

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

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

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

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

55 • A National Quality Standard - sets a new national benchmark for the quality of education
56 and care services, and promotes the safety, health and wellbeing of children.

57 • A national quality rating and assessment process - assesses and rates approved services
58 against the National Quality Standard. The aim is to promote continuous improvement in the
59 quality of child care and early learning services.

60 • A national legislative framework - the framework creates a uniform national approach to the
61 regulation and quality assessment of child care and early learning services. It replaced
62 existing separate state/territory licencing and quality assurance processes. The national
63 legislative framework consists of the *Education and Care Services National Law*, and the
64 *Education and Care Services National Regulations*.

65 • A national body governed by the Australian Government and state and territory
66 governments - the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority - to ensure
67 the new system is implemented consistently and effectively across all states and territories.

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

70 The guiding principles of the National Quality Framework are:

71 • The rights and best interests of the child are paramount.

72 • Children are successful, competent and capable learners.

73 • Equity, inclusion and diversity underpin the framework.

74 • Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued.

75 • The role of parents and families is respected and supported.

76 • Best practice is expected in the provision of education and care services.^{vii}

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

- 80 1. Educational program and practice
- 81 2. Children's health and safety
- 82 3. Physical environment
- 83 4. Staffing arrangements
- 84 5. Relationships with children
- 85 6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- 86 7. Leadership and service management.

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

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

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

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

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

- 108 • 'how road safety education and any active transport initiatives are incorporated into the
 109 program' (Standard 6.3, Element 6.3.2, Guide to the National Quality Standard).
- 110 • 'children being supported and appropriately supervised when being transported to or from
 111 the service by car, bus, train, tram or on foot.' (Standard 6.3, Element 6.3.2, Guide to the
 112 National Quality Standard).
- 113 • 'the strategies and processes used to support children's positive transition to formal
 114 schooling and children with additional needs in their transition to school and to specialist
 115 services.' (Standard 6.3, Element 6.3.2, Guide to the National Quality Standard).
- 116 • 'educators supervising children closely when they are in a situation that presents a higher
 117 risk of injury – for example, on an excursion near a road or water.' (Standard 2.3, Element
 118 2.3.1, Guide to the National Quality Standard).

119 Introduction

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

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

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

146 <http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/Home/SafetyAndRules/RoadSafetyEducation/EarlyChildhood/Core>
147 [EarlyChildhoodResources.htm](http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/Home/SafetyAndRules/RoadSafetyEducation/EarlyChildhood/Core)

148 VicRoads, in partnership with leading early childhood expert Catharine Hydon, Early Learning
149 Association Australia and Gowrie Victoria, has recently developed an online resource for early
150 childhood educators (including tertiary students) working with young children and their families in
151 early childhood settings. The Starting Out Safely Educator Resource demonstrates how the National
152 Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education can be implemented in a range of early
153 childhood settings. The resource includes case studies, links to the Early Years Learning
154 Framework and the National Quality Standard and practice suggestions which bring the national
155 practices to life. The resource guides educators in embedding road safety education in their
156 curriculum, including the everyday interactions and conversations educators have with children and
157 their families. Educators will engage with the resource in their local context, considering their local
158 environment, children and families’ experiences and understanding of road safety and any road
159 safety challenges specific to their neighbourhood and community. VicRoads recognised the
160 previous Starting Out Safely resource was no longer relevant or suitable for the early childhood
161 context as it was an activity based approach. Importantly the new Starting Out Safely Educator
162 Resource will support and empower educators to take children out into the community to gain
163 valuable ‘real world’ road safety experience and to support them to reach their full potential as
164 active and responsible community members.
165

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

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

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

190 **Purpose**

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

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

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

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

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

206 **Method**

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

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

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

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

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

231 **Results**

232 *Policy for early childhood services*

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

236 *Policy for family day care*

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

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

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

248 **Discussion**

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

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

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

261 **Conclusion**

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

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