Under the National Quality Standard (NQS), ‘each child’s learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation’ (Element 1.2.1). The requirement for documentation is just one part of a bigger picture, in which documents about children’s learning and development help educators to plan the program, meet each child’s needs, and engage with families.

The NQS does not specify what types of documentation educators should use, nor how often documentation should be produced. The key is to find ‘appropriate ways to collect rich and meaningful information’ in each setting (Guide to the National Quality Standard, p. 40). This means that the process of documenting children’s learning and development will probably be different in each setting.

In order to help educators reflect on their own practices, we visit three services and ask: how do you document children’s learning and development and why?

Case study No.1 | Service #1: Creative Play Early Learning Centre
Long Day Care service
Location: Bulleen, north-east Melbourne, Victoria

‘View documentation as part of your daily routine and what you do on a daily basis—not something that you have to do separately.’

When the National Quality Framework (NQF) was introduced in 2012, many of the educators at the Creative Play Early Learning Centre in Bulleen, north-east Melbourne, were very apprehensive. According to Georgina Dimitrakis, manager of the centre, ‘a lot of my educators were feeling the stress of it all, it was the fact that it was a change.’ Nearly two years down the track, Georgina is pleased to report that those educators ‘now look back and say, ‘oh, this is much easier and better’—they’re so much more enthusiastic’.

One of the areas that the Bulleen educators are feeling confident about is the documentation of the children’s learning and development, and the way they have woven it into their work. ‘We value the importance of the time with the children, so we offer, within our service, resources to make documenting children’s learning a part of our daily experience within the room,’ Georgina explains. ‘That can involve the children and the families, rather than excluding them. So each of our six rooms has a laptop, each room has a camera that the children have access to as well.’

The use of cameras and computers, and the integration of documentation into other elements of the program at the centre, means that information can be shared immediately with families. ‘Educators email daily to families,’ Georgina says. ‘They’ll email photos, they’ll email a little bit of a reflection, which really doesn’t take long at all. It takes 10–15 minutes of their time.’

Once the practice of emailing parts of the documentation to families became routine, the educators found that families were much more interested in discussing the program—with them and with their own children. ‘They like to then be able to discuss it with their children and continue that discussion at home,’ says Georgina.

‘A lot of our parents give us feedback that they might, in the evening, log onto their computer with their children and discuss together what they’ve done, reading off what we’ve emailed.’

Involving the families in sharing, and contributing to, the documentation is in keeping with the Bulleen service’s philosophy, Georgina says: ‘When a child’s enrolled here, the whole family is enrolled, meaning we recognise the key role that families play in their children’s learning.’
Georgina explains that the process of recognising significant moments of learning and development begins with knowing the child. ‘Families, educators, community and children do need to work in partnership to identify children’s strengths, abilities and interests,’ she says. ‘We ask parents for their feedback, verbally and in writing, completing questionnaires, sharing children’s current interests, sharing their children’s abilities and strengths. Children behave differently in different settings: we might see things the parents don’t see, and the parents might see things that we don’t see.’

The educators at the centre seek to involve the children in recording their own learning. ‘We use various strategies,’ says Georgina, ‘including show and tell, children’s voice—we ask children what they like, what they know, and then we move on later—after implementing those experiences around that topic—to what they have learned.’

When the educators recognise a moment of significant learning or a learning opportunity for a child, they’ll often seek to build on it and incorporate their observations into the program right away. ‘What we see, we do straight away,’ explains Georgina. ‘We forward plan as we go. It’s no longer what we used to do—we used to get the ideas and plan for the next fortnight. Now, whatever we do, we do it as we go. Whatever our interactions, whatever comes out of our interactions, whether it’s spontaneous—looking up into the sky and seeing a plane and then extending it to making planes—we do it right there and then.’

For Georgina, there are three keys to success in documenting children’s learning and development. First, ‘a collaborative approach: you involve the children, you involve families and you involve educators’:

Second, ‘view documentation as part of your daily routine and what you do on a daily basis—not something that you have to do separately’.

And finally, Georgina emphasises the importance of ‘acknowledging people’s strengths and interests, and using them for documentation’. In the case of the multicultural team of educators in Bulleen, this means recording learning in a variety of languages.

‘In the past, sometimes bilingual educators may not have felt very confident in being part of documentation, that is, writing observations, because English is not their first language,’ Georgina explains. ‘So within our centre, we encourage our bilingual staff to document their observations in their first language. It brings the best out in them—it really gets them involved, it brings out confidence.’

‘And we have families from the same cultures as our bilingual educators, so they get to read observations of their children in their first language as well.’

In the next article in this series, we visit a family day care service in south-east Tasmania.