



## The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



# Understanding cultural competence

## Setting the scene

One of the purposes of the e-Newsletter series is to open up big ideas from the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) for thoughtful reflection and discussion. This e-Newsletter focuses on 'Cultural competence' which is one of the eight key practices that the EYLF highlights as essential to support children's learning.

'Cultural competence' is one of those expressions where we all think we know what it means, but we might all mean something different. It's a term and a set of concepts we need to return to and come to understand over time. Cultural competence is underpinned by the Principles outlined in the EYLF:

- secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships
- partnerships
- high expectations and equity
- respect for diversity.

Becoming 'culturally competent' requires educators to engage with the fifth Principle—ongoing learning and reflective practice.

The concepts and practices around cultural competence will be revisited in several newsletters, with examples from field research that show how educators in different contexts are working with the 'cultures' that make up their educational and wider communities.

*'... a strong cultural identity is essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong.'*

## Unpacking cultural competence

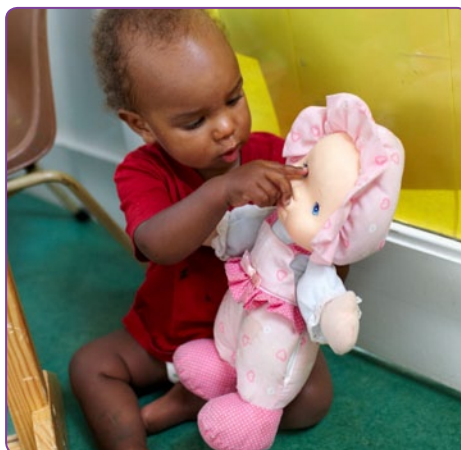
The EYLF (p. 16) describes cultural competence as:

*... much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses:*

- *being aware of one's own world view*
- *developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences*
- *gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views*
- *developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures.*

The *Educators' Guide* to the EYLF (p. 21) (DEEWR, 2010) explains why respecting, understanding and including a child's culture is so very important:

*Culture is the fundamental building block of identity and the development of a strong cultural identity is essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong.*



In the context of an early education and care setting the *Guide* (p. 26) stresses that cultural competence needs to be applied on three levels:

- **At the individual level**—where it will be evident in the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours of each educator in their relations with children, families and colleagues.
- **At the service level**—where it will be evident in the policies, procedures, expectations and practices of the setting and the way in which the views of children, families and the community influence decisions.
- **At the systems level**—where it will be evident in the way services relate to local community people and agencies and respect local protocols.



## What is culture?

The *Educators' Guide* to the EYLF (p. 22) expands our understanding of 'culture':

*Culture can be defined as 'what we create' beyond our biology. Not given to us, but made by us (Williams, in MacNaughton, 2003, p. 14).*

*Using this definition, culture incorporates the scope of human diversity and ways of being, such as gender, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, age and sexuality.*

This means that as educators, we need to 'think about our own values, beliefs and attitudes related to diversity and difference and acknowledge and address any bias that we may hold' (*Educators' Guide* p. 22).

As well as critically examining our own assumptions, 'cultural competence' requires us to take a strong approach to countering racism and bias when we encounter it. This is a long way from a 'live and let live' attitude. It involves making a conscious decision to promote children's cultural competence so that we can build a just and inclusive Australian society.

As Wendy Lee, a Key Note speaker at the ECA conference said:

*Being moral includes living the principles of justice. It involves making sure that everyone gets a fair go and that hidden attitudes to race, class and difference are made visible and challenged.*

## Cultural competence as it relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

While cultural competence encompasses a wide spectrum of difference beyond race and ethnicity, those aspects are usually the first in our minds when we hear the term.

As well, because we work with young children and families, we have a special responsibility to contribute to Australia's reconciliation and equity agendas in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

The *Educators' Guide* to the EYLF (p. 24) highlights our role in 'closing the gap in current educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children'. As educators, we contribute to improved learning outcomes for Indigenous children directly when our educational programs reflect children's cultural ways of being and knowing and when we make particular efforts to build strong relationships with their families, so that children grow strong in culture and engage with learning.

We also contribute to reconciliation and equity in a less direct sense when we ensure that *all* children are familiar with the rich and long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Taking steps to build a deep understanding about Indigenous custodianship for our local environment can be a good place to start.

For example, a preschool in NSW, which has no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children enrolled at present, decided that it was very important to enrich children's understanding and respect for Indigenous cultures. So, the educator invited a local Aboriginal Elder to spend a day talking about the surrounding area—its history, foods, stories and language—and how Aboriginal people had cared for the land for centuries. The children were fascinated and continued to talk about what they'd learned for ages. Karen then invited the Elder back and asked the children's families to come as well. Staff and parents said they learned an enormous amount and 'it changed my attitudes about some things'.

As Karen says:

*It's important to move beyond tokenism. A few books and posters and an hour at an expensive cultural performance can't have the same lasting effect as coming to know and appreciate Aboriginal history and culture through local knowledge over time and in many ways.*

Of course, it may not always be possible for an early learning setting to gain the wisdom of a local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Elder first hand but there are other ways to build children's knowledge and respect for Australia's long Indigenous habitation and history.







One setting in South Australia, for example, uses *Dreaming Stories* in picture books and film to share Indigenous values, responsibilities and spiritual beliefs with children from a range of cultural backgrounds (Connor, 2007). They have found that children from very different cultural communities can relate to the stories, unpack the meanings and make connections to their own family and cultural beliefs.

In the ACT, another setting acknowledges each day the Indigenous peoples who have custodianship for the land on which the centre is located. (It is important to name the particular Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander group relevant to the land and its setting.)

As Carmel (Richardson, in press, p. 25) says:

*The inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in the program is in response to the centre's commitment to equity, inclusion, social justice and reconciliation and reflects the deep commitment to diversity that is also acknowledged as one of the guiding principles of the EYLF (p. 13). All children are familiar and comfortable with these rituals.*

Another ECA publication, *Diversity and difference: Lighting the spirit of identity* (Mundine & Giugni, 2006, p. 15), explains that:

*All children have the right to know Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the right for the true history of Australia to be told. Reconciliation is integral to an early childhood curriculum.*

## Building an understanding about 'culture'

On the EYLF PLP Forum, Judy mentioned that 'we make assumptions about what each of us understands about "culture" and "cultural competence"; perhaps we should start by sharing aspects of our own "culture" with each other and with the children?'

Judy quoted Wendy Lee, the speaker from NZ at the conference:

*If the children you teach still think you sleep at the kindergarten, how well do they really know you? What does this say about cultural competence and relationships?*

Educators need to talk about 'culture' with colleagues and to ask questions such as:

- How might our views of culture affect our relationships with children and families?
- Might we sometimes advantage some children and families and disadvantage others?
- Do our interactions with families show that we respect and value them as they are, or 'as we would like them to be'?
- Does our environment reflect a genuine knowledge about the cultures of the children in our care?
- Are our representations of cultures in books, images and artefacts contemporary and inclusive, or do they fall into stereotypes?
- How can we share stories and understandings about Australia's First Peoples and about others who have journeyed to this place?

Forthcoming e-Newsletters will examine other aspects of difference and delve more deeply into the complexities of working with an evolving concept of 'culture'. They will also address a vexing question that Diane has raised in the online Forum: *How do we give children real choices in life, whilst conserving and respecting their own rich, cultural heritage?*

As Anne Kennedy says (*Every Child*, 2009):

*'Respecting difference is an ethical duty.'*

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### References

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