



Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority

QUALITY AREA 1

SUPPORTING AGENCY: INVOLVING CHILDREN IN DECISION-MAKING

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states children have a right to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives.

In the approved learning frameworks, agency is defined as being able to make choices and decisions to influence events and to have an impact on one's world. Supporting children's agency is about recognising that children have a right to make choices and decisions, and are capable of initiating their own learning.



LINKS TO THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK

The National Quality Standard (NQS) recognises children as competent and capable. Supporting children's agency and involving them in decisions cuts across all seven quality areas of the NQS, with a particular focus in:

Element 1.1.1: Curriculum decision-making contributes to each child's learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators.

Element 1.2.3: Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions that influence events and their world.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS YOU CAN SUPPORT CHILDREN'S AGENCY

Intentional teaching

When educators are intentional, purposeful and plan for children's learning, this helps children to be active agents in sourcing their own learning. This can be achieved by allowing children to make decisions about, plan for and help set up their preferred method of learning. Children might decide how to research information on dinosaurs for example, or what

they would like to cook in a cooking experience.

Genuine decision-making

Sharing the power that adults hold, and trusting that children are competent decision-makers can support children's agency.

For example, educators can:

- arrange activities, routines and the physical environment so that children have a range of opportunities to make choices about what they will do and how they will do it
- provide children with the opportunity to make choices in circumstances where their decisions will be able to be accepted.

Supporting agency involves educators taking a step back and critically reflecting on, "Do I need to decide for children?"

Instead, consider ways of setting up environments, routines and learning experiences that support children to make decisions and have agency independently of adults. For example, asking children what they know about areas of interest and what they would like to find out more about.

Think about ways educators support children to make their own choices throughout the day.

Responsive interactions

Talking respectfully with children, and having conversations where children's ideas and thoughts are genuinely sought and valued, is the key to engaging children in decision-making processes. As children develop, they will be able to participate in increasingly complex decision-making.

Talking with children about what they think and responding to what matters to them will give children a sense of ownership over the decisions that they have contributed to.

Examples of responsive interactions include:

- Promoting independent exploration and appropriate risk taking
- Asking questions that give children the opportunity to initiate and lead their own learning
 - What do you think?
 - What do you want? Why?
 - How can we do this differently? (or safely, enjoyably, easily)
- Allowing children to establish their own routines, behaviour, guidelines and consequences, or taking cues from children's behaviour
- Providing flexible and unhurried routines which allow children to make choices about decisions which affect them
- Using behaviour (rather than the clock) as a cue for meal time or moving from one structured activity to the next
- Providing children with the opportunity to participate in large periods of uninterrupted play and taking cues for providing structure or resources (this will allow children to negotiate where and with whom they would like to play)
- Acknowledging and responding to children's contributions by ensuring their ideas and interests are reflected in the program
- Promoting independence and self-help skills through the opportunity to participate in routine tasks like preparing meals, setting up environments and selecting resources.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS, EXPERIENCES AND RESOURCES

Environments that support children's decision-making are set up in ways that provide children with a variety of resources to choose from and allow children to make choices independently of adults. They can be open-ended, allow multiple uses, be used creatively, and involve sustained, shared thinking, and include both manufactured and natural items.

Examples of responsive environments include:

- Having equipment shelving at child height and encouraging children to choose the materials they want to use
- Having areas where children can store works in progress to return to over a period of time
- Setting up play spaces with areas that allow children to choose between quiet and busier areas, indoor or outdoor play, in large groups, small groups or solitary play
- Providing space where children can store and independently access their own belongings.

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE

Supporting agency at a service level:

- Engaging children in decisions about meals and routines
- Involving children in discussions about service policies, procedures and practices
- Developing the service philosophy by engaging with key stakeholders such as children, schools, families and the broader community.

Supporting agency in under two year-olds:

- Seeing babies and toddlers as capable of being an active participant in routines, activities and experiences
- Scaffolding language to assist children in expressing feelings
- Using routines as a platform for learning about wellbeing, identity, communication and learning
- Facilitating self-help skills as opposed to doing tasks for children
- Being aware, and responsive to young children's verbal and non verbal cues
- Being respectful during routines, asking children's permission to check their nappies, talking to them about putting on a bib and respecting if they are not hungry or need a cuddle to transition from sleep.

Supporting agency in 3-5 year-old children:

- Supporting children to negotiate a resolution rather than solving it for them
- Providing opportunities for children to set goals for learning
- Providing opportunities for children to learn through co-researching with adults
- Offering choices of experiences based on what children are interested in learning about
- Encouraging children to think about fairness and equity within the service, local community and outside world
- Considering a more democratic system of decision-making, for example children could explore voting on relevant issues
- Supporting children's voice within the community and connecting with community planning and consultation in all matters that affect children.

Supporting agency in school age children:

- Promoting learning through leisure and play-based activities that children plan and are relevant to their interests and other learning
- Extending on peer support programs and creating mentoring relationships
- Allowing children opportunities to assess and identify hazards and develop risk assessment strategies
- Supporting children to take on the responsibilities of arrival and departure including developing procedures for handling their belongings and greetings educators.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Educators are encouraged to reflect on the following points when considering how the service involves children in decision-making:

- What is an appropriate level of autonomy for children in the age range?
- How are children involved in program decision-making and contributing to the environment? How do they assist everyday routines and transitions? How are they involved in menu planning and food preparation?
- What responsibilities do children have? How does this contribute to their sense of agency?
- What strategies do you employ to capture the voices of children in planning and seek their feedback?
- How will children know they have been heard?
- How are children's interests pursued and celebrated?
- Does the physical environment and culture of the service allow for educators and children to chat about ideas?

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Early Childhood Australia's Professional Learning Program e-Learning videos, [Connecting with practice – EYLF & NQS, Doing your own thing—Child's agency](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGeeK4gtTwk) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGeeK4gtTwk>

[Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework Practice Principle Guide 3: High expectations for every child](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood) at www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood

[UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](http://www.ohchr.org) from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at www.ohchr.org

Stonehouse, A. (2011) *The more you know, the more you see: Babies' and toddlers' learning and the EYLF.*

More information is available on the ACECQA website [acecqa.gov.au](http://www.acecqa.gov.au)

Acknowledgment

The information in this publication was adapted from a National Childcare Accreditation Council resource.

WHAT TO CONSIDER FOR ASSESSMENT AND RATING

Authorised officers may look for and discuss a range of different behaviours which demonstrate that educators value children's agency. They might also look for how this is reinforced through the service's policies, the educational program and educator's practice.

Observing educators:

- Encouraging children to try new things
- Positively impacting children's self-esteem and belief in their own ability
- Bolstering children's motivation to try new things
- Encouraging family's expectations for their child
- Making a positive difference to children's sense of wellbeing and agency.

Discussing with educators about:

- Believing all children are competent and capable
- Having an awareness of their own beliefs, culture and the values they hold around children's learning and considering how this may influence the opportunities they provide for children to promote agency
- Having high expectations for all children regardless of their age, gender, ability, cultural, linguistic or family background
- Valuing and showing respect for children's autonomy and independence.

Sighting:

- Philosophy and policy that recognises children's rights and describes their role in decision-making
- Documentation and planning for children's wellbeing, decision-making and supported self-regulation.

