
Editorial: Supporting families and children in times of emotional stress

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As the year rushes along, we get closer to the national changes that will improve early childhood services. Some will happen quickly, others will be phased in over time. Many people will have participated in consultations around the Early Years Learning Framework and other proposals to improve quality in early childhood services. Planning is underway to harmonise regulations across the states. Change will be slow but in the long run what is important is that quality improves and is sustainable over time.

As the year unfolds, so does the global economic crisis. Current events are unsettling for all of us. There is uncertainty and often confusion about financial matters. We're not sure about our country's financial status or our own financial security and this uncertainty can be transmitted to children.

Many adults are worried about jobs and mortgages and this can impact on family stability and harmony. Parents are under enormous pressure when jobs and homes are under threat. Practitioners in early childhood services are also affected by the current financial difficulties, even if not directly. When friends or family are on a financial roller coaster, everyone is impacted.

Families who were using full time care may no longer need it or find they can't afford it because their jobs are gone or working hours cut back. Inevitably, children sense tensions and stress in their families and may need extra support in their early childhood services.

No one should underestimate the importance of sharing experiences and concerns with others who can listen and understand. The current economic crisis won't necessarily be personally stressful for each of us but readiness to support vulnerable children and their families is important.

Several of the articles in this issue of Every Child provide suggestions for helping children cope in times of stress – although they were not written for that purpose.

Now more than ever, it's time to talk about what really matters to children, families and communities and how to help each other in difficult times, so Anna Giesenberg's article on spirituality for young children is timely. As she says, spirituality concerns the way people show joy, love, compassion, care, wonder and consideration for each other and their surrounding world. Fostering care and compassion is critical when our worlds are unsettled.

More than ever in times of stress children need to play creatively and happily. They need reassurance about their worlds and play provides a safe creative context for this. Carmel Richardson says 'we need to know when to step in to support children as they play and when to stand back and let play unfold â€¦ Children have great capacities for courage, persistence, innovation and generosity when they play'. When they are anxious or stressed they need extra nurturing.

On a different tack, Louise Hard discusses why bullying is an issue in some early childhood work places. At a time where many workplaces are experiencing financial and other challenges in themselves, as well as having staff who are unsettled because of financial worries, tensions surface and people may take it out on each other. But this is never acceptable. Intimidating tactics, belittling, name calling, insults and teasing, isolation, overwork and demeaning of expertise are never OK and must be stopped. People who bully in the workplace must be confronted, whatever the motivation for their bullying. Louise says each of us needs to build robust professional identities and support each other against such practices, but equally, codes of conduct, personnel management and industrial strategies must be enforced to combat workplace bullying.

In this Every Child we have a number of articles to help early childhood educators finetune practice and explore new ideas to better support all children's learning. With the evolving economic uncertainty, recognising the stresses on many families and supporting them where necessary is especially important. Whatever the context, it's important to be optimistic, to protect children, and avoid speculation and panic. Being informed and supporting children in a way that is culturally, developmentally and age appropriate will always be the right course of action.

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