Foundations

Developing Social & Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood

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CHILDREN'S SERVICES MAGAZINE

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"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognise, accept, and celebrate those differences."

Audre Lorde

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the second issue of *Foundations* for 2012, which focuses on respect and diversity. In this issue we will hear from KidsMatter Early Childhood about embracing and celebrating differences, explore issues surrounding equity in early childhood and consider the perspective of a male educator and his experiences in children's services.

The project team is pleased to bring you the good news that Xstrata Coal NSW has announced it will continue funding *Foundations* throughout 2012. This marks the fourth year that Xstrata has funded *Foundations* through their Corporate Social Involvement Program.

This funding ensures we are able to continue supporting the important role that early childhood educators play in the social and emotional development and wellbeing of babies, children and families. We will support you in this role by providing information, practical ideas and the latest research.

This year marks a time of great change in the early childhood education and car   eld and this is not without its challenges. The *Foundations* team will strive to source and include information and tools to help staff with these changes and transitions including the implementation of the National Quality Standards.

Two more issues are planned for 2012. Based on your feedback we intend to focus on the themes of brain development and mental health, and intentional learning. If you would like to contribute to these issues or if you have any feedback or suggestions please feel free to contact us.

Ellen Newman

Ellen Newman
Everymind

EQUITY IN
Early Childhood Education

By Kylie Thomas

educators across Australia. According to Sims (2009), equity in early childhood education refers to fairness and is based on a balance of two different sets of rights: every child's right to an *opportunity* to attend an early childhood environment and every child's right to *participate* and be represented equally within that environment.

Children have diverse needs and belong to different cultures and social groups which results in children *participating* in early childhood environments differently. Children's access to quality early childhood programmes which address issues of equity and social justice are crucial in maximising children's *participation* in the learning experiences (Robinson & Diaz, 2006).

Equal Opportunity in Early Childhood Education

Under the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, states and territories have committed to achieving universal access to early childhood education for all children by 2013 (Council of Australian Governments, 2008). The Agreement targets a child's right to have an *opportunity* to attend an early childhood environment, by stating that by 2013 children will have access to quality programmes organised by four year university trained early childhood teachers (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). However throughout Australia there is currently a shortage of teachers, so will these goals be achievable?

While this is a positive agreement addressing each child's right to the *opportunity* to attend an early childhood environment, it neglects the need to address each child's right to equal *participation*. Opportunity alone will not improve the quality of early learning experiences provided to children.

Every Child's Right to Participate

Equality of participation is an issue in early childhood education that is concerned with early childhood educators, together with children, creating a diverse range of cultural and social learning activities and experiences for all children to access in the early childhood environment (Elliot, 2006). Images of the child as less competent or developed than adults can lead to a misconception that children do not have the emotional or cognitive capability to make rational choices. This thinking may lead to the voices of children being left out of decisions that affect them, denying children their right to participate equally in their early childhood environment. More importantly   ted Nations' Conventions of the Rights of the Child (The Convention) (1989).

How Can Educators Ensure Equal Participation in the Early Childhood Environment?

According to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), through their practices educators should reinforce the principles laid out in The Convention (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). The Convention states that all children have the right to participation. This includes educators involving children in decisions that directly affect them (United Nations, 1989). The issue of equal *participation* involves educators collaborating with children about all matters affecting their lives and respecting children's family, culture, language and other identities by representing these diversities in everyday activities and learning experiences.

Including children's cultural and social backgrounds into the programming and planning enables children to successfully participate equally in the early childhood environment. In today's early childhood environments, a vast array of *spaces* will be available and they may change depending on the children's interests. This can include spaces that allow children to express their knowledge and understanding of the world, by providing a range of activities within different spaces.

Activities supported by spaces include but are not limited to:

- **art**
- **reading**
- **imaginative play**
- **problem solving**

Catering for diversity through inclusive practices acknowledges that all children have different life experiences. The early childhood environment then becomes a place for collaborative learning supporting diversity and difference through respecting each child's equal right to *participation*. Embedding practices of diversity and inclusion in early childhood environments is a di
develop practices that promote diversity through communicating with children, their families and each other, g?"

Catering for Diversity in the Early Childhood Environment

Representing each child in the early childhood environment involves more than simply adding a range of diverse resources. This is one small aspect of inclusion and diversity. Resources need to be discussed and explored with children and educators need to *listen and observe* how children are interacting with them.

Recently, I added a large felt world map to the preschool environment. This resource included felt animals and people from around the world. The children had been exploring animals and the relationship that humans have with them. My intention was for the children to explore the differences between land and sea animals. However the children had a different interpretation and as a group they decided to place the felt people onto the country in which they believed they were born. Not wanting to interrupt the children's engagement with this resource, I watched on as the children's interests changed from animals to people and places of origin. Shortly after this experience, I noticed some children kindly explaining to another child that because her skin was brown, she was not from Australia. Adding this resource to the environment inspired a conversation about diversity, but it did not encourage children to explore inclusion and equity.

This resource needed to be supported with a *sustained shared thinking* conversation that involved educators and children in discussions about respect, diversity and inclusion within the Australian context.

Sustained Shared Thinking

s two or more individuals *working together* in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and the ideas must develop and extend through the discussion. Addressing each child's right to *participation* through the practice of *sustained shared thinking* involves early childhood educators engaging with families and children to effectively work together in order to *negotiate*, *develop* and *implement* learning agendas, outcomes and assessments for their own children. Family involvement is critical to the success of young children in early learning environments, as each family comes from a diverse culture with different traditions, values, and belief system. In order to effectively address the issue of equity, educators need to create mutual respectful relationships, where parents and children are heard and their ideas are included in the environment.

As recognised in the EYLF (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), an image of a child that is based on children being capable and knowledgeable, requires educators to respect each child's capabilities, culture, and unique qualities. Planning for equity in the early childhood environment is important for children's social and emotional wellbeing. Each child and family bring with them a collection of diversities to the child's own learning, resulting in children experiencing a sense of *belonging*, *being* and *becoming* differently.

With each environment being different in terms of philosophies, children, families and community involvement, how you include families in your unique environment will vary. *Sustained shared thinking* practices are one way educators can improve the issue of equity in early childhood education. Being able to include the voices of children and their families by catering for each child's diversities and encouraging a sense of wellbeing should be seen as a positive attribute of the early childhood education sector.

Something to think about …

✓ equity in early childhood is broad

✓ it is important that children have access to early childhood environments that represent who they are

✓ early childhood educators need to represent all children equally to address their right to participation

✓ differences need to be acknowledged to address equity in early childhood

✓ the ability to program and plan for children, with children, families and communities is a strength of the early childhood sector

✓ helping children uncover difference and diversity in a supportive environment has the potential to transform future societies and will increase acceptance and respect for others.

Resources and References:

Further information about *sustained shared thinking* practices can be found at: http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/shared_thinking.pdf

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Embracing and celebrating
DIFFERENCE

By KidsMatter Early Childhood

KidsMatter Early Childhood is a national mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative that acknowledges the critical role that early childhood services have in enhancing factors that promote children's mental health and wellbeing.

The KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) framework provides Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services with a 'mental health lens' through which to view service practice and includes four components

Component 1: Creating a sense of community

Component 2: Developing children's social and emotional skills

Component 3: Working with parents and carers

Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental

Creating a Sense of Community

Component 1: *Creating a sense of community* explores how important *inclusive* ECEC environments are for children's mental health and wellbeing. Inclusive communities allow opportunities for people to fully engage and participate regardless of their characteristics. Diversity refers to differences in people's characteristics such as age, gender, family structure, religion, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, physical and intellectual ability, country of origin and economic position. It is just as important to recognise that there are also many similarities that will connect individuals. When diversity is valued and inclusion is encouraged people are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and form social connections with others.

Children's self-esteem, sense of identity and belonging is strengthened when they feel their family, cultural background and individual uniqueness are respected and valued. Children who feel included are more likely to participate freely and actively in social experiences, form
associated with being a part of their early childhood community.

Valuing diversity and being inclusive are closely linked. T
contribute and participate meaningfully in their communities, enjoy opportunities available to them and develop a secure sense of belonging. Recognising and valuing difference enriches the community, can lead to effective communication between families and staff, and forms a strong basis for developing positive relationships.

Babies and young children learn and develop through their early experiences and relationships. From an early age children begin to develop a sense of who they are, where they belong, an awareness of differences and similarities among people and start to form opinions and attitudes. Children's ideas about diversity and how they
y see, hear and feel around them. This early
learning about themselves and others lays the foundation for their future attitudes and values, health and wellbeing.

Respecting Diversity and Promoting Inclusion

How can families and staff respect diversity and promote inclusion?

- **Model respect for diversity whenever opportunities arise**

- **Share your background with others and encourage them to share theirs**

- **Expand children's awareness of diversity through social events, books, songs and toys**

- **Challenge discrimination by dealing with behaviours that are not socially inclusive**

- **Reflect on your beliefs and reactions to diversity and how these influence your behaviour**

- **Provide opportunities for children to listen to different people and their perspectives**

- **Respect individual differences and acknowledge that membership of a particular group does not mean everyone has the same values and needs**

- **Promote and model inclusive behaviour, for example having notices available in a number of relevant languages for families and staff and encouraging everyone to contribute their skills and interests to the service**

- **Encourage opportunities for parents, carers, families and staff to develop social connections**

- **Display posters showing families from a wide range of backgrounds and use books that represent family diversity at the service**

- **Support the different abilities of children and their families and share information with families about support services in their community**

- **Link families with appropriate local services to provide support and assistance.**

The Importance of Relationships

The Early Years Learning Framework, the National Quality Standard and KMEC all acknowledge the
ing in respectful and sensitive ways with
all members of ECEC communities is at the core of understanding, valuing and embracing people from diverse backgrounds and is a critical element when promoting inclusion. Positive, respectful, trusting relationships in ECEC communities are pivotal to people's sense of belonging, feeling connected and included and impacts on the overall sense of the community. Services involved in KMEC are guided to critically think about how members of their communities (families, staff and children) experience belonging, connections, feeling included and relationships.

As a way of working toward enhancing the sense of community of staff, families and children, some KMEC services have done the following:

- **In an effort to extend activities to maximise the inclusivity of their environment, one service encouraged staff and family members to paint *welcome* in their home language on the ground at the entrance of the service.**

- **While on holidays an A/Director sent each child an individual postcard.**

- **Changed the name from 'staff meetings' to 'team meetings' and encouraged staff members to contribute to agendas rather than the Director always setting the meeting agendas.**

- **Included a piece of writing with some personal information to staff photographs at the entrance of the service.**

- **Created 'family photo and info trees' encouraging children and family members (and sometimes staff too) to attach photos or drawings of their family and related information (*eg* pets, holidays, shared interests *etc*).**

- **Introducing a 'weekend bear', *ie* each child took a turn taking the bear home and being responsible for it for a weekend and then contributed to the bear's journal with photos *etc* of what the family did with the bear over the weekend.**

- **A number of services attempted to collaborate more carefully with staff and families to increase turn out to, and engagement with, service held social events (*ie* thinking about timing, interest levels, cultural relevance and subject matter or theme *etc*).**

- **Two services with a high proportion of Indigenous families thought about how they were nurturing their connections with families and how they might improve upon these connections and help families feel more comfortable at the service. They came up with various strategies such as consultation with Elders associated with the school, outreach to families in terms of going to visit families rather than expecting them to come to the service, thinking more about family engagement with popular activities such as sports, and holding off-site gatherings such as BBQs or picnics.**

When children, families and staff feel valued as individuals with individual characteristics, strengths and differences, the ECEC service is likely to have a strong base of positive relationships and a genuine sense of community that promotes mental health and wellbeing.

"When inclusion is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children have to become 'normal' in order to contribute to the world. Instead, we search for and nourish the gifts that are inherent in all people. We begin to look beyond typical ways of becoming valued members of the community, and, in doing so, begin to realise the achievable goal of providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging." (Kunc, 1992).

KidsMatter Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative has been developed in collaboration with *beyondblue*, the Australian Psychological Society and Early Childhood Australia, with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and *beyondblue*.

Further information about KidsMatter is available at: **www.kidsmatter.edu.au**

References:

Kunc, (1992), as cited in Valdiva, R., L. Brault, et al. (2006). Embracing inclusion: When ALL means ALL. In J. R. Lally, P. L. Mangione and D. Greenwald (Eds.), *Concepts for care: 20 essays on infant/toddler development and learning* (pp. 65-69). San Francisco: WestEd.

Helping the Development of Emotional and Social Intelligence in Children

By Brian Andrew

'I Grow in Grandad's Garden' is a children's book, which tells the story of six year old Ellie and her Grandad taking a personal development journey around Grandad's garden.

Some early childhood educators have been using the book in their service to engage children by creating a relaxed and natural environment for them to share what makes them happy, sad, afraid and excited.

The reader takes children on a fun journey around the garden using four interactive questions to discover what they are thinking and feeling, helping the children to identify and express their feelings, emotions, hopes and dreams.

The Four Stop Spots

The book comprises four spots in the garden, each representing a different place and a different discussion. You may like to engage with children about each of the four questions over several weeks. Some early childhood services have permanently embedded each of the four spots into their settings. This does not have to be in an outdoor space but can be a conceptual space inside the service.

Think and Thank Seat

you say thank you for?" He shares a few thoughts of his own and Ellie adds hers. They share what makes them happy and what they are grateful for.

The second stop spot in the book is the *Let Go Log*. Here Grandad explains that everyone ends up carrying hurts on the inside and that others hurt us and we hurt others. He acknowledges that sometimes we don't want to talk about them. Grandad asks Ellie the second stop spot question; "Have you got any hurts inside?"

After walking through the rainforest trail Ellie and her Grandfather reach *Cross over Corner*, the third stop spot in the book. *Cross over Corner* is designed to help children identify and talk about their anxieties. It encourages them to have courage and be brave in overcoming their anxieties.

At the fourth stop spot, *The Dream Table* Grandad asks Ellie the fourth question; "What are your dreams?" When you ask a child what their dreams are it can be like turning on a tap. It is important for us all to have dreams, hopes and goals to achieve. These can help add purpose and meaning to our lives.

It is important to let children know that they don't need to talk about any of the stop spot questions if they don't want to. Children should feel safe and secure and have the freedom to be able to talk about these topics in their own time.

Several schools, organisations and homes have recreated Grandad's Gardens both indoors and outdoors.
                                                                thin their gardens or homes where they
can talk to their children using the four stop spot questions as a starting point.

Children's Activity

Read the book until you get to one of the four stop spots and then use the questions in the book to engage the children and promote discussion.   en with
the concept of the four stop spots.

For example you may like to:

- highlight what Ellie says thank you for or give them examples of things you are grateful for

- invite your students to share what makes them happy and what they can say thank you for

- ask them to help write a thank you list poster to put on the wall of the centre

- invite discussion on how they feel inside when they say thank you

- get them to create a thank you card to take home as a gift for their families – with a focus on what they can say thank you for at home

- develop a thank you culture in the classroom by creating the four stop spots in the classroom

- encourage the children to say thank you every day

- provide examples of things that make people feel hurt for example: when someone is mean to me (including bullying, name calling, pushing and shoving), when others won't let me be part of their group or when someone talks unkindly about me

- invite students to share what makes them sad/what they need to get out and let go of

- invite discussion on how they feel inside when someone hurts them

- ask them to share the things that happen that make them sad, worried or hurt

- explain that just as others hurt us, sometime we can hurt others

- encourage the children to think about their actions and try not to hurt each other

- ask them to share their dreams and hopes with a small group or close peer. They may like to create a drawing of one of their dreams.

Working in Children's Services from the Perspective of a Male Educator

Noel Jensen shares his experience as a male working in early childhood education and care and offers some tongue in cheek advice on how to support male workers.

by Noel Jensen

A , "You boy should get rid of ya". And she did, every single one of them, for 2 weeks solid (pardon the pun). In a way she did me a favour as changing cloth nappies and using pins was so did I get plenty of practice. Every day she would come into the change room smiling, "Had enough yet boy?" "Bring it on", I would say back to her and smile ever so nicely.

This experience (and other similar ones) made me think that choosing child care as my profession was not going to be as easy as I thought. But these experiences also gave me the resolve to continue with my chosen vocation. I know many males who did not have the same determination.

This was 20 years ago, but unfortunately I don't see that much has changed. As a Children's Services lecturer I continue to hear stories from male students about negative and sometimes discriminatory experiences out in services. I have heard stories of males being made to feel inferior or distrusted, not being allowed to work with babies, change nappies, hug children and generally being made feel unwelcome. In my experience a large majority of male students do not complete their studies purely because they keep hitting barriers in centres.

Saying all this, I have had a wonderful career in the early year's education and care and have been blessed to work at some fantastic services with fantastic staff. But, even with support, at times it can be a very isolating experience for males. Suspicion about the motives of males in childcare, public debate about child protection and stereotyping can

sure you are never alone with children and some parents (and staff) on occasion give you looks of mistrust, it does take its toll.

At present I am researching getting a new pet and reading a lot of factsheets on how to care for your pet. This has given me the idea that what may be missing for male childcare workers is a factsheet.

So I have decided to write the do's and don'ts of supporting men in care in the same format. Below are my top 7 tips for supporting new and current male staff members in an education and care service.
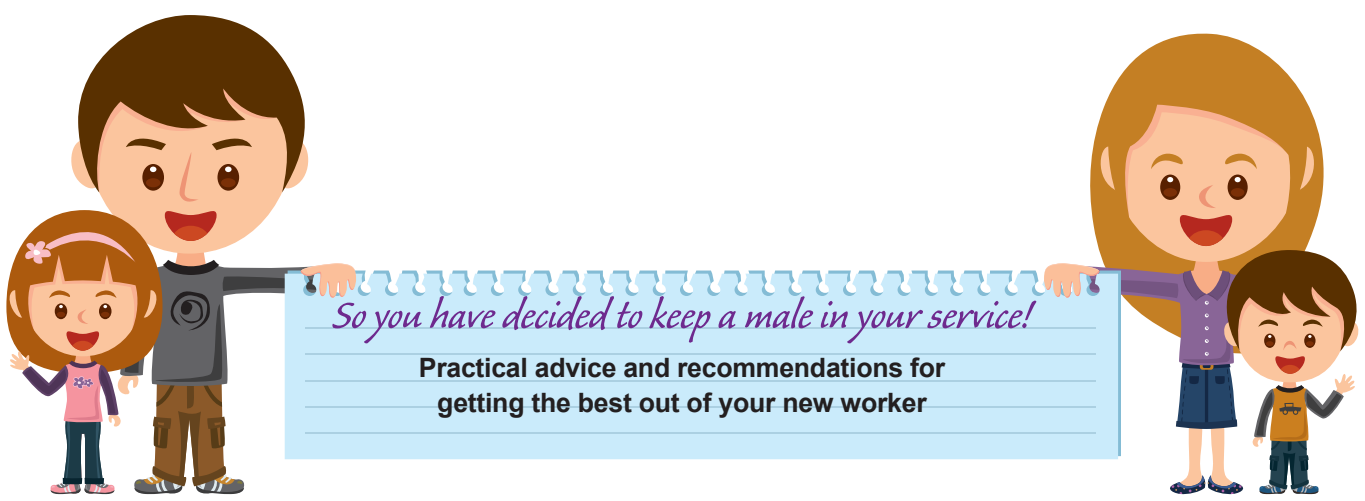not only some of the common issues I have seen facing males in the workplace, but also the common and distinct wellbeing needs that male workers bring to workplace.

I write this article tongue in cheek and with humour so please don't take offence. Sometimes it can be helpful to have a less serious look at a serious issue. I know there are some real generalisations, but I have found that most males working in care will fall into at least a few of the categories below.

> *One of the things about equality is not just that you be treated equally to a man, but that you treat yourself equally to the way you treat a man.*
> Marlo Thomas

So you have decided to keep a male in your service!

Practical advice and recommendations for getting the best out of your new worker

Congratulations on making your choice on selecting a male for your service. I am sure you will be very happy with your decision, but as with any new arrival there are some clear do's and don'ts that will help them settle in. You also need to consider the on-going management, upkeep and care of your male so that they feel they are a valued member of your services.

1 **Introduce males to new people respectfully and carefully.** Being introduced "Here is our male carer" or "He is our only one but he is really good with the kids" can make a male worker feel their contribution is tokenistic. Introductions need to be made as you would with any other valued member of staff and as part of the team. This helps families understand the importance of having both positive male and female role models for children.

2 **Consider a second or third male for company and perspective.** No matter how welcoming you make your male feel in your service, the fact is that males need to bond
conversations of women's issues fascinating, we need a little 'man talk'. Having other males in the service can also help in sharing the load of tokenism. More males can mean the spotlight is not on just one individual. And yes while I do acknowledge that males like to show their feathers, they like to do it in their way and time and are not comfortable always being at the forefront. Be careful though, males can be territorial and if they have been the only male for some time they could feel threatened by a new arrival.

3 **Men like babies too.** Yes men can be more physical and yes I have even been told that our care practices are a little different to those of our female counterparts. Most males I have talked to feel that this is the reason they are excluded from the babies' room. We all have a tendency to gravitate towards particular age groups (I am not a toddler person). Males should not just be relegated to the Kindy age groups and older just because they are males. I always loved working with babies but in some situations I was not given that choice. Trust your male to do the job they need to do, but let them do it in their way.

4 **Males like to be helpful but they should not automatically be the heavy duty lifter, handy man or security guard.** I remember once a manager saying to me after a late night meeting "Noel can you please take the girls to their cars. We have had some issues in the car park after dark" I looked at her and said "And what would you suggest I do if confronted???" On the other hand though as the male I felt obligated to protect the female staff. . While we teach children the importance of being an individual and that we are all capable of doing the same things, there can be a historical hangover of gender roles. Even in services where we promote equity among children we aren't always very good at it when it comes to other adults. Males will lift your heavy stuf with wanting to help rather than the reality of actually always being able to do it any better or differently from their female counterparts.

5 **Males are physical.** In most situations I have worked, I have found that males like to be more physically active than their female counterparts and will spend more time outside in active play. This has led to some resentment as they are seen as just playing and not doing their job. Remember to look at the skills of the individual and how those individual traits and passions can be utilised as a team. These differences need to be seen as positives for the whole service.

6 **Males may not tell you directly how they are feeling.** In other words you may not always understand your male, but don't worry they don't always understand you either. As in any team situation positive communication is a vital key in keeping everyone happy. Explain the roles, routines and responsibilities to your male.

7 **Don't feel threatened; males are competitive.** Good news is though they tend to be more competitive with each other rather than their female counterparts. They show this competitiveness through their play and these skills should be seen as positive opportunities for children to learn in a constructive environment that will support them transitioning to school and then onto work.

I hope these little tips will help you in making your decision of keeping a male in your service. You will not be sorry with your choice. Just remember the keys to any good professional relationship are compromise, communication and commitment.

On a more serious note though, the issue that I am drawing attention to here is that the challenges about the role and perception of males entering into such a female orientated environment can be quite overwhelming. As with any individual, we deal with new challenges in different ways and in the best way we know how. But based on my experiences, and those of the students I teach, the sense of isolation, even in a very supportive environment, can chip away at one's self-esteem and self-worth. For some, being the only male, having the sense of always being watched or having to prove oneself or feelings of not being fully trusted can cause the individual to internalise or withdraw.

I have been part of a few online forums supporting males in care and the same issue keeps coming up, the sense of isolation. Males generally don't tend to talk about these issues to other people but tend to internalise and even if they do want to talk about the issues, who do they share that with? We tend to socialise with the people we work with, so when the rest of your workplace is female that socialising is different to the 'normal' male bonding experiences. Even adult males need other positive male role models.

I agree with the philosophy of encouraging more males into care and education. Statistically some children will not have access to a positive adult male role model until they are in high school. This is, in my view, an absolute disadvantage for some children and needs to be addressed.

However, consider the best person for the job. Quality outcomes for children come from quality care and education practices. Consider the positive role modelling that children will be experiencing while having positive carers and educators, not just between themselves and the educators but observing positive engagement between adults.

Inclusion and belonging are important aspects of our wellbeing. Noel's article raises some important questions in regards to what a workplace can do to assist staff members f
workplace. There are also questions about what new workers can do to support these practices and how they can collaborate to assist developing a ECEC environment that is supportive of all those who are part of it.

If you need assistance or support around workplace issues please contact
Lifeline 13 11 14 or Mensline Australia 1300 78 99 78

Building Stronger Connections

with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities

By Helen Starkey (Department of Education and Communities)
and Mary-Kate Balog (Everymind)

Early childhood education and care experiences pave the way for future outcomes. However, accessing early childhood services does not come easily for everyone. For example we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are less likely to access early childhood education than non-indigenous Australians. This can be a factor in poorer academic, social and wellbeing outcomes later in life.

In cases where an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child attends a mainstream service it is important for the service to recognise and cater for cultural differences and practices. Programs that are culturally inclusive, building upon linguistic and conceptual skills for Aboriginal children can help to give them the best Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have been recognised as important, particularly in areas where there is a high Indigenous population.

The New South Wales (NSW) state government recognises that this is an importan
early childhood education strategies as part of the *Close the Gap* campaign. *Close the Gap* aims to eliminate
the disparity between life outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

The early years sees the greatest growth and development for an individual. During these early years
children build the foundations for their cognitive, physical, emotional and language development. Connecting
m develop these foundations.

Research has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents look for a sense of connectedness
and understanding when choosing a preschool for their child. Many services are already actively creating
supportive environments for children and families from diverse cultures. However it is worthwhile considering
what can be done to further promote the inclusion of these families.

Aboriginal Programs in NSW Government Preschools

The NSW Government has implemented several strategies over the past few years with an aim of increasing
the participation of Aboriginal children and families in targeted preschools.

These projects aim to:

- **improve the confidence of families and children when engaging with education**
- **strengthen the relationships between communities, families and schools**
- **increase the understanding that staff have of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and develop better responses to the communities needs**
- **and increase participation.**

Building Stronger Connections

The Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010-2014 aims to ensure all four year old Aboriginal children in
remote communities have access to early childhood education within   years (2013). Based on this target,
the *Building Stronger Connections* (BSC) project aimed to increase access by Aboriginal children to NSW
Government preschools through enhanced engagement of Aboriginal families and communities.

The project objectives were to develop culturally appropriate resources and strategies and to encourage
parents and caregivers to participate in the education of their children with the goal of building stronger
connections between preschools and the Aboriginal community.

During 2009, 22 schools across NSW participated in the early childhood BSC project. Windale Public School
preschool, in Newcastle, was one of the preschools to participate in the project. When Windale preschool
opened in 2005 it had an Aboriginal population of 15%, which has since increased to 34%.

Windale Public School joined the BSC project in order to increase the number of Aboriginal children
attending the preschool. The importance of early childhood education is reinforced to parents through the
school through Milabah, the Schools as Community Centre located in the grounds of the school; through
connections with Awabakal Preschool; the Birra-li Birthing Unit; and Awabakal Aboriginal Medical Service.

The preschool has worked in many ways to engage Aboriginal families. With funding from the BSC project
the preschool implemented a 'Read Aloud At Home' program. Families and carers were involved in selecting
culturally appropriate books for the children. Initially they were invited into the preschool to help their children
paint book bags. They continue to be involved through the exchange of books and are encouraged to read
regularly to their children.

One parent who was involved in the program now works in the pre   ,
"I helped out in the preschool as a volunteer parent and last year as part of the *Building Stronger
Connections* project I was employed to assist in the preschool for Reconciliation, NAIDOC, and ATSI
children's days. This year I have been employed too in the preschool as an ACEO (Aboriginal Community
                                                          to assist the children, parents and teachers
with Language and Speech development of children."

Another parent who was involved in the project related their experience, "Both my children and fiancée identify as Indigenous and the *Building Stronger Connections* program has been a very powerful tool when we talk to our children about their heritage and history... I think the program gives parents a great sense of pride in playing such an important role in their child's education."

Kids Excel Program

Kids Excel was introduced in 2004 under the New South Wales *Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy*. This strategy built on the work carried out through the NSW Government initiatives *Families First and Better Futures* and focused on improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities. The purpose of *Kids Excel* was to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people by focusing on 0-12 year olds.

The *Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy* aimed to develop more responsive and integrated service networks to support families and communities in bringing up healthy babies, children and young people. It emphasised better coordination and targeting of existing resources, ensuring mainstream services were meeting the needs of Aboriginal people and testing new ways of supporting communities.

As part of *Kids Excel* Phase 2, funding has been provided to four preschools across the Hunter and Central Coast to employ part-time ACEO.

The role of these additional support workers is to work in the preschool to support quality transition to school programs and create opportunities for Aboriginal parents to engage in their child's learning.

Windale preschool has used the funding from this program to expand their '*Read Aloud At Home*' project. This project is monitored by a parent and reading strategies to assist parents have been included in the bags.

The ACEO has been trained by a speech pathologist to assist teachers implement a speech and language program with a focus on vocabulary development, phonemic awareness and expressive and receptive language.

Outcomes

Following the conclusion of round one of the *Building Stronger Connections* project a state wide evaluation was undertaken. It was found that the project led to increased enrolments in 16 out of 22 participating schools, with enrolments of Aboriginal children in the 22 services state wide increasing from 16% to 24.6%.

This project identified that the most critical aspects of ensuring enrolment of Aboriginal children and successful transition to school are:

- **Building strong and respectful relationships between parents, the broader Aboriginal community and the preschool and school.**

- **The development and implementation of culturally appropriate strategies for engaging children and their families including the employment of an Aboriginal person to work in the preschool.**

Something to think about......

What can you do to increase enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in your service?
The evaluation of the Building Stronger Connections project ide
being implemented, these included:

● **the employment and involvement of Aboriginal Australians**

● **promoting a sense of Aboriginal identity within the preschool**

● **promoting the preschool and raising its profile in the Aboriginal community**

● **developing a sense of sharing and teamwork**

● **supporting Aboriginal parents to value the role of early childhood education for their children and their involvement with the service.**

(NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2010)

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In 2012 the Hunter Institute of Mental Health is celebrating 20 years of promoting social and emotional wellbeing across Australia.

Since starting operations in 1992, the Institute has become internationally recognised for our achievements in delivering programs for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing (including local, state and national initiatives) and the prevention of mental illness and its impacts on those directly or indirectly affected.

By working in partnership with others we apply our knowledge and skills to increase the knowledge and skills of individuals, organisations and communities to create the conditions for improved mental health. One of the key ways in which we do this is through the translation of frameworks and evidence into resources, programs or practices. Foundations is one example of a project delivered by the Institute.

The Institute would like to acknowledge and thank its partners, collaborators and funders for their contributions, support and encouragement.

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