


# VICTORIAN EARLY YEARS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

## PRACTICE PRINCIPLE GUIDE EQUITY AND DIVERSITY





Practice Principles cultural knowledge story by Dr. Sue Lopez Atkinson (Yorta Yorta) and artwork by Annette Sax (Taungurung)

Adapted by the Department of Education and Training from *Practice Principle Guide – Equity and Diversity*, by Dr Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse.

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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is one in a series of eight guides to the Practice Principles in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and is revised and updated from the *Practice Principle Guide: Equity and Diversity* written by Dr Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse (2011).

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 4: Equity and Diversity 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 found at: [www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/eyldf/profresources.htm](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/eyldf/profresources.htm)

## PRACTICE PRINCIPLES – CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE STORY

- Bunjil the Eagle and Waa the Crow represent Aboriginal culture and *partnerships with families*.
- The water hole symbolises *reflective practice*.
- The gum leaves with their different patterns and colours represent *diversity*.
- The stones underneath the leaves represent *equity*. They reflect the additional support put in place in order for all children to achieve.
- The child and adults standing on 'Ochre mountain' symbolise the *high/equitable expectations* we hold for children and adults.
- The family standing on and looking out from 'Ochre mountain' reflects *assessment for learning and development*. Such assessments draw on children's and families' perspectives, knowledge, experiences and expectations.
- The child and adult figures also represent *partnerships with professionals*.
- The land symbol as mother earth represents the basis for *respectful relationships and responsive engagement*.
- The symbols for land, water and people signify *holistic and integrated* approaches based on connections to Clan and Country.

(Dr. Sue Lopez-Atkinson, Yorta Yorta)



# EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

## Early childhood professionals:

- promote cultural awareness in all children, including greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being
- nurture children's evolving capacity to learn from birth, regardless of circumstances or ability
- support all children to develop a sense of place, identity and a connection to the land and the natural world
- engage in sustained shared conversations with children to explore equity and diversity, to promote each child's sense of identity
- ensure that the interests, abilities and culture of every child and their family are understood and valued
- ensure that all children have equitable access to resources and opportunities to demonstrate their learning
- maximise opportunities for all children to do well and learn from others, including opportunities to experience diversity and difference in ways that nurture positive attitudes and care and respect for others
- identify and implement the type and level of support or intervention that is required to demonstrate and improve children's learning and development
- recognise multilingualism as an asset and support children to maintain their first language, learn English as an additional language, and learn languages other than English
- are committed to equity and avoid practices that directly or indirectly contribute to gender inequality, prejudice and discrimination.

(VEYLDF, P. 12)

THE VEYLDF IS INFORMED BY THE PRINCIPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (1989) AND THE VICTORIAN CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES ACT (2006).

# WHAT DO EQUITY AND DIVERSITY MEAN?

Understanding Practice Principle: Equity and diversity in the VEYLDF and putting it into practice relies on a clear understanding of the terms diversity, inclusion and equity. Concepts and practices related to inclusion and equity overlap considerably and are explored in this resource.

The term diversity is used broadly to refer to the variety of differences in people, including their cultural and language backgrounds, religion, values, sexual orientation, abilities, educational background, socioeconomic status, lifestyles, and gender. Within any of these categories there are many differences as well – that is, people who share one characteristic will differ in many other ways. Respect for diversity is essential to provision of high quality services.

There is great diversity among children in Australia. There are currently almost 400 languages spoken and 18 per cent of the population speaks a language other than English at home. As well as cultural and linguistic diversity, approximately eight percent of Australian children have a disability, and approximately 4.3 percent have a severe disability. Children also differ in their socio-economic status, family structure, living conditions and mental, physical and emotional health. All of these factors affect their learning and development (see Evidence Paper 4).

Inclusion is the active response by early childhood professionals to understand all children's and families' experiences and children's individual capabilities. It is important to recognise and nurture each child's sense of belonging to their family, community and early years' settings. (VEYLDF, P. 12).

Early childhood professionals understand that every child develops and learns in unique ways and has unique learning dispositions, strengths, abilities and interests. This means they respond to individual children in different ways – for example, by providing additional support, adapting learning experiences or making special provisions.

The aim of inclusion is equity. In early childhood, equity refers to every child's right to participate in all aspects of community life, including non-discriminatory early childhood services. Equity and equality are often confused. Equality refers to everyone having the same rights and being offered the same opportunities, while equity involves ensuring individuals have what they need to enact those rights. For example, every child has a right to early education (equality) - some children and families require additional support to access early childhood education and participate fully (equity).

Professionals have an ethical obligation to actively challenge inequities by recognising and then removing or reducing barriers to children's learning that interfere with their active participation in community life. These barriers are not always obvious. In the example below an early childhood professional identified a barrier to participation and addressed it in a practical way.

### Case study

A playgroup co-ordinator was given a venue for a playgroup in an area where many low-income families lived and where there was little public transport. She wondered if this was the reason attendance was low. She saw this as a matter of equity – all families and children have a right to access the service. She lobbied the Council to provide a small bus fitted with booster seats and recruited volunteers to pick up families. Attendance rose.

Perceptions of gender, power, equality and respect are developed in the early years. Early childhood professionals need to be conscious of their own biases and those around them, including amongst children, colleagues and families. This awareness helps avoid practices that directly or indirectly contribute to gender inequality, prejudice or discrimination. It also enables professionals to challenge gender stereotypes and to actively promote respectful relationships in their services.

### Discussion starter

Think about the concepts of diversity, inclusion and equity discussed in the section above and how they relate to your work.

How is a commitment to equity enacted in your setting?

Can you identify a time when you acted to prevent or stop discrimination against a child or family? How do you ensure that there are no practices in your setting that discriminate against or exclude families or children?

What intentional teaching strategies do you apply to challenge gender stereotyping and to encourage diversity and gender equity amongst children?

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE A COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY?

Early childhood professionals respect for diversity is important because it:

- promotes children's sense of identity and belonging to family, groups and communities
- helps children learn to respect and be comfortable with diversity and difference
- supports multilingualism
- promotes inclusion and equity for all children and families

Early childhood professional's commitment to equity is important because it:

- demonstrates respect for diversity
- underpins partnerships with families, the community and other professionals
- benefits all children's learning and development
- informs responses to each child's unique learning and development trajectory

Some of these points are discussed below.

## Professionals committed to equity respond to each child's unique learning and development trajectory

Children are more likely to achieve in the Learning and Development Outcomes in the VEYLDF when professionals understand and support each child and family's diverse strengths, abilities, interests, and cultural practices. Each child's learning and development benefits from individualised support. Individualised, varied, focused and additional support is especially important for the meaningful inclusion of children with disability.

### Reflective questions

- What are some of the strengths that the children and families you work with bring? How do you acknowledge and build on these strengths?
- What are some of the challenges that children and families face that affect children's learning? How do you acknowledge and respond to these challenges?
- Do you have a clear understanding of what matters most for each child and family about the child's learning and development? If not, how could you find out and then use that information?
- How does your practice reflect this understanding?

## Professionals commitment to equity underpins partnerships with families and the community

The Practice Principle: Partnerships with families acknowledges family diversity and recognises the key role that families play in their child's learning and development. Professionals committed to equity focus not only on children but also on their families. When families feel accepted and respected and are joint decision-makers with professionals, both professionals and families have a greater understanding of the child and are better placed to support learning and improve outcomes.



Many families face a range of complex issues including poverty, mental illness, loss of family, isolation, toxic stress, trauma and family violence which may require you to collaborate with a range of professionals in your community (see Practice Guide Partnerships with professionals).

### Professionals commitment to equity promote children's sense of identity and belonging to family, community and early childhood services

A strong sense of identity, critical for being a confident learner, emerges when children feel accepted and valued. When professionals show respect for difference and do everything they can to include every child fully and support every child's learning and development, children see themselves as successful and capable.

Commitment to equity and respect for diversity require a deep understanding of and appreciation for the role of community in children's lives. Every child's experience of community is different and complex. Community includes the people, places, values, relationships and outside influences that affect a family. These influences may include religion, socio-economic status, employment, safety, housing, mental and physical health, gender and the impact of the dominant culture and language. Whatever the diversity of children's experience, their sense of belonging to family, community and early childhood services should be nurtured.

THE PRIMARY PREVENTION OF FAMILY VIOLENCE REFERS TO CHANGING ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOURS, NORMS AND PRACTICES TO ADDRESS KEY DRIVERS AND STOP VIOLENCE BEFORE IT STARTS. RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION IS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PRIMARY PREVENTION OF FAMILY VIOLENCE CHARACTERISED BY PEACEFUL CONFLICT-RESOLUTION, GENDER EQUALITY MUTUAL RESPECT AND CONSIDERATION AND TRUST.

### Case study

At her child's 8 month Maternal and Child Health (MCH) visit, Ashanti asked her MCH nurse if she should stop speaking to her child in her home language of Amharic so she would learn English without being confused.

The MCH nurse explained that bilingualism and multilingualism contribute to children's success as learners and that encouraging and supporting children to use and develop their first language and cultural identities, helps children to feel confident as communicators and users of language.

Having her child connected with her family values and their cultural heritage and traditions was important to Ashanti and she was relieved this would strengthen her child's positive sense of identity and wellbeing.

### Professionals commitment to equity helps children learn to respect and be comfortable with diversity and difference

Inclusive practices benefit all children. They learn to accept difference through the interactions and conversations they participate in as well as those they observe. Attitudes to difference develop from a very early age, and if equity and social justice are to be achieved in the broader community it is essential that children learn attitudes, values and ways of being that contribute to an inclusive and equitable society. Children can learn from the important adults in their lives about looking for strengths in others, valuing them and communicating that value.

# HOW DOES A COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY LOOK IN PRACTICE?

A commitment to equity and respect for diversity starts with professionals requires professionals to actively address issues of inequality and promote the value of diversity and difference.

Professionals ideas about diversity and difference are complex and influenced by many factors, both personal and professional. Critical reflection about all aspects of your service operation can help you to gain clarity about the contexts for your work and how its values, philosophy, policies and procedures affect your beliefs and practices. Critical reflection enables deeper understanding of:

- your own and others' views on equity and diversity
- your own and others' biases
- different cultural and family practices and ways of being
- unchallenged assumptions that work against equity, including the ways that practices, language and the environment can reinforce stereotypes or the dominant culture
- barriers to inclusion and equity
- how to communicate and interact respectfully across cultures.

All aspects of service provision should reflect a commitment to equity and respect for diversity, including:

- service philosophy and policies
- physical environments
- routines
- teaching, learning and assessment practices
- partnerships with families
- partnerships with professionals
- community connections.

Each of these aspects is discussed in the following section.

*EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA'S CODE OF ETHICS IS A SET OF STATEMENTS ABOUT APPROPRIATE AND EXPECTED BEHAVIOUR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS. IT REFLECTS CURRENT PEDAGOGICAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, PROVIDING A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION ABOUT THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS.*

## Service philosophy and policies

Every early childhood organisation or service has a philosophy or mission statement that guides and informs policies and practices.

Policies and procedures flow out of philosophy statements. Their content and the way they are expressed can invite acceptance and belonging or interfere with it. They affect the way you engage with families and children, and how they engage with you.

### Case study

After learning that promoting gender equality at an early stage of life helps children to build respectful, equitable relationships of their own, an education and care service decided to review their Inclusion and Equity Policy.

The existing policy included statements regarding not discriminating on the basis of gender and providing equal opportunities to resources and equipment, however it did not include proactive statements regarding challenging gender based stereotypes.

To become more affirmative in their practice, the service included the following preventative actions

- Promote women's independence and decision-making
- Challenge gender stereotypes and roles
- Strengthen positive, equal and respectful relationships
- Challenge condoning of violence against women

*(Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia, P. 33)*

### Reflective questions

- How does your service philosophy show a commitment to equity and respect for diversity and difference?
- How does it acknowledge children's and families' rights?
- How does it support children to develop the skills for lifelong positive relationships?
- Are educators aware of their own gender bias? What steps are taken to overcome these to build respect and model gender equality?

A FAMILY DAY CARE EDUCATOR EXPERIENCED DIFFICULTIES SETTLING A CHILD TO SLEEP. THE FAMILY HAD TOLD HER THAT THE CHILD SLEPT ON A MAT ON THE FLOOR SO SHE PROVIDED SOMETHING SIMILAR. THE CHILD WASN'T SETTLING AFTER A WEEK. THE FAMILY THEN TOLD HER THAT AT HOME THE CHILD SLEEPS DURING THE DAY IN THE ROOM WHERE OTHER EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS ARE. AS THE EDUCATOR SAID, 'THIS WAS A VITAL PIECE OF MISSING INFORMATION!' SHE HAD SUCCESS WHEN SHE TRIED THIS AND MADE IT A GENTLE RELAXING TIME FOR THE OTHER CHILDREN.

## Physical environments

Physical environments send powerful messages. The entry to a service is the first contact point for children, families and other visitors. An inclusive entry environment has visible signs of welcome to families and children and evidence of connections to people's cultures, communities and families.

### Discussion starter

Pretend you are a visitor to your service, arriving for the first time. What are the signs that you are welcome?

Is the welcome for everyone – all age groups, genders, families with diverse family compositions and cultural backgrounds and abilities? What improvements would you recommend?

Inclusive welcoming entries:

- have signage, notices and information for families in local community languages as well as in English
- Acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which they are situated
- are attractive, clean and tidy
- cater for equipment such as prams, bikes, wheelchairs or walking frames.

Environments designed to support every child's learning and development show respect for children's and families' language, cultural and family backgrounds and recognise children's capacity for making decisions and choices (agency).

In your environment, what evidence is there that inclusion and meaningful participation for every child is promoted? Is there for example:

- easy access to all play materials and learning areas such as the book corner, vegetable garden, painting easels, blocks, or the sandpit
- enough clear space so that children and adults can move around freely
- a private nappy-changing space for older children if required
- diversity in all resources or materials, including books, pictures, puzzles, musical instruments and art materials
- labelling that assists children with communication disabilities and children who are learning English

What else can you identify in the environment that supports inclusion? What changes will you make to ensure your environment is inclusive for everyone who uses it?

## Routines

Events that happen every day, such as arrivals and departures, meals, sleep or rest times, are important times to respect diversity and strive for equity. They need to be flexible and promote children's sense of security and belonging. Each family has different ways of doing things, for example, the way they greet and farewell others, the foods they eat and how they prepare and serve them and sleeping practices.

## Reflective questions

- How do you ensure continuity in routines between home and the service in order to support children's sense of security and belonging?
- How do you involve children and families in ensuring continuity?
- Can you think of an example where you collaborated with a family to ensure continuity of care practices between home and your service?
- What more could you do?

## Teaching, learning and assessment practices

Early childhood professionals do more than set up inclusive, welcoming environments. They consciously promote children's respect for diversity and difference and encourage them to act fairly with others.

Children learn about equity and diversity when professionals model fairness, inclusion and respect for diversity. Professionals also challenge children's unfair behaviour or evidence of bias or stereotyping. They go beyond just reminding children to be 'nice to their friends' by teaching strategies to help them express their feelings about unfairness and how to take peaceful action. Professionals use spontaneous opportunities to teach the value of differences and respect for diversity.

**INTENTIONAL TEACHING INVOLVES EDUCATORS BEING DELIBERATE, PURPOSEFUL AND THOUGHTFUL IN THEIR DECISIONS AND ACTION**  
(EYLF, P. 15)

## Case study

A Prep teacher explained that she doesn't ignore children's questions about diversity or difference. She listens carefully before responding and tries to be honest. She expects that children can understand quite complex matters if they are explained carefully. She gave an example of a child who asked 'Why does he talk funny?' about a child with speech difficulties. Rather than say, 'Please don't say that' or ignoring the question, she explained that the child 'speaks differently because he has a problem getting his tongue to work fast'. She then asked the child 'Can you remember how clever he is at telling us what he wants without using words?' The child remembered how he uses signs and gestures to communicate. The teacher also explained that saying someone 'speaks funny' can hurt their feelings.

## Reflective questions

- Do your assessment practices identify what children are learning or have learned about diversity?
- How do you incorporate children's learning about diversity into your planning?

A commitment to equity is reflected in assessment practices that are inclusive, and promote high expectations for every child. Assessing what children know, can do and understand requires an approach that focuses on children's strengths, abilities and interests.

MORE INFORMATION ON ASSESSMENT CAN BE FOUND IN THE PRACTICE GUIDE: ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT.

A strength-based approach is not about seeing a child's learning and development only in a positive light and neglecting to identify areas for further development or areas of concern. Rather, the strength-based approach views situations realistically and looks for opportunities to complement and support existing abilities and capacities as opposed to focusing on, and staying with, the problem or concern. This approach supports professionals to question strategies to identify what works for the child and how it works so that those strategies can be continued and developed to match the child's abilities.

For example, Sarah was engaged and focused with well-developed problem-solving skills and concentration in the indoor environment but was easily distracted, disruptive and at times reacted with aggressive behaviour when the group was outdoors. Educators reflected on the outdoor and indoor environments and noticed that indoor experiences were usually small group activities, whilst the outdoor environment provided no small group or quieter play and learning opportunities. By rearranging the outdoor environment to include small group experiences and dividing up the area to create both small and large group activity, educators were able to redirect Sarah to small group experiences that supported her learning style. Strategies were developed in collaboration with Sarah's family and applied consistently. As Sarah grew used to working positively in the busy outdoor environment, educators, along with Sarah's family supported Sarah to reflect upon her reactions and encouraged her to consider and make choices about her own behaviour.

### Discussion starter

- How do you include the views of children, families and other professionals who are also working with a child and family in assessing children's learning?
- Do you apply strength based approaches to develop individual learning plans or goals for each child? Are these based on collaborative assessments? Reflect on the questions above and identify two or three practical steps you will take to make your teaching, learning and assessment practices more inclusive.

Where might you find help to make these changes?

How will you assess the effectiveness of the changes or actions you take?

## Case study

An educator working with a child with behavioural challenges decided to plan intentionally to build a positive sense of identity and belonging for that child:

“There were so many times when we had to stop or distract him – remove him from the situation and explain that he was interfering with other children’s learning. We were worried that he saw himself in a very negative light. We reflected on our program and the ways we were supporting him and decided that we would use a range of intentional strategies to help him develop a more positive sense of identity as a valued contributor to the group. So any time he co-operated, was gentle, played with other children or contributed to a group conversation, we’d say something to show that we noticed and approved. The other thing we did was to let him play with another child with us supervising from a distance. We realised we’d been ‘hovering’ around him, which may have conveyed the message that we didn’t trust him. I think that was what helped him the most. Without saying anything we were saying that we trusted him and expected him to be able to manage playing with another child. And mostly he responded well to our expectations.”

## Discussion starter

Identify examples from your practice where you have adapted or modified the curriculum or environment to support a child’s full participation.

What difference did these adaptations or modification make to the child’s learning and development?

If you have identified a child who is not progressing in their learning, what specific actions have you taken to help this child progress? What else could you do? Who could help?

## Supporting children’s first language

An important part of a commitment to equity is supporting children to value, maintain and strengthen their home language as they learn and use English. This may include collaborating with families to ensure that they appreciate the importance of and benefits to their children.

### Reflective questions

- How do you support children learning English as an additional language to maintain their first language? How do you encourage families to do the same?
- Do you use support services such as the FKA Children’s Service to help build your understanding and capacity? Do you use interpreter services?
- Do children have regular access to books, stories, music and songs in their first language/s?
- Do you know and use key words in children’s home languages – for example, hello, goodbye, please, thank you, yes, no, mummy, daddy, baby, grandma or grandpa?
- What more could you do?

Have a look at the resource booklet [Learning English as an Additional Language in the Early Years \(birth to six years\)](#).

THE FKA CHILDREN’S SERVICES LIBRARY CAN HELP YOU FIND BOOKS IN CHILDREN’S FIRST LANGUAGES. CHILDREN’S BOOKS IN A VARIETY OF LANGUAGES CAN ALSO BE FOUND TO PURCHASE ONLINE.

## Partnerships with families

Supporting families in ways that demonstrate a commitment to equity can include:

- helping families build strong social networks through participating in community-based services such as playgroups
- understanding the different support required for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability and toxic stress including: children experiencing trauma, children living in out of home care, refugee children and those experiencing intergenerational poverty.
- providing a range of useful information about local community services that cater for diverse families
- empowering families to make decisions about appropriate support for their child.
- ensuring a welcoming and accessible physical environment for all families

The Practice Principle: Partnerships with families requires early childhood professionals to engage in and encourage open communication and to value families' knowledge and ideas. Families have as much valuable information to share with professionals as professionals have to share with families. Some families will require additional time, resources and support from professionals to feel comfortable about talking about their child or offering information to professionals.

Early childhood professionals who are committed to equity and respect diversity, recognise that the way families support children's learning is unique. There are many possibilities for making connections with children's home and family experiences and show respect for families' lifestyles, traditions and their roles as their children's educators.

For example:

- ensuring that all learning materials and resources (books, pictures, posters, for example) show accurate images of children, adults or particular groups in the community and reflect families' interests, cultures and languages.
- ensuring that learning materials and resources represent diverse gender roles and challenge gender stereotypes.
- telling stories rather than always reading them, having books for borrowing in children's home languages, providing books without words and audiobooks for families so that every family can read or share stories with their children.
- lending mathematics or science kits that engage families in their children's learning in ways they may previously not have considered.
- using family recipes in cooking experiences and in meals provided.
- providing resources that families can borrow, exchange, or keep to support their child's learning such as paper, pencils, crayons, books, toys, and dress-ups.

Practising respect for diversity includes choosing experiences that are authentic and relevant to the community, the families and the children who use the service. A service in Melbourne, in addition to embedding culturally appropriate practices throughout the program in different ways, celebrates important culturally based events in the community and gives information to all families about their meaning. For example, the centre had a celebration at the end of Ramadan, as many of the families are Muslim. All the families and children join in and learn about what Ramadan means for the Muslim families. They also celebrate Diwali, a Hindu festival, the Chinese Moon Lantern festival and Easter. They always consult with families before deciding on what to celebrate and on how and when to celebrate these special events.

Remember that families' ideas about child rearing may differ from yours.



## Case study

A supported playgroup facilitator in a culturally diverse community, with many families needing extra support, said that she and her colleagues are challenged by some of the childrearing practices. She gave two examples. "Many families have very definite ideas about appropriate behaviours and interests for boys and girls. The facilitators have worked hard to persuade families that boys playing in the home corner and girls playing with blocks and trucks, supports learning. They are also aware that many of the families have older children caring for younger children when parents are out. "We've had lots of discussions and will continue to do so. We realised that we had some gender and cultural biases that we need to examine. We need to learn more about the cultural backgrounds of the families we work with and their values. We have to think deeply about what's the respectful and ethical thing to do whenever situations come up. The main thing is that we continue to work hard to develop strong partnerships with the families."

A commitment to the Practice Principle: Equity and diversity requires a high level of professional competence, which includes values, knowledge, understandings and skills.

## Reflective questions

- What would you say about how well you put respect for diversity into practice? What about your colleagues?
- What more can you learn and explore?
- Where can you get support to strengthen your skills and understanding?
- How can children and families help you to improve your skills and understanding?
- What first steps will you take?

## Discussion starter

Issues related to power can interfere with equity. In relationships between professionals and families and professionals and children there is an element of power involved. Power includes physical power, trying to make someone fit into your way of doing things, discriminating or using gender, age, language or cultural background for example to make someone feel excluded or not valued. Power can be exerted obviously with words or actions or be subtle.

Read the following two short examples and think about the type of power being used. Discuss how you would respond in a way that would challenge this unfair use of power.

1. Tom and Nic are playing with cars and there is a dispute about a car that they both want. Tom starts to cry when Nic takes the car. Nic says to Tom, 'You're a sissy baby anyway.'
2. Di and Mena are discussing a request made by a mother about her baby. Di says, 'Well she has made things hard for herself, and she can't expect us to do what she does, can she?' Mena agrees and says, 'Yes, children have to learn to fit in with our routines. She won't know if we have or haven't done it.'

## Partnerships with professionals

Barriers to equity can be overcome more effectively when professionals work together (see Practice Guide: Partnerships with professionals). Health, education, welfare and early intervention professionals in a community can work collaboratively to overcome barriers to equity. Strategies could include:

- offering maternal and child health services in the evenings as well as during the day
- providing all information about local child and family services collated and in community languages
- offering shared professional learning sessions on topics of mutual interest such as working with children and families experiencing vulnerability
- participating in multidisciplinary teams or networks to enable a holistic approach to supporting families and children, especially those experiencing vulnerability.

Together, educators and early intervention professionals develop individual learning plans for children with a disability by collaborating with the child and family.

These partnerships, based on shared goals and mutual respect, promote the children's full inclusion in the services in which they participate.

### Case study

An important part of collaboration is being clear that the focus is on the child's full participation in all of the learning opportunities available. When a range of professionals in a range of services and service types support a child, shared goals are important.

An ECIS professional explained how she had worked with educators and the family to identify specific physical skills that would support a child with a developmental delay to participate fully in the program. The educators suggested using play-based learning experiences where the child could practise these skills rather than expecting the child to do tasks that were different from what other children were doing. The educators also knew about the child's interests, which meant they could plan experiences that motivated the child and encouraged engagement. The child's mother said that when she tried to get the child to practise these skills in isolation at home he was not interested. She could see that practising skills while he was playing in a social context and doing things he enjoyed was a much more effective way for her child to learn.

## Privacy

When professionals work in partnership they have ethical and legislative obligations related to families' and children's privacy, both in written records as well as conversations about children with other professionals.

It is important for all professionals to remain informed about changes to privacy, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability such as exposure to family violence and who are known to child protection. There are provisions in legislation that reinforce the need for mandatory reporting to ensure the best interest of the child is maintained.

See also information on [Child Safe Standards](#)

## Community connections

Inclusion extends beyond the service into the local community and beyond. Children live and learn with others in a range of communities including families, early childhood education and care services, local communities and global communities through the use of information technologies. It is important that children see themselves as valued members of these communities. Outcome 2: (Children are connected with and contribute to their world provides an impetus for early childhood professionals to plan for children's learning about place, location, time and community – where and how they belong and the different identities they have in the communities in which they participate.

Practical strategies to support community and environment connections include:

- hands-on, practical projects led by the children and supported by adults to explore or examine things that are of interest to them in their community
- mapping the local community as an ongoing project flowing from children's continued engagement in community life and their knowledge of the key features, strengths and identity of 'their place'
- building strong community connections and partnerships through visiting local places regularly, participating in community events and inviting community members into the service to work with the children. This requires thinking beyond traditional 'community helpers' such as police or nurses to people working in sport, business, the arts or welfare. Think about things of interest in your area – even a bike repair shop, a butcher, or grain silos can provide rich topics for learning.
- thinking of ways to connect via the internet with other communities within or outside Australia
- ongoing opportunities to connect with the natural environment within the service and in the community through experiences for example with mud, sand and water, gardening, growing vegetables, engaging in sustainability and conservation practices such as recycling or mulching and using local parks or reserves.

Professionals who are committed to equity and diversity promote cultural awareness in all children, including a greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives.

There is evidence that many non-Aboriginal children and adults have limited knowledge of, or misunderstandings about Aboriginal communities and culture. They may have images of Aboriginal people that are inaccurate or outdated – for example, many people believe that the majority of Aboriginal people live traditional lifestyles in remote parts of the country, however while this is the case for some Aboriginal people, most Aboriginal people live in urban environments and have diverse lifestyles.

Early childhood professionals can promote respectful understandings of Aboriginal people and cultures in different ways, including:

- using photographs or images of contemporary Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in diverse fields such as business, law, teaching, sport, art, dance, theatre, health or government
- inviting Aboriginal elders as custodians of the land to share their knowledge of the local environment – for example their knowledge of indigenous plants could inform native garden redevelopment plans and sustainability practices
- embedding Aboriginal stories, storytelling and music into the program
- displaying and talking about the significance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags
- participating in learning about Koorie culture at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne ([www.koorieheritagetrust.com.au](http://www.koorieheritagetrust.com.au))
- celebrating National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day (NAIDOC) in August, registering your event with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal Child Care (SNAICC, [www.snaicc.org.au](http://www.snaicc.org.au)) and getting advice from them.

While the practices above benefit all children's learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, professionals also need to think deeply about the complex and interconnected factors that impact on Aboriginal children's engagement in early childhood services.

### Reflective questions

- How do you engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in your service and/or in your community?
- How do you ensure that your program or curriculum is responsive to local Aboriginal identity, traditions, language and culture?
- How can the VEYLDF support your work in promoting respect for cultural diversity, including Aboriginal cultures and perspectives?
- What are some of the historical and current barriers that contribute to the exclusion of Aboriginal families and children from participation in early childhood services?
- How could you help to remove or reduce these barriers?

### Discussion starter

Several communities in Victoria and beyond have formed local partnerships to promote early literacy awareness and learning. Annual community events are held to increase the community's understandings of the importance of early literacy. A broad range of community members, local government officers, professionals, businesses, families and children participate in these events. Local businesses and local governments sometimes provide financial support. There may also be regular community-based literacy experiences such as story time at the local library.

How could you/your service engage with the local community?

What is going on in your local area that the children are interested in investigating?

How could you use that to support learning in the five Outcomes?

### In summary

To achieve equity and demonstrate respect for diversity, professionals need to have high expectations for themselves as well as for children. They work in partnerships with families and other professionals to support every child's learning, development and sense of belonging as a valued and active member of society. Professionals actively challenge the barriers to equity through participating in professional learning, critically reflecting on their practice, and ensuring their practice supports the learning and development requirements of every child.

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