
Early Years Learning Framework

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Background

A substantial early childhood reform agenda is being progressed through the Council of Australian Governments with the Commonwealth and state and territory governments working collaboratively to deliver significant improvements in human capital outcomes for young Australian children.

The Australian Government has committed to a broad reform agenda for early childhood education and care which focuses on providing Australian families with high-quality, accessible and affordable integrated early childhood education and care. The agenda has a strong emphasis on quality and successful transitioning to formal schooling to ensure all Australian children reach their optimum potential for future success in education and life. This includes a significant investment in the education, development, health and care of Australian children.

Included in this reform agenda is an Australian Government commitment to close the gap for Indigenous children in relation to education and health outcomes. Young Indigenous children will be provided with the best possible start to life-long learning through provision of quality early childhood education programs, regardless of locality. These programs will acknowledge Indigenous perspectives, the relevant Indigenous culture and context, and ensure partnerships with families and communities.

To promote social inclusion, emphasis will be placed on improving equity and access for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including refugees), as well as children from other disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Early Years Learning Framework is a key component of the National Quality Framework. It will underpin universal access to quality early childhood education in the year before formal schooling and is linked to the National Quality Standards in order to guide early childhood educators in delivery of nationally-consistent and quality early childhood education programs.

For the first time Australia will have a National Early Years Learning Framework which recognises that children learn from birth and which supports the successful transition to formal schooling.

Belonging, Being, and Becoming: a Framework for Learning in Early Childhood Settings

The Framework invites early childhood educators to engage in critical conversations about how they think about, understand and practise the facilitation of young children's learning in early childhood settings. It also invites broader conversations about Australia's hopes and desires for children and the contribution that early childhood settings can make to building a future based on fairness, democratic principles, reciprocal rights and obligations, equality of opportunity, improving equity and overcoming social disadvantage.

Vision

The Framework aims for early childhood settings to be places of children's belonging, being and becoming. It recognises that children have rights that are identified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. These rights encompass notions about provision, prevention, protection and participation. Educators in early childhood settings have an obligation to enact these rights through using them as tools to achieve equity and social inclusion.

Children from birth are competent and capable, active contributors to their own and others' learning. Educators acknowledge young children's:

- uniqueness and complexity
- capacity for self-direction and self-motivation
- right to attachments and security as a base for being and becoming
- multiple relationships
- abilities to form opinions and their right to express ideas and preferences
- connection to place.

Educators work in reciprocal relationships with children where give and take is part of the mutual obligation of being together. They extend children's learning opportunities through intentional teaching. Learning happens in social interactions that promote children's capacity to participate in and transform their worlds.

Early childhood settings both contribute to and benefit from community life as they support and enhance the lives of young children and their families. They are friendly welcoming places in which both adults and children teach and learn.

Purpose

The Framework validates existing good practice and also provokes critical reflection and change. It provides a common language for promoting children's learning and development.

The intent of the Framework is to:

- foreground the ethical dimensions of teaching, learning and relationships in early childhood settings
- highlight the critical importance of learning in the first three years of life
- advocate for the use of diverse theoretical perspectives in planning for and guiding children's learning, and in reflecting critically on curriculum decisions
- promote the role and importance of educators with specialised early childhood teaching qualifications as pedagogical leaders
- encourage educators working with young children to use their professional judgment in deciding how to act in the best interests of children
- emphasise the importance of continuity in learning
- acknowledge the significance of transitions in children's lives, including the transition into primary school
- be a catalyst for reflection, dialogue, critique, debate and discussion
- open up possibilities for practice and innovation.

Three motifs: belonging, being and becoming

The Framework is unified by three connected motifs or themes that characterise childhood, early childhood educators and settings. These are belonging, being and becoming.

Belonging is integral to human existence. We are born connected to family, community, culture and place. *Belonging* acknowledges our interdependence with others and participation in relationships, particularly those within family and early childhood community contexts. *Belonging* is the essence of being and becoming—the contexts of our belonging shape who we are and who we can become.

Being is about knowing ourselves, building and valuing our relationships with others, appreciating life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life. *Being* recognises the significance of the present in our lives. Childhood is not solely or even mainly preparation for adulthood or for the future—it is a time to *be*, to experience childhood as active participants and contributors.

Becoming is an ongoing process of recognising our diverse potentials and possibilities. The concept of *becoming* captures the changes in the early years in young children's identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills and relationships. It also encapsulates early childhood educators, children, families and communities working together to create a just and fair society.

Educators and families, along with children, impact significantly on children's experiences, and therefore on their *becoming*. They make critical decisions which encourage or discourage and enable or limit children's exploration, creativity, security, embracing of diversity, collaboration, deep engagement, fulfillment and satisfaction.

Values and guiding principles

The values that underpin this Framework are derived from those that underpin Australian democratic traditions. Values commit us to action in collaboration with children, families and communities. These values encompass a respect for and recognition of:

- Diversity and difference
- Participation and agency
- Potentials and possibilities
- Equity
- Reconciliation
- Relationships and responsibilities
- Family
- Multiple perspectives

Diversity and difference

As a nation, our diversity and our ability to live together democratically and, for the most part, harmoniously is one of our greatest strengths. But living with diversity and difference brings with it great responsibilities and challenges. All Australians, whether adults or children, have an obligation to acknowledge, respect, value and nurture many kinds of diversity and difference within our society. Acting responsibly means challenging bias and planning intentionally for social inclusion.

Indigenous children, children with disabilities and developmental delays, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children at risk through poverty and other family circumstances, like all children, have a right to have their abilities, strengths and interests acknowledged as a basis for full participation in meaningful ways.

Valuing diversity and difference requires educators to recognise the complexity and realities of children's lives and to respond to rather than ignore or judge the challenges they may face.

Educators who work with sensitivity and respect enable an inclusive early childhood community for all families, particularly families who may have experienced discrimination or exclusion, including those living in poverty, refugee families, families experiencing mental health problems, and gay and lesbian families.

Participation and agency

Early childhood settings are communities in which all participants—children, educators and families—are welcomed, feel a sense of belonging and are active, valued contributors.

Children develop understandings of community, rights and civic responsibilities. Their civic participation includes respect for and inclusion of others, honesty, care and compassion and empathy for all.

Civic participation is enabled when educators:

- acknowledge and respond to children's agency and contribution to their own learning and experience
- consult with children on matters that affect them
- take children's perspectives into account when making decisions
- recognise the ways that children contribute to communities and provide opportunities for them to do so.

Potentials and possibilities

Potentials are made possible when children and adults bring their ideas, interests and questions to the learning environment. Through careful observation, engaging conversations and critical thinking the possibilities for curriculum are expanded along with children's exposure to many ways of knowing, being and becoming.

Early childhood settings can be places where there is excitement about discovery; where curiosity and questioning are encouraged and uncertainties are explored; and where multiple perspectives are valued and innovations and creativity prized.

Equity

All children have the right to enjoy and express their own culture, practice their religion and use their home languages. Early childhood settings are well placed to demonstrate an appreciation for the rich diversity that makes up the Australian social landscape. While rich in possibilities this diversity also brings some challenges that provide opportunities for adults and children to discover together ways of creating socially just solutions to unjust situations.

Reconciliation

Valuing Indigenous knowledges is fundamental to reconciliation and commitment to reconciliation is integral to the life of every early childhood setting. All children have opportunities to learn with and from local communities, in order to understand the basis of their society and how they participate in it. Community elders and other members of the community contribute to this learning. Both-ways experiences bring together Indigenous Australians' traditions of knowledge and other traditions in the spirit of respect for diversity. Indigenous perspectives are embedded in teaching and learning.

Relationships and responsibilities

Children learn from relationships with others from infancy. Building and negotiating relationships requires acknowledgement of the many ways of belonging, being and becoming that are reflected in Australian society. Children learn about ways of living and knowing and their responsibilities through a network of relationships. In the early years children are developing an appreciation of their interdependence with others and their environments. They are also developing skills and understandings needed to establish positive peer relationships. From birth children have experiences that can lead to them being capable of collaborating with others.

Settings in which there are active efforts to identify children's strengths and contributions help children learn to value their relationships with each other and to appreciate the power of being and learning together.

In addition to our responsibilities to each other, we have a shared responsibility to respect and care for our environmentally diverse and fragile continent. Environmental sustainability is critical to our present and the future. Human survival depends on our custodianship of the planet. All adults and children share a commitment to make the world a good place to live now and in the future. Enacting custodianship of the planet and encouraging environmental sustainability provide important learning experiences for children.

Family

Children are intimately connected to their families and are known most effectively in the context of their families. Children's earliest and most powerful learnings come from their families, and this learning context provides a springboard for learning in other contexts.

Families are encouraged and supported to engage actively in children's learning and development from birth. Early childhood settings can complement children's experiences of families when educators and families develop collaborative relationships.

Educators can nurture collaborative relationship partnerships by:

- respecting individual, family, cultural and linguistic identities of children
- negotiating mutually agreed learning priorities and outcomes for children
- seeking out the knowledges, values and practices of families and embedding these in the curriculum
- committing to ongoing shared decision making
- being willing to change and to accept change in others.

Multiple perspectives

Educators base their practices on multiple perspectives about children and early childhood education. These perspectives, continually contested and changing, invite debate and challenge traditional ways of seeing children and approaching learning and teaching. Educators' learning is enhanced when they recognise that all theoretical perspectives have strengths and limitations and when they engage with these debates.

Adopting multiple perspectives does not constitute an 'anything goes' approach. Rather, it can challenge us to:

- investigate why we act in the ways that we do
- recognise how our actions and thoughts are enabled and limited by the theories and beliefs that we use to make sense of our work
- consider the consequences of our actions for the lived experiences of children
- find new ways of working fairly and justly.

Learning and pedagogies

Learning is a transformative process of active engagement that encompasses:

- learning to live together
- learning to be
- learning to know and to do.

From birth through the first five years of life, children participate in social environments that enrich and shape their learning.

Educators use their knowledge of children, the wisdom that families contribute about each child and a broad range of pedagogical possibilities to actively engage with children in learning. They:

- create opportunities for children to engage with others, their environment and in a range of experiences
- intentionally guide children and assist them to discover their potentials and achieve their learning goals
- ensure that children encounter cognitive challenges through teaching techniques such as modeling, open questioning, speculating and explanation.

Educators in early childhood settings help children to develop positive dispositions towards learning, including imagination, resilience and reciprocity. Learning dispositions and styles become important parts of children's learning identities, which they take into new settings, such as school, and also provide the foundation for future formal learning.

Infants and toddlers are naturally curious, and when provided with appropriate opportunities and encouragement will explore the world around them. These early learning experiences lead on to preschoolers' exploration of ideas, finding their own solutions to problems and collaborating to pose problems and search for solutions. This learning is fundamental to lifelong growth and development.

Learning and play

Children are born ready to explore, investigate, relate and negotiate. They learn how to play from those around them, so play varies from individual to individual, family to family, and across cultural groups. Through their play, children construct their meaning of their social worlds.

Play can be about pleasurable exploration of spaces and places and time spent with friends. Play provides opportunities for children to discover, learn, create, improvise and imagine. Through play, children's thinking can be fuelled, and they can acquire confidence in themselves and their capacities as learners. Even more importantly, play can enhance children's desire to learn, to know.

But play is not always innocent and fun. Sometimes it can be cruel, unfair and unjust—a space for politics and power relations, where children are excluded on the basis of gender, age, size, skin colour, proficiency with English, class, ethnicity, sexuality and more. It is important that educators are aware of the possibilities and realities of play, and of the romance and nostalgia that can be associated with play. It is not sufficient to just 'let children play' and trust that learning occurs.

Educators use their professional judgment to enhance children's play experiences and to guide children's learning through play. They:

- watch, listen, and sometimes play alongside children to understand what is important to them
- use that understanding to interact with children, talk with families and colleagues, and help children to make their thinking visible
- provide the information, props, experiences, and conversation that will 'nudge' children to take their thinking further
- balance intentional teaching with opportunities for children to engage in the environment on their own terms and to "write their own scripts"
- work with children to challenge power assumptions and create play experiences that promote equity, fairness and justice.

Learning and relationships

Children's learning is supported through positive social engagement with adults and peers. Shared experiences and children's connections to people and places provide a strong platform for educators to initiate learning opportunities and also to follow the particular ideas and interests of children. Through positive, reciprocal relationships educators and children are able to work together as co-constructors of knowledge and curriculum. Educators recognise that the collective knowledge and understandings of the group are richer than the knowledge and understandings of individuals.

Positive, reciprocal relationships enable educators to join sensitively in children's play and projects that involve ongoing thoughtful conversations which stimulate children's thinking and enrich their learning.

Families play a vital role in contributing to curriculum decision-making. Collaborative partnerships with families can assist educators to understand the importance of the social context of learning for each child. Exchanging observations and expectations and maintaining dialogue about children's learning and development with each family helps to build strong foundations on which to create curriculum opportunities.

Learning and creativity

All children are encouraged to engage with creative processes and to find creative and innovative solutions to problems. They have time, space and opportunities every day to imagine, create and innovate.

Children also have daily opportunities for aesthetic experiences, and opportunities to learn about the arts and develop their own artistry and creativity. In early childhood settings, the arts are valued as form of self-expression, a means of learning and an expression of community. They provide:

- children with a language and a powerful means of communicating, especially when words are not adequate for what children want to say
- a way of learning about each others' cultures, histories, societies, thoughts and ways of thinking and seeing
- a way for individuals and communities to depict diversity and difference in Australia's richly multicultural society.

Indigenous Australian arts, both traditional and contemporary, are a powerful means of communicating the stories, histories, beliefs, practices and knowledges belonging to Indigenous peoples. These influence the identities not only of Indigenous people but of all Australians.

Learning environments

Supportive physical and social environments facilitate children's engagement with materials, younger, older and same-age peers, and adults. Educators support children's engagement in the learning community by affording them time for interactions, providing a range of opportunities for joint tasks and activities, and giving access to the tools and equipment that support communicative, social and other kinds of competence.

Physical environments, both outdoors and indoors, encourage learning through their richness, organisation, size and shape, as well as the materials offered and opportunities for sustained engagement. Educators use places and resources in the local community for learning.

Learning and transitions

Childhood is a time of transitions. Physically and emotionally supportive environments are essential for children's learning. In the first five years of life, children live in a range of places and spaces, each with its own purpose. Transitions affect children's being and are a part of children's becoming, as they move from one space to another, one experience to another, one person or group of people to another. Early childhood educators support children in these transitions through working with families and communities and building reciprocal relationships. It is important for families and educators to share information and work collaboratively to know children well and deeply and use that knowledge to inform what is provided. This is particularly important for transitions to formal schooling in order to ensure continuity of learning.

Learning outcomes

The key learning outcomes within the Framework are clustered around four broad curriculum areas. Each of these four areas has strong connections with the others, and together they represent essential elements that contribute to an integrated, holistic and comprehensive curriculum that will enhance the skills, knowledges and dispositions desirable for young children.

The broad curriculum areas are:

- identity and belonging
- languages, literacies and creative expression
- exploration, investigation and thinking
- civic participation and contribution to the future.

Identity and belonging

It is essential that children come to know and respect themselves. Equally important are children's ability to get along with others and their developing sense of social responsibility and integrity. This includes respecting others, being inclusive and enacting honesty, care, compassion and empathy.

To promote a sense of identity and belonging, early childhood settings provide an environment where young children:

- feel safe, secure and protected
- learn effective ways to seek attention and comfort
- acknowledge and take pride in their cultural and spiritual identities
- acknowledge themselves as capable, competent and valued contributors to the learning environment
- experience a sense of belonging and community within the early childhood setting and with their family, culture and the broader community
- contribute to their own health and wellbeing by learning about and practising elements of healthy lifestyles
- demonstrate emerging awareness of the rights and needs of others
- develop skills and understandings that enable them to relate to, communicate with and interact effectively with others
- develop an emerging sense of autonomy and responsibility for self-regulation and behaviour
- recognise, accept and express a wide range of emotions, thoughts and views constructively.

Languages, literacies and creative expression

From birth, children communicate with and relate to others. Using all the skills they have to form relationships, they are social beings who are intrinsically motivated to connect with others. As their skills and understandings develop, they become better and better at exchanging ideas, thoughts, questions and feelings. Infants and toddlers use sounds, facial expressions, gestures and later words to communicate. Older children also use drawing and painting, writing, construction, music, dance and drama to represent their thinking and express feelings.

Children interpret existing cultures, make meaning and build their own cultures with a range of symbol systems. Children's arts cultures (for example, music, visual arts, dance, drama) are naturally rich, diverse and involve complex transactions.

Technologies such as computers are part of everyday life for many children, and they use technologies both as a resource to investigate information and as a tool to express meanings.

To promote rich languages, literacies and creative expression experiences, early childhood settings provide an environment where young children:

- communicate their thoughts, feelings and understandings
- engage in a variety of play experiences that involve social interactions and communication
- use many forms of communication in their learning
- create meaning using a variety of culturally valued symbol systems
- explore many different ways of using language
- enjoy literature of a variety of kinds and from a range of cultures
- become critical producers and consumers of a range of texts
- become competent speakers of their family language and appreciate diverse languages
- become competent communicators in English
- develop an emerging interest in print and in the processes of reading and writing
- use functional forms of creative expression and invent new possibilities
- represent their views and perspectives using a range of strategies and media
- demonstrate enjoyment of and engagement with the creative arts
- use multiple technologies including tools, equipment, multimedia and information and communication technologies (ICT) both to access information and investigate ideas and as tools for inventing, developing and applying creative processes and to represent their thinking.

Exploration, investigation and thinking

From birth, children are curious about the world around them. They explore their environment actively using all their abilities. When they are given opportunities to investigate and explore, children develop essential strategies for learning that will last for life. These include questioning, problem solving, predicting, hypothesising and reasoning. At the same time they also develop positive dispositions towards learning and towards themselves as learners.

To promote the exploration, investigation and thinking of young children, early childhood settings provide an environment where young children:

- create meaning and share understandings through investigations, exploration and communication
- solve problems through active exploration, trial and error, hypothesising and reasoning
- demonstrate sustained curiosity and a positive disposition towards learning
- develop early mathematical understandings in real-life situations, investigations and play
- recognise connections and relationships by using symbols and patterns
- use questions to clarify, challenge and reflect on their growing knowledge
- participate in a rich variety of learning opportunities and develop a passion for learning
- demonstrate an emerging understanding of diverse views, values and perspectives
- demonstrate an emerging awareness of and relationships with their local communities
- experience appropriate levels of challenge where they are able to experiment and take risks in their learning
- persevere and experience the satisfaction of achievement
- experience the benefits and pleasures of shared learning and exploration with others.

Civic participation and contribution to the future

Awareness of self and the satisfaction of contributing to one's community is an important aspect of building civic pride and responsibility. Collaborative relationships between educators and children's families and communities and respect for diverse values and practices support children's development of a positive identity and social relationships. Strong identities and respect for diverse approaches build an ethical base from which children can contribute to shaping future possibilities for themselves and the broader community. Social responsibility also includes knowledge about and respect for the natural environment.

To promote a sense of civic wellbeing and contribution to the future, early childhood settings provide an environment where young children:

- build sensitive and responsive relationships with younger, older and same-age peers and adults
- participate in group experiences and shared decision making
- value and take care of their environment and contribute responsibly to sustainable futures
- challenge unfairness and bias
- appreciate and honour diversity
- contribute to decisions about rules and expectations that affect their lives
- are involved in critical reflection and consider consequences for others
- are partners with families and educators in planning and facilitating their learning.

Pedagogical leadership

In addition to supporting children's learning, qualified educators provide pedagogical leadership when they:

- create a culture of consideration for the ethical implications of relationships and pedagogies
- negotiate competing ideas about early childhood and draw on a number of knowledge bases about children, learning and curriculum in order to ensure the best learning outcomes for all children
- articulate their practice and its intentions clearly to children, families, colleagues, professionals in other disciplines, and the broader community
- mediate a partnerships philosophy and approach to families and communities
- enact curriculum as a means of addressing equity and disadvantage
- work in strategic alliances with other professionals who are involved with children and families, particularly on behalf of children and families with special rights
- contribute actively to a strong culture of learning through reflective practice and critical enquiry
- mentor colleagues to facilitate their professional growth and development.

In order to provide pedagogical leadership, educators commit to their own professional development and learning.

Assessment

Assessment is essentially ways of paying attention to and really knowing children and their learning in order to collaborate with and provide for them more effectively. Educators have a variety of ways to collect, record, organise, synthesise and interpret data and, most importantly, to use these data appropriately and constructively to promote children's learning. Assessment often begins with careful observations. The educator brings to these observations professional knowledge and knowledge of each child and the context. The more educators know and bring to assessment, the more enlightened and useful it will be. It is the meaning educators make of what is learned through assessing that matters.

Assessment focuses on children's learning in a broad sense, including strengths, interests, needs, dispositions, style, temperament as well as skills and knowledge.

Engaging families and children in assessment processes allows for new understandings to emerge that would not be possible if educators rely solely on their own strategies and perspectives. Sharing assessment with the children and their families demonstrates respect, helps educators make better sense of the assessment (through the feedback) and supports learning. It is a powerful way to make learning visible. It is equally powerful in eliciting diverse perspectives that can inform planning for children's learning.

The critical piece of the process is using the information gained from assessment to inform planning for children's experiences. Although there may be specific assessment requirements, particularly for children with disabilities and developmental delays, a culture of critical reflection is essential to the work of an educator.

Researching and reflecting on teaching and learning

Systematic reflection on practice provides critical insights from a range of perspectives to bring about change and continuous improvement. It allows us to ask difficult questions about the value and the ethics of our practices.

Reflection includes identifying and investigating teaching and learning practice and issues associated with power, control and social justice. Events can be 'pulled to pieces' (that is, deconstructed) to see all aspects involved, which will help educators examine the conditions or context of an event or experience.

We can reflect on questions such as:

- What theories, philosophies and understandings shape my work in early childhood education and why?
- How do these theories, philosophies and understandings help me do my work?
- Who is advantaged when I work in this way? Who is disadvantaged?
- What questions do I have about my work? What am I challenged by? What am I curious about? What am I confronted by?
- What aspects of my work are not helped by the theories and philosophies that I usually draw on to make sense of what I do?
- Are there other theories or philosophies that could help me to better understand what I have observed or experienced? What are they? How might those theories and philosophies affect my practice?

Questions like these remind us that educating always involves choices; educators always have to choose; and that educating is a moral and ethical encounter between adults and children.

