Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Evidence Paper

Practice Principle 5:
Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

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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 (Practice Principles). 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.

Practice Principle 5: Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

Executive Summary

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework is for *all* children in Victoria. *Respectful relationships and responsive engagement* is one of the eight Practice Principles for Learning and Development of the Victorian Framework, and underpins effective practice in early childhood. This evidence paper presents the research to support this practice principle.

Research has found that close relationships between early childhood professionals and young children actively support children's learning and development (see for example Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, Bryant, Clifford & Barbarin, 2008). Warm and trusting relationships with familiar adults enable children to form secure attachments to early childhood professionals, providing a secure base from which to take risks and explore their environment (Rolfe, 2004).

Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations 1989) describes children's right to have their cultural identity, language and values respected – whether these values relate to the country in which the child is living or to the country from which the child may originate. The Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (2006) describes various professional responsibilities which are based on the UNCRC. Both the UNCRC and the ECA Code of Ethics underpin this practice principle which is pivotal to professional practice in early childhood education and care. Close relationships enable early childhood professionals to better understand individual children and their broader cultural contexts, which enable them to respond sensitively and appropriately to their individual needs (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008).

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

- Early childhood professionals develop and maintain respectful relationships and responsive engagement with children and their families.

- Early childhood professionals develop warm, respectful relationships which provide a secure base, giving children confidence to explore and learn.

- Early childhood professionals develop an understanding of the broader context for each child. This enables them to develop learning programs that are responsive to each child and engage in conversations that are authentic and relevant to the child.

- Early childhood professionals create a culture of critical reflection, to understand the impact of their values and opinions on others; and to find effective ways to incorporate values and cultures of the community into their program.

Introduction

When early childhood professionals develop respectful relationships with children and their families, they find out more about children's interests, skills and abilities. This knowledge enables early childhood professionals to provide learning environments that respond to children's interests and needs, extend their learning and support their development. Early childhood professionals are encouraged to develop respectful relationships and engage responsively with children and families. The Victorian Framework states that:

> 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:
>
> - initiate warm, trusting and reciprocal relationships with children
>
> - provide safe and stimulating environments for children
>
> - develop learning programs that are responsive to each child and build on their culture strengths and knowledge to take their learning and development forward
>
> - understand, communicate and interact across cultures by being aware of their own world view
>
> - respect the views and feelings of each child.
>
> VEYLDF, p.11

This evidence paper presents the research supporting Practice Principle 5: Respectful relationships and responsive engagement. This principle emphasises the importance of relationships between early childhood professionals, children and families that are sensitive and supportive. All children and families benefit from feeling welcome and valued in their early childhood settings, and this can be achieved when early childhood professionals make time to find out about children's and families' opinions with a genuine interest.

Getting to know families makes it possible for early childhood professionals to provide authentic play activities and to have relevant conversations with children (Joseph & Strain, 2004). Parents' satisfaction with early childhood settings has been found to be linked with the sense that they (as parents) were

trusted and could trust in return, and that they would be listened to and treated with respect (Goodfellow, 2008).

What do we mean by 'respectful relationships and responsive engagement'?

"Respectful" means courteous, considerate and well-mannered. Developing and maintaining *respectful relationships* requires an early childhood professional to understand the values of each family and to be courteous and considerate in relationships with children and their families, and to understand that the values of families may differ from the values of the early childhood professional.

At the same time, early childhood professionals need to engage *responsively* with both children and their families in order to get to know them: this requires conversations, discussions, prompt and positive reactions. Each of these ideas implies action and *inter*action. Responsive engagement with families is built upon a platform of respectful relationships, so that relationships of mutual trust can be developed. A responsive early childhood professional should be sensitive to children's uniqueness, providing learning experiences that are guided by children's interests, support social, emotional and cognitive development, and which sustain children's innate desire to learn (Lally & Mangione, 2006).

> • 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. (VEYLDF, p. 11)

Respectful relationships are as important in mainstream settings as they are in settings that specifically support children with developmental delays and disabilities. Since the 1990s, the field of early intervention with young children with disabilities has been built on three foundation stones: emphasis on children's strengths and abilities, supporting families' choices and decision-making, and actively developing relationships between families and professionals which are collaborative and supportive (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). These foundation stones are also the basis on which respectful relationships and responsive engagement are built – for *all* children – and provide a useful framework for thinking about developing and enacting respectful relationships in all early childhood education and care settings.

Responsive engagement with children

Attuned engagement between an adult and a child is a key feature of a responsive relationship. When an early childhood professional is attentive when interacting with children, the nature of the engagement could be described as "a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 265).

Another way of describing close responsive engagement between an early childhood professional and a child is to describe the early childhood professional's "caring presence". The concept of "caring presence" comes from nursing and focuses on the "heart and soul of professional practice" (Goodfellow, 2008). 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. Gallagher & Mayer refer to the "delicate dance in which learning emerges in the context of the teacher-child relationship" (2008, p. 81). Throughout the early years, learning takes place in the context of relationships; the relationship between a teacher and a child may have a special influence on children's development:

> From a child's perspective, positive relationships with teachers may protect against the poor school performance associated with an unsupportive home environment (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). For example, in a sample of maltreated and non-maltreated children, Lynch and Cicchetti (1992) concluded that as a result of their experience with parents, maltreated children may express a greater desire for closeness to non-parental adults compared with non-maltreated children. Just as teachers are likely to put more effort into children with whom they have a positive relationship, children who trust and like teachers may be more motivated to succeed. (Hamre and Pianta, 2001, p. 626).

Respectful relationships with families

Interactions between children and early childhood professionals are the point at which professionals intersect with children's families and communities, and cultures that may differ from their own.

In order to enjoy respectful relationships and responsive engagement, it is important to understand the family culture. Becoming culturally responsive is an on-going process that requires an early childhood professional to understand his or her own culture as well; to recognise the similarities and the differences between them (Howrey & Whelan-Kim, 2009).

"Cultural differences" are more than ethnic differences. It describes more than speaking different languages, or dressing differently. Within groups of people who share a national background or a language there may still be many differences. Every family has its own understanding and practices of culture. When it comes to raising children, differences abound. Few parents have raised their own children in precisely the same way that they were raised themselves – in this way, society evolves. If early childhood professionals are to develop respectful relationships and practise responsive engagement with children and families they must become familiar with the values and expectations of each family, in order to respond appropriately to the culture of that particular family and that particular child.

This deeper understanding of one's own culture compared with another requires on-going critical reflection, and cultural understanding (of oneself) is necessary before cultural understanding of others can be addressed (Barrera & Corso, 2003).

> • Early childhood professionals understand, communicate and interact across cultures by being aware of their own world view. (VEYLDF, p. 11)

Breastfeeding is an example where a range of cultural practices and values exist (Barrera & Corso, 2003). In some cultures, infants are bottle-fed, or weaned at an early age; in others, breastfeeding ceases only when the children "want to stop" (Townsend-Cross, 2004). Children's play is also viewed and valued differently in a range of contexts (Fleer, 1999). Townsend-Cross (2004) describes how non-Aboriginal children are typically encouraged to play with certain toys in certain ways and at certain times, whereas Aboriginal children are encouraged to play freely and creatively with whatever resources are available to them.

In some cultures, children are raised by the community and "shared responsibility for care of infants does not seem to get in the way of close attachment to mothers" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 115-6). Comparing social practices across different communities emphasises the need for attuned and responsive interactions with children. For example, one study found that whilst some children make verbal requests for assistance in their classroom, other children's requests for assistance are communicated non-verbally (Rogoff, 2003). Another case study of four preschool children showed that they each employed a range of techniques to communicate ideas including using words, gaze, body movement, and facial expressions (Flewitt, 2005). By providing environments that offer children many ways to express meaning, educators increase opportunities for children's voices to be heard and valued. Understanding the nuances of children's culture enables the professional to provide responsive and appropriate support for children's learning.

Cultural differences are not necessarily attributed to ethnicity-determined social constructs of childhood. For example, comparative studies of play across several countries found that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds play very little and many do not participate in socio-dramatic play (Smilansky, 1968).

The early childhood professional who engages in respectful relationships and responsive engagement will be aware that some elements of early childhood care and education may be unfamiliar to some children and their families. An example of this is the philosophy of play-based learning.

> • Play is essential for its ability to stimulate and integrate a wide range of children's intellectual, physical, social and creative abilities. Active engagement with, and attunement to children in their play extends and supports their learning. Shared, sustained conversations are also a powerful and important feature of active adult engagement. (VEYLDF, p. 12)

This statement reflects current pedagogy; that play facilitates, supports and extends children's learning and development, and that adults play a pivotal role in extending this learning. Yet Fleer (1999) reminds us that we cannot assume that these theories of play are necessarily relevant to or part of the experience or expectations of all families and their children. In building respectful relationships and responsive engagement, the early childhood professional considers her or his professional knowledge of learning and development in light of each child's cultural knowledge.

Why are respectful relationships and responsive engagement important for children's learning and development and for effective teaching?

Studies have found that close relationships between early childhood professionals and young children actively support children's learning and development (see for example Howes, Burchinal, Pianta, Bryant, Clifford & Barbarin, 2008). Various longitudinal studies have demonstrated the significant difference that early intervention can make in children's long-term trajectory (e.g. Ramey, Bryant, Wasik, Sparling, Fendt & LaVange, 1992) and the importance of established relationships for the effectiveness of this intervention.

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement have been linked with specific learning outcomes that last over time

A clear link has been established between positive early childhood professional-child relationships and positive outcomes for children in both preschool and

primary school contexts (Thomason & La Paro, 2009; Pianta, 1997). The quality of the relationship between early childhood professional and child has been shown to impact on the "rate and quality of language development for infants and toddlers" (Thomason & La Paro, 2009, citing Burchinal, Roberts, Nabors & Bryant, 1996; NICHD, 2002). An adult's caregiving relationship with a child has also been shown to impact on motor activity, motor control and social conforming behaviour, such as greetings (Kopp & Wyer, 1994).

> Teachers are involved in the regulation of activity level, communication and contact with peers, the formation of friendships, and self-image. Parents and teachers also teach. They are nearly continuously involved in interactions with children designed to impart knowledge, improve skills, and enhance competences with respect to academic performance (Pianta, 1997, p. 19).

Warm and respectful relationships promote children's self-regulation and self-identity

The presence of a familiar, non-parental caregiver reduces the stress which children feel when separating from a parent (Marty et al, 2005). In fact, emotion regulation is an important by-product of early childhood professionals' respectful relationships and responsive engagement with children and their families (eg Greenberg et al, 1993; Hofer, 1994). In this way, patterns of interaction affect children's relationships with members of their peer group (Pianta, 1997). As children develop, they experience, interpret and regulate emotions in culture-specific ways, whilst simultaneously establishing the emotions as part of a response repertoire (Thompson, 1994). Emotion regulation involves self-regulation strategies but frequently relies on the assistance of a responsive early childhood professional.

A child's sense of self develops in a social context and is also supported through responsive relationships with familiar adults:

> The self emerges from how others respond to us and relate to us during the early years. Put simply, from an attachment perspective the child only becomes truly human through interactions and relationships. Without human relationships there is neither opportunity to form a sense of self nor consciousness of that self (Rolfe, 2004, p. 41).

Warm and respectful relationships help children to establish secure attachments

From birth, warm and trusting relationships with familiar adults are important for children to learn and develop. According to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, infants are social beings biologically dependent upon the care of sensitive

and responsive caregivers. "Signalling behaviours" in the infant bring the caregiver close (Rolfe, 2004), and a child's sense of trust emerges from the sensitive attunement of a nurturing caregiver-child dyad, which provide a secure basis from which the child may explore the environment. Children's emerging sense of self develops as they experience the ways in which other people relate to them, and as they observe their own impact on other people. Gradually, an internal working model develops which influences children's perceptions, expectations, and responses to the world and the events that take place in it (Rolfe, 2004).

Children develop attachment relationships with non-parental caregivers (such as early childhood professionals) in much the same way that they develop attachment relationships with a parent (Marty, Readdick & Walters, 2005). Early childhood professionals have a duty to responsively engage the children in their care so that children develop secure attachments to the early childhood professional. Secure attachments make children feel safe, and this feeling of safety is a strong base from which children can explore the world and learn from each new experience.

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement enable early childhood professionals to build on children's culture, strengths, interests and knowledge to take their learning and development forward

Early childhood professionals are able to develop a greater understanding of the broader context for each child when they develop respectful relationships with children and their families. By knowing each child, the abilities and their interests early childhood professionals are able to respond sensitively and appropriately to each child (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008) and can provide opportunities that extend children's learning.

Vygotsky (1978) theorised that children's learning is extended when they are engaged with activities that are a little too difficult to manage alone, but when supported by a more knowledgeable person (a peer, a family member or a professional educator), who prompts, asks questions, or maintains the child's interest, the level of difficulty is kept at a manageable level and the child is successful at completing the task (Berk, 2009). Knowing each child enables professionals to engage in this zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and to provide the right level of challenge and support to extend each child's learning.

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement support sustained shared thinking

Sustained shared thinking is an interaction which "involves an adult being aware of the child's interests and understandings, and involves the adult and the child

interacting together to develop an idea or skill" (Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons & Melhuish, 2008, p. 29). It has been linked to improved cognitive outcomes for children (Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons & Melhuish, 2008; see also the Evidence Paper for *Practice Principle 6: Integrated teaching and learning approaches* for a more detailed discussion of interactions for learning.).

Early childhood professionals who are sensitive and responsive to children's cues are better able to engage in sustained shared thinking and are able to assess what type of assistance children need, if any, and ensure their responses are accordingly child-centred (Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2003). Sustained shared thinking underpins a range of techniques used in teaching young children, such as co-constructing understanding, philosophising, and scaffolding their learning, amongst others (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004).

How can we achieve best practice?

Children receive consistent care within their early childhood setting

Consistency of care is important in promoting responsive relationships with children, and in supporting children to develop trusting relationships with adults in early childhood settings. "Constancy means being able to rely on the same group of people being around most of the time, and continuity of experience for birth to three-year-olds depends on practitioners and parents/carers sharing the care of the children effectively" (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 47). Through a consistent experience, children quickly understand what to expect and predict and as the new setting and relationships become more familiar, are able to relax, explore and take risks in their learning.

A culture of reflection within an early childhood setting supports professionals to become more responsive to children's culture.

When family practices differ from the philosophy of the early childhood setting, the professional may be tempted to criticise the family or their practice. A critical approach is not an effective approach for professionals who aim to develop respectful relationships and practise responsive engagement with children and families. Barrera & Corso (2003) suggest that applying a third space philosophy by reframing such differences as *complementary* rather than contradictory – as different points along a continuum – enables the early childhood professional to approach situations from the perspective of finding middle ground.

A culture of reflective practice can help professionals reframe cultural differences, applying a third space philosophy. Colmer (2008) describes the need for a participative management style in early childhood settings and for team leaders to support their team members in reflective practice. Each team member needs to be aware of their own feelings and beliefs, and should also be sufficiently confident to reflect on beliefs or to have them questioned by colleagues, in order for the team as a whole to evaluate the service offered to children and families on an on-going basis (see the Evidence Paper *Practice Principle 8: Reflective Practice*).

Early childhood professionals share information about children's learning with the child's family and listen to each family's values, views and opinions

Respectful relationships and responsive engagement must be considered in terms of relationships and engagement with families, and not just the children attending the early childhood centre. However, there are some practical reasons why it can be difficult for these relationships to be established. One study in the US found that conversations between parents and early childhood professionals in early childhood settings were friendly, but brief, lasting on average as little as 27 seconds (Schupancer, 1998). Most conversations occur at drop-off and pick-up times, and are likely to focus (quite superficially) on the children.

MacNaughton (2008) recognises that it can be difficult to build positive relationships with parents, but asserts that this can be achieved if early childhood professionals make time to seek out and pay attention to parents' and families' opinions with a genuine interest. She advocates a family-centred approach to building respectful relationships with families, and suggests that this assists the early childhood professional to take a collaborative approach to understanding the child and the child's abilities (MacNaughton, 2008).

Getting to know families enables the early childhood professional to make children's play authentic and the conversations relevant (Joseph & Strain, 2004), taking into account the fact that "play" and "play-based learning", on which the VEYLDF is based, may be unfamiliar constructs for some families. By extension, the families are then involved in setting the values and the goals of the early childhood centre. Goodfellow (2008) found that parents' satisfaction with an early childhood setting was linked to the sense that they were trusted (as parents) and could trust in return, and that they would be listened to and treated with respect by non-judgmental early childhood professionals.

Early childhood professionals recognise the diversity of the Australian community

In a multicultural society, it is essential for early childhood professionals to develop and sustain caring and reciprocal relationships with all children in their care, mindful of the needs of individual children in order to ensure that each child's agency and emerging competencies are recognised and supported (Bandura, 2001). Importantly, this includes responsiveness to children's home language(s) and recognising the benefits of multilingualism (Clark, 2009).

A warm, responsive emotional climate is demonstrated by close physical proximity, matched affect, laughter and enthusiasm, calm voices and respectful language – between the early childhood professional and the child, and the child and other children (Pianta et al, 2008). Early childhood professionals who are sensitive to the needs of the children in their group anticipate problems and plan proactively. They acknowledge and respond appropriately to children's emotions, and children are seen to seek the support of the early childhood professional as needed.

This style of early childhood professional-child interaction is important when working with *every* child. For example, Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth & Nelms (2004) describe a clear shift from a notion of inclusion as including children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, to a broader sense of inclusion as promoting "tolerance, acceptance of difference" and "creating a sense of belonging" for all children.

Colmer (2008) points out that sustaining attachment relationships with the children in their care is demanding work for an early childhood professional. However, children's learning and development are driven by respectful relationships and responsive engagement:

- 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. (VEYLDF, p. 11)

What are the implications for achieving best outcomes for children?

1. Early childhood professionals develop and maintain respectful relationships and responsive engagement with children and their families.

> Knowing each child's interests, abilities and experiences is essential to building respectful relationships with children, their families and communities. Respectful relationships and knowledge of children and their families are necessary to establish responsive engagement, and to be able to respond effectively to the needs of each child.

2. Early childhood professionals develop warm, respectful relationships which provide a secure base, giving children confidence to explore and learn.

> Attached relationships with early childhood professionals have similar influence on children's outcomes as attached relationships with parents: supportive relationships allow children the security to try new things and to develop a sense of confidence, which encourages learning.

3. Early childhood professionals develop an understanding of the broader context for each child. This enables them to develop learning programs that are responsive to each child and engage in conversations that are authentic and relevant to the child.

> Responsive engagement requires attuned interactions with children and knowing each child; not only respecting their interests and abilities but listening to children, engaging in attentive and extended discussions (i.e. sustained shared thinking) which build on the contributions made by children.

4. Early childhood professionals create a culture of critical reflection, to understand the impact of their values and opinions on others; and to find effective ways to incorporate values and cultures of the community into their program

> In order to create, practice and sustain respectful relationships, and thereby foster responsive engagement, early childhood professionals need to continually reflect on their own practices, and how these practices allow children and their families to engage in learning.

Methodology

To begin with, an online database search was carried out for current literature using the following search terms;

- respectful relationships
- respectful practice
- responsive engagement
- teacher-student relationships
- teacher characteristics
- classroom characteristics
- teacher-child reciprocal relationships
- emotional support
- responsive programs
- cultural inclusion
- cultural diversity

Search results were refined by selecting articles that focused on the early years from birth to 8.

The University of Melbourne's online databases were viewed using "Supersearch". This provided a wide selection of electronic journals, scholarly databases, theses and government reports, locally, nationally and internationally, with a particular focus on those abstracts identifying a specific Australian context or a focus on the early years. Only on-line, peer reviewed journal articles and literature published in the last 20 years have been considered, however when journal articles cited references relevant to the topic, these references were also investigated. Also, longitudinal studies and theories of early childhood education were explored.

The databases searched were

A+ Education (Informit)

Academic Search Premier (EBSCO)

ERIC (CSA)

Web of Science (ISI)

JSTOR

Family & Society Plus Text (Informit)

PsycINFO (CSA)

Web of Science (ISI)

Wiley Interscience Journals

Finally, the following publications were included for their direct influence on Australian early years' policy and practice:

- MacNaughton, G. *Shaping Early Childhood; Learners, Curriculum and Contexts* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2009). *Preschool Attendance*. ABS, Canberra.

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