



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Relationships with children

Setting the scene

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) highlights educators' relationships with children as central to supporting their learning. Principle 1 in the EYLF is about secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships.

Quality Area 5 in the *National Quality Standard* (NQS): Relationships with children (ACECQA, 2011) focuses on two related areas: educators developing and maintaining respectful and equitable relationships with each child (Standard 5.1); and educators supporting children to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults (Standard 5.2).



Why do educator–child relationships matter?

Educator–child relationships:

- help children feel secure, which frees them to explore, play and learn
- contribute to children's sense of identity
- offer opportunities for children to learn how to interact with others: respect others' rights, be appropriately assertive, show caring, negotiate and resolve conflicts
- enable effective teaching and learning.

Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity – 'who I am', 'how I belong' and 'what is my influence?' (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009, p. 20).



Practices that build and strengthen relationships

The philosophy of each service needs to give priority to educators' relationships with children. This priority has direct implications for policies and practices.

Giving priority to relationships is reflected in practices such as:

Staffing

Some centres have a system in which each educator takes the main responsibility for several children, communicates with their families and becomes very knowledgeable about those children. This system is built into family day care! Other centres have a more informal arrangement that ensures that over time all educators come to know every child well.

Minimising the number of different educators who work with children—especially very young children—supports relationship building. It takes time to build relationships, so having at least a core of educators who are with the children over a long period of time acknowledges the importance of relationships.

'Settling in' and transitions

Having one educator develop a strong relationship with a child when they begin to attend the setting provides a strong foundation for the child to build subsequent relationships.

When a family member stays to help a child settle in and the child experiences the trusted family member interacting with an educator, the child and educator begin to form a relationship.

When children move to another group in a centre, it is crucial to help them foster relationships with the new educators before they move.

Example 1:

Rukmini, a centre director, shared a story about a child's early experience in her centre:

We prioritise strong, secure relationships between children and adults, and consistent individualised practices. Educators are attuned and responsive to children's cues.

Mali, whose family is from Malaysia, started attending our centre recently. Her parents were worried about her settling, as it had taken a long time at her previous centre.

Her mother occasionally wore a headscarf (hijab). Runa, one of the educators, also wore a headscarf. Mali developed a very strong attachment to this educator. We discussed this and decided that it was important to foster this attachment at the start to help her feel safe and secure. One morning the mother brought in a headscarf for Mali to wear. She had told her mother that she wanted to 'look like Runa'. We think the similarity between her mother's appearance and Runa's helped her feel secure.

We try to be flexible and to respect children's preferences as we consider what is best for them and how we can achieve our aim of every child feeling comfortable and secure in their relationships with educators.

We have discussed the possibility of putting in place a primary caregiving system and will discuss it again as part of our Quality Improvement Plan.

Sometimes children and educators naturally gravitate to each other because of personality, cultural background, shared home language, or temperament. Sometimes, just as in our personal relationships as adults, there's a deep connection that is difficult to pin down. We encourage those relationships and monitor and reflect on them to make sure they are positive for children.



Everyday 'all-the-time' practices

Just as is true in our lives, children's relationships build and grow stronger over time through everyday encounters. Practices that promote relationships include:

- showing warmth and welcome: demonstrating to children that you are happy to see them, sharing a laugh with them
- respecting each child's uniqueness and communicating that respect to the child
- actively looking for each child's strengths and sharing your appreciation of those with the child, the child's family and colleagues
- showing children that you know them well, for example by helping them to identify their feelings and offering needed help and support to deal with feelings
- creating and taking full advantage of one-on-one times, even brief ones, with each child
- trying hard to understand children's communication—verbal and non-verbal—and responding appropriately
- responding respectfully and authentically to encourage children to ask questions and share their thoughts
- remembering something a child told you and mentioning it later
- keeping promises
- being available, accessible and interested—for example, sitting nearby, watching and listening
- encouraging independence while communicating that you are available to help
- helping children to form relationships with children and other educators
- showing children you understand that learning to relate to and interact with other children and manage behaviour is hard
- looking behind their behaviour to try to figure out what it means.



Example 2:

Janani, a family day care educator, spoke about how she prioritises relationships in her interactions with children:

Building a strong positive relationship with each child is what matters most. I know that if they trust me and feel happy and secure with me then they will learn with me. My relationship creates a situation where children pay attention to what I do and say—and so they learn about themselves and about how to get along with other people. I know that showing that I value them contributes to their sense of identity and also teaches them about how to interact with others. Children learn so much from the words and behaviour of people they have relationships with!

I always acknowledge children's efforts by saying things like 'Thank you,' 'You have been helpful,' 'You have worked really hard' and by asking them how they feel about what they have done. I will often say things like 'Your mum and dad are going to be thrilled' or 'I am very proud of you.'

I treat each child as an individual. I know, for example, that some children want and need a lot of physical affection and close contact with me, while others need and enjoy my attention but don't want so much physical closeness. By tailoring my interactions and relationships to each child, I show respect and let them know that I know them really well and accept them for who they are.



Conclusion

If we need convincing about the significance of relationships in children's lives, we need only to reflect on the importance of relationships in our own lives and learning.

Ann, an educator who works with children with disability, spoke about forming relationships with children with autism. What she said applies to all children:

Establishing strong relationships is especially important with children with autism. They often find relating to others challenging—it doesn't come naturally.

I work with the idea that each child needs to feel that they're the most important person in the program. I always greet every child warmly, and I 'park' any negative feelings I might have about the challenges a child may present.

I ask myself 'When will this child allow me to play beside her?' I spend a lot of time sitting near them and wondering—wondering what's happening, what they're thinking and feeling, what their understanding of the situation or experience is. I try to never assume or force a relationship. As they become more familiar with me and I with them, and as they come to understand that I respect them and they can trust me, a relationship develops. The relationship comes from give and take, but I try as much as possible to wait for the child to invite the relationship.

With the help of families, I find strengths and interests and engage with the child on the basis of those. I use those interests as intentional teaching opportunities to support engagement with me, to make requests of the child and to encourage the child to play alongside others. Adding humour and having fun together are vital to relationship building.

Sometimes I am very direct. For example, a child was having difficulty trying to get a bike around a corner. He was screaming to express his frustration. I told him to say 'Help, Ann' and he did. He needed to learn that he could get help and how to ask for it appropriately.

I have to relate using all forms of communication to get the message across. I use words, of course, but also facial expressions and body language. Teaching children both to read others' feelings and how to express feelings is so important.

The other day a child said to me 'He's my friend—I hit him'. He didn't know appropriate ways to interact with a friend. I teach empathy by helping children learn about the impact of their behaviour on others.

The key I think is wondering, not assuming.

When I consciously try to take the child's viewpoint, I always end up with a better understanding of the challenges they're facing.

The first time a child comes in and says 'Hello Ann' I'm blown away, because I know how hard it is for that child to get to that point.

Reflecting on the examples provided, you might like to review:

- how you and your colleagues establish and strengthen relationships with children
- how those relationships contribute to children's learning
- how you can become more aware of practices that strengthen relationships
- evidence in your setting that might be relevant for NQS assessment
- ways to improve practice in this Quality Area.

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References and resources

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Biography

Anne Stonehouse lives in Melbourne and is a consultant in early childhood. She was a member of the consortium that developed the national *Early Years Learning Framework*.

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