



Working together to create inclusive services and communities



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What is expected of ECEC services?

While there is no explicit requirement in anti-discrimination legislation for services to 'work together', collaboration is one of the goals of the *National Quality Standard (NQS)* for early childhood education and care. Quality Area 6 of the NQS (Collaborative partnerships with families and communities) states that ECEC services should 'collaborate with other organisations and service providers to enhance children's learning and wellbeing', including facilitating 'access to inclusion and support assistance' (ACECQA, 2017, p. 11).

Similarly, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) emphasises the importance of services working together. Under the NDIS, universal services (such as ECEC) and targeted services (such as early childhood intervention) are encouraged to strengthen their work together to deliver better outcomes for children with disability and complex additional needs through child-centred care.

What are the benefits of collaboration and integration?

Collaboration and integration between different services are built on a 'child-centred' approach (also known as 'consumer-directed care'). Child-centred approaches recognise that children with disability and complex additional needs are likely to achieve better outcomes if they and their family can choose from a suite of support services, tailored to meet their individual needs. Under this model, supports and interventions are thoughtfully designed to 'wrap around' the child and to be responsive to the child's changing developmental needs.

For children and families, the benefits of support service collaboration and integration are clear:

Integrated services contribute to improved outcomes in family functioning and children's wellbeing by improving access to services, enabling early identification of problems, enhancing referral pathways and providing holistic responses for families (DETE, 2013, p. 3).

The purpose of Commonwealth and state anti-discrimination legislation is to create greater inclusion of people with disability in our communities. Legislation requires organisations to remove barriers that may directly or indirectly exclude people with disability, including children, from participating in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The removal of such barriers often requires support agencies and professionals from different fields to work in collaboration with each other.

Collaborative and integrated service delivery

Creating fully inclusive ECEC services and communities involves more than individual services improving their own internal policies, procedures and practices to improve inclusion. Increasingly, ECEC services are working together with health, disability support and social and community welfare providers to develop integrated ways of supporting children with disability and complex additional needs to participate in their programs.

Greater support service integration and collaboration can strengthen access to early intervention for children who may be at risk of developmental delay. It can help to build more effective referral pathways over time, as it deepens each support service's understanding of how different interventions can help a child's inclusion, participation and development. The benefits of effective early intervention—acting 'early in the life of a child' and 'early in the life of the issue'—are also significant. Research shows that early intervention has the potential to mitigate or reduce the effects of disability or developmental delay for some children, and may lessen the intensity of supports, interventions and treatments required over the long term (Moore, 2012).

What do collaboration and integration look like in practice?

When ECEC services and other support agencies (such as allied health providers and disability support providers) work in a collaborative or integrated way, they:

- facilitate the early detection and diagnosis of children with disability or developmental delay
- arrange timely referrals and supported access for children with disability to specialist intervention services and therapies
- make adjustments to the ECEC program and for each child to ensure that all children and their families may access, participate and benefit from the program.

Building collaboration and integration in ECEC services

Researchers acknowledge that ECEC services and other agencies are on an early journey towards collaboration and integration (Moore, 2012). This journey can be characterised

as a continuum, where these support services move from autonomous, cooperative and coordinated to achieving collaborative relationships (refer to Figure 1).

Developing collaborative approaches between ECEC services and other local support agencies is an important strategy to create inclusive services and communities. Approved providers, service supervisors and management have an important leadership role in achieving these goals. Management and educators will need to be supported to build the knowledge and skills to do this work well.

Tips for building collaboration and integration

In building their capacity and skills in collaborative and integrated practice, ECEC services should:

- ☑ recognise that collaboration and integration of support services is a new and emerging area of professional practice
- ☑ provide relevant professional development opportunities for educators and service supervisors, such as team-building, communication, planning, negotiation and conflict resolution skills
- ☑ keep abreast of new research and developments in integrated service delivery and transdisciplinary practice
- ☑ initiate sufficient non-contact time for service supervisors and educators to participate in planning meetings with other local support agencies and with the families of children with disability and complex additional needs
- ☑ model inclusion and collaboration by seeking out people with disability, or family members of children with disability, to participate in ECEC service management meetings or in planning and quality improvement working groups.

Figure 1. Teamwork for inclusive practice

Not integration		Integration	
Autonomous	Cooperative	Coordinated	Collaborative
Organisations operate independently	Remain independent but network and share information Low commitment Informal arrangements	Some joint planning Often project-based coordination Medium commitment Semi-formal partnerships	Shared culture, visions, values and resources Joint planning and delivery of some services High commitment Formal partnerships



Where to find more information

The report *Integrated early years provision in Australia* was prepared for the Professional Support Coordinators Alliance (PSCA). It includes detailed information on the nature and benefits of integrated early years services.



Photo: Lime

References

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2017). *Guide to the National Quality Standard*. Sydney, NSW: ACECQA.

Moore, T. G. (2012). *Rethinking early childhood intervention services: Implications for policy and practice*. Pauline McGregor Memorial Address, presented at the 10th Biennial National Conference of Early Childhood Intervention Australia and the 1st Asia-Pacific Early Childhood Intervention Conference, Perth, Western Australia.

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