

JULY 2011

Foundations

Developing Social & Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood

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CHILDREN'S
Behaviour

SOCIAL
INCLUSION

Professional
LEARNING

CHILDREN'S SERVICES MAGAZINE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addition to the authors listed above, **Everymind** (formerly the Hunter Institute of Mental Health) would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their contribution to this issue.

The *Foundations* reference group: Lyn Connors, Lindy Dunlop, Dianne Enks, Jannelle Gallagher, Susan Huff, Jenny Rue, Judith Skerritt, Nicole Vesperman and Dee Wardle.

Cardiff Early Education & Care Centre, Cardiff; Cessnock Play and Learn Project; Hamilton Child Care Centre, Hamilton; Dr Lyndall Strazdins, ANU; TAFE Hunter Institute; and Warners Bay Early Learning and Care Centre, Warners Bay for their assistance and support for articles and photographs included in this issue.

Custom photographs were taken by Limelight Creative Media. Some photographs and graphics have been supplied by contributors. Stock photographs are also utilised for this publication.

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the first issue of *Foundations* for 2011. This issue focuses on the theme of change, including, how work is changing, how we can change our practice through professional development and changes inspired by the Early Years Learning Framework.

Change has been selected as our theme because it is an important aspect in our lives. As such, how we feel about change is significant to our mental health and wellbeing. If we are feeling apprehensive about change then we may need to consider how we could best manage our feelings and concerns. We should also consider how others, including the children at your service, experience change.

It can be helpful to ask ourselves, "what tools do people need to cope with changes"? Helpful tools could include talking with a colleague, reflecting on our thoughts and feelings or undertaking further training or education to extend our skills. For example, *in this issue Wendy Foster talks about how we might need to change our instinctive response to children's behaviours to become more relevant to the child and their situation.*

We are pleased to announce that Xstrata Coal NSW will continue to fund *Foundations* during 2011, through their Corporate Social Involvement Program. Three issues of *Foundations* will be produced this year under the new funding. If you would like to contribute to *Foundations* or if you would like to share some ideas please feel free to contact me via email: ellen.newman@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au

Ellen Newman

Ellen Newman
Project Officer
Everymind

*"To change one's life:
Start immediately,
Do it flamboyantly,
No exceptions
(no excuses)."*

William James



Trevor Hazell (**Everymind**) and Nigel Charnock (Xstrata Coal NSW)
at the Corporate Social Involvement Program launch

International Year of the Forests

Celebrating Forests for People



The natural environment is constantly changing with or without our influence. Trees grow each year changing through the seasons. 2011 is the United Nations international year of the forests and a good opportunity for services to consider the environment and how children and staff feel and interact with the outdoor areas at their service.

Lyn Connors, the Director of Hamilton Child Care Centre, talks to us about the importance of the outdoor environment, the Early Years Learning Framework and respecting children's work.

One Step at a Time

Unlike popular television shows, where transformations occur over a weekend, Lyn has taken a pragmatic approach to recreating the centre's outdoor areas. "Our outdoor environment is a work in progress. It has been going for five years already and we're about to complete two more projects, a frog pond and a new deck. By approaching the areas in this way we are able to complete small projects as the funds become available. This also gives the staff and families at the centre some ownership and connection to the projects."

When the staff and children returned to the service in 2011 they were surprised to find that a new project had been completed over the break.

At the end of last year many of the children who were leaving had been at the centre for a long time, with many of the older children having attended the centre since they were babies.

In some families several of their children had attend the centre and there was a strong relationship between staff and families.

The older children had been working on a long-term project with the Art Educator, Jussara. The project involved creating mosaics from materials like squares of coloured paper or natural materials. As a major element of the project the children each made a mosaic tile gluing pebbles and mini glass gems to the tiles before filling them in with earthy red, yellow or brown coloured grout.

"We had a farewell party where the children showed their families the tiles they had made and the 22 tiles were then presented to the centre as a gift. We had to consider how we could respect the children's artwork and ensure these beautiful tiles didn't end up in the storeroom. This is how the idea of a path came about."

"I contacted a landscape gardener and she was able to integrate the children's tiles into a path and have it completed before everyone returned from holidays. It was magical to watch the children returning to discover the path, complete with their tiles."

"New babies and children also enjoy the many patterns, textures and colours of the tiles. Babies often try to pick up parts of the tiles and spend time discovering the 'depth' of the path. It was validating for staff as well as for the children as they all invested a lot in the mosaic tile project. It provided a real boost for everyone and we started the year with a high."

Respecting the work of staff and children and engaging in events to celebrate this can help develop a sense of community. When families feel connected to the centre, staff and children's learning they can reduce any social isolation that they may be experiencing and this can be beneficial to their mental health.

Where there's a Will...

"I don't accept that I am not able to make things happen." Lyn explains "A high percentage of our annual budget is allocated to staffing costs, we value our staff and want to keep them so this is important. This means that we have to find funds other than those we get from our fees to enable us to do projects like the new path."

"As a community based long day care centre we aim to create a sense of community and reciprocity this manifests in many ways including parents helping with fundraising or contributing their knowledge and skills. The staff and parents undertake fundraising making it possible for us to develop our outdoor area. As we have raised the funds our outdoor areas have been renovated. It is a good way to show parents how their fundraising efforts contribute to the centre and the children's experiences. These activities are also a good opportunity for families to get to know one another."

"Over the past five years we have been able to complete many projects through fundraising and grants."

Other areas that feature in the centre's outdoors space include:

- **a new deck (purchased with a one off grant from community services)**
- **the bush house, which serves as a quiet and private area**
- **fruit trees and veggie gardens**
- **multi-level platforms**
- **a home corner**
- **a musical instrument section complete with a stage**
- **a dinosaur cave**
- **and a boat featuring a flag made by a previous group of children.**

INTERNATIONAL YEAR
OF FORESTS • 2011



Linking to the Early Years Learning Framework

“Part of inspiration for the path project came from the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) particularly the belonging element. By keeping the tiles and incorporating them into the centre we are showing children that they belong and we respect and value their work.” Some of the outcomes achieved through this activity include:

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Children feel safe, secure and supported

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing
 - Recognise the contributions they make to shared projects and experiences

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Children transfer and adapt what they have learnt from one context to another

Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Retrieved July 3, 2009 from http://www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy_agenda/quality/pages/earlyyearslearningframework.aspx

Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.

Creating a sense of belonging for children can help foster their social and emotional wellbeing. Feeling safe and secure can enable children to feel at ease in the service and confident in themselves, promoting the positive development of relationships with their peers and staff. When staff show they value children's contributions, such as with the tile project, they can help children see their place in the service and the world as important.

Something to think about...

How do you demonstrate to the children in your service that you respect and value their work?

What projects would you like to undertake in your outdoor environment? How could you make this possible?





What is social inclusion

for families in an early childhood setting?

By Pat Jewell

Belonging, Being, Becoming is the title of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. This title acknowledges the importance of children's social inclusion in early childhood settings. Social inclusion is about a child and their family member's sense of self, connection and belonging to groups and communities.

"Fundamental to the Framework is a view of children's lives as characterised by *belonging, being and becoming*. From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place. Their earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families, who are children's first and most influential educators." (EYLF, p7). Early childhood settings have been identified as a significant "community hub" where relationships between early childhood educators and families can grow and develop. However, Hadley states in her PhD study: "the role of early childhood services as community and family support services is not well articulated nor well understood by staff or families" (p6, 2007).

With the Early Years Learning Framework in place it is timely for early childhood educators to **revisit** and **rethink** the importance of social inclusion both for children and their families. Early Childhood Australia's Code of Ethics states: "In relation to families I will: assist each family to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion" (ECA Code of Ethics, 2009). We also know there is a strong link between the relationship that early childhood educators have with families and the child's experience in the early childhood setting. Kasting reminds us "the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievements" (Kasting, 1994 p146). Allowing and encouraging parents to be closely involved in their children's education actually means that families have a feeling of "belonging" in the early setting. But many early childhood educators find it difficult to provide an environment for families where families feel "at home" in the early childhood setting.

A young child with blonde hair, wearing a bright pink bucket hat and a pink long-sleeved shirt with a graphic that says "Be HEARTED", is reaching out with their right hand towards a yellow table. Another child's arm, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, is also visible on the table. The background is blurred, showing other children and outdoor setting.

“If one desires a change, one must be that change before that change can take place.”

Gita Bellin

My Masters research identified a link between how early childhood educators see themselves (their professional identity) and the relationships they can build with families. The data recognized that for most of the early childhood educators their professional identity was specifically and strongly connected to their work with children while the connection to working with families was weaker. One area identified as a weakness was the discrepancy in perceived communication between early childhood educators and families. Early childhood educators felt that they are communicating with parents whereas parents did not feel that there was communication between them.

Early childhood educators should acknowledge that some families are easy to engage and build a relationship based on trust and respect, an equitable relationship. These families usually understand the early childhood system that their child is part of and feel confident and comfortable when they bring their children. They are usually able to provide a stable environment for their child at home and have time and commitment to spending time in the early childhood setting. These families are more likely to feel confident and comfortable within the early childhood setting, but this may not apply to all families attending the service.

In our increasingly complex world families are more complicated and their lives can be difficult. They may have issues with their health, literacy, finances or their own relationships. Families may not be in a position to fully engage in the early childhood setting this can provide a challenge to an early childhood educator trying to begin building a relationship. These families are less likely to feel connected to the early childhood setting.

Communication

A good starting point to begin to understand what isn't working in the area of communication is to look at what early childhood educators and parents are saying about each other. My research revealed there are some fundamental differences in the values and expectations the groups hold of each other.

A selection of the comments from early childhood professionals about parents included “parents were difficult”, “didn’t read notices”, “didn’t bring everything their child needed”, and “didn’t care about their children”. This reflects a negative, critical attitude towards parents that will act as a barrier to early childhood professionals including families in the setting.

The parent also revealed a difference in expectations and values with some negative and critical feelings and attitudes reflected in comments such as: “felt intimidated by some staff”, “worried staff thought they were a bad parent”, “didn’t think staff cared about their child”, “worried about how their child behaved”. It appears these parents do not feel comfortable and confident in the early childhood setting,

Relationships

The research identified differences in what early childhood educators and parents wanted in their relationship with each other.

Early childhood educators wanted parents to: “come to centre with everything the child needs for the day”, “read notices”, “bring back paperwork needed on the day” ie signed permission forms and “bring child on time.” These comments have an outcome focus – what parent need to do to meet the needs of the early childhood educator. Parents on the other hand wanted a relationship. A selection of their comments included: “to be greeted in a friendly manner and for staff to know my name”, “for the staff to show an interest in me and my family”, “to be treated in a respectful friendly way”, “to be included in the program” and “to have a relationship with the staff caring for my children”. The parental comments have quite a different emphasis and focus.

The parent data indicated that families wanted a relationship with the early childhood educators who cared for their children, the early childhood educators, on the other hand, only felt secure in their relationship with parents when they could communicate through notice boards and newsletters, a more directive approach.

Hadley has identified: “Rather than supporting families, some forms of information dissemination from the early childhood services actually increases pressure on families” (Hadley, 2007, p.6).

Elliott calls this relationship that parents want from early childhood educators as: “intentional, purposeful and meaningful relations between children and families and early childhood centres & schools and teachers” and “connectedness embraces a “feeling of being in touch” and that “we’re in this together.” (Elliott, conference keynote address, 2009)



What Does This Mean For The Early Childhood Educator?

For early childhood educators who want to begin a journey of connection with their families or revisit their journey with families here are some points to consider.

- **Rethink your professional identity (when you describe your work do you include families in your description?)**
- **Have another look at how you see parents – what image do you have? Are they mostly positive or are they negative? If they are negative how will this impact on parents feeling safe and welcomed in your service?**
- **Take the lead in your relationship with parents – role model to them how you would like to be treated.**
- **Trust that parents know what is best for their children and respect their knowledge even if it is different to your own knowledge of what is best for children.**

How you see parents has a huge impact on how you can or cannot relate to them. Persevere with the parents you find difficult, always be pleasant. Think about how you will start your conversations with parents, what do you have in common? How can you start the conversation? It is only when you have built a rapport with families that you can talk about *difficult* issues from an equitable standpoint.

What Parents Want

Finally parents were asked what they want from early childhood educators and this is what they said: “Communicate in a positive, constructive way”, “Be friendly, know parents names”, “Be open and approachable”, “Know parents so they can be part of the team”, “Build one to one relationships with each family” and “Respect the ways parents choose to raise their children”.

Children and families have the right to an early childhood experience that is nurturing, educational and fun. “Where staff are respectful in all their interactions with children (and families) at all times. Where staff are inspirational and passionate leaders with ‘people skills’ and teacher commitment” (Elliott, conference keynote address 2009).

Early childhood professionals need to think about their interactions with parents as actually supporting the parents and meeting the parents’ needs. When parents feel they, and what they want for their children, is valued and respected they will feel comfortable in the early childhood setting and therefore be able to contribute to the program in the early childhood setting.

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Children's Behaviour

an emotional response gone awry

By Wendy Forster

When a child consistently presents with behaviours that are challenging or puzzling, our first response is often instinctive. This response is based on our own experience as children and/or as parents. This initial response may be unhelpful bringing with it a complex web of relationships, values and expectations that hold little relevance to the child and their situation.

Wendy explains that:

**If you always do what you've always done,
you always get what you've always got...**

As we worked through the process of reviewing our Behaviour Guidance Policy, it became clear that if we wanted to have a better understanding of children's behaviour, we needed to view it through a new lens. It made sense to focus our attention on Attachment theory. In particular the 'Circle of Security' model (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002). This model translates attachment theory (which is complex) into a working model for both parents and childcare staff to apply to their daily practice. For more information about the circle of security please see the resources on the following page.

In essence, the model involves staff:

- Managing roles so that there is always an adult physically and emotionally available to children.
- Being aware of where children are on the circle, and what intervention is required to help them manage their emotions.
- Providing *safe hands* for each child – a refuge for when their emotions are too big for them to manage.
- Reflecting on how we can support all children to effectively use the circle, at the same time teaching emotional regulation.

We're developing a deeper understanding of the behaviour of the children we work and of ourselves. We can identify:

- **Situations that challenge us emotionally and thereby impact on how we respond to children's behaviour.**
- **The difference between connecting with children and behaviours that seek to control.**
- **Those children or others that we find most difficult to work with. When this occurs, we need to be honest and plan as a team to ensure that we build positive relationships.**

Case Study

Sally was working with a group of nearly three year old children. Among them was Charlie. Charlie was exhibiting a range of behaviours that were challenging for staff, including tantrums. He was generally non compliant at the most difficult moments. His mother was experiencing post natal depression and Charlie's behaviour was unpredictable.

Sally was at her wit's end. She was honestly feeling helpless and beginning to see her relationship with Charlie disintegrating. This was at a time when Charlie most needed a pair of safe hands to help him regulate his emotions.

Sally needed to look at Charlie's behaviour through a different lens. She realised that Charlie used mainly the top half of the circle, rarely coming in. This meant that Sally only noticed him when his emotions had gotten too big and he found himself in trouble.

Strategies were put in place to help him manage his emotions before they overwhelmed him. At the same time, Sally began to work hard at strengthening the relationship with Charlie's mother. Over time, Sally began to describe Charlie's behaviour differently. Words like 'difficult', 'unpredictable' and 'uncontrollable' were replaced with reflective questions and observations that supported connection. With increased emotional support, Charlie's behaviour modified, his mother also came into the circle and Sally was more aware of the signals that he needed help.



Children are sensitive to the significant adults in their lives and build their self-understanding upon the interactions they have with their parents, teachers and carers. When these attachment figures have a deeper understanding of the children in their care, they can provide a foundation of emotional well being and security that enables children to thrive. (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004)

“Change is never a loss – it is change only.”
Vernon Howard

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Circle of Security: www.circleofsecurity.org/

Too Busy

Considering the demands on working parent's time

Dr Lyndall Strazdins from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, Canberra has written extensively on the topic of time and how a lack of time can be a barrier to living a healthy, active life, particularly for parents.

According to Lyndall we should start to think of time as a resource, we can be rich or poor in time and there are time costs attached to participating in activities. The time we have or don't have can affect our ability to live our lives in a healthy and balanced manner for example eating healthily and exercising both require time. Lyndall explains that time along with income, human capital, psychological capital and social capital make up the five resources underpinning family wellbeing.

Working parent's represent a group who are particularly time poor. While there are many reasons why families access children's services work is a motivating factor for many families.

When people are time poor we can feel rushed, overwhelmed and stressed.

In the long term this can develop into mental health problems. We all need to find time to look after our mental health and wellbeing. By considering the time costs associated with activities and trying to reduce these, children's services staff can help free up families time.

Thinking Differently About Time

Ever wonder why eight hours is considered the average working day? One hundred and fifty years ago, long work hours were a feature of the Australian economy. Protesters asked for the working day to be divided into thirds with eight hours for work, rest and recreation.

The eight hour day became a right (for some) in 1856 however work hours didn't reduce immediately and in 1890 they still averaged over 50hrs per week. This gradually changed and by the 1980's full-time workers in Australia averaged 40 hours per week. In Australia currently this is no longer the case for many workers with work hours being longer than eight hours. For working families combining work and caring for children means that there is even less free time available.

Work Impacts on Time

Time pressure is emerging as a modern dissatisfaction. The availability of free time has declined, and it has become more precious than ever. This has come about because of changes in the nature of work, how long people are working, who is working and the time cost associated with caring for children. In families this is compounded as parent's combine caring and working.

Other factors that might make families particularly time poor include commitments such as caring for another person or experiencing health difficulties.

*In 2007
the average
Australian
full-time
employee:*

*worked nearly
42 hours/week*

*one third
of employees
worked unpaid
overtime*

*one third of
men in full time
employment worked
more than
50 hours /week*

Women in the Workforce

Women now represent nearly half of the Australian labour force, much of the increase has been driven by the work-force participation of mothers. In 2001, over 72% of Australian mothers with dependent children worked for pay, compared to 46% of mothers in the 1980's. Even mothers with very young children show a similar trend. In 2000, 45% of Australian women with children under four were in the paid workforce compared to 29% in 1985.

For families, the combined work times of both parents reveals how much time use has changed. Three decades ago, most couple families in the United States had mothers at home and in these households the time devoted to paid work (by fathers) averaged 45 hours per week. In Australia the combined workload in dual-income families is close to 70 hours per week.

Families with employed parents may have more income, but they are now 'time poor', and the pressures of time poverty are especially acute for mothers. Adding together paid and unpaid work, the total time demands on full-time employed parents is 14 hours per day for mothers and 12 hours per day for fathers. Child care helps but does not solve the problem because parents still want to preserve time with their children. What is lost is leisure time. Men and women without children average 35 and 31 hours of leisure time per week respectively, but fathers and mothers of infants (when care demands are high) only average eight hours and two hours per week. Now a significant proportion of adults struggle to find time free from working and caring.

*Compared to 1997
Australians are:
working longer
sleeping less
spending (even) less time
exercising or eating
spending less time
on recreation
or leisure*

Something to think about ...

How many of the families at your service have all parents working full time?

What ways does your centre support working families?

What are some other ways in which your service could support these families?

Are there ways that you could reduce time burdens on your families?

Have you considered what the time costs to families might be of your policies and procedures, and any ways to trim them?

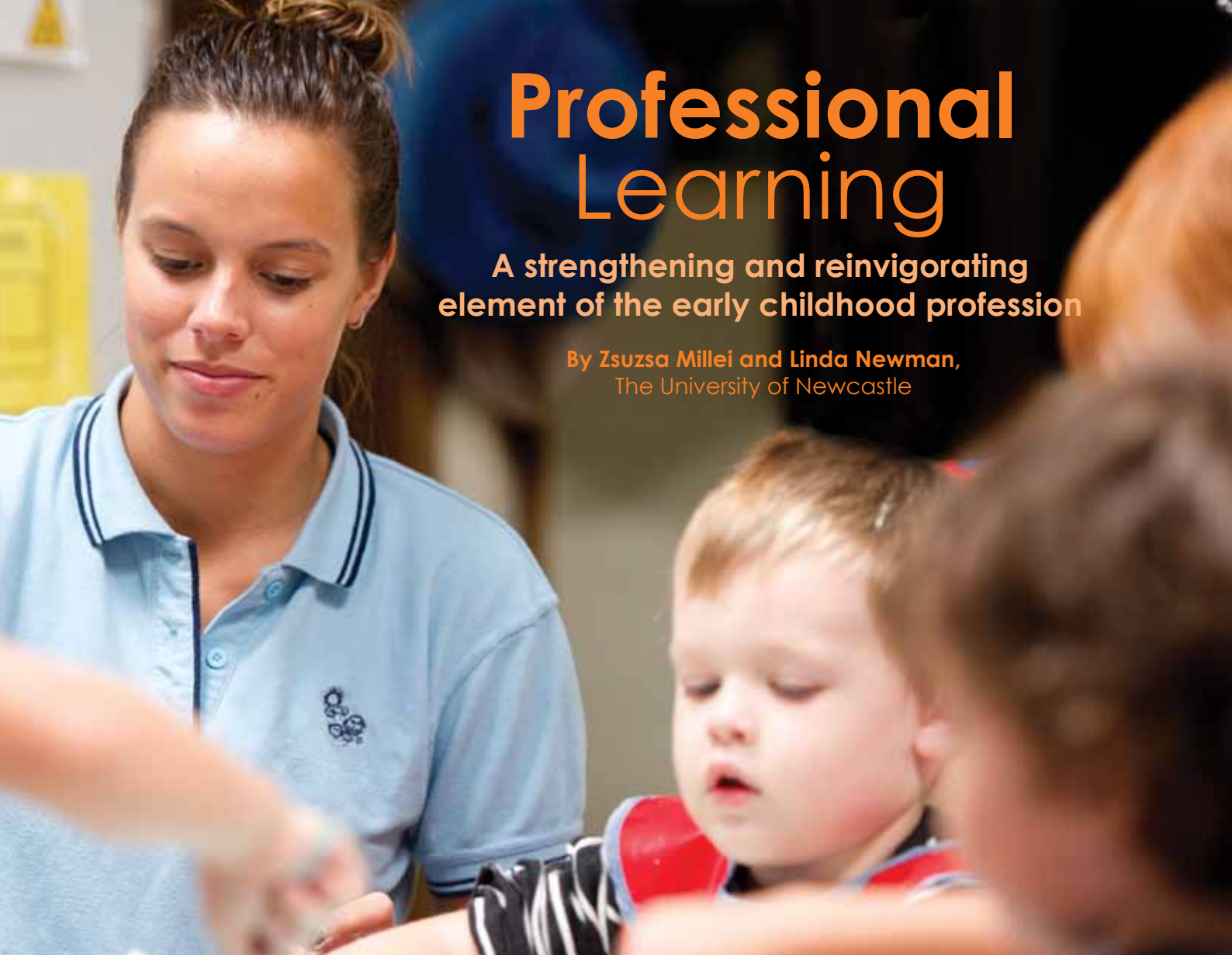


Lone Parent Families

There has been a rise in lone parent families. In 1986 single parent families represented 14% of families with children under 15, this had risen to 22% by 2004 (ABS, 2007). In addition to this 83% of single parent families were mothers and half of the single parent families were employed (of these about 50% worked full time) (ABS, 2003).

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Professional Learning

A strengthening and reinvigorating element of the early childhood profession

By Zsuzsa Millei and Linda Newman,
The University of Newcastle

It is recognised in many professions that ongoing learning is essential to keep abreast with developments within one's profession. Early childhood teaching is no exception. The New National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education highlights the importance of professional development and prescribes that early childhood settings should devise plans and implement those. Many professions mandate regular updating of qualifications. The NSW Institute of Teachers in its Professional Teaching Standards has four stages of teacher competence and each explicitly entails professional learning. These are Graduate Teacher; Professional Competence; Professional Accomplishment; and Professional Leadership (<http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/>). The Institute points out that ongoing professional learning is at the heart of teacher professionalism and leads to improved student learning.

The Early Years Learning Framework also endorses the need for ongoing professional learning within Principle 5. "Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice" where educators are encouraged to "seek ways to build their professional knowledge" and engage in "a lively culture of professional inquiry" (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 13). There is also a professional learning program offered for educators (<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfp/>).

For us to continue to grow in strength and credibility as a profession, it is important to engage in ongoing learning. Peter Moss (2006) advocates for early childhood workers to be researchers, instead of 'substitute mothers' or 'technicians'. He urges us to continuously seek deeper understanding and new knowledge, for us to be learners and do research as part of our everyday practice, to be reflective and dialogic practitioners (2007, pp. 36-37).

Further study – joining the community of scholars

One way to enrich one's professional life and embrace new challenges is to engage in further formal study. In doing this you will become part of a community of scholars operating within a learning community or community of practice. With this group you will gain access to the latest thinking and research, resources and networks. By joining a group of people with similar work and scholarly interests you will be able to engage in collaborative thinking and reflection, share and test your ideas with others and research your ideas in practical ways to change your working environment and practices together with and for the benefit of children and families as well as yourself and colleagues. A learner in this learning community will collaborate towards co-constructing knowledge in relationship with others (peers, colleagues, children and families) and “also with theories, concepts and analyses from many different fields; in short, through frequent border crossing” (Moss, 2007, p. 36). Learning community members engage in dialogue, - a process of transformation, and listening, - to be open to others: children and adults without making them “the same as us” (Rinaldi, 2005).

The strong international body of research in early childhood education offers abundant opportunities for professionals to create a nexus between research and practice. By taking part in formal and informal research, “through critical reflection, teachers construct and reconstruct new practices”, thus contribute to the existing body of research (Blaise, 2006, p. 105). As an active learner/researcher you will further improve the ability to articulate your practice to others – the why and the how of your work. Moreover, early childhood teachers reported in Jenny Overton's study (2009, p. 6) that “learning/professional development had contributed to their sense of empowerment and professional self-worth. Knowledge, or more particularly, being seen to have further knowledge, was equated [by them] with power for speaking up and confidence” in one's profession.





The Master of Early Childhood Education at The University of Newcastle

At The University of Newcastle the new Master of Early Childhood Education (MECE) has an innovative inquiry based approach that enmeshes practical knowledge and theories. It has adopted the understanding of teachers as researchers in their own practice. The program builds on and extends already acquired professional knowledges and skills by continuously and critically reflecting on participants' practices. The suite of early childhood courses covers areas such as contemporary ways of looking at, and inquiring about childhood and early childhood education (philosophies, methods and theories), contemporary issues, becoming a teacher researcher, diversity and rethinking literacies. MECE has also been designed to allow people to gain an additional specialisation within the early childhood degree. You can graduate with a major in a range of interesting options by selecting 4 of your 8 courses from the suite of courses in a specialist area, such as early childhood intervention, educational leadership, comparative education, Information Communication Technology, literacy, social justice, Aboriginal education, creative and performing arts, or many more.

MECE accommodates people who wish to extend their three or four year teaching degree with a postgraduate degree. Students who enrol can start with just one course if this suits them. There are eight courses required to graduate with a MECE. Classes are held in the evenings, and many have flexible study arrangements with some online learning involved. If you have not studied for a while, support is available through the library (using electronic databases, searching the library etc.) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning (essay writing, critical thinking etc.). The early childhood classes are small groups, so you will have close contact with your peers and lecturers.

To find out more

For more information go to <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/program/10934.html> or get in touch with Associate Professor Linda Newman (programme convenor) at Linda.Newman@newcastle.edu.au or on 4961 3632. Mid year entry will be available in 2011.

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www.newcastle.edu.au



Transitions *to school*

Change occurs at many stages of a child's early education and some children will need more assistance adjusting to these changes. Starting school is an important time for children and the way in which they transition to school can influence their whole school career (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Children's services staff can play an important role in the process of supporting transitions by working with local schools and families.

The transition to school occurs at an important time in terms of social, emotional and cultural development with children around the ages of four to seven years experiencing an increase in responsibilities and independence in many cultures. There is evidence that during this time there are shifts in cognitive development which may be accompanied by psychological changes (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Dockett & Perry (2001) undertook a research project on school transition programs in NSW. They identified that the most important issues for children, families and educators as children start school include:

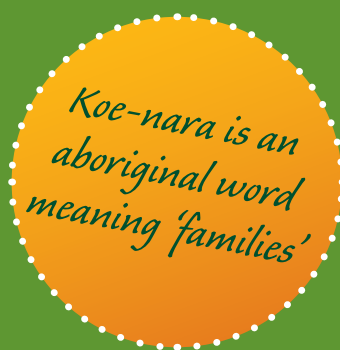
- ✓ **knowledge**
- ✓ **social adjustment**
- ✓ **skills**
- ✓ **dispositions**
- ✓ **the rules of the school**
- ✓ **family issues**
- ✓ **the nature of the educational environment.**

Developing an Effective Transition-to-School Program

School readiness is often one of the main areas considered in transition programs. Dockett and Perry (2001) acknowledge that while these skills and knowledge are important social aspects such as making friends and functioning in a classroom setting are also of high importance to the children, parents and educators. They found that when positive relationships existed between everyone involved, including children's services staff, feelings about transitioning to school were positive. However when these relationships were not evident there were feelings of hesitation, anxiety and concern.

Schools and communities vary greatly and transition programs need to be diverse and flexible to meet needs of the local area. Dockett, Perry & Howard (2000, as cited in Dockett & Perry 2001) have developed guidelines for effective transition to school programs. The key areas identified in the guidelines are:

- establishing positive relationships between children, parents and educators (including children's services)
- facilitating each child's development as a capable learner
- differentiating transition to school programs from school orientation
- finding dedicated funds and resources for the program
- involving a range of stakeholders
- planning the program well and evaluating it
- being flexible and responsive
- having a program based on mutual trust and respect
- having reciprocal communication among participants
- taking the local community into account.



Cessnock Play and Learn Project

Recently I met with a group of early childhood educators, school teachers from the Cessnock Community of Great Public Schools and community services representatives from the Cessnock area who are developing a supportive transition program called *Cessnock Play and Learn Project (PAL)*.

The group of local services and public schools meets each term to share information and discuss approaches to transition to school. The group identified an opportunity to expand their activities to reach more families in the community and developed the *PAL* project.

PAL aims to make schools more family friendly places and relieve the stress and pressure parents may feel when their child is starting school. Parents and children feel more comfortable starting school if they have met the staff and have a better understanding of the school and how it operates. Recently the group submitted an application for funding to help them expand the project.

The group hopes to produce a booklet and website to engage parents and caregivers of children aged 0-5. These resources will outline the essentials of school, preschool, child care, family day care and playgroup enrolment; services available in the district; links to school and community programs.

The project will undertake to strengthen community ties and work collaboratively with community organisations. There will be an annual Play and Learn day where entertainment and information will be provided to families while giving them a chance to meet teachers and other professionals in a relaxed environment.

Last year a schools festival was held where several local public schools came together and performed. All of the local preschools were invited to attend. This provided younger children with an opportunity to interact with the school community.

Anecdotal information suggests around one third of the children starting school in the area have not attended any kind of early childhood service, it is important for these children to have access to a comprehensive transition program. Koe-nara, Cessnock Schools as Community Centre operates a transition to school group known as Ready Set Go, the program targets all children across Cessnock LGA who have not attended a prior to school early childhood setting.

The *PAL* program recognises the importance of developing a relationship with children's services staff. When teachers talk to early childhood staff they develop a better understanding of the learning that takes place before school and develop a mutual respect.

Transition programs have already proven useful in the area by helping identify the unique needs of children. Giving teachers the opportunity to have programs developed for these children when they start school. Previously teachers might not have been aware of these needs until the first day of school which could potentially create a negative start to school for the child.

Something to think about...

Children may need assistance making transitions other than starting school for example they may also require extra support as they change rooms within a service, when there are changes in staff or when they first start the service....

What ways does your service work with the schools in the area?



The Early Years Learning Framework discusses the importance of belonging – relationships are crucial in determining a sense of belonging. Many elements may need to be incorporated in a transitions program to ensure children see themselves in the setting for example Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elders or community members may be invited to participate in transition to school projects.

In some situations it may be appropriate to include a significant or important person from the child's life to allow the opportunity for the child to settle. The National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care 2010 requires that all early childhood services across Australia support each individual child to make a positive transition as they move from the service to formal schooling as stated in quality element 6.3.2 "Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing relevant information and clarifying responsibilities." The Cessnock *PAL* Project is just one strategy which early childhood services in the area are utilising to meet this element.

To find out more about the *Cessnock Play and Learn Project* please contact Melinda Stokes, co-ordinator for Cessnock Community of Great Public Schools Promotions Team, (02) 4990 8105 or to find out more about the programs run at Koe Nara, contact Local Facilitator, Jane Hodgson (02) 4990 9354.

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Recently the Minister for Mental Health and Ageing, Mark Butler, launched the new Children's Services Vocational Education and Training resource developed by the Response Ability team.

The resource is available to all tertiary education institutes and registered training organisations offering selected children's services courses.

For more information contact: education@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au.



For more information please visit
www.everymind.org.au/foundations



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Foundations has been developed by **Everymind** (formerly the Hunter Institute of Mental Health) with financial support from Xstrata Coal, through its corporate social involvement program.

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