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## What parents want: parent preference regarding sleep for their preschool child when attending early care and education

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** While most children cease napping between the ages of 2 and 5 years, across a range of international settings the allocation of a mandatory naptime is a common feature of the daily routine in Early Care and Education (ECE) programs for children of this age. Evidence regarding the developmental effects of napping is limited but, beyond age 2, is consistently associated with delayed night sleep onset and increased number of awakenings.

**Objectives:** The present study examined parent preferences towards napping in ECE.

**Methods:** Participants were 750 parents of preschool-aged children attending a representative sample of Australian ECE programs across metropolitan, regional and rural sites in 2011. We analysed quantitative and open-ended questionnaire data from a large, longitudinal study of the effectiveness of Australian early education programs (E4Kids). Statistical analyses examined prevalence of parent preference for sleep and demographic correlates. Thematic analyses were employed to identify parents' rationale for this preference.

**Results:** The majority of parents (78.7%) preferred that their children did not regularly sleep while attending ECE. The dominant explanation provided by parents was that regular naps were no longer appropriate and adversely impacted their children's health and development. Parents of younger children were more likely to support regular naps.

**Conclusions:** The results highlight a disjuncture between parent preferences and current sleep policy and practices in ECE. Further research is needed to establish evidence-based guidelines to support healthy sleep-rest practices in ECE. Such evidence will guide appropriate practice and support parent-educator communication regarding sleep and rest.

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With the growth of dual income families, attendance at Early Care and Education (ECE) programs is increasingly a part of the everyday life of young children in developed economies. In the United States, 66.5% of preschool children attend ECE while in Australia, the site of the current study, this rate is 80.1%.<sup>1</sup> Commensurately, ECE is an important and inevitable influence on child health and development.<sup>2,3</sup> In this paper, we focus on the interface of ECE with children's sleep. Our focus is the preschool period (3–5 years); during this stage, children experience a normative biological

transition to monophasic sleep in which the drive for day-time sleep declines as sleep consolidates into a single night period.<sup>4,5</sup> This transition is set against the public demands of the ECE settings, where provisions must meet the sleep and rest needs of multiple children, and the private demands of the family setting, where parents must balance their work schedules with family functioning.<sup>6</sup> Emerging reports of sleep practice in ECE across a range of international settings suggest that allocation of standard and compulsory sleep times for preschool children is commonplace.<sup>7–9</sup> In the preschool years these practices have been associated with delayed onset and disruption of night sleep<sup>10,11</sup>, raising the question about effect on family functioning.<sup>12</sup> Currently, there are no published systematic studies of family perspectives. Against this background, we utilise a large and nationally representative sample of children attending ECE in Australia to ask parents about their preferences

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for their children's daytime sleep. The views of parents emerge in a context of scientific, public and practice controversy about the value of daytime sleep for preschool children.

### Sleep in ECE: a current scientific controversy

Sleep affects health, well-being, behaviour and learning throughout the lifespan.<sup>13,14</sup> Sleep in ECE has emerged as an area of scientific controversy in which different research findings have been pitched against each other to justify or militate against promotion of daytime sleep. Studies showing benefits of daytime sleep for memory consolidation have been presented as justification for promotion of sleep in ECE settings.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, findings of a negative association between daytime sleep and the quality and duration of night sleep have raised concerns about the costs of day sleep for ongoing night sleep<sup>10,11</sup> and associated development and health outcomes.<sup>16</sup> The controversy is largely attributable to individual variation in children's transition to monophasic sleep. Studies showing benefits to learning apply uniquely to those children who have not yet ceased habitual daytime napping<sup>15</sup> while negative impacts of daytime sleep on night sleep apply primarily to those children who have ceased habitual napping.<sup>16</sup>

There is considerable individual variation in sleep and rest needs of preschool children attending ECE. While by age 3 the majority of children will have ceased to require daytime sleep, 15–30% of children will still habitually nap at least on some days.<sup>17</sup> Further, for some children disrupted night sleep following illness or family difficulties indicate the value of opportunity for compensatory sleep.<sup>18</sup> Children attending for long days while their parents are working may benefit from recuperative sleep or may require, instead, a quiet rest time to support their physical and emotional needs in the environmentally demanding context of ECE. Understanding the costs and benefits of daytime sleep in ECE settings inevitably requires understanding of the interplay of individual child needs and those of their families. Family perspectives make considerable contributions to this understanding.

### Sleep in ECE: a current controversy for families

Sleep in early childhood is intricately associated with family functioning and well-being<sup>19,20</sup> and can be contentious.<sup>21</sup> Opinions regarding sleep practices such as controlled crying and co-sleeping vary considerably and reflect conflicting research findings<sup>20,22</sup> cultural beliefs<sup>21</sup> and parent preferences.<sup>23</sup> Napping in the preschool years is similarly contentious.

In the preschool years when the majority of children cease napping, the provision and promotion of daytime sleep presents a potential source of conflict between educators, parents and children.<sup>6,12</sup> For many preschoolers, a daytime sleep is associated with delayed and disrupted nocturnal sleep that may impact child and family functioning. While there is currently little systematic evidence regarding parent perspectives and experiences, there is a proliferation of commentary on parenting websites and internet forums. Themes include ECE programs “forcing” children to sleep when they no longer required it, inappropriate scheduling of the naptime (ie, too early), and the naptime interfering with night time sleep routine.<sup>24</sup> Although not specific to the context of ECE, a sample of English parents were reported to prefer that their child not nap, reporting that daytime napping resulted in delayed nightsleep onset and decreased night-time sleep.<sup>25</sup> The issue straddles the private and public domains of family life and ECE and is a potential source of tension between parents, children and ECE educators.<sup>6</sup>

### Sleep in ECE: a current controversy for ECE practice

Across a range of international contexts naptime has been documented as a compulsory feature of ECE for all children regardless of their age or biological stage of sleep transition.<sup>7–9,39</sup> However, these practices are not necessarily driven by scientific evidence. Qualitative studies indicate that the routine scheduling of a naptime in preschool ECE is provided, at least in part, to meet the needs of staff and the functioning of the ECE program, rather than to cater for children's physiological and developmental needs.<sup>26,27</sup> For example, the daytime sleep period allows time for staff to have lunch breaks and complete cleaning and record keeping.<sup>26</sup> The consequences for children and staff may not be beneficial, however. Pattinson et al<sup>8</sup> conducted an observational study of 2114 children in 113 ECE classrooms and found that 71% of children did not sleep during naptime and reported naptime was characterised by a significant reduction in emotional climate, an increase in behavioural problems and increased demands on staff to engage in behavioural management.

Perhaps more than any other curriculum content in ECE, the effects of naptime can extend beyond the ECE context to impact the child<sup>11</sup> and family life.<sup>19</sup> As parents are the primary caregivers and advocates for their children, as well as consumers of ECE, their preferences and perspectives regarding naptime in preschool ECE are important. Ward et al<sup>9</sup> identified night sleep and behaviour difficulties as key underlying rationales that parents may apply in determining their preference for sleep in ECE. Parents' views can influence ECE practices, yet these have not been systematically studied. The aim of the present study was to identify parental preferences, and understand their rationale for these perspectives. This was ascertained by asking parents two focal questions: “If given an option, would you choose for the study child to sleep at their early childhood program or school?” and “Please explain the reason for your preference.”

### Method

#### Sample and design

Data were derived from an Australian longitudinal study of early education, *Effective Early Education Experiences for Children (E4Kids)*. *E4Kids* is a 5-year longitudinal study examining the effectiveness of ECE programs by tracking their impact on education, health and equity outcomes in a large cohort of 2,539 3-to-4-year-old children.<sup>29</sup> *E4Kids* commenced in 2010. The data analysed for this study derives from the second year of *E4Kids* (2011). *E4Kids*' sampling frame provided a cohort of children attending a representation of licensed ECE programs in Australia. Licensed programs include Centre-based child care centers, preschool education programs and registered home-based day care. A description of these ECE types is provided in [Table 1](#). Australia shares similar practices, services and philosophy regarding the care and education of young children to other OECD countries.<sup>28</sup> Comparison of *E4Kids* with national cohorts from USA and Britain confirm comparability in type and observed quality using standard measurement.<sup>29</sup>

Stratified random sampling was applied to recruit parent participants whose children were attending licensed ECE programs in metropolitan, regional and rural sites across two Australian States, Queensland and Victoria. The overall sample represented the diversity of families using ECE in Australia (Tayler et al, 2013). In 2010, 2,539 participants were recruited to participate in the *E4Kids* study. In the first year there was a 74.9% (N = 1869) response rate for participants completing the parent questionnaire. From the 1,869 participants who completed the parent questionnaire in 2010, 1,300 (76.47%) completed the parent questionnaire in 2011. In the second year of *E4Kids* (2011), the parent survey contained questions regarding children's sleep. As the focus of the present study was on parent preferences in the context of preschool ECE settings, parents of school-aged children were subsequently excluded (N =

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