

kindergarten access for all children: ensuring the sector is responsive to the community



The ideas and suggestions in this tip sheet connect with the Practice Principles of the **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework**.

- Partnerships with families
- Partnerships with professionals
- High expectations for every child
- Equity and diversity
- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Assessment for learning and development
- Reflective practice

It is recommended that educators refer to the **VEYLDF** and the Practice Guides for further suggestions and ideas about continuous improvement. (See over for website details.)

Access to quality kindergarten programs enhances children's learning and development. It is particularly beneficial to children who experience significant disadvantage. Participation in quality early childhood education benefits children's learning in the here and now and well into the rest of their lives including more formal schooling.

Access for all children relies on communities, governments, employers, organisations and agencies, professionals and families working together. A collaborative approach results in services seeking to understand the changing needs of families and planning programs to respond to all families.

This work is about connecting to what is important in local communities, responding to

diversity, addressing barriers and designing programs that deliver quality in responsive ways. It is more than a response to a funding agreement – it is an essential response to children as citizens.

With the changes to the educator to child ratio, educators and service managers should communicate with families and the community about the way programs will continue to support children's learning and development. This may include addressing questions or concerns about the ratio change to build families' confidence in and continued engagement with, early childhood education. This is possible when you adopt a welcoming and inclusive approach towards all families, especially those who are hard to reach or who find it difficult to participate.

"Quality education and care shapes every child's future and lays the foundation for development and learning. The early years are critical for establishing self-esteem, resilience, healthy growth and capacity to learn. Research shows quality education and care early in life leads to better health, education and employment outcomes later in life."

– <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/introducing-the-national-quality-framework>



Review local trends and demographics.

It is important that professionals along with their employers and managers investigate, understand and respond to changes in local demographics and families' circumstances. Family life can change rapidly and the demographics of a whole community can change too; for example, one year families may be able to readily access a sessional program but the next year families find that they are requiring longer hours to work or study. An annual review that examines local data (best sourced via local government) combined with conversations with local community members will ensure that programs are designed to be responsive to contemporary communities.

Trial an innovative model.

Consider offering an alternative to the standard programs offered at the service as part of a trial – a Saturday morning for example. Sometimes it is helpful to try something new and invite the participants (children, families and professionals) to help with the evaluation.

Make decisions based on access for all children and their families.

This sounds obvious but there are times when particular interests get in the way of making ethical decisions that ensure no child misses out on opportunities to enhance learning. This process takes time and a commitment to constructive dialogue. Sometimes it might be a matter of choosing between two difficult choices.

But in the end children come first and their rights and best interests are paramount. (The ECA Code of Ethics is a useful tool to support this discussion).

Communicate with everyone.

Deciding on how to ensure access to kindergarten services for everyone requires communication. Talking with families, other professionals, employers and the community should be planned and systematic when big decisions are being made about program delivery. It is helpful to delegate this task to a particular person who can ensure regular communication with all involved.



Questions for reflective discussion

The VEYLDF practice principles invites educators to think about and challenge their current practices. Use the following questions to support discussion with your colleagues.

- What are your shared understandings of the needs of families in your local community?
- What agencies operate in your local community? What can they tell you about the needs of families?
- What barriers or difficulties do families experience as they access kindergarten?
- What strategies can be developed to eliminate or reduce these difficulties?
- What strategies have you utilised to establish strong relationships with children and their families, especially those experiencing vulnerability?
- Why do you think they have worked? What might you do differently?
- Consider ways to encourage engagement and participation of families in the decisions that shape the service – how could we share power with the families we work with?

References & further reading

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2009). Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. DEECD and VCAA, Melbourne.

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf>.

Resources on the Practice Principles

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/edcare/Pages/profresource.aspx#link93>

Reflective Practice Education Resource

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/support/Pages/reflectivepractice.aspx>

ECA Code of Ethics

<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics/>

DET webpage supporting the Improved Educator to Child Ratio in Funded Kindergarten Programs

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/improvedchildratioinkindergarten.aspx>

ACECQA resources for families

The families section outlines how quality education and care is vital to children's development and explains what the National Quality Framework means.

<http://www.acecqa.gov.au/families>

DET website about Kindergarten for parents

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/kindergarten/Pages/default.aspx>