Stars are made of glass: Children as capable and creative communicators

Supporting the Early Years Learning Framework

Leonie Arthur, Felicity McArdle and Marina Papic

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Leonie, Felicity and Marina were members of the consortium contracted to develop the Early Years Learning Framework, were critical friends to sites involved in the trial of the EYLF and continue to work closely with early childhood settings engaged in exploring the potential of the EYLF.
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Introduction

This booklet is the third in the Research in Practice Series, designed to complement *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009). It focuses on Learning Outcome 5 of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): Children are effective communicators (DEEWR, 2009).
What does effective communication look like in the early years?

Young children are curious and want to learn more about their worlds and their experiences. They are driven to communicate—first about their needs, and then about their desires, interests, knowledge and competencies. Communication—making and sharing meaning—is essential to learning, as well as to being and belonging.

Children learn about their worlds and communicate with others using many different languages (Malaguzzi, 1998). Family, community and cultural practices all shape and influence children’s verbal and non-verbal languages, their patterns of interaction and their preferred modes of communication. Through interactions with family, community members and educators, young children learn to use, understand and respect many ways of communicating. These may include drawing, constructing, composing music, and performing, as well as speaking, reading and writing in community languages and/or English.

The arts (music, dance, drama, visual arts and media) provide powerful ways to communicate. Sometimes, the arts can be used to express ideas when words are not available, or are inadequate (Wright, 2003). At the same time, if the goals of equity and success for all children are to be achieved, children must be able to communicate their knowledge, experiences and ideas skilfully in the language used by those around them.

This means they must learn to read and write. Educators play a critical role in supporting children to be effective communicators. The EYLF highlights the importance of intentional teaching, where educators are ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and interactions’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 45). This is particularly important in the area of communication, where well-planned play environments which are rich in language and opportunities to exchange meaning with others support children to develop understandings of texts and symbols. This process is also facilitated by educator modelling, co-construction and scaffolding.
As noted in Learning Outcome 5 of the EYLF, ‘children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 41). Today, more than at any previous time, we are surrounded by a range of digital and multimodal images and texts (New London Group, 1996; Makin, Jones Diaz & McLachlan, 2007).

**Texts can be:**

- oral—e.g. conversations, stories, poems, songs and rhymes
- print based—such as books and magazines
- visual—including photographs, drawings and paintings
- gestural—e.g. performances, body and facial gestures, dance
- spatial—such as architecture, constructions and sculptures
- multimodal (texts that integrate a number of different modes, such as images, words and sound)—including music videos, movies, television programs, DVDs, computer games and websites.

Children will bring varied experiences with texts to the early childhood setting and have a capacity to communicate using a range of texts. Some children will be familiar with books. Others will have experiences with storytelling, or songs and rhymes. In many communities children will be familiar with texts in languages other than English. Some children will use Braille or communication boards as aids to communication. Many children will engage with texts on television, DVDs and computers and will be interested in the texts of popular culture. Children will be able to create texts with their voices, bodies, materials such as paints, pencils and clay, and many will be able to create meaning with still and moving cameras, music recorders and computers.

Children learn that texts contain messages, and that they are constructed in different ways. Communicating effectively—being literate in any language—means being able to get meaning from and create meaning with a range of texts.
How do children develop understandings of literacy in the early years?

Literacy in the twenty-first century involves much more than reading, writing, speaking and listening. With increasing technologies and globalisation, literacy now also includes creating meaning using a range of visual, gestural, spatial, printed, oral and multimodal texts. It includes viewing images and multimodal texts, and critical thinking about texts (critical literacy).

**Viewing** involves ways of seeing and interpreting everyday events, objects and people. *Visual literacy* is necessary for reading, understanding and interpreting images, photographs, drawings, videos, diagrams and multimodal texts. In the visual arts, the ‘grammar’ includes elements (such as colour, line and shape) and principles (such as design, pattern and balance). Like words and sentences, children can learn to use these elements to communicate ideas and create moods.

**Critical literacy** involves thinking about and questioning the meanings and purposes of texts (such as books, films, advertising catalogues and websites), the values being expressed and how texts work. It means learning that texts present particular points of view. Critical literacy involves asking questions, such as who is included and who is not, and examining the ways in which particular groups of people are represented in texts. Critical thinking also enables the creation of new texts that are more inclusive of diverse cultures and languages and that challenge stereotypes and bias, such as traditional gender roles.
Children develop understandings of the processes of reading, viewing, writing and the creation of multimodal texts through everyday interactions and play-based experiences. As they engage in family practices and centre routines and play with literacy materials, particularly when educators are involved in these interactions, they develop understandings of print and images.

When children experience stories, songs and rhymes and take part in conversations with adults, they learn to hear and discriminate sounds and develop understandings of the patterns of language. They gradually develop phonological awareness and learn to control and manipulate the sounds of language. When educators point out aspects of language, such as rhyme (words that end in the same sound) and alliteration (the same sound at the beginning of words, for example, Peter Piper) children begin to develop phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is a key aspect of literacy and a predictor of successful literacy learning.

Phonological awareness is the broad understanding of the sounds of a language, which begins with learning to hear different environmental and vocal sounds and to discriminate between types of sounds. Phonemic awareness is the ability to recognise the smallest units of sounds in words, such as the three sounds that are in the word c-a-t. It includes being aware of words that rhyme and have alliteration.

Exposure to digital and paper-based print and images, access to writing and drawing materials—along with discussions with educators about letters, numerals, words and the sounds of language—support children to develop understandings of print and letter–sound relationships.
Children make meaning from visual, spoken, gestural and spatial texts, as well as print-based and multimodal texts. For example, babies learn to interpret facial gestures and then words. Toddlers will often be interested in images and print. They may read by looking at the pictures and making up the story, perhaps using the words they remember if they have heard the story before to create their own meaning. Older children may act out or retell a familiar narrative, read along with an adult or read alone. Children draw on a range of strategies, including using the pictures, their memory, imagination, recognition of familiar words, knowledge of how stories work and their understandings of text conventions and print to make meaning and create new meanings from print-based texts.

As children’s spoken language develops they can use their understandings of the grammatical structures of texts to make predictions about what type of word comes next when reading. When children consolidate understandings of the sounds of language, they also use their understandings of letter–sound relationships to get meaning from text.

Older children may act out or retell a familiar narrative, read along with an adult or read alone.

**Grammatical structures of texts** describe the ways that words are put together to make meaning. This means, for example, understanding the word order for statements and questions (as in ‘You are going shopping,’ and ‘Are you going shopping?’). Readers use understandings of grammatical structures to help them to make predictions about the type of word (for example a noun or a verb) that comes next in the text.

Children may engage in reading-like behaviours in their play, for example reading signs, catalogues, posters and print on food packaging in dramatic play. They will often demonstrate what they know about texts and print in these play episodes, for example holding the book with the title page at the front and running their finger under the print as they read.
Text conventions are understandings about how texts work and how they are used to exchange meaning. For example, a book is held and read in a particular way and a shopping list usually takes a different form to a narrative.

Concepts of print are understandings of how print works. This means, for example, understanding that print has meaning and that, in English, print is made up of letters and words and is read from left to right and top to bottom. It also includes understandings of punctuation and knowledge of upper and lower case letters.
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Supporting the Early Years Learning Framework

Leonie Arthur, Felicity McArdle and Marina Papic
The Early Years Learning Framework: Getting started
This book explores the central understanding upon which the Framework has been built, and looks at the why and how of educator’s engagement with the ideas and understandings that can be found within it.
Author: Joy Goodfellow. 28 pages.
Price: $14.95

The Early Years Learning Framework: Building confident learners
Explores how educators can help children to be confident and involved learners, focusing on Outcome 4 of the first national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia.
Author: Leonie Arthur. 28 pages.
Price: $14.95

Every Child Vol. 15 No. 4 – Early Years Learning Framework
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Author: Various. 36 pages.
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Stars are made of glass: Children as capable and creative communicators

Stars are made of glass: Children as capable and creative communicators focuses on Learning Outcome 5 of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia and explores how children communicate using spoken language, music, movement, images and symbols.

The role of the educator is to expose children to a broad range of techniques through which self expression can take place, to empower children to utilise these means of communication to communicate confidently and to make sense of the world around them.

Educators can provide resources and experiences and interact with children in ways that stimulate children to expand their communication repertoire for an increasing variety of purposes, audiences and contexts. This book will help you understand:

- The many ways that children communicate
- How children develop understandings of literacy and numeracy concepts and processes
- The role of the arts and information and communication technologies in communication
- Learning environments that support children to be capable and creative communicators
- The role of the educator in supporting children to be effective communicators

Stars are made of glass: Children as capable and creative communicators is the third in the Research in Practice series about the EYLF to be published by Early Childhood Australia. This issue was designed to complement Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009).

While these are practical guidebooks for educators, they may also be of interest to families and others who work closely with young children.