1 Family-centred Practice
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About this guide

This guide is part of a series of eight guides to the practice principles in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLF).

Use this guide to support individual critical reflection on your practice, for discussion with a mentor or critical friend and as a guide for discussion with colleagues.

The guide draws on the Evidence Paper for Practice Principle 1: Family-centred Practice written for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development by the University of Melbourne. For detail about the evidence mentioned in this guide, and for more depth on this practice principle refer to the evidence paper.
What is family-centred practice?

Children learn in the context of their families and families are the primary influence on children’s learning and development. Professionals too, play a role in advancing children’s learning and development. Professionals engage in family-centred practice by respecting the pivotal role of families in children’s lives. Early childhood professionals:

• use families’ understanding of their children to support shared decision-making about each child’s learning and development
• create a welcoming and culturally inclusive environment where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to children’s learning and development experiences
• actively engage families and children in planning children’s learning and development
• provide feedback to families on their children’s learning and information about how families can further advance children’s learning and development at home and in the community.

(VEYLD, p. 10)

The term family-centred practice originated in the field of early childhood intervention in the 1950s and is now used commonly in a variety of early childhood settings.

Family-centred practice is a set of values, skills, behaviours and knowledge that recognises the central role of families in children’s lives. It is sometimes described as working in partnership or collaboration. It involves professionals and families working together to support children’s learning and development.

Early childhood professionals who engage in family-centred practice respect the uniqueness of every person and family. They share their professional expertise and knowledge with families and at the same time regard families’ expertise as valid, significant and valuable. They position themselves as knowledgeable and skilled consultants who support families’ choices, knowledge and values. This role contrasts with that of professionals as experts who see their role solely as educating families.

Family-centred practice is characterised by:

• mutual respect and trust
• reciprocity
• shared power and decision making
• open communication and responsive listening
• honesty
• shared goals
• clarity about roles and responsibilities
• complementary expertise and contributions
• negotiation.
Professionals engage in family-centred practice by respecting the pivotal role of families in children’s lives (VEYLDF, p. 10).

Family-centred practice is most effective when early childhood professionals:

• understand what family-centred practice means and why it is important, are committed to it and know how to go about making it happen
• approach all interactions in a respectful and responsive way
• welcome and support families to develop a sense of community and belonging
• establish clarity about respective roles and responsibilities
• take a collaborative, partnership approach to working with families from the first encounter
• respect diversity and difference and are culturally competent
• establish procedures to deal with conflicts
• participate in ongoing professional learning to build their skills
• are supported to work in family-centred ways.

A maternal and child health nurse committed to family-centred practice asks first-time parents what supports they feel they need and how she can assist them to find that help in the local community. Different types of parent groups for different purposes have emerged from this approach.

A Prep teacher using family-centred approaches empowers families by asking them about their views on homework and how it fits with family lifestyles and beliefs. Each year homework tasks reflect families’ beliefs and interests. They are flexible in how and when children complete them. One parent commented that ‘We see this approach as a shift from our child doing more school work at home, to doing real homework!’

Reflective Questions

• What would families say if they were asked for examples that illustrate the characteristics of family-centred practice?
• How do you think families see the relationship with professionals in the service? How could you find out?
• Reflect on and discuss with colleagues what family-centred practice means to you.
• Do your philosophy statement and policies reflect and encourage family-centred practice?
• What are some examples of practices in your service that illustrate key points about family-centred practice in the VEYLDF?
• What improvements can you make?
• If family-centred practice is a new concept for you, how could you find out more about it?
Although the way family-centred practice translates into practice is unique to each setting and for each family, early intervention research has identified four broad models of family-oriented programs that are on a continuum from less family-centred to more family-centred.

In less family-centred models such as the professional-centred model, professionals approach their work with families as experts who know much more than the families and who believe they can ‘fix’ the families’ problems. In a family-allied model, professionals begin to engage families a little more by expecting them to accept guidance and carry out instructions. Professionals then move to family-focused models which are based on a more positive view of families.

Through ongoing critical reflection on practice and access to professional development, professionals gradually shift their practice to family-centred models. In these models, professionals support families to identify their own needs. Professionals respect family strengths and competency.

Figure 1: Moving towards family-centred practice
(adapted from Dunst et al., 1991)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional-centred models:</th>
<th>Family-allied models:</th>
<th>Family-focused models:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The professional holds the knowledge with which to “fix” the problems which the family cannot do without assistance.</td>
<td>The professional holds the knowledge, but involves the family a little more by relying on the family to put this knowledge into practice.</td>
<td>The professional regards the role of families more positively, but families are still encouraged to use a range of services to help them meet their needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The professional is considered to know more than the parents about what the child needs in order to grow and develop as it should.</td>
<td>The family is seen to need the guidance of the professional.</td>
<td>Families and professionals discuss what families need to improve the way they function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families are regarded as not able to assist their own children</td>
<td>The professional knows best, but believes that families can help to carry out their instructions to benefit the child and the whole family.</td>
<td>The professional and the family discuss the family's needs, and the professional helps families to select the best options for the family and the child.</td>
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Family-centred models:

The goal of exemplary family-centred practice is achieved when the family determines what assistance it needs, and the professional's role is to facilitate the meeting of each individual family's needs.

A strength-based and competency-based approach is demonstrated by the professional, and support services are geared towards assisting families to develop their own network of resources – both formal and informal.

The professional listens to what the family wishes for the child and helps the family by meeting those needs where possible, or by helping the family to meet its own needs.

This approach is empowering for the family.

Discussion Starter

Discuss with colleagues where your service fits in the continuum from professional-centred models to family-centred models?

Do different practices and policies in your service illustrate different points along the continuum?

What steps can you take to move further along the continuum?
Why does family-centred practice matter?

Families are the most important contributors to children’s learning and development. Children's learning is advanced when families, professionals and children work together.

Children's everyday experiences within their family and community are influenced by the communities, culture of the environment in which they are raised – by what is approved or disapproved of, encouraged or not. Children participate actively and contribute to those experiences. For example, some families encourage children to be independent and others encourage interdependence.

It is crucial that professionals understand the family, cultural and community contexts for every child and use that knowledge to build on children's values, and extend their knowledge and skills. The best way to gain that knowledge is through open communication that occurs in a relationship of trust and mutual respect with families.
Benefits for Children

Discussion Starter

What do you see as the main benefits of family-centred practice for the children with whom you work?

Compare your list of benefits with those below.

Family-centred practice has numerous benefits for children. It:

- promotes attachment and strong family-child relationships
- supports continuity of learning and care experiences
- provides a secure base for learning
- promotes positive attitudes to learning.

Early childhood professionals play an important role in maintaining and strengthening children's attachment to and connection with family, which is critical to their sense of identity (VEYLD Outcome 1).

A maternal and child health nurse explained how she enjoys helping parents tune into their baby's competence at gaining adults' attention, communicating without words and showing pleasure in adult company.

Family-centred practice supports continuity in children's lives. Learning opportunities that build on children's prior learning experiences from home and community enhance children's learning and support children to feel safe and confident as learners.

In early childhood settings, relationships between professionals and children provide a secure base that helps children to feel safe, secure and supported. This encourages them to try new experiences and to learn. The quality of these relationships depends on professionals knowing the child deeply and understanding practices at home. Major differences between practices at home and in the early childhood setting can have a negative impact on children's wellbeing and learning.
This example highlights the importance of understanding the cultural contexts of children's lives for creating continuity for children and affirming and extending their learning. It also shows how early childhood professionals can promote learning in areas where children may have less knowledge or skills.

The educator's intentional planning is a good example of equity in action, as she ensured all children had opportunities to experience both oral and read shared story experiences.

The educator was not only aware of culturally different literacy practices, she also had a positive attitude to these differences and was able to explain to families how she was building on and extending children's knowledge and skills in different literacy traditions.

Reflective Questions

- What are the implications for early childhood professionals of evidence indicating that home literacy practices are more powerful than classroom literacy experiences?
- How does your current practice acknowledge the importance of home literacy practices?
- What could you do to improve connections between home literacy practices and literacy practices in your setting?
Benefits for Families

Family-centred practice has numerous benefits for families that in turn impact on children's learning and development. Family-centred practice leads families to have:

- greater satisfaction with the service
- a stronger sense of self-efficacy and control
- more positive perceptions of their children
- more positive perceptions of their competence as parents/carers.

As one educator expressed it:

“The benefits of partnership are that you end up building trust and a program that is far more responsive to a community of people who don’t just think about themselves but rather about how the group will benefit and gain from their collaboration. That collaboration is based on listening to other people's perspectives. There's no distinction between the philosophy and how it is enacted in the program for children and for families. We treat each other as citizens and believe that each person deserves respect.” (Educator and director in an education and care setting)

Everyday experiences either contribute to or take away from families' sense of control over major life events. Family-centred practice in early childhood services can make a significant contribution to families' feelings of empowerment.

Through family-centred practice, early childhood professionals help families to appreciate their importance in their children's lives. They respect diversity, reinforce the message that there are many good ways to raise children and promote the idea that there are many excellent learning opportunities in everyday experiences.

Working with families to see every child's competence as a learner shifts the focus from what children can't do to recognising what they know and can do.
How do we go about family-centred practice?

Adopting a family-centred approach can be challenging. It can require changes in attitudes and behaviour and adjustments to priorities and role definitions. Some early childhood professionals may worry that parents will make requests or demands that they cannot accommodate. Practice and research evidence indicate that when there is mutual trust and respect for each other's complementary roles and responsibilities, expectations are reasonable.

When professionals engage in family-centred practice they:

- foster respectful relationships and responsive engagement characterised by warmth and trust
- share information openly with families using a range of styles and kinds of communication
- regard families as experts on their children's lives, actively seek children's and families' views and take them into account in practice
- offer choices and encourage families to make decisions
- take responsibility for initiating and developing family-centred practice
- reflect on their own beliefs and practices (see Practice Guide 8: Reflective Practice).

These points are discussed below in more detail.
Foster respectful relationships and responsive engagement characterised by warmth and trust

Professionals bring respect for difference to family-centred practice. They create welcoming, inclusive environments that reflect the lives, languages, cultures and communities of families. They interact with families in warm friendly ways that demonstrate respect and convey the message that families belong.

Reflective Questions

- What do families see in the physical environment in your service that links to their cultures, languages, communities and family life?
- What are some examples from your own practice of responding to the child in the context of family, culture and community?
- How do you find out about these contexts?
- What more could you do?
- Where might you find help to do this?

In early childhood intervention research the concept of ‘help’ is used to clarify the role of the professional in family-centred practice. Two categories of ‘help-giving’ practices have been shown to strengthen families’ agency and effectiveness:

- relational practices, such as active and reflective listening, empathy, warmth, and trustworthiness
- participatory practices, such as emphasising the family’s responsibility for finding solutions to their problems and for acquiring knowledge and skills to improve life circumstances and deciding on a course of action.

At enrolment an early intervention professional asks families to talk about what their child does well, their interests and how they support these strengths at home. The child is involved in these conversations by talking about or pointing to photographs of things they like to do. Together they plan how the service can continue what happens at home and extend it. Every semester they revisit and assess these plans before setting new goals and the ways they might be achieved.

This example is also a reminder that a family-centred approach includes the child as an active collaborator.

Respect requires early childhood professionals to be sensitive to the complex relationships in the lives of children and their families, and the diversity of what constitutes a family. Sensitivity is shown when professionals have reasonable expectations of families that take into account the demands and pressures on families and individual family members. It is important to be aware that family participation or involvement may differ depending on the family.
A director and educational leader of an education and care program said:

“The most important thing is trust. If there’s trust then you can be open with families and them with you. Trust builds out of respect. Everything we do with children and with families is modelled on respect.”

The director of an education and care service explained that they do many things to support families who have busy or difficult lives, including providing nourishing breakfasts, which some parents enjoy with their child, a toy and book swap session once a month, and arranging for the maternal and child health nurse to visit the service at drop-off or pick-up time.

Early childhood professionals provide feedback to families on their children’s learning and information about how families can further that learning at home and in the community (VEYLDF, p. 10).

Share information openly with families using a range of styles and kinds of communication

Ongoing communication with families is a priority in family-centred practice. A two-way process of communication between professionals and families might include daily or regular conversations or emails, shared diaries, newsletters, communication books or phone calls. It may also include more formal strategies such as reports, interviews, and the preparation of Transition Statements. Professionals also communicate with families by modelling caring interactions and respectful relationships. Developing a communication and feedback policy and planning in consultation with families and children is a helpful strategy.

At one education and care setting the early childhood professionals collected left-over lanyards (plastic pockets on a cord for inserting name tags). On a regular basis they put a short note in the pocket about something interesting that happened with the child that day or some good news about an achievement – anything positive – and the child wears it home. They encourage families to read the note in the child’s presence as a basis for talking about the child’s day. Often parents put a note in it for the child to bring back to the centre.

Family-centred practice does not mean avoiding difficult topics or problems, but dealing with them respectfully. The trust between families and professionals that develops through family-centred practice makes it easier to talk about problems or difficult issues when they arise.
Regard families as experts on their children’s lives and actively seek children’s and families’ views and take them into account in practice

One feature of family-centred practice is the effort made by professionals to work collaboratively with every family. This requires professionals to be genuinely interested in and open to others’ ideas. The ability to listen is paramount. It requires professionals to be responsive to questions and requests and to interact with children, families and other professionals respectfully. Professionals must go beyond listening however and demonstrate that they use what families and children have told them in their practice.

An educator working with four year olds decided to ask families in her intake interview with them what they hoped their child would get out of the year. She said she was a bit afraid that the answers would either be impossible to achieve or that they might conflict with her philosophy and practices. She was pleasantly surprised and has used that initial conversation as a basis for further conversations about each child. She reports that families’ answers to that question gave her useful insights into their priorities and values.

Seeking families’ views can be challenging when there is limited time for conversations. For example, in education and care settings conversations with families occur typically at the busiest times of the day. However, these obstacles can be overcome if early childhood professionals make time to seek out and pay attention to families’ opinions with genuine interest.

A maternal and child health nurse uses the Parents’ Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) in child health visits as a way of ensuring that parents’ concerns are addressed first. She used to greet the parent and child and ‘jump right in’ with her agenda. She sees that the way she does it now is not only more respectful and satisfying for parents, but it results in valuable information being shared about the child and the parent-child relationship.
From their first encounter, professionals encourage families to share information about their child and their child rearing values and practices. They use that information in their practice.

Family-centred practice means that professionals are sensitive to families’ preferences when they consider ways to learn about the child's family life so that links can be made in the service and vice versa. Some families enjoy and appreciate professionals making home visits, some might prefer to meet in a local park or cafe while others may prefer to talk at the centre or service, either as part of a small group or individually.

Professionals respect privacy and confidentiality and recognise that some families will be much more interested in and willing to share information than others. As trust builds and families become increasingly convinced that professionals respect them and want to hear what they have to say, they will share more information.

An educator of three and four year olds talking about responding to each family's unique circumstances said:

“I treat different families differently. For example, some are very keen to know what behaviour is normal, especially if it's their first child. And if I know a family is overly worried about their child and they ask how their day was, I'll think more carefully about how I share a concern with them.”
Professionals’ expertise is not disregarded in family-centred practice.

The table below provides examples of how families and professionals can make equal and complementary contributions to decisions about children in order to support their learning, development and wellbeing.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The family has...</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Professionals have...</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...specialised and expert knowledge of their child.</td>
<td>A parent explains to a speech therapist that her child seems to stop using words when he is tired or frustrated.</td>
<td>...specialised professional knowledge about language development and problems.</td>
<td>The speech therapist works with the parent to find ways to reduce the reasons for the child getting frustrated. She also suggests some simple ways to encourage the child to vocalise his needs when he is tired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...specialised parenting skills.</td>
<td>A Somali parent shows educators how she uses a long cloth to tie her baby to her body as a way to keep him close to her when he needs comforting.</td>
<td>...specialised professional knowledge and skills in the education and care of many children.</td>
<td>Educators reassure the parent that they have used the same practice with other babies and will use it with hers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...deep knowledge of the impact of family and community contexts on their lives.</td>
<td>At school enrolment, the family of a child with complex additional needs discusses the impact of being involved with a range of health and early childhood intervention specialists since the child’s birth.</td>
<td>...professional knowledge of and respect for the diverse contexts of children’s and families’ lives.</td>
<td>The school staff ask the family for advice about working collaboratively with the other professionals involved with the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...an interest in having a partnership with the professionals who work with their child.</td>
<td>A father identifies to a family day care educator that he feels isolated from other families as a single dad.</td>
<td>...knowledge of the importance of partnership with families and being a resourceful professional.</td>
<td>The educator tells the father about a local ‘Saturday Dads’ playgroup and finds details about it for him.</td>
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</table>
Offer choices and encourage families to make decisions

Early childhood professionals value and build on each family’s strengths and recognise them as experts on their children. They actively promote the belief that families are confident and competent educators of their children.

Professionals encourage and support families to make choices and decisions. The relationship is dynamic and the role of leader in decision-making shifts from time to time depending on the situation. Sometimes families make the decision, sometimes professionals, and often decisions are made jointly. Professionals contribute their perspectives and professional knowledge and families contribute their deep knowledge of the child from birth on.
A director and educational leader in an education and care centre said:
“What I want to communicate to parents is ‘I see you as an expert on your child. We will get to know your child in a different way, so eventually we may be able to tell you things you don’t know – just as you can tell us things we don’t know.’”

The leader of a supported playgroup said:
“Sometimes promoting the parents’ confidence and their sense of being a good parent conflicts with what might be called best practice with children, and we have to make some tough on-the-spot decisions, but mostly we try to keep at the forefront of our minds how important the parent-child relationship is. That’s what matters most.”

A director and educational leader said of drop-off times at his education and care setting:
“Families can stay until they’re ready to leave. I don’t know if there’s ever a reason why a parent needs to leave – unless they want to. They decide, and if they don’t want to stay that’s okay too.”

The director of an education and care service said:
“When a child begins and throughout the child’s participation [in the program] the cook, educator, director and parent discuss the child’s food preferences and opportunities for including it on the menu. Parents will initiate a discussion around the decision about toilet learning, which is made jointly with educators also sharing information. Educators actively encourage families to ask questions about the curriculum and contribute to it, for example by telling educators what is happening in the child’s life outside the centre. This is achieved through what is called our ‘living document, the curriculum’ where children, parents and educators make notes and changes according to information provided.”
Take responsibility for initiating and sustaining family-centred practice

In early childhood settings a variety of ways are offered for families to be involved in and connect with the service. However, educators understand that families’ interest in and capacity to participate will vary. They also understand that participation and involvement are not the same thing as a collaborative relationship. Research suggests that it is important to families that their involvement is constructive and valued. Sometimes a lack of involvement might mean that parents are happy with the service. Responsive professionals take care to ensure that parents do not feel guilty if they choose not to become involved.

A school in a regional city wanted to find ways to encourage parents to become active volunteers and model engagement and learning to the students. They encouraged parents to volunteer by arranging with the local provider of adult education for volunteers to obtain recognition for their volunteer roles in the school. Volunteers were required to have a police check and a working with children card which they wore with their volunteer badge while volunteering. They also completed an induction process before commencing their volunteer role at the school and becoming part of the official pool of volunteers that the school could call on. All of these features raised the profile of volunteering.

The adult education centre also offered a range of accredited courses for volunteers at the school, for example, coffee making, food handling and introduction to computers. The school developed as a community learning centre where students can see adults benefiting from being involved and learning new skills.
A family day care field worker described her scheme’s attempts over several years to offer social events and talks about child rearing. Attendance was very low, which resulted in professionals complaining about parents ‘just not caring’. They started to see it differently when a colleague suggested that instead of blaming families maybe they just got it wrong. ‘What’s wrong with parents voting with their feet?’ she asked. That helped the scheme to see that they were making assumptions about what parents should be interested in. Now, she reports, they ask families what they want. As a result what they offer is much more popular.

Have you experienced similar unexpected outcomes from planned parent education activities or events? If so, how have you responded?

What assumptions were you making about families?

How might you challenge attitudes that may unfairly position some families as ‘not interested’ or ‘uncaring’?

Identify some new strategies for a more family-centred approach to involving parents or for family responsive events.

Family-centred practice means supporting every family to participate at the setting at the level at which they want to participate. It is the professional’s responsibility to find new ways of engaging families and linking them in with other services if they are requested or needed. Attending local early years’ network meetings and forming alliances with other professional agencies promote connections with the family and child services in your community. Participation in local networks helps professionals to understand the multiple and changing needs of the families they work with.

Professionals can support each other to move toward family-centred practice and meet the challenges it brings. Reflecting regularly with others helps early childhood professionals to develop deeper understandings of family-centred practice, its benefits and how to embed the approach in everyday practice. A shift from a ‘professional as expert’ model requires a whole-of-organisation approach with support from management and at the policy level.
Reflect on practices and beliefs

As is true with all aspects of practice, it is important for professionals to critically reflect regularly not only on their practices but also the beliefs and values that underpin them. The area of family-centred practice is a particularly complex one, in part because each family is unique. Engaging in critical reflection with other professionals and being open to their perspectives on situations can not only be reassuring but also lead to solutions and good outcomes. Practice Guide 8: Reflective Practice is a useful resource to inform reflective practice.

The director at an education and care setting summed up family-centred practice in her service:

“Our community has a strong belief that families need to feel comfortable in the centre if their children are to feel comfortable. Children benefit because the transitions between home and the centre are smooth. What is offered must reflect not only the children’s needs but also the families’ needs. There is a strong policy that translates into practices that acknowledge that the child’s learning and wellbeing is viewed in this environment as a co-operative venture in which the centre temporarily shares responsibility for children and provides another place where children can feel at home and be themselves.

“It is important that people are allowed to be themselves. This occurs when educators have taken the time to gain an understanding of the child and their family. They are able to initiate conversations that are relevant to both the child and their family. The benefits include a sense of shared responsibility and positive outcomes for children, their families and educators.”
References and resources


