reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION • SPRING 2013 • ISSUE 52

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The opinions expressed in *Reflections* are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of Gowrie Australia. By publishing diverse opinions we aim to encourage critical reflection and motivate practitioners in Early Childhood Education and Care Services to respond. Gowrie Australia's privacy policy precludes the use of children's names. Fictitious names are substituted.

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editorial

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the Spring issue of *Reflections* with a strong theme of wellbeing and mental health. Professor Laevers and Bart Declercq's article highlights research that indicates the focus on emotional wellbeing and involvement strongly supports competence development in young children.

The now regular *Voice of the Educator* article shares one meaning of wellbeing in a very practical way with examples of how this occurs in everyday practice at the il nido Children's Centre in South Australia.

A Clinical Nurse Specialist from West Australia raises the important role played by parenting groups, playgroups and Early Childhood Education and Care services in assisting relocated families and new parents integrate into the local community. The article highlights studies that indicate the less social support for women in these situations, the higher potential of perinatal depression and anxiety, which also translates into some child behaviour problems.

The findings of the study referred to in the article, certainly supports the Kidsmatter Early Childhood initiative - a program which is partnering with many Early Childhood Education and Care services around Australia to support improved mental health and wellbeing for children.

The article by London early childhood consultant, Tim Gill, raises the debate of risk and resilience. The challenge of balancing the risks so that children benefit in positive ways and become increasingly resilient is an ongoing dilemma for educators with the fear of child injuries, blame and potential litigation weighing heavily on minds. Yet for children the thrill of defying gravity (and the rules), freedom and the challenge of new adventures are at the forefront of their minds.
As stated in the article, the National Quality Standard gives guidance to a thoughtful and balanced approach to risk and challenge where children are encouraged to explore, experiment and take appropriate risks in their learning.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) article shares the early information on how the National Quality Framework is working across the nation, and identifies the areas proving to be more challenging and those more commonly being met by services. As more services undergo the rating and assessment process, stronger conclusions will be drawn to support new areas for inquiry and research.

Finally, Gowrie Australia commissioned a position paper to articulate to candidates in the 2013 Federal Election the *not negotiables* for the education and care sector in Australia. The message is simple – uphold the reform agenda and continue support for the strengthening of young children's learning and development in Early Childhood Education and Care. The gains made must not be lost, and more can and must be done as it is an investment in Australia's future.

Regardless of the outcome of the election … which party is leading the country, who is the Prime Minister and who is the Minister for whatever the portfolio is named ... the need remains to show the strong leadership and direction that is essential to place children at the centre, and for this country to be recognised as a true leader internationally.

Until next time,

Ros Cornish
on behalf of Gowrie Australia

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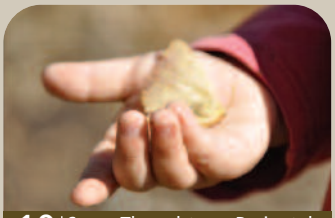
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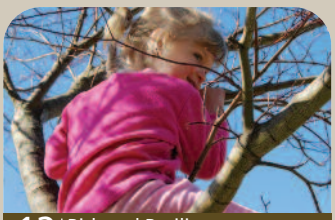
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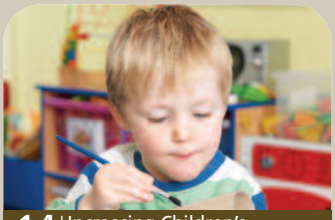
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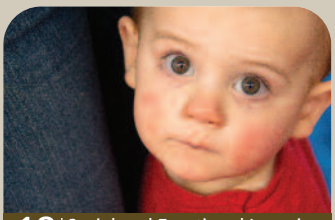
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On behalf of Gowrie CEOs

Gowrie Australia's Position on Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

With the Federal election due in 2013, Gowrie Australia commissioned Associate Professor and Principal Research Fellow, Faculty of Education, Australian Catholic University, Dr Joce Nuttall to develop a *Message to Candidates for the 2013 Federal Election*. Dr Nuttall advocates for all political parties to continue to fund programs in support of the early childhood education and care sector and, based on Dr Nuttall's work, the following article sets out Gowrie's key goal (below) and supporting beliefs and motivations.

The strengthening of young children's learning and development in early childhood education and care is an investment in Australia's progress toward genuine social inclusion, in building workforce capacity, and in international competitiveness – now and in the future.

Gowrie Australia urges Australia's political parties to commit to upholding the reform agenda outlined by the Labour Government and which built on work undertaken by the previous Coalition Government.

This agenda is based on sound international evidence from research and practice. It aims to:

- Dramatically strengthen young children's learning and development in early childhood education and care.
- Raise the qualifications and competence of Australia's early childhood education workforce.
- Provide positive and inclusive services for Indigenous families, refugee and migrant families, children with additional learning needs and families facing economic hardship.
- Provide peace of mind for working families that their children's emotional, social, physical and intellectual development is being promoted in early childhood services.
- Minimise risks to Australia's future economy by ensuring Australia's preschoolers are ready to begin school with knowledge and skills to support academic success.

Gowrie Australia urges all parties to stick with the reform of the early childhood sector.

The present reform agenda is an ambitious one and has its challenges and its critics. Raising the knowledge and skills of an entire workforce is a long-term project. Introducing the new early childhood curriculum frameworks will take time and changing systems of funding and accountability inevitably has an impact on the sector. But evidence is already beginning to show that these changes are having a positive impact:

- The qualifications base of Australia's early childhood education workforce has already risen dramatically due to investment in additional university places and fee help for TAFE students.
- Investment in professional development is supporting stronger leadership and curriculum implementation.
- Early childhood centres are integrating support for families across the whole range of human services for children, from birth to school entry.
- State and Federal Governments are working together to increase access to services for vulnerable, disadvantaged and Indigenous children and families.

These gains must not be lost and more can be done!

Gowrie Australia urges all political parties to uphold the present reform agenda – *and to go further.* International comparisons show Australia still has much to do to build the early childhood sector. We need to support children and families to participate fully and equitably in the 21st century economy.

- We see the potential for *a comprehensive review of funding for the early childhood education and care sector.* This review would address the present unhelpful fragmentation of funding streams for early childhood services. The aim of such a review would be to *identify a way to fund services to maximise affordability, accessibility and equity of access*. Solutions must be found to support young families in low socio-economic circumstances. And, if women's workforce participation is to grow, solutions must be found for dual-income families where one income is entirely committed to paying for childcare.
- We also see the potential to *extend current initiatives to achieve strong connections across all services for children and families.* More can be done to encourage innovative services for families living in poverty, new Australians and busy working families. Early childhood services already have the infrastructure to bring services together. With Government support for further integration and for enhanced staff development, health professionals and early childhood educators can work together to enhance the wellbeing of children and families.

The education and care of our youngest Australians is complex, demanding, and highly responsible work. Gowrie Australia and the thousands of stakeholders across our networks take this work seriously. *We urge all parties to develop policy that will maintain and enhance the present reform agenda in early childhood education and care.*

Any political party adopting this platform of ongoing reform deserves to receive strong support from every Australian family accessing early childhood education and care programs.

Each of the individual Gowrie CEOs took responsibility for sharing this message with policy makers and politicians from all parties, and are committed to continue to work with Governments, to demonstrate the benefits of the reform.

We share this position with readers in the hope that you too may advocate on behalf of children, families and early childhood professionals to ensure the gains made are not lost, and the investment in the early childhood education and care sector increases to support improved outcomes for all children.

Reflecting on Progress, Responding to Need

Author:
Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)

Analysis of the assessment and ratings of children's education and care services is beginning to provide an insight into how the National Quality Framework is working across the country.

While it is still very early in the quality improvement journey to draw strong conclusions, the ratings are beginning to highlight some valuable information for providers, educators, policy-makers and regulatory authorities.

In May 2013 the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) published the quality ratings on its website as part of new national registers under the National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education and Care.

This was the first time quality ratings under the new National Quality Standard (NQS) had been made available publicly, with ratings for more than 2000 services made available online. Ratings for services are progressively being added to the registers each week.

Over time, all long day care, family day care, outside school hours care, preschools and kindergartens in the national registers will be assessed on their progress in meeting the new quality standard.

At 31 March 2013, there were more than 12,800 education and care services and almost 13% had been rated against the NQS.

The second *ACECQA Snapshot* is expected to be released this month and will contain updated figures and analysis of ratings progress. The snapshot will be updated and released quarterly.

It is still early days in the reporting cycle for the NQF and the sample of assessed services is small and not random.

Over time, reports on the quality rating of services across Australia will give a valuable indication into the questions the sector is asking such as:

- What is the pattern of quality in education and care across metropolitan and rural areas, and across socio-economic areas?
- Are providers of education and care services finding it harder to get qualified staff in rural areas?
- Are some service types finding it more difficult to do well in a particular quality area compared with other service types?
- Can we understand the strengths of different service types by looking for common themes in quality ratings at the standard level?
- Is there a correlation between quality of education and care services, and the size of provider?

As more data becomes available, new areas for inquiry will develop and ACECQA will continue to work with national stakeholders to develop specific research questions.

It is anticipated that this data will start to provide answers to questions such as:

- What are the priorities for professional development?
- How might higher education and vocational training providers re-focus their programs?
- What can service providers in metropolitan areas learn from their rural counterparts?
- Is there any correlation between quality rating and types of service?

In the last ACECQA Snapshot, 1,620 services had been rated against the NQS. Nationally, 55% of those services were rated as *Meeting* (33%) or *Exceeding* (22%) the national quality standard overall. *Working Towards* the national quality standard was the most common rating – with 45% of services in that category.

With the introduction of any new system, it was expected many services would need to make quality improvements, and this is reflected in the quality rating results so far.

Early analysis of the data from the national registers is giving us our first opportunity to see the quality areas that services may find it harder to achieve, although, again, this data needs to be tested over time.

At a national level, initial data shows services are more commonly *Meeting* or *Exceeding* the standard in areas relating to staffing arrangements (QA4), relationships with children (QA5) and collaborative partnerships with families and communities (QA6).

The quality areas, educational program and practice (QA1) and physical environment (QA3) are so far proving more challenging for providers to confidently implement.

Time will tell whether these results emerge as trends, or are overtaken by other results, as more services are assessed and the sample becomes statistically reliable.

Staffing and relationships with children and families are a well-established part of most providers' procedures, but the use of a learning framework and criteria around the environment are new aspects of the national standards for many services.

This is the sort of new information that the NQF is making possible. In the long term, it has the potential to show if the new national standards are making a difference. In the short term, it means identifying elements that services are struggling with, and targeting support to help improve these areas of need.

ACECQA is continuing its role to educate and inform the community and the sector about the NQF with the development of new resources such as Quality Area posters, materials for families through Family News and the development of a series of short videos about the NQF to be released shortly.

Look out for this month's *ACECQA Snapshot* and keep up to date with ACECQA's news and updates by subscribing to our emails http://www.acecqa.gov.au/Subscribe.aspx and by following us on Facebook and Twitter.

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What is *"Wellbeing"* all about?

Author:
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Team Leader
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What does the term 'wellbeing' mean exactly, for both us as early years educators, and for the children in our care? After some thinking I came to the conclusion that my definition of the term is 'feeling happy and being healthy'. So, as an integrated centre, how do we at il nido (il nido meaning 'the nest' in Italian), nurture a sense of wellbeing, how do we ensure our children, our families and staff feel happy and are healthy?

Imagine how it must feel, as a young child entering the doors of a 100 place children's centre for the first time. What a maze of adults and children, new faces, different spaces, new pace, in fact for many, a whole new world. This is where the importance of our work comes in as educators. We ensure that our environment is welcoming and feels like a second home for all of the children who come here. Our goal is to create a 'nest' for them, to be their extended family, to meet their needs (both physical and emotional), to soothe, to comfort, to share enjoyment and learning and to celebrate the journey they take, in every moment of every day.

The more I think about it, the more I can visualize exactly what it looks like at il nido as I see it every day, and it is a mixture of security and exploration. For children from as young as only a few months, right through to the children who are almost starting school, the pace is unrushed and unscheduled, time is set by children exploring at their own pace, when they feel ready. At the same time, stability is provided by having one familiar person and by maintaining consistency with the home setting through items and photos from home, and through the use of similar routines. Links are formed with families as they engage in our program, and attend events such as family tea nights and our end of year party.

The children exhibit a sense of confidence and happiness as they proceed on their sensory journey. Children at il nido belong, they are important, worthy and valued. We can hope that this feeling of wellbeing will stay with them for life.

We have many tools to help us develop a sense of belonging for our families, here are just some from our 'bucket' that form part of our culture at il nido:

- play based curriculum and learning
- learning stories
- natural materials and the use of sensory resources
- homely environments (informed by families)
- the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia
- our local community
- primary care giving system
- nurturing relationships influenced by attachment theory (Circle of Security)
- Reggio Emilia
- children's voices

Educators support children's learning through interactions, scaffolding, creating choices, providing open ended items and quiet play areas, bringing the outside in and using our vast open outdoor areas regularly. We source recycled and reused items as much as possible, in line with our Reggio Emilia influenced approach.

We also feel that it is imperative for staff to feel a sense of belonging in order to work together as a team, and that they too have a sense of wellbeing. We have a supportive environment that includes several social functions a year, as well as monthly staff meetings, reflection journals, regular professional development, annual appraisals, team meetings and opportunities to engage in further education and be involved in other areas of the industry. The links that are developed through serving as a learning centre for students from University, TAFE and local schools provide us with access to current research and knowledge, as well as the opportunity to mentor future educators. In addition, our community space provides families with many services such as playgroups, CAFHS (Child & Family Health Service) and parenting courses.

No matter who comes to il nido, they have a place and, hopefully, a sense of wellbeing in our nest.

Some Thoughts on Perinatal Mental Health in an Early Childhood Education and Care Environment

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Parts of Australia are experiencing a period of rapid growth, which attracts increasing numbers of families from interstate and overseas. Each time a family relocates they leave behind the family, friends and the community that would have supported them during the often testing time of pregnancy and raising small children. The African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child" is still true, but what happens when that village is no longer accessible? The answer is that we have to create a new village. Early parenting groups run by child health nurses help new parents who live locally and have babies of similar ages to meet. Playgroups have provided substitute communities for many families across Australia for decades. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres provide the respite and child care that once might have been provided by a grandmother.

For the majority of people being pregnant and having a baby is an exciting and joyful time, but for some it is more challenging. Mood changes are normal in pregnancy and immediately after the birth of a baby. Hormonal changes that come with being pregnant, and the adjustment that is required as a woman learns to be a parent affects how a woman feels, and certainly can be worrying. This is perfectly normal. However too much anxiety, or persistent negative changes in feelings, behaviours and thoughts may indicate a mood disorder that requires assessment and treatment.

Perinatal anxiety and depression are quite common. In fact research undertaken in Australia found that up to 9% of women will experience depression in pregnancy, with that number increasing to 16% in the year following childbirth. Anxiety, which can be just as debilitating, is probably even more common. Fathers also experience perinatal depression and anxiety at nearly the same rate.

Many studies have determined a relationship between perinatal depression and anxiety and adverse outcomes in children. Young children of depressed mothers may be more impulsive and have more difficult peer interactions, and insecure attachment is more common. Cognitive, language and emotional development can also be affected.

Women with less social support are more likely to become depressed, but Lee and colleagues found in their 2006 study that high levels of social support and child care protects against the effects of mild to moderate maternal depression on some child behaviour problems. An Australian study by Giles and colleagues from the University of Adelaide (2001: e1) found that “..as little as half a day of formal child care at the age of two years modified the effect of recurrent maternal depressive symptoms on total behaviour problems in children aged five years.”

It is important to note that depression or anxiety in a parent is not a confident predictor of unfavourable outcomes in children. In fact, we know that despite a parent’s ill health, the majority of children will not be affected. Infants thrive when they have an expectation that their physical and emotional needs will be met. Even with some degree of depression or anxiety, many parents are able to provide “good enough” parenting - where the parent is attentive and responsive to the infant, and has empathy for and the ability to reflect the infant’s feelings. In other cases, these needs may be met by a variety of people such as another parent, grandparent or regular caregiver.

Johnston and Brinamen (2005: 270) discussed infant mental health principles in the context of child care and proposed that formal child care’s primary purpose “.. is to provide children with experiences in adult-child relationships that instil a basically positive sense of self and the world.” ECEC educators also have an increasing role in developing and affirming the parent’s sense of self and supporting the parent-child relationship.

Parents have often looked to their child's educators for tips and advice on parenting and have used them as a sounding board for concerns around child development and behaviour, but a postnatal mood disorder may make this supportive relationship difficult to establish.

Depression may affect a parent's motivation, organisation, memory, concentration and decision making. This may make getting to child care on time, with all the necessary luggage on the right day, just too hard. Organising a costume for book week may be out of the question.

Low mood, exhaustion or withdrawal from social contact, are also symptoms that impact on the ability of a parent to engage with caregivers. What may appear to be disinterest or a need for perfection, may in fact be symptoms of a depressed or anxious parent.

Educators can support a parent's role and foster a positive relationship between parents and their children by including parents in decision making, and reinforcing the fact that as a parent, they know their baby or toddler better than anyone else. Supporting home routines where possible helps promote secure attachment in the centre, but also reassures the parent of their ability to care for their infant. Role modelling age appropriate play and soothing techniques will give a parent something to try when they are at home, and smooth the transition between home and care.

Asking the parent about their child's routine, temperament and preferences may be a routine conversation that helps an educator provide appropriate care, but it also helps to develop a relationship with the parent based on trust and mutual respect. This is particularly important when a parent's self-esteem and self confidence is lacking.

By developing an increased appreciation of the effects of perinatal mental health issues and the consequences that these illnesses have on both parent and child, educators will be able to provide a service that not only provides a secure base for the child, but also fosters relationships between parents and their children.

Being able to provide information on local resources that can assist with perinatal mental health issues is important. The local child health nurse or perinatal mental health team will be able to provide support and appropriate referrals to families experiencing depression or anxiety.

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Risk and Resilience

Author:
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London

Four-year-old Jo is up a tree in the outside space of her kindergarten. She has climbed the bottom branches, and is now crawling along a big, curving branch about a metre above the ground – the perfect height to test her nerves. She doesn't realise it, but some adult eyes are keeping watch on Jo. A member of the kindy's staff has spotted her, and is monitoring her progress from a discreet distance. Jo is a keen and competent climber, and presses on. She is soon higher than ever before, and shows no signs of stopping. Imagine you are the watching adult. What would you do? How and when would you step in? And more importantly, on what basis would you make these decisions?

Of course, it is absolutely right to be concerned about children's safety. But this concern needs to be tempered by a recognition that play, exploration, adventure and uncertainty are at the heart of children's learning, from the day they are born. No child would ever learn to climb – or even to walk, or ride a bike - if they were not driven by a hunger for competence, and a desire to get to grips with the world around them.

Risk and resilience

When we think about risk, our mind typically turns first to physical challenges. But there is also social risk: learning how to get along and resolve differences. And there is emotional risk: experiencing, and learning to overcome, a whole range of fears and anxieties. In all these cases, the goal for adults should be the same: to help children get more confident, and competent. To help them learn how to cope with the everyday challenges that life might throw at them. This is what, in my book *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*, I call adopting a philosophy of resilience. And it demands a thoughtful approach to risk. So what does a thoughtful approach to risk look like? The essential first step is to recognise that risk cannot be eliminated. In fact, quite the opposite: a degree of risk is essential to creating good learning opportunities. The zero-risk childhood is an impossible goal, and so is the zero-risk setting. In almost any situation, children can and do have accidents, feel sad or frustrated, fight, get hurt or upset. Indeed in many cases these outcomes are best understood not as blameworthy, but as valuable learning experiences in their own right. In a good learning setting, bad things sometimes happen. Hence a thoughtful approach to risk is one that balances the risks against the benefits.

National guidance

In Australia, official guidance on early learning supports the need for a thoughtful, balanced approach to risk and challenge. The National Quality Standard (NQS) states that environments should be "inclusive, and promote competence, independent exploration and learning through play" (Standard 3.2). In assessing against this standard, assessors are told they should discuss how educators "plan learning environments with appropriate levels of challenge where children are encouraged to explore, experiment and take appropriate risks in their learning" (Element 1.2.2).

Other NQS sections underpin the need for a balanced approach. For example, under the standard for healthy eating and physical activity, providers are invited to ask themselves how they "encourage children to solve problems in relation to physical challenges in the environment" (Standard 2.2).

What does a balanced approach look like?

Let us come back to Jo and ask a key question: *What is she getting out of that experience?* The answer is that she is getting a great deal. Perhaps the most obvious benefit – but in truth, amongst the least interesting – is simple physical exercise. On top of working up a sweat, she is:

- Building her gross and fine motor skills, and her awareness of her body and what it can do;
- Boosting her self-confidence and sense of achievement;
- Practicing real-time risk management at first hand;
- Learning about her emotions and how far she is willing to go before her fears tell her to stop.

Not forgetting the intrinsic thrill of defying gravity, and the sensory stimulation from feeling the bark beneath her hands and the wind in her hair.

Having thought about the benefits, we can also ask: what are the risks? The most obvious is the risk of injury. How great is that risk? Not that great. Most children are well able to assess and manage risks like these for themselves – and their competence and confidence are easy to spot. Indeed many children are better at climbing than we think they are. If Jo does make a mistake, in all likelihood the worst that could happen is some injured pride along with a bump and a bruise. Yes, if she is really unlucky, she could get a broken limb. But while this would definitely not be much fun, she would almost certainly make a full recovery in a few weeks, and be back climbing trees (probably with a little more care this time).

Of course many educators are as worried about being blamed or sued as they are about injury. There is an important point here: the risks that should be our prime focus are surely those that concern the child.

Yet it is the risks to adults – loss of reputation, worries about liability – that too often crowd our minds, and cloud our judgements. It can sometimes feel like we are devoting far more time to covering our backs – through policies, guidelines and paper trails – than to looking after children.

We simply have to tackle this blame culture head-on, if we are to build a philosophy of resilience. This may seem a tall order. However, it can be achieved – but only if we have a clear focus on the value of risk experiences, and their crucial role in helping children learn. What is more, as the quotes above show, national guidance provides ample hooks for doing this.

Paranoid parents?

When talking to professionals about risk, I am often told that parents are the biggest problem. This needs unpicking. Yes, there are some anxious parents out there. But there are also many parents who are fed up with the way that their children's sense of adventure and appetite for experience are being stifled. For every parent who wants to buy knee pads for their crawling baby, there is a mother like Lenore Skenazy: the New York journalist who found herself at the centre of a media storm after letting her nine-year-old son travel home on his own on the subway (and who created quite a stir when she visited Australia in 2012). She is now one of the leaders of a growing global movement to give children more everyday freedoms. Her book and blog *Free Range Kids* make a witty, intelligent case for her cause (and mine).

The truth is that parents, like the rest of us, are on a continuum when it comes to attitudes to risk. The mistake so many settings make is that they think they have to set their benchmark at the level of the most anxious parent. So a single complaint about a piece of equipment leads to its removal. We need to take away that veto, and do more to help some parents understand why it is so important to give children a taste of adventure.

The time is right to move beyond the blame culture. We need to reject the zero risk mindset, and recognise and promote the value of adventure and challenge in children's play and learning. We need to worry less about checklists and back-covering, and more about what will help the children we work with to develop their confidence, competence and resilience: to help get them ready for a world full of opportunities and challenges. Perhaps most important of all, we need to reflect on our own childhoods, and remind ourselves just what it felt like for Jo, when she climbed higher than she ever had before.

Acknowledgement

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Increasing Children's Competencies through Wellbeing and Involvement

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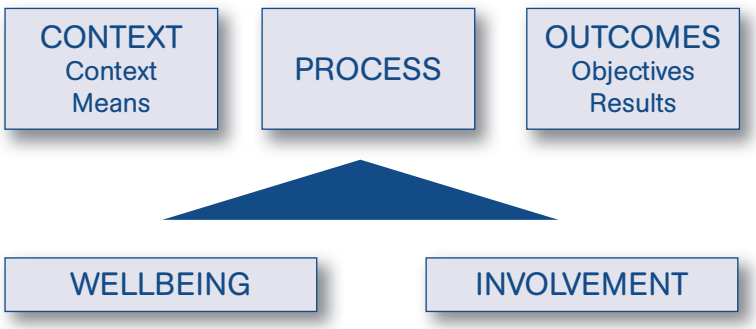
Children who feel at ease, secure and confident are more receptive to deep level learning. Belgian researchers, Ferre Laevers and Bart Declercq maintain that focusing on emotional wellbeing and level of involvement can pave the way to competence development.

In search of quality

What makes young children learn in early childhood settings? From the point of view of the parent or the curriculum developer, the question is often answered by expressing expectations with regard to the educational context and the practitioners' actions - the infrastructure, the content of activities, interaction style. From the policy or government viewpoint, there is a more direct reference to the expected outcome of the learning process. With regular assessments the system of care and education is 'forced' to get better results. In the middle of this stands the practitioner, living and working with children. How can he or she combine context and outcome - together? In this article we want to answer exactly this question.

The quality of the experience

An evident starting point for the assessment of the quality of any educational setting is to focus on two dimensions: the degree of 'emotional wellbeing' and the level of 'involvement'. It helps us to sense if what we are doing, in other words the context, is leading somewhere - to the outcome!



To know how each of the children is doing in a setting, we have first to explore the degree in which they feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and demonstrate self-confidence. All this indicates that their emotional wellbeing is good and that their basic needs are fulfilled. The second indicator, involvement, is linked to the developmental process and requires the adult to set up a challenging environment favouring concentrated, intrinsically motivated activity. Care settings and preschools have to focus on both aspects - paying attention only to emotional wellbeing and a positive climate is not enough, while efforts to enhance involvement will only have an impact if children feel at home and are free from emotional constraints.

Involvement, the key word for increasing competencies

Involvement refers to a dimension of human activity, not linked to specific types of behaviour, nor to specific levels of development. Both the baby in the cradle playing with his voice, and the adult trying to formulate a definition, can share that quality. One of the most predominant characteristics of this 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi[1]) is concentration. Involvement only occurs in the 'zone of proximal development[2]' and goes along with strong motivation, fascination and total implication. Further analysis reveals a manifest feeling of satisfaction and a bodily felt stream of positive energy. Of course, one could describe a variety of situations where we can speak of satisfaction combined with intense experience, but not all of them would match our concept of involvement. Involvement is not the state of arousal easily obtained by the entertainer. The crucial point is that the satisfaction stems from one source - the exploratory drive, the need to get a better grip on reality, the intrinsic interest in how things and people are. Only when we succeed in activating the exploratory drive do we get an intrinsic type of involvement and not just involvement of an emotional or functional kind. One couldn't think of any condition more favourable to increase the competencies of young children. If we want deep level learning, we cannot do without involvement.

Deep level learning

The concept of 'deep level learning' expresses the concern for a critical approach to educational evaluation. We don't see the process of development as a mere addition of discrete elements of knowledge to an existing repertoire. On the contrary, every performance depends on an underlying structure of fundamental schemes. These operate as basic programmes that regulate the way one processes incoming stimuli and constructs reality. Through them we interpret new situations and act competently - or not. They determine which and how many dimensions of reality can be articulated in one's perception and cognition.

Impact on practitioners

Practitioners welcome the concepts of 'wellbeing' and 'involvement' as stimulating and helpful in improving the quality of their work. The concepts match the intuitions of many practitioners and give them a scientifically based confirmation - that when we can get children in that 'flow state', increasing their competencies must and will take place within the area(s) addressed by the activity. In contrast to effect variables – the real outcomes are only seen on the longer run – the process variables give immediate feedback about the quality of interventions and tell us on the spot something about their potential impact. Furthermore, bringing involvement and wellbeing to the foreground as key indicators for quality, engenders a lot of positive energy and synergy. The enthusiastic responses of children are very empowering and give the practitioner deep satisfaction both at the professional and the personal level.

Impact on policy

Impact can also be measured on a large scale. By measuring 'wellbeing' and involvement' in a pre- and post-test design, it's possible to answer the key question, '*Is what we are doing (e.g. the implementation of a training programme) leading to the expected outcomes?*' Multiple research results both in the UK and Belgium indicate significant improvement in both wellbeing and involvement over the course of one year. This increase is strongly linked to improvements in the learning environment, such as the materials and activities on offer, organisation, adult style, degree of freedom for children and climate.

Conclusion

Taking wellbeing and involvement as points of reference in the guidance of professionals makes it possible to respect the actual level of functioning of the practitioner and the setting. When implementing one starts where one stands, with all the limitations linked to the actual situation. This is the real impact - wellbeing and involvement mobilise and enhance energy in people, drawing them into a positive spiral which engenders deep level learning. Only in this way can we make early childhood settings more effective and strong enough to meet the challenge of education. It is quality in progress.

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1 Mihály Csíkszentmihályi first proposed the state of 'flow' to describe total absorption in an activity.

2 A concept developed by Lev Vygotsky to describe the range of abilities that an individual can perform with assistance, but cannot yet perform independently.

WELLBEING

When children and adults ...

- feel at ease
- act spontaneously
- are open to the world and accessible
- express inner rest and relaxation
- show vitality and self-confidence
- are in touch with their feelings and emotions
- enjoy life

...we know that their mental health is secured

INVOLVEMENT

When children and adults are ...

- concentrated and focussed
- interested, motivated, fascinated
- mentally active
- fully experiencing sensations and meanings
- enjoying the satisfaction of their exploratory drive
- operating at the very limits of their capabilities

...we know that deep level learning is taking place

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING:
A foundation for early childhood mental health

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Early childhood is our best opportunity to build mental health and provide children with the social and emotional foundations to grow into capable and happy adults. KidsMatter Early Childhood is partnering with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services around the country to achieve better mental health and wellbeing for children, through promotion, prevention, and early intervention. By providing these services with Professional Learning sessions and resources, KidsMatter targets social and emotional learning and development, which is so crucial for children's current and future mental health. By focusing on these aspects, the KidsMatter Framework also supports the achievement of the *Early Years Learning Framework's* Learning Outcomes.

Early childhood mental health has been described as the "capacity of a young child – within the context of their development, family, environment and culture – to:

- participate in the physical and social environment;
- form healthy and secure relationships;
- experience, regulate, understand and express emotions;
- understand and regulate their behaviour;
- interact appropriately with others, including peers; and
- develop a secure sense of self" (HIMHCS & HISC, 2012:13).

This definition reflects the significance of healthy social and emotional learning and development in the early years. As ECEC services see many children for extended periods of time, they are well placed to support children's social and emotional development.

Meeting children - *for who they are and where they come from*

Children come from a range of contexts and they all develop at different rates and stages. KidsMatter asks ECEC services to reflect on the children who are a part of their communities. Do they know them well? Knowing children well is the basis of supporting children's social and emotional development. When we know who children are, what they're like, where they come from, and what their family is like, we are more equipped to relate to them in a way that suits their style of social and emotional learning.

The significance of relationships

Children are born with the capacity to form relationships. It is through their relationships that children learn about who they are, how to interact with others, and how to manage their emotions (Stonehouse, 2012). By getting to know children and their families well, educators support this ability to develop and form relationships. KidsMatter focuses on the role of relationships between children and educators. These relationships provide a model for how children should treat and expect to be treated by others. They also instil a sense of safety and security, allowing them to explore and interact with their world. The experience of supportive relationships assists children in their ongoing relationship formation and in developing positive mental health.

Being confident to explore

Warm, responsive and trusting relationships provide a secure base from which children can explore. It gives children a sense that they have the capacity to influence their surroundings (Kostelnik, Whirem, Soderman & Gregory, 2009). This sense of agency develops through a child's repeated experiences of having their needs met, using and extending their abilities, and having opportunities to take risks. KidsMatter encourages ECEC services to think about the range of opportunities, interactions and experiences they provide for children, and to consider how these influence children's social and emotional learning and development.

Managing feelings and behaviour

The foundations for managing emotions and behaviour are set up in early childhood. Positive relationships provide the safety for children to experience, express, understand and manage their emotions and their behaviour. Knowing when to step in, and when to stand back to support children in their social and emotional learning, can be challenging (Nolan, Kilderry & O'Grady, 2006). Regularly taking the opportunity to reflect when working with children, perhaps with colleagues or a mentor, can support such decision making in challenging situations.

Making friends

Being able to form positive relationships with peers and adults is an important life skill. Children who have had many opportunities to support their social and emotional learning are better prepared to form relationships with others. Friendships also represent unique experiences for children to further extend their social and emotional learning. Reflecting on the decisions ECEC services make, and how these influence children's opportunities for interaction and time alone, can have a great influence on children's social and emotional learning.

How children see themselves

A child's sense of self is how they see themselves as an individual. It is also the guide for how they interact with others now and as adults (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman & Gregory, 2009). When children see themselves as being able to make an impact on their world, they feel confident and capable of taking on challenges. Children develop an understanding of who they are from how significant people in their lives respond to them. When adults are mindful of how their behaviours are interpreted by children, they can interact in ways that support children's development of a positive sense of self.

Social and emotional learning in practice

Children's developing sense of self and social and emotional learning all have a direct influence on how well they can navigate their social worlds. Their growing understanding of who they are, and how their behaviours and emotions affect themselves allows them to make decisions about how to respond to others (Kostelnik et al, 2009). As more and more children attend ECEC services for longer periods of time (DEEWR, 2012), educators play a significant role in children's social and emotional development. KidsMatter highlights the value of this role and provides a framework to guide practice with mental health in mind.

Want to know more about KidsMatter Early Childhood?

KidsMatter provides expert knowledge, tools and support to help grow happy and healthy young minds. It is funded by the Australian Government and backed by the expertise of the Australian Psychological Society, *beyondblue* and Early Childhood Australia.

The Kidsmatter resources are valuable for families and for those working in ECEC settings. Along with general information about the initiative, all of KidsMatter's resources can be accessed on our website, www.kidsmatter.edu.au. These resources are grouped under four themes, which reflect the Components of the Kidsmatter framework:

- Creating a sense of community;
- Developing children's social and emotional skills;
- Working with parents and carers;
- Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties.

Also available online is the KidsMatter Early Childhood Programs Guide, which enables ECEC services to make informed decisions when selecting evidence-based mental health and wellbeing programs for their ECEC service community.

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National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE

Summer 2012

Autumn 2013

Winter 2013

2013 WA Early Childhood Education & Care Conference

Wheels in Motion
26 – 27 October 2013
Perth Convention Exhibition Centre, WA
W: http://www.waecec.com

Infant & Early Childhood Social & Emotional Wellbeing Conference 2013

What vision do we want for our future?
Where should we be focusing our attention and effort?
30 October – 2 November 2013
National Convention Centre, Canberra, ACT
W: http://www.iecsewc2013.net.au

FRSA NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2013

Investing in Families and Communities: Prevention + Integration + Innovation
5 - 7 November 2013
National Convention Centre, Canberra, ACT
W: http://www.frsa-conference.org.au/

LSAC & LSIC Research Conference 2013

Growing Up in Australia and Footprints in Time
13 – 14 November 2013
Rydges Melbourne, VIC
W: http://www.aifs.gov.au/conferences/

Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity Conference 13

Narratives of Equity
15 – 16 November 2013
University of Melbourne, VIC
W: http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/yrc/

The 2nd International Research in Early Childhood Education (IRECE) Conference 2014

Children's rights to early education
8-10 January 2014
Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile
W: http://www.education.monash.edu.au/research/conferences/irece/2014/

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Nationally committed to optimal outcomes for children and families.