



YMCA Australia

Submission to the Productivity Agenda Working Group

A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

September 2008

Section 1: Introduction

YMCA Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide our input into the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

YMCA Australia is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that delivers programs and services to help build strong people, strong families and strong communities across Australia.

The YMCA operates in over 500 locations across Australia and during 2007 an estimated 2.2 million Australians accessed a YMCA facility or service. We employ over 7,500 staff and work with more than 3,000 volunteers.

For the purpose of this submission, we will focus on two issues that are of critical importance from the YMCA perspective. Firstly, we would like to elaborate on one of the key themes that will underpin the Early Years Learning Framework – respectful and trusting relationships. The second issue of concern for the YMCA (and the sector more broadly) is that of workforce capacity.

In addition to providing this written submission, YMCA's from around Australia have participated in community consultation forums on the Early Years Learning Framework in recent weeks.

Section 2: The YMCA's role in early childhood services

The YMCA is one of Australia's largest providers of children's services. We understand the key factors in delivering effective and successful children's programs and are committed to developing and operating the highest quality programs.

We seek to provide programs that support and strengthen families and nurture the health development of each child involved. We also recognise and value the role that children and families play in building strong communities and the positive impact a caring and connected community has on the welfare of children.

Our support for children and families involves a range of not-for-profit programs and services that includes, but is not limited to:

Early Childhood Care and Education

- Centre Based Long Day Care
- Occasional Care
- In Home Care
- Family Day Care
- Extended Hours Care
- Creche
- Preschool
- Kindergarten

Early Intervention Developmental Programs

- Playschool
- Ed Gym
- Aquatic Education
- Gymnastics
- Healthy Kids
- School Sports
- Sport Skill Development Programs
- Camping

Outside School Hours Care

- Before School Care
- After School Care
- Vacation Care

Family Programs

- Family support programs
- Family education programs
- Family recreation programs

Across our broad range of other service areas, the YMCA also places great emphasis on integrated, family-focused programs that support children, parents and families in optimizing health and wellness, personal capacity building and social inclusion. The YMCA also works in partnership with parents, other community organisations and government to enhance public policy and attitudes towards children, families and communities.

In 2007:

- there were 2,258,670 visits to a Y Children's Service;
- the YMCA provided care for 427 children with special needs each week;
- the YMCA offered 25,398 daily Childcare/OSHC places; and
- 91% of YMCA Associations managed a Children's Service.

Section 3: The YMCA's response to a proposed National Quality Framework

YMCA Australia is highly supportive of the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and is particularly heartened by the focus of the proposed framework on an approach that is based on individual children's strengths.

A fundamental approach adopted by the YMCA in building strong people, families and communities is towards identifying and optimising individuals' *developmental assets*. This has been a particularly critical element in the development of the YMCA's Early Childhood Curriculum.

Developmental assets identify specific elements that work towards the healthy development of a person and in particular, children. These elements include:

External Assets:

- **Support** – children need to experience support, care, and love from their families, neighbours, and many others. They need organisations and institutions that provide positive, supportive environments.
- **Empowerment** – children need to be valued by their community and have opportunities to contribute to others. For this to occur, children need to feel safe and secure.
- **Boundaries and expectations** – children need to know what is expected of them and whether behaviours or activities are ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’.
- **Constructive use of time** – children need constructive, enriching opportunities for growth through participation in a range of creative activities, developmentally and age-specific programs, community involvement and quality time at home.

Internal Assets:

- **Commitment to learning** – children should be encouraged to develop a lifelong commitment to education and learning.
- **Positive values** – children need guidance to develop positive values that guide their choices.
- **Social competencies** – children need help in developing skills and competencies that equip them to make positive choices, to build relationships and achieve their goals.
- **Positive identity** – children are assisted in gaining a sense of their own power, purpose, worth and potential.

YMCA believes that building these assets in children is not exclusively the responsibility of early childhood education, but that it is about each person in our community playing a role in the raising of children. We do believe however, that these developmental assets should be a critical foundation of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.

In building developmental assets in children, the YMCA focuses on understanding children, supporting families and building strong communities.

Understanding children

The YMCA knows that children need experiences that set the stage for their growth and lifelong learning. The early years are a time to shape development and build personal assets that assist children to become positive, healthy young people who reach their full potential. The YMCA provides an environment that give children opportunities to learn and play, and supports parents in raising their children. The YMCA approach to child development helps children succeed and grow in body, mind and spirit.

Supporting families

A child’s development cannot be addressed in isolation from the family and the broader environment in which the child lives. The YMCA recognises that parents and guardians are the most important people in a young child’s life. We aim to support them to increase their capacity to nurture, challenge and understand their child. The YMCA promotes a family friendly environment and supports an inclusive approach that accepts each child, parent and family.

Building strong communities

We are committed to listening and actively responding to the needs of local communities. By identifying programs and services that build community capacity and promoting partnerships, we can strengthen the community to support and respond to children and their family’s needs. Our aim is to foster an environment where children and their families thrive and reach their full potential. Our children’s programs are designed to impart positive values towards

the community and the environment. We aim to foster an appreciation of their environment and a shared responsibility to respect and protect it.

3.1 Respectful and Trusting Relationships

One of the key areas which the YMCA believes is of critical importance is the quality of the relationships between children, early childhood education staff, parents, other children and the broader community. While programs can support developmental asset building, relationships are the foundation and trust in that relationship is paramount.

YMCA Australia believes that in nurturing the development of respectful and trusting relationships, children will experience:

- opportunities to develop a range of communication skills for a variety of purposes;
- interactions that allow for positive conflict resolution;
- different cultures in a respectful and inclusive manner;
- a welcoming and inclusive sense of belonging in their community that enables them to understand their social responsibilities;
- opportunities to learn alongside others;
- positive relationships with early childhood education staff who foster development and diversity of the holistic child;
- relationships that are built on honesty, respect, responsibility and caring;
- consistent positive attention, respectful caring and physical care in response to the child's individual needs;
- emotional support and a sense of belonging;
- relationships with adults who model self control, positive social skills, engagement in learning and health lifestyles;
- connection with the broader community in a respectful and culturally sensitive way;
- access to resources that encourage an awareness of diverse relationships; and
- opportunities to explore relationships and develop friendships that initiate positive interactions.

YMCA is encouraged to see that building *respectful and trusting relationships* is a critical theme which will underpin the development of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.

3.2 Workforce Capacity

A long standing and critical issue for early childhood education are the ongoing challenges of workforce development and capacity.

The YMCA believes that we cannot build nurturing, respectful, caring and educational environments for our children until we are able to build a caring and supportive system that genuinely respects and values teachers, educators and carers. Legislated regulations and accreditation frameworks need to encourage and support the development and positive environments rather than undermining them – albeit unintentionally. Support for these changes will only be possible when we have more appropriate training for those that work in early childhood services, particularly child care.

As an employer of over 1000 staff in our children's services programs, YMCA Australia is acutely aware of the skills crisis in early childhood education and care and is greatly concerned about predicted staff shortages that estimate by 2013, there will be a national shortfall of over 7,000 childcare workers. Low pay, poor opportunities for career development and a lack of recognition of the status of workers have contributed to this crisis. There has been little intervention to date on the part of successive governments to alleviate this situation despite a broad recognition of the high levels of responsibility and workload demands of those working in the sector. YMCA Australia acknowledges and supports announcements made by the Federal Government since November 2007 and hopes these proposed initiatives reflect a genuine desire on the part of Government to initiate large scale and innovative reform of the early childhood education and care sector.

YMCA Australia would like to endorse the proposals put forward by the LHMU – The Childcare Union in their recently launched campaign paper *BIG STEPS*.

3.3 Integrated Service Types

In applying an integrated set of standards to all service types, consideration for the current variation between current service types is essential.

The YMCA across Australia provides licensed short stay child care and occasional care in more than 62 community recreation facilities. Families attend these facilities for a range of programs including, health and wellness, education and community services. The short stay childcare service enables the parent or guardian to enrol their child in a quality care environment while they utilise the facilities services. Children enrolled in this style of care may only attend the service 1 or 2 hours per week. The minimal time children spend in this style of service poses challenges to child care staff when programming for the individual child. This unique circumstance needs to be taken into account when developing integrated standards relating to education programs for all service types.

The proposed modular approach may be a solution whereby licensed short stay child care services have their own specific set or version of standards.

Section 4: Conclusion

YMCA Australia welcomes this current round of consultations on the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and although concerns have been raised regarding the proposed time frame for implementation of 1 July 2009, the YMCA is keen to continue open and collaborative dialogue with Government and the early childhood education and care sector in relation to critical reforms that are urgently required.