

# UNPACKING CRITICAL REFLECTION: DILLY BAG OF TOOLS FOR TEAM LEADERS





**Critical reflection is an area that can be particularly tricky for educators and staff. It is not a concept that many people are comfortable with and can be quite confronting. It can take a lot of practice and support to embed it clearly within day-to-day practice and documentation. The good news is that it doesn't need to be time consuming or difficult and educators and staff generally critically reflect a lot; they just don't call it that.**

This resource is designed to support team leaders of education and care services with practical strategies, tips and activities to work with educators and staff to strengthen their critical reflection skills and their ability to talk about and document how they critically reflect on their practice.

Please note team leaders could be the responsible person, the nominated supervisor or the educational leader.

Critical reflection is a central skill for early childhood educators and staff. It is required for application of the National Quality Standard (NQS) in a number of ways. This includes both its application specifically to programming, but also more broadly to all aspects of the service, and the interactions and approaches of the educators and staff.

- NQS element 1.3.2 requires that critical reflection on children's learning and development, both as individuals and in groups, drives program planning and implementation.
- NQS element 4.2.1 requires that management, educators and other team members work collaboratively and with mutual respect, and challenge and learn from each other, recognising each other's strengths and skills.
- NQS element 7.2.1 requires that there is an effective self-assessment and quality improvement process in place.
- Critical reflection is also the second of three themes that a service must demonstrate in order to achieve a rating of "Exceeding NQS" for any standard.

This fact sheet does not provide guidance on demonstrating the second theme for exceeding the NQS. It offers practical supports for team leaders to assist their team in critically reflecting on their practice in order to improve.

# WHAT IS CRITICAL REFLECTION?

Critical reflection involves learning from everyday situations and problems. It means regularly asking questions of yourself and about your actions to better understand why things happened in a certain way and how this might inform future planning and actions. It is central to making changes and improvements to support children's learning and outcomes.

Critical reflection is a form of ongoing learning that encourages educators and staff to:

- Think about their practice and the provision of education and care of their service from different viewpoints;
- Gather information from different perspectives to develop a deeper understanding of their work;
- Make conclusions about the strengths and opportunities for improvement of their practice and the care provided to children;
- Explore ideas for different ways that these activities, interactions, approaches and procedures could happen and different ways that they could think about them; and
- Identify some quality improvements and a plan for how to integrate these within the program and practice.

It is applied to each aspect of the program – the planning cycle, the principles that guide the NQS, the educator's own behaviour, activities and interactions, operation of the service and the children's learning and development. It is essential to program planning and implementation, and should be part of each educator's daily activities. It helps educators to identify what is working and what needs to be improved or changed.

# HOW CAN YOU ASSIST EDUCATORS WITH CRITICAL REFLECTION?

This section suggests a series of activities that team leaders can try to help educators and staff improve their critical reflection skills and better embed critical reflection within their practice. Take one step at a time, and remember it is OK to start slow.

Something to think about before you start though – sometimes educators and staff struggle with the phrase 'critical reflection.' Consider whether it might be helpful to use a different term for it at first, until educators and staff feel more comfortable with it. Some ideas are:

- "Deadly ideas";
- "Deadly reflections";
- "Deadly reflections: looking back and thinking forward";
- "Deadly thoughts"; and
- "PRO – unpacking the Practice, Reflecting on options, implementing and observing the Outcome".

We use "deadly reflection" in this resource. It might also be helpful to reframe deadly reflection discussions as yarning up about your day, which is what we do best as Aboriginal educators and staff.

# EMBEDDING DEADLY REFLECTIONS WITHIN YOUR ROUTINE

- Structure times for each educator and staff throughout the day to stop and think about what they are doing, why and how it is going. This may be:
  - (a) setting a daily goal at the beginning of the day that they write up on a team board;
  - (b) checking in with you or another educator/staff member at lunchtime to reflect on how this is going and sharing ideas for the afternoon; and
  - (c) ten minutes to write in your journal at the end of the day.
- Structure weekly meetings which reflect on what is happening at the service and include time for writing reflections beforehand or bringing them to the meeting. Focus on issues that have come up during the day.
- Make it a requirement to discuss at least one strength and one area requiring improvement in every professional discussion. Starting with strengths tends to make people more able to listen to feedback and properly reflect on areas for improvement.
- Include deadly reflections in the weekly planning requirements for educators and staff.
- Ensure educational leaders have regular meetings with educators and staff that focus on a set of open-ended questions.



- Have a weekly quote that you put up in the staff room from an Aboriginal leader or other leader on something that will inspire them to think about their work differently.

## EMBEDDING DEADLY REFLECTIONS WITHIN SERVICE PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES

Team leaders set and oversee the processes and procedures to make educators' and staff's responsibilities clear and support educators and staff to meet them.

- Ensure educator and staff induction processes cover deadly reflections and expectations of educators and staff.
- Learn about educators' and staff's strengths and what professional development they may benefit from. Develop a professional development plan.
- Draw on team strengths, including having team members with the relevant skills to do the write-up of team meetings.
- Have a simple and clear format for documentation of learnings. You could use photo collages with key words, photo learning stories, an "our day" daily reflections diary, talk-to-text notes on mobile phones, developmental checklists, and weekly selfie-videos that team members take yarning up about their day on the iPad, which are open to the whole team. There should be opportunities to note what was significant about what a particular child did.
- Display "deadly ideas" learning documentation in the staffroom for comment, discussion and support. This may assist educators and staff to become more comfortable with sharing work with their colleagues, and may also foster learning.
- Work together as a team to build deadly reflections into service processes. Discuss how the service currently examines its practices and decision-making, and identifies successes and areas for improvement. Consider how the service creates opportunities for team conversations, questions and debates. Develop a plan for integrating these into your processes and programming. As part of this, you could consider how you use the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), NQS and other tools to support your daily reflection.
- Think about how your reflections currently turn into quality improvement strategies. Are there things that you could do to better facilitate this? Documenting the improvements that were decided in your Quality Improvement Plan after each staff meeting could assist.
- Review systems for collecting information from families, children and team members about their perceptions of the service. Make sure that you are integrating their feedback into your review and planning processes and providing feedback on how the information has been incorporated. Having an anonymous feedback box is an easy way to get feedback. Having a survey with some incentives for those participating can also help to get more people involved.
- Have the team put acknowledgements of each other into a jar over the week. Type these up, read them out at the team meeting, put them on the wall, and based on the results, award an educator of the month. A prize doesn't need to cost money, it could be two hours in lieu. Nikinpa Aboriginal Child and Family Centre tried this and found that over time, comments evolved to become much more specific, focused and meaningful.



## DEADLY REFLECTION STRATEGIES TO NURTURE A CULTURE OF LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

- Encourage what, how and why questions – Why do we do it in that way? How does the practice improve outcomes for each child? Why did I respond that way? What may have been impacting me at that time? How did I feel? How did the child respond? How does the practice advantage or disadvantage any children? Could the practice be improved? Draw on the questions in the deadly reflection posters.
- You can create a safe space for educators and staff to feel comfortable asking these questions by asking them yourself and modelling how to do it, and then encouraging others to do the same.
- Have current literature available, like professional magazines, journal articles or other resources to extend educators' and staff's knowledge and prompt deadly reflection.
- Pick a topic and ask these important questions from the EYLF: "Who is advantaged when I work this way? Who is disadvantaged?"
- Have a focus on different values (e.g. diversity) and areas of the NQS for each month of the year to examine each in greater depth.
- In meetings and on the floor, talk about the different strengths and skills that each team member brings, encouraging others to do the same.
- Display one standard at a time on a large poster or whiteboard and ask educators and staff to write examples of how they are meeting it in one colour and new ideas for how to approach it in another colour. You could even use a whiteboard or white tiles in the bathroom!
- Brainstorm what an educator is at your service. What are the qualities you value in each other? Write them down and display them in your staff room. Draw on these qualities when encouraging team members and at meetings.
- Twice weekly do a "question drop", where a question is given to each team member. They spend five minutes during the day to respond to the question.
- Do an activity using "I statements" that helps team members talk about their feelings. Each team member needs to say an "I statement" about their day – for example, "I feel..." This can be a fun game that helps the team identify and become comfortable with sharing their feelings. Next team members can look at why they felt that way. Then team members can practice three "I statements" with each other during the week and report back at the next meeting.
- Work through case studies or scenarios with your team, such as the scenario presented in the Reflections Gowrie magazine (p.5).
- Encourage and positively reinforce team members who challenge each other constructively and identify each other's strengths.
- Use the questions from the NQS and Assessment and Rating section of the National Quality Framework (NQF) Guide, to inform meetings on each element of the NQS. Each section is very short and will help refresh your mind on each element.
- Have a monthly team debate at team meetings, where two or more people are assigned different sides of a topic and need to debate how well the centre approaches it – focusing on issues around the program quality, environment design, inclusion and equity, children's wellbeing and working with families.
- Do the "fish bowl" activity in a team meeting, where half of the team is in a circle and the rest are watching them. Ask the team in the circle a question that they are required to examine together. The observers can tap someone on the shoulder and step in. Everyone contributes to the discussion and each person's opinion is respected. Someone summarises and writes up an action plan based on the issue discussed.
- Ask one or two team members to research an area of the NQS and lead a conversation with the team about how they see this reflected in the work of the service, including what is done well and where there are opportunities for strengthening practice.
- Encourage the team to look outside the service and engage with people, ideas, research and innovations happening in the wider community. Organise quarterly exchanges or staff meetings with neighbouring services, support participation in conferences, webinars, in-service trainings or further study.



"YARNING UP ABOUT WHAT IS HAPPENING, WHY AND WHAT ELSE COULD WE DO TO PROGRESS OUR GOALS IS WHAT WE DO NATURALLY.

IT IS OFTEN JUST RECOGNISING HOW DEADLY WE ARE IN ALREADY DOING IT AND WRITING IT DOWN THAT IS THE NEXT STEP!"

Geraldine Atkinson, SNAICC Deputy Chair

## STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

- Focus on how you celebrate successes together at your service and with families.
- Include team members in discussions about service approaches and processes. This can help them to feel included and valued in the service and have buy-in to these approaches.
- Discuss questions around service culture with your team. How do you ensure that everyone's voice is heard and considered? What strategies do you use to find out how people feel within their team? Are there other ways that these issues could be approached?
- Identify how team members are encouraged to support and mentor each other. Are there other ways that this could be supported? For example, having a buddy system with new or younger team members paired with more experienced educators and staff, and rewarding team members that are supporting and mentoring others well.
- Require the team to document in their journals how they are working with their colleagues to reflect on practice, exploring new possibilities and recording outcomes that have resulted in improved practice with benefits for children and families.
- Discuss values – personal, professional and organisational values – and how they relate to practice. Ask team members to identify what values are important to them and why. This can help them feel more comfortable talking about them and seeing how they link to what they do. This can also help them to be more motivated and connected in their work.

## EMBEDDING DEADLY REFLECTION IN THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Team leaders can create a nurturing environment for deadly reflection.

- Set up extended periods of uninterrupted time for educators and staff to closely observe a small group of children, foster closer relationships with them and provide greater insight into children's thinking and learning.
- Ensure that there is a space that is calm, quiet and conducive to deadly reflection where educators and staff can go to quietly unpack the day.
- Display the poster on deadly reflection in this space to help the team think about it.
- Have triggers in different spots in the service to help the team remember to have their daily reflection goal and to reflect on the activities they are doing. This could be agreed reflection words you are focusing on together or questions to assist deadly reflections.
- Invite team members to spend their daily reflection time in a nearby natural environment.

**Start small! Slowly embed deadly reflection so it doesn't feel too overwhelming for you or your team.**



# RESOURCES

Here are some other resources that you may find useful on deadly reflections.

1. The [NQF guide](#) – explains deadly reflection and its role in the NQF. It also has great questions to guide reflection on each standard and element of the NQF.
2. [Developing a Culture of Learning Through Reflective Practice: National Quality Standard Information Sheet](#), ACECQA.
3. [The journey towards critical reflection](#), ACECQA.
4. [Uncovering the layers of reflective practice](#), ACECQA.
5. [Reflection template](#), ECA.
6. [Fact Sheet - EYLF Principle 5: Ongoing learning and reflective practice](#), SNAICC.
7. [Reviewing Practice Reflection Tool: Planning, documenting and assessing children's learning](#), ECA.
8. [The empowered educator blog](#) – with reflection learning action guide.
9. The [ACECQA Blog](#), which has posts about key issues all involving deadly reflection. This includes a post on reflecting on how you respect and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the development of a Reconciliation Action [Plan](#).
10. [ECA Learning Module](#) on deadly reflection.
11. Deadly reflection videos [one](#) and [two](#).
12. Foundation for Success has some amazing [videos](#) on a whole range of activities and areas of practice, with insights from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders in Queensland. This includes a [video](#) on documenting and reflecting.

