

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE



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The National Quality Standards (NQS) requirement for reflective practice as a means of continuous improvement can only be met if educators understand what reflective practice is and what it involves.

To meet the NQS requirements, educators need to reflect upon their practices as individuals, and as part of their team and service. They are also required to document that reflection. However, many educators are still unsure what reflective practice really means and what it requires of them.

Clarifying terms

The terms evaluation, reflection and reflective practice are often used interchangeably by mistake. They are connected, but have different meanings.

When we evaluate, we assess events, daily occurrences and practices against objective criteria. For example, we might evaluate the way we change a toddler's nappy against the service's documented nappy change procedure. Our thoughts, feelings and philosophy are not relevant – only the facts about our practice.

When we reflect, we revisit a situation or event. We think about how it occurred, the context and how we felt about it. Educators document their reflections in a variety of ways, such as reflection sheets and diaries. This documentation provides some of the source material for reflective practice.

Reflective practice requires us to 'think about our thinking'. It involves reflecting on our current practice, the outcomes, and how we might change our practice for better outcomes. We still examine our practice – objectively and subjectively, as with reflection – but we also look at what informs our practice, and what action is required to improve this practice.

Reflective practice can lead to changes in knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Using the earlier nappy change example, we would examine our current nappy change practices and their outcomes for children together with the recommendations of recognised authorities. We would then use all of this information to help us decide whether we need to make changes.

Reflective practice means being:

- Honest with ourselves about what we do
- Open to different ways of working
- Willing to change our ways.

To reflect effectively we need to consider:

- What questions we will ask
- When we will ask them
- How often we will ask them
- How and where we will document our thinking and responses.

The NQS contains 168 reflective questions to guide our practices. We do not need to respond to all of these questions; however, we do need to demonstrate that we reflect regularly, and that this reflection covers each of the seven quality areas. Many services develop their own questions that relate specifically to their setting, way of operating, or perhaps their philosophy.

Systematic reflective practice

One way to demonstrate that educators in your service reflect upon their practices is to have a structured reflective practice system

in place to support them. Your system should be: simple, inclusive, regular and documented.

Service leaders need to:

- Communicate and direct educators to the relevant content of the NQS, Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), and/or My Time, Our Place (MTOPI) framework.
- Develop a list of reflective questions to cover each of the NQS's seven quality areas. This could be based upon the reflective questions suggested in the NQS, and/or consist of those developed to meet the specific needs of the service. The list can be used as evidence of reflective practice if the date and method of reflection (i.e. individual, team or service) is recorded against the questions.
- Require educators to reflect upon their practices at least three times per week, and document that reflection. Remember reflection needs to be on a topic or issue, rather than a general statement such as "We had a good day".
- Maintain a Service Reflection Diary in which all educators are required to write a brief comment about an issue identified by the nominated supervisor.
- Include reflective practice on the monthly team meeting agenda. This will ensure whole-of-service reflective practice is properly documented in Team Meeting Minutes.

Why is reflective practice so important?

Reflective practice is important because it results in thoughtful decisions that are in the best interests of children and families. Without reflection, it is likely we will continue to use the same practices in the same way, and lose the opportunity for improvement and better outcomes.

In addition to our individual reflection, we need to reflect with members of our room and service upon shared knowledge, skills and practices. Further, we need to reflect upon how well each team meets the requirements of the NQS and learning frameworks, namely EYLF and MTOP, and the kindergarten learning guidelines.

Any areas or shortfalls we identify can be included in our Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). They can also be included in our whole-of-service professional development plan and in the team mentoring arrangements.

Team reflection often identifies individual professional support needs. This information can then form part of our individual educator appraisals and professional support plans, just as the needs identified by our individual reflection do.

The NQS acknowledges us as educators with a professional responsibility to:

- Reflect on individual educator, team and whole-of-service questions across all quality areas.

- Undertake this reflection as a matter of course, and not wait until being told to do so.
- Accept that reflective practice adds to our underpinning knowledge about what we do and why.

Services need to have a system in place to support regular reflective practice and its documentation. This ensures educators will continue to improve their knowledge, skills and practices, to facilitate the best outcomes for children, families and the service.

