

WHITEPAPER | EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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# Where Risk Lives

Active supervision, ratios, and the transitions that hide most of the danger — a practical guide for educators, service leaders, and casual staff.

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**A McArthur Whitepaper**

*The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF*

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## Executive summary

*Being in ratio does not mean the room is supervised. Active supervision is a system of behaviours — and the gap between having enough adults and having safe coverage is where most findings sit.*

Edition 01 of this series mapped the shift from compliance to child-safe culture. This second edition drills into where that culture is tested hardest: the moments of movement, transition, and role ambiguity that fill an ordinary day in early childhood education and care. Arrivals, departures, toileting, mealtimes, sleep and rest, high-risk play, digital device use, transport, and excursions — these are not unusual events. They are the everyday routines where supervision demand is highest and where assumptions do the most damage.

The central argument is practical. Ratios are the starting point, not the answer. Active supervision depends on whether educators know their zone, their children, their exits, and their escalation pathway — and whether they can prove it. For casual educators working across unfamiliar services, the first five minutes of a shift determine whether the system holds.

### SEVEN HABITS OF DEFENSIBLE SUPERVISION

1. Position where supervision is strongest, not where it is most comfortable.
2. Scan continuously — environment, children, exits, blind spots.
3. Count at every transition, and reconcile against the live attendance record.
4. Listen for changes in tone, volume, and silence.
5. Anticipate the next ten seconds from the cues already visible.
6. Communicate handovers explicitly — state, confirm, count.
7. Document objective facts when something goes wrong or nearly goes wrong.

### Who this whitepaper is for

- Service leaders and nominated supervisors designing supervision systems that hold under pressure.
- Educational leaders coaching positioning, scanning, and communication habits in their teams.
- Permanent educators sharpening their daily discipline around high-risk routines.
- Casual and agency educators who need a transferable framework for the first five minutes at any service.

## 1. Ratios support supervision — they do not replace it

*A service can be fully in ratio and still have weak supervision. This is the single most important distinction in this whitepaper.*

### The false confidence of ratio compliance

Ratios tell services the minimum staffing requirement — one to ten for preschoolers in New South Wales, for example. They do not tell services whether children can be seen, heard, counted, and responded to right now. Two educators may meet ratio, but if one is changing a nappy and the other is having a long conversation at the gate with a family, the main group may not be actively supervised at all.

The better question is not "Are we in ratio?" It is: "Is the current supervision arrangement actually controlling the risk in this moment?" That question needs to be asked continuously, not checked once on a roster.

#### THE TEST FOR SERVICE LEADERS

Walk through your service at 8:45am on a Tuesday. Count the adults. Count the children. Now observe: can every child be seen, heard, counted, and responded to within three seconds? If not, ratio is being met but supervision is not being delivered.

### What active supervision actually looks like

When a team says a space was actively supervised, they should be able to explain what that looked like. Who was positioned where? Who was scanning the area? Who counted? Who held the exit? Who completed the sweep? Who changed position? Who escalated when risk increased?

Active supervision is not saying "I was watching." It is the live evidence of a system operating in real time — positioning, scanning, listening, anticipating, counting, communicating, and responding early.

Behaviour	What it means in practice	What it prevents
<b>Positioning</b>	Stand where sight lines are strongest. Move as risk moves. Keep exits in view.	Blind-spot incidents; gate breaches.
<b>Scanning</b>	Continuous visual sweep — peripheral zones, shared boundaries, hidden spaces.	Undetected movement; missed exits.
<b>Counting</b>	Deliberate head counts at every transition. Reconcile against live attendance.	Missing child; transport mismatch.

Behaviour	What it means in practice	What it prevents
<b>Listening</b>	Attend to tone, volume, and silence. Silence in a four-year-old room is information.	Delayed response to distress.
<b>Anticipating</b>	Predict the next ten seconds from visible cues. Position before, not after.	Reactive response; escalation into incident.
<b>Communicating</b>	State handovers explicitly. Wait for confirmation. Repeat back.	Coverage gaps during breaks, toileting, documentation.
<b>Responding</b>	Act early. Pause or stop routines before risk becomes an incident.	Incidents that should have been prevented.

## 2. The first five minutes: what casual educators must know before they supervise

*If a casual educator cannot answer six questions within the first five minutes of a shift, the system has a gap — not the educator.*

### Six questions before supervising

Casual and agency educators work across unfamiliar services. They may not know the layout, the children, the blind spots, or the escalation pathway. The first few minutes of a shift determine whether supervision is safe or built on guesswork.

1. Where are the blind spots, exits, and gates in my zone?
2. Who is the responsible person today, and what is the escalation pathway?
3. How many children are currently present, and does the physical count match the attendance record?
4. Which children need closer supervision — medical conditions, behaviour support plans, new enrolments?
5. What is the head-count rhythm — how often, and at which transition points?
6. What do I do if the count does not match?

#### FOR SERVICE LEADERS

If your induction for casual educators does not answer these six questions within the first five minutes, your supervision system is relying on silent assumptions. Design the induction to be a five-minute briefing, not a folder handover.

### Shared responsibility is not vague responsibility

The approved provider sets the systems. The nominated supervisor or responsible person manages day-to-day implementation and escalation. Educators actively supervise in their assigned zones, follow procedures, and raise concerns. A casual educator is not expected to design the supervision system — but they are expected to know their immediate role before they are positioned to supervise.

Role	Before the shift starts, they should know...
<b>Approved Provider</b>	Systems, policies, staffing decisions, notification obligations.
<b>Nominated Supervisor / Responsible Person</b>	Who is on the floor today, zone allocations, escalation pathway, break coverage.
<b>Permanent Educator</b>	Zone, children, blind spots, count rhythm, child-specific risks.
<b>Casual / Agency Educator</b>	Zone, exits, responsible person, child count, child-specific risks, count rhythm, escalation pathway.

### 3. High-risk routines: the everyday moments that hide the most danger

*High-risk routines are not rare. They happen every day. Arrivals, departures, transitions, toileting, meals, and sleep are all high-risk — and because they are familiar, teams underestimate them.*

#### Arrivals and departures

Children, families, gates, authorisation, conversations, and attendance records all move at the same time. The practical question is: who is controlling the entry and exit point, and how do we know each child has been handed over or released correctly? A friendly conversation with a family must not create a supervision gap.

- Casual educators should never release a child without checking collection authorisation with the room leader or responsible person.
- If an unfamiliar adult approaches for collection, the response is: "I need to check the collection authorisation before the child is released."

#### Transitions

Transitions create risk because children, adults, and assumptions all move. The safe sequence is repeatable:

7. Count before moving.
8. Control the gate — know who is entering and exiting during movement.
9. Sweep hidden spaces — bathrooms, behind furniture, behind plants.
10. Count on arrival.
11. Confirm with the attendance record before continuing.

#### Toileting

Toileting adds a layer because educators must maintain children's privacy while ensuring supervision is effective. The team needs to know: who is with the bathroom group, who is holding the main group, who can respond if support is needed, and when the count is reconciled.

#### Mealtimes

Choking, allergies, cross-contamination, and hot food can escalate in seconds. For casual educators, the safest rule is never to assume you know who can eat what. Before the meal starts, ask about allergies, dietary requirements, feeding support needs, and medical management plans.

**BEFORE MEALTIMES — FOUR QUESTIONS FOR CASUAL EDUCATORS**

1. Are there any children with allergies, dietary requirements, or feeding plans I need to know about?
2. Where should I sit?
3. Which children need to be closest to an educator?
4. Am I serving food or supporting supervision only?

**Sleep and rest**

Sleep and rest periods can look calm but do not remove the supervision duty. Supervision must be consistent with service policy, procedure, risk assessment, and Red Nose guidelines. Educators must know their position, visibility, physical check frequency, documentation requirements, and child-specific risk factors.

A physical check means a physical check — not a glance through a window or a camera monitor. Educators should know what they are assessing at each check:

Check element	What to observe
<b>Breathing</b>	Visible chest or abdomen movement.
<b>Colour</b>	Any change from normal skin colour.
<b>Position</b>	Face and head uncovered; safe sleeping position.
<b>Bedding</b>	Cots secure; no loose blankets over face.
<b>Room temperature</b>	Within safe range; air conditioning functioning.
<b>Hazards</b>	No objects in or near cots that shouldn't be there.
<b>Settled / distressed</b>	Child appears comfortable; no signs of distress.

**SLEEP ROOM DISCIPLINE**

If music or ambient noise prevents an educator from hearing children breathing, coughing, moving, or becoming distressed, it should be reduced or turned off. Raising this is not being difficult — it is fulfilling the supervision duty.

## 4. Supervision planning: making safe practice predictable

*Active supervision is stronger when educators are not inventing the safe way during a busy transition. Planning gives the team a shared picture before pressure arrives.*

### What a usable supervision plan contains

A supervision plan is only useful if educators can apply it in real time. It should cover:

- Zones — which areas each educator is responsible for.
- First positions — where educators stand when the routine begins.
- Blind spots — specific to the layout, not generic.
- Head-count rhythm — how often, and at which trigger points.
- Child-specific adjustments — medical, behavioural, new enrolments.
- High-risk equipment — climbing frames, water play, cooking stations.
- Stop triggers — the conditions under which a routine or experience pauses.

### Rosters shape supervision quality

Rosters are not just staff administration. Breaks, relief coverage, gate control, toileting routines, and casual educator placement all affect where supervision holds. A roster can look covered and still fail in reality if people move without communicating.

This is why break coverage, room movements, and relief arrangements need clear handovers — and where required, correct sign-in and sign-out procedures. Every room movement should be signed: start shift, break, room change, end shift.

### The handover discipline

Supervision weakens when an educator steps away, answers a question, starts documentation, or becomes absorbed with one child. If nobody confirms coverage, the handover has not happened. The safe pattern is:

12. State where you are leaving and what you need covered.
13. Name the area, the exit, or the child group.
14. Wait for explicit confirmation.
15. Count if children are moving.

#### **EXAMPLE: BREAK HANDOVER**

Wrong: educator simply disappears for five minutes.

Right: "My break is rostered now. I have been covering the side gate and the climbing frame. Can you confirm who is taking over?" Educator leaves only once coverage is confirmed and the service movement process has been followed.

## 5. High-risk play and environments: matching supervision to risk level

*The aim is not to remove meaningful play. It is to match supervision to the level of risk so children can participate safely.*

### Responsive supervision, not one-size-fits-all

Not all play carries the same risk. Low-risk play may be managed with scanning and engagement. Medium-risk play may require closer proximity, smaller groups, and tighter boundaries. High-risk play may require arm's-reach supervision, one-on-one allocation, or a specific risk assessment plan.

Risk level	Supervision response	Example experiences
<b>Low</b>	Scanning and engagement from zone position.	Block play, drawing, reading corner, dramatic play.
<b>Medium</b>	Closer proximity, smaller groups, defined boundaries.	Sandpit, outdoor gross motor, puzzles with small pieces.
<b>High</b>	Arm's reach, one-on-one, or dedicated risk assessment.	Water play, climbing frames, cooking with tools, nature walks.

If staffing, attention, or boundary control drops, the safe decision may be to pause or stop the experience. That is not punitive — it is a professional safety decision. The key is to make the adjustment early, before the risk becomes an incident.

### Water, climbing, tools, and cooking

These are high-arousal, new-skill experiences that need deliberate proximity and role allocation. Before opening the experience, the team should decide hazards, positions, proximity rules, count frequency, and stop triggers. Casual educators are generally not expected to plan complex high-risk experiences independently — but they are an important part of the supervision team and need clear role allocation.

#### **BEFORE SUPPORTING A HIGH-RISK EXPERIENCE — FIVE QUESTIONS FOR CASUAL EDUCATORS**

1. How many children are involved?
2. Where should I stand?
3. What are the boundaries — where can children go and not go?
4. Who is scanning the wider group while I am focused here?
5. What is the agreed stop trigger if behaviours escalate?

## 6. Digital devices and supervision: attention is the risk

*Devices support quality practice. They also narrow attention. The core rule is straightforward: device use must be planned around active supervision, not at its expense.*

### Where devices create supervision gaps

Digital devices are part of everyday service practice — attendance, communication, learning documentation, photos, messages, and incident records. But looking down, typing, scrolling, searching, or reviewing photos for a daily book reduces scanning, exit monitoring, and responsiveness.

The operating rule: use service-supplied or service-authorised devices and approved platforms. Capture what is required, then stop. If device use pulls attention away from the zone, hand over the scan and exits first.

### The safe sequence for image capture

- 16.** Plan — identify a safe moment when coverage is confirmed.
- 17.** Cover — another educator takes the scan and exits.
- 18.** Check — authorisation, service rules, and child consent.
- 19.** Capture — only what is needed; quality over quantity.
- 20.** Store — on the approved platform only.

Avoid photography during intimate care, toileting, distress, nappy change, or any situation where a child's dignity may be compromised. If a child says "don't take my photo" — respect it. If no one can cover the scan, the photo waits.

## 7. Transport and excursions: where the system leaves the building

*Transport and excursions place children outside the usual room and yard. The supervision system has to be even more detailed — because the consequences of a gap are harder to contain.*

### Transport is supervision

When the service provides or arranges transport, the risk assessment must consider children, route, counting process, vehicle, restraints, equipment, and staff roles. Details need to be clear before children board — not worked out once the vehicle is moving.

### Embarking and disembarking: the highest-risk handover points

Children must be accounted for at every key point. A count mismatch must be treated as an immediate safety event until resolved. This is not a moment to keep moving and sort it out later.

#### IF THE DISEMBARKING COUNT DOES NOT MATCH THE LIST

1. Stop everything.
  2. Secure the children who are present with adequate supervision.
  3. Re-check the list.
  4. Check the vehicle and nearby locations.
  5. Escalate immediately through the service pathway.
- The routine only continues when the mismatch is resolved and children are accounted for.

### Excursion discipline

Excursions can become chaotic when responsibility floats. The risk assessment should drive adult numbers, named child groups, adult positions, toilet and boundary controls, emergency equipment, and head-count points. Head counts happen at defined points — not only when someone feels uncertain.

Before the excursion	During the excursion
<b>Know your named child group.</b>	Count at every defined head-count point.
<b>Know your position at the venue.</b>	Maintain line-of-sight on your group.
<b>Know where toilets and exits are.</b>	Position an adult at toilets and exits.
<b>Know when head counts occur.</b>	Reconcile counts against the list.

Before the excursion	During the excursion
<p><b>Know where first aid and medications are.</b></p>	<p>Escalate immediately if a count does not match.</p>
<p><b>Know who to inform if a child needs support.</b></p>	<p>Stay in your position until formally relieved.</p>

## 8. When something goes wrong: the closed-loop response

*The goal is not to blame. It is to make children safe, improve the control that failed, and prevent the same weakness from continuing.*

### The response sequence

21. Make children safe — stop the routine if needed; secure children; provide first aid or emergency response.
22. Count and reconcile — physical count against attendance record.
23. Escalate — responsible person, nominated supervisor, or emergency services as required.
24. Document — what happened, what action was taken, who was told, what was documented, and when.
25. Review — what control failed or nearly failed? What changes prevent recurrence?

Near misses deserve the same discipline. A gate left open, a handover failure, a missed count, or a transport mismatch — these all show where the system needs attention before harm occurs.

#### REFRAME FOR THE TEAM

An incident on climbing equipment is a supervision signal, not just a playground accident. Ask: were educators close enough? Were numbers too high? Was the equipment being used safely? Did the activity need closer positioning or a pause? The answer drives the control improvement, not the blame.

## 9. A 30/60/90-day plan for service leaders

Horizon	Focus	Concrete actions
First 30 days	Map and stress-test	Walk every indoor and outdoor zone for blind spots. Audit supervision maps against current layout. Run the six-question casual-educator test. Verify sleep and rest check procedure against Red Nose guidelines.
Days 31–60	Embed and rehearse	Active supervision coaching cycle — observe, feedback, adjust. Transition drills (indoor–outdoor, toileting, mealtimes). Handover protocol audit: confirm explicit state-confirm-count pattern. Device use audit: when, where, who covers.
Days 61–90	Culture and review	Near-miss review: are they being reported and acted on? Roster vs reality audit — does break coverage actually hold? Excursion and transport count-reconciliation review. Casual educator induction — does it answer the six questions in five minutes?

### What defensible supervision looks like, in one sentence

#### DEFINITION FOR THE STAFF ROOM WALL

Defensible supervision is when every adult can name their zone, count their children, describe their exits and blind spots, explain their handover, and point to the person they would escalate to — right now, without checking a folder.

## About M<sup>c</sup>Arthur

M<sup>c</sup>Arthur has supported the Australian early childhood education and care sector for more than 35 years. We work alongside approved providers, service leaders, and educators across the country — placing the right people, building leadership capability, and helping services translate regulatory change into confident, day-to-day practice.

Our Early Childhood Education team partners with services on workforce, governance, and continuous improvement. The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF is our editorial series for the sector — built from frontline webinars, expert interviews, and direct casework with services across NSW and nationally.

### Continue the conversation

This whitepaper is the second in a three-part series. The final edition will cover understanding children's behaviour — trauma-informed practice, co-regulation, and the educator wellbeing systems that make it sustainable. To receive the next edition and access the webinar replays, visit [www.mcarthur.com.au/insights](http://www.mcarthur.com.au/insights) or speak with the M<sup>c</sup>Arthur Early Childhood Education team.

