

INSIGHT | RECORDS & PRIVACY

Documentation That Holds Up

Records are not bureaucracy. They are the evidence base for every defensible decision. The seven elements of a record that survives scrutiny.

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

When an incident is investigated — internally, by a regulator, or in the worst case by a court — the record is what speaks. Not the educator's memory, not the team's recollection, not the policy on the shelf. The record. Services that train educators to write records well prevent more risk than services that train them to follow checklists.

The seven elements

1. Date, time, and exact location.
2. Who was present — children, staff, families, visitors. Names and roles.
3. Observable facts only — what was seen, heard, said. No labels, no inference.
4. Witness contributions captured separately and attributed.
5. Actions taken — who did what, when, in what sequence.
6. Notifications made — to whom, by what channel, at what time.
7. Follow-up — actions, owners, and review dates.

Two records, same incident

POOR RECORD

Liam was being naughty at lunchtime and pushed Aria. Aria cried. We sorted it out. Mum was told at pick-up.

STRONG RECORD

At 12:14pm in the indoor dining area, Liam (4y) pushed Aria (3y) on the upper arm during lunch service. Aria cried for approximately 30 seconds. Educator J. McK separated the children, checked Aria's arm (no mark visible), supported both children to use words. Aria's family notified at pick-up at 5:35pm by lead educator. Behaviour support note added to Liam's daily record. Followed up with educator team at 3pm debrief; agreed to review lunchtime seating arrangement.

Privacy is part of documentation

The Privacy Act 1988 (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles set the default rule: personal information is collected, used, stored, and disclosed only with consent and through authorised channels. Records that name children, families, or staff sit inside this regime. State and territory privacy laws may apply additionally. Exceptions exist — court orders, life-threatening emergencies — but they are narrow, and using them must itself be documented.

Three habits that protect everyone

- Write at the time, or as close to the time as is safe and practical. Memory degrades fast.
- Keep facts and characterisations on different pages. "Liam pushed Aria" is a fact. "Liam was being naughty" is a characterisation.
- Read your record back and ask: would this make sense to someone who was not there?

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