


VICTORIAN EARLY YEARS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

PRACTICE PRINCIPLE GUIDE
RESPECTFUL
RELATIONSHIPS
AND RESPONSIVE
ENGAGEMENT





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 – Respectful relationships and responsive engagement*, by Dr Anne Kennedy and Anne Stonehouse.

© State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) 2017

Practice Principle Guide – Respectful relationships and responsive engagement for is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence. You are free to reuse the work under that licence, on the condition that you credit the State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training), indicate if changes were made and comply with the other licence terms available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

The licence does not apply to:

- any trademarks or branding, including the Victorian Government logo and the Department of Education and Training logo
- images or photographs or other content supplied by third parties.

Copyright queries may be directed to copyright@edumail.vic.gov.au

Authorised by the Department of Education and Training

2 Treasury Place, East Melbourne, Victoria, 3002

CONTENTS

About this guide	4
What are respectful relationships and responsible engagement?	5
Why are respectful relationships and responsive engagement important?	8
What do respectful relationships and responsive engagement look like in practice?	10
Conclusion	19
References and resources	20

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).

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

The guide draws on the [Evidence Paper](#) for Practice Principle 5: Respectful Relationships and Responsive Engagement 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.

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)



WHAT ARE RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS AND RESPONSIBLE ENGAGEMENT?

From birth, secure attachments formed through warm and respectful relationships with familiar adults are fundamental to children's learning and development. These relationships protect, regulate and buffer children. They provide a secure base that helps children to feel safe and confident to try new things.

Interactions with children and families inform early childhood professionals' knowledge of children's distinctive interests, skills, cultures and abilities. This is crucial to providing positive experiences and a safe and stimulating environment that will encourage children to expand their capacities and deepen their knowledge and understandings.

Early childhood professionals:

- demonstrate sensitivity and initiate warm, trusting and reciprocal relationships with children and their families
- support families' choices and decision making
- ensure that children experience safe and stimulating learning environments
- help children to establish secure attachments and develop self-regulation
- develop learning programs that are responsive to each child and build on their culture, strengths, interests and knowledge
- support shared sustained thinking
- listen to, hear and take into account the views and feelings of each child
- recognise when a child learns something significant and apply this knowledge to strengthen learning relationships that reflect the uniqueness of the child and their family
- recognise and deepen their understandings about other people and how values and beliefs influence their own world view
- demonstrate respect and understanding of the views of other professionals and families when communicating and interacting across cultures.

(VEYLDF, P. 11)

Developing and maintaining respectful relationships is the foundation for working effectively as a professional. It requires professionals to respect the values of each family, even when they differ from their own.

Responsive engagement with children and families builds on respectful relationships and sensitivity to the uniqueness of each child and family. Professionals understand that the most effective learning experiences are based on children's strengths, abilities and interests.

Attuned engagement is one characteristic of a responsive relationship. It involves alert awareness, being receptive and connected to both individuals and the group and responding accordingly.

Another way of describing responsive engagement between an early childhood professional and a child is the concept of 'caring presence', which comes from the nursing profession. Caring presence requires awareness of the child and 'engrossment' in the interaction, so that the early childhood professional recognises when the child learns something significant.

Case study

An educator, who had a meeting to attend, described her frustration with a child who was very slow to finish morning tea. She made a few comments to the child about hurrying up, and then she stopped and thought about how the child might be feeling about her obvious frustration and need for a hurried routine that morning. Reflecting in the moment, she remembered that earlier in the morning the children had talked to her about bullying. She wondered whether her frustration led to an interaction that did not reflect a commitment to respectful relationships and responsive engagement with children.

In this example, the educator uses reflection in practice (Practice Principle: Reflective practice) to think about her relationship with a child. The example shows how a daily routine can and should have respect and responsiveness at its centre.

The educator is aware that balancing children's and adults' needs or the needs of individual children and the rest of the group is not always easy. The child's need for a relaxed routine conflicted with the adult's need for the routine to be over quickly.

Professionals often have competing tasks and obligations that require them to prioritise. A challenge for educators in education and care settings – family day care, centre-based settings, playgroups, school classrooms, outside school hours care – is balancing attention given to a particular child while maintaining awareness of what is happening in the group and for other children. An additional challenge for maternal and child health nurses and supported playgroup facilitators is balancing attention to adults on the one hand and children on the other.

Case study

A supported playgroup facilitator said:

"It helps me when I start to feel a tension between focusing my attention on children and on the adults to remember that one of the most important things I can do – probably the most important thing – is to promote a strong and positive relationship between the parent or carer and the child. So it's not one or the other – my focus needs to be on both. What am I doing to support that parent to see him or herself as a 'good' parent and to see his or her child as an amazing human being who is learning all the time? That's what's important."

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement are important in all settings; however, the field of early childhood intervention offers useful insights into the practice principle. Since the 1990s, early childhood intervention has been built on three foundations:

- emphasising children's strengths and abilities
- supporting families' choices and decision-making
- actively developing collaborative and supportive relationships between families and professionals.

These foundations provide a useful framework for thinking about respectful relationships and responsive engagement with all children and in any early childhood setting.

Case study

A supported playgroup included several children with additional needs. The facilitator held an informal interview with each family to find out what outcomes for their children and themselves they hoped for in participating. The parent of one child with a vision impairment said that she wanted more than anything for her child to have a friend and to be invited to a birthday party. She also told the facilitator that the family was very musical, and that her daughter had a keen interest in and enjoyment of music. The playgroup facilitator kept this in mind and decided that although she could not make a friendship happen, she would organise a group birthday party four times a year for all children who had had birthdays in that quarter. She also worked hard to help other children recognise this child's incredible attunement to sounds and music by offering 'guess that sound' games and singing experiences.

The facilitator demonstrated respect and responsiveness by seeking each family's views. Knowing about the child's interest allowed her to respond and identify a strength for this child that could be shared with other children. Highlighting the child's strengths would contribute to the image other children developed of this child with additional needs.

OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY

FROM BIRTH, RELATIONSHIPS ARE AT THE FOUNDATION OF CHILDREN'S CONSTRUCTION OF THEIR IDENTITY... IN ORDER TO FORM A STRONG SENSE OF SELF, CHILDREN NEED TO BUILD SECURE RELATIONSHIPS FIRST WITHIN THEIR FAMILIES AND THEN WITH CARING, ATTENTIVE ADULTS AND OTHER CHILDREN IN THE PLACES THEY SPEND TIME.

(VEYLDF, P. 18)

WHY ARE RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS AND RESPONSIVE ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognises children's right to have their cultural identity, language and values respected (Article 29). The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (2016) describes various professional responsibilities that are based on the Convention. Both the Convention and the Code of Ethics underpin Practice Principle: Respectful relationships and responsive engagement.

Everyone, including children and families in early childhood settings, likes to feel welcomed. Knowing that they are respected and that professionals will listen and respond appropriately has a number of benefits for children and families. Evidence indicates that respectful relationships and responsive engagement:

- are linked to specific learning outcomes that last over time
- contribute to the development of children's identity and sense of self
- promote children's self-regulation
- help children to establish secure attachments
- enable early childhood professionals to build on children's culture, strengths, interests and knowledge to take their learning and development forward
- support shared sustained thinking
- support children to take healthy risks, share their expertise and engage in constructing new meaning and learning with others
- increase family satisfaction.

Reflective questions

Think about your current practices for getting to know a child and family when they enrol or begin participating in your early childhood setting.

- Why is it important that you get to know children and families from the beginning?
- Are relationships considered a priority in your setting? What are some examples that illustrate your answer to that question? What are some steps you can take to give greater priority to relationships with children and families?
- When there are 'gaps' in your knowledge, what do you do and who can help you? What do you do to get to know new children and families?
- How does the physical environment where you work support and encourage respectful relationships and responsive engagement between you and children or between you and families? How could you make the environment more welcoming?

Discussion starter

As relationships and trust build, families tend to share more information.

A Prep teacher said:

“You can’t ask about everything at an intake interview. Once you have a strong relationship, information just flows naturally. Sure, some families are more private than others, but once they know I can be trusted and that I respect them they are more willing to be open and honest with me. When I think about it, I’m like that in my personal life. I don’t share a lot of personal stuff unless I really know and trust someone.”

Consider examples of information that families have shared because of your relationship with them.

Do you think early childhood professionals put too much pressure on families to share information about their lives? How much do we really need to know?

What is important to know and how do we use that knowledge in our interactions with children and their families?

How much do or should professionals share with families and children about their own personal and family lives?

Respectful, responsive relationships support children to take healthy risks, share their expertise and construct new meaning and learning with others (Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).

CHILDREN LEARN IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES. FROM BIRTH TO EIGHT YEARS, CHILDREN CONTINUE TO ESTABLISH LEARNING DISPOSITIONS AND PATTERNS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHERS THAT HAVE A PROFOUND INFLUENCE ON THEIR LEARNING, BEHAVIOUR, MOTIVATION AND CAPACITY FOR BEING CONFIDENT AND INVOLVED LIFE-LONG LEARNERS.

(VEYLDF, P. 21)

WHAT DO RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS AND RESPONSIVE ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement occur when professionals:

- demonstrate cultural competence in their interactions with children and families
- give priority to warm, respectful relationships between professionals and children
- ensure that children experience continuity in their experiences and relationships
- encourage and support children to have respectful relationships with other children and to teach and learn from each other
- interact with children to extend their learning in a variety of ways
- listen and respond to children with full attention.

Below is a discussion of each of these points with examples of respectful relationships and responsive engagement in practice.

Professionals demonstrate cultural competence in their interactions and relationships with children and families

To develop respectful relationships and practise responsive engagement with children and families, early childhood professionals must become familiar with the culture, values and expectations of each family. Understanding children's social, cultural and family backgrounds helps professionals to respond to and support children's learning appropriately.

Culture is not just about ethnicity or race, it is also about the diversity of family lifestyles, structures and ways of being. Building cultural competence is an ongoing process that requires early childhood professionals to also understand their own culture, values and beliefs.

Cultural competence includes:

- being aware of personal culture, values and beliefs
- acknowledging both similarities and differences
- having positive attitudes to differences
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and perspectives
- developing cross-cultural communication skills
- understanding that culture relates to many things.

An important dimension of cultural competence is being supportive of children's and families' use of their home language(s) and recognising the benefits of multilingualism.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS RECOGNISE AND DEEPEN THEIR UNDERSTANDING ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND HOW VALUES AND BELIEFS INFLUENCE THEIR OWN WORLD VIEW
(VEYLDF, P. 11)

PLAY IS ESSENTIAL TO STIMULATE AND INTEGRATE A WIDE RANGE OF CHILDREN'S INTELLECTUAL, PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND CREATIVE ABILITIES.
(VEYLDF, P. 14)

Case study

One early childhood educator talked about her commitment to supporting children to maintain their first or home language. Her centre has a policy of ensuring that one out of two assistants speaks the language of one of the cultural groups in the community. The centre hosts a group for Aboriginal and Somali mothers where the women share different cultural practices such as weaving or painting. The teacher also believes it is important to ask families what they want when planning ways to support them.

Child rearing beliefs and practices vary from family to family and among cultural groups. For example:

- infants are breast fed, bottle fed or weaned at an early age
- breastfeeding ceases only when the children want to stop
- children are raised by the community and responsibility is shared among a number of people
- children make verbal requests for assistance, while in other families, children's requests for assistance are more likely to be communicated non- verbally
- children are encouraged to be independent in feeding or dressing themselves, while other families encourage interdependence and reliance on adults to do these things for children.

In building respectful relationships and responsive engagement, early childhood professionals consider their own professional knowledge and beliefs in relation to those of families. Some elements of early childhood education and care may be unfamiliar to families. For example, the VEYLDF reflects contemporary thinking about pedagogy in early childhood, including the idea that play supports and extends children's learning and development and that adults play a pivotal role in extending this learning. These ideas about play are not universally held and are not part of the experience or expectations of all families. Some families may see play as an activity of little value.

When family childrearing practices, beliefs and values differ from those in the early childhood setting, professionals may be tempted to be critical or judgmental. Through reflection, professionals may become aware of their own feelings and beliefs, consider issues from different perspectives, and become able to work through differences respectfully and find the best resolution.

Reflective questions

- Do you know what families think about the role of play in learning? If not, how could you find out about their understanding of play?
- How do you help families understand the importance of play for children's learning?
- How could you encourage ongoing conversations with families about play and its benefits for children from infancy?
- How could the VEYLDF support your conversations about play?

Warm respectful relationships between professionals and children are a priority

A warm, responsive social and emotional climate is demonstrated by gentle physical contact, laughter and enthusiasm, calm voices and respectful language between early childhood professionals and children, and also among children. Early childhood professionals who are sensitive to children, anticipate problems and plan ahead to prevent them. They acknowledge and respond appropriately to children's emotions, and children seek the support of adults as needed.

Case study

A teacher in a kindergarten with an indoor-outdoor program (a program where there is supervision both indoors and outdoors at the same time) spoke about asking a child to go outside with a child who was not coping with the inside activities that morning. The child was having difficulty regulating their behaviour and the behaviour was disrupting others; however, she knew that he would calm down outside, away from the group. She also knew that the accompanying child not only would be a calming influence but also that he would be pleased to be asked to help. She added that she could not have done this at the beginning of the year before she knew the children well.

Respectful partnerships with professionals are an important aspect of respectful relationships. This is discussed more fully in materials related to Practice Principle: Partnerships with professionals.

Children experience continuity in their experiences and relationships

The younger the child, the greater the importance of continuity of their experiences in the family and early childhood settings. When children's experiences and relationships are consistent and somewhat predictable they learn what to expect, can predict what will happen, and as the new setting and relationships become more familiar, they relax, explore and take risks in their learning.

Continuity is more likely to occur when professionals and families communicate openly. Over time, professionals learn about families and children through conversations and discussions with them.

Discussion starter

In making decisions about how to group children, the main priority in some settings is continuity of relationships for very young children.

Think about what happens in your setting in relation to grouping children.

- To what extent does it take account of the importance of continuity in experiences, expectations and relationships?
- What are the benefits or outcomes when families and children experience continuity of relationships with professionals?

Case study

An educator working with toddlers in a child care centre spoke about the centre's system of 'allocating' new children to a particular educator from the beginning, so that they can form a strong relationship. They are mindful that this relationship acts as a foundation for the child to form relationships with other educators, in much the same way that it happens when family members stay with their child when they first start at the service and help their child form a relationship with an educator.

This example highlights the need for careful planning to ensure that initial relationships are a basis for new ones. Respectful, responsive relationships support children and families through transitions from one context to another, such as from hospital to home or from home to an education and care setting.

Professionals encourage and support children to have respectful relationships with other children and to engage with them in collaborative learning and teaching

Children learn from each other, and group settings offer many opportunities for learning together. Multi-age groups, such as in family day care and Outside School Hours Care afford many opportunities for younger and older children to teach and learn from each other. Educators can have this in mind in setting up environments, encouraging collaboration and encouraging sharing of special talents and interests.

OUTCOME 2: CHILDREN ARE CONNECTED WITH AND CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WORLD

CHILDREN INCREASINGLY ENJOY BEING IN GROUPS AND CONTRIBUTING TO FAMILY AND SOCIAL LIFE FROM BIRTH. CHILDREN WHO ARE STRONGLY CONNECTED TO THEIR WORLD PARTICIPATE IN SHARED EVERYDAY ROUTINES, EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES, AND USE OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTRIBUTE TO DECISIONS.

(VEYLDF, P. 19)

THE TEACHER FOSTERS POSITIVE RELATIONS WITH AND BETWEEN STUDENTS AND DEVELOPS SHARED EXPECTATIONS FOR LEARNING AND INTERACTING

(E5 INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL, P. 21)

Case study

Three eight to ten-year-old boys in an after school care program wanted to spend all their time on the basketball court. The educator didn't discourage this, but when she noticed several younger children spending a lot of time looking on, she asked the older children if they would teach the younger ones to play basketball. This evolved into a project that went on for weeks and included the older boys petitioning the school to put up a lower hoop. Eventually more and more younger children took an interest, resulting in enough children to make up two small teams. The older boys took increasing interest in their roles as teachers, and seemed genuinely proud of the skills the younger children were developing. They recommended to the educator that when spring came they'd like to do the same thing with cricket.

Of course, relationships between children are not always smooth sailing. Many schools use specific programs such as Restorative Justice, Tribes and Circle Time to promote children's capacity to solve relationship and friendship issues without over-reliance on adults. These programs are designed to teach children respectful ways to deal with conflict, as well as to build children's social competence and resilience.

Case study

A primary school that uses the Restorative Justice program has observed that there has been a considerable reduction in the number and level of conflicts in the playground and in the classrooms. Through the program children have learned how to express their strong feelings with words, listen more to what others have to say, rely less on teachers sorting out problems and negotiate between themselves when there are issues with shared resources or with friendships.

Case study

When several children in a kindergarten complained to their educator that they had been waiting for a long time to have a turn on the new swing, she decided to help them resolve the conflict rather than just asking them to find something else to do. She asked the children to think of a fairer way to organise time spent on the swing so that more children could have a turn. The children made a few suggestions, which they discussed with the educator. Their preference was to use a timer that would give everyone time to enjoy the swing without staying on it to the exclusion of others.

Early childhood professionals engage with children in a variety of ways to extend children's learning

They:

- know children in the context of family, culture and community
- build on children's strengths, abilities and interests
- have conversations and interactions with individual children in ways that have meaning for children
- reflect on children's perspectives and discuss those reflections with children
- teach intentionally
- set up learning environments that support children's sustained engagement with materials, each other and adults and that promote collaborative learning.

OUTCOME 5: CHILDREN ARE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

CHILDREN COMMUNICATE FROM BIRTH. MOST CHILDREN ARE INNATELY SOCIAL, CREATIVE AND MOTIVATED TO EXCHANGE IDEAS, THOUGHTS, QUESTIONS AND FEELINGS. THEY BEGIN BY USING GESTURES, MOVEMENT, VISUAL AND NON-VERBAL CUES, SOUNDS, LANGUAGE AND ASSISTED COMMUNICATION TO ENGAGE IN THE WORLD AND FORM RELATIONSHIPS.

(VEYLDF, P. 22)

Case study

A family day care educator described how she adjusts her interactions and actions to the different ways the children respond to new experiences she provides.

"Sometimes I support the child with words, so I might say, 'Ben would you like me to help you this time?' For some children I let them have plenty of time to slowly begin to show interest in something new I have provided and I might tell them 'it's okay just to look first'. There are other children who seem to need me to physically support them by sitting close to them when there are new experiences."

This educator's responses to the different ways young children react to new experiences shows her understanding of the concept of 'responsive engagement' as essential to extending learning. Using words, actions or allowing more time are simple teaching strategies that respond to each child's learning style or disposition. Professionals always have in mind as they engage with children in learning experiences promoting communication skills.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS DEMONSTRATE RESPECT FOR AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE VIEWS OF OTHER PROFESSIONALS AND FAMILIES WHEN COMMUNICATING AND INTERACTING ACROSS CULTURES.

(VEYLDF, P. 11)

Case study

A family day care educator said:

"I love to have babies in care before they are in that stage of first words that aren't even real words – you know, when they use a particular sound over and over to mean something. It takes a while to figure out what the 'word' means, and usually there are lots of conversations with families about this and we try to figure it out together, but it's an amazing time and I love it when we figure it out and can respond to the baby in a way that makes sense. I sometimes wonder if the baby thinks 'Whew, it took a while but they finally got it!'"

There is a clear link with positive relationships between early childhood professionals and children and positive outcomes for children in both prior- to-school and primary school contexts. Research indicates that the quality of this relationship affects both the rate and quality of infants' and toddlers' language development and their trajectory for later language development. Effective communication is possible for all children, including those who have communication disorders or who are learning English as an additional language.

Strategies to support every child to be an effective communicator include:

- encouraging children's communication by paying careful attention, showing interest, giving time and responding in meaningful ways
- encouraging families to maintain the child's first language at home and using words from that language in the early childhood setting
- using assisted communication resources, for example a photo of the child participating in an everyday routine such as hand-washing or getting dressed that can be used to support the child's participation in these routines
- working with early childhood intervention specialists to develop strategies to ensure a child's communication efforts are responded to, recognised and developed.

There are many myths or misconceptions about communicating with babies and toddlers and their unique ways of communicating with others. The table below shows some myths and realities.

A MYTH	THE REALITY
<p>Babies and toddlers should be left to cry when they are new to an early childhood setting as they have to learn to separate from their families.</p>	<p>Separation from their family is usually an emotionally challenging experience for a young child. It can take a long time before a child understands that this loved person will return. Children’s daily transition to an early childhood setting requires very sensitive practices to reassure and comfort them so that they come to understand over time that their family will return and that in the meantime they are safe.</p>
<p>Babies and toddlers should be left to cry and not picked up when they are crying, as they have to learn to amuse themselves.</p>	<p>Crying is a young child’s way of expressing strong feelings related to pain, distress, discomfort or frustration. If adults ignore this signal they place the child at risk of being overwhelmed by these feelings. If that happens often it can lead to significant negative outcomes for a child. Older children who are fearful or distrustful of others, or who have difficulty regulating their emotions in appropriate ways may well have experienced too many early episodes where they were distressed and no one provided comfort and re-assurance. Resilience and social competence develop through experiences of warm, consistent, loving, inclusive and reciprocal relationships rather than through being ignored, neglected or rejected.</p>
<p>Babies and toddlers should be left to cry and not picked up so that they don’t become spoiled.</p>	<p>No babies or toddlers have been spoiled by being comforted when they are distressed. It is a normal human response to comfort another person who is distressed, whether that person is a baby or an adult. Children are social beings. Very young children find adults the most interesting things to look at, play and engage with. Some of the best learning for babies and toddlers happens when another person interacts with them and not when they are left to ‘amuse themselves.’ Educators need to find a balance between playing and interacting with babies and toddlers and allowing them time to explore their environment alone or with other children.</p>
<p>There isn’t much point in talking to very young children, as they cannot talk back or have a conversation and they do not understand what others are saying.</p>	<p>Babies and toddlers do enjoy conversations with others from birth, even though initially they do not understand the words. Young children need to be ‘immersed’ in language every day by the people who care for them. Language immersion is an important factor in supporting children’s development as communicators. The more adults show their enjoyment and interest in talking or communicating with babies and toddlers throughout the day, the more they will ‘talk’ back to the adults through non-verbal ways such as smiles or gestures, later with words and much later in sentences. Singing songs, chanting rhymes or poems, playing finger games, telling stories, sharing books together and having conversations are good ways to immerse babies and toddlers in language.</p>

Early childhood professionals listen and respond to children with their full attention, engaging in 'shared, sustained thinking'

'Shared, sustained thinking' is about working collaboratively with children by sharing ideas to extend their learning. Children become confident, involved learners when their ideas or skills are recognised and encouraged (Outcome 4: children are confident and involved learners).

Educators sustain children's thinking in different ways such as conversations, questions, suggestions, clarifying ideas, or thinking aloud – 'I wonder what would happen if...?' When a family day care educator talked with two children about the cubby house they were building outside, she encouraged and sustained their thinking by asking them questions about spending time in the cubby and how to make it comfortable. The children and the educator talked about what items were needed and where they could find them.

OUTCOME 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

FROM BIRTH, RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE WARM AND SUPPORTIVE ASSIST CHILDREN TO EXPRESS FEELINGS SUCH AS JOY, SADNESS, FRUSTRATION AND FEAR AND TO IDENTIFY AND ACCEPT THEIR OWN AND OTHERS' FEELINGS. ATTACHMENTS

(VEYLDF, P. 20)

Case study

A Grade 1 teacher described the different strategies she uses to sustain children's thinking about and engagement in their learning.

"I used to think that saying to children 'keep going,' 'good boy' or 'well done' was enough to keep them engaged in their learning. Through experience and professional development, I have come to understand that sometimes you need to do or say more in order to deepen children's learning. I will sit with children and tune into what they are doing and then ask questions that require them to think about what they are doing or learning. I find open questions such as 'I wonder why you have...' help to clarify their thinking and keep them motivated. Mind you, this has to be done carefully as too many questions can interrupt the thinking processes. Sustaining meaningful conversations with children supports a shared approach to learning as we solve problems together or create new understandings about something."

Reflective questions

- If you filmed your interactions with children over a day or a week, would there be significant time spent in meaningful conversations with children? If not, how could you change your practice to allow for those types of interaction?
- How do you use questions to motivate children to think about their learning?
- How could the concept of sustained shared thinking support improved learning outcomes for children in your setting?

Discussion starter

Read the information in the following table and think about what actions you would plan for the blank boxes.

Reflect on the questions and add your own examples and action plans that would help support improvement in this aspect of your practice.

In planning your actions, think about who or what might help improve this aspect of your practice as well as what you could do as an individual.

QUESTION	PRACTICE	ACTION TO IMPROVE
<p>Do I/we really listen to children? How do I/we know?</p>	<p>Educator: Sometimes at the end of the day I can't recall any meaningful conversations with individual children.</p>	<p>I am going to try 'on the couch time' which I heard about. It means spending 15 minutes each day sitting on the couch and inviting a couple of children to join me for an informal conversation.</p>
<p>Do I/we really listen to families? How do I/we know?</p>	<p>MCH nurse: Occasionally when I am rushed, I partly tune out to what a parent or family member is telling me and just focus on the baby and the examination.</p>	<p>I think I need to allow longer for some visits so that there is time to listen carefully to what a parent is telling me. I could re-organise the appointment schedule to help this. I will check with other nurses how they manage the need to have time to really listen to families.</p>
<p>Do I/we respond respectfully to each child's unique ways of communicating? How do I/we know?</p>	<p>Educator: A student mentioned recently that she had noticed that Cassie always thumps the high chair tray when she wants to 'tell us' something or when she means 'yes'. I hadn't noticed that with all the busyness that is going on at lunchtime. I wonder if there are others I haven't noticed or heard?</p>	<p>I plan to...</p>
<p>Do I/we respond respectfully to families whose first language is not English? How do I/we know?</p>	<p>Teacher: I have found it difficult to share information about children's learning with CALD families during the end of the term interviews. Sometimes these families don't come to the interviews.</p>	<p>I could...</p>
<p>Do I/we provide learning experiences that are responsive to each child's culture, strengths, abilities and interests? How do I/we know?</p>	<p>Teacher: I try to respond to the children's different ways of learning by providing a range of ways they can tell or show me what they know or can do. Not sure if I am responding to each child's cultural background.</p>	<p>I need to...</p>

CONCLUSION

Relationships with both children and families are the fundamental basis for effective teaching and learning. Professionals who recognise this appreciate the contribution they make and engage in practices that give priority to them. Responsive engagement takes many forms and is both a characteristic of respectful relationships and a contributor to them.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Birckmayer, J., Kennedy, A. and Stonehouse, A. (2008). *From lullabies to literature*. 1st ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Circle Time: www.circle-time.co.uk

Clark P. (2009). *Supporting Children Learning English as a Second Language in the Early Years (birth to six years)*. Melbourne: State of Victoria (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority).

http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EY_ESL_Paper.pdf

Cohrssen, C., Church, A., & Tayler, C. (2011), *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework Evidence Paper, Practice Principle 5: Respectful Relationships and Responsive Engagement*. East Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development).

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/respectrelns.pdf>

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2007), *Maternal and Child Health Nurse Reflective Practice*. East Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/support/all.pdf>

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009), *Effective Schools Are Engaging Schools*. East Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development).

<https://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/stuman/wellbeing/segpolicy.pdf>

Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australia Governments. (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: early years learning framework for Australia*. Canberra: Australia Government.

www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/PolicyAgenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx

Department of Education and Training and Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. (2016). *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For All Children from Birth to Eight Years*. East Melbourne, VIC: State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training).

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veyldframework.pdf>

Early Childhood Australia (2016), *Code of Ethics*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia

<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/eca-code-ethics/>

Education.vic.gov.au (2009). *e5 Instructional Model* [online] Available at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/Pages/e5.aspx>. [Accessed 3 March 2017]

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/Pages/e5.aspx>

Fuse.education.vic.gov.au. (2015). *VEYLDF Modules - FUSE - Department of Education & Training*. [online] Available at: <https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Search/Results?AssociatedPackageId=&QueryText=veyldf&SearchScope=All> [Accessed 28 Feb. 2017].

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Search/Results?AssociatedPackageld=&QueryText=veyldf&SearchScope=All>

Tribes Learning Community: www.tribes.com

United Nations (1989), *The Convention on the Rights of the Child*. UNICEF, New York.

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

Whalley, M. (2010). *Involving parents in their children's learning*. 1st ed. Los Angeles CA: Sage.

Wellbeing Australia: Restorative Practice in Schools:

http://wellbeingaustralia.com.au/wba/restorative_practices/

