Best Start
Best Life

Early Childhood Workforce Retention Guide

This evidence-informed guide is intended to support providers and service leaders to further consider key areas that impact workforce attrition and retention. It highlights effective service-level strategies and practices to support workforce wellbeing and improve the retention of staff.

Acknowledgement of Country

The department proudly acknowledges Victoria's Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal people and communities to Victorian life and how this enriches us.

We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards the equality of outcomes and ensuring an equal voice.

'Respecting Connections' (2023) by Nakia Cadd, a Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Bunitj, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung woman who grew up in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne.

'When thinking about acknowledging Country, it's about respecting those many different connections; to the land, sky, waters, animals, people and stories.'

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Introduction

Retaining and valuing our skilled teachers and educators is critical to delivering high-quality early learning programs that maximise learning and development outcomes for Victorian children.

Over the course of consultations on the Best Start, Best Life reforms, we heard directly from Victorian early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals about the importance of respecting and supporting the existing workforce, and maintaining their high levels of professionalism and skill, as the system expands.

In response, the 2023 Best Start, Best Life Workforce Strategy (the Strategy) set out the Victorian Government's comprehensive approach to supporting workforce retention, in partnership with the sector. It focuses on enhancing transition from study to practice, supporting career development and wellbeing, effective leadership and lifting practice quality. The Strategy commits to a range of new workforce initiatives and continues existing retention and recognition programs including Beginning Teacher Conferences, End-to-End Career Supports, Provisionally Registered Teacher mentoring and grants, and the Victorian Early Years Awards.

Workforce retention is complex, with local, national and system-wide factors all contributing to attrition rates and causes. Similarly, strategies to improve retention are different for every service, and employers are uniquely placed to take action to build and maintain a thriving and valued kindergarten workforce locally. Many providers and services have long invested in their own innovative approaches to improving staff wellbeing and reducing attrition, and the Victorian Government's workforce initiatives complement these efforts.

How to use this guide

This workforce retention guide brings together contemporary Australian and international research and current exemplary practice from a range of Victorian ECEC services. It:

- highlights the benefits of improving workforce retention, including reducing associated financial costs
- outlines the four key elements that support workforce wellbeing and retention at a service-level, and
- describes effective practices that can be considered by providers and services as part of improving their own retention efforts.

This guide is aimed at all types of ECEC providers and service leaders but not every strategy or practice will be applicable to every setting. Service providers and leaders are encouraged to use the guide to reflect on current retention efforts in their services and consider whether some of the ideas and strategies identified could strengthen their existing practices.

Why retention matters

The benefits of workforce retention in ECEC services are generally well understood. Workforce retention increases stability, enhances consistent trusting relationships, and increases continuity of care and learning for children, especially those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.[1] This leads to sustained relationships with children, better engagement with families, and supports staff wellbeing and job satisfaction. On the flipside, research indicates that unsupportive working conditions cause anxiety and stress, and negatively impact workforce wellbeing.[2]

Consistent, well-staffed teams create a **positive, stable environment**, reduce stress, burnout and absenteeism, build trust, and help facilitate continuous learning and skill development. Low staff attrition means that organisational knowledge is maintained which supports more consistent quality practice.

Retention aids in the **effective and efficient operation** of services. When staff are more familiar with routines and policies, and have stable employment, there is less reliance on longer-term casual staff, and services run more smoothly with reduced disruption and pressures on existing staff.

Retaining experienced staff also contributes to the **financial sustainability** of services. The financial cost of staff attrition varies across services and service types but can significantly impact financial sustainability, particularly for smaller services without centralised human resources and administrative functions. Staff turnover does not just mean additional recruitment, onboarding and training expenses, it often necessitates increased spending on casual relief staff and in some circumstances agency placement fees.

1 The Productivity Commission (2024) *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, The Productivity Commission, accessed 18 November 2024.

2 Logan H, Cumming T and Wong S, (2020) 'Sustaining the Work-Related Wellbeing of Early Childhood Educators: Perspectives from Key Stakeholders in Early Childhood Organisations' *International Journal of Early Childhood,* 52(1).

While there is limited published research on the cost of staff turnover in ECEC, analysis undertaken by dandolopartners on behalf of the Department of Education (the department) estimates, that in current labour market conditions on average, it costs approximately 40% of a teacher or educator's annual salary to replace them.[3] This is likely to be a conservative estimate, with findings from the nursing industry indicating that replacing an employee costs between 50-75% of an average salary and this increases for specialist positions.[4] These figures of over 50% of an annual salary align with estimates cited in a 2024 article on impacts of turnover in the early childhood sector.[5]

In addition to the direct costs of replacing staff, there are indirect, less tangible impacts. These include the loss of corporate knowledge and relationships with children and families, the time and workload to onboard new staff, the impact of turnover on morale and the loss of productivity that occurs during periods of staffing instability. Over time attrition can also result in reduced family engagement and reputational risks.

Financial costs of workforce turnover

Recruitment costs

- advertising
- reviewing applications
- interviewing
- reference checking
- agency placement fees

Offboarding exiting staff

- exit interviews
- administration and paperwork
- reduced productivity
- agency or casual staff backfilling fees

Onboarding and training

- 'non-teaching' induction time for staff member and leader
- organisational training
- onboarding and set up requirements

3 This is indicative only. It assumes both teachers and educators are employed under the VECTEA at a mid-point salary and that it takes approximately 6 weeks to recruit and replace the positions with the service relying on agency casual relief teacher coverage and paying an agency placement fee.

4 Lindquist M, (2023) 'The Real Cost of Turnover in Healthcare', Oracle, accessed 21 May 2024.

5 Bull R et al., (2024) 'The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 69(4).

What works to support retention

There are many reasons why an early childhood teacher or educator might leave a service. Some factors are specific to the individual, such as family or health related reasons, and are unlikely to be affected by service-level actions. Some are reflective of sector or societal wide challenges and are also beyond the immediate control of services, including a lack of community recognition of the value of ECEC, and current labour market characteristics.

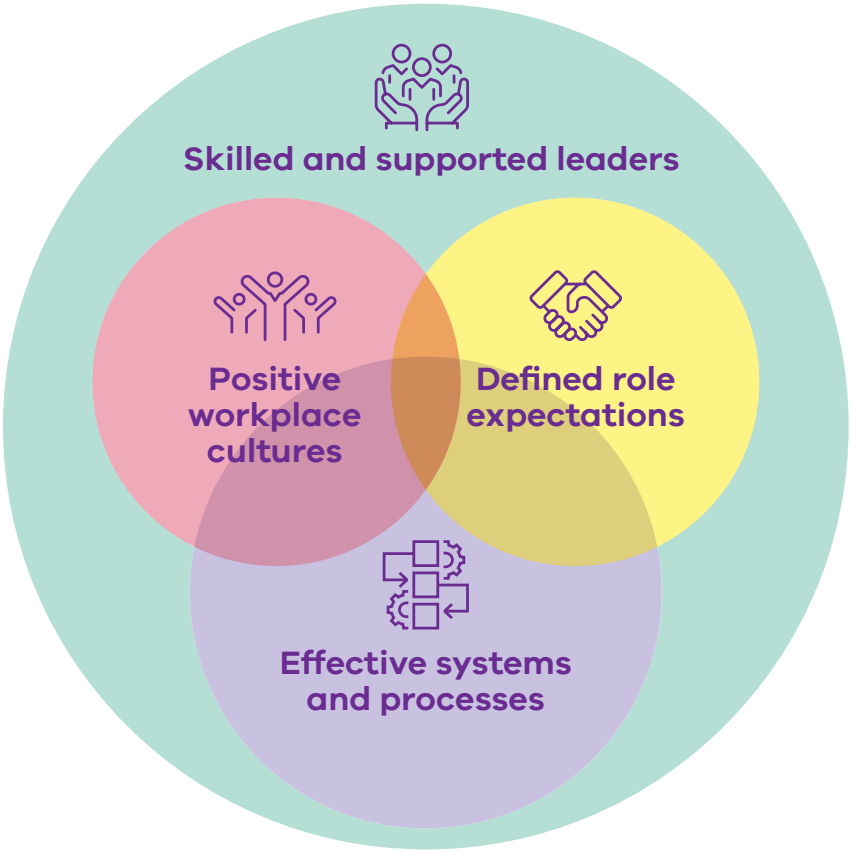
Many of the key factors that influence whether employees stay or go, however, are at the service and provider level. This can include workload, level of support from peers, management, team culture, flexibility, recognition and career progression opportunities. These factors can be positively influenced by purposeful workforce planning, leadership and dedicated actions to support retention.

Pay and conditions, of course, are both service-level and also sector-wide factors. The awards specifying minimum conditions are set at the national level, and in late 2024 the Australian Government introduced a wage increase for eligible Centre Based Day Care services through a 'worker retention payment'.[6] The Victorian Government continues to provide higher per child funding rates for services employing staff under the two main Victorian enterprise agreements, or equivalent agreements, and many services choose to pay above award or agreement levels as part of their quality and retention efforts.

A review of current international and local evidence indicates that early childhood professionals stay in workplaces when they experience four elements that support their overall wellbeing at work:

- skilled and supported leaders
- positive workplace cultures
- defined role expectations
- effective systems and processes.

These four interconnected service-level elements of workforce retention are the key focus of this guide. Examples of good practices and evidence-informed approaches are outlined against each element.



6 For more information on the Australian Government worker retention payment see: https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/workforce/wages, or reach out to your peak body for further resources, such as the Australian Childcare Alliance at https://www.aca-worker-retention-payment.org.au.

Skilled and supported leaders

Research shows that leadership has a significant impact on workforce retention. Effective leaders, who are well supported themselves, foster continuous quality improvement, reflection, collaboration, and agency among their team members.[7]

Leadership is also an enabler for the other critical retention elements. When leaders are effective, they:

- nurture positive and constructive **workplace cultures** from the top down, including role modelling best practice and maintaining reasonable expectations
- set boundaries around **reasonable role requirements** for their staff, with explicit instructions around what is 'too much' and where staff should be focusing time and effort
- create **operational environments and routines** that foster positive culture and balance the competing demands of individuals and organisational requirements.

Four key strategies and practices to support ECEC leaders at all levels, informed by research and exemplary practice from Victorian services, are:

- developing the leadership pipeline
- providing access to necessary specialist resources
- building structured and intentional leadership teams, not heroic individuals
- investing in professional and peer-to-peer learning opportunities and purposeful mentors.

Developing the leadership pipeline

- Promote individualised career planning and early identification and development of emerging leaders through dedicated performance and development discussions. This can be particularly important for teachers and educators from diverse backgrounds who face additional barriers to accessing leadership positions.
- Enhance room leader leadership capabilities. This could be via in-service coaching from educational leaders in the service or cross-service coaching. This empowers room leaders with practical information and support to lead their teams and contribute across services.
- Foster leadership and plan for succession. Research suggests that many ECEC leaders find themselves in the role 'by accident' and feel they lack preparation and training, especially in terms of management skills. Providing leadership opportunities for interested staff can build competence and confidence over time and better prepare staff to take the next step in their career.[8]

Providing access to necessary specialist resources

- Ensure leaders know where to go, and have access to, specialist advice in areas like financial management, human resources, industrial relations, people management and compliance. This could be from a central office team, a committee of management, an early years manager, external partners, or peak bodies.
- For larger organisations with multiple services, supporting a local approach to management and decision-making for human resources or complaints can empower local service leaders. It also helps services tailor responses to community contexts, provided leaders have the necessary skills and expertise, and know where to go for assistance if needed.

Building structured and intentional leadership teams, not heroic individuals

- Encourage distributed leadership and delegation of leadership tasks, where appropriate. Research shows that encouraging individuals to take charge in their area of expertise or interest is empowering.[9] In a larger service, this may mean designated roles responsible for day-to-day operations, people and pedagogical leadership. In smaller services, it may mean designated responsibilities for particular functions, where educators and teachers build expertise in certain practice areas such as inclusion.

7 Daily S et al. (2018) *Culture of continuous learning project: A literature review of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative*, Office of Planning Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed 13 June 2024.

8 Douglass A L (2019) 'Leadership for quality early childhood education and care' *OECD Education Working Papers*, accessed 13 June 2024. Eskelinen M and Hujala E (2015) 'Early childhood leadership in Finland in light of recent research', in Waniganayake, Rodd J and Gibbs L, *Thinking and Learning about Leadership: Early Childhood Research from Australia, Finland and Norway*, Verlag Barbara Budrich.

9 Cross E et al. (2022) 'Leading for quality in Western Australian early childhood services: An emerging framework', *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(4).

- Have clear channels for staff to seek guidance and coaching from leadership teams and equip leaders with mentoring and coaching skills. Research indicates that when staff know how to access professional guidance, coaching or supervision from leaders they feel supported. This could include clarity about who to go to for guidance on pedagogy, parental engagement and other issues.[10]

Investing in professional and peer-to-peer learning opportunities and purposeful mentors

- Create time for leaders at all levels to come together and share experiences. This provides space to jointly problem solve and create shared language and behavioural norms. It can be within or across services, particularly at the centre director level, including at the department's Early Learning Leadership Forums (see link in Initiatives and resources).
- Provide opportunities for service leaders to learn from specialists about leadership topics including having difficult conversations, rostering effectively, overseeing team career development, and financial planning.
- Support leaders to understand and engage with adjacent sectors like allied health and disability services, and upskill their staff in working with other professionals involved in supporting children and families.
- Promote formal and informal mentoring for all leadership positions. This could include a focus on operations, people management or strategy skills with mentors outside the provider or sector.

10 Heilala C, Lundkvist M, Santavirta N, and Kalland M, (2023), 'Work demands and work resources in ECEC – turnover intentions explored', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 32(7).

Case study

Only About Children (OAC) Altona North

Only About Children (OAC) Altona North is a 48-place long day care service in Western Melbourne. It is one of the 25 OAC service locations across Victoria.

OAC has a focus on providing structured and responsive support to its leaders. As well as protecting times for directors to share their experiences in communities of practice, OAC has a 'lattice' rather than a 'ladder' career progression model, supporting staff to move across as well as up to new positions. This means team members at all levels are given development opportunities, which has helped retain those who may have otherwise looked for alternative opportunities for career progression.

Centre directors in particular, are encouraged to take up roles in different services to round out their management skill sets in different community settings. To make sure services are meeting the unique needs of their local communities, centre directors are also empowered to tailor the management of their services as much as possible.

The Centre Director at OAC Altona North feels strongly about this 'lattice' model and the opportunities it provides to develop as a leader:

> **"I credit my centre's Exceeding A&R to my strong pedagogy and practice, developed by [my] experiences in a range of rooms, roles and centres. This deep experience, rather than rushing to the next upward promotion, ensures I deeply understand and can discuss the 'why' behind our practice, and I share this regularly with my team."**
>
> - Centre Director

In addition to retaining team members who may otherwise look for alternative opportunities, OAC reports that this initiative allows greater flexibility across its workforce and the ability to fill vacancies with qualified centre directors who know the organisation and role well.

Skilled and supported leaders

Initiatives and resources

Victorian Department of Education:

- Early Learning Leadership Forums
- Best Start, Best Life Evening Leadership Series
- Best Start, Best Life Educational Leaders Conference
- Educational Leadership Program
- Coach and Mentor Training Program
- Effective Mentoring Program
- Early Childhood Mentor Map
- Coaching for Returning Teachers and Educators Program
- Early childhood operational leaders' professional development program (forthcoming 2025)

Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA) Victoria:

- Workforce Planning Toolkit

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA):

- Quality Area 7 Educational Leadership and Team Building Fact Sheet

Positive workplace cultures

Positive workplace cultures are about relationships and how people feel at work. Positive workplaces are psychologically safe and supportive environments that enable reflection and learning, staff voice in decision-making, team cohesion and shared values.[11] When employees feel a sense of belonging to a team and in an organisation, they are more likely to want to stay.

A strong workplace culture leads to greater retention and quality practice by building rapport and support within teams to manage the emotional demands of working in early childhood settings.[12] As per Quality Area 4 of the National Quality Standard, staffing arrangements should enhance children's learning development, through continuity of staffing and early childhood professionals who are collaborative, respectful and ethical.

Four key strategies and practices to build positive workplace culture, informed by research and exemplary practice from Victorian services, are:

- prioritising staff connection and belonging
- providing access to professional development and opportunities for professional growth
- enabling employee voice and agency
- promoting staff recognition and value.

Prioritising staff connection and belonging

- Foster a sense of community, collegiality, professionalism and shared values. Research notes that services with strong shared values and an emotionally positive and consistent workplace culture promote high-quality teaching practice.[13]
- Attract, celebrate and promote workforce diversity. Supporting workforces to be culturally safe and inclusive improves educational experiences for all children and promotes welcoming and inclusive workplaces for staff from all backgrounds and circumstances.[14]
- Prioritise staff emotional health and safety. Research indicates that the emotional demands on the workforce are sometimes 'invisible' to leaders. Supporting children and families with experience of child protection, family trauma and other stresses can come at a personal cost for teachers and educators and lead to emotional exhaustion. Supports such as employee assistance programs, counselling and other wellbeing strategies support staff to feel safe at work.[15]

11 Hine R et al. (2022), 'From struggling to flourishing and thriving: Optimizing educator wellbeing within the Australian education context', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol 115.

12 Hine et al, 'From struggling to flourishing and thriving: Optimizing educator wellbeing within the Australian education context' and OECD (n.d.), 'Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)', Research Brief: Working conditions matter, accessed 13 June 2024 and OECD (2019), "Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care: Eight policy measures from OECD countries', accessed 13 June 2024.

13 Hine et al, 'From struggling to flourishing and thriving: Optimising educator wellbeing within the Australian education context' and Bull R.et al. (2024) 'The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 69(4).

14 Campbell M, (2022) 'More diversity can help solve ECEC staff shortages and families missing out', *The Sector,* accessed 22 May 2024.

15 Logan et al, 'Sustaining the Work-Related Wellbeing of Early Childhood Educators: Perspectives from Key Stakeholders in Early Childhood Organisations' and Bull et al, 'The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector'.

Case study

Kiddie Cove Sunbury

Kiddie Cove is a 97-place long day care service located north-west of Melbourne that serves a diverse, multicultural population.

Kiddie Cove prioritises staff connection and undertakes a range of practices which allow space for educators to connect, develop rapport, and build professional skills in a positive, supportive environment.

The service maintains consistent room teams wherever possible, so that the same educators work together which supports predictability for the children and builds rapport among staff. The rooms have a deliberate mix of new educators and experienced staff and a mix of ages and cultural backgrounds. This team diversity helps to embed a variety of perspectives, enables newer educators to be mentored by more experienced staff, and builds inclusive learning and work environments.

Staff are encouraged to participate in collaborative problem solving in the first instance, ahead of escalating issues with leadership if needed. Leaders are equipped with conflict resolution skills through their training, and all staff are provided strategies to maintain open, clear communication with one another.

Providing access to professional development and opportunities for professional growth

- Support formal and informal professional development opportunities, including the department's Early Years Learning Networks for early childhood teachers (see link in Initiatives and resources). Research shows professional learning is critical to workforce retention, in services and across the sector. It is part of a healthy workplace, supports staff self-worth and professional identity and fosters commitment.[16] Exemplary services prioritise and contextualise professional learning to suit the needs of their teams.
- Create purposeful opportunities to have structured and regular professional learning conversations, based on individualised employee growth planning and reinforcing the importance of life-long learning.[17]
- Supporting coaching and mentoring within work hours. This shows staff their employer is invested in them and their career progression.[18] Research indicates the effects of mentoring can support retention for at least 5 years.[19]

16 Logan et al 'Sustaining the Work-Related Wellbeing of Early Childhood Educators: Perspectives from Key Stakeholders in Early Childhood Organisations'.

17 Gibson M, et al. (2023) 'Shining a light on early childhood educators' work. A report from the Australian study Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work: A multi-level investigation'. *Queensland University of Technology*, accessed 13 June 2024.

18 Gibson et al, 'Shining a light on early childhood educators' work. A report from the Australian study Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work: A multi-level investigation'.

19 Ronfeldt M and McQueen K (2017) 'Does New Teacher Induction Really Improve Retention?' *Journal of Teacher Education*, 68(4).

Enabling employee voice and agency

- Involve educators and teachers in decision making that impacts them. International and Australian research shows that when employees implement their own vision, draw on their strengths, and have 'decision-making influence', they have greater work satisfaction.[20] Retention is supported when staff are included in discussions about organisational and service policies, curriculum development and designing engagement with families.[21]
- Be responsive and act quickly when issues arise. Make sure there are clear systems and processes for collecting and actioning feedback and concerns raised by staff.[22]
- Foster a collaborative workplace culture where leaders make time for critical reflection in a supportive environment that values diversity. For example, by encouraging all staff to participate in meetings and consultations, and to raise agenda items, they are more likely to feel heard and genuinely engaged.[23]

Promoting staff recognition and value

- Value and reward staff. This could be via access to incentives such as additional professional learning. The Victorian Government frequently offers a range of free professional learning opportunities and services may also be eligible for Commonwealth Government subsidies to support professional development and practicums (see link in Initiatives and resources)
- Acknowledge excellent educational practice with staff and families. Sharing positive feedback about teachers and educators with the team and with families promotes broader engagement and acknowledgement of staff.
- Celebrate successes and milestones to create a culture of value and recognition. This could include gestures like letters of appreciation, awards, team building activities and celebrations.
- Foster trusting and open dialogue between leadership and staff. Findings from services rated as 'Exceeding' under the National Quality Standard suggests that where staff and leadership model emotional sensitivity and invest in trusting relationships, teaching quality and job satisfaction improves.[24]

Case study

Alexandra and District Kindergarten

Alexandra and District Kindergarten is a 51-place, two-room sessional kindergarten located two hours northeast of Melbourne. It services Alexandra and surrounding rural communities, with children and families coming from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The service has a record of high staff retention with many working there for over a decade. It has strong ties back to the community and is overseen by a tight-knit parent committee of management.

The service leadership fosters a strong sense of community through induction processes that focus on values and their practical application. Management actively seek staff feedback on how the service is run - from supporting individual children, to engagement with families and events. Their commitment to building connection has also focused on building psychological safety and openness among the staff, which is nurtured and modelled by the leadership.

At the start of each session, teams come together to connect and reflect, discuss the day ahead and have the opportunity to raise concerns.

> **"Making sure [the staff member] feels connected, even if she's just in one day a week, is really important."**
>
> - Nominated Supervisor

Staff report they feel heard and respected, and there is strong team connection. This results in minimal staff turnover and supports high-quality and consistent learning for children.

20 Bull et al, 'The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector'.

21 Cumming T, Wong S and Logan H (2021) 'Early childhood educators' well-being, work environments and 'quality': Possibilities for changing policy and practice', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 6(1) and Gibson et al, 'Shining a light on early childhood educators' work. A report from the Australian study Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work: A multi-level investigation'.

22 National Health Service (2022) Improving Staff Retention: A guide for line managers and employers, National Health Service, accessed 22 May 2024.

23 National Health Service, Improving Staff Retention: A guide for line managers and employers.

24 Logan et al, 'Sustaining the Work-Related Wellbeing of Early Childhood Educators: Perspectives from Key Stakeholders in Early Childhood Organisations'.

Positive workplace cultures

Initiatives and resources

Victorian Department of Education:

- Early Years Learning Networks
- Training and support for early childhood professionals
- Supports for early career early childhood professionals
- How to find an early childhood education mentor
- Supporting early childhood educator mental health and wellbeing
- Induction supports (forthcoming 2025)

ACA Victoria:

- Workforce Planning Toolkit
- Employee Assistance Program

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA):

- Employee Management & Development Resource
- Employee Assistance Program (Early Childhood Wellbeing Support Program)

ACECQA:

- QA1 Developing a culture of learning through reflective practice
- QA4 Belonging and becoming for educators
- QA7 Educational leadership and team building
- Supporting performance development of professionals
- Educator Wellbeing Posters

Australian Government:

- Professional development subsidy

be you:

- Educator Wellbeing

Defined role expectations

As outlined in Quality Area 7 of the National Quality Standard, roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and understood to support effective decision making and service operation. Clearly defined job requirements and guidelines, as well as stable environments with sustainable workloads, also make a considerable difference to staff engagement, wellbeing and ultimately retention.

To do impactful work, teachers and educators need time, resources and the right capabilities to meet expectations from leaders, families and themselves. They also need to feel like their everyday work is manageable and equitable, in line with reasonable role expectations.

Two key approaches to define role expectations, informed by research and exemplary practice from Victorian services, are:

- creating clear expectations and norms around day-to-day practices and workloads
- ensuring appropriate support for working with children and families with complex needs.

Creating clear expectations and norms around day-to-day practices and workloads

- Communicate clear expectations with parents and families around the frequency and type of child and program updates. Aim to balance engagement and documentation for families with reasonable workloads for teams. Engagements that are more purposeful and higher quality, but less frequent, can help manage workloads (see case study).
- Deliberately plan for, and communicate about, the impact on workload during periods of staffing transition. This could include regularly reviewing service policies and providing staff with clear advice about how the service will manage absences and other pressure points to prevent remaining staff absorbing excessive workloads.
- Agree clear and manageable expectations around paperwork and documentation. Leverage teaching teams to document children's learning across the program. This can be supported with professional development and coaching to assist with purposeful, learning-focused observations.
- Maintain clear expectations around planning and non-contact time. Provide guidance and support to the teaching team to work collaboratively and effectively plan and prioritise tasks across the team, including handing work over when required.
- Provide opportunities for teams to meet regularly during service hours to collaborate and plan together. This can be supported by pooling planning time across the week and prioritising planning for teaching teams rather than individual staff members.

Case study:

Centre for Early Education Ballarat Grammar

The Centre for Early Education (CEEd) is a long day care centre on the grounds of Ballarat Grammar School, an independent school in regional Victoria. It offers education and care to 110 children each day from six months of age through to school entry.

The service is focused on documentation norm-setting with staff to support them to best manage necessary administration requirements in a reasonable and evidence-based manner.

Through orientation processes, sustained professional development, team meetings, informal discussions, policies, and family engagement, CEEd has embedded a 'quality over quantity' approach to documentation. Staff are encouraged to prioritise relationships with children to identify learning goals before progressing to observation and documentation. This has lessened the administrative workload of staff, who can focus on relationship building and meaningful documentation practices, creating reasonable and supportive role expectations.

> **"[The National Quality Framework doesn't] say how many individual observations you need to make…it's about being responsive to the needs of the individual and the group."**
>
> – Centre Director

The service's open communication with families sets expectations about the level of engagement they will receive. The emphasis is on the importance of meaningful face-to-face relationship building with families as opposed to more frequent and time-consuming screen-based observations. Families have indicated they prefer this approach, reporting that it helps build their understanding of their child's development.

Ensuring appropriate support for working with children and families with complex needs

- Acknowledge the capacity required to support children and families with complex needs and proactively utilise available support including Preschool Field Officers and Kindergarten Inclusion Support. Research indicates that staff who feel they cannot meet the needs of children and families and lack support are more likely to leave.[25]
- Prioritise proactive support, using available resources like School Readiness Funding, to reduce burnout and foster more diverse workplaces. This can, where appropriate, include the use of additional staff with skills to assist the workforce to manage the complex needs of families and children.
- Leverage School Readiness Funding and other available professional development supports to provide service-wide professional learning on relevant inclusion topics to enable all staff to understand and welcome children from diverse backgrounds into the service, and provide access to information about other referral services.
- Make sure there are dedicated staff with expertise in inclusion support. Having an allocated teacher or educator with experience and confidence to support children with complex needs helps to manage role requirements, and can also build the capacity of all staff over time.

25 Heilala C, Lundkvist M, Santavirta N, and Kalland M, (2023), 'Work demands and work resources in ECEC – turnover intentions explored', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 32(7).

Defined role expectations

Initiatives and resources

Victorian Department of Education:

- School Readiness Funding
- Preschool Field Officer program
- Kindergarten Inclusion Support

ACECQA:

- QA1 Fact Sheet Educator and Teacher Early Childhood
- QA1 Fact Sheet Approved Provider Early Childhood
- QA6 Building Partnerships With Families

Australian Government:

- Disability Standards for Education for Early Childhood e-learning
- Inclusion Support Program

Effective systems and processes

Systems and processes underpin and enable positive workplace culture and clear role expectations.[26] Effective systems and processes allow for autonomy, predictability and equity,[27] while also ensuring that teachers and educators have the tools and capacity to do the core elements of their role.

Three key practices to build and maintain effective systems and processes, informed by research and exemplary practice from Victorian services, are:

- ensuring rostering practices support collaboration and manageable workloads
- creating clear policies that focus on workforce wellbeing and quality delivery
- maintaining contemporary HR practices, including recruitment and induction processes.

Ensuring rostering practices support collaboration and manageable workloads

- Plan your roster in consultation with room leaders and other staff. Predictable rostering of shifts and break times, settled well in advance, provides certainty to teachers and educators to organise their lives outside of work.
- Provide consistent and reliable planning and administration time, including opportunities for teams to come together and reflect, and time for leaders to provide necessary coaching and support.[28]
- Allocate consistent teams within rooms/programs where possible. Consistency builds strong workplace relationships, shared norms, opportunities to learn together and better continuity of care and learning for children.

Creating clear policies that focus on workforce wellbeing and quality delivery

- Ensure that mandatory policies around compliance, risk, staff wellbeing and health and safety are clear and accessible. Having effective and well understood processes helps staff feel valued and respected as professionals and can be key to staff feeling safe at work and preventing burnout.
- Support appropriate autonomy and increase time available to spend with children by having effective and clear policies and guidance on roles and responsibilities. This can alleviate potential confusion and help staff to agree and meet expectations.
- Prioritise a consistent staffing profile where possible. As outlined in the case study, some services have achieved this by employing permanent staff to cover breaks, lunch covers, planning and professional learning, or building a pool of recurring and familiar casual staff who understand the service, the children and the team.

26 Cumming et al, 'Early childhood educators' well-being, work environments and 'quality': Possibilities for changing policy and practice'.

27 Cumming et al, 'Early childhood educators' well-being, work environments and 'quality': Possibilities for changing policy and practice'

28 Cumming et al 'Early childhood educators' well-being, work environments and 'quality': Possibilities for changing policy and practice'.

Case study

Gowrie @ The Harbour

Gowrie Victoria is a medium-sized not-for-profit service network, with six services in metro Melbourne. Gowrie @ The Harbour is a 150-place centre, operating in inner metropolitan Melbourne, with many new migrant families and a relatively transient community.

Gowrie @ The Harbour rosters permanent staff members to cover breaks, lunch, non-contact and professional learning time and supports each room to self-manage their own rosters. This enables the same staff to be in each room, fostering strong, consistent relationships with children and less time spent on handovers to casuals. The approach also provides flexibility to empower teams to make decisions that support the needs of the children and staff.

> **"[The model] creates more ease for staff. It creates a safe space, knowing that you're coming to a space where there's consistency... it takes the workplace stress off you. [You know] what you're expecting."**
> – Assistant Manager

Gowrie's self-management norms around rostering mean that staff feel like they have more control over their days and can complete tasks at times that make sense for them, the children and the service overall. Room leaders work with staff to identify the optimal planning time arrangements, creating a culture of thinking deliberately about how staff plan their workload and making the most of the time they have out of the room. Staff can protect time for planning in a way that is visible and helpful to their colleagues and room leaders, which supports collaboration, engagement, wellbeing and retention.

The centre director spends less time creating bespoke rosters, freeing them up to support room leaders develop their leadership skills and to undertake management tasks. This approach to building self-management skills empowers staff in the room and also takes pressure off the leadership team.

Maintaining contemporary HR practices, including recruitment and induction processes

- Have clear and accessible resources and templates to support recruitment, onboarding and performance processes. Services with strong HR documentation and processes, including induction documentation, can better support staff, especially early career professionals.
- Consider how work arrangements and policies can better support employees. Some services offer incentives such as additional leave entitlements and discounted childcare for staff member's children utilising the Australian Government's discount measure (see link in Initiatives and resources).
- Take a data-driven approach to workforce planning where possible. Collecting and analysing workforce trends, such as leave requests, average time employed at the service, and information from staff satisfaction surveys, provides valuable data to improve workforce retention.[29]

29 Australian Childcare Alliance, (n.d) *Guide to Workforce planning for education and care services*, Australian Childcare Alliance, accessed 13 June 2024.

Effective systems and processes

Initiatives and resources

Victorian Department of Education:

- Change Management Toolkit
- Induction supports (forthcoming 2025)

ACA Victoria:

- Workforce Planning Toolkit

ELAA:

- Employee Management & Development Resource
- Employment and Onboarding Guide
- Helpful Resources for Policy Development

ACECQA:

- Supporting performance development of professionals

Australian Government:

- Child care discount for early childhood workforce
- Practicum exchange network

Prioritising retention at the service-level and utilising available supports

The Victorian early childhood sector is diverse and retaining the workforce is a complex challenge that must be addressed at national, state and local levels. There are significant differences in communities, organisational structures and other contexts in which ECEC services operate. This means services experience different retention challenges, and what works in one service won't necessarily be a good fit in another.

While there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach, the evidence-informed practices outlined in this guide showcase the effective, thoughtful and innovative work that many Victorian services are doing to support workforce retention. Services are encouraged to consider these strategies and practices and how they may be relevant to adapt to their local circumstances. Services are also encouraged to engage with the range of department retention programs and sector resources available, as outlined throughout the guide. For further support and assistance, please reach out to your local Early Childhood Improvement Branch contacts.[30]

We acknowledge the ongoing commitment services make to supporting teachers and educators to have rewarding and lasting careers in ECEC so that we can ensure Victoria's children have the best start.

30 To find your service's Early Childhood Improvement Branch see: www.vic.gov.au/contact-early-childhood-improvement-branch

Directory of programs and resources

Skilled and supported leaders

- Developing the leadership pipeline
- Providing access to necessary specialist resources
- Building structured and intentional leadership teams, not heroic individuals
- Investing in professional and peer-to-peer learning opportunities and purposeful mentors

Victorian Department of Education programs and resources

Early Learning Leadership Forums take place twice per year in each of the Department's 17 areas and bring together service and organisational leaders locally to strengthen collaboration and leadership capability

https://www.vic.gov.au/leading-impact-events-early-childhood-leaders

Best Start, Best Life Evening Leadership Series are hybrid events designed to keep early childhood leaders up to date with the reforms

https://www.vic.gov.au/leading-impact-events-early-childhood-leaders

Best Start, Best Life Educational Leaders Conference brings together early childhood educational leaders, experts and practitioners at key points in the Best Start, Best Life reform

https://www.vic.gov.au/best-start-best-life-2025-educational-leaders-conference

Victorian Educational Leadership Program comprises two micro-credentials for educational leaders in Victorian funded kindergarten services to build skills in contemporary leadership and pedagogy

https://research.qut.edu.au/childandfamily/velp/

Coach and Mentor Training Program helps experienced Victorian teachers and educators build their coaching and mentoring skills

https://www.vic.gov.au/coach-and-mentor-training

Effective Mentoring Program supports experienced teachers to enhance their mentoring knowledge and skills to support graduate and returning teachers achieve full registration

https://www.vic.gov.au/effective-mentoring-program

Early Childhood Mentor Map helps provisionally registered early childhood teachers search for an Effective Mentoring Program-trained mentor nearby

https://www.vic.gov.au/how-find-early-childhood-education-mentor#mentor-map

Coaching for Returning Teachers and Educators Program supports eligible teachers and educators to transition back into the sector

https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-update-august-2024/helping-teachers-and-educators-return-sector

Early childhood operational leaders' professional development program (forthcoming 2025)

Other resources

ACA Victoria's **Workforce Planning Toolkit** supports services to create a 5-year workforce plan

https://vic.childcarealliance.org.au/workforce-planning-toolkit/

ACECQA's **Quality Area 7 Educational Leadership and Team Building Factsheet** provides guidance to educational leaders on developing a distributed leadership approach

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-05/QA7_EducationalLeadershipAndTeamBuilding.pdf

Positive workplace cultures

- Prioritising staff connection and belonging
- Providing access to professional development and opportunities and opportunities for professional growth
- Enabling employee voice and agency
- Promoting staff recognition and value

Victorian Department of Education programs and resources

Early Years Learning Networks offer opportunities for local collaboration and professional connection for early childhood teachers and educational leaders

https://www.vic.gov.au/early-years-learning-networks-early-childhood-teachers

The department's **training and support for early childhood professionals** webpage provides information on a range of career and professional learning supports for early childhood professionals

https://www.vic.gov.au/training-and-support-early-childhood-professionals

Career supports for teachers in their first 5 years of teaching outlines supports for early career professionals including Communities of Practice, coaching and conferences

https://www.vic.gov.au/supports-early-career-early-childhood-professionals

Early childhood provisionally registered teacher mentor program provides mentor support for provisionally registered teachers to move to full teacher registration

https://www.vic.gov.au/how-find-early-childhood-education-mentor

Mental health and wellbeing for teachers and educators online resource includes webinars, videos and other tools to support mental health and wellbeing for early childhood professionals

https://www.vic.gov.au/supporting-early-childhood-educator-mental-health-and-wellbeing

Induction supports (forthcoming 2025)

Other resources

The Australian Government's **professional development subsidy** supports teachers, educators and managers in eligible services to complete training

https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/workforce/support/professional-development-opportunities/professional-development-subsidy

be you's **educator wellbeing supports** includes a wellbeing guide, fact sheets, planning tools, event recordings and videos

https://beyou.edu.au/resources/educator-wellbeing

Other resources (continued)

ELAA resources

Employee Management and Development Resource provides tools to foster motivated and engaged employees

https://elaa.org.au/resources/free-resources/employee-management-development-resource/

Employee Assistance Program (Early Childhood Wellbeing Support Program) offers essential counselling services tailored to the needs of staff on the Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement (VECTEA)

https://elaa.org.au/news/empower-your-teams-wellbeing-through-des-early-childhood-wellbeing-support-program/

ACA Victoria resources

Workforce Planning Toolkit supports services to create a 5-year workforce plan

https://vic.childcarealliance.org.au/workforce-planning-toolkit/

Employee Assistance Program provides practical services including telephone counselling from psychologists, social workers and other mental health professionals for ACA members

https://www.aca-telushealth-eap.org.au/

ACECQA resources

Supporting Performance and the Development of Professionals Fact Sheet helps leaders to build staff capacity

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/Supporting_performance_development_of_professionals.pdf

Quality Area 1 Developing a Culture of Learning Through Reflective Practice Fact Sheet guides educators to self-assess their practice

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/QA1_DevelopingaCultureofLearningThroughReflectivePractice.pdf

Quality Area 4 Belonging, Being and Becoming for Educators Fact Sheet sets out professional expectations for educators

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-04/QA4_BelongingAndBecomingForEducators.pdf

Quality Area 7 Educational Leadership and Team Building and Team Building Fact Sheet supports leaders to develop collaborative leadership

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-05/QA7_EducationalLeadershipAndTeamBuilding.pdf

Educator Wellbeing Posters help services to showcase staff wellbeing and the relationship to the National Quality Standards

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/supporting-materials/posters#EWP

Defined role expectations

- Ensuring appropriate support for working with children and families with complex needs
- Creating clear expectations and norms around day-to-day practices and workloads

Victorian Department of Education programs and resources

School Readiness Funding addresses educational disadvantage through building the capacity of educators and families to support 3-year-old and 4-year-old children in services delivering funded kindergarten programs in Victoria

https://www.vic.gov.au/school-readiness-funding

Preschool Field Officer Program supports the participation of children with additional needs in kindergarten programs

https://www.vic.gov.au/preschool-field-officer-program

Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) provides support for funded kindergarten services to enable greater inclusion of children with disability, developmental delay or complex medical needs

https://www.vic.gov.au/kindergarten-inclusion-children-disabilities

Other resources

ACECQA resources

Quality Area 1 Educational Program Documentation for Educators and Teachers Fact Sheet provides practical documentation guidance to staff

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/QA1_FactSheet_Educator_and_teacher_EarlyChildhood_0.pdf

Quality Area 1 Educational Program Documentation for Approval Providers Fact Sheet provides practical documentation guidance for approved providers

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/QA1_FactSheet_Approved_Provider_EarlyChildhood.pdf

Quality Area 6 Building Partnerships with Families Fact Sheet supports services to build strong engagement with families

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-01/QA6_BuildingPartnershipsWithFamilies.pdf

Australian Government resources

Disability Standards for Education for Early Childhood (prior to school) e-learning provides information and resources about legal obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992

https://www.nccd.edu.au/professional-learning/disability-standards-education-early-childhood-prior-school

Inclusion Support Program helps children with additional needs via tailored support and funding to Child Care Subsidy eligible services

https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/inclusion-support-program

Effective systems and processes

- Ensuring rostering practices support collaborative and manageable workloads
- Creating clear policies that focus on workforce wellbeing and quality delivery
- Maintaining contemporary HR practices, including recruitment and induction processes

Victorian Department of Education programs and resources

Change Management Toolkit provides service leaders and centre managers with practical change management guidance and strategies to support services in their planning and implementation of Pre-Prep alongside Three-Year-Old Kindergarten

https://www.vic.gov.au/Best_Start_Best_Life_information_for_professionals

Induction supports (forthcoming 2025)

Other resources

ACECQA's **Supporting Performance and the Development of Professionals Information Sheet** offers guidance for leaders to build staff capacity

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/Supporting_performance_development_of_professionals.pdf

ACA Victoria's **Workforce Planning Toolkit** supports services to create a 5-year workforce plan

https://vic.childcarealliance.org.au/workforce-planning-toolkit/

ELAA resources

Employee Management and Development Resource provides tools to foster motivated and engaged employees

https://elaa.org.au/resources/free-resources/employee-management-development-resource/

Employment and Onboarding Guide details guidance on effective recruitment and onboarding

https://elaa.org.au/product/employment-onboarding-guide/

Helpful Resources for Policy Development provides practical tools to support services to design their own policies and processes

https://elaa.org.au/resources/free-resources/helpful-resources-for-policy-development/

Australian Government resources

Child Care Discount for Early Childhood Workforce provides guidance to eligible services wishing to offer a discount on childcare to their staff

https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/early-childhood-workforce/child-care-discount-early-childhood-workforce

Practicum Exchange Network provides a dedicated website where services and educators in training can search for and arrange practicum exchange opportunities

https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/workforce/support/professional-development-opportunities/practicum-exchange-network

Best Start Best Life

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