



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Nurturing creativity

The *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011) asks educators to progress children’s learning in all of the Learning Outcome areas:

Curriculum decision making contributes to each child’s learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators (Element 1.1.1).

Setting the scene

Children’s creativity is connected to all five Learning Outcomes in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and receives explicit attention in Outcomes 4 (Children are confident and involved learners) and 5 (Children are effective communicators). Outcome 4 highlights creativity as an important learning disposition that impacts on learning throughout life.

Aspects of creativity are woven through Outcome 5, while the most direct reference is in the key component ‘Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media’ (EYLF, p. 42). Evidence of this key component includes, for example, children:

- imagining and creating roles, scripts and ideas
- sharing stories and symbols of their culture
- re-enacting stories
- using the creative arts such as drawing, painting, sculpture, drama, dance, movement, music and storytelling to express ideas and make meaning
- experimenting with ways of expressing ideas and meaning using a range of media
- beginning to use images and approximations of letters and words to convey meaning (EYLF, p. 42).

This e-Newsletter extends the discussion of creativity to include the creative use of language, problem solving and improvising as well as items in the list above.

At first, we may think of creative people as artists, sculptors, composers, cooks and chefs, architects or writers—people who create something tangible, something that we can touch, see, taste or hear. However, educators need to be creative thinkers who innovate, value originality and use their imaginations.

This e-Newsletter uses examples and quotes from Gowrie Victoria Docklands, Melbourne, where creativity is valued at all levels—in the curriculum for children, in the creativity educators bring to planning and implementing the curriculum, and in the service leadership—thus treating ‘creativity’ as an overall approach to practice.



Where does creativity fit in the curriculum?

The philosophy statement for Gowrie Victoria states that children should have opportunities to:

- imagine and create
- propose theories and reasons
- master skills
- have meaningful experiences
- express thoughts and ideas
- solve problems
- engage in reflective thinking
- explore diverse ways of knowing, thinking and learning. (Gowrie Victoria, n.d.)

All of these experiences nurture creativity.

Nurturing creativity starts with an image of children as wise and capable decision-makers about their own experience. As Karen, an educator at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands says: 'The starting point is what children already know. Often they know much more than we think they do. Our role is to give them a chance to share what they know.'

Children are born predisposed to be creative. It is our job to nurture children's creativity and allow it to flourish and find expression.



How might we support children's creativity?

In the physical environment:

- Provide lots of open-ended, natural and 'found' materials.

There is something inherently better about natural materials. Their naturalness encourages children to tune in to their properties and how to use them (Michelle, Manager Children's Program, Gowrie Victoria, Docklands).

- Make available a range of materials that encourage creative expression—for example, paints, blocks, paper, glue, textas, pencils and crayons.
- Include beautiful objects such as stones, shells, flowers, art prints, fabric and baskets.
- Improvise equipment and materials—for example making a teepee from palm fronds.
- Support children to feel a sense of ownership of, and responsibility for, equipment and materials—let them choose and help them learn to care for things.

In learning opportunities offered:

- Teach children techniques—for example, wiping a brush on the side of the paint pot to prevent dripping, using the right amount of glue, or maintaining balance in sculptures.
- Give babies and toddlers sensory experiences and opportunities to explore and experiment with materials.
- Introduce children to a variety of excellent examples of creative expression in art, architecture, inventions, music and dance.
- Use a range of books, stories and other media that lead to loving beautiful, powerful text.
- Allow big blocks of time and encourage efforts that extend over days or weeks.
- Integrate various types of music into the curriculum.
- Adopt a creative approach to routines—for example, collaborating with children to turn lunchtime into a restaurant re-creation.
- Plan opportunities for children to collaborate with each other and to be open to others' perspectives.

Example 1: Educators and children together made a list of roles children could take in the group. These roles included mediating when minor conflicts arose, being in charge of particular areas in the room, taking care of lockers, and making sure water was available to drink. Through this process, children learned to take responsibility in various ways.

Example 2: Karen and some children watched window cleaners at a nearby multi-storey building. The children were mostly interested in how the platform moved up and down. This led to erecting pulleys alongside the sandpit to be used to raise and lower buckets of sand and water.

Example 3: Children were interested in endangered animals. They decided to create a board game. They collected and drew pictures and established rules. The game and the rules evolved over several weeks as the children pursued this interest.

Example 4: A child wove a ball of wool around pieces of furniture, which led to wrapping the whole room! Instead of discouraging it, the educator watched to see where the experience would take children. The educator then showed children images of the large-scale artistic wrapping work of the artist Christo. This led to a long-term interest in weaving of all kinds—how looms work, hand weaving, weaving from different cultures, and examining spider webs. Karen commented that ‘weaving is embedded in that room because of that initial unforgettable experience’.

Creative approaches mean planning with an open mind and being open to possibilities that you would never have thought of beforehand (Karen).

It’s about how creatively you respond to children’s interests and what you choose to do about a topic or interest—going beyond the obvious. For example, when you notice that a child is interested in trucks, not just thinking ‘I’ll find some books on trucks and encourage her to do a painting of a truck’ but maybe encourage her to:

- look for trucks outside the centre, noting their colours, types, names and the different jobs they do
- collect all the trucks in the room and build a garage for them
- ask a local mechanic to talk to the children about how trucks are made and how they work—perhaps he or she could provide some parts so children could build their own.

Creative intentional teaching requires educators to see possibilities (Michelle).

In interactions with children:

- Encourage children to pursue their own original ideas, interpretations and expressions.
- Show that you value diversity and difference.
- Involve children in critical reflection and solving real problems.



Example 5: An educator engaged the children in solving the problem of glasses falling over when they cleaned up after lunch. The children came up with the solution: only two glasses should be stacked inside each other.

- Promote collaboration—highlight the benefits of bringing creative minds together.
- Allow children to make mistakes and help them to see that these can spark new learning.

Mistakes are fine because creativity demands risk-taking. Every mistake is an opportunity to learn (Karen).

Example 6: Karen has a book in the block area with photos of previous constructions. Children can look back and remind themselves about what worked and what didn’t.

- Model and demonstrate, improvise and make innovations.
- Ask children genuine open-ended questions, encourage them to ask questions and help them to find their own answers and solutions to problems.
- Encourage initiative, value ‘having a go’.
- Contribute useful and encouraging comments about children’s efforts when they are being creative.

Most importantly, have fun, value and enjoy each other in a secure environment where it’s good to ‘have a go’.



When children are confident they often know what they want to do. We just need to support them to do it (Karen).

When you take a broad view of creativity you have to manage families' expectations and weigh up your response. For example, families may be disappointed if children don't bring home paintings or if they don't make birthday or Mother's Day cards—in other words, they may expect conventional 'products' that demonstrate their child's creativity. We owe it to families to justify what we are and aren't doing and ensure that our practice makes sense to both children and families (Michelle).

Nurturing educators' creativity

Creativity isn't just in the doing. It's an attitude and approach that says, 'We'll learn from every experience.' You have to build a safe, secure place for educators and children, where it's okay to take risks and to make mistakes.

You need 'thought leaders'—people who see possibilities, have outcomes in mind and are comfortable knowing that you can't always know what exactly will happen. You have intentions but you don't let them constrain you.

Leadership and management have to be creative to encourage and support educators to be creative in planning and implementing the curriculum and to nurture creativity in children. There has to be a culture of empowerment and innovation—a community of learners where critical reflection and deep thinking are everyday practice, where all angles are explored. It's about shared decision making, but it's not always a matter of reaching consensus. Sometimes we ask people if they can live with a decision even if they don't agree (Michelle).

Michelle acknowledges that it takes time for both children and educators to discover strengths and skills and develop a sense of community, where each person contributes according to their strengths. 'Nurturing creativity is about identifying people's strengths and establishing an education community.'

Some questions for reflection

Do you tend to:

- give children answers, do things for them, or show them the right or best way?
- focus more on the product of creative efforts than on the process?
- offer craft activities where everyone does the same thing or children have few choices and where the emphasis is on following instructions (for example, colouring in or making cotton-ball Easter bunnies)?
- use mainly commercial toys rather than 'found' objects?
- rush children through routines with a focus on efficiency and cleanliness?
- make judgemental comments such as 'that's beautiful' or 'clever boy' in response to children's efforts?
- compare children's efforts?
- limit access to materials?
- ask lots of closed questions?
- display children's work without thinking about where, why or how?
- frequently display two or more pieces of children's work that look exactly the same?

If the answer to the majority of questions above is 'yes', you may want to reflect on the extent to which you are nurturing children's creativity and complying with NQS Element 1.1 (see the beginning of the e-Newsletter).



Conclusion

It is important for educators in early learning settings to recognise and show that they value the many manifestations of creativity.

Nurturing creativity translates into a 'can do' attitude at every level, where everyone—all staff, families and children—know they are valued, feel safe and secure, and so can take risks—that's what creativity is all about. It boils down to giving educators permission to be creative, to use their intuition, to have the confidence to be spontaneous (Michelle).

Some questions for reflection

In your work and in your setting do you acknowledge and encourage some kinds of creativity more than others? If so, why? What actions might you take to broaden the kinds of creativity you recognise and support?

What is one thing you can do to promote children's creativity and creativity overall in your workplace?

References

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Biography

Anne Stonehouse lives in Melbourne and is a consultant in early childhood. She was a member of the consortium that developed the national *Early Years Learning Framework*.

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An Australian Government Initiative

The NQS Professional Learning Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.



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