

Planning and Delivering a Program in a Children's Service

A guide for services operating under the *Children's Services Act 1996* and the *Children's Services Regulations 2020*



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Introduction

Early childhood is a time of rapid learning and development. The quality of the experiences children have, the relationships they form and the environments they engage in, all have a profound impact on their life opportunities and outcomes.

Children's services in Victoria offer care to children on a non-regular basis. They include occasional care services in settings such as neighbourhood houses, limited hours services in recreational facilities, early childhood intervention services, mobile services and school holiday care programs that operate for up to 28 days a year. A key feature of many children's services is that children attend for short periods of time.

However, just like other early childhood services around Australia, children's services offer children unique learning opportunities that support them to develop their curiosity and thinking skills, create positive connections with others, and explore the world around them.

The quality of the educational program provided in children's services makes an essential contribution to these positive outcomes and is a foundation for later success.

Educators in children's services are responsible for delivering an educational program based on an approved learning framework and delivered in a manner that accords with that framework. It should be based on the developmental needs, interests, and experiences of each child and designed to take into account the individual differences of each child.

This guide recognises that many children's services provide care for a small number of children who attend occasionally, and for short periods of time. It provides practical ideas to help educators tailor the programming requirements in these settings.

The *Children's Services Act 1996* (CS Act) was revised in 2019 and adopted objectives and guiding principles that focus on quality educational and developmental outcomes, and the safety, health and wellbeing of children.

The objectives of the CS Act are:

- to ensure the safety, health

and wellbeing of children attending children's services

- to improve the educational and developmental outcomes for children attending children's services
- to promote continuous improvement in the provision of quality children's services.

The guiding principles of the CS Act are:

- that the rights and best interests of the child are paramount
- that children are successful, competent and capable learners
- that the principles of equity, inclusion and diversity underlie this Act
- that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued
- that the role of parents and families is respected and supported
- that best practice is expected in the provision of children's services.



Choose the ideas that make the most sense for you, the children that attend your service, and the nature of the education and care provided.

Purpose of this guide

This guide is written for educators, nominated supervisors, staff members and volunteers in children's services. It aims to help them make decisions that support and improve the quality of the educational programs they design and deliver to children.

Using practical examples, this guide identifies and explores the features of effective educational programs for children. It reflects the changes in May 2020 to the CS Act and the new Children's Services Regulations 2020 (CS Regulations).

In particular, the guide will discuss how educators:

- implement the new requirements of the CS Act in relation to the educational program
- enhance interactions with children, and their relationships in groups
- organise the program to maximise learning opportunities for children, especially during routine times
- enhance educators' practices to support children's learning and development
- provide a range of play and learning experiences, including physical

environments that enhance children's learning and development in the five Early Years Learning Outcomes (learning outcomes)

- use the planning process to make effective program and practice decisions
- record aspects of the program and document children's learning.

Thinking, exploring ideas and taking action is an important part of improving learning outcomes for children in children's services.

To assist educators and approved providers to put the ideas in this guide into practice, the symbols below have been used to indicate where there is an opportunity for reflective practice, or to suggest an idea to try.

Choose the ideas that make the most sense for you, the children that attend your service, and the nature of the education and care provided.



Reflection questions

In collaboration with others in your team take a moment to consider these questions and how they relate to your setting.



Ideas to try

Consider these ideas and how they might apply in your setting.

Maximising children's learning in quality children's services

Children's services can provide children with rich and varied opportunities for learning:

- for some children attending these services it will be the first time they experience an early learning environment outside their own homes
- for other children it will complement the early childhood education experience they receive in other settings
- children's services also support parents and carers to participate in community life or look after their own health and wellbeing.

The length of time children may attend a children's service varies, and educators are responsible for designing programs that support children to learn and grow across the five learning outcomes.

The nature of children's services means that educators will need to consider how children's learning is maximised. Children's attendance may be irregular, or they may attend for shorter periods of time. This may mean that educators might:

- consider spending more time getting to know children, and supporting their relationships with others, rather than planning to complete specific activities
- use music and dance to include opportunities for physical activity if environments are smaller, with limited or no outdoor space.

Despite the complexities, it is important to recognise the potential for learning offered in children's services and design programs that benefit children.



Reflection questions

- Is there a vision statement or philosophy that is publicly available that articulates what you believe is the purpose and potential of your service?
- If there is, how long since it's been reviewed?
- Were the families and children involved?
- How do you use this to inform the decisions you make about your practices and the program?



Ideas to try

- Ask the families to let you know on enrolment what they hope their children will learn when they are at the service.
- This can be done using a simple question on the enrolment form, or better still, in the conversations you have with them at orientation.
- Use these ideas to inform your decisions about the program. For example, if the families say they want their children to make friends and socialise with other children, then make sure you plan to support children to interact and get to know each other.





Understanding the expectations for children’s learning in children’s services

Children’s services must operate in a way that ensures both the safety, health, and wellbeing of the children being educated and cared for, as well as providing an educational program that meets the educational and developmental needs of children.

Changes to the CS Act, that commenced in 2020, formalise and strengthen the expectation that services will create programs that enhance the education and care children receive.

For many services, these changes are already part of program design, and confirm a long-standing commitment to children’s learning. For others,

it will serve as an opportunity to make positive changes to the way their practice and program is designed and delivered.

An important change included in the revised CS Act is to the requirement for an educational program. This obligation requires services to deliver a program that is *based on an approved learning framework*,

and delivered in a manner that accords with the approved learning framework (CS Act: section 108). For more information on educational programs see page 13 in this guide.

The CS Regulations include additional requirements that inform the daily planning and delivery of the program. Educators translate these expectations into practice in multiple ways, as set out below.

Expectation of the Regulation	Practice implementation
 <p>Children's Services Regulations</p> <p>Educational program (regulation 42)</p> <p>An educational program is to contribute to the following outcomes for each child:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the child will have a strong sense of identity • the child will be connected with and contribute to his or her world • the child will have a strong sense of wellbeing • the child will be a confident and involved learner • the child will be an effective communicator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning decisions about the learning opportunities that will be provided for children will be made with the outcomes in mind. For example, educators understand that a decision to include playdough for the toddlers supports children to develop their fine motor skills which is part of supporting children to have a strong sense of wellbeing. • Evaluation of children's learning will reference the outcomes in the CS Regulations and in the learning frameworks, and educators will use these to make further planning decisions. For example, educators observe that infants are becoming interested in removing all the blocks and cars from the baskets and identify that this is an example of children's curiosity and links to the outcome that the child will be a confident and involved learner. • Educators then plan for further opportunities for children to explore new and diverse materials (including fabric and natural materials) and place them in a range of containers and baskets in easy reach of the babies.
 <p>Children's Services Regulations</p> <p>Interactions with children (regulation 104)</p> <p>Reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that the children's service provides education and care to children in a way that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourages the children to express themselves and their opinions • allows the children to undertake experiences that develop self-reliance and self-esteem • maintains at all times the dignity and rights of each child • gives each child positive guidance and encouragement toward acceptable behaviour • has regard to the family and cultural values, age, and physical and intellectual development and abilities of each child being educated and cared for by the service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educators plan to spend intentional unhurried time talking and connecting with children – one on one and in small groups and during routines. These are times when educators can support children to share their feelings, ideas and interests verbally and nonverbally. • Learning experiences offered to children are open-ended and encourage children to play and experiment freely with the resources and equipment. • Educators use positive behaviour guidance strategies that support children to understand and regulate their feelings and model how to play respectfully with others. • Educators are aware of, and include aspects of, children's family and cultural lives in the program. For example, in dramatic play spaces, in the choice of storybooks, and opportunities to join in celebrations.
 <p>Children's Services Regulations</p> <p>Relationships in groups (regulation 105)</p> <p>Reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that the service provides children being educated and cared for with opportunities to interact and develop respectful and positive relationships with each other and with staff members of, and volunteers at, the service.</p> <p>The size and the composition of the groups in which children are being educated and cared for by the service must be considered.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group sizes affect the experience of the child in the children's service and may impact on factors such as noise level, the amount of stimulation and the level of engagement of children and educators. Smaller group sizes benefit all children and are particularly important for younger children as they offer more opportunities for interactions. • The service's physical environment and the developmental needs of children are considered together with operational requirements when determining group sizes.



Reflection questions

- What aspects of these expectations do you believe are already in place at your service?
- What evidence do you have to support this?
- What aspects need to be strengthened or refined?
- What areas are missing?
- What things could you do to implement changes?



Ideas to try

- At a staff meeting, take some time to explore the requirements of the CS Act and CS Regulations.
- It is important that those who work in children's services understand the legal framework that underpins their work.
- Take a section of the CS Act and invite educators to think about what this might mean in their daily practice.
- What actions would need to be taken to ensure that this aspect is in place?
- What would it look like for children?
- What would need to change or never happen?





Using the Frameworks

Children's services are now required to use an approved learning framework. They are also encouraged to consider the practice principles, and how to apply them to program decisions that can extend and enrich children's learning in the five learning and development outcomes.



Children's Services Act and Regulations

Required programs (section 108)

Educational program (regulation 42)

For children's services, the approved learning frameworks are:

- The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) – for children from birth to 8 years
www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf
- Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) – for children from birth to 5 years
www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks

- My Time, Our Place: A Framework for School Age Children in Australia (MTOF) – for school aged children
www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks

These frameworks:

- 1 provide educators with support and guidance in planning and decision making, about how the program will support children's learning and development
- 2 inform educators about quality practice and enhance the learning experiences offered to children.



Using the Outcomes

Attending a children's service gives an opportunity to extend and enhance each child's learning and development.

Educators must focus on delivering *outcomes* for each child being educated and cared for at the service in accordance with the frameworks.

However an educational program is designed, the content must contribute to supporting the following outcomes for each child:

- 1 Children have a strong sense of identity
- 2 Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- 3 Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- 4 Children are confident and involved learners
- 5 Children are effective communicators.

The approved learning frameworks, and related resources, help explore each of these five outcomes in more detail and provide a range of practice strategies. Resources that support educators to use the frameworks can be accessed on the websites listed at the end of this document.

Some examples of how to use the outcomes in practice are on page 8 of this Guide.



Using the Practice Principles

Educational programs are at their best when they feature opportunities that drive quality outcomes for children and their families. While every program is different, educators will make local decisions about what works for them. It is helpful to consider the practices that are known to support children to learn and grow.

These practices are outlined in the approved learning frameworks. The VEYLDF has eight practice principles for learning and development, the EYLF has five principles for learning and early childhood pedagogy, and the MTOP has five principles concerning children's play, leisure and learning and pedagogy.

Applying the practice principles of the VEYLDF below, consider how they connect with the expectation to provide an educational program. The Principles and Practice in the EYLF could also be applied in a similar way.

Reflective practice

Using planned opportunities to think about how to improve the educational program through practice, especially thinking about what works in children's services, what hasn't, and what changes could support children's wellbeing and learning.

Partnerships with families

Making decisions about the program in collaboration with families that consider their values and expectations about children's learning and development. This will include talking to the families to understand what is important to them about their child's participation and using this information in the programming decisions.

High expectations for every child

Recognising that each child has the ability to learn, and that having high expectations for children's learning and development supports children to learn from birth, every day, and across all settings.

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

Building strong and positive attachments to provide the support children need to feel safe and confident, to try new things and to learn. Paying attention to relationships and interactions between educators and children, children and other children, and educators and families forms the foundation for an effective program.

Equity and diversity

Valuing each child's family and culture and how this shapes their learning and development. This will involve helping children to be comfortable with differences and modelling behaviour which respects and values these differences.

Assessment for learning and development

Evaluating children's learning and development to identify what they know and can do and what other opportunities may help them to build their knowledge and understanding. Understanding children's knowledge, interests and skills and the values of their family help inform decisions about the program.

Integrated teaching and learning approaches

Combining different approaches to the learning experiences offered to children. Some learning experiences are initiated by children and responded to by educators, while others are educator-led and respond to the child's abilities and interests. Play is central to the concept of integrated teaching and learning approaches.

Partnerships with professionals.

Working with other professionals to improve the way the program supports children's learning and development. This includes, for example, knowing whether the child attends another service, encouraging parents to see the maternal and child health nurse, or talking to the other educators in the community to understand more about the other learning experiences available locally for children.



Educational Programs in Children's Services

An educational program is an essential part of delivering a quality children's service in Victoria. More than a set of activities, an educational program aims to provide opportunities and experiences that stimulate learning and development for all children.



Children's Services Act and Regulations

Required programs (section 108)

Educational program (regulation 42)

Creating an educational program includes planning for:

- **educators' practice** – including how the relationships and interactions between children, educators and families will be fostered
- **the physical environment** – how it's organised, including equipment and resources
- **the routines and ordinary everyday activities** – such as eating and drinking, resting, toileting and nappy changing, washing hands, arriving and leaving
- **the organisation of time** – how time flows, how big or small the time periods are for uninterrupted play and when this occurs
- **a range of experiences that support a wide variety of learning and development needs** – opportunities for children to initiate and lead their own learning, as well as those that educators initiate and plan ahead of time.

Effective programs involve creating an engaging program that provides learning opportunities for each child being educated and cared for at the children's service. Thinking and making decisions about the educational program can contribute to:

- children's enjoyment of the learning experience
- families' feelings of security and satisfaction about leaving their child in the service
- educators' enjoyment and satisfaction in their work
- the quality of children's experiences in the program and how these short episodes make a positive contribution to each child's progress in the outcomes identified in the approved learning frameworks.

Planning the program

Educators are responsible for planning a program that supports children's learning and development. Specific decisions about how the program will look, and what experiences are included, are best made by the educator team who know the children and setting best.

It is helpful to follow a planning cycle that keeps track of what is known about the children, what they need to grow and learn, and how educators' practice can support their ongoing learning and development. Partnerships with children and families are also important in planning the program.

Using a planning cycle reflects current thinking and best practice.

A planned program might operate over an extended period, and include many permanent learning experiences to respond to the numbers of children moving through the program over the course of a week or month.

Equally the program might need to be highly responsive, and change daily as the needs of the children change.

Remember, planning activity needs to be *in proportion to the nature of the education and care provided, the amount of time the service operates, and the attendance pattern of the children.*

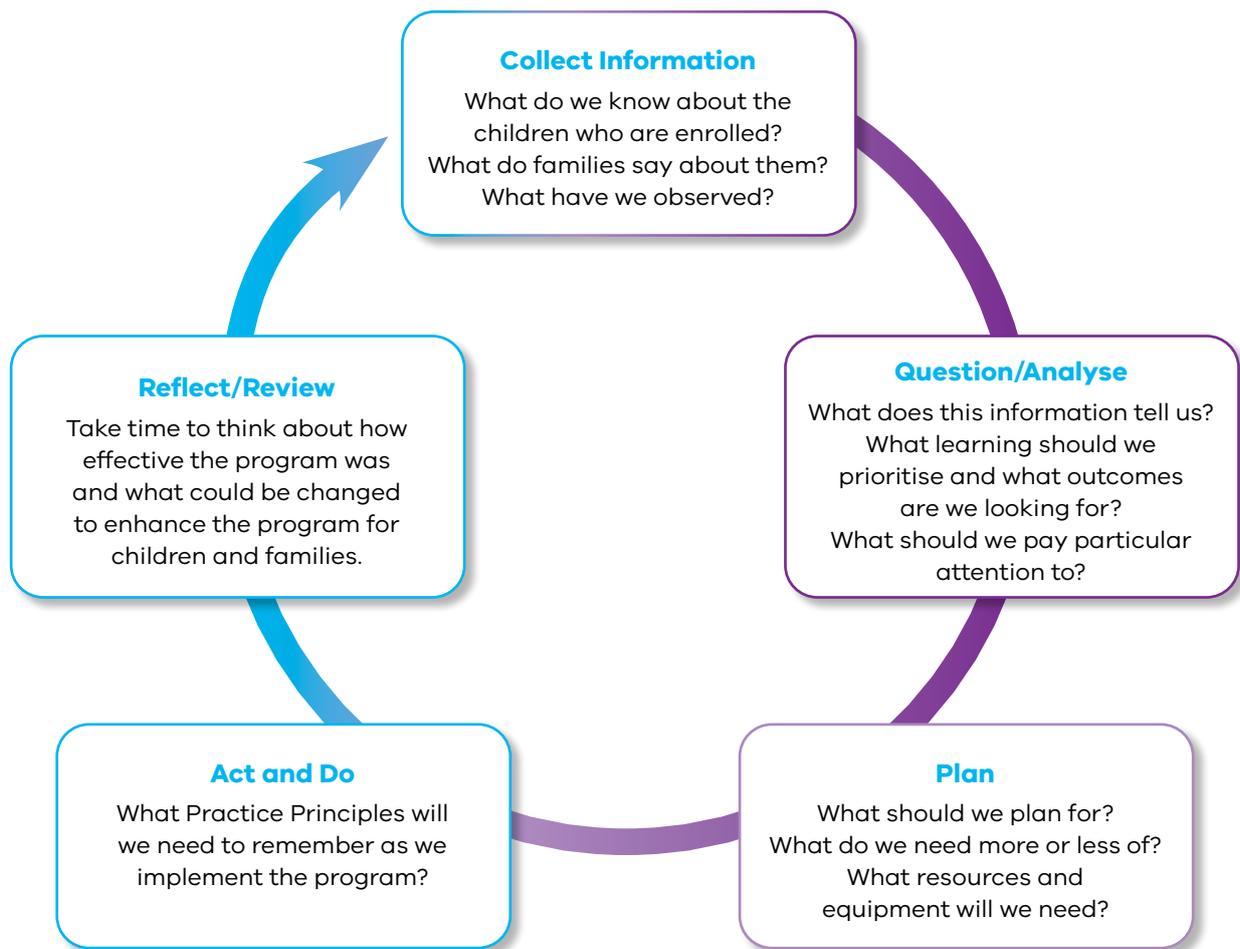
Whatever the circumstances of the service, following the steps of the planning cycle will assist

the team to design a quality program that is engaging and enjoyed by children and families.

Program planning requires a combination of thinking ahead of time about the program, preparing for it, and then responding to children spontaneously as opportunities arise. This is commonly referred to as guided play and learning. Regular reviews of how the planning cycle is being implemented will ensure the process meets the needs of the individual service.

Spontaneous program decisions will be required to adapt to changing circumstances, and to best respond and build on each child's interests, strengths, knowledge and culture.





If a novel event occurs, such as bulldozers and cranes operating next to the service, or the number or ages of the children attending the service changes, or the staffing changes, the program can be changed to take advantage of it.

No matter how program decisions are made, it's important to keep in mind that effective programs:

- are based on each child's current knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests
- cover all dimensions or elements – not just 'special activities'
- can be recorded in different ways – as a table with columns

and rows, or a mind map, on paper or online

- are organised to plan for learning and development. They should include routines for learning experiences across different parts of the program such as inside, outside, mealtimes and group times
- don't have to include everything every time. Some parts of the program can be planned permanently, such as the reading area or block play, and other parts can be changed
- provide opportunities for child-directed play and learning, guided play and learning and adult-led learning.

When making planning decisions it is important to keep the outcomes of the approved learning frameworks and the CS Regulations in mind. Program decisions need to consider evaluations of previous planning decisions, and consider the purpose of what is being offered to children.

The formal program, that is displayed and shared with families, will most likely form the basis of a more detailed working or operational document that the team uses on a day-to-day basis, such as a diary or reflective journal that helps capture ideas or concerns as they arise.

Program plans let others know what's happening but there is no one 'right' or 'best' way. The most effective programs suit the settings and come from educators working together as much as they can, and with families and children, sharing ideas, insights, concerns, learnings and knowledge about children.

For more information on planning using the VEYLDF, see the VCAA's Early Years Planning Cycle Resource for the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EarlyYearsPlanningCycle.pdf>).



Reflection questions

- How is the program planned?
- Is the program planning process effective – does it support learning and help educators to feel confident about their practice?
- What improvement could be made?
- How do you plan currently?
- How do you ensure that there is a link between other documentation and the plan?
- If there are limited opportunities to meet together, how can the key themes of the planning cycle be communicated and supported?
- Are there some ideas in this section that you can incorporate into your planning process and ways of documenting the plan?



Ideas to try

- Invite the educator team to consider each of the steps in the planning cycle as they work with children.
- Perhaps place the planning cycle in a prominent location and talk together about how this is being applied in the service.
- Remember, it's not about doing more; it's about feeling confident that there is a process that supports the decisions being made about children's participation in the program.





Regulatory requirements for educational programs



Children's Services Regulations

Information about educational program to be kept available (regulation 44)

The CS Regulations require that:

- Information about the contents and operation of the educational program must be available and displayed at the service at a place accessible to parents (regulation 44).
- Assessments or evaluations relating to each child must be documented and consider the period the child is being educated and cared for by the service and how the documentation will be used by educators. It must be readily understood by educators and parents (regulation 43).
- A parent may request information about the content and operation of the program as it relates to their child, including information about the child's participation in the program and the child's assessments or evaluations (regulation 45).

An effective learning program is supported by a number of documents and records, including:

- a vision statement or philosophy (written by educators and the approved provider in conjunction with children and their families) if one exists
- enrolment forms in individual files that include information about children and their families
- reports or notes from initial enrolment conversations with families about children's development and learning, interests, achievements, experiences in the service and in the family, and concerns or questions
- an educational program plan that includes information about the contents and operation of the program
- assessments or evaluations relating to each child.



Documenting children's learning



Children's Services Regulations

Documenting of child assessments or evaluations for delivery of educational program (regulation 43)

Documenting or recording the program and the learning that is taking place over time assists educators to plan effectively.

The documentation process and record needs to be *in proportion* to the time the program operates and reflect the nature of education and care provided. More documentation will be required for children who regularly attend, for example individual plans and goals for learning, while children who attend only occasionally might have an enrolment form and notes related to specific needs and interests.

It is sometimes easy to feel overwhelmed by the need to record information about the program, so remember documenting is about quality, not quantity.

Here are some possible ways to record information – each will need to be evaluated to determine if it is applicable to your service.

- In a service where children are enrolled on a permanent basis and attend regularly, feedback from families in the form of a survey may be useful. However, it would not be helpful for a service in a gym where children attend only occasionally and for limited hours.

- A communication book or diary that records information provided by the parent each time the child attends.
- The enrolment form and other introductory information about the child provided at enrolment and updated regularly.
- Feedback from families and children (surveys, questionnaires, notes from interviews and conversations) about the program.
- A 'graffiti whiteboard' that families can use to give feedback quickly using sticky notes or markers.
- Online app-based products that communicate information about the program and children's learning to families.
- Notes, observations or records made about children's interests, needs and learning – anything that is noticed about a child or about an aspect of the program – anything that's happening, something that a child says or does, or what's working well and what's not.
- Collections of children's artwork – drawings, paintings, etc.
- Photos of children engaged in the program.



... remember
documenting is about
quality, not quantity.



Reflection questions

- An individual support plan for children with additional needs.
- A reflection diary or journal specifically for educators with more detailed notes that reflect on the program and aspects of the program that might need to change. This is evidence of ongoing assessment of what's working, how it's working, and how it can be improved. These notes might come out of an informal discussion with colleagues and families and could be used at a meeting with the staff team to plan for the future.

- What kinds of documentation do you use now?
- How does it link to what you plan and provide for children every day?
- Are there additional kinds of documentation or changes to current documentation that would contribute to a more effective program?
- Consider the sort of information you record about children.
- How do you know what's important and worth writing down?
- Do you have an agreed plan about what you will record and who will be involved?
- How do you use these notes?
- How do they support the next planning decisions?
- Where are the notes stored and who has access to them?



Ideas to try

- Even if you don't know if something is significant, if it catches your attention and it represents something that's changing for children, it's worth jotting down a note about it.
- Keep a small note pad in your pocket to take down notes as you work with the children.
- As you watch, listen and talk with children, you learn about what experiences to offer and how to offer them. The notes you make about this can then be used later to build up knowledge of individual children and to inform program decisions.
- Photos are another good way of making a brief record – but make sure you add some written notes.

Sharing the program with families



Children's Services Regulations

Information about the educational program to be given to parents (regulation 45)

Sharing information with families is an important way to ensure parents are confident about the education and care their child receives in the service. Creating efficient ways (both formally and informally) to exchange information with families is particularly helpful. Ideally, this occurs each time the child attends the service, both when they arrive and before they leave.

Educators might consider a range of strategies, including:

- being deliberate about welcoming each child and parent individually and using their names (have a list handy)
- supporting parents to settle their child as they come into the program, and having a friendly informal conversation with the parent to put them at ease

- having a notebook, folder or sheet on which parents write any information that educators need to know about the child that day
- sharing something positive about their child's experience with parents, which contributes to their feelings of trust.

Displaying a program for families that outlines the planned learning experiences that will be offered to children also gives a powerful message about the role of families in the program, and reminds them that they are considered as important partners in their child's experience at the service. Think about what families will want to know, and document the information so that it's easy to understand and gives them a picture of what will happen.



Features of effective programs

Relationships and interactions



Children's Services Regulations

Interactions with children (regulation 104)

Relationships in groups (regulation 105)

Warm and positive interactions between children and educators create relationships that foster children's learning.

In children's services, educators will need to develop skills at building these relationships quickly, and nurturing these connections each time they work with children.

Relationships are developed when educators show interest in children, demonstrate pleasure in the child's company and respond to their ideas and interests. Talking, singing and playing with children, including young babies, is an effective way to build respectful relationships. Meaningful conversations support thinking and problem-solving, and support children to learn, develop and grow.

Helping children settle in and make the transition from being with family to being in the children's service is essential for their wellbeing. Sometimes, at the start, both families and children need gentle, caring support from staff to separate. Encouraging family members to stay with the child for a time while the child gets familiar with the place and people, can help alleviate children's separation anxiety. Being with children when parents leave, holding and comforting them and then helping them find something interesting to do can make it easier.

When children first start coming to the service, it's best if they stay only for a short time, but long enough to settle and get involved with what's going on. The time they stay can be gradually extended until they feel comfortable with staying on their own.

Something else to think about:

Talking with Children

Meaningful conversations with children are one of the most powerful ways educators can develop relationships that enhance learning. Educators do this when they take advantage of every opportunity to have one-to-one interactions with children that are warm and absorbing, even if they are brief.

Talking with children, including babies, is important because it:

- helps children learn language and how to communicate
- supports feelings of belonging
- adds to feelings of safety and security when they are away from their families
- helps them learn about the world around them.

Educators can talk with children about what's happening and about the things they like and, where appropriate, what might be worrying them. It's just as important to encourage children to talk by being a good listener and responding to the things they say.



Arrivals and departures are part of the daily routine, and can be used as an opportunity to deepen relationships between children, their families and the service. For other examples of routines see the 'Routines' section on page 26 of this guide.

Service leaders and approved providers can support educators to build relationships by giving priority to interacting with children and helping them to plan strategies that nurture these connections. Building a relationship with each child over time is a priority in a quality service.

Responsiveness and respect are particularly important when helping children learn behaviours that are valued and accepted. Educators support children to learn to guide their own behaviour in positive ways through modelling respectful behaviour, talking with them, setting limits and helping them in other ways to learn about looking after themselves, others and the physical environment.

Children enjoy the company of, and learn a lot from, each other. One of the most important experiences a service can offer is the opportunity for children to spend quality time with other children. Learning to socialise and get along well with each other is one of the challenging areas of learning for young children, and they will need educators to help them to develop these skills.

Positive relationships and interactions between educators and children, children and other children, and educators and families form the foundation for a quality program. Every family and child needs to feel welcomed and that they belong. Children need to feel respected and to know that warm, caring adults will look after them.

Educators initiating one-to-one interactions with young children is important at all times and particularly during routine activities such as nappy changing and mealtimes. These interactions support children's learning and development and feelings of wellbeing.



The physical environment



Children's Services Regulations

Furniture, materials and equipment (regulation 74)

Outdoor space – natural environment (regulation 82)

Welcoming and inspiring physical environments, such as the way the furniture, resources and materials are arranged, make a significant positive contribution to how children learn. Educators can support this learning when they set up an environment that is vibrant, inviting and flexible. An environment should be both responsive and challenging to children's interests and abilities.

Consider the following ideas in relation to setting up an engaging learning environment in a children's service.

- Ensure that children have a choice of materials, equipment and toys to choose from and that these are both accessible and safe.
- Display materials in a thoughtful and attractive way, for example, on shelves instead of in baskets or boxes, so that children can choose. Place materials in interesting combinations, for example, toy animals with blocks.
- Provide lots of open-ended materials that can be used in different ways by children of different ages and with different interests. Some examples of open-ended materials include blocks, Duplo and Lego bricks, construction toys, balls, paper and crayons or felt tip pens. Also make materials for dramatic play available, such as dolls, a home corner and dress-ups. While children enjoy single-use toys, such as jigsaw puzzles, these usually only suit children in particular age ranges.
- Try to provide some experiences for children who want to be active, even if there isn't an outside play area – some examples include a simple obstacle course, appliance cartons to crawl through, cardboard boxes or baskets into which to throw soft balls.
- Supply a large number of picture books accessible for children of different ages, including sturdy ones with cardboard pages for babies and young toddlers.
- Guard against having too much or too little available. The aim is a rich and interesting environment that isn't overwhelming.



Reflection questions

- Look at the ideas in this section and use them to evaluate the environment in your service.
- Which of these points currently reflects the way your environments are created?
- Which ones could be strengthened?
- How would you go about doing this?

- Aim to offer each child opportunities for both easy successes and challenges. This could mean dividing up the space into smaller areas, while still ensuring good supervision. Smaller spaces help children concentrate and allow children to interact with one or two children at a time. Use portable barriers for times when older children are doing something that isn't safe for babies and toddlers. In other words, set up the space to encourage children to get along well with each other and to reduce the amount of time directing children.
 - Be aware of the noise level – use music for a purpose and for children's benefit, rather than as background that contributes to the noise level.
 - Try to create an environment that reflects the communities and cultures of the families using the service – consider if the children and their families feel welcome and at home in the environment
- Understand that when children play and can choose things to do and get very involved in their learning, the space that they are in will become somewhat messy and disorganised – a very tidy environment where mess isn't allowed isn't always a quality learning environment. Try to maintain a balance between keeping the space and materials organised enough that children can find things and concentrate, and accepting that messiness and 'disorganisation' happens when children play.

When children can choose to play and explore in a rich educational environment in which they feel comfortable, educators will be able to interact with individual children and each other in ways that maximise learning and support children and families to feel safe, secure and supported.

Something else to think about:

Changing Spaces Around

Occasionally, but not too often, it's great to change the environment around. How often spaces are changed around should depend first and foremost on children's interests and engagement. Children can be less engaged if nothing ever changes, but at the same time, there is security in a level of sameness.

For example, if the program has some new children and/or younger children and the space seems to be working, (that is, children are engaged and settled), then you don't need to change things.

Likewise, if children seem unsettled and uninterested, it might be time to change things and create new challenges.

Keep in mind that a little change can make a big difference, especially for young children.



Play and learning experiences

Programs that are full of rich opportunities for children to play and explore provide one of the best possibilities for learning and development.

Children and families will feel positive about participating in children's services when the learning experiences offered are interesting, accessible and varied. These opportunities come mostly from:

- rich environments that build learning, that offer children choices and let them take the lead in their own play and learning
- educators who design programs that respond to children's interests and capabilities, and reflect the values and expectations of their families
- caring and respectful interactions and communication between educators and children, sometimes initiated by adults, at other times by children.

It is important to note that every experience a child encounters in a children's service should contribute to their learning and development, rather than just a few special activities. When educators build programs around a few special activities and little else, there is a risk that ongoing play and learning experiences in a rich environment may be neglected.

Although special activities such as group times or flexible 'free' craft opportunities can enrich the program, there is no value in making children stop what they are doing and all participate in an experience that an adult initiates.

It's not always easy to predict what children will choose to play with but, when making decisions about the program, it's important to try to balance the activities so that they are all equally interesting to the children and they won't all want to do the same thing at the same time.



Ideas to try

- Organise an 'environment audit' where you walk through the children's learning spaces (as well as the entry) to assess their quality and effectiveness.
- Look at the overall environment and ask yourself how interesting it is for children.
- A rich environment is much more than activities on tables and a collection of toys.
- Ask yourself what there is to do in the space if you took all the toys away.
- For example, are there interesting pictures on the wall at child height for children to look at and talk about?

When programs provide a range of learning experiences for children to choose from, it supports children to follow their interests and engage in play and learning.

Something else to think about:

What if the service has no outdoor space?

Some children's services are not required to have outdoor space:

- services with a Limited Hours service approval, and
- some services with an Occasional Care service approval that were formerly licensed as a Limited Hours Type 2 service before May 2020.

(Regulation 77(1))

In this situation, educators will need to plan creatively to provide learning experiences in a natural learning environment. Options may include: setting up a 'wet area' with sand and water, having a collection of foliage, sticks, stones, nuts and berries, etc., or taking children to a park.

Routines

Routines, or the daily tasks or experiences children participate in, are opportunities for conversations and interactions, for learning important skills and moving toward independence. Rather than being separate from the planned learning experiences offered in a children's program, routines can create meaning and support children to learn about themselves and others. They can also provide children with a sense of security and safety where children can interact in a stable environment. Examples of these routines include: arriving, leaving, toileting and nappy changes, eating, dressing, handwashing and resting.

Arriving and leaving are particularly important routines in a children's service and need to be given priority when making decisions about the program. Helping children settle in and make the transition from being with family to being in the service is essential for their

wellbeing. Sometimes children will be upset about coming to care and being away from their family and home. Some ideas to settle children are set out in the 'Relationships and interactions' section starting on page 21 of this guide.

Mealtimes are another routine which can be used as an opportunity to support children by modelling sensitive and responsive interactions. This can include how to respond appropriately to others' behaviour, how to communicate effectively to resolve conflicts, and taking turns. Sitting down to share a meal can also support conversations about healthy eating, children's own home cultures, and more. It can also allow for children's agency if they are allowed to serve themselves, choose which of the options they will eat, and how much. Sharing food can create stronger relationships between children, and between children and educators.



Reflection questions

- What importance do you place on routines in your program?
- Are there ways that you could integrate routines into the program and take more advantage of them as part of a learning experience for children?



Ideas to try

- Create a space on the planning format you use to plan for a specific routine, for example, handwashing. Consider what action you could take to make this a stronger learning experience.

Something else to think about:

Supervision

Supervising children at all times and staying aware of what is happening is essential.

Actively supervising children is an expectation of the CS Act and a critical part of the educator's responsibility to keep children safe.

Effective supervision means enthusiastically engaging with children and planning a program that reflects children's needs, interests and abilities.

Sometimes, the need to supervise and help children with activities can interfere with the quality of the children's interactions and the supervision of children who are not participating in the activity.

Often, the simplest experiences are the most effective to supervise. Consider setting up a collection of cardboard boxes, some new props to go with the blocks, a few empty food packets in the home corner, a few new hats in the dress-up corner, a fresh batch of play dough, looking at a book with a few children, singing a song together.

CS Act: Section 105



The organisation of time

In a children's service, children will be coming and going most of the time, which means that having a relaxed, easy flow to the day or session is critical so that children can enter and leave easily. A good guide to follow is to minimise the times when children are waiting with nothing to do such as queuing, and when everyone must do the same thing.

Flexible, relaxed transitions from one part of the session to another are easier to manage for educators and children. Letting children know in advance that a change is about to happen allows them to finish what they are doing.



Reflection questions

- How is time organised in your service?
- What are the most important times in the program? Why?
- Are transitions smooth or hurried?
- Are there times when children are waiting? What else could happen at these times?



Ideas to try

- Try rearranging the timetable to be more flexible to enable you to try something different.
- For example, consider trying an indoor/outdoor time when most of the children are arriving.



Realising the potential of children's services

Designing and delivering a quality educational program brings many parts together to ensure that children, no matter how long they are present, receive rich and positive learning opportunities.

What matters most is that educators take time to think about the way the program supports children to feel a sense of belonging and to be engaged in meaningful ways.

This guide encourages educators to take time to plan programs that include:

- opportunities that cater for all areas of children's learning and development
- a balance of child and educator-initiated experiences
- opportunities for children to make choices and contribute to decisions
- support for interactions and relationships between children and educators that are warm, inclusive and respectful
- environments that have plentiful resources that reflect children's interests and are organised to encourage children's engagement

- deliberate efforts to welcome and communicate with all families.

Families want their children to be safe, secure and happy when they are in a children's service. Changes to the CS Act that commenced in 2020 confirm that this experience is also one that supports children to learn and develop.

To make the most of the educational programs in children's services educators must be enthusiastic and committed to knowing the needs and interests of each child.

They must develop plans that support learning and development, and take the time to reflect on how those plans will be improved. In this way, children's services contribute positively to outcomes that mean children receive the best possible start in life.



Links

There is a range of resources available that support educators to design and deliver programs that are in line with the practices, principles and outcomes of the approved learning frameworks.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) provides videos, learning and development plans, and other helpful resources to support the development of best practice programs and curriculum for children aged 0-8 years – [Early years curriculum resources](#).

In particular the **Early Years Planning Cycle Resource**: for the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

VCAA's Wellbeing Practice Guide focuses on practices that support the outcome: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training provides resources for early childhood educators to support the [Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework](#).

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment provides resources for early childhood educators to support the [Early Years Learning Framework](#) and [My Time, Our Place](#).

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) provides resources for early childhood educators.

The Commission for Children and Young People provides information relating to the Victorian Child Safe Standards, the Reportable Conduct Scheme and the Child Information Sharing Scheme.

