Topic: Meeting and exceeding the National Quality Standard (NQS): Quality sleep practices in ECEC

Aim: The aim of this conversation is to support critical reflection on service policies and practices relating to children’s sleep and rest at the service; to look at how well these meet the intent of the NQS and to identify opportunities for quality improvement in this area.

Select some questions from each of the groups below to frame a conversation that is relevant to your service now.

1. Conversation starters
   To begin, think about questions to get the conversation started. These questions introduce the topic and seek to engage everyone in the conversation.
   - Let’s start by reflecting on current expectations. What does the NQS say about sleep and rest? What words and themes stand out? (It may be useful to have a few copies printed out of the key sections e.g., QA 2.1.2; Regulations r81 to support discussion).
   - What are our current policies and practices regarding sleep and rest?
   - What does a positive sleep-time in ECEC look, sound and feel like (from a child’s perspective; a parent’s perspective; our perspective)?

2. Reflecting on beliefs and attitudes
   These questions draw out educators’ feelings about the topic recognising that individual beliefs, values and attitudes influence learning and behaviour.
   - Why do we make time for sleep and rest in ECEC?
   - What’s currently working well?
   - What’s not working well? What are the challenges?
   - What level of choice do children currently have about their sleep and rest in our service?
   - How do you feel about giving children more choice at sleep and rest time? What are the opportunities and challenges of this?

3. Thinking about current practice
   These questions support educators to think more deeply about the topic and to consider the implications for their daily practice.
   - How are we catering for children’s individual sleep needs (e.g., children who need a sleep as well as children who no longer need a sleep)?
   - How are we supporting children’s agency and autonomy at sleep time?
   - What educator tasks and activities are appropriate during sleep time?
   - How are we communicating with families about sleep and rest?
   - How are we seeking and responding to parents’ views and preferences about their child’s sleep and rest?
   - How does a positive approach to sleep and rest link to the NQS (and EYLF)? What quality areas are relevant to sleep and rest routines and practices?

4. Deciding on actions
   These questions support action.
   - What will we do to strengthen this important area of our work? (This may include getting more information, engaging in action research and/or identifying professional learning opportunities to build educator capacity).
   - How will we apply our learning to improve what we do?
   - What are our priorities for quality improvement in this area and how will we work together to achieve these?
Starting a professional conversation

Professional learning activities that enable educators to talk about their practice and support collaborative and critical reflection are more likely to lead to enhanced practice. There are different ways to support this type of learning in ECEC, including some formal approaches and others more informal in nature. One approach is the idea of a professional conversation in ECEC.

A professional conversation draws educators together to explore a topic of shared interest and importance, for example sleep and rest in ECEC (Irvine & Price, 2014; Irvine & Collie, 2011). In essence, it is a planned and purposeful conversation between colleagues about their professional practice. In a larger group (e.g. a staff meeting), it is a good idea to nominate an educator to facilitate the conversation. The facilitator’s role is to:

- create a safe and positive learning environment;
- support meaningful participation in the conversation; and
- support shared thinking and learning.

In a smaller group, it may not be necessary to formalise this role and, in any group, this role can be shared. It is important to note the facilitator is not positioned as the ‘teacher’ or ‘expert’ on the topic. Their task is simply to guide and support the group’s conversation. The success of the conversation rests with the entire group. Everyone in the group should be willing to engage in the conversation; participation extends beyond talking to listening and critically reflecting on the views and experiences of others.

Designing your professional conversation

While the idea of a conversation suggests informality and spontaneity, a professional conversation needs some pre-planning. In particular, the design and sequencing of the questions is important. The questions on page 1 use Stanfield’s (2000) four-level question framework. This comprises questions: (i) to get the conversation started; (ii) to draw out educators’ beliefs and feelings about the topic, recognising these can influence learning and behaviour; (iii) to support critical reflection on current practice; and (iv) to identify actions to enhance knowledge and improve practice. The idea is to select some questions from each group to design a conversation that is relevant to your service. Professional conversations maintain a practical orientation and have an action focus. Key points and agreed actions should be documented, shared and revisited. The result is working documentation. It doesn’t need to be lengthy or beautiful, but does provide a record of activities designed to support professional learning and improved practice.

Some practical tips to get started:

- Create a safe and supportive learning environment. This includes creating a comfortable and pleasant physical environment for adults as well as a trusting and supportive emotional environment where everyone feels valued, respected and able to share their views openly and honestly. Conversations are often better over a cup of tea or coffee.
- Begin with the aim of the conversation, and explain how the conversation works.
- Determine your conversation ‘rules’ (e.g. respecting different views; allowing others to share their views; listening to the views of others).
- Allow sufficient time for the conversation. Generally, you will need around an hour.
- Use your time wisely. It is important to get to the action question(s). Sometimes the action may simply be that you will set aside more time to explore this topic together.
- It is a conversation not an interview. While the conversation needs to maintain its aim and focus, you may choose to follow questions that emerge from the group as long as they contribute to the agreed topic of conversation.
- Make your thinking and learning visible. Document key ideas and actions as you engage in conversation.

References:


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