



Achieving responsive sleep, rest and relaxation practices in ECEC

Research review 1

Supporting healthy sleep development in early childhood is vital for ensuring that children can flourish and meet their individual potential. As with other areas of child development, such as walking or talking, there is considerable individual variation in children's sleep needs across the early childhood period.

The importance of supporting early sleep development is reflected in the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which specifies that

Each child's wellbeing and comfort is provided for, including appropriate opportunities to meet each child's need for sleep, rest and relaxation (Quality Area 2, Element 2.1.1)

How ECEC services achieve responsive sleep, rest and relaxation practices for infants and young children has, until recently, received little research attention.

Overview of the SLEEP studies

To understand how ECEC services respond to children's sleep, rest and relaxation needs and the impacts of these practices on children, families and educators, we conducted the first large-scale observational studies, internationally, of sleep practices in ECEC. Collectively these studies have observed sleep, rest and relaxation practices in over 180 ECEC settings in Queensland, including kindergarten, long day care and family day care programs. Our observations examine both the practices used and also how children responded to these practices. To date approximately 3000 Queensland children, aged from birth to 5 years, have been included in these studies.

How do services meet individual sleep, rest and relaxation needs?

Our studies show that the majority of ECEC programs (86%) provide for sleep, rest and relaxation via a single standard sleep or rest period in the middle of the day. A small number of services provided responsive sleep practices including enabling children to sleep at varying times responsive to individual need and giving children voice in decisions about sleep, rest and relaxation activities.

Provision of a standard sleep time was very common amongst toddler (100%) and preschool (91%) age groups. For preschool (3-5 year) aged programs, over two-thirds of ECEC services had a mandatory sleep-rest time in which alternative

activities, such as reading books or playing, were not permitted. Mandatory sleep-rest periods lasted for 1 hour on average, but ranged from between 15 minutes to more than 2 hours. Only a third of preschool aged children slept during sleep-rest times. Mandatory sleep-rest times were found to impact negatively on the quality of interactions observed between educators and children, and was reported by parents as being associated with reduced and disrupted night-time sleep.

Sleep practices for babies were typically described by educators as being more flexible and responsive to the infant's sleep cues than they were in older age groups. In practice, however, approximately half of the ECEC services provided babies with a single, standard sleep-time. A small number of ECEC services did provide flexible sleep practices and greater child choice. These services identified and responded to individual sleep cues, provided spaces for sleep and rest opportunities throughout the day and included children and families in decision making.

Safety in the sleep environment

For babies below 12 months of age the risks associated with Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI), including SIDS, necessitate compliance with current Safe Sleeping Guidelines. Our observations showed that over two-thirds of ECEC services did not comply with all Safe Sleeping Guidelines for babies. Key areas in which differences between current guidelines and practice was observed included not placing babies on back to sleep and the use of loose bedding, quilts, sheepskins or soft toys.

A range of approaches to sleep, rest and relaxation in ECEC

Our research shows that ECEC services adopt a range of different approaches to sleep, rest and relaxation for children. These approaches offer varying degrees of child agency, flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs. An overview of some of the approaches observed within our studies, and the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches is provided below. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but is provided as stimulus to support critical reflection on different ways of thinking and working in relation to sleep, rest and relaxation in ECEC. Whatever approach a service uses, it is critical to remember that maintaining adequate supervision is a legislative requirement for all services and should be carefully considered in planning.

Separate sleep spaces

At the most flexible end, some services have a separate sleep space where children who require sleep can do so throughout the day, whilst the other children continue their other activities.

Advantages: Allows for greatest flexibility in providing sleep and rest for children, enabling educators to respond to individual sleep and rest needs (e.g. who sleeps and when they sleep).

Challenges: Is only possible where an appropriate space and adequate supervision is available, with some services creating a specific sleep space for children as part of their service design.

Multi-room use

An alternative observed in settings where a separate space for sleep was not available, is to think about children's sleep and rest needs from a whole service perspective (i.e., to look beyond the immediate group). In this approach children who require sleep are moved into one room, whilst those not requiring sleep are moved to another. For example, a centre-based service with multiple rooms may choose to place children who need to sleep in one room and non-sleepers into another.

Advantages: Children who require sleep are placed together, minimising disruption from non-sleeping children, whilst non-sleepers are able to engage in a full range of alternate activities.

Challenges: Ensuring this is a positive experience for all children (sleepers and non-sleepers) and that staff work collaboratively to ensure smooth transitions. Responding to children who need sleep outside scheduled times. Careful planning and good communication between staff is needed to ensure adequate supervision for all children, consistent with legislative requirements.

Indoor/outdoor spaces

Another approach is to set up a designated sleep and rest area within a room, and providing non-sleeping children with access to other areas, such as outdoor spaces. In this approach, children might be consulted on their sleep need, and be involved in decision making about restful or relaxing alternatives.

Advantages: Allows for a range of alternate learning opportunities for non-sleeping children within a standard sleep and rest periods, whilst ensuring opportunity for sleep for those who require it. Supports children's agency and choice in sleep and rest.

Challenges: Ensuring that alternate activities are not disruptive to sleeping children and that there is appropriate supervision for both sleeping and non-sleeping children. Responding to children who need sleep outside scheduled times.

Relaxation times

Some services provide a range of alternative relaxation activities such as guided imagery, massage or yoga. In these services sleep times are only provided to children as and when needed.

Advantages: Allows for children to experience and learn a range of different approaches to resting and relaxing their bodies and minds.

Challenges: Ensuring children requiring sleep are provided with opportunities to do so and that relaxation activities are responsive to individual preferences and needs.

Including children and families in decision making

Including child and family perspectives is critical to meeting the individual needs of children, families and communities. For more information on what children, families and educators tell us about sleep, rest and relaxation in ECEC please see our second resource in this series which discusses "Stakeholder Perspectives".

Developing a quality improvement plan for sleep, rest and relaxation in ECEC

Do you recognise some of these practices within your own service? Are there areas that you have identified for quality improvement?

Sleep, rest and relaxation provides a perfect place to bring together and reflect on all seven Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard. When undertaking a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) for sleep, rest and relaxation in ECEC, reflect on the following questions:

1. How do current sleep, rest and relaxation practices reflect your service educational philosophy?
2. Are practices responsive to different child and family perspectives and needs?
3. How does your service include the voices of children and families in planning and improving sleep, rest and relaxation practices?

For more information and examples from educators undertaking a QIP for sleep, rest and relaxation please see the related visual podcast included within this series.

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.
2. Pattinson, C., Staton, S., Smith, S., Sinclair, D., & Thorpe, K. (2014). *Emotional Climate and Behavioral Management during Sleep Time in Early Childhood Education Settings*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. Vol 29, Issue 4, p660-668.
3. Staton, S., Smith, S., Pattinson, C. & Thorpe, K. (2015). Mandatory naptimes in childcare and children's nighttime sleep. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioural Pediatrics*, 36(4), pp. 235-242.
4. Staton, S., Smith, S., & Thorpe K. (2015). "Do I Really Need a Nap?": The Role of Sleep Science in Informing Sleep Practices in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*. 1(1), pp. 32-44.

The SLEEP program is funded by the Queensland Government Department of Education and Training

