The sleeping elephant in the room: 

Practices and policies regarding sleep-rest time in ECEC

Abstract

The National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia identifies the need for services to make provision for each child’s sleep, rest and relaxation within a national early year’s policy framework that also requires that opportunities for learning and physical health are optimised, and that the agency of each child and their family is respected. Against this background, the scheduling of a standard sleep-time in ECEC centres remains a common practice, even in rooms catering for older children for whom daytime sleep may no longer be necessary. This article draws upon existing scholarship to explore the issues and tensions associated with sleep-rest, in the context of Australian curriculum and quality standards documents. We review accounts from educators, parents and children and contemporary views regarding high quality practice in ECEC, with an aim of supporting critical reflection on practice and continuous quality improvement in ECEC.

Keywords: early childhood education; national quality standards; sleep; rest

Word Count: 6,477
Introduction

Sleep is important. Across the lifespan sleep, alongside nutrition and exercise, is a key pillar of health that affects daily functioning and life-long well-being (Galland, Taylor, Elder, & Herbison, 2012; Wong, Halaki, & Chow, 2013). Sleep is particularly important in childhood. Commensurate with findings from adult populations, the quantity, quality, rhythmicity and regularity of sleep experienced by children predicts their ongoing well-being (Bell & Zimmerman, 2010; Lam, Hiscock, & Wake, 2003). Sleep in early childhood may have a greater importance, however. Early childhood is both a foundational period in sleep development and one in which sleep patterns are increasingly sensitive to the environment (Touchette et al., 2013). From birth to 5 years, sleep consolidates into the night period and habitual daytime sleep ceases. The speed with which this happens and the patterns of sleep that develop are affected by the care environment, both in the home and early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting (Jones & Ball, 2013; Staton, Smith, Pattinson, & Thorpe, 2014).

Sleep in early childhood is controversial. In early childhood, the regulation of children’s sleep patterns affects not only the child but also the wellbeing of their adult carers and other family members (Hiscock & Wake, 2001; Martin, Hiscock, Hardy, Davey, & Wake, 2007). A perennial issue is the way in which the needs of adult and child should be balanced and the degree to which adult carers should shape or respond to a child’s sleep pattern (Blunden, Thompson, & Dawson, 2011; Douglas & Hill, 2013). Most controversy has centred on parenting. For example, there has been considerable debate about the relative value of adult-led behavioural modification of children’s sleep (controlled crying, controlled settling) compared with that of alternative child-led approaches that advocate education about normative sleep development and promote more responsive approaches to children’s sleep behaviour (Middlemiss, 2004). In contrast there has been relatively little public debate about sleep practices in settings outside the home (Staton, Smith, & Thorpe, in press). This is surprising given that the out-of-home context has the added complexity of a triadic relationship in which decisions about sleep practices involves, and affects, the family, ECEC educator and the individual child (Ahnert & Lamb, 2003; Groeneveld, Vermeer, van Ijzendoorn, & Linting, 2010; Pierrehumbert, Ramstein, Karmaniola, Miljkovitch, & Halfon, 2002).
The purpose of the current paper is to shed light on this ‘sleeping elephant’ in the early childhood education and care room, and in ECEC services more broadly. The article draws upon existing scholarship to explore the issues and tensions associated with mandating sleep-rest, in the context of Australian curriculum and quality standards documents, to establish a series of questions and issues for practitioners to consider in their own local settings. In this paper, we draw on the *Education and Care Services National Regulations* (NSW Government, 2011), and use the broad phrase ‘sleep and rest’ to refer to standard routines and practices designed to meet children’s needs for sleep and/or rest during the day while attending an ECEC service. While the practice of sleep and rest time is evident across all formal ECEC services (e.g. long day care, kindergarten and family day care), our focus is centre-based services. In particular our interest is in the requirements and expectations for children aged 3 – 5 years because after the age of 3 years the majority of children cease to require daytime sleep (Acebo et al., 2005; Iglowstein, Jenni, Molinari, & Largo, 2003). We examine theory, research, policy and practices regarding sleep in ECEC in Australia, from historical and contemporary perspectives, and raise questions for debate and critical reflection among professionals, parents, policymakers and researchers in contemporary ECEC.

**Setting the context: The National Quality Framework**

In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) committed to a new comprehensive National Quality Framework (NQF) to cover all formal ECEC services prior to school entry. The NQF marks an important shift in quality assurance in Australian ECEC, from what was a prescriptive two-tiered system of state regulations and national accreditation, to an integrated system that combines minimum regulation standards and higher quality aspirational standards to promote and support continuous quality improvement. Perhaps, most significantly, the NQF applies performance-based standards that allow flexibility, professional judgment and local interpretation.

Within this context, the NQS identifies the need for ECEC services to make provision for each child’s sleep, rest and relaxation needs:

*Quality Area 2, Element 2.1.2:* Each child’s comfort is provided for and there are appropriate opportunities to meet each child’s need for sleep, rest and relaxation. (NSW Government, 2011, p. 165)
However, this standard does not stand-alone. Reflecting contemporary research and practice wisdom, the NQF adopts a holistic perspective on quality and learning in ECEC, and quality areas and elements are seen to be inter-dependent. The standard relating to sleep, rest and relaxation is specified against a background of other requirements within the NQS that also have relevance to the provision of sleep and rest time.

In Figure 1, we specify some key quality standards relevant to the practice of scheduled sleep and rest time in ECEC and the issues they raise. There are three broad areas of tension that emerge that relate to child rights, family rights and ECEC responsibility. The issue of child rights relates to the relative costs and benefits of sleep-rest time are set against those of costs and benefits to child learning (Quality area1) and other aspects of health and wellbeing (Quality area 2). The issue of child and family agency in determining sleep-rest needs and the appropriate timing for meeting these needs is set against the ability to accommodate needs within the facilities of the ECEC environment (Quality area 3) and decisions made by services and educators to schedule sleep-rest time (Quality areas 5 and 6). The responsibility of the ECEC centre relates to the level of supervision of children and the use of sleep rest time for other staff duties as pitched against the number of children who do not actually sleep in the sleep-rest period (Quality area 4). To understand how best to provide for sleep and rest in ECEC contexts, there is a need to recognise the range of available practices, reflect on these in light of research evidence including the accounts of children, parents and educators in response to sleep-rest practices.

**Sleep rest practice Australian ECEC**

There is currently a range of practices relating to provision for children’s sleep, rest and relaxation documented in Australian ECEC settings. In Table 1, we outline and define these practices based on observations of sleep and rest practices conducted in 130 ECEC rooms (Staton, 2015). Across ECEC services in Australia provision for sleep and rest for 3-5 years olds may include responsiveness to individual children through provision of quiet places to rest and retreat and, in a few centres, activities such as massage, mindfulness and guided imagery. More commonly provision is made through the standard scheduling of a sleep and rest time in the middle of the day (Staton et al., in press). There is however considerable variability in the practices used within this scheduled period. These vary in the levels of choice and autonomy for the child. Both the standard scheduling of sleep and rest time and mandating of a period of sleep present challenges of incompatibility with other requirements
specified in the NQS (see Figure 1). The mandating of sleep and rest raises questions about whether some services and educators recognise sleep and rest time as part of the educational program, and therefore subject to these requirements, or whether they see this as a period of time outside the educational program.

**Children’s requirements for sleep and rest**

There are many reasons why children may require sleep or rest during their day in an ECEC program. First, there is considerable variation in the timing of the biological transition from daytime napping through to monophasic sleep in which the requirement for daytime sleep ceases. Among preschool children age 3-5 years, while the majority will have ceased to require daytime sleep, between 15% and 30% of children will not yet have achieved monophasic sleep and will require sleep during the daytime, at least on some days of the week (Acebo et al., 2005). Second, daytime sleep may compensate for disrupted night sleep. In some families, particularly those living in conditions of social disadvantage, higher levels of disruption to children’s night sleep associated with factors such as noise, overcrowding and family stress has been reported, and may mean that more children will require opportunity to sleep or rest during the day (Kelly & El-Sheikh, 2011; Mezick et al., 2008). Third, a quieter, less social period of time may reduce the stress of a busy and long day in ECEC. Evidence from biological studies measuring salivary cortisol (a marker of stress) across the ECEC day suggests ECEC, especially across a long day, can be stressful for some children (Sims, Guilfoyle, & Parry, 2006). A following argument has been that a period of sleep or rest serves to reduce such stress (Desjean-Perrotta, 2008). However, current evidence on the impact of sleep time on cortisol does not show that rising cortisol patterns across the ECEC day are reduced by the experience of sleep time (Ward, Gay, Alkon, Anders, & Lee, 2008; Watamura, Sebanc, & Gunnar, 2002). Further, differential effects are found for children who do and do not sleep within an allocated sleep time (Staton, Pattinson, Smith, & Thorpe, 2013; Ward et al., 2008). Finally, sleep and/or rest may benefit learning. Studies have shown that for children who still typically need a daytime sleep (biphasic sleep stage), memory and learning performance is better after sleep (Kurdziel, Duclos, & Spencer, 2013).

While all of the justifications for making provision for sleep within ECEC are important to consider and potentially valid, it is notable that there is considerable individual variation in sleep and rest need. None of the circumstances that necessitate daytime sleep or rest apply uniformly to all children and do not justify standard scheduling and/or mandating of a sleep-
rest period. The NQS standard relating to sleep and rest clearly acknowledges variation in need, requiring consideration of children’s ages, developmental stages and individual circumstance. The key focus then is how and who determines individual need and the appropriate practice response. Theories about competence and agency of children to determine their own needs, what constitutes effective teaching and learning in the early years, and the relative positioning of the views of children, parents and educators become central in determining practice. In the next section, we reflect on historical and contemporary perspectives on ECEC philosophies, principles and practices and consider how these have shaped and influenced current sleep routines and practices for preschool children who attend ECEC centres today.

**Current research evidence about the impacts of sleep-rest time in ECEC**

There is a growing body of evidence that testifies to the importance of sleep in early childhood. Disrupted and shorter duration of night sleep is associated with obesity (Bell & Zimmerman, 2010), raised risk for accidents (Boto et al., 2012), poorer cognitive functioning and behavioural difficulties (Lam, Mahone, Mason, & Scharf, 2011; Touchette et al., 2007). Establishing positive sleeping patterns early in life likely has long-term health promoting effects (Landhuis, Poulton, Welch, & Hancox, 2008). A recent Australian study, for example, estimates the cost of sleep problems in children aged 0-7 years to be $27.5 million per annum in primary healthcare costs alone (Quach et al., 2013). Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), estimated that almost 30% of Australian children aged 4-5 experience sleep problems, ranging from mild to severe (Hiscock, Canterford, Ukoumunne, & Wake, 2007). Children with such problems were 37% more likely to sustain an injury requiring medical attention than children with no sleep problems (Hiscock et al., 2007).

Limited evidence on the impacts of ECEC practice on children’s sleep comes from just two studies conducted in Japan (Fukuda & Asaoka, 2004; Fukuda & Sakashita, 2002). Both compare the night-time sleep of children attending programs in which sleep time is mandated with those attending programs in which sleep is a choice. These studies found that mandated sleep time disrupted night sleep, through both delayed onset and increased night waking (Fukuda & Sakashita, 2002) and that these effects endured beyond the ECEC years into the school years when mandatory sleep had ceased (Fukuda & Asaoka, 2004). These studies suggest that the impact of sleep practices in ECEC are neither transitory nor restricted to the ECEC years and warrant consideration. Additionally, a recent Australian study reports that
the emotional climate declines significantly between active sessions and sleep-time in ECEC centres (Pattinson, Staton, Smith, & Thorpe, 2014). Sleep and rest, rather than serving to provide a period of rest, may paradoxically be a source of stress for both children and educators.

Acknowledging the holistic nature of child development in the early years, and the impact of the quality of ECEC services on children’s health, learning and wellbeing, in the immediate and long-term, we assert that ECEC services have an important role to play in supporting the development of healthy sleep and rest practices. We also recognize diversity in children’s individual and developmental needs, and families’ needs and preferences regarding sleep and rest practices in ECEC. In this final section, we explore some different perspectives on how high quality sleep and rest practices in ECEC can be defined, with a view to supporting critical reflection and improved practice.

**Meeting each child’s requirement for sleep and rest in Australian ECEC: pedagogical approaches**

For at least 60 years, a period of daytime sleep or rest has been documented as a routine part of the ECEC day in Australia. This practice is evident even in the older preschool age group (i.e. 3 – 5 years). Gahan’s (2005) history of Chislehurst kindergarten in Queensland, for example, described sleep as an integral part of the daily program and one that was “not an extra” regardless of the social background of the children attending. Similarly, a recent study of 130 kindergarten and long day care centres, also conducted in Queensland, found that 90% of centres routinely scheduled sleep in their programs (Staton et al., in press). These practices are not unique to Australia but also occur internationally (Kurdziel et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2008; Watamura et al., 2002).

Although there has been continuity in the practice of allocating a sleep and rest time across 60 years, in the same period there has been considerable change in the underpinning theoretical understandings of childhood, children and the purpose of ECEC. Documents from the 1940s indicate a theoretical assertion that the role of an educator is to provide for the regulation of child behaviour and for imprinting a mark of routine to establish lifetime patterns.
(The object of the Nursery school) is to ensure the fullest development possible for each child by providing an environment which offers suggestions for normal and natural growth of body, mind, personality and character from the very beginning of life, during the first and most important years of life – as first impressions leave their mark for all time. The child ...learns to adjust himself normally and naturally to his environment, including other children and adults....Nothing is forced, and children are never over-stimulated. Sleep and rest divide the morning from the afternoon.

(Principal of the Brisbane Kindergarten Training College (1944) as cited in Byrne, 1986)

The historical rationale for inclusion of sleep and rest as an integral component of a preschool program follows logically from this assertion. The teacher, drawing on expert knowledge, would determine sleep-time practices.

The historical pedagogical practice is one of adult-led modelling of individual behavioural regulation as a means to achieve later self-regulation. This approach contrasts markedly with contemporary social constructivist pedagogical principles and practices that promote the child as a competent, active and equal agent in learning, within a community of learners comprising peers, educators and families (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). Through this philosophical lens, emphasis is placed on achieving a balance between child and adult-led activities, recognising and responding to individual strengths, interests and needs and supporting increasing child autonomy (Sylva et al., 2004). Within this philosophical context, children should be given opportunity to make inputs into any decision about their need for sleep and be provided with a range of defined alternative activities.

Compulsion and/or whole group uniform practices do not respond to either individual (Pattinson et al. 2014) or cultural needs (Sinclair, Staton, Smith, Pattinson, & Thorpe, 2013) within the Australian context are would therefore seem incompatible with the underlying philosophies of the NQS (Figure 1). Though the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) makes little specific mention of the role of sleep within the educational program, there is not a logical sequence from social constructivist or culturally based curriculum and pedagogy to practices that involve scheduled and/or mandated sleep time for all children without provision of alternative activities.

When set alongside the broader NQF, and standards and expectations for quality educational programs and practices, how are current practices that schedule and/or mandate sleep time
explained? We suggest that the apparent misalignment between the quality standards and practices observed in many ECEC settings have two potential explanations. First, sleep and rest time may not be seen by some as a part of the educational program but rather as an activity that sits outside the curriculum objectives of the EYLF and, in contrast to the approach in the 1940s, not an integral focus for learning but rather ‘time out’ from teaching and learning. Alternatively, sleep and rest time may be viewed as a response to a perception that all children in ECEC services should sleep or rest to promote their health, development, learning and wellbeing. This view appears to be stronger for children attending long day care services where hours of attendance are longer (Sinclair et al., 2013). Within contemporary theoretical understandings, the voices of educators, parents and children are important in understanding the value of inclusion of sleep-time in ECEC. We therefore examine their accounts.

**Meeting each child’s requirement for sleep and rest in Australian ECEC: The experiences of educators, parents and children**

The views of educators, parents and children from across the 60-year period present a picture of diverse responses to sleep and rest-time in the ECEC setting. In Table 2, we present a representation of quotes from Gahan’s interviews with adults who were variously teachers, parents and children attending Chiselhurst kindergarten in the 1940s and 1950s (Gahan, 2005) against recent studies of educators (Inglis, Staton, Smith, Pattinson, & Thorpe, 2013), parents (Sinclair et al., 2013) and children (Nothard et al., 2013). Together these accounts indicate that sleep and rest time, both historically and currently, has received mixed reaction from educators, parents and children. The historical accounts from Chiselhurst provide a picture of educator-led practice that, while acceptable to some parents and children, was to others reluctantly accepted and privately contested. More recent accounts present open ambivalence and contestation. Current educators’ accounts are particularly interesting in their description of sleep and rest time. They present a picture of competing demands in which the needs of educators, parents and children are oftentimes in conflict. Educators variously describe the scheduling of sleep and rest for children as a “tricky” balance of competing needs, “a time to get things done”, a time for educators to “de-stress” and a time for children to sleep or rest (Inglis et al., 2013). Issues emerge when educators’, parents’ and children’s needs and expectations are pitched against each other. Interestingly, one contemporary educator described the child’s view as the lowest priority. Operator and/or educator needs
also seem to be given higher priority than children’s needs and preferences in some centres. Parent and child accounts reflected the sense that many do not want routine scheduling of a sleep and rest time. Sinclair and colleagues (2013), in their analysis of 1700 parent accounts from the E4Kids data reported that 80% of parents, if given the choice, would prefer their 4-6 year olds not sleep in their ECEC program.

Some parents reported negative impacts stemming from the practice of mandated sleep-time. One factor to emerge is the distinction parents make between sleep and rest with many accepting the need for a quieter period during the day but not the requirement of sleep for children who have ceased to habitually nap at home. Children’s accounts, both historical and current, provide descriptions that depict them managing sleep time with imagination and subversive games (e.g. playing under the blankets; positioning themselves near windows or bookshelves; drawing pictures on the ceiling in their mind). Children’s accounts of opportunity to exercise choice and to engage in alternative activities to sleeping, allowed in some but not all contemporary centres, were more positive. This included allowing children to make informed decisions about their need for sleep or rest on a daily basis, proactive teacher-led approaches such as group massage and mindfulness sessions to support rest and relaxation, and differentiated activities (i.e. sleep, rest and/or ‘quiet’ alternative activities) to meet diverse child and family needs (Nothard et al., 2013). How well contemporary practices in sleep and rest time align with the NQF, that promotes the agency and rights of the child, inclusive and responsive educational programs and practices, and genuine partnership with families, is a question clearly raised by the accounts of the teachers, parents and children.

Awakening the debate about appropriate provisions for each child’s sleep, rest and relaxation

The NQS provides a broad and flexible framework for what constitutes positive sleep rest practices and identifies some general expectations regarding the provision of “opportunities for sleep, rest and relaxation” (NSW Government, 2011) for all children in ECEC, regardless of age. Emphasis is placed on flexible practices that are sensitive and responsive to individual need for sleep, rest and/or relaxation throughout the day. Within the context of performance-based standards, educators are expected to draw on contemporary community standards, to consult with families and to exercise professional judgment to determine appropriate and responsive sleep and rest practices. Compliance with this standard is
determined through an Assessment and Ratings Process based on external observation of practice, conversation with educators and review of policy and practice documentation.

In what may constitute a landmark case in this area, a centre’s overall rating was recently determined on the basis of their sleep and rest practices. According to ACEQA (2013) documentation, an ECEC centre’s sleep and rest practices were initially rated as ‘Meeting the NQS’, leading to an overall centre rating of ‘Meeting the NQS’. The centre believed their sleep practices were of a higher quality and sought a first tier review. Upon examination of the assessor’s original documentation, and consideration of current community standards, the State Regulatory Authority determined the centre’s sleep practices did not meet the NQS standard. The sleep practices were deemed to be overly structured because all children (sleepers and non-sleepers) were required to rest for approximately 25 minutes, during a scheduled sleep period, with no alternative activities permitted. The centre’s rating for this area of practice was amended to ‘Working towards the NQS’, leading to a subsequent reduction in the overall centre rating (ACECQA, 2013). The centre contested this decision. Upon receipt of evidence of an updated sleep and rest policy and approach, developed in consultation with families, that required children to rest for a ‘short’ (undefined) period and then be offered quiet activities, the centre was found to meet requirement. The final outcome was that original rating was reinstated (ACECQA, 2013).

Provision for sleep rest practices in Australian ECEC programs are specified by the NQS as integral to programs. The NQS presents a holistic and integrated perspective on what constitutes quality practice in ECEC, and the various standards, including those on sleep and rest, are interrelated and meant to be read together. Further the EYLF definition of ‘curriculum’ infers, sleep and rest time is considered to be part of the educational program and the EYLF principles and pedagogical practices are seen to apply to sleep, rest and relaxation. This includes, for example, the view of children as active participants and decision-makers within the educational program, the expectation that educators will work in partnership with families and respect diversity in family views, needs and preferences. Links can also be made to the EYLF learning outcomes including the broad focus on supporting early learning and successful transition to school, and to some specific areas such as ‘children taking increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing’ (COAG, 2009; Outcome 3.2).
To date there is a greater silence and larger challenge to practice with regard to the provision of relaxation. In our definition of relaxation provided in Table 1, we do not infer that relaxation necessarily implies sleep or rest but rather indicate this as distinct. For many individuals, including young children, relaxation is achieved actively rather than passively. Going for a walk or climbing a tree may be a way to “let off steam” and relax. Consideration of individual perspectives on what is relaxing in the context of ECEC presents a diversity of individual possibilities for enactment of the NQS. The means by which appropriate provision for children’s relaxation is made is a subject for ongoing discussion, data collection and reflection.

**Conclusion**

Physical and emotional wellbeing underpin effective learning. Sleep, rest and relaxation play a central role in attaining positive wellbeing and are, therefore, rightly recognised by the NQS as integral to ECEC programs. How sleep, rest and relaxation are best achieved in ECEC settings is a “really tricky” problem. There is a need for debate, discussion, data collection and documentation of consultative solutions to ensure that sleep-rest practices best serve children, families and educators. Our current understanding of appropriate practice is limited and subject to physical, structural, economic and cultural constraints. There is however evidence of practitioners facing the elephant in the room. In conclusion we provide an example of one educator’s response (Figure 2).
References


Figure 1.

NQS element and questions raised regarding provisions for sleep and rest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Questions regarding sleep and rest time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - Educational program and practice</td>
<td>Element 1.1.3 The program, including routines, is organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child's learning.</td>
<td>Should children who do not require sleep have a standard mandated sleep time?</td>
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<td>Element 1.1.6 Each child’s agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and to influence events and their world.</td>
<td>Are children provided with real opportunities for choice around sleep, rest and relaxation?</td>
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<td>Element 2.1.2 Each child’s comfort is provided for and there are appropriate opportunities to meet each child’s need for sleep, rest and relaxation.</td>
<td>Does a standard mandated sleep-rest time meet each child’s individual need for sleep, rest and relaxation?</td>
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<td>2 - Children’s health and safety</td>
<td>Element 2.2.2 Physical activity is promoted through planned and spontaneous experiences and is appropriate for each child.</td>
<td>Is requirement of sleep-rest time a promotion of sedentary behaviour?</td>
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<td>Element 2.3.1 Children are adequately supervised at all times.</td>
<td>Is reduction of supervision or the focus on administrative activities during sleep and rest time appropriate?</td>
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<td>3 - Physical Environment</td>
<td>Element 3.1.3 Facilities are designed or adapted to ensure access and participation by every child in the service and to allow flexible use, and interaction between indoor and outdoor spaces.</td>
<td>Are facilities and spaces designed to allow for response to children’s individual sleep and rest needs?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 - Staffing arrangements</td>
<td>Element 4.1.1 Educator-to-child ratios and qualification requirements are maintained at all times.</td>
<td>Is the reduction of staffing during sleep-rest time appropriate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 - Relationships with children</td>
<td>Element 5.1.1 Interactions with each child are warm and responsive and build trusting relationships</td>
<td>Does the requirement to sleep-rest affect the levels of warmth and responsiveness to children?</td>
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<td>6 - Collaborative partnerships with families and communities</td>
<td>Element 6.2.1 The expertise of families is recognised and they share in decision making about their child’s learning and wellbeing.</td>
<td>Are parents allowed agency in defining their child’s sleep and rest needs?</td>
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Table 1.

Definition of sleep, rest and relaxation practices in Australian ECEC services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Group provision for sleep and rest</td>
<td>Centres allocate a time for sleep and lower levels of stimulation for the group during the day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individualised provision for sleep rest</td>
<td>Centres allocate space for sleep and lower levels of stimulation and retreat throughout the day to enable response to individual child need.</td>
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<td>Scheduled sleep and rest time</td>
<td>Centres define a specific time in the day, typically following lunch, during which a sleep and rest period occurs.</td>
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<td>Mandated sleep</td>
<td>Centres allocate a period of time in which children are required to lie on bed or cot with no other activity permitted regardless of whether they sleep.</td>
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<td>Mandated rest</td>
<td>Centres allocate a period of time in which all children are required to engage in a quiet activity.</td>
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<td>Relaxation</td>
<td>Centres make provision for children to engage in activities that reduce the child’s levels of emotional stress.</td>
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Note. Definitions derive from direct observations of sleep practices in 130 ECEC rooms (Staton, 2015).
Historical and current perspectives of educators, parents and children regarding sleep and rest time in ECEC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Historical (1940s-50s)</th>
<th>Current</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Anne Clark (principal) insisted that a “worthwhile” kindergarten programme should include a strong focus on the physical care of children – and that lunch and sleep routines were therefore not “an extra”, even for healthy, well-cared-for middle class children.</td>
<td>“Really tricky with range of ages, balancing parent’s needs, children’s needs and staff needs. We tend to honour parents’ views- put as having a higher value than children’s views, because we still have to work with them.”</td>
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<td>Chiselhurst mothers ...recalled Miss Clark strongly advocating the benefits of a cooked lunch and sleep at kindergarten – as much for them as for their children.</td>
<td>“It’s a time when we get things done – play journals, art activities cleaned up or prepared, toilets are cleaned, kitchen cleaned, checklists ticked off.”</td>
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<td>Eileen, indicated that she had approached Miss Clark to ask whether her daughter, Catherine, could have a short rest, as “she had never been a good day-sleeper, and Catherine had told me she was having to draw pictures on the ceiling (in her head) because she was bored at sleep time” Eileen recalled that Miss Clark politely pointed out, in response, that while she believed that all young children benefited from the opportunity to rest, she would get staff</td>
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<td>“Miss Clark saw to it that they had a little nap after lunch which I liked”</td>
<td>“When my child slept at Child Care she was then awake up until 10 p.m. at night and a lot of stress was involved.”</td>
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<td>Eileen, indicated that she had approached Miss Clark to ask whether her daughter, Catherine, could have a short rest, as “she had never been a good day-sleeper, and Catherine had told me she was having to draw pictures on the ceiling (in her head) because she was bored at sleep time” Eileen recalled that Miss Clark politely pointed out, in response, that while she believed that all young children benefited from the opportunity to rest, she would get staff</td>
<td>“Nap time is part of the daily routine, however my son resents it as he hasn't had to nap at home for a long time.”</td>
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<td>“He is in school next year and needs to be able to stay awake all day without tiring too much.”</td>
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<td>“I believe an hour or two sleeping every day is good for the development of children, mentally,</td>
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to “monitor Catherine’s mood at the rest-time”. On reflection, Eileen suspects, that Catherine probably had to rest like all the others, and she did not press the issue further, since she “trusted and valued” Miss Clark’s advice and support and physically.”

“It gives me some more time with him in the evening while his younger sister is sleeping to do one-on-one activities - puzzles, games, lego.”

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<td>“I remember the sleep time and a big room full of small beds in rows. I can’t imagine how, but thirty children went to sleep simultaneously. I certainly feel it happened gently and we woke up aware of others stirring but not crying. We used to sing a medley of songs afterwards, before ‘going home’ time.”</td>
<td>“You have to lay down and be really quiet”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I remember rest time on the canvas stretchers and the smell of the stretchers. It seemed as though there was an enormous amount of space between me and the ceiling of the huge room. You had to lie on your bed and be deathly quiet. I had a little crocheted rug on my bed, and I remember poking my fingers up through the holes pretending they were puppets to keep myself entertained.”</td>
<td>“We do massage... We do massage and relaxation sometimes”</td>
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<td>“You just rest all the time because you’re not allowed to play”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“They [teachers] don’t make you.. You can just sit up or lay down or sleep or rest anything”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I like having rest time”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“if you can’t get to sleep they [teachers] pat you... they are trying to help you get to sleep”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“They [teachers] just clean”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 1.**

*A case example of one educator’s response to addressing sleep-rest within their preschool classroom.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Context</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Practice Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>National Quality Framework</strong></td>
<td>• Service propose phasing out sleep time as children would be moving into school the following year.</td>
<td>• Teacher was unsure and decided to talk with parents and children about their views.</td>
<td>• Some parents did not want to get rid of sleep time as children were too tired at night</td>
<td>• Director discussed sleep time with children and encouraged children to come up with a list of quiet activities they could do during rest time.</td>
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<td>• Other parents indicated that they did not want a sleep time as the children went to bed too late at night if they slept during the day.</td>
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