

INSIGHT | ETHICS

Compliant on Paper, Ethical in Practice

The gap between meeting the regulation and meeting its intent is where ratings are won and lost. A practical model for closing it.

McArthur Early Childhood Education | The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF

A service notices that a row of storage cubes in the foyer is creating a blind spot. The compliant move is to remove them. The ethical move is to ask the children where the cubes should go and design the new arrangement with their input. Both moves close the supervision risk. Only one builds the culture the 2026 NQS refinements are now asking services to demonstrate.

Where the gap usually opens

Compliant action	Ethical extension
Sleep checks logged at set intervals.	Children's preferences for rest position, comfort items, and routine respected and documented.
Documented parental consent for photos.	Child consent sought at the moment of capture, in language they understand.
Behaviour incident recorded and parent notified.	Family input invited; cultural context considered; child's voice represented in the plan.
Cultural events recognised on a calendar.	Family knowledge consulted; routines, language, and food adjusted year-round.
Educator induction completed.	Educator coached, debriefed, and given a feedback channel that closes the loop.

A test for service leaders

Pick any policy in your service. Ask three questions:

1. If we executed this policy to the letter, would children's voices, dignity, and cultural identity be visibly stronger as a result?
2. Would a family from a culture different to ours recognise themselves in how this policy plays out?
3. Would an educator new to the sector know not just what to do, but why it matters?

THE PRACTICE PRINCIPLE

Compliance is the floor. Ethics is what you build on top. Services that confuse the two for each other plateau at meeting the standard. Services that hold them together exceed it.

Five habits that close the gap

- Consult children before changing their environment, not after.
- Document family input on routines, food, language, and cultural practice.
- Use the Code of Ethics as a working document, not a wall poster.
- Reflect on bias openly in team meetings — including leadership's bias.
- Treat "that's how we've always done it" as a question, not an answer.

This article is part of The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF — M^cArthur's editorial series for the early childhood education sector. For the full whitepaper and webinar replay, visit www.mcarthur.com.au/insights.