

DECEMBER 2009

Foundations

Developing Social & Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood

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CHILDREN'S SERVICES MAGAZINE

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From the Editor

Foundations is a resource for children's services staff about supporting social and emotional wellbeing in early childhood.

Our second issue explores children's emotions. Topics include listening to children's voices and feelings, and supporting children who experience difficult emotions such as anxiety or grief.

Foundations was officially launched during children's week, as part of the TAFE Hunter Institute's Early Childhood Connections seminar.

As Dee Wardle, who developed the seminar concept, explains: "We wanted to create an opportunity for those in the industry to establish and maintain networks and increase their awareness of best practice." The *Foundations* team was pleased to be able to take part and explore social and emotional wellbeing as one of the topics for the day.


Jaelea Skehan (Director, **Everymind**) launched *Foundations* and spoke about the importance of partnerships in promoting mental health and wellbeing. John Watson represented Xstrata Coal, providing an overview of the Corporate Social Involvement Program through which *Foundations* is funded.

Katie McGill, clinical psychologist and program manager at the Institute, shared some of her own experiences in working alongside children's services staff to support the mental health and wellbeing of children.

We hope you will enjoy reading our second edition. We welcome your articles, activities or suggestions for future issues.

Karen Stafford
Program Manager
Everymind





Children's Emotions

EMOTIONS HELP US to understand our world and give meaning to our experiences. They influence the way we respond to situations, people, memories, sensations, needs and ideas.

Emotions have a big influence on our behaviour and wellbeing in childhood and later in life. Families and children's services staff have a special role in shaping children's environments and relationships early in life, which have a major impact on emotional development.

Emotions

Emotions can be divided into two parts: the experience of the emotion, and the way that emotion is expressed.

Experiencing an emotion involves more than feelings. There are changes in our bodies (heart rate, breathing, hormone levels) and our thoughts, as we make decisions about the situation. Being able to recognise feelings and manage these physical responses are important skills for wellbeing.

Expressing an emotion occurs through behaviour, sounds and words. How an emotion is expressed is influenced by temperament, culture, values, learned behaviours, stress, health and wellbeing. Other factors include attachment and how a child has had their emotional needs met in the past.

Emotional Development

Emotional development begins in infancy and continues into adulthood. Babies and young children learn about emotions through watching and interacting with others. Their experiences in the early years are very important in laying the groundwork for future emotional regulation and relationships.

Babies express their basic physical and emotional needs directly and start to learn about their internal feelings through the response of carers. When carers respond appropriately and the baby's hunger or discomfort is settled, this lays the foundation for feelings of contentment and happiness. This early care is the basis of positive relationships and secure attachment.

If for some reason carers are not able to be responsive or consistent, or there is a significant disruption to the child's relationship with their main carer(s), it is more difficult for children to learn positive messages about emotions and about how to express and resolve negative feelings. This is because they may receive mixed messages from observing and interacting with their carer(s).

Older children experience and identify a wider range of emotions than babies. They need to learn how and why emotions happen, how others experience emotions, and how to express emotions in socially accepted ways.

This takes time and children can sometimes be overwhelmed by their emotions and physical feelings. Toddlers and pre-schoolers need adult support and guidance to help them learn, along with opportunities to try their skills in different situations.

Long-Term Outcomes

Experiences in the early years can have an important influence on our longer-term mental health and wellbeing, physical health, learning and life achievements. We continue to learn additional social and emotional skills throughout our lives, and apply them to new situations, but the early years remain an important time in development.

Families and early childhood staff can support better long-term outcomes for children they care for, by supporting their best possible social and emotional development in the early years.



“It should be noted that children at play are not merely playing; their games should be seen as their most serious actions.”

Michel de Montaigne

CHILDREN'S **Activity:** *Expressing Emotion*

Children can benefit from adult support and guidance to help them learn about emotions. Sometimes we can incorporate specific activities or opportunities into our program to support their growing understanding of emotions.

Expressionless dolls, as pictured above, offer a good tool for discussing emotions with children. You could:

- Offer children pre-drawn facial expressions that they can stick onto the doll as you are discussing a range of feelings. Older children may like to draw these themselves.
- Give a doll to a small group of children and ask them to personalise it, eg give it a name, age, clothes, favourite colour, etc. Read the children a story, stopping at appropriate intervals to ask them how the character might be feeling. They can use the doll and the drawn expressions to show this.
- Explore emotions and body language. What might the doll do if they were really happy or sad? You might need to demonstrate using your own body – for example, when I feel angry I fold my arms ...

It is important to reassure children that all emotions are a normal part of life. By choosing how we express these, we are able to develop and maintain positive friendships and relationships with other people. ●

Hearing Children's Voices



By Dr Zsuzsa Millei and Karen Watson
School of Education, University of Newcastle

OUR VIEW OF CHILDREN informs our practice. The recent literature on working with children promotes an image of children as competent, strong and capable individuals who have their own understanding of the world around them. In practice this means that staff:

- respect children and value their contributions to the lives of their communities
- create authentic relationships with children based on trust, openness and acceptance.

Building strong and healthy relationships creates the foundations for raising happy and healthy children. These relationships can engage with children's mental health and wellbeing in ways that offer children opportunities to discuss issues or concerns and at the same time offer trustworthy relations to support them in times of need.

A body of literature maintains that children's experiences of their wellbeing can be quite different to what adults think, or notice. By listening to a child's views about their own wellbeing we can understand what is needed to create a better environment for this child in this moment.

In doing so we ensure that the changes we introduce are meaningful and that these actions also respect the child's autonomy and support resilience. Gaining an understanding of children's views on their own wellbeing is not as easy as asking them: 'How are you?'

How might we explore and understand children's feelings and ideas better?

Children begin to develop an understanding of their social world and social experiences not long after their birth. As infants they use 'joint attention' as a way to communicate their meaning.

In the following example Max's message is clear when time is taken to 'listen' to his cues: *One day shortly after his first birthday Max was being picked up by his father from his babysitter. Max pointed out the door, next to his red boots which were up on the shelf, then to two bags for his clothes and finally to his coat which was hanging on the doorknob* (Carpendale & Lewis 2006, p. 80).



By toddlerhood children understand that others have needs and desires, but may not always realise that these desires are different from their own. Through pretend play, children begin to achieve shared meanings with peers and adults. Play presents an opportunity for us to observe children's early understandings of social situations. We might ask questions, pretend emotions and actions, and observe the ways in which children interpret and respond to situations.

By three, most children understand that others have different emotions, knowledge and beliefs to their own. Research shows that children achieve social understanding of relationships at a young age through interactions within their family context. They learn to manage their feelings and develop an understanding of the emotions of others. Talking to children about feelings and helping to identify, name and understand them is an important role for children's services staff.

For Reflection

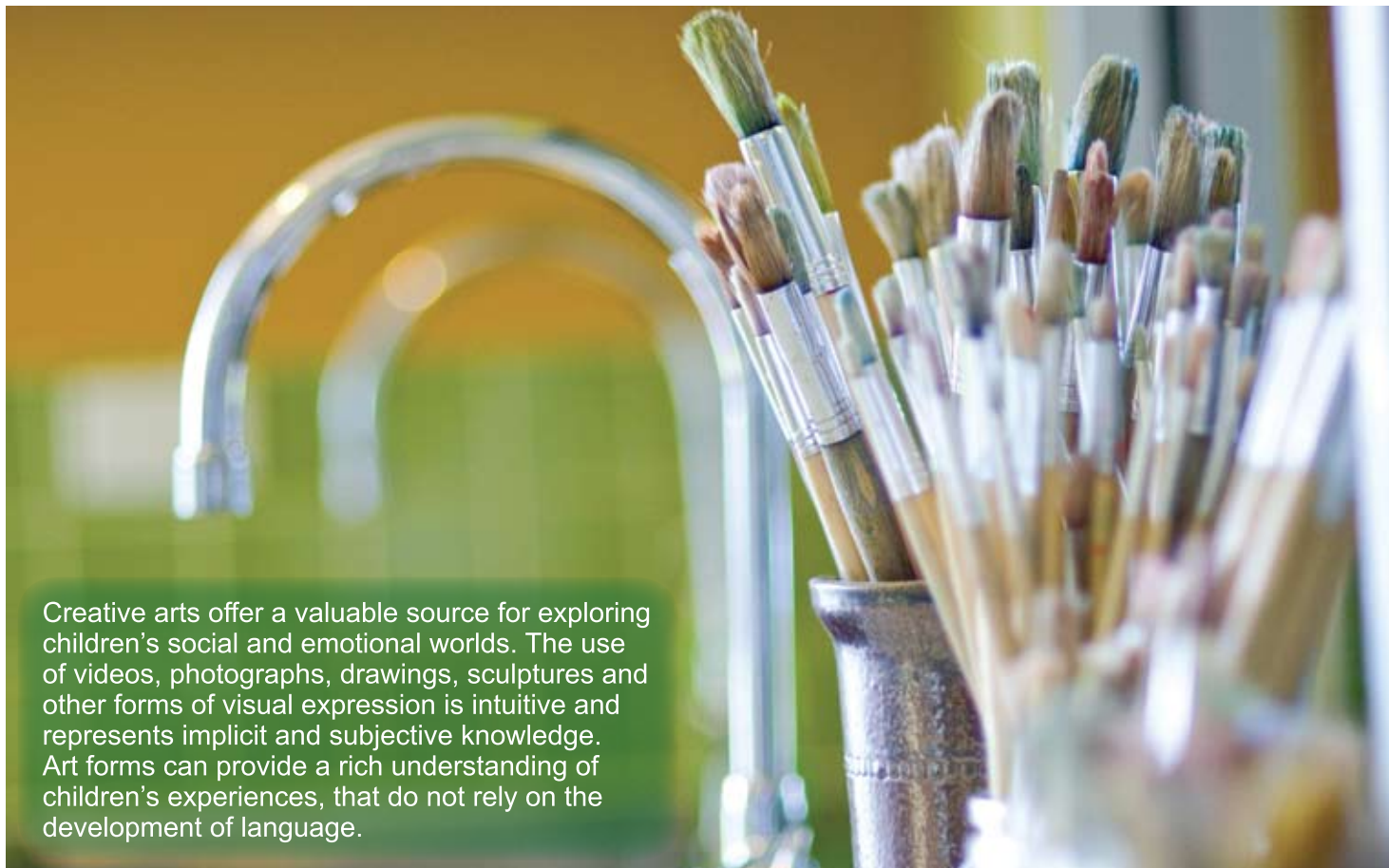
In trusting relationships with children, adults relate with humility, with no expectations that children speak about their feelings (Sumsion, 2003). If feelings are shared, children's confidence is respected at all times. Adults have a genuine commitment to listen and to reciprocate sharing, to take children seriously, to give children a chance to withdraw from discussion if they choose.

There is evidence to suggest that as adults we are not very good at this. Some researchers have argued that we do not have a culture of listening to children. Listening to their words and understanding children's non-verbal communication requires time, patience and an appropriate space. The rewards however, include a much better chance to facilitate children's wellbeing.

Creating opportunities to share feelings

Here are some ideas to try:

- Read a book with a group of children, then share interpretations of the feelings experienced by the characters. Really listen to the responses as a way to understand children's own experiences.
- Observe children's drawings and paintings for clues to their experiences. Children can represent or express emotions just as adults do in creative, playful and abstract ways.
- Give children opportunities to express themselves through photography or video, allowing them to record what is important to them. The focus of the exercise can be quite general or more specific, such as asking them to show spaces where they are happy, sad, anxious or relaxed.



Creative arts offer a valuable source for exploring children's social and emotional worlds. The use of videos, photographs, drawings, sculptures and other forms of visual expression is intuitive and represents implicit and subjective knowledge. Art forms can provide a rich understanding of children's experiences, that do not rely on the development of language.

As Cox (2005), an expert on children's drawings claims: the "*drawing activity is actively defining reality [the ways in which it is constructed and understood by the child] rather than passively reflecting a 'given' reality*" (p. 14).

Both stories and creative arts provide useful tools through which to discuss children's views and ideas. They shift the focus from the child onto the story or art work, allowing them to better express themselves. Children might also offer selected photos or artworks to describe certain feelings. Through stories, dramatic play and creative expression, we can empower children to discuss what is important to them and why.

'Listening' to children's views and interpretations of their world with humility, and reciprocating those, will help to reduce the adult-child power imbalance, giving control to the child and allowing them to set the agenda and to describe their own reality, including their own wellbeing.

Children have a view of their own emotions and mental health. Our challenge is to find practices that will help us to listen to their voices, and to do it in meaningful ways for them. ●



References:

- Carpendale & Lewis (2006). *How children develop social understanding*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cox, S. (2005). Intention and meaning in young children's drawing. *Journal of Art and Design Education*, 24(2), 115-125.
- Sumsion, J. (2003). Researching with children: Lessons in humility, reciprocity, and community. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. 28(1), 18-23.

Resources:

- PhotoVoice projects – offer visual literacy and powerful universal language to express their ideas and represent their realities: <http://www.photovoice.org/html/projects/photovoiceprojects/>
- Pat Milner and Birgit Carolin (Ed.) (1999) *Time to listen to children: personal and professional communication*. London/New York: Routledge





Responding to the Challenge

Talking with Lyn Foster

Lyn is the Owner and Director of Blossoms, a Childcare Centre in Tuncurry. Lyn and her team offer a program that focuses on children's emotional wellbeing and involvement.

Listening to the child within

When I opened my long day care service I felt a strong sense of obligation to ensure that our service would think not only about physical and cognitive development of the child but there would be a focus on the child's emotional needs. I like to think of it as the child 'within'. I have used this term often during my working life and when trying to move thinking away from looking just at an activity based program.

I often encourage those who work with young children to look beyond the action of the child and put themselves inside the child's mind. As we do this, often we realise how much we miss of the child's thoughts and especially how much emotion we are not responding to. By the nature of our day we are often action based – we are busy people who can easily move through our day involved in 'doing' instead of 'thinking'. It is so easy to lose that connection with the child's emotions and lose touch of how important that time is in the day for the child.

Before opening my service I had been the Director of a small community based preschool, where I was able to encourage children in independent thinking and work within a framework that encouraged small group, child-initiated projects. From this I could see the importance of allowing children to make their own decisions and enjoy the confidence and relationships that developed not only between the staff and the children but the children themselves.

For me, trying to bring that philosophy into a service for children under three provided a new challenge.

Supporting children's wellbeing

Starting with a room full of new babies was daunting! As a new service we had new under 2's starting regularly. We had to learn not only how to work together but also form new relationships with parents. It was certainly a challenging time and there were lots of times when we had difficulty meeting our ideals!

*"You must look into
other people as well as
at them."*

Lord Chesterfield

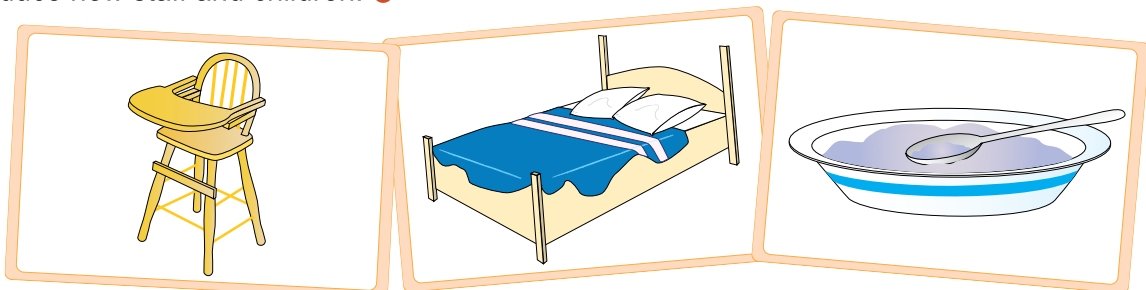
Our first challenge was to provide pause time..... so hard in a busy environment. This was the time we stopped and thought about the child 'within'. This was the time when we stopped moving before picking a baby up; it was the time we looked for a physical cue to see whether they wanted to play with a certain toy or the time we kept still so a child could come to us.

Secondly we watched what we were doing physically. It is so easy as an adult in a baby room to make decisions. We put bibs on (often from behind) without any conversation; we pick children up whilst in conversation with another staff member, we place children in areas without any allowance of their ability to make a choice (often non-verbally). So we decided to provide all children with some time for acceptance. Sometimes this would mean returning to a child for a second time – this sometimes tested our patience – however we found very quickly that after a short while the relationship that we had allowed to develop became time efficient, as the children started to take the lead and gave us actions that helped with our routines.



The third strategy we used was to provide simple signing that would build communication between ourselves and the children. We used Makaton signs (a system of communication based on a combination of spoken words, sign language and graphic symbols). We used the signs for finished, sleeping, a greeting sign and the thank you sign. Using mainly these four, we were able to let children tell us when they were finished eating, when they wanted to go to bed and what they wanted. We also gave our parents information about signing and were pleased that these were used in many homes – this helped enormously. Our parents joined with us in understanding the well being and involvement procedures that are now part of our service.

As these children have grown we have enjoyed watching them move through to the next age group – they appear confident and best of all happy. We now face the new challenge to keep the momentum going as we introduce new staff and children. ●



Understanding & Supporting Children Who Are Anxious

What is Anxiety?

Have you ever woken up in the morning and felt sick at the thought of something you had to do that day?
Have you had times when you just couldn't stop thinking about something?

This is anxiety, or it can be called stress, nerves or worry. Everyone feels anxious or nervous at some time, even people who seem very confident and assertive.

Anxiety can cause changes in a person's body, thoughts and behaviour, such as:

- a feeling of tension in the body
- faster heart beat and breathing
- headaches, muscle aches, upset stomach
- thinking or worrying about something all the time
- fidgeting, jigglings and restless movements
- avoiding a situation.

Why Do We Experience Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and important part of life that helps us get ready to deal with a threat or challenge.

Our muscles, heart and lungs prepare the body for 'fight or flight' so we can defend ourselves or run away. If neither of these is possible, we may 'freeze' and do nothing. Our minds go over the problem again and again, trying to find a solution. These are important survival strategies in difficult situations.

The way people experience and deal with anxiety depends on a range of factors, including temperament and life experience. Differences in temperament can be observed early in childhood, with some children having a tendency to react more intensely to potentially frightening situations.

Anxiety in Children


Children experience anxiety but show it in different ways from adults. They don't have the capacity to think about and talk about their worries in the way adults do. Their feelings are expressed through their behaviour and body language.

Case Study Part One: Corey

Corey is four and has been going to the same service for two years. Most mornings, he still clings to his mum and doesn't want her to go. Staff help with the separation, trying to get Corey involved in activities and comforting him if he gets upset.

During the day, Corey is often withdrawn and doesn't join in. He does not seem to have any friendships with the other children and relies heavily on one or two carers he knows well.

When planning the roster, the service tries to make sure that Corey has familiar staff to work with him. They have tried various strategies over the past year to encourage Corey to join in and build relationships.



"The art of living lies less in eliminating our troubles than in growing with them."

Bernard M. Baruch

Babies and young children show fear and anxiety by crying and becoming visibly distressed, for example when separating from a parent or familiar carer. Separation anxiety is a normal part of development, but the discomfort is gradually reduced as the child learns that their parent or carer will come back.

Older children show fear or anxiety in a variety of ways, including:

- becoming quiet and withdrawn
- clinging to familiar carers and not exploring
- avoiding situations, eg asking adults to do things for them
- crying and becoming distressed
- getting restless, angry or upset.

Supporting Anxious Children

Children who have fears and anxieties need adults to help support them and manage their feelings, until they develop greater confidence and better coping strategies. For a baby or young child, we can offer security and reassurance by holding and cuddling them, using a soothing voice, and supporting their need to have a comforter or security item.

When supporting older children who are frightened or anxious, we can:

- help them use words to talk about things that are frightening or worrying
- accept and acknowledge their fears, but reassure them that the situation is safe
- teach them breathing and relaxation exercises to release tension
- help them to gradually build confidence in dealing with the object or situation
- encourage them to work out ways to solve the problem or reduce their fears.

For example, Sally talked to her mum about 'bad kids' at preschool who pushed her 'because they don't like the good kids'. Sally's mum let staff know, and had a couple of talks with Sally about the situation.

How do you feel when that happens? What do you do? What else could you do? Acknowledging and talking about the situation helped Sally feel more confident. With her mum, she was able to develop a strategy for dealing with the situation. 'Ask them to stop. Go tell the teacher.'

We can also help to reduce children's anxiety by using care practices that are similar to those used at home and by maintaining routines. A regular routine helps children to feel confident about what to expect. This may be particularly important to their security if the child has experienced changes in other aspects of their life.



When is Anxiety a Problem?

Anxiety is a normal part of life and can be an important survival mechanism. However it is only useful as long as it helps us to solve a problem or deal with a challenge.

Our fight or flight response is helpful for handling short-term demands on our mind and body, when we are under threat. However many of the challenges people deal with in our society are not short-term, life-threatening situations.

Longer-term issues can relate to our self-concept, relationships, life goals, or pressures such as work or study. These problems cannot be solved through fighting or running away, but our bodies still switch on the fight-or-flight system.

Something to think about...

What are the things in your life that make you feel anxious?
Are they short-term situations or long-term sources of stress?
What activities do you do to manage stress and anxiety?

For ideas on looking after your own wellbeing read our October 2009 issue.

Anxiety becomes a problem if feelings of worry or stress are extreme or go on for a long time. They become difficult to manage and are no longer helpful. This type of anxiety tends to hold us back and stop us from reaching our goals.

In babies and children, some fearful and anxious behaviour is common, particularly at certain stages of development. However anxiety can be a problem if it goes on for a long time, is taking up a lot of the child's energy, or stops them from doing things.

Anxiety in children may be a problem if:

- children are fearful or anxious much of the time
- anxiety stops them from participating in activities
- anxiety affects their social skills or communication with others
- anxiety interferes with their ability to meet developmental milestones.

Case Study Part Two: *Corey*

Although Corey's been at the service for some time and staff have tried to support him, he seems to have difficulties with separation and ongoing anxiety. Because he finds it hard to manage these uncomfortable feelings, he becomes withdrawn.

Children may deal with anxiety by trying to get adults to deal with a situation for them, or avoiding things that make them feel uncomfortable. However a pattern of avoiding the situation just reinforces the problem and makes it harder to manage the anxiety.

In the short term, Corey could find the transition to school difficult and may have trouble building relationships with teachers and other children. This could affect his behaviour and learning. In the longer term, he may be at risk of developing anxiety or depression later in life.



Getting Help

Many children who experience anxiety overcome this without having significant ongoing problems. With support from their carers, and through their own maturation and experience, they are able to develop strategies for dealing with difficult situations.

Some children, such as Corey, may benefit from assessment and early intervention with a health professional to help ensure the best outcomes for them in the short and longer term. Child psychologists and other health professionals are available in private practice or through public child and community health services.

Your service may already have links with an agency that could assist a child and family in a situation like this. If a family requests assistance to find a local service or health professional, you can also suggest they talk with their family GP in the first instance, who can arrange a referral.

Staff Meeting Activity:

Some children have feelings of anxiety when enrolling in a service for the first time, because of the unfamiliar environment and routines.

They need to adjust to the expectations of the service and reconcile this with their own ideas of what they would like to do while in care.

As a team, discuss strategies you might put in place to help children feel less anxious in a new setting and to ensure their voices are heard in planning your program. ●

Starting Child Care:

Maggie's Story



Six months ago, Brett and Frances started their eighteen-month-old daughter in child care.

"We both felt apprehensive about Maggie starting care. I was unsure if I was making the right decision by returning to work," said Frances. "Maybe I should delay until Maggie was older."

When Frances called to enquire about places, the staff member was extremely helpful. "She was great, a terrific first point of contact. She could tell I was anxious and was really supportive without making me feel like some neurotic mother - although I probably was! Later when we visited the centre we found the other staff were just as supportive, and welcoming."

The centre works toward making everyone feel happy and comfortable at the service. Staff explained that this includes "welcoming each family in the morning, asking how things are going. And ensuring there is someone available to answer questions and share news at the end of the day."

"On Maggie's first day Brett and I were total wrecks, but trying hard not to show all that emotional stuff to Maggie," said Frances. "It was terrible having to leave her. A staff member came up and gave Maggie some individual attention and stayed with her. That made me feel better about leaving, but I still cried."

While Frances found the separation hard, she felt that staff really took time to learn about things that were unique to Maggie, such as her routines and interests, "even down to her favourite songs."

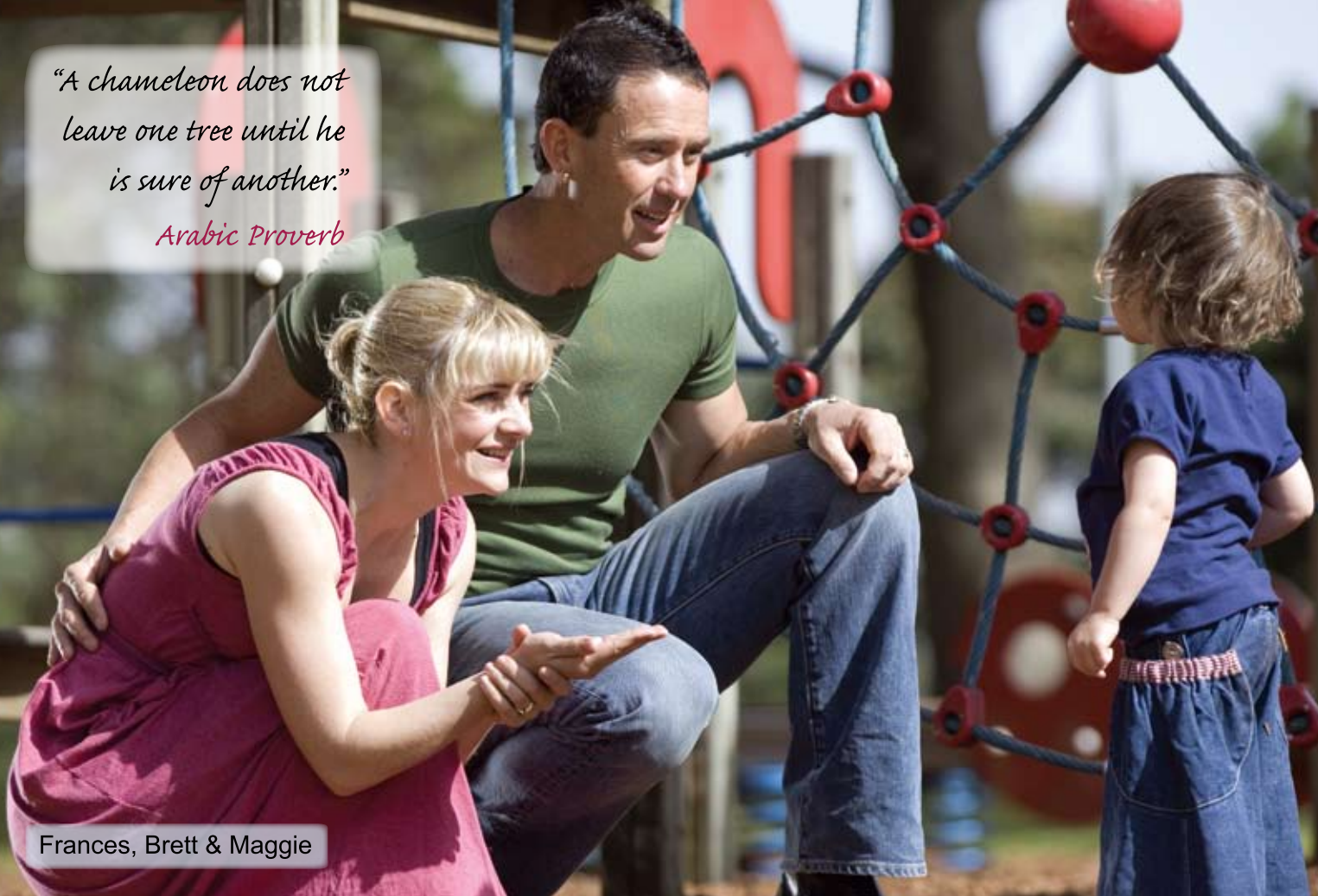
In the afternoon, the service called to let Frances know that Maggie was upset and had probably had enough for her first visit. "I appreciated that," said Frances. "They didn't prolong that first day."

Staff at Maggie's centre suggest that, where possible, parents ease children into their early care experiences gradually. "Start your child before you return to work, as tackling both at the same time can be difficult," one staff member recommended.

Frances continues Maggie's story: "A week later we took Mags for her second day. Though she was only going one day a week, I was still unsure about leaving her. After I got home I got a phone call – Maggie had vomited three times just after I left."

*"A chameleon does not
leave one tree until he
is sure of another."*

Arabic Proverb



Frances, Brett & Maggie

The service has a policy about sending children home when vomiting, so Frances picked Maggie up. "As soon as we were in the car, she was fine - perky, chatty, not a care in the world. There were no signs of any lingering illness. I suspected it was a bit of separation anxiety, rather than her being sick."

Frances wanted her daughter to settle into care and have positive experiences there. Yet if Maggie kept vomiting or was anxious, that was going to be difficult.

"So I talked to the centre manager. He had some terrific suggestions, which included seeing our family GP as a first step to confirm there was nothing physically wrong with Maggie."

"Then we worked together on a plan for managing Maggie's emotions and reactions when we drop her off. Staff also talked to us about our own anxiety and how this might be transferring to Maggie. They helped us develop strategies to minimise the impact of leaving her."

Staff at the centre also found it helpful to "talk with Maggie and reassure her that Mum will be back after work. Frances would always give us a time which meant that we could explain this to Maggie. She could see 'being picked up' as part of her daily routine."

Maggie didn't vomit the next week and continued to attend care, but after a couple of months she still wasn't completely settled.

"She was not eating or sleeping as much as she would at home," said Frances. "She was making it through the day, but taking up a lot of staff time and attention. Staff suggested we try two days in a row at the centre followed by one day at home with me. This might help her get into the routine."

Within two weeks of this new arrangement, Maggie was happy and settled at the service. She was eating and sleeping normally and participating in the activities.

"Now when I drop her off she turns around and says 'bye mum - have fun at work' and is happy to stay the whole day," said Frances. "Now I cry as I leave for different reasons!" ●

CHILDREN'S Activity: *Relaxation*



Using deep breathing and relaxation exercises with children is one way to help them transition from active outdoor play to structured indoor activities.

Techniques such as breathing and progressive relaxation can also be taught to children who are prone to anxiety, as a way to help them manage tension and difficult feelings.

This poem was written as a progressive relaxation for releasing tension in the face. Preschoolers and toddlers can do the actions while they listen to an adult read the poem.

The Butterfly on My Nose

There's a butterfly on my nose, oh no!
It tickles and flutters, makes me wrinkle it so!
I wiggle and wiggle and wiggle my nose
And up, up and away it goes!



Whew, I relax my face
And watch the butterfly dance, swirl around the place
I breathe real deep and watch it go,
I breathe real deep and relax just so.



Uh oh, there's a butterfly on my nose once again.
I squint with my eyes and scrunch my forehead
Ah, there it flies away again.
I relax my eyes and my forehead.

Whew, I relax my face ... (as above)

Oh no, there's a butterfly on my nose!!!
How did it get there and rest so close?
I smile real big, make my cheeks spread out
Away it dances and floats about.

Whew, I relax my face ... (as above)

My face feels relaxed, the wrinkles are smoothed out.
As I watch the pretty butterfly, I calm me down.
I rest my eyes, my forehead and cheeks,
My mouth, my nose, and even my teeth!

My face is smooth, the wrinkles are gone.
I'm ready to listen and learn, my ears are turned on.



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Resources:

For this and other relaxation and meditation activities for children, visit:

www.kidsrelaxation.com





Children's Grief: *Jenny's Story*

By Martha Birch
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www.nswiop.nsw.edu.au

Setting the scene

The outdoor area was busy, with children running, calling out and working on a range of activities. It was hard to find Jenny at first, the small three-and-a-half year old, who started here a year ago. She blended in among the other children ... There she was, playing quietly in the sandpit on her own.

The last week had seen such a change in Jenny that staff were concerned about how to support her. Jenny's father had died suddenly. Her family was trying to keep familiar routines going and get on with their lives, but everything had changed.

Something to think about...

How could the staff help Jenny cope with the loss of her father? What might she be thinking and feeling about the change that had happened to her and her family? How could staff support Jenny to understand what had happened and express her grief?

Children's Grief

Childhood grief is just as painful and real as the grief felt by adults. The difference is that children have less understanding of the meaning of death and the permanence of the loss.

The loss can be harder for them because other family members are also dealing with grief and problems. Jenny's mother has lost her life partner, she is faced with the distress of her children, funeral arrangements, and uncertainty about the future. How well does she see the needs of a small child, who may not express grief in the visible way an older child or adult would?

Opening the Door

Mandi had been working at the service for about 8 months and had come to know Jenny quite well. She had always been a happy and confident child, willing to try new things and able to play well with the other children in her group. Mandi wondered if she might be able to help Jenny in a simple way.

Mandi decided to try just being the same with Jenny, while watching how she played and listening to anything Jenny might want to talk about. Maybe this would help her work out how best to support the little girl right now.



Mandi sat down near Jenny, picking up a trowel and digging in the soft white sand. Jenny looked up but said nothing and went back to filling her bucket. Mandi found a bucket and started to fill it too. Jenny watched. She was quiet but gave a sigh. Mandi could feel the sadness behind that sigh, but said nothing.

After a while, Jenny turned to Mandi and said: "My daddy died". Mandi nodded and said: "Yes, it feels sad to think about that." Jenny looked at her for a moment and nodded. Then she turned away and kept playing in the sand.

This was just a start for Mandi and Jenny, to build the openness between them that would help Jenny to talk about her feelings and fears. Mandi didn't have to say the right thing, just show that she was open to Jenny's feelings and was not afraid to hear her. That was all Jenny needed for now.

Loss and Grief

Children of Jenny's age do not show grief like older people. Sometimes, it is hard to realise they are feeling sad because they seem to be playing normally. At this time in life, children are focussed on exploring the world and everything in it. This process does not stop when children are grieving. However there may be times when the sad feelings are stronger and they need someone to talk to.

Children may experience loss and grief from:

- death of a family member or friend
- separation, divorce, family breakdown
- loss or death of a pet
- moving house, state, or country
- loss of homeland, culture, language.

When grieving, children may ask simple questions about death, which require answers that are just as simple. They may be afraid that other people they love will die. They need reassurance that these people are not going to be taken away too.

A child may want to talk about the nice things they liked about the person that died, or how they miss them. Anything a child talks about during the time of grief needs an honest and caring response, appropriate to their age and stage of development.

Play and artwork can be other outlets for children's feelings and thoughts. A child may play out what they have been told about the loss, or use play to work out their own part in the events that they remember. They may create a painting or collage and then talk about their thoughts and feelings while they show it to you.

This can also be a time when routines and familiar faces give reassurance that the whole world is not lost or shattered. Children may need more cuddles and closeness throughout this time and need to be comforted when they feel sad or lonely.

Ongoing Support

Mandi kept a special eye on Jenny and had a chance to talk to her mother later that week.

It was a tough time for them all, Jenny's Mum said, but they were coping and it was reassuring that Jenny still liked coming to the service. Jenny's mother had confidence in the care she received there. She told Mandi that they all talked about "Dad" at home, and that Jenny joined in. They looked at photos and talked about good times they shared together. Mandi asked if Jenny might like to bring a photo of her Daddy to the centre. Her mother thought this was a good idea.

This was the beginning of a long journey for Jenny, but she had Mandi and the other staff at the centre, who were aware of her deeper feelings and would be available to listen or respond when she needed it. Over the next few months, Jenny's quiet times became fewer and, by her 4th birthday, she was almost her usual self.

The birthday reminded her that Daddy wasn't there and that was spoken about openly. When she blew out the candle on her cake, everyone guessed her wish.

Being available, open and responsive with children, when they are trying to manage painful feelings, is all that anyone can do. We can take the time to listen and think when a child talks to us. It will lead to bigger things. ●

References and Resources:

Honoring Our Babies and Toddlers: Supporting young children affected by a military parent's death. *ZERO TO THREE*

Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network.

www.zerotothree.org

www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au





At the Launch: Jaelea Skehan and staff from the Institute, with John Watson from Xstrata Coal

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