

New beginnings for early childhood road safety education in Australia – leading change through policy development

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Abstract

The first ever National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) introduced 1 January 2012, called for strong national leadership to improve the quality of education and care for children in Australia. The Road Safety Education Reference Group Australasia (RSERGA) responded to this challenge by advocating for the place of road safety education (RSE) in this new Framework, resulting in RSE being included in this new national regulatory environment. Today all Australian early childhood services can be assessed on how RSE is incorporated into the educational program. Although a significant achievement, this was just the beginning of the journey. All levels of the early childhood sector in Victoria needed assistance to meet the new NQF responsibilities relating to road safety. Research by Neuroscience Research Australia revealed deficits in knowledge about safe transportation of children among the Family Day Care sector in Victoria. VicRoads, together with Early Learning Association Australia, responded by leading the development of model best practice road safety education and safe transport policies to guide the sector to improve road safety knowledge, practice and outcomes. This paper will discuss the evidence-based approach to developing the policies and the support provided for successful implementation. A few years ago, this work would have been impossible, but RSERGA took the unique opportunity presented by national reform to embed road safety into the early childhood system, improving national outcomes for children and their families.

Background

Children and road safety

Research shows that road trauma is one of the leading causes of death among young Australians. The road transport accident death rate for 0-14 year olds (1.4 per 100,000) is higher than accidental drowning deaths (1 per 100,000 children). Nationwide, in 2011 there were 61 deaths among children 0-14 years due to road transport incidents (incidents occurring on a public highway or street involving a moving vehicle such as a motor vehicle, bicycle or tram). 75% of children who died as a result of road transport accident were passengers, and a further 20% were pedestrians. The remaining 5% were cyclists or motorcycle riders.ⁱ

Young children are particularly vulnerable because of their small size and the fact that their cognitive and perceptual skills are still developingⁱⁱ. Younger Australian children aged 0-4 were 2.2 times more likely to be killed in a road transport accident than those aged 10-14 (2.0 and 0.9 per 100,000, respectively)ⁱⁱⁱ, emphasising the importance of evidence-based road safety education programs in the early years.

Early childhood research and policy environment

Conclusive national and international evidence demonstrates that the significant brain growth, development and learning that occur in the early years of a child's life can have a dramatic impact on their present and future physical and mental health, behaviour and learning capabilities.^{iv} Research has shown that the brain grows rapidly and is most malleable during early childhood. Genetic make-up and environmental factors during early childhood interact to have life-long effects

on the structural development of a child's brain and on programming biological and behavioural responses.^v

A number of studies also point to the critical importance of high-quality in early childhood development programs for improving outcomes. Key aspects of quality linked to positive child outcomes include higher qualifications of the early childhood professionals, lower child-to-staff ratios and a strong relationship between the child and a stable caregiver.^{vi}

The research about the critical importance of children's early growth and development was pivotal in driving national reform in early childhood education and care. In December 2009, the Council of Australian Governments agreed to a partnership to establish a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care ('National Quality Framework'). Designed to give children the best possible start in life, the National Quality Framework which took effect on 1 January 2012, raises quality and drives continuous improvement in education and care services through:

- A National Quality Standard - sets a new national benchmark for the quality of education and care services, and promotes the safety, health and wellbeing of children.
- A national quality rating and assessment process - assesses and rates approved services against the National Quality Standard. The aim is to promote continuous improvement in the quality of child care and early learning services.
- A national legislative framework - the framework creates a uniform national approach to the regulation and quality assessment of child care and early learning services. It replaced existing separate state/territory licencing and quality assurance processes. The national legislative framework consists of the *Education and Care Services National Law*, and the *Education and Care Services National Regulations*.
- A national body governed by the Australian Government and state and territory governments - the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority - to ensure the new system is implemented consistently and effectively across all states and territories.

The National Quality Framework applies to most long day care, preschool/kindergarten, family day care and outside school hours care services in all states and territories.

The guiding principles of the National Quality Framework are:

- The rights and best interests of the child are paramount.
- Children are successful, competent and capable learners.
- Equity, inclusion and diversity underpin the framework.
- Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued.
- The role of parents and families is respected and supported.
- Best practice is expected in the provision of education and care services.^{vii}

The National Quality Standard is a key aspect of the National Quality Framework. The National Quality Standard consists of seven quality areas, each containing standards and elements, that children's education and care services are assessed and rated against. The seven quality areas are:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships with children
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Leadership and service management.

The National Quality Standard is linked to national learning frameworks that recognise children learn from birth. It outlines practices that support and promote children's learning. These are *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Early Years Learning Framework) and a framework for school aged care, *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia*.

Advocacy by the Road Safety Education Reference Group Australasia (RSEGA)

The National Quality Framework is a breakthrough for Australian children's education and care. For the first time, every state and territory in Australia is now working to achieve the same quality outcomes for children. This 'breakthrough' reform required a review of early childhood road safety education programs and practices and also provided a unique opportunity for state road and education authorities to advocate for road safety.

VicRoads, on behalf of RSEGA, led the response to the *Information Paper on the Education and Care Services National Law and the proposed National Regulations*. The submission advocated for the value and place of road safety education in the National Quality Framework. The submission brought together contemporary early childhood research and road safety research, resulting in a clear case for all Australian children to receive road safety education from birth. The submission was endorsed by Neuroscience Research Australia (NeuRA) and the Kidsafe Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Australia.

As a result, for the first time, road safety has been formally recognised as an important component of quality early childhood education and care for Australian children. The National Quality Standard includes assessment requirements such as:

- 'how road safety education and any active transport initiatives are incorporated into the program' (Standard 6.3, Element 6.3.2, Guide to the National Quality Standard).
- 'children being supported and appropriately supervised when being transported to or from the service by car, bus, train, tram or on foot.' (Standard 6.3, Element 6.3.2, Guide to the National Quality Standard).
- 'the strategies and processes used to support children's positive transition to formal schooling and children with additional needs in their transition to school and to specialist services.' (Standard 6.3, Element 6.3.2, Guide to the National Quality Standard).
- 'educators supervising children closely when they are in a situation that presents a higher risk of injury – for example, on an excursion near a road or water.' (Standard 2.3, Element 2.3.1, Guide to the National Quality Standard).

Introduction

Although the inclusion of road safety in the National Quality Framework was a significant achievement, research revealed that the Victorian early childhood sector required support and guidance particularly in the area of the safe transportation of children in vehicles. A study conducted by NeuRA in November 2011 and commissioned by VicRoads revealed that knowledge of best practice in transporting children was relatively poor among Victorian family day care service providers. The greatest gaps in knowledge among the providers were related to the appropriate transition time to adult seat belts, and the use of the front seat. The findings indicated that “more effort is required to support family day care services, which are required to ensure that transport is suitable and safe for all children.”^{viii}

In addition, a baseline evaluation of VicRoads early childhood road safety education delivery model conducted in 2011-2012 highlighted that a low proportion of early childhood services and early childhood peak body organisations had road safety education and safe transport policies in place. For example, of the 376 early childhood educators who participated in the evaluation, 39% reported that there was no reference to road safety in any of their policies. In addition, there was scant reference to road safety in the policies of Victorian early childhood peak body organisations.^{ix}

In light of these findings, VicRoads recognised that more research was required to re-define early childhood road safety education in the context of the National Quality Framework and to support the sector to incorporate evidence-based road safety into the curriculum. To achieve this, in 2011, VicRoads, with funding from the RSERGA agencies, contracted the Child Health Promotion Research Centre at Edith Cowan University to develop National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. Current literature on road safety education and early childhood education was reviewed in light of the Early Years Learning Framework and underpinned the development of the eight national practices. The national practices were then validated by experts in road safety and early childhood education. The practices are designed to guide early childhood services and policy-makers to develop and implement evidence-based road safety education.^x For more information, please visit:

<http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/Home/SafetyAndRules/RoadSafetyEducation/EarlyChildhood/CoreEarlyChildhoodResources.htm>

VicRoads, in partnership with leading early childhood expert Catharine Hydon, Early Learning Association Australia and Gowrie Victoria, has recently developed an online resource for early childhood educators (including tertiary students) working with young children and their families in early childhood settings. The Starting Out Safely Educator Resource demonstrates how the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education can be implemented in a range of early childhood settings. The resource includes case studies, links to the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard and practice suggestions which bring the national practices to life. The resource guides educators in embedding road safety education in their curriculum, including the everyday interactions and conversations educators have with children and their families. Educators will engage with the resource in their local context, considering their local environment, children and families' experiences and understanding of road safety and any road safety challenges specific to their neighbourhood and community. VicRoads recognised the previous Starting Out Safely resource was no longer relevant or suitable for the early childhood context as it was an activity based approach. Importantly the new Starting Out Safely Educator Resource will support and empower educators to take children out into the community to gain valuable 'real world' road safety experience and to support them to reach their full potential as active and responsible community members.

Just prior to the development of the national practices, VicRoads led the redevelopment of its early childhood road safety education program (Starting Out Safely), first introduced in 1989. VicRoads embarked on a review of its delivery model, resulting in Starting Out Safely being delivered for the first time from within the early childhood sector after many years of being delivered by VicRoads regions. The review identified the importance and strength of working within the early childhood sector. Since 2011, Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) has delivered Starting Out Safely, with VicRoads and ELAA working in partnership with the early childhood sector to support best practice road safety education.

Starting Out Safely focuses on supporting early childhood educators to work collaboratively with children and their families to guide children's learning in 'being' and 'becoming' safe and independent road users. The program includes: early childhood road safety education advocacy at the state and national level; professional development for early childhood educators statewide; child restraint education (including to culturally and linguistically diverse communities) statewide and an interactive education session for children in funded kindergarten programs. These key components have been reviewed and redeveloped by VicRoads and ELAA to align with the National Quality Framework.

Since ELAA commenced delivery of Starting Out Safely in 2011, over 3,300 early childhood educators have participated in road safety education professional development sessions, delivered by leading early childhood experts, including over 500 early childhood students from tertiary institutions. Over 1500 preschools across Victoria have participated in ThingleToodle education sessions, reaching over 18,000 young Victorian children and their families. Over 2,400 parents and carers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities have attended over 125 child restraint education sessions. More than 1,300 family day care educators and 100 maternal and child health nurses have attended a child restraint education sessions.

Purpose

The research conducted in Victoria (refer to Introduction) pointed to the clear need to provide the early childhood sector with policy guidance and support to meet the road safety and safe transport needs of children as required by the National Quality Framework.

VicRoads, together with ELAA, and in consultation with the early childhood sector, responded by developing best practice Road Safety Education and Safe Transport Policies. This is the first time that such policies have been developed for the early childhood sector in Victoria.

The purpose of the Road Safety and Safe Transport Policies is to provide evidence-based, best practice guidelines and procedures to ensure children at early childhood services are:

- adequately supervised at all times, including on excursions and regular outings
- kept safe while travelling as pedestrians, cyclists or passengers in vehicles, and
- able to participate in road safety education to help them to become safe and responsible road users.

While the model policies present an optimum practice model for services, it is emphasised that the policies should be tailored to reflect the individual service's local context, philosophy, needs, practices, beliefs and values.

Method

The content of the policies was informed by the key road safety early childhood research (refer to Background) and the National Guidelines for the Safe Restraint of Children Travelling in Motor Vehicles.^{xi} These guidelines, developed under the auspices of NeuRA and Kidsafe - The Child Accident Prevention Foundation of Australia, provide best practice recommendations that have been approved by the National Health and Medical Research Council. The Child Restraint Guidelines have been developed to ensure that parents receive straightforward, consistent advice from all sources on how to keep children safe in cars.

The content of the policies also reflect the Guiding Principles of the National Quality Framework (refer to Background).

ELAA, a national peak body, has considerable expertise and experience in developing policies for the early childhood sector and supporting their implementation. ELAA led the drafting of the Road Safety Education and Safe Transport Policies, in consultation with VicRoads, early childhood education leaders, peak bodies including Family Day Care Victoria, Family Day Care Victoria Australia and Municipal Association of Victoria and a leading child restraint expert, Dr Julie Brown.

Initially, two draft policies were developed – a policy for early childhood services and a policy for family day care services as the needs of each service type are so different. For example, as many family day educators regularly transport children in cars, they need to have a good understanding of the Child Restraint Road Rules and how to fit, use and move child restraints.

Two focus groups were held to ‘test’ the policies; gather feedback and explore what barriers and motivators educators and providers might face in adopting the policies. One focus group was held with educators from six early childhood centres representing a range of service types. The other group comprised six family day care providers/coordinators from council run, non-profit and private services.

Results

Policy for early childhood services

On the whole the early childhood educators appeared to be more familiar with the style, format and level of detail of the policy presented. They seemed eager to adopt a best practice policy and to embrace any training or resources that were developed.

Policy for family day care

The focus group with family day care educators/providers highlighted the need for a different approach in presenting the policies and a greater level of support to implement them. The family day care educators/providers indicated that a shorter, less detailed policy would be desirable and that a summary version for family day care educators would be useful.

In light of the feedback received, some changes were made to simplify and shorten the policy for family day care services. Rather than having one longer policy it was determined that two policies be developed: one focusing on road safety education and the other policy on safe transportation.

The focus group with the family day care educators highlighted the need to engage with peak bodies such as Family Day Care Victoria, to ensure the relevance of the policies to the family day care context. ELAA has strengthened relationships with these peak bodies, which has also provided opportunities for ELAA to educate the family day care sector about the new policies.

Discussion

Critical to the success of these policies, as identified in the focus groups and broader consultation, is the need to support early childhood services to implement them in practice. As part of the Starting Out Safely program, ELAA has commenced development of a range of support materials and professional development sessions that will be offered to services to assist them in meeting the policy requirements. For example, ELAA has partnered with Moonee Valley Family Day Care, who has agreed to ‘champion’ the policies and provide feedback on their experience implementing the policies in practice. ELAA will work closely with this service/scheme to develop resources and training to support policy implementation across the state.

Importantly, ELAA will review and update the policies regularly to ensure continued compliance with legislative and regulatory requirements and the most recent evidence base.

The policies are available from the VicRoads and ELAA websites and through ELAA’s *PolicyWorks Manual – National Quality Framework*.

Conclusion

As early childhood services start to implement the new Road Safety Education and Safe Transport Policies and engage more with the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education, it is important to evaluate the extent to which these interventions lead to an improvement in educators’ road safety knowledge and practices and ultimately improve outcomes for Victorian children and their families. In particular, as the policies are promoted and supported throughout Victoria, it would be valuable to follow up the NeuRA research to determine whether there has been an improvement in the Victorian family day care sector’s knowledge and practices in relation to the safe transportation of children.

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