



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Promoting independence and agency

Childhood is a time of increasing independence. As children grow and develop they become more able to do things for themselves, to express themselves and to explore their world independently.

As newborns we enter the world completely dependent on others—for food, warmth, shelter and survival. Throughout our lives we remain connected to those around us. But we also strike out on our own, developing the confidence to explore and make sense of our surroundings, gradually becoming aware that we have influence and a measure of control over things that happen.

Humans are fundamentally social creatures. We live in families and communities and actively seek connections with others. One of our key roles as educators is to help children to relate to others in positive and collaborative ways. This emphasis on connection is strongly reflected in both the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). Alongside this sense of togetherness it is also important to help children develop a sense of themselves as individuals—with their own skills, strengths, likes and dislikes.

A focus on independence is sometimes criticised for promoting an individualistic, 'all about me' attitude. If we only focus on individualism then this may be the case. But if we place 'independence' within the wider context of community, then we help children to recognise the value of thinking about yourself as well as others. Then they can begin to understand the responsibilities that go with being an individual and a member of a wider society.



Why does independence matter?

Independence contributes to the development of self-esteem, identity and wellbeing. Doing something for yourself produces a powerful sense of achievement and success. When children have opportunities to make choices, to attempt tasks for themselves, and to take on increasing responsibilities, their sense of themselves as competent members of society grows.

We have a sense of 'agency' when we feel in control of things that happen around us; when we feel that we can influence events. This is an important sense for children to develop. Too often adults treat children as though they are incapable of making decisions or holding valid opinions. If instead we listen to and respect children's words and ideas, we model collaboration and cooperation and show that we recognise children's capabilities.

Independence and agency in the EYLF and NQS

Ideas relating to independence and agency are woven throughout the EYLF and the NQS, and are specifically mentioned in several places.

Element 1.1.6 of the *National Quality Standard* states:

'Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and influence events and their world.' (*Guide to the National Quality Standard*, ACECQA, 2011, p. 19).

Similarly, the EYLF's Learning Outcomes recognise the following:

- 'Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency' (Learning Outcome 1.2, p. 22).
- 'Children take increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing' (Learning Outcome 3.2, p. 32).
- 'Children are confident and involved learners' (Learning Outcome 4, p. 34).

For children to reach these outcomes we need to provide them with opportunities to develop the confidence to explore their world, to ask questions, to express ideas, to get things right, but also to understand that you can be wrong and learn from mistakes. Key learning dispositions such as curiosity, creativity and imagination, and learning processes such as inquiry, experimentation and investigation all presuppose a degree of child-independence.



Making choices

Allowing children to make choices for themselves is an important yet relatively easy step towards encouraging independence and agency. When we make materials and resources easily accessible, without the need for adult assistance, we promote children's ability to resource their own learning independently and successfully.

Open environments that allow children to choose whether they want to be indoors or outdoors, or whether they want to be alone or with company, encourage children to be aware of and take responsibility for their own preferences. Flexible arrangements around eating, sleeping, drinking, toileting and other routine parts of the day also encourage children to be responsible for their own physical needs and wellbeing. For older children, voting and other group processes for reaching agreement can help to give a sense of democratic decision-making in action.

Sometimes we avoid offering choices because that may not be compatible with an efficient daily routine. From an educator's perspective children's differing choices have the potential to complicate our day. Lunchtime, where a group of toddlers can serve their own lunch, is unlikely to be as quick or tidy as it might be if the meals are served up by an adult. Yet, if we recognise

the importance of choices for children's sense of identity and wellbeing, then we will gladly accept such 'complication' as a legitimate part of what we do. An environment without choices quickly becomes institutional; the exact opposite of what we want for children, families and for ourselves.

Of course, total free rein is not necessarily desirable either. While children are certainly capable of making many choices, their ability to do so develops over time and with guidance. Our role as educators is to help children develop the decision-making skills needed to make good choices, to help them to recognise the options that are available, and to recognise the responsibilities that come with particular preferences, while being a member of a group.

When introducing children to 'choice' it can be helpful to start with a small number of options. As children get used to making their own decisions then the number of options provided can be increased. To go from no choice to total choice is a disorienting experience. As educators, we can help to smooth this transition and ensure that children develop the ability to make successful decisions by providing a level of choice that is not overwhelming.

Example:

Providing children with a range of materials and resources from which they can freely choose allows them to exercise their independence and make their own decisions about what they will do. A learning environment that is orderly and organised so that children can select resources and activities sends the message that we trust children to make choices about the materials that they want to use and when they might want to use them. Once children become accustomed to greater independence and free access to materials, educators are better able to concentrate on engaging and interacting with the children rather than fielding constant requests for 'something else' from the storeroom.



Real tasks and responsibilities

Another way to develop independence is through providing real tasks and challenges that allow children to attempt difficult and challenging work. Experiences that are not simple and that require practice and perseverance help children to become resilient and provide a sense of tremendous achievement.

Cooking, gardening and woodwork are all examples of experiences that provide opportunities to use real tools or utensils and complete real 'adult' work. The sense of satisfaction that comes from doing something 'grown up' is hard to overestimate. Children live in a world where they are continually reminded that they are not 'grown up' yet, and that there are many things they are 'not yet ready' to do. Often there are good reasons for such restrictions. But even so, the constant feeling of not being able to do things can be damaging to children's sense of self and their ability to demonstrate their capabilities (rather than just their limitations). Perhaps this is why children respond so enthusiastically to real tasks.



Children at the woodwork bench, Dorothy Waide Early Learning Centre. From the NQS PLP Talking about practice series video: *Being Adventurous*.

In a recent episode of the NQS PLP's *Talking about practice* series educators at the Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning talked about the importance of risk-taking and challenge for children, and provided the example of children participating in woodwork experiences where they were able, under careful supervision, to use real tools and materials to make their own constructions. If we are not used to it, the idea of three- and four-year-olds pounding nails or cutting with a saw can seem downright dangerous. But if we consider the benefits to the children of participating in such experiences, and plan those experiences carefully, they provide a wonderful opportunity for children to demonstrate independence and competence as well as to feel powerful and successful.

Example: Involving babies and toddlers in routines

'Part of the routine in our babies and toddlers room is having the children help to collect the trolley for mealtimes ... so they walk down to the kitchen, they know the safe place to sit, they wait for instructions, and they're given tongs and bowls and a loaf of bread. They load the trolley up and they help to push the trolley back to the room. So they're involved in something that's a really important part of their day, not just a play experience that has been set up for them...

Encouraging babies and toddlers to really be a part of those routines and to help you—it actually makes your day easier and less stressful as well ... It means that you have more time to slow down and to interact and to really be with the children because you don't have to feel like you're thinking three steps ahead to the next chore.'

Belinda George, Educator and Lecturer

This example comes from the *Talking about practice* series video: 'I can do it!' Supporting babies' sense of agency, available at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/e-learning-videos/talking-about-practice/i-can-do-it-supporting-babies-sense-of-agency/.

Having a voice

When children have a say in what is going on around them, they start to develop the sense that their ideas and opinions matter. As educators we can encourage children's sense of agency by welcoming and responding thoughtfully and respectfully to their questions and ideas and, where possible, incorporating their ideas and suggestions when we plan and implement experiences. Allowing children a voice in what goes on means sharing some of our power and control, but it also helps to promote a more positive, open and cooperative dynamic between adults and children.

Vital ways of listening to and honouring children's voices include using children's interests as the basis for our programs; responding to children's criticisms or comments; and allowing children to help make decisions that affect them.

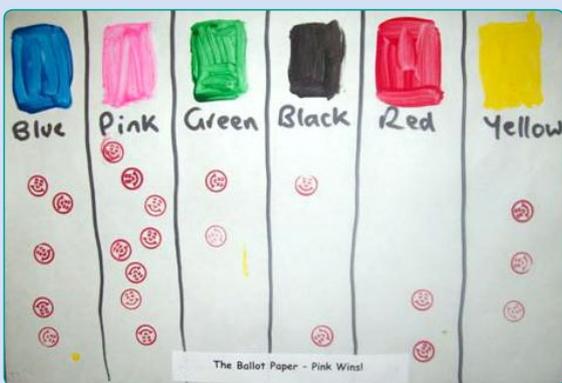
However, this listening can happen in more subtle ways as well. As educators we have a responsibility to respond to what children are telling us—both directly and through their behaviour and actions. Reading children's cues and responding to them is an important skill for educators to have. This is especially the case with very young children who may not be able to communicate their needs and wishes verbally.

For older children, discussion and debate are important ways that they can contribute to decision-making. For babies and infants that kind of contribution is not possible. However, when we respond to children as individuals, and shape our routines to accommodate children's own individual patterns (rather than the other way around) we begin to give the message that each child's 'voice' is an important one, no matter how young they are. If that message continues throughout a child's experience of our setting then we will have taken a significant step toward the creation of a positive sense of self that incorporates a healthy dose of independence and agency.

Example: Democracy 101...

As a teacher I have often used voting with preschool-aged children as a way of making decisions. It can be an effective way to help children realise the rights and responsibilities that go along with being a member of a group. It asserts the right to have an opinion and to make a case for it, while emphasising that others have opinions and ideas that also need to be considered. Often, as a group, children were able to reach consensus through discussion, with everyone agreeing on a course of action. But sometimes, when we were deadlocked, voting provided a way to find a resolution.

Of course voting with young children is not always straightforward. The idea of one vote per person is not a well-recognised principle in childhood and so, to ensure a fair ballot, we used a system where children recorded their vote with a stamp. After discussion of the issue at hand we would create a ballot paper that included visual representations of the available options. Each child could then indicate their vote by putting a stamp under the symbol representing their choice. In this way we avoided the problem of children submitting multiple votes as well as creating a record of the vote that could be counted (and re-counted if necessary) to determine the result.



Conclusion

Children are active learners. From birth they constantly seek to explore and make sense of their surroundings. When we recognise and make use of this fact we encourage the development of independence and promote effective learning.

By embracing children's input and encouraging their involvement, we enrich our work as educators. As the EYLF notes, 'viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities ... to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9).

We also extend children's learning and their sense of wellbeing. Promoting the development of independence, alongside interdependence, enables children to become active participants in their own learning as well as active and valued members of a group. Such experiences form the foundation for long-term successful learning, positive self-esteem and future success.

Luke Touhill

Early childhood consultant and writer

Biography

Luke Touhill is an early childhood consultant and writer. He has worked in early childhood for 20 years as a teacher, director, manager and trainer. As a teacher his interests include project-based learning and the integration of 'real' experiences such as cooking, woodworking and gardening, into early childhood programs.

Coordinating Editor

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011–12 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2013 series.

References

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