); communicating with busy parents and listening to what parents want to tell them about their child. Again, whilst important, this didn’t seem like a major criterion on which a parent might make a decision about the choice of service.
- **Leadership and service management:** This was considered to be important; particularly in relation to long day-care, but also for kindergarten and preschool services. Parents agree that the director needs to be energetic and capable to ensure all employees are happy and engaged (and hence good for their children), and the service needs to be innovative and aware of new ways of doing things in the sector. However, these aspects were not necessarily things that sprung to mind based on the heading alone.

Once the names of the quality areas had been explored, additional descriptions were introduced.

National Quality Framework Quality Area 1:

Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority

educational program and practice



1 Educational program and practice

2 Children's health and safety

3 Physical environment

4 Staffing arrangements

5 Relationships with children

6 Partnerships with families and communities

7 Leadership and service management

? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?
High quality education and care gives children the best start in life

1

A program helps each child to learn and develop. Experiences stimulate and engage each child.

Examples of what to look for:

- Your child's interests and ideas are included in the program.
- Your child is supported by educators to participate in play and learning.

The National Quality Framework introduces a new quality standard to improve children's education and care services across Australia. Seven quality areas help ensure your child is given the best possible start in life. Over time, all Australian services will be rated against the National Quality Standard.

Response to detail of each quality area

For the most part, the extra descriptions provided made sense (see example at left⁵). However, apart from clarifying minor differences (i.e. between the health and safety and physical environment categories) they were not highly engaging and importantly did not tell parents more than they already 'guessed' about what the quality area meant.

"It's a bit clinical and it's certainly not about the kids."

"It gives you the bare bones but relies on me paying enough attention to flesh out what it means for me."

The more process-focussed the language (i.e. the leadership poster) the less engaging parents found the posters. The more appealing language related to a greater individual focus on (my child) and on positive relationships between carers and children (and to a lesser extent families), although how that might be achieved was (again) a matter of guesswork. We note that the format of the poster was also seen to emphasise non-essential words and pictures with text relating to the particular quality area limited to a vague broad statement and slightly clinical examples).

Summary take out: *There is currently a disconnect between parental framing of quality and the terminology and descriptions used for the seven quality areas under the National Quality System. Neither the titles for the different quality areas or the descriptions provided in the current communications materials communicate the true intent of the seven quality areas to parents.*

Implication for parental engagement and use of the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings as well as quantitative measurement of awareness: *Similarly to terminology currently in use to name the framework, system and ratings, naming and description of the seven quality areas will need to be given careful thought with respect to framing these in communications and for the purposes of measuring awareness with precision in any future surveys undertaken by the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority.*

⁵ All the descriptions provided were as per the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority posters for the seven quality areas. These are available at: <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/quality-area-posters>

Response to the ratings

Overall the ratings (stimulus below) were difficult to relate to. There were questions around the need for so many degrees, especially the need for three ‘green’ ratings’ and an ‘excellent’ category, and some would have preferred a yes/no rating or a met/not met approach. There were also anxieties associated with the fail rating (‘requires significant improvement’). Parents expected that in these instances the service would be shut down, and consequently were worried about what the implications might be if their service was shut down and what that would mean for their child’s care arrangements. Parents also have no yardstick by which to understand what the ratings would look like in practice (overall and against each of the seven quality areas). Again they pointed to the lack of tangible specifics included in the ratings.

“How long can you be working towards? In the NT you can be working towards for a really long time! Our hospital has been working towards for about 10 years I think!”

Significant Improvement Required	Working Towards National Quality Standard	Meeting National Quality Standard	Exceeding National Quality Standard	Excellent
<p>Service does not meet one of the seven quality areas or a section of the legislation and there is an unacceptable risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of children.</p> <p>Immediate action will be taken to address issues.</p>	<p>Service may be meeting the National Quality Standard in a range of areas, but there are one or more areas identified for improvement.</p>	<p>Service meets the National Quality Standard.</p> <p>Service provides quality education and care in all seven quality areas.</p>	<p>Service goes beyond the requirements of the National Quality Standard in at least four of the seven quality areas.</p>	<p>Service promotes exceptional education and care, demonstrates sector leadership, and is committed to continually improving.</p> <p>This rating can only be awarded by ACECQA.</p> <p>Services rated Exceeding National Quality Standard may choose to apply for this rating.</p>

Parents tended not to read the fine print about how the ratings were applied, and hence the practicalities of how the ratings may work in practice were questioned. For example, some groups expressed an expectation that the ratings would need to incorporate a parental feedback component which needs to be reflected in the rating to get the full picture. Input into the ratings was also questioned in terms of whether ‘auditors’ would show up unexpectedly to do random spot checks like occupational health and safety inspections or health inspections in restaurants.

There was a strong feeling that a high rating was important for some of the seven areas, but not important for others. For example, parents suggested that it was the most important for health and safety and relationships with children, and there was a feeling that these should be more heavily weighted in the calculation of their services overall rating. This prompted frequently recurring discussion of fact that all seven areas are not of equal importance and that they would or should not all be equally ‘weighted’.

Ratings	Response
Significant improvement required	There was an assumption that these centres would be closed down if this rating was applied. This raises some anxiety – with those experiencing service shortages.
Working towards National Quality Standards	This would be potentially acceptable if applied to a newly opened service, and could also be the case for services with less funding. Many parents showed a lack of appreciation that a centre not meeting the standard would be required to improve or that the increased transparency of rating system would be an impetus for centres to improve.
Meeting National Quality Standards	Many would be happy with this standard, and think this rating would suffice if the standard being met is high.
Exceeding National Quality Standards	Some confusion that this rating equates to a service not failing in any of the seven quality areas. In addition, how impressive the rating is depends on which four it is exceeding the standard in.

We note that the lack of clarity around ratings is not necessarily advanced by service-specific information. Following the group discussion, parents were asked to complete a homework task, asking them to go onto the *mychild* website and check their services rating and respond to a few short questions. That parents did not automatically understand the information provided is illustrated by the responses below: The following quotes illustrate two typical responses.

“I didn’t understand the overall rating. It was a simple sentence stating that the centre meets the new National Quality Standard. I would have thought there would be more information. A status based on the 7 areas in the National Quality Standard ranking. I thought the overall rating would be one of the 5 ratings.”

“So does that mean it is in the middle of rankings (as per our discussion group?). Not above average or excellent? If that’s the case then I suppose it makes me a bit bummed, a little concerned but moreover curious what standards were not being met (as it’s a lovely environment and teachers seem to do a good job)? I’d definitely want the opportunity to investigate further and learn what if any improvements are planned for future (like when a shop has a building proposal outside it’s window).” (Rating – accredited)

(See Appendix 2 for a full analysis of the homework task).

The National Quality Framework, Ratings and choice

Parents appreciated the idea that the ratings would provide consistency across services and service types, and was seen as a key benefit for some in the process of choosing a service for the first time and in cases where parents have multiple options available to them. However, unless the rating was ‘Significant improvement required’, parents said that they would consider still the ratings as part of the overall bundle of items. Assuming they knew to check, parents were inclined to feel that in this situation (which no longer applied to any of this sample), they would look for the ‘highest rated’ service, use this to frame the interviews with service providers, and then add their own criteria (convenience, cost and feel and affinity with the centre and staff).

“It doesn’t make me feel different about my centre but if I had to choose a child care centre for another child in the future I would be sure to use this website/rating as a guideline of which centres to look through instead of looking through most of them in my town & only going on my opinion of how the day care centre was on that day.” (Rating- meeting)

“I think it’s very important, great to know the rating of my centre, can help you choose the right centre. Before, you get what they give you, you have a short visit to decide if they are good enough. This will push the centres to be better”.

We note that if the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority is wanting to institute a uniform behaviour (i.e. checking ratings) as part of selecting a service they will need to inform/nudge parents towards doing so. For instance:

- this might involve centres having to inform parents of their ratings status as part of initial visits/when apply for waiting lists;
- and/or communication around application for the child care benefit (although this stage will likely be too late to inform choice);
- through maternal and child health services;
- for those already in services perhaps ensure that it is mandatory for centres to communicate when rated (in a more engaging fashion than the current ‘display’ requirement); and
- better promotion of the mychild and ACECQA sites.

However, while ratings may be useful in the choice process, it appears that they will be unlikely to affect the service currently used. Parents tended to think that the ratings (if known and understood) would not influence their behaviour in relation to their current centre as long as their children are happy. In relation to their existing services, they weigh their own personal experience and judgement over what they perceive as a potentially irrelevant bureaucratic process (which may not take their values into account). Most still maintain that the overall rating is not as important as how happy they are with the service, the dynamic between educator and child, or how much the child enjoys attending the service. Having said this, however, parents could be prompted to ask the service director why it hadn’t received a top rating.

“You go on what you see not what you read”

“I was surprised. After being in this kindy/preschool for a little while I find it a very complete and comfortable learning environment. I have every faith in the staff and the school so to see it isn't meeting the standard yet is a little confusing. I see in the individual criteria they are meeting and/or exceeding in the areas I find most important, so although overall they are not yet meeting the standard they are fulfilling everything I am looking for and feel is important in a kindy/preschool.” (Rating Working towards)

“After being made aware of this service, I was naturally curious to see the rating. Upon discovering all 3 of my childcare centres weren't I was disappointed. I wanted reassurances that my choices and hard earned money was going to quality. Instinctively I like to think they're good but I don't really know.”

“I am not bothered by my kindergarten not being rated yet, as my personal dealings with them are to my complete satisfaction, and as we are already using them I don't feel that seeing the ratings now would be of any benefit or give me any cause for rethinking our choice.”

In addition, other parents felt that, for them, the rating system was essentially an irrelevancy to the extent that even if their centre was rated very low, they couldn't shift as there were no other options available to them. Some even felt it would be a bad thing as one would feel bad about the centre one was forced to have one's children attend.

Summary take out: Overall parents found the descriptions of the National Quality Ratings somewhat confusing. They have no real yardstick by which to understand what the ratings would look like in practice (overall and against each of the seven quality areas). Parents reported that the ratings (if known and understood) would not influence their behaviour in relation to their current centre unless in the event of an outright fail (requires significant improvement). This is because they weight their own personal experience and judgement over what they perceive as a potentially irrelevant bureaucratic process (which may not take their values into account). However, they say it would influence their initial choice of service.

Implication for parental use of the National Quality Framework, System and Ratings in selecting a service: The real opportunity for promoting use of the ratings appears to be at the stage of initial service selection for a first child. However, given its ad hoc nature, there is currently no point during the choice process where parents can be naturally engaged. Targeting of those in the process of selecting a service will require careful consideration.

5. PARENTAL RESPONSE TO THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

In addition to assessing parents' existing understanding of quality, and their awareness and response to the National Quality Framework, Standard and Ratings, this study also explored the idea of a survey instrument to measure aspects of parents of parental understanding and awareness. At this early stage of survey development (and within the constraints of the methodology) cognitive testing was not undertaken. Instead the overall idea of a survey was canvassed as well as four specific areas of information or questioning to gauge the level and type of language and information appropriate to the survey.

Overall response

Overall, the ideas introduced in the survey were complex. Parents suggested that if they hadn't been familiarised with the language and concepts as part of group discussions they would either assume the survey would be irrelevant to them and so not complete it or answer questions based on a 'best guess' or what was meant.

Specific areas of information or questioning explored

Four specific areas of information or questioning were explored. They are discussed in more detail below and included:

- who is collecting this information?
- who should take part in this survey?
- what type of service does your child attend?
- how would you rate the quality of your service?
- Please rank, in order of importance to you, the following quality areas

Who is collecting this information?

Currently, the survey is introduced as 'being undertaken by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). ACECQA is independent of state and territory regulatory authorities and the Australian Government.' This introduction comes across as lengthy and also fails to establish the relevance of the survey to them. A sharper introduction that focuses on the importance of the survey to their lives would likely encourage greater participation rates.

'I'd be thinking if the introduction is this long, how long is the survey going to take?' Sydney parent

Who should take part?

The introduction to the current survey also indicates that 'this survey is for families using approved education and care services.'

Many parents in this study were at a loss as to what an ‘approved education and care service’. By and large they are unsure as to what an education and care service is (and don’t necessarily attach the term to long day care, family day care, preschool or out of school hours care). Even if they do associate the term ‘education and care service’ with the service they are using, they are unsure what approved means – and who might be approving their service and on what basis.

“Approved education and care services. I have no idea. Is it approved? aren’t they all?” Gold Coast parent

What service type does your child attend?

Another question asks parents to nominate whether their child attends Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care, Preschool or None of the above.

Whilst overall this question was viewed as fairly straightforward, it did raise some areas of question and confusion.

- For parents whose child is attending kindergarten (i.e. South Australia, Victoria). *“I haven’t a clue which service she uses... none of the above because she’s at kindy” – Gold Coast parent*
- What is preschool versus long day care (with preschool program) – does it come down to whether or not the child stays later?
- Does a service which is not technically a preschool (the preschool is attached to the primary school) but also not a ‘long’ day care as it shuts at 5pm and doesn’t take very young children (under 2 years) fit under one of these?
- Several had no idea what ‘family day care’ was
- Where does occasional care fit?

On a scale of 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), how would you rate the quality of education and care at your service?

Most parents felt that they would be confident in providing a rating. However, they emphasised (but often only upon further prompting/probing) that they would answer based on how their child’s experience – and their perceptions of their child’s happiness or enjoyment in attending their centre – rather than any specific quality criteria. Several parents indicated they would not be confident in providing a rating at all as the question is asking about two distinctly different things – education versus care – and as such should appear as two questions. This suggests that as it stands, this question is not consistently measuring one thing and any resulting data would be very hard to interpret.

Please rank, in order of importance to you, the following quality areas

Another question asks parents to rank a series of quality areas including:

- Educational program and practice
- Children’s health and safety
- Physical environment
- Staffing arrangements
- Relationships with children
- Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- Leadership and service management

Parents found this question challenging to answer. Many indicated they would not be able to choose between the areas, and would instead just be forced to provide any response. For example, parents in one group explained that health and safety was the most important, but if staffing arrangements were not adequate health and safety were not assured, and they were therefore interlinked and equally important. However, perhaps more importantly, the parents also emphasised that their perceptions of what each category stands for were at odds with the more full and formal definitions provided under the framework. Again, this indicates that unless caution is exercised the survey instrument will not measure what it is intended to.

Summary take out: *As it currently stands the risk is that parents will either assume the survey is not relevant to them or answer in such a fashion that the survey instrument will not measure what it is intended to. Recommendations relating to the survey instrument have been provided in the below section.*

6. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGAGING PARENTS AND SURVEY DESIGN

Communicating with and engaging parents

In order to fully achieve the intent of the new National Quality Framework, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority is seeking to ensure that parents:

- Understand the ratings and why they are important, help them make informed choices
- Understand the importance of quality
- What they should be looking for in a service e.g.: what quality looks like – important especially if a service has not been rated.

Language

As we have outlined above, parents have a strong existing intuitive and emotional understanding of what quality care looks like, and introducing any more formal idea of quality will require care, especially in the choice of language, to ensure parents are successfully engaged. In particular, ensuring that communication is child and family-centric will be crucial. For instance, focussing on the aims for children ('happy and healthy', 'enjoying [service type]', 'becoming school ready', 'play-based learning') and the quality of relationship between carers and family will ensure a focus on what parents think is important. We would also suggest re-thinking use of the term 'long day care' as this suggests to parents a judgement that they are putting their child in care for (too) long. day care or child care are more appropriate terms.

However, even more important is the bigger opportunity inherent in the idea of a quality framework itself... bringing parents along with the idea that this framework and the quality system and ratings that sit under it are **about striving for excellence in the system**... and bringing all up to a higher standard rather than merely meeting what almost all believe is an already achieved minimum. If the terminology, 'National Quality Framework', 'National Quality Standard' and 'National Quality Ratings' cannot change, we would suggest a plain English tagline to accompany them on all parent-focussed communications (for instance along the lines of '**a new benchmark for excellence for children in child care, family day care, preschool**' etc.)

Below we have outlined some suggestions on how to tackle 'frequently asked questions' based on the sort of language parents in this study said they expected to hear.

- *The National Quality Framework is a new standard introduced by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments to promote excellence in child care, family day care, pre-school, kindergarten and out of school hours care across Australia.*
- *How will this make a difference?*

-
- *Services will be required to meet new and higher standards of care.*
 - *Over the next three years all services will receive a ‘quality rating’ to help parents choose where to send their children.*
 - *Where can I find the rating of a particular service?*
 - *Log on to <http://mychild.gov.au/>*
 - *In the “Find a local child care service” tab at the top of the screen, enter your child’s service type and/or suburb and click “search”.*
 - *On the results page, select your service.*
 - *On the service’s page, look for a tab named “Quality”.*
 - *Click and check whether your service is rated or not, and what the rating is.*
 - *Or provide similar instructions for the ACECQA website.*
 - *What is the rating based on?*
 - *Each service is assessed on a number of factors including health and safety, the service’s indoor and outdoor environment, staff care of children, staff qualifications and ratios, opportunities for different experiences and age-appropriate learning, communication with parents and connections to the broader community.*
 - *Who rates the service?*
 - *Services are assessed by state and territory governments. You can find out all about the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority at www.acecqa.gov.au.*

Intervening in service choice

At a more practical level, there is also an opportunity to better support parents through what they feel can be the somewhat difficult process of selecting a care type and individual service (which can also be quite an emotional process for parents of younger children). A practical helpful checklist based on the seven quality areas but tailored to care type as well as information on how to find out whether a centre is rated would assist here – and ensure that the National Quality Framework is able to be taken into account at a time when parents are most open to it. We would note that any checklist, alerting parents to consideration of quality needs to be very tangible, ideally listing criteria to observe or ask for details of how a centre handles particular issues, rather than more conceptual formulations of the seven quality areas.

In addition to providing this information, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority will also have to give some thought as to when to provide it, and the channel through which they ought to do so, as there appears to be no natural point of intervention. For instance, parents choosing long day care or family day care are currently not using any external source of information in a systematic way. For instance, some parents talk about entering their children’s names on long

day care waiting lists while still pregnant (and when they are a long way from any idea assessing quality of service). From this point they go direct to services as part of the visual scoping process (and services do not appear to be volunteering their ratings status at present). At no time in this trajectory are they made aware that there is a quality and ratings system that is relevant to their choice. By the time parents apply for the Child Care Rebate (the first real point of contact with government) they have usually made their service choice.

Unless services can be persuaded to make their ratings more visible (i.e. being required to provide a standardised information sheet to parents upon enquiry/applying to a waiting list), it appears that mass media communications directly from the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority or government promoting the existence of ratings on the *mychild* website will be the most viable way to intervene.

Summary of recommendations:

1. **Positioning the National Quality Framework:** *Seize the opportunity to inject a sense of innovation and excitement, and to persuade parents that this is not just about meeting the minimum but a revolutionary reform that will help achieve new standards of excellence. The key positioning here is ‘striving for excellence’. If the terminology, ‘National Quality Framework’, ‘National Quality Standard’ and ‘National Quality Ratings’ cannot change, we would suggest a plain English tagline to accompany them on all parent-focussed communications (for instance along the lines of ‘a new benchmark for excellence for children in child care, family day care, preschool’ etc.)*
2. **Language:** *In addition, ensure that the language used in communications successfully ‘translates’ the ideas behind the framework, standard and ratings by using parents natural language, including terms such as ‘play-based learning’, ‘becoming school ready’ and ‘development’.*
3. **Intervening in service choice:** *We are suggesting adoption of a practical checklist as well as appropriate communication channels to help ensure that parents are best equipped to take the framework, standard and ratings into account when selecting services. These include:*
 - *Developing a checklist that gives parents a tangible set of criteria to evaluate new services against (based on the seven quality areas).*
 - *Requiring services to provide parents with their ratings on first contact (i.e. on joining a waiting list or first visual scoping).*
 - *Or, if services will not proactively provide ratings to prospective parents, consider the merits of a mass media campaign to raise parental awareness of the ACECQA and mychild websites and availability of ratings and quality checklists.*

Survey design

Success in engaging parents with the National Quality Framework will be measured against the following key performance indicator (amongst others):

- *The proportion of parents who indicate that they know their service's rating and understand its meaning.*

We note that the adequacy of these performance benchmarks and indicators and the methods of collecting data or information to demonstrate achievement against these will be examined within the context of the review of the National Partnership Agreement on The National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care

Below we have drawn on our quantitative survey expertise to provide suggestions on the survey design and development based on insights from the groups.

Role of the survey

Based on insights from the group discussions, there are two different options for undertaking the quantitative survey.

Option 1: Benchmarking awareness and understanding: Given the overall low awareness of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority and the framework, any survey conducted in the near future would act as a benchmark of parent's awareness of the areas. Such a survey would then act as a baseline measure against which to measure the efficacy of future communication to parents. Unless the survey is very specifically couched the risk is that parents may simply guess the response to answers, given their limited knowledge and propensity to misunderstand the terminology in use. The survey could measure parental awareness and understanding of ratings as per Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority's remit, however the language used and concepts measured would need to reflect parents' generalist understanding.

Option 2: Tracking awareness and understanding: The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority could decide to delay the survey until after further investment has been made in communicating to parents. Assuming that communications are successful, increased awareness would allow measurement of the above, as well as how greater awareness has translated into use the ratings and awareness of the precise nomenclature of the framework, standard and ratings.

In addition, we would suggest consideration be given to precisely what the survey is designed to measure – currently it is a broad instrument that asks parents generally about their thoughts and priorities to do with issues of quality in care. We would suggest that if the primary or only aim is to

measure ‘the proportion of parents who indicate that they know their service’s rating and understand its meaning’ than the structure of the survey could be made much tighter, measuring.

- Type of service
- Name of service (to enable verification of answer)
- Whether service rated and (if rated) what rating service has received
- Source of awareness
- Understanding of the ratings (i.e. perhaps through a self-rating of how knowledgeable parents feel about rating or an open-ended question asking parents to describe what the rating means)
- Demographics: location, parental education and income, age and position of child in care.

Methodology

An online survey is likely the most appropriate quantitative method given the complexity of the issue to be discussed. This would allow the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority to provide more detail to parents if required on particular areas of the framework, ratings or quality areas.

Structuring survey questions

We would make the following specific recommendations as to survey question design based on the areas tested in this study:

- The introduction is crucial for establishing a connection to engender interest in participation. We suggest: *“We are talking to parents across Australia about government changes to ensure high standards of excellence in services such as day-care, family day care, out of school hours care; kindergarten or preschool. The survey is being conducted on behalf of federal and state and territory governments.”*
- Ensure that service options take into account the different terminology used for three and four year old preschool/kindergarten and the first year of school across Australia. Brief descriptions may need to be included here.
- Reconsider use of the ‘approved education and care’ terminology – a proxy such as receipt of the child care rebate may be a better indicator here.
- If parental feedback on quality is required at this stage, we suggest spelling out the detail of the feedback sought, and questioning on tangible and visible outcomes to avoid confusion that can exist when using more conceptual terminology or terminology with competing or inexact meanings. For instance:
 - (Learning): my child is taking part in age-appropriate learning activities (give examples)
 - (Health and safety): the service my child attends:
 - a. Manages children’s personal care well (food, toileting, sleep)

- b. Manages contagious illness well
- c. Manages my child's health condition well (i.e. asthma, autism)
- o (Physical environment): the service my child attends:
 - a. Has clean and well-maintained indoor and outdoor spaces
 - b. Has play areas that are welcoming for children and offers lots to do
- o (Staff): the service my child attends:
 - a. Has enough staff to adequately supervise children
 - b. Has staff who act in a caring way
 - c. Has staff who meet my child's individual needs
 - d. Has staff who communicate well with parents
 - e. Has staff who are part of a well-run team
 - f. Etcetera...

Summary of recommendations:

1. Given low awareness, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority to reconsider the role of the survey (benchmark or tracking).
2. We would suggest that if the primary or only aim is to measure 'the proportion of parents who indicate that they know their service's rating and understand its meaning' than the structure of the survey could be made much tighter, measuring.
 - Type of service; Name of service (to enable verification of answer); Whether service rated and (if rated) what rating service has received; Source of awareness; Self-rating: how knowledgeable feel about rating; Open-ended: what rating means; Demographics: location, parental education and income, age and position of child in care
3. Specific changes to increase participation rates and measurement accuracy as discussed in section 6 above.

APPENDIX 1: DISCUSSION GUIDE

NB. Moderators to listen throughout the discussion to the natural language parents use to inform development of the questionnaire.

Introductions and warm up

- Welcome: establish group dynamic (bonding) and high energy
- Create a sense of empowerment, build self-confidence and anticipation of the session as fun and non-threatening, and make sure (by how we come across as well as by the words we use) that everyone is valued and every comment welcomed
- Emphasise privacy and confidentiality
- Introduction round – use to establish connections across the participants – build on the things they have in common and begin to build conversation to each other and not just to the moderator

Open the conversation... keep it light and get people talking to each other /no longer directing comments mainly to the moderator: set parameters for discussion then sit back to let discussion move away from moderator to become participant centric. We've got a really interesting topic today... we're all here because we've got kids who are in [name type of service, child care/family day care/before or after school care/kinder/preschool]. Let's start off by having a bit of a chat about that. The data shows that it's really important that kids get a good start in life, how do we feel that services like [name type] help provide that, what do we feel about how they are currently going in giving kids that good start, do we get a sense that things are changing, improving? What could be done better? ...

- *Listen for common descriptors: views and attitudes around ECEC (including ideas of quality and the NQS and NQR), language used; emotional vs rational words and images.*

Move conversation naturally onto choice of service.... Some of us have been talking about how we came to be using the service we're using. Let's have a bit more of a chat about the sort of factors and information/advice we took into account when we made that choice, the sort of process we went through, what was most important in making the choice to go to a particular service... and also what would have been helpful but was really missing in terms of information... Over to you...

- *Moderators: ensure coverage of full range of considerations, process followed and information/advice used.*
- *Note, if have moved states, services make sure understand which perceptions/experiences apply to.*

And focus in on the idea of quality....Overall, if we had to sum up what a quality service is, what are the words, feelings, attributes we'd look out for... let's list these out... [once list exhausted]... how did these considerations of quality fit into the process we've talked about above....

Raise the National Quality Standard and National Quality Ratings... We've been talking a bit about quality... we might have heard a bit around the traps about these things called the National Quality Standard and National Quality Ratings... has anyone heard about these, know what they are about? What have we heard?

- *Moderators: ensure coverage of awareness, content knowledge (including who is responsible for them), source of information, importance of ratings.*
- *If any awareness explore understanding the seven NQS quality areas, the five ratings levels and what they mean.*

[If there is any awareness] Do we get a sense that the National Quality Standard and National Quality Ratings have anything to do with the [child care/family day care/before or after school care/kinder/preschool] our kids go to? Whether they have a rating? Anyone looked into anything like that?

- *If any awareness of ratings understand views of rating and importance of this.*

Introduce stimulus on the National Quality Standard and National Quality Ratings...

- *Moderator to introduce and discuss each piece of stimulus in turn:*
 1. *NQF poster – hand out and read 'What NQF means for you and benefits for families sections*
 2. *NQF poster – hand out and read 'New quality ratings system and names of seven quality areas sections;*
 3. *Individual quality areas sections (x7, moderator copy only to read out)*
 4. *NQF poster – hand out and read 'Ratings against the National Quality Standard and individual ratings names and descriptions;*
- *Moderator to set context for reception of each piece and read out loud for those with poor literacy*
- *Moderator to encourage conversation and adopt a largely non-directive approach; in this context, the following areas will be explored during the discussions, however, the order and manner in which discussions flow will follow participants' lead*

Areas of exploration:

- *Unprompted response to the standard, quality areas and ratings*
- *Prompted exploration of what the standard, quality areas and ratings mean to parents in relation to education and care quality including on:*
 - *Do families understand the seven NQS Quality Areas (based on title alone versus description). What further information do they need? Which do they consider to be most important, why? Do any surprise them?*
 - *Do families understand the five ratings levels? What further information do they need?*
 - *Do families have any idea what quality would look like in practice at each rating level, overall and by quality area?*

- *Ability to influence decisions*
- *Where we would look for information*
- *How do families respond to existing communications materials?*

Workshop concepts/language: We talked earlier about how important quality is, and now about the introduction of the National Quality Framework, Standards and Ratings... is it our sense that this is a worthwhile direction but perhaps the way in which they're talking about it is a little hard to understand? Let's have a think now about some other ways to talk about these ideas that make more sense to parents like us, that mean in the future parents will really engage with the conversation.... Here's some ideas that other parents have had....

- *Introduce STIMULUS A – alternative language – map against the quality areas and overall Standard/Framework*

Finally, testing and refining proposed draft questions to be included on the quantitative survey instrument. [Stimulus B]

Summary and close: Thank you everyone! That was a great group!

Introduce post-group task...

- Respondents will be emailed the task the day after... basically asks them to go onto the mychild website and check their services rating and respond to a few short questions
- If people don't have access to email/the internet we will give them a hard copy of the task (please print out) and a stamped, addressed envelopes (please get a few from Jess for emergencies) and let them know following the group if their service is rated (details of whose service is or isn't rated will be provided by Mehdi to moderators prior to groups). Respondents will then have a week to reply and get back to us.
- We are providing cash incentives to the Indigenous groups as being less likely to have access.
- Everyone else will be paid via bank transfer (recruiters should have collected both their email addresses and bank details for us).

APPENDIX 2: POST-GROUP INDIVIDUAL CAPTURE TASK

The following request was provided to parents post group:

Good morning/afternoon,

Thanks so much for taking part in this project; we really appreciate you taking the time to provide us with your valuable insights.

Are you able to the 'mychild' website and look up the rating for your child care, kindergarten, before or after school care or pre-school service:

- Log on to <http://mychild.gov.au/>
- In the "Find a local child care service" tab at the top of the screen, enter your child's service type and/or suburb and click "search".
- On the results page, select your service.
- On the service's page, look for a tab named "Quality".
- Click and check whether your service is rated or not, and what the rating is. It may say that your service is "Accredited" but this doesn't mean that it is rated. If you can't find a rating, please read the introductory paragraph, which may clarify if your service has been rated yet or not.

Based on the rating for your service, please write us a short email (addressed to shae@hopenmind.com.au) letting us know:

Was your service rated? Yes/No

- **If NOT rated:**
 - How did you find the information search process (easy/hard)? What could be improved?
 - How are you feeling about it not being rated yet? Why?
 - Does it make you feel differently about your service/how you will choose a service in the future?
 - What would be the best way to keep you informed as your service gets rated?
- **If rated:**
 - How did you find the information search process (easy/hard)? What could be improved?
 - What was your service's rating?
 - How do you feel about your service's rating (e.g. were you surprised)? Why?
 - Does it make you feel differently about your service/how you will choose a service in the future?

Full analysis of the task is provided below:

Following the group discussions, an email was sent to the participants asking them to go onto the mychild website and search for their childcare service. They were then asked a series of questions about the website, their service's rating, and their response to that rating.

Information search process/ ease of use of website

While remembering that they were given very clear instructions to access the website (and hence more detail than the average parent would have) overall parents indicated that the website was easy to use, and that they had no issues finding the information relevant to their service. Overall, the site comes across as user friendly, professional, and easy to navigate.

"Website looks professional, easy to navigate and full of useful information.

I find it difficult to point out anything that can be changed."

"The information was very easy to find and look up even on a smart phone."

However, respondents did have some recommendations to offer, as follows below:

- Change the "Quality" tab to "Rating", as many did not immediately associate "Quality" with the ratings system discussed. Another thought was to have the overall rating front and centre under each childcare service, which is an encouraging recommendation, showing that these participants think the rating system should be central.

"I found the 'Quality' tab section hard to understand that that was the rating section. I didn't think it would have been under that name."

- Making it easier to find a service, for instance, having an autocomplete function and a search by postcode.

"If there was an area for improvement perhaps an autocomplete or auto population of the centre name when typing, because if you don't have the exact wording, the centre doesn't appear in the search."

"Maybe you could have a search via post code."

- A minority of respondents reported significant trouble using the website. The most common problem seemed to be that they had difficulty finding their centre. Several mentioned that nothing came up when they searched for their centre by name, and they had to search instead by location or in the alphabetical list.

"I couldn't find my childcare/pre-school service. When I type the name, it didn't come up. I had to search via 'location'."

“I asked the system to search in my suburb only & it gave me centres outside my suburb.”

“I found the search process hard at first as I typed in the suburb and nothing came up, then I tried the name of the centre and nothing came up. I did this a few times under both tabs “childcare centre” and “kindergartens”. I finally found the A - Z search and found my centre in there”.

Parental response to the rating of their service: from those using unrated services

Respondents were asked how they felt about service not being rated; and if a rating would make them feel differently about how they would choose a childcare centre in future. There were three distinct groups:

- Many parents said that they were happy with their service and so not concerned that it has yet to be rated. These parents felt it made no difference to them that their childcare service has not been rated: they had close and positive relationships with their centres, and relied on their personal experience over an independent rating system.

“I am happy with all aspects of the service without an external rating.”

“No feelings have changed. My child is happy, the centre is good and they are striving to exceed.”

“I do not mind that it has not been rated yet as I love the centre, it’s staff and philosophies.”
- A smaller proportion questioned why their service has yet to be rated, and wondered what this might mean to them. These parents could also express confusion about the process, and wanted to know what the lack of a rating meant. Several asked for clarification about when the National Quality Framework would be visiting their centre.

“I would be interested to know why they haven’t been rated and how the NQF prioritises its visits and ratings.”

“Would like to know the reason why it hasn’t been rated or will they not be rating that day-care because of its location.”
- However a substantial proportion of parents were disappointed, nervous and/or upset that their centre had not been rated. They expressed considerable disappointment, and in fact quite strong emotional reactions, to the fact that their service has yet to be rated. There was also some misconceptions among this group that being unrated was equivalent to a negative rating, or that if their centre was not rated it was the fault of the centre itself.

“Upon discovering all of 3 of my childcare centres weren't rated I was disappointed. I wanted reassurances that my choices and hard earned money was going to quality childcare.”

“I'm not happy that it has not been rated. It feels like they have not been assessed and makes me anxious. Like no one is there to rate them or check on them.”

“I feel uneasy now that I know it has not been rated but hoping that in 2014 it will receive some kind of rating as I will be checking now monthly.”

“It is frustrating, either all centres should be rated or none. It makes me wonder why my centre has not been rated yet, is it not as important as other centres?”

“I'm assuming there's some sort of mistake as our centre has an extremely good reputation.”

“To be honest, I'm a little shocked and disappointed. I always believed that a PCYC is heavily monitored due to the large number of children who use its facilities. Because of that I felt in order to beat any public scrutiny, they would have registered and implemented all the control measures to land themselves in the green zone.”

Parental response to the rating of their service: from those using rated services

Respondents were asked how they felt about their childcare service rating under the National Quality Framework, and if it made them feel differently about how they would choose a childcare centre in future. The responses from the participants whose childcare centres were rated were largely dependent on what the rating was.

- **Working Towards National Quality Standard –** While some indicated that while they were disappointed but not surprised, the majority were shocked by their centre's low rating, and many disagreed with the rating or were very upset by it. Some were also concerned that the rating would reflect badly on them as parents.

“Not surprised, but still disappointed. I think the staff are great and trying to do the best with minimal resources.”

“I read the overall rating first and was DEVASTATED! I was really upset that this centre was looking after my child without even meeting the standards!”

“I checked other child care's and found they are all doing better than mine. It does make me feel a bit uncomfortable now about my care provider. As much as I understand this information and rating system can be necessary I do not agree with it being public, I feel it

creates judgement among peers regarding where you send your child to care, particular in an environment where child care is extremely hard to come by and after waiting over 12 months to even get my position I didn't really have a lot of choice."

"Of course I feel differently, they have a low rating. I would be silly not to feel different. That said, what option do we have, we send our child there two days a week, the staff do a good job and while there are things that could be better, there are limited options in this town. Looking at all the other childcare centres in town none are above 'Working towards' so really how would we choose differently anyway? These type of ratings are so arbitrary and I have no doubt no updated enough to really reflect what is going on in any of them."

- **Meets National Quality Standard** – Most of those parents whose childcare centre was given this “average” rating felt that their service deserved a higher rating. They were however much less emotional and negative about the rating and the ratings system than those whose centres received a “Working Towards” rating.

"I am surprised about the services rating, I thought it would have been exceeding national standard, mostly because I know how hard they work on ensuring everyone with working within the policies and procedures".

"I am very interested to find out this rating as I would of assumed they would be higher but at the same time I am happy to see the standards are set high so I can feel confident my child is getting quality overall care."

"Makes me question what an "excellent centre" would look like!"

All of the respondents reported that they had no plans to switch childcare providers after seeing this rating, and they did not feel any differently about their centres.

No I don't feel different about my service after seeing the ranking on the website. I have experienced first-hand the level of service, support & education from my current Daycare Centre and I am more than happy with their system.

I've had such a good experience with the service I wouldn't change, it just makes me think the standards must be really high.

- **Exceeding National Quality Standard** – As might be expected, the small proportion of parents whose childcare centres were rated “Exceeding National Quality Standard” were very happy, it validated that their choice of childcare was the right one, and they seemed to be proud of the rating. These respondents were also very positive about the National Quality

Framework in general, and indicated they looked forward to using the service in future and telling others about it.

“I feel very happy to know that the service where my kids go has that rating. I was not very surprised as we use this service for a long time and we know from personal experience that the Staff and facilities are very good.”

“It has made me feel happy to know that I have chosen a good day care for my child.”

“I will 100% be using this website and its services in the future. I don't know why I didn't know about it before. I will be using this website to find another day care centre in the future.”

“I doesn't make me feel different about my centre but if I had to choose a child care centre for another child in the future I would be sure to use this website/rating as a guideline of which centres to look at instead of looking through most of them in my town & only going on my opinion of how the day care centre was on that day.

I will definitely check this service regularly and see if it changes. I feel like I want to know what they are doing specifically to improve this score. I will be recommending this to all my friends and family to check out when they select their services.”