

Developing a space for belonging

Developing a space for belonging within the early learning setting might seem like a complex and quite difficult thing to achieve, given this broad understanding of what belonging might mean for families and their children. So what might be entailed in developing an early childhood space for belonging?



REINFORCING A SENSE OF IDENTITY

Early childhood settings are complex spaces populated by broadly diverse groups of people. All people who access early childhood settings should feel welcomed and included. And for some, this is more easily achieved because the setting reinforces and supports their own sense of identity and ways of being in the world.

For example, some families feel more welcomed and acknowledged than others from the point of enrolment. They can easily fill in the enrolment form, ask questions of the staff and feel confident that their parenting choices are heard and reflected in the style adopted by the setting's staff. When they tour the centre they see images on the walls that reflect their own faces and family constellations and even the resources on the shelves look familiar and somewhat like those they have at home. They might be invited to share in the decision-making processes of the learning community and they feel secure in exchanging information with early childhood educators who they feel understand them well.

For these families and their children the centre feels safe and familiar. Children are invited to listen to familiar stories and to respond to adults and peers in ways that are similar to their ways of being with family members at home. They are provided with familiar resources and their play choices are acknowledged and validated because they fit within the expectations educators have of them. They speak the same language as their teachers and so, even though it's hard to say goodbye to their families at the beginning of each day, they know they will be able to communicate their needs and be cared for in ways very similar to the ways they're cared for at home. These children and their families quickly develop a strong sense of belonging within the early learning centre and their experiences are likely to be positive and confirming.

THROUGH THE EYES OF DIVERSITY

But for some families and children the childcare setting can feel very unfamiliar and far less welcoming.

The enrolment forms may be confusing or require information that is difficult to divulge so early in the relationship with centre staff. The form may not even be written in an accessible language. Or the enrolment form might ask for both mother and father to fill in sections. But what if there are two mothers or two fathers and no adequate place for the second to record their details? What if one or even both carers are neither mother nor father to the child? Does this first point of official contact with the centre send a message that diverse family constellations are neither acknowledged nor welcomed within this setting? It may seem a simple matter but it does matter and does make a difference.

And if families move into a centre setting and find nothing familiar, they may feel isolated and even intimidated. If educators neither ask about nor acknowledge family information about parenting styles and preferences, parents might feel excluded from the care and education their children will be exposed to. All of a sudden it may seem as if their own ways of parenting and socialising their child aren't valued. And if the environment and the educational program aren't explained, then it may never seem clear what their children are participating in or learning.

Children might feel lonely and unwelcome too, if their own ways of being aren't recognised and safeguarded by early childhood educators. Being different in some way may present opportunities for other children to marginalise them, especially if educators don't or can't acknowledge that children can and often do discriminate against others because of difference. Children work hard each day to fit in and belong, and educators need to recognise this hard work and actively support children for whom this hard work may be even more challenging.



HELPING PEOPLE TO BELONG

So how do educators create spaces of belonging? First, they have to really know who the members of their community are. Getting to know families, children and colleagues well through respectful and thoughtful relationships is crucial to understanding what everyone needs, to have a real sense of belonging. People feel they belong when they feel others are genuinely interested in them and open to sharing information with them. 'In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging' (EYLF, p. 7).

It's important to create safe places where all families can exchange information with the understanding that the information they share is respected and will be responded to in thoughtful ways. This might mean using an interpreter when language use is diverse. Having staff members from the local community who share diverse language use and cultural practices can be a wonderful asset. Families also need to know that their privacy will be honoured and that they can discuss difficult issues without fear of recrimination.

Relationships aren't limited to relationships between people. We also have relationships with places and everything that constitutes particular places. So the setting and the way it is resourced is important and should reflect community values and concerns, for example in relation to social inclusion and working towards Reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The land on which the centre is located and the community in which the centre is situated are also important, as is knowledge about the histories of the local community. The educational program should reflect these local knowledges and relationships so that learning is relevant and meaningful to all those who access the setting. And the technologies employed within the setting (such as the enrolment forms and the documentation used to illustrate community participation and learning) are important too. The artefacts and administrative technologies used in the setting should be inclusive and accessible, and reflect and represent the diversity to which we all contribute.

GETTING EQUIPPED

When we consider the significance of relationships with people and also our collective relationship with the places in which early childhood care and education is performed, then we are better equipped to undertake the task of creating a space of belonging for all community members.

People need and want to feel connected to other people. Families, children and staff want to feel connected to the setting in which these relationships occur. This is made possible when all learning community participants feel respected, acknowledged, safe and welcomed and when the learning environment reflects the values, hopes and dreams of the community it serves.

Carmel Richardson

Director
Wiradjuri Preschool Child Care Centre

Reference

All mentions of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) in this publication can be attributed to the following reference:

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra, ACT: DEEWR.

Respecting Diversity: Articulating early childhood practice

This book will help you identify some ways in which early childhood educators can talk about their practice with families. It draws upon the setting's philosophy and curriculum documents as bases from which educators articulate their practice, and suggests how to support staff to be able to do this well. Throughout the book, scenarios are presented as examples of everyday practice.



ECA Code: RIP1101

To order or find out more please visit
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au
or (free call) 1800 356 900

Early Childhood Courses Certificate III, Certificate IV and Diploma via distance study

ECTARC is an award winning training organisation that specialises in early childhood training and professional development. ECTARC is well known across Australia for the **high level of support** that distance students receive throughout their studies.

Call today to speak to one of our friendly Training Officers about our programs and the affordable **pay per unit plan**. Phone 02 4223 1111 or visit our website at www.ectarc.com.au for details.



www.ectarc.com.au

