

RELAXATION IS A MUST

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Teaching children relaxation techniques during rest time routines in early childhood education and care services would significantly increase children's health and wellbeing, and provide them with a skill they can use throughout their lives. It would also ensure services exceed the NQS 2.1.2 and support children's progress towards Learning Outcome 3 of the EYLF and MTOP.

Meeting each child's need for sleep, rest and relaxation sounds like a simple task for educators in early childhood education and care services. However, as any educator will tell you, especially those working with children older than three years, achieving this end is far from simple and requires educators to balance a number of competing demands.

To date, services and educators have used established routines to manage rest times and these generally meet the requirements of the National Quality Standard (NQS), Education and Care National Regulations (National Regulations), Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and My Time, Our Place (MTOP).

These routines include placing the children in a quiet environment, regulating the temperature, dimming the lights and playing soft soothing music. With few exceptions, infants and toddlers who are tired fall asleep readily.

However, older children who no longer feel the need for sleep during the day are often reluctant, even resistant, to rest or relax. Educators are then left to balance the needs of these children against those of the children who do need sleep or rest. In those services which have rest pause conditions on their licences, the task is often left to one educator.

Usually, educators manage rest time by requiring all children to lay quietly on their beds for the first 20 to 30 minutes. After that time, children who are not asleep are provided with quiet activities such as puzzles, drawing and books for the remainder of rest time.

Educators believe that these practices ensure that children who need to sleep can settle undisturbed. They also believe that these practices afford the children who do not sleep the significant physical, emotional and cognitive benefits that accompany relaxation. Further, they believe that these practices promote the children's awareness that relaxation is

integral to a healthy lifestyle, and increase their ability to take enduring responsibility for their health and wellbeing.

Educators' beliefs about the affects of their practices on the children who do not sleep are partially correct. Relaxation does, as research evidences, bring many benefits. However, encouraging children to lay still with their eyes closed falls far short of the relaxation referred to in the research and does not increase children's ability to assume responsibility for their own health and wellbeing.

Relaxation results from using specific techniques designed to release body tension and calm the mind. It is an acquired technique, not one that comes naturally. Fortunately, the technique is simple and easy to teach. Once learned, it can be used through adulthood.

Daily rest time is an ideal opportunity to teach children the technique, and the best way to teach it is to use a specially devised relaxation CD. The CD guides children through the process of tensing and relaxing each of their body parts in turn while encouraging them to breathe slowly and deeply throughout.

The more familiar the children become with the CD, the more readily and more deeply they relax when it is played. Such CD's usually run for 25 to 30 minutes. It helps if educators teach children the concepts in the CD for a few days before introducing the CD. These concepts include tensing and relaxing the body, pointing and toes and opening fingers. Children will then find it easier to follow the CD's instructions.

It is critical to use a relaxation CD with children rather than a meditation or visualisation CD. Using a relaxation CD will change the tenor of rest time because it meets the needs of both sleepers and non-sleepers so all children benefit from the atmosphere it brings. Most importantly, children learn how to relax – a skill that will benefit them for life.



Introducing relaxation techniques into rest routines would ensure that educators:

- meet children's need for sleep, rest and relaxation (QA 2.1.2, Reg 81);
- assist children to recognise and communicate their bodily needs, such as rest (QA 2.1.2, LO 3.1)
- promote children's awareness of a healthy lifestyle (QA 2.1.2, LO 3.2); and,
- increase children's ability to assume greater responsibility for their own health and wellbeing (2.1.2, LO 3.1).

Most importantly, children would be equipped with a skill that will bring them wellbeing, now, and that they can benefit from throughout their lives. Best of all, rest time could well become the time that children and educators look forward to.

