ACHIEVING RESPONSIVE SLEEP, REST AND RELAXATION PRACTICES

In 2017, we embarked on a campaign to share discoveries that we made on the effectiveness of sleep practices within childcare settings, and their association with childcare quality, through the *Effective Early Educational Experiences* (E4Kids) study, funded by the ARC Linkage Projects Scheme, the Victorian Department of Education and Training, the Queensland Department of Education, and the Australian Government.

E4Kids is a five-year longitudinal study designed to assess the impact of everyday, approved ECEC programs on children's learning and developmental outcomes. Originally operating out of the Queensland University of Technology, Professor Karen Thorpe led a team via E4Kids to conduct the first large-scale observational studies of sleep practices in ECEC environments. The team investigated the effectiveness of sleep, rest and relaxation practices within more than 180 kindergarten, long day care and family day care settings, including more than 3000 children (from birth to five years).

ECEC services adopt a range of approaches to sleep, rest and relaxation for children, with varying degrees of child agency, flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs. However, the majority of programs (86%) use a single standard sleep or rest period in the middle of the day, during which alternative activities such as reading books are not permitted. Mandatory sleep-rest periods range from 15 minutes to more than two hours (one hour on average). Providers that employ mandatory sleep-rest periods do so with all age groups, including toddlers and babies who have huge variabilities in sleep needs. Our research found that 100% of toddler rooms enacted mandated sleep-rest and, despite providers self-reporting as being more flexible and responsive with babies (who require anywhere between one and five naps per day), we found approximately half of the services provide babies with a single, standard sleep time.

Mandated rest practices are problematic as individual children's needs vary. For example, a child waking at 5:30 am may be more ready for a midday nap than one who wakes at 7:30 am, yet if they are in the same centre, they will be put down for a nap at the same time. The result is often stress rather than rest. Furthermore, our research found that mandatory sleep-rest times 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. Despite this, many centres maintained expectations that all children nap in the middle of the day, along with expectations that educators use this free time to undertake cleaning, record-keeping and educational planning, and to take their rest breaks.

When evaluating our findings against children's learning and development outcomes, we discovered that sleep-rest practices are a barometer of quality. The services that have the most flexible sleep-rest practices are those observed to have the highest-quality practices at other times of day (see Table 3 opposite).

FLEXIBLE SLEEP PRACTICE OPTIONS

Separate sleep spaces allow children who require sleep to do so throughout the day, while other children continue their other activities.

- Advantages: Allows for greatest flexibility, enabling educators to respond to individual sleep and rest needs.
- Challenges: Is contingent on adequate spacing and staffing within their service design.

Multi-room use considers children's needs from a whole-service perspective; children who require sleep are moved into one room, while those non-sleepers are moved to another.

- **Advantages:** Children who require sleep are placed together, minimising disruption from non-sleeping children, while non-sleepers are able to engage in a full range of alternative activities.
- **Challenges:** Requires careful planning and strong collaboration among staff to ensure adequate supervision, smooth transitions, and accommodations for children who sleep outside scheduled times.

Indoor/outdoor set up provides options for children to move into a designated rest area within a room, or outdoor areas for non-sleepers.

- **Advantages:** Supports child agency by providing a range of options for children, within standard sleep-rest periods.
- **Challenges:** Ensuring that alternative activities are not disruptive to sleeping children and that there is appropriate supervision for both sleeping and non-sleeping children.

Relaxation times 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 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.