



Review of the 2011–2014 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan

Building educator capability to provide inclusive programs that build children's social and emotional well-being research project

In 2014, the Department of Education and Training reviewed the 2011-2014 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Action Plan (WAP) to assess the plan's achievements and to inform future development strategies for the early childhood education and care workforce.

The *Improving workforce capability and service delivery responses to children with complex emotional and social behaviours within an early childhood education and care setting* research project was undertaken as part of the review in response to issues raised at the Early Childhood Workshop in December 2013.

During the workshop, educators and service providers described the increasing challenges faced by services seeking to respond effectively to children with complex emotional and social behaviours, and identified a need for further professional development and understanding of inclusive responses.

How was the research conducted?

The [Creche and Kindergarten Association Limited](#) (C&K) was commissioned to complete the project between July and September 2014.

Data was collected through a mixed method approach including:

- six face-to-face consultation meetings across five regional locations
- an online survey distributed through ECEC peak bodies and service providers, government agencies, regional officers and other networks
- a review of relevant literature regarding best practice.

93

participants attended a face-to-face consultation meeting

241

respondents completed the online survey

The project was overseen by an expert advisory group with conclusions tested and validated by a focus group drawn from across the sector.

What were the research findings?

In Queensland, the exact number of children in ECEC settings with complex emotional and social behaviours is not known. These children may or may not have a diagnosed disability. Educators consistently reported that the number of children with complex emotional and social behaviours in their services has increased.

'Children arrive on our doorstep undiagnosed and we are the first port of call in addressing their needs [with] little support from outside agencies. [We] have one additional needs educator in a group with three children diagnosed with autism (very complex needs)... I totally support inclusion but only [with the] necessary resources to support [us to] make the pre-prep [kindergarten] year a positive experience for all.'

Gaps in current skills and knowledge

Educators believed that there were shortfalls in the adequacy of existing qualifications and training to sufficiently prepare them to respond to the needs of children with complex emotional and social behaviours and their families.

'I operate an inclusive program where the diversity of all people are celebrated, including those who behave in diverse ways. Supporting children/families with complex social/emotional needs can be emotionally taxing and at times can feel very difficult when I do not feel trained to manage the types of behaviours presenting.'

The research identified that many qualifications have limited content relating to inclusive practice for working with children with complex behaviours. While it is an entry level qualification, the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care was particularly seen as insufficient given the complexity of issues with which children are currently presenting.

The online survey asked educators whether they had attended training on recognising and guiding children with complex social and emotional behaviours:

69% indicated they had attended training

31% indicated they had not received any specific training

Many respondents indicated that, despite completing training, they still felt they had skill deficits in this area.

'I feel like I'm not knowledgeable to help them (child) and their family.'

Educators proposed multiple responses to this issue including:

- mandatory induction training for all new workers on supporting children with complex behaviours
- offering more specialised skill sets as either professional development or part of an existing qualification
- revising current units offered in diploma level qualifications to more adequately reflect contemporary educator needs
- raising the entry level qualifications required
- making available a broader range of skill sets from other qualification areas.

Relationships with families

The capacity, competence and confidence of educators to provide feedback to parents about their child's complex needs was identified in the research as a critical skill needed.

The online survey indicated that 91 per cent of respondents had held conversations with parents regarding children's social and emotional behaviour. Educators stated that these conversations could be challenging, with parents not always receptive to feedback, and that achieving follow-through in referral to external medical and support agencies could be difficult. Educators were most likely to refer parents to general practitioners and medical specialists in the first instance.

'Parents are often distressed, confused and overwhelmed when they realise there is a developmental delay and/or when they get a diagnosis.'

Educators pointed to the positive role of parent education programs, such as the Circle of Security, in increasing parents' understanding of their child's behaviours and confidence in responding to their needs.

Links to allied health professionals

The research further identified the need for skills development in transdisciplinary practice, enabling educators to develop confidence in working professionally across disciplines at a local level. Educators believed more skills in this area would better equip them to not only form closer linkages with health care professionals, but assist to raise their profile as 'recognised and valued professionals'.

Educators proposed mentoring arrangements with allied health workers at a local level to build these relationships, whilst gaining practical skills and advice in guiding children with complex social and emotional needs.

'For children who are diagnosed, it is very reassuring to read reports from allied health and medical professionals. It can be very satisfying to work with these parents and collaboratively develop goals. Educators need to be allocated more paid time to work collaboratively with these families.'

Time

A further cause of stress for educators was that they felt compromised—that they could not deliver the desired quality learning program to children with complex needs due to lack of time and the limitations of existing staff/child ratios.

'Sometimes, my full attention has to be on that one child, leaving 19 other children to my assistant. [This] adds a layer of stress in every aspect of the day [and] raises doubts - are we dealing with this the correct way?'

Were findings dependent on location or service type?

Generally the data showed no difference in the views of respondents dependent on the type of ECEC setting (long day care, kindergarten, family day care, outside school hours care, etc.) or geographical location. However rural and remote services indicated there were fewer referral avenues and support services available to them.

Specific needs identified by educators

Across the consultations, educators stated they often felt stressed and unsupported in responding to complex needs. Respondents:

- found difficulty in easily accessing practical training and professional development because of the nature of their working environment, with little free time and the cost of training being prohibitive
- did not necessarily have strong connections with other services in their local area, so sharing of information on good practice was not always possible
- in rural, remote and regional areas, stated that they find it even more difficult to access professional development and support
- don't know where to go to look for resources, describing fragmented efforts to access information and learning tools online

- want to increase their knowledge and skills but said that a lot of the available resources don't quite fit the mark and are not sufficiently practical.

Respondents expressed the need for practical hands-on training, development and advice. They indicated they would benefit from:

- something accessible after hours 'when you aren't feeling good about what had happened during the day and are turning things over in your mind'
- an independent professional advisor, such as a child psychologist or other allied health professional, who was impartial, having no vested interest
- an opportunity to talk things through, discuss vulnerabilities, affirm strengths, and acquire new tools
- an opportunity to explore how to respond to challenging situations and complex behaviours exhibited by children and/or tasks such as speaking with parents
- a place to identify and affirm strengths and identify and address personal inhibitors.
- an opportunity to learn and use new tools and techniques.

'The advantage of after-hours professional advice is that it is more than just the exchange of advice, it provides someone to 'take risk' alongside.'

The following tables highlight the range of possible approaches and barriers to training and professional development identified by educators.

Proposed approaches
Localised training
Mentoring on the job
Online access to training and resources
After hours advice and support
Shared professional development with other professionals

Possible barriers
Limited non-contact time with children
Distance from training events
Cost of training
Feeling tired and stressed at the end of the day
Professional boundaries

Some proposed solutions from educators

Educators put forward a range of proposed solutions that would assist them to more effectively recognise and guide children with complex social and emotional behaviours.

Strong networks and showcasing

Educators stated that they often worked in relative isolation to the wider ECEC sector, and therefore opportunities to showcase positive practice in individual services and networks would provide effective learning opportunities.

'Working in isolation means that they may lack a supportive network to assist them when observing, planning for and interacting with children with additional needs.'

Central point for information

Two terms consistently used by educators were 'one-stop shop' and 'practical'. That is, a solution that brings together training, professional development and support strategies in a consolidated and practical way.

The concept of an integrated ECEC website addressing these issues, which also included an after-hours support service for educators, was canvassed at consultations as a possible way to meet the 'one-stop shop' need.

Educators fully supported this proposal and believed this option would be particularly valuable for the ECEC workforce, which is geographically dispersed, experiences issues accessing training and professional development during working hours, and has no independent source of support to discuss children's behaviour guidance issues with after hours.

Educators also expressed strong support for the further development of strategies and programs aimed at greater integration of service delivery, and were enthusiastic about the potential for improved outcomes for children and families offered by integrated models such as the Early Years Centres and Children and Family Centres.

Conclusions

This research project confirmed that inclusive practice with children with complex emotional and social behaviours is a critical issue for the ECEC workforce, and inadequate training and support is generating significant stress for educators responding to the increasing complexity of issues that children and families are presenting.

Educators from across the sector are seeking improved access to targeted training and professional development, as well as support to work across professional boundaries and in more integrated ways, in order to deliver improved outcomes for children and families.

'Solutions must include capacity building in communities, by communities, with support.'

The findings of the research project will be used to inform future ECEC workforce development strategies, including the development of a new ECEC Workforce Action Plan.

For more information

Please visit the dedicated WAP review page on the department's website at www.dete.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/WAPreview