



Stakeholder perspectives on sleep, rest and relaxation in ECEC

Research review 2

Sleep, rest and relaxation are an essential part of the ECEC day, providing both learning opportunities and support for healthy bodies and minds. The Early Years Learning Framework includes sleep, rest and relaxation as part of the curriculum and early childhood curriculum and commencing October 1 2017, the requirement to have policies and procedures for sleep and rest is set out in s168(2) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations. To support this work we provide an overview of recent research undertaken in the Australian context documenting the perspectives of children, parents and educators.

What do children tell us?

Children communicate their perspectives on sleep, rest and relaxation both through their behaviour and their words. To understand the perspectives of infants and young children we observed approximately 3000 children in ECEC settings and interviewed 54 children aged 3–5 years from services with different sleep philosophies and practices.

Our observation studies showed that children clearly communicate their need for sleep through a range of behavioural cues. These cues were understood and verbalised by educators for infants and toddlers, for example;

“you look sleepy.”

“you are rubbing your eyes...do you need to sleep?”

“oh honey you are doing that thing when you get super tired aren't you?”

Although educators were highly attuned to behavioural cues, they did not always respond. Instead, many services were observed working towards children having a standard sleep time, for example:

“it is not your time yet” and *“we need to keep away those sleepys”*

Our conversations with children aged 3–5 years indicated that some enjoyed rest times. However, many children saw educator and parent expectations as restricting their autonomy. They described rest-time as removing or limiting their choice to play and learn. For some children the challenge of restriction elicited ingenuity as they devised strategies for *coping*. For example one child when asked what advice she would give to a friend about sleep-rest time answered: *“wear lots of hair clips”*. She described hairclips as props for her play under the blankets during the enforced rest-time in her service where educators expected all children to lie down without alternative activity.

When provided with opportunity to make choice children demonstrated deep understanding about the value of sleep and

rest. For example children described choosing sleep on occasions when they *“had ballet lessons after Kindy”*, *“need energy”* or *“were feeling cranky”*. Some educators explicitly talked with children about the value of sleep, rest and relaxation.

Children's message

Children told us that:

- Practices should be responsive to their sleep cues to enable them to cope and thrive in their ECEC service.
- Choice of alternatives to rest times and opportunities for participation in decision making about rest and relaxation options should be provided.

What do parents tell us?

Children's sleep and rest affects family functioning and parent wellbeing. Our research asked parents about their preferences for children's sleep and rest when they were in ECEC, the practices in their child's ECEC and the impacts on their child and family.

In the first 2 years of life most children sleep during the day. Our survey of 115 parents of infants and toddlers found that 76% identified sleep practices as an important factor in their selection of an ECEC service. Their focus was on safety, comfort, emotional support, responsiveness to individual sleep needs and the ability of the service to maintain regularity of sleep patterns established in the home.

Sleeping at ECEC was reported as a problem by 20% of parents, with the sleep environment being noisy and children having difficulty settling being their major concerns.

Beyond age 3, the majority of children cease to regularly sleep in the daytime. Our survey of 750 parents of children aged 3–5 years asked *“If given a choice, would you choose for your child to sleep in their Early Childhood Service?”* and *“why?”* Almost 80% of parents preferred that their child never or only on occasion sleep while at their ECEC service, citing disruptions to the child's night sleep and to family functioning when their child was required to sleep. Those with younger children and whose children had long days at their service were among the minority (21%) of parents who preferred that their child sleep.

Parent's message

Parents told us that:

- Sleep practices are salient factors in choosing their service provider.
- Respecting their child's individual routine and providing a quiet, safe, and secure sleep environment is vital.
- Sleep practices in ECEC can affect their child's night sleep and wellbeing, which can also have significant impact on their family's functioning.

What do educators tell us?

Provision for sleep and rest presents significant tensions in ECEC in which service provider policy, parent's requests, demands on educator time and the individual developmental and daily needs of children need to be negotiated.

Our research asked 250 educators working in centre-based and home-based ECEC services about the sleep-rest practices within their service and their own experiences and practices. Early childhood educators described the sleep-rest period as 'tricky' - an area of their day-to-day work in which the tensions between individual and communal needs were high. While acknowledging the aspirations to be responsive to child and family need, they described their ability to deliver individualised practices as largely constrained by the physical spaces and staffing levels of their service.

In practice 84% of services were scheduling a standard routine sleep-rest period in the middle of the day for infants and young children. Individual educators felt that they, and the children in their care, have limited autonomy in determining sleep-rest practices. Instead, they believed these are largely dictated by service leadership and parents.

Some educators described professional discomfort with current practices, observing that these did not best meet the needs of all children. Parent requests to "prevent" or "make" a child sleep were particularly difficult.

Many educators described rest-time as "time to get all of our tasks done". The expectation by many services that educators undertake cleaning and programming while children sleep, means that for many educators a single rest-period, in which children's choice of activity is limited, is seen as logistically necessary.

Educators acknowledge that opportunities for children to make choices about sleep and rest are important but, with a few exceptions, child agency was not a priority.

Educator's message

Educators told us that:

- Child agency is important.
- Service philosophy and physical environment limit potential to be responsive.
- Demands of programming, cleaning and parent requests limit their potential to afford children choice.
- Leadership and support from service providers is vital to enabling responsive sleep, rest and relaxation practices.

Reflecting on sleep, rest and relaxation philosophies

Policies and procedures for sleep, rest and relaxation should reflect a service's broader educational philosophy. Considering how a service's philosophy links to and impacts on sleep, rest and relaxation practices can be useful for supporting critical reflection and helping to identify key areas for quality improvement. Key questions could include:

- What areas of the service's broader educational philosophy are reflected in current sleep, rest and relaxation practices? What areas are inconsistent?
- What might a philosophy for sleep, rest or relaxation look like from the perspective of children, families and educators? How might these philosophies be enacted?

Where to find more information

1. Staton, S., Irvine S., Pattinson, C., Smith S. & Thorpe, K., (2015). The sleeping elephant in the room: Practices and policies regarding sleep/rest time in ECEC. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol 40, Issue 4, p77-86.
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3. Northard, M., Theobald, M., Irvine, S., Staton, S., Pattinson, C. & Thorpe, K. (2015). "I have to rest all the time because you're not allowed to play": Exploring children's perceptions of autonomy during sleep time in long day care services. *International Journal of Early Childhood*. Vol 47, Issue 3, p423-44.
4. Thorpe, K., Irvine, S., Pattinson, C., Staton S. (2017). Insider perspectives: The 'tricky business' of providing for children's sleep and rest needs in the context of early childhood education and care.

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