



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



'Additional needs'—looking beyond disability

Setting the scene

All children, in fact all people, have additional needs at times. These may be relatively minor or life altering; short term, long term or ongoing.

Children have additional needs for a variety of reasons, including:

- having a disability
- living in complex or vulnerable circumstances
- their cultural, linguistic or family background.

E-Newsletter No. 38 (Owens, 2012) focused on the additional needs that arise for children who have a disability. This e-Newsletter focuses on the many other categories of additional needs that educators encounter and respond to.

Inclusion (or *inclusive practice*) is a term used often in relation to children who have disabilities. However, in its broadest sense, *inclusion* refers to the right of all children to participate fully in the curriculum in an early learning setting. The glossary of the *Guide to the National Quality Standard* clarifies how the term *every child* applies to inclusion:

Every child is used in the National Quality Standard when it is intended to suggest an inclusive approach. It implies that all children have the same opportunity regardless of their age, gender, background or abilities (NQS Guide, ACECQA, 2011 p. 203).

The NQS Guide states that children 'who require or will benefit from specific considerations or adaptations' (p. 202), in addition to children who have a disability, include those who:

- are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- are recent arrivals in Australia
- have a culturally and linguistically diverse background
- live in isolated geographic locations
- are experiencing difficult family circumstances or stress
- are at risk of abuse and neglect
- have a medical or health condition
- demonstrate challenging behaviours
- are gifted or have special talents
- have other extra support needs.



Children in the above categories may have additional needs, but that does not imply *neediness*, *weakness* or *deficit*. In fact, some categories of additional needs, such as having a home language other than English, experiencing more than one cultural context, or being gifted, are in fact strengths. The final item on the list above is children who 'have other extra support needs'. These may arise from a wide range of circumstances, for example:

- settling into a new service
- moving to a new group within the service
- having a new baby in the family
- being the only child who is 'different' in some way—skin colour, gender or age, for example
- a parent's temporary absence, be it planned or unexpected
- a parent's illness
- family separation and divorce
- a death in the family.

A very shy, insecure or very active child has additional needs also.

A complete list of the origins of additional needs might lead to the conclusion that additional needs are essentially about each child's uniqueness and the influence of the contexts of their lives on their wellbeing and learning.



Including children with additional needs

Some educators assert that supporting children with additional needs is the same as good practice with any child. While the same basic principles apply to all children, at times educators need additional skills and knowledge to ensure that they can truly support each child's learning.

Because diverse circumstances can lead to a child having additional needs, it is difficult to offer general advice about how to respond effectively. Specific responses depend on the reason for the need, the child and the family. For example:

- A child who is gifted may need not only challenging learning opportunities that match their interests and capabilities, but also educators who understand that academic giftedness or talent may not extend to social skills and who will help the child learn to interact positively with other children.
- A child who is missing a parent due to their absence needs affection and attention, and opportunities to communicate feelings to an empathetic educator.
- A child who has a new sibling may need a break from focusing on, or even talking about, the new family member.
- A child who has experienced trauma because of a natural disaster, their experiences as an asylum seeker, domestic violence or child abuse or neglect, may need intensive specialist help in addition to secure, trusting relationships in an early learning setting.
- A child who is learning English as a second language needs someone in the service who speaks their home language and extra support to develop communication skills in English.

Educators plan and implement the curriculum to include all children and emphasise both what children have in common and what makes each child unique. Some children will need extra attention, more support and more direct intervention from educators than others.

Collaborative relationships with families are essential

Good practice stems from knowing each child deeply. Knowing children well means knowing them in the context of their culture, family circumstances and community life. Deep knowledge comes from spending time with the child and also from information shared by the child's family, in a relationship of mutual trust and respect.

Partnerships with all families are crucial, but they are particularly important for children with additional needs. Families are valuable sources of information about many things—for example their culture, the child's previous experiences and interests, and effective strategies to support the child's learning.

Some families are much more open and willing than others to share their stories. Some will want to tell their story over and over while others will take time to trust you. The stronger the relationship, the more families are likely to share. Educators need to plan their interactions with families with a view to building relationships that respect the value of what families can tell them, and also their rights to privacy and confidentiality. Educators need to ask themselves how much they really need to know in order to support a child and avoid pressuring families to divulge information.

Sometimes it is the child who has additional needs; often the child's additional needs are connected to a family member's or the whole family's additional needs. When parents or families are going through stressful and difficult times, the best way to support them may be to show respect and friendliness, demand little of them and demonstrate that we value and welcome both them and their child.

Families' additional needs and stresses may complicate our relationships with them. If this happens, it is important to focus on what you and families share: a commitment to promoting the child's learning and wellbeing.



Strong connections with other services

Addressing children's and families' additional needs often exceeds the expertise of educators in an early learning setting. Knowing when to seek specialist support for families and having connections and relationships with a range of human service organisations and specialists makes it easier to help families access the help they need. Going beyond giving information, educators can support families' access and participation. As one parent said, 'I felt so much better about going to the mental health service because I knew that the childcare centre had used them before. I knew if they thought they were good, they would be.'

Other agencies and specialists are sources of advice and information for educators. An educator reported that her service's strong links with a community cultural organisation meant that they had experts ready to help them. She said, 'I don't have to be an instant expert on culture, language or religion—I just need to know when to get help and advice and then get it!' She also said that the service's relationship with the organisation contributed to families from that cultural group trusting them.

Conclusion

Ultimately, including children with any additional needs is about equity, respect for diversity and having high expectations. Educators apply those principles to ensure that all children participate fully in the curriculum and progress in all areas described in the *Early Years Learning Framework Learning Outcomes*.

When you feel challenged by a child or family with additional needs, keep in mind that what is most important is a trusting, respectful, caring relationship with the child and the child's family, and that the child's interests are paramount.

Practice example

A mother from an African background arrived several years ago at a service with two children, a three-year-old and a baby. She was in crisis, having left a relationship because of domestic violence. She had just come out of hospital, where she was treated for injuries received in a domestic violence incident. Her two children had been cared for through Child Protection while she was in hospital.

She had no family or other support and needed a place for her children to go while she got her life back in order.

The first challenge the service faced was helping the children and mother separate each day. Both children were extremely distressed by separation, having recently experienced extended separation from their mother and placement in foster care. The mother was also very distressed, and when she left the children she stayed near the doors of the children's rooms, listening to them crying. The director described the family's settling-in period as 'heart-wrenching'. Educators gave extra attention, including lots of cuddles, to the children. The director formed a relationship with the mother and stayed with her outside the rooms until she was ready to leave.

It took a very long time for the older child to show signs of feeling secure in the environment. He began to talk about the specific domestic violence incident that resulted in his mother's hospitalisation. The educators were careful listeners, open and non-judgmental. They recognised that he still loved his father and that it was important for him to express these feelings. He cried often and over very minor issues. All of the educators in the group recognised his emotional needs and supported and comforted him.

Educators noticed that he enjoyed drawing and was very skilled at communicating through drawing. He frequently drew police, usually in police cars, and his mother being assaulted. Whenever he drew a picture of his family, there was a police car in the background. Occasionally he drew a picture of his dad. Educators encouraged his drawing, giving him many opportunities to draw. They listened attentively when he wanted to talk about what he had drawn. The service arranged for an art therapist to come in. She worked with all the children although her focus was on this child with additional needs.

Educators made special efforts to help the child feel a strong sense of belonging to the group, encouraging him to be a helper and involving him in tasks with educators that allowed time for one-to-one conversations.

When the younger child had difficulties separating, the older child spent time in her room with her.

When the younger child had a minor fall at the service and developed bruising, the director made sure that Child Protection knew that the accident had happened at the service.

'One role that we play is that of advocate for the family with other agencies', she said.

The service played an active role in linking the mother with other support services in the community. They worked closely with Child Protection, supported her as she engaged with welfare agencies, and helped her to secure financial support. They liaised with her counsellors and continue to communicate with others who support this family, such as members of her church.

Although the situation has improved, the director believes that this family will always have additional needs, as the mother has ongoing physical and emotional health challenges. According to the director, including this child and family essentially boils down to being accepting, welcoming, respectful and having strong links in the community.

A sign of the strong relationship that the family has with the service is that the mother shares her successes and achievements, as well as relying on the service for support. She recently interrupted a staff meeting to report that her third child, who was in school when the younger children began attending the service, had been chosen to be school captain!

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References

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Biography

Anne Stonehouse lives in Melbourne and is a consultant in early childhood. She was a member of the consortium that developed the national *Early Years Learning Framework*.

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Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.



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