



# Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

## Evidence Paper

### Practice Principle 1: Family-Centred Practice

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## Practice Principle 1: Family-Centred Practice

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The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework guides early childhood professionals' practice in Victoria. The Victorian Framework identifies eight Practice Principles for Learning and Development. The Practice Principles are based on the P-12 Principles of Learning and Teaching, the pedagogy from the national Early Years Learning Framework, and are informed by the latest research.

The Practice Principles are interrelated and designed to inform each other. They are categorised as Collaborative, Effective and Reflective:

**Collaborative**

1. Family-centred Practice
2. Partnerships with professionals
3. High expectations for every child

**Effective**

4. Equity and diversity
5. Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
6. Integrated teaching and learning approaches
7. Assessment for learning and development

**Reflective**

8. Reflective practice.

These Evidence Papers document the research that underpins each Practice Principle. The content of the Evidence Papers will be developed into a series of practical guides – *Practice Principles in Practice* which will provide practical advice to early childhood professionals on how to align their practice to the Practice Principles.

## **Executive summary**

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework acknowledges that highly effective early childhood professionals engage in family-centred practice. Family-centred practice is when professionals and families work as equal partners in supporting the learning and development of the child.

Many family-centred approaches have their origin in the early intervention context. However, they have gained increasing prominence in early childhood education in Australia, and are relevant in all early childhood settings.

Family-centred practice is essential for improving learning outcomes. Research shows that parents' involvement in their child's education is associated with improved learning outcomes for children (Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009; Huang and Mason, 2008; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisoon & Waniganayake, 2009). Family-centred practice promotes continuity of care for children in early childhood settings. By understanding and respecting family relationships and routines, professionals are able to provide children with greater continuity and more secure attachments, and develop responsive learning programs which build on children's prior learning experiences.

In family-centred practice, the strengths of the child's family are valued, emphasised, and acted upon. Professionals engaging in family-centred practice encourage and respect families' choices and their decision-making. They work collaboratively with families, recognising them as equal partners in supporting the child's learning and development. Effective family-centred practice is characterised by sensitivity, diversity, and flexibility.

The implications for practice informed by the research and detailed in this Paper are:

- The early childhood professional needs to take responsibility for initiating and developing family-centred practice
- Beginning and maintaining a family-centred practice may be challenging, and professionals need to reflect on their own beliefs and practices
- Families must be respected as experts in their children's lives.
- Family-centred practice requires professionals to be aware that family participation or involvement can vary from family to family.
- Communication is crucial in family-centred practice.

## Introduction

The Victorian Framework recognises the importance of family-centred practice in improving outcomes for children. It states:

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.

(VEYLDF, 2009, p. 10)

From birth, families provide the primary learning environment for young children and are their child's first and foremost educator. In early childhood education and care, professionals have an increasingly significant influence on the lives and learning of young children. This influence, however, is built on understanding the knowledge and expertise of families.

When a young child spends a lot of time with an early childhood professional, that professional enters into an important relationship with the child and their family. Not only is there a duty of care which must be exercised at all times, but the relationship between the professional, the child and the family needs to be characterised by warmth, trust, open communication and mutual respect. Family-centred practice involves more than simply encouraging families to be involved with their children's education and care. In family-centred practice, the relationship between the family and the early childhood professional is increasingly regarded as a partnership (Alasuutari, 2010).

This Paper documents the research that demonstrates the importance of Practice Principle 1: Family-centred Practice in improving outcomes for children. Throughout the paper, parents' and families' roles in children's learning are understood as foundational to best practice. This Paper begins by defining family-centred practice in the context of early childhood practice. The significance of working closely with families is then considered in light of how this practice impacts on children's development and learning outcomes. It then discusses what family-centred practice looks like in the field and how this can be achieved and provides evidence of best practice. The Paper summarises contemporary research about the importance of family-centred practice and concludes by highlighting the implications for practice.

### **What do we mean by 'family-centred practice'?**

The idea of family-centred practice is not new. References to this approach date back to the early 1950s (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). In Australia, the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century, first acknowledged the important role of families in children's education, endorsed by all Australian education ministers in 1999. The federal government declared parental (family) involvement a priority in education policy in 2004 (Daniel, 2005) and formalised this with the publication of the Family-Schools Partnerships Framework in 2008. In 2008, the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians replaced the Adelaide Declaration and reaffirmed all governments' commitment to a family-centred approach. Family-centred education is central in the national Early Years Learning Framework (2009) and the role of the family as the primary educator underpins the Victorian Early Years Learning Framework (2009).

Family-centred practice can be described as a philosophy that frames quality practice, and as a professional standard that meets society's values (Brown & Remine, 2008). There are many different approaches to family-centred practice. However, regardless of the approach, they are all aimed at improved outcomes associated with family involvement (Daniel, 2005).

Research has identified four broad models of family-oriented programs which move incrementally from less family-centred to more family-centred. Importantly, 'families prefer family-centred services and supports over professionally-centred services' (Scope, 2005). These broad models are not discreet, but exist on a continuum of family-centred practice. Although these models originate in an early intervention context, they are relevant to all early childhood settings. The research underscores the importance of moving toward a

more family-centred model (as presented in Figure 1) to achieve the best outcomes for children’s learning and development.

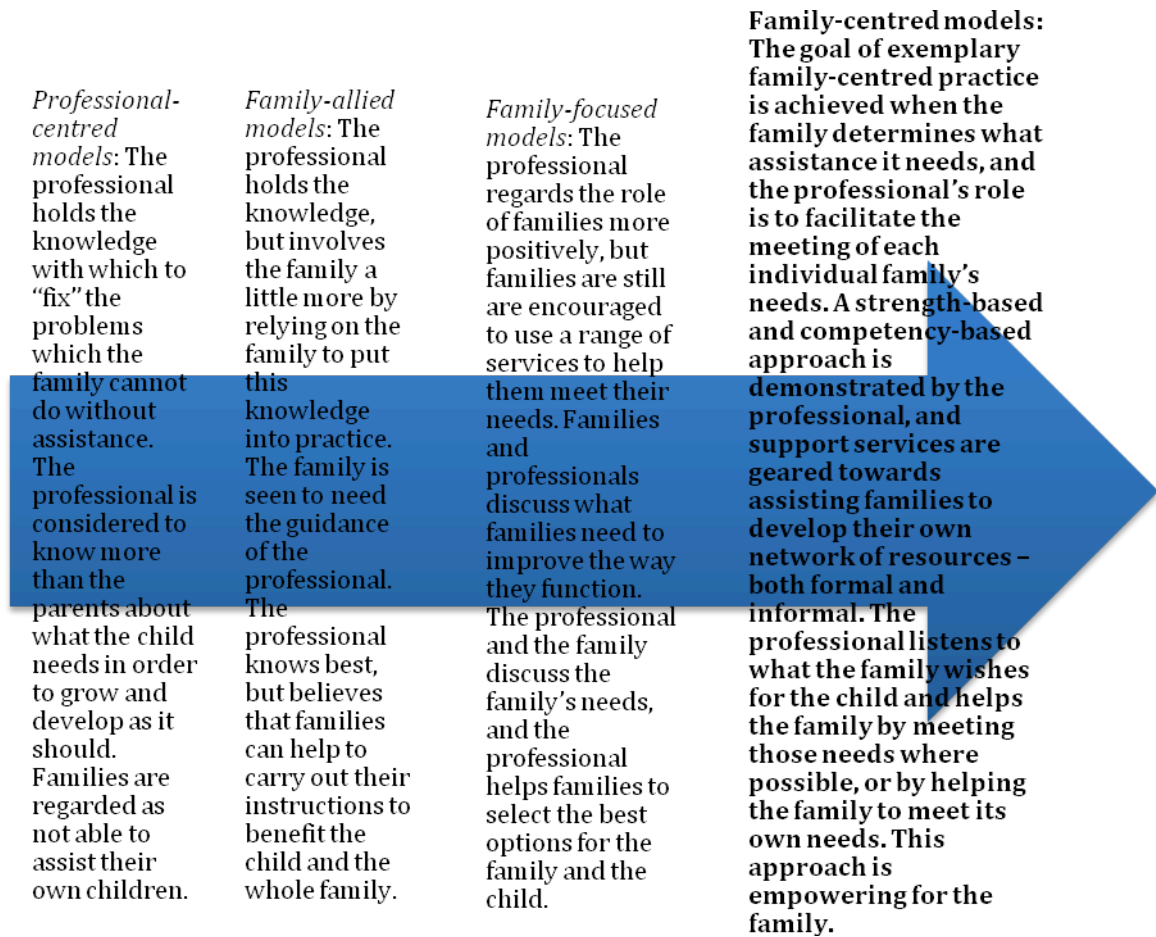


Figure 1: Moving towards family-centred practice (adapted from Dunst et al, 1991)

The following five elements are common to contemporary definitions of family-centred practice (see, for example, Brown & Remine, 2008; Brown & Bortoli, 2010):

1. The strengths of the child’s family are valued, emphasised, and acted upon. Instead of focusing on a family’s perceived deficits, the professional identifies and builds on the family’s strengths
2. Professionals encourage families’ choices and their decision-making. It is important for the early childhood professional to respect the family’s role in making decisions about their child

3. A collaborative relationship exists between families and professionals. To collaborate means to cooperate and to work as partners, or as a team. It does not mean that the family leads and the professional follows – neither does collaborating mean that the professional leads and the family follows. Instead, families and professionals are equal partners in a family-centred practice
4. Familiar family activities provide the foundation for effective early childhood programs. What is familiar to the child’s family may differ from what is familiar to the professional. In order to offer a family-centred practice, it is essential for the early childhood professional to learn about children and families’ day-to-day activities so that each child experiences continuity between their experiences at home and in early childhood settings
5. Family-centred practice most effective when it is characterised by sensitivity, diversity, and flexibility. This is essential, if the previous four elements of a truly family-centred practice are to be effectively implemented.

The expertise of the professional is not overlooked in family-centred practice. To involve families is not to ignore the discipline knowledge and specialised skills of early childhood professionals, but to take on the challenge and stimulation of working with adults and young children recognising that children, professionals and families can make an equal and complementary contribution to supporting children’s learning and development (Hannon, 1998). Truly family-centred practice requires skilled and reflective professionals to deliver a responsive program that strengthens the capacity of each individual family and supports the best learning outcomes for each child.

### **Why is family-centred practice so important in early childhood learning and development?**

*Family-centred practice is essential for improved learning outcomes*

Research shows that parental involvement in their child’s education is associated with improved learning outcomes for children (see, for example, Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009; Huang & Mason, 2008; Hujala, Turja, Gaspar, Veisoon & Waniganayake, 2009). According to Dunst and his colleagues, there are a number of ‘broad-based positive influences on a number of aspects of child, parent, and family functioning’ when parents are involved in their child’s learning and development (Dunst, Johanson, Trivette & Hamby, 1991). Research identifies positive outcomes for children in specific learning domains when families are involved in learning. For example, young children’s literacy learning at home can be more powerful than literacy learning in the classroom (Hannon, 1998). On this basis, best practices in early childhood education recognise the family as the primary educator and build on this knowledge and these home experiences.



Family-centred practice has been strongly related to families' satisfaction with the early childhood program, a stronger sense of self-efficacy and control for families, parents having a more positive (rather than negative) perception of their children, and parents feeling more positive and competent about their children (Scope, 2005). These outcomes are important because they impact on child development (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

The benefits of professionals and families cooperating to support children's learning include improvements in children's attitudes and performance that continue throughout and beyond children's years in education settings (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993; Trusty, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 2002). Notably, these improvements are evident, irrespective of the parents' socio-economic status, race, employment or marital status (Snodgrass, 1991).

Patrikakou and Weissberg (2007) emphasise that it is important for educators and families to work together to support children's social and emotional development. This is particularly important in cases where there are increased economic and social pressures on families or weakened community institutions that would usually nurture children's emotional, moral and social development.

*Family-centred practice promotes continuity of care for children in early childhood settings*

Young children benefit from consistent and responsive care-giving (Rolfe, 2004). In order to provide consistency, professionals need to know and respect the care-giving styles of the family. Building on familiar routines allows children to feel secure and attached to professionals in early childhood settings.

Dissonance between practices at home and in the early childhood setting can have a negative impact on children's wellbeing. Accordingly, professionals are most effective when they develop learning plans for children which are individualised and flexible (Wilson & Dunst, 2005). By developing close relationships with families, professionals are able to draw on children's experiences outside the early childhood setting – even seemingly ordinary events like a trip to the shops, to the beach, or to visit grandparents – and develop responsive learning programs which build on children's prior learning experiences. Valuing familiar activities helps to provide continuity of care for the child.

### *Family-centred practice promotes secure attachments*

Attachment theory tells us that early childhood educators influence children's internal working models; that is, the way children believe the world works and their understanding of where they fit into it (Rolfe, 2004). Professionals also provide a secure base that helps children to feel safe and confident, to try new things and to learn (DEECD, 2009). Research has shown that children are able to form secure attachments with professionals and that this attachment – as with primary caregivers – depends on the quality of the interactions (Rolfe, 2004). The quality of these attachments depends on understanding the child's individual needs and the context of the child's family relationships (Cortazar, & Herreros, 2010). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting the education and care of infants and young children: each child has a unique world view, or internal working model, which influences the child's socio-emotional behaviours, and the child's relationship with the childcare professional. Cortazar and Herreros (2010) argue that children who lack a secure attachment may find it difficult to adapt to a childcare setting, and require individualised care and teaching strategies. Informed and reciprocal communication between family and educator supports transitions for the child from care at home, to care in an early childhood setting.

### *Inclusive environments promote family involvement*

One of the cornerstones of family-centred practice in the Victorian Framework is the notion of a culturally inclusive environment. Importantly this differs from the idea of incorporating other cultures into a mainstream approach. Research by Boykin (1994) in the United States suggests that children and families from minority cultural groups and low-income families may not be comfortable with the mainstream middle-class values which govern most education systems, and further research in the United States has found that education systems undervalue the social and cultural capital of minority cultural groups and lower-income families (Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009). Families are more likely to be involved in their children's school experience when they enjoy a warm, trusting and open relationship with their child's educator (Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009). To develop trusting relationships with families, early childhood professionals need to work from an informed understanding of the social and cultural capital held by families and communities, rather than assumptions about the knowledge and heritage each child brings to the early childhood setting. Research conducted in New Zealand demonstrates that through open and informed conversations between teachers and families, 'the gap between home and school culture was lessened' (Meaney, 2001, p. 13).

## **What does family-centred practice look like in early childhood education and care settings?**

*Family-centred practice requires strong and inclusive relationships between families and educators*

Families should at all times be encouraged to contribute to the learning which takes place in the early childhood setting. Not only does family input broaden the socio-cultural representativeness of the setting, but this input is a crucial link in the family-child-educator relationship which is at the heart of family-centred practice. Despite this, many educators feel unprepared for establishing collaborative relationships with families, and sometimes these relationships have been described as ambivalent or even hostile (Sumsion, 1999).

Many programs that call themselves 'family-centred' are not as family-centred as they claim (Dunst, Johanson, Trivette & Hamby, 1991). Moving towards a family-centred program can be challenging, and requires changes in attitude, behaviour and state of mind. Professionals may need to change how they view their own roles and responsibilities with regard to children and their families (Trivette, Dunst, Boyd & Hamby, 1995). These can be difficult changes to make, particularly as the professional must take responsibility for change of practice, programs, and centre management. 'It is program and staff differences that account for the degree to which program models and practices show a presumption toward family centredness' (Trivette et al, 1995, p. 245).

Family-centred practice has been slow in its implementation. Despite three decades of research highlighting the benefits of family-centred practice, it is still difficult for some organisations to make this change because the change involves cognitive, attitudinal and behaviour change (Trivette, et al, 1995). Evidence indicates that this may be because practitioners are looking for practical and precise guidelines on how to implement family-centred practice. Challenges may include existing administrative work to complete over and above working with children, lack of support from colleagues and management, and a struggle to see families as 'experts' and 'equals' in the team (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Despite these challenges, the impetus for moving to family-centred practice is grounded in better outcomes for children (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

*Families' involvement in the education of their children varies from family to family*

Professionals who successfully engage in family-centred practice understand that families' involvement in the education of their children may vary enormously. Tayler (2006) refers to a continuum of parental involvement which

ranges from passive support to active participatory decision-making, and describes how expectations of family involvement vary from individual to individual, coloured by any number of influences, including one's own personal educational experiences. Understanding families' *perceptions* of involvement enables professionals to recognize, value and support the way families are involved in their children's learning and development (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

Families' limited active participation in the early childhood setting does not necessarily imply a lack of interest – a lack of visible participation may in fact be underpinned by silent support. If there is an open, respectful, collaborative and flexible relationship with a child's family, the professional will either be aware of the reasons for the family's perceived lack of participation, or will be able to establish and respect the reasons for it.

Extensive research suggests that families are more active participants when they believe that their involvement is constructive, that it is valued, and that they have the time and skills to get involved (Rogers, Wiener, Marton & Tannock, 2009). Availability is a fundamental issue. Parents' who have serious constraints on their time and energy may not demonstrate involvement in their children's lives at school or in their early childhood setting (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 1995). This should not be interpreted as a lack of family engagement with their child's learning; families that choose not to be involved in at-school activities are not necessarily disinterested. Importantly, the most significant impact on positive outcomes for children appears to be family support of children's learning that takes place in the home environment (Singh et al, 1995).

Rice and Lenihan (2005) urge professionals engaging in family-centred practice to be mindful not to have unreasonable expectations of parents and the responsibility they take on. Dodd *et al* state that 'sometimes parents did not have the energy or the inclination to be "empowered"' (Dodd, Saggars, Sherry & Wildy, 2009). Furthermore, effective early childhood professionals are sensitive to the complex relationships in the lives of children and their families, and the diversity of what constitutes 'a family'. A family-centred approach acknowledges the possible demands which may be placed on *a range* of people involved in the child's life. Families should be heard and supported when they choose the role they wish to play in family-centred practice (Franck & Gallery, 2004). The research also warns against seeing families as inconsistent when their expressed wishes or interests change (Rice & Lenihan, 2005).

Research suggests that low socio-economic status may also influence parental involvement in children's education for a range of reasons including time constraints, differing opinions about the value of school, and the demands of life in general (Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009, p.89). Epstein (1995) found that teachers

who implemented frequent measures to involve parents in their schools were less judgmental of parents with lower levels of education and lower incomes, and of single parents. These measures for involvement can include: workshops, video-tapes, computerized phone messages on parent and child rearing at each age and grade level; weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comments; home visits at transition points to preschool, elementary, middle, and high school; and neighbourhood meetings to help families understand schools and to help schools understand families (Epstein, 2005; see also Epstein, 2001). Effective early childhood professionals employ 'a variety of flexible and family sensitive models for co-operation' (Hujala et al, 2009, p. 74).

### **How can we achieve best practice?**

*Family-centred practice requires strong and inclusive relationships between families and educators*

Positive relationships with families form a solid foundation on which educators, families and children can together build strong, secure bonds which offer security and support. Professionals who take a sincere interest in families' opinions show that they value families' thoughts and beliefs about their children (Knopf & Swick, 2007). Professionals who have a broader and deeper understanding of the children in their care, are more approachable than educators who appear to already have *all* the answers. Positive relationships can be built when educators take a collaborative approach to understanding the child and the child's abilities (MacNaughton, 2008).

Consistent communication through a variety of means (Swick, 2004a) allows relationships to be strengthened between families and professionals. Trusting relationships are built on the professional's responsiveness and positive attitudes towards children and families (Knopf & Swick, 2007). While the research indicates that families want close relationships with professionals (Swick, 2004b), respectful relationships carefully attend to the expectations and needs of families in the *type* of relationship built between professionals and families.

*Effective early childhood professionals recognise the expertise of families and focus on collaboration*

The Victorian Framework recognises the importance of collaborative relationships between families and early childhood professionals. It states:

Early childhood professionals...use families' understanding of their children to support shared decision-making about each child's learning and development (VEYLDF, 2009, p. 10).

Family-centred practice focuses on strengths, not deficits. It actively promotes families' choices and decisions, and is based on a collaborative relationship between families and professionals. By engaging in family-centred practice, the early childhood professional is positioned as a consultant, supporting the family's choices, knowledge and values. This moves us away from positioning the educator as an expert manager, someone who is attempting to control the family (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

Regarding families as experts on their children and their children's education may require a shift in perspective. Traditional hierarchies which position the educator as the professional who has *most* knowledge about the child's learning and development overlook the knowledge and experience that families have about their child's learning. The parents' expertise may differ, but is 'in no way lesser or less significant than the practitioner's' (Alasuutari, 2010, p. 155). The early childhood educator's professional knowledge provides another area of expertise to the collaborative partnership.

Sumsion also describes a family-centred approach as 'connected teaching', which requires the educator to see the world from the perspective of the child and the child's family (Sumsion, 1999). Connected teaching requires professionals to regard the child as pivotal to the family-professional relationship and to have faith in children and their families. The educator's role is changed from teaching from the front, to co-constructing learning, helping children and families to develop their own ideas (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Mutuality – the idea that children learn, develop and make new meaning through interacting with other people – is an important concept in family-centred practice. In the context of early childhood education and care, professionals, families and children co-create the meaning of their various learning experiences

*Effective early childhood professionals encourage family's choices and decision-making*

In early intervention research, the concept of 'help' is used to clarify the role of the professional in family-centred practice. Help-giving practices in the context of family-centred practice fall into two possible categories: relational practices – such as active and reflective listening, empathy, warmth, and trustworthiness – and 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' (Dunst, Boyd, Trivette & Hamby, 2002, p. 222) and deciding on a course of action.

When both categories of help are implemented, the family's agency and effectiveness is strengthened (Dunst et al, 2002). Not only does this increase the family's self-efficacy, but it also empowers the family (Scope, 2005; Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). Focusing on the strengths that people already have and their existing resources is essential if the professional is to facilitate empowerment (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). By accepting responsibility for identifying and resolving problems independently, the family takes credit for successes.

Research has established that a sense of empowerment is a strong predictor of success in many domains of life (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). Family-centred practice contributes to a sense of empowerment, and supports a positive trajectory for children and families. Real-life experiences are the crucial determinant in whether individual families regard themselves as having a strong sense of control or lacking control over major life events (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). Empowerment includes the following key components: 'self-efficacy, participation and collaboration, sense of control, meeting personal needs, understanding the environment, access to resources, and personal action' (Dempsey & Foreman, 1997; Dunst, Trivette & LaPointe, 1994).

*Effective early childhood professionals build relationships with families which are characterised by warmth, trust and open communication*

Research has demonstrated that parents' involvement in their children's education hinges upon the relationships between parents and teachers, and the similarities and differences between their beliefs (Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009; Meaney, 2001). Parental involvement in their children's education increases when parents' relationships with educators are characterised by 'warmth, trust, and communication' (Nzinga-Johnson et al, 2009). Developing high quality relationships of this nature should be a priority, particularly in settings 'that aim to build partnerships with historically marginalised parents' (Nzinga-Johnson et al p. 89). This is important for relationships with families in the Australian context – not only with regard to historically marginalised parents, but also with families at risk of marginalisation due to their minority status or families in which English is not spoken as a first language.

When professionals build successful family-centred practices, the relationship between educators and families is characterised by mutual understanding and attunement to the care and education of the children.

## **What are the implications for best outcomes for children?**

### **1. The early childhood professional needs to take responsibility for initiating and developing family-centred practice**

Establishing family-centred practice must be led by the early childhood professional. This process involves informal conversations with families about their children, and incorporating families' contributions both as partners and as a valuable resource. Collaborating with families requires interaction skills to communicate professional expertise and to expand on practices to support children's learning and development, whilst at the same time listening to the knowledge, interests, availability and expectations of families.

### **2. Beginning and maintaining a family-centred practice may be challenging, and professionals need to reflect on their own beliefs and practices**

There are challenges for professionals in moving towards family-centred practice, particularly if they are not used to considering families as equal partners in young children's learning and development. Changing attitudes and professional beliefs may be challenging, but an open disposition, respecting differences and being aware of one's own values are pivotal elements of family-centred practice.

These challenges can be addressed in pre-service training for early childhood professionals that builds knowledge of the research and theory underpinning family involvement in children's education, and includes practical skills training for collaborating with families.

### **3. Families must be respected as experts in their children's lives**

Family-centred practice acknowledges the experience of families and the fact that the home environment is a primary place of learning. Regardless of language, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, each family brings strengths and skills to the learning relationship. Recognising the knowledge and expertise of families is not simply a form of respectful practice, but is foundational to effective pedagogy in early childhood education. Family involvement in children's education is essential for improved learning outcomes.



#### **4. Family-centred practice requires professionals to be aware that family participation or involvement can be different for different families**

Families have different resources, expectations and assumptions and competing demands on time, all of which can influence direct participation in early childhood settings. Families which seem to be uninvolved in their children's education may take a great deal of interest, but demonstrate this in different ways. For example, families may actively engage with their child's learning in the home.

Children's interaction with their families at home has a significant influence on learning. Family-centred practice is not simply bringing families into early childhood settings, but recognising the learning that takes place at home. Professionals need to be sensitive and informed about individual children's and families' experiences.

#### **5. A range of communication methods and styles is crucial in family-centred practice**

Families are more likely to engage with their children's learning and development in an early childhood setting when they feel that their contribution is valued, appreciated and understood. Respect, warmth and reciprocity are crucial in the relationship between the family and the early childhood professional. Where there is open communication, professionals and families are able to respond to individual children and promote optimal learning outcomes.

## Methodology

This Paper is based on a review of national and international literature published over the last twenty years. Literature was obtained by using the University of Melbourne's on-line database. Where journal articles cited older references which appeared to be relevant to the topic at hand, these references were also investigated, whether primary or secondary research material. Also, longitudinal studies and theories of early childhood education were explored as their relevance became apparent through the research.

Much of the literature investigates teachers' relationships with children who have additional needs, whether these needs are deemed to arise from externalising or internalising behaviours, skills challenges, or socio-economic status, rather than teachers' respectful relationships and responsive engagement with all children. Peer reviewed ratings of "very good" and "excellent" were prioritised.

Databases searched:

A+ Education (Informit)  
Web of Science  
PsycINFO  
Academic Search Premier (EBSCO)  
ERIC (CSA)  
Web of Science  
JSTOR  
ERIC  
Wiley Interscience Journals

On-line databases were searched for literature relating to "early childhood" and "young children" and:

Family-centred practice  
Parental involvement  
Parent-school  
Parent-teacher

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