Talking about practice: Social and emotional learning

Introduction

Both the NQS and the national EYLF highlight social and emotional learning as critical from birth to support children’s wellbeing in the present and for the future. Social and emotional learning is featured in a number of the Quality Areas, Standards and Elements in the NQS, in the concepts of belonging, being and becoming, and in the Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes in the EYLF.

As a result, many educators are reflecting more deeply on what they do to support children’s social and emotional learning throughout the curriculum—in routines, the physical environment, their interactions with children and families and planned learning experiences.

Relationships between educators and children are central to children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The emphasis on educator-child relationships in the NQS and EYLF is motivating educators and services to review their policies and practices to ensure that they support building strong relationships with children. There is greater appreciation that strong relationships require knowing children well, and that respectful partnerships with families are essential.

Even if you believe that your service does a good job of supporting children’s social and emotional learning it can be useful to remind yourselves of practices that matter as a way of ensuring that they are intentional and remain a priority.

Each of the three segments focuses on one NQS Element and one EYLF Learning Outcome Component. However, there are strong links with other parts of the NQS and EYLF. While the focus is on social and emotional learning and the ways educators support it, many other topics are discussed and illustrated in the footage. While the richness of the video may present some challenges for the facilitator to keep the discussion centred on social and emotional wellbeing, the diversity of topics covered does point out very powerfully the strong connections between social and emotional learning, other areas of learning and all aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy.

The discussion and footage in services includes babies to five-year-olds in different settings. However, most of the messages are relevant to all settings and age groups. It is important to stress this in the discussions and help people think about implications for their practice.
Throughout the discussions around the video, highlight the importance of children's agency, the fact that children are active contributors to their own social and emotional learning.

Each segment can be used separately, or the three can be used together. For each segment there are suggestions of key points and possible questions for discussion and reflection. Although questions to guide your discussion are provided, you are best placed to think of other questions and issues for discussion that will meet the needs and interests of the people you are working with. Participants will also have their own comments and reactions, and of course it is important to respond to those.

An important part of using the TAPS is to decide on some actions that result and support those to take place.

Segment 1: Relationships and connections with others—Dalaigur Preschool and Children’s Centre

Quality Area 5—Relationships with children

5.2 Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.

Learning Outcome 2—Children are connected with and contribute to their world

2.2 Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation.

You could begin by asking what participants know already about social and emotional learning and what current practices in the service support that learning.

You could also have some discussion about current understandings about the role of educator-child relationships in children’s social and emotional learning.

The service in this segment clearly places a lot of emphasis on relationships with families. It is clearly one where families are welcomed, where they are respected and empowered and a high-priority is placed on their sense of belonging.

Janet suggests that the service can play a big role in supporting and strengthening family-child relationships. She speaks about a gardening day at the centre as an occasion where families and children can relate to each other in more relaxed and positive ways than they might at home.

Janet also mentions the power of children experiencing their parents being in the service.

- Why is this important for children's social and emotional wellbeing?
- What does it achieve?
- How do we encourage this in our service?
- It would be interesting to explore the extent to which participants see supporting parent-child relationships as part of their role.
Do you think we have a role to play in strengthening children’s belonging to their family?

Why or why not?

If you do think this is our role, what are some examples of practices that illustrate this?

Does our service offer opportunities similar to those at Dalaigur?

What could we do to improve or increase the number of ways that we support families to enjoy each other’s company?

The service obviously sees itself as having a role in promoting children’s wellbeing by finding out their interests and building on them and by helping children learn to identify and regulate their feelings.

How do we find out what children are interested in? How do we build on those interests?

Roslyn ‘Lotti’ Moseley mentions that children enter the service in different ways—some are relaxed, some anxious, some shy or hesitant. This is true in the beginning of participation and on an ongoing basis.

Why is it important to notice how children enter?

How can a relationship with an educator help children as they enter and settle in?

What is our experience of children settling in?

Lotti says that it takes most children a couple of weeks to settle in. Do you agree? What strategies do we use to help children settle in and feel comfortable and secure?

Janet talks about children helping children learn to name their feelings.

What is the value of children being able to identify or name their feelings?

How do we go about helping children learn to do this?

Do we encourage children to ‘own’ their feelings—to recognise and accept them?

How do we go about helping children learn positive ways to express their strong feelings?

Lotti and Janet imply that there have been some serious situations in the community that could affect children’s social and emotional learning. You may want to talk about the beautiful healing sculptures—a very explicit effort to help children cope with very difficult circumstances with tangible and lasting results. Janet says that one result of this project was families being amazed at what children could do.

Have we had that experience of families being surprised at what their child is capable of?

How does that support children’s social and emotional wellbeing?

Professionalism and ongoing professional learning are also very important in this service. Janet says that educators and staff are keen to be seen by others as professionals. They’ve put a lot of effort into this.

How does our service promote educators’ ongoing learning?

What are the signs that educators and staff in our service see ourselves as professionals? How do we think others see us?

Do we need to improve image in the community? If so, how can we go about it?

Lotti’s and Janet’s comments give the impression that this service is a powerful force in the larger community.

Think about your own service—would you say that it is a powerful force in the community?

Why or why not?

If so, give some examples.

If not, what can we do to strengthen our visibility in and contribution to the community?

Finish the segment by asking for one idea that people will take away and at least one action, big or small, that each person will take as a result of the discussion.

Segment 2: The physical environment and children learning to relate to others—The Kindergarten

Quality Area 3—Physical environment

3.2 The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.

Learning Outcome 1—Children have a strong sense of identity

1.4 Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.
You could begin this segment by asking one or more of the following broad questions about the physical environment before watching the video:

How does our physical environment:

- encourage children to act independently?
- promote and encourage interactions with other children?
- support children to understand their own feelings and develop empathy towards others?
- encourage responsive relationships between educators and children?
- assist educators to turn spontaneous opportunities into intentional teaching experiences?

Margaret’s first comment in answer to Judy’s question about how the environment supports social and emotional learning is that it is natural, and this is something they work on continuously.

- Why and how does having a natural environment support children’s social and emotional learning?
- How natural is our environment? What can we do to improve it?

Margaret makes the interesting point that they set up the physical environment to reflect the respectful image they have of children as capable and competent.

- What is our image of the child in this service? What is the evidence of that in our physical environment?

It is clear that Kylie and Margaret plan intentionally for children to have opportunities to learn to collaborate, empathise with and interact respectfully with each other. Small group experiences, family grouping for part of the day, having an indoor/outdoor program, the ways they set up the home corner and having pets are some examples of practices. In some services these opportunities may occur but are ‘taken-for-granted’ parts of the curriculum.

- What ideas can we adopt or adapt for our service?

What do we do to encourage collaboration and respectful interactions among children? What more could we do?

Margaret uses an interesting term—‘subtle intentionality’—as she talks about building on children’s interests.

- How does giving choices and having open-ended materials help educators to identify children’s interests and build on them?
- How do we help children learn to feel and express empathy?
- What are some examples that we have noticed of children showing empathy?
- How do we help children learn to feel and express empathy?

Kylie’s discomfort with Lizzie the lizard and the way they use that as a learning opportunity is interesting. In some ways it’s an example of an educator revealing herself to children.

- What do we think about Kylie sharing her discomfort with Lizzie with the children? What learning opportunities does that present?

There is considerable discussion in this segment about the learning opportunities that are built in to the environment and how these opportunities support children’s sense of agency and their social and emotional learning more generally. Margaret and Kylie talk about:

- children knowing where things are and accessing them independently or requesting that they are brought out
- making available lots of open-ended materials that can be used in many different ways
- providing materials and equipment that encourage collaboration
- having spaces that children ‘own’, where adults can’t go.

- What ideas can we adopt or adapt for our service?
The last dot point may provoke debate, as some people may think that it is risky for children to ever be out of sight. Encourage this discussion and invite different perspectives.

- Can children play hide and seek in our environment?
- Are there spaces where children can safely ‘hide’, be on their own if they choose?
- Are there spaces that children ‘own’? What does that mean?
- Why is it important to have these kinds of spaces? How do they support social and emotional learning?
- How can we provide them and still supervise children?

Many services, like this one, have a limited amount of space and/or space with limited possibilities for supporting children’s learning. This service has come up with some solutions in addition to creating an interesting and beautiful natural environment: using a ‘wild space’ across the road and going for neighbourhood walks. These are great learning opportunities for many reasons, but Margaret and Kylie speak about them as offering many authentic opportunities for children to express feelings. This is an interesting perspective about kinds of learning opportunities that might be overlooked.

- What does the idea that educators are researchers and learners with the children imply?

Many services, like Margaret’s, are in rural or more geographically isolated locations and therefore have limited access to external professional development.

- If that’s true of your service, what steps can you take to ensure that educators have ongoing opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge?
- What are the features of the service in the video that encourage educators to learn, to reflect, to question?
- How can we improve?

Finish the segment by asking for one idea that people will take away and at least one action, big or small, that each person will take as a result of the discussion.

**Segment 3: Planning for social and emotional learning—University Preschool and Child Care Centre**

**Quality Area 1—Educational program and practice**

1.1.6 Each child’s agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and influence events and their world.

**Learning outcome 3—Children have a strong sense of wellbeing**

Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing.

In the introduction, Judy talks about intentionally planned experiences. There are some misunderstandings about what the concept of intentional teaching means. You may want to explore this a bit, and establish that it doesn’t mean direct instruction even adult-initiated or led experiences. The term refers to educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in what they do.

- What is our understanding of the meaning of intentional teaching? What are some examples?
Lynley mentions the importance of having large blocks of time.

- How does having large blocks of time support children's social and emotional learning?
- Do we plan for large blocks of time? What gets in the way? Can we take steps to minimise obstacles? How might we begin?

Lynley talks about educators supporting children's learning in various ways. Some of those ways are planned in advance and others are decisions educators make as they work with children.

- What are all the ways that we support children's learning?
- Can we think of any examples of supporting children’s learning by standing back and not getting involved? [Point out that not getting involved can be an example of intentional teaching.]

Eileen says that the most important thing with babies is having a collaborative partnership with families.

- Do you agree?
- Do you agree that the younger the child the more important partnerships are? Why or why not?

She stresses the importance of using the time when parents are in the service with their children to observe how parents interact with their baby and to exchange knowledge. This is an important use of that experience, rather than seeing it mainly as a time for the parent to help the child settle in.

- How do we use the times that parents are present in the service to exchange knowledge about the child and to learn from the ways parents interact with their child?

It is significant that in talking about professional development for staff, Lynley mentions conversations with families and the information they provide as a source of new knowledge for educators. This comment reflects respect for parents as experts on their child.

- Do we take full advantage of the knowledge and insights that families have on their child?

- How can we encourage more sharing and how can we demonstrate to families how much we value the information they share with us?

Lynley and Eileen say that a strong sense of self and feeling connected to their educators are both critical for children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

- What do I think is most important for children's social and emotional wellbeing?
- How do we build social and emotional learning into our planning?

A specific practice that is part of the lunchtime routine in this service (place cards) is highlighted as contributing to social and emotional wellbeing and learning. It’s an interesting example, as although it is simple and straightforward, Lynley mentions several ways that it contributes to children’s learning.

- What learning opportunities does this simple practice give children?

Some people may react to this practice by noting that it denies children the opportunity to choose where they sit and who they sit next to.

- What do we think about this practice?
- What have we learned from discussing this example?

- How do we make sure that both in our planning and in taking advantage of spontaneous occurring events we promote children’s sense of agency and nurture confidence and a strong sense of self? What are some examples of doing this?
- How do we let children know that we value them?
- What skills and knowledge are required to ‘tune in’? How do educators gain those skills and knowledge?

In this segment there is considerable focus on babies.

- How do the messages in this segment about babies apply to older children?

This service has a generous allocation of time for reflection and planning.

- How can services where the time for planning is more limited build in opportunities for reflection about and planning for supporting children’s social and emotional learning?

Finish the segment by asking for one idea that people will take away and at least one action, big or small, that each person will take as a result of the discussion.
Conclusion

This TAPS reminds us that social and emotional learning opportunities occur throughout the whole curriculum—all aspects of the children’s experience. It also reminds of the importance of educators planning for these opportunities and using the ‘lens’ of social and emotional learning to interpret and analyse their observations of and interactions with children.

It emphasises the critical importance of two-way communication with families in order to build family-child relationships and to know the child well.

Before deciding on actions, you may want to remind participants about the major topics covered in the TAPS, all of which are looked at with the lens of social and emotional learning opportunities. These topics include:

- Relationships
- Planning
- Partnerships with families
- The physical environment
- Learning experiences or opportunities
- Educators’ professional learning.

You could ask the following questions in general or in relation to each topic:

- What have I learned?
- What action will I take as a result of what I have learned?
- What is the first step?

References and resources: