PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Since mid-July we have had the pleasure of working with ECA’s new CEO, Sam Page. While Sam has been making great progress in getting to know us and settling into leading ECA in its work we have been talking to her about ECA, and about our early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

Some things that impact on our work, whoever we are, have stood out in this including:

- Complexity—the histories and current work of ECEC services and program types, our theoretical understandings and professional practices, and approaches and standards in training institutions are among the many factors that contribute to complexity. As we work to achieve a national ECEC program that is consistent, well resourced and inclusive for children everywhere, (recognising the different services they need), it is important that we all respect this diversity and find solutions that respond to the complexity.

- Collegiality—the willingness of people and organisations to work together to achieve lasting outcomes for the wellbeing of children has contributed so much—from the day-to-day benefits for young children in ECEC initiatives such as the development of the Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Age Care. However, collegiality can be tested by the frustrations that inevitably arise where there are different experiences, expectations and understandings and limited resources. However, in all situations collegiality is important and worth guarding. Finding constructive ways through challenging situations brings better outcomes.

- Vision and commitment—whether we are teachers, educators, trainers, academics, service managers, government officials or members of parliament, being informed by values and principle and acting from these provide an enduring inspiration and guide. This is what energises many people in our sector, and has the potential to support us through the changes and challenges of quality improvement and rationalisation of the ECEC system.

Vision and commitment challenge us to step back from certainty and overcome personal, workplace, jurisdictional and political interests to achieve greater goals for the education and wellbeing of young children.

For all of us one of the most important goals is working to achieve the transformation of Reconciliation to gain equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

ECA is an organisation of principle and values. To achieve our best for young children and ECEC, we need to always work together with these and other qualities and to:

- find ways to include, welcome and develop new leaders, new mentors, and new practitioners
- reflect carefully and honestly
- keep learning, and
- advocate strongly and fearlessly.

We have just returned from the ECA National Council Meeting and Conference in Perth—wonderful gatherings of listening, learning, sharing, and thinking with so many colleagues! Thank you all, and please keep up your great work for young children. Watch ECA’s website and publications for information about the proceedings. Very best wishes to all, and please stay in touch.

Ros Cornish
Newly elected National President

Margaret Young
Outgoing National President
RESPECT, CONNECT, ENACT—DEVELOPING EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA’S RECONCILIATION ACTION PLAN

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs) are about turning good intentions into real actions. A RAP is a plan that uses an holistic approach to create meaningful relationships and sustainable opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians (Reconciliation Australia, 2012).

Early Childhood Australia’s vision for Reconciliation begins with our acknowledgement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original owners and custodians of Australia, and our recognition that their culture and heritage shapes the cultural heritage of all Australians. Our vision seeks a transformation of understanding, both personal and organisational, that ensures the promise of a strong future for every Australian child is realised.

ECA’s Reconciliation Action Plan builds on this vision to describe how we will transform our strong commitment to Reconciliation and our accomplishments to date, including ECA’s Code of Ethics, our Strategic Direction, and protocols for acknowledgement of country, into a set of measurable actions. By placing these actions into a plan, we make a public and strategic commitment to put words and ideas into action and to be accountable to our members and the sectors for their implementation.

ECA has worked hard over many months to develop a plan that reflects our national diversity, the complexity of the issues and our developing relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations. In this plan we are conscious not to declare an arrival point, but rather to articulate a set of beginning actions through which we formalise work to be done, relationships to be nurtured and stories to be told.

The plan outlines a detailed set of actions that are simultaneously ambitious and foundational. They will be led by the ECA Board, CEO and staff, enabled through branches and supported by our members.

Development process

The development of the RAP was made possible by the significant contribution of a number of people across Australia. Through a consultation process involving the National Board, branches, members and key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, several themes and ideas emerged, including:

- the overwhelming support for the formalising of ECA’s commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families
- the need to support branches and members individually to become more involved in this important part of ECA’s work and to take action themselves
- the necessity for further dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people (members, professionals and communities), and
- our obligation to establish stronger action and to generally be braver about our commitment.

Our ECA RAP

The RAP is a comprehensive document that spans a four-year period. The actions fall into three categories: Relationships, Respect and Opportunities, as well as a significant set of commitments that ensure we report on our progress, including:

- Engage our employees, branches, members and partners in understanding the protocols around Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country ceremonies and use these as opportunities for advocacy.
- ECA invests in the ongoing development of cultural competency within its staff team.
- ECA will use our relationship with government at all levels to promote policy decisions that enhance the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.
- Collect achievements, challenges and learnings from our members, the early childhood sector and Reconciliation Australia for inclusion in the Annual Impact Measurement Report.

At this stage the actions are largely focused on the organisation nationally (Board, CEO and National Office) in collaboration with our branches and members. It is envisaged that local efforts at branch level will be supported by this overall plan or indeed complement work that is already underway. We encourage members to get in touch with their local branch to find out more or check out our conversations on Facebook.

Copies of the RAP are available on the ECA website or via your local branches. For more information please see: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/ECA_Reconciliation_Action_Plan_web.pdf.

Catharine Hydon
Early Childhood Consultant

References:
DOVER STREET PRESCHOOL—KIDSMATTER EARLY CHILDHOOD PILOT SITE

I still remember hearing about the KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot beginning in over 100 preschools and long day care centres all over Australia. I knew straight away that I wanted to be a part of this fantastic initiative. Our preschool has a very small staff (just me and my assistant); we both agreed it would be a great opportunity for our community, families, and children—and for us—to become a pilot site. I was very excited when we were accepted. With a member of our committee joining us in our leadership team, we began to work on the first of four Components.

Component 1: Creating a sense of community

Component 1 focuses on services building a sense of community, which promotes feelings of belonging and connectedness for all children, families and staff.

- To identify what the families wanted their children to learn and what was important to them, we developed a survey and asked families to write what community meant to them on a ‘community tree’.

- There are 19 cultures in our centre. We asked each family to write and/or draw about their interests and culture on a piece of fabric, which we then displayed in our parents’ room. We incorporated aspects of each of these into our program, making books about them for each child. We also welcomed several families who came to share their interests/culture with the children and staff.

- We are fortunate to have a very large parents’ room. With the help and input of parents, we furnished it and made it a place with a sense of community and belonging for our families and visitors.

- As there are only two staff at our centre, we discussed how we both felt about each other. We both felt valued and appreciated. I include Jenny in all decision making and always ask and value her opinion. We work very closely together and communicate with each other numerous times every day. I could not do my job without her! We are a team.

Component 2: Developing children’s social and emotional skills

Social and emotional development has always been an area that I strongly advocate for and believe is an essential ingredient in early childhood and beyond. The KidsMatter Framework allowed me to look more deeply at how we could further support children’s social and emotional development on an everyday basis.

- We developed a rule book with the children, allowing them to help make the rules. This gave the children a sense of ownership and empowerment.

- We purchased the PALS social skills program which teaches children from three to six years of age about emotions and getting along, and used the program at group time and also on a needs basis.

- We introduced role-play scenarios at group time to help the children learn how to deal with conflict situations, gain confidence and stand up for their rights in an appropriate way.

Component 3: Working with parents and carers

We looked at how we could connect families with each other and also how we could further support families with relevant parenting resources.

- With permission from families, we established a contact list to enable families to meet outside kinder hours for play dates for the children and socialisation for the adults. This was a huge success and many of the families became close friends. We also started a morning tea group every month in our parent’s room.

- We asked parents what information and resources were relevant to their needs, and set up a resource area in our parents’ room, with a reading area and borrowing system that offered a range of DVDs, children’s books, adult reading books, etc, as well as KidsMatter tip sheets and information for families. We made sure we provided all our resources in several different languages. We also now run educational DVDs for families to watch.

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Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties

I was very interested in learning more about this Component as it was an area that I knew the least about.

- We set up procedures for addressing the needs of children and families, including a resource folder with information about support services.
- To reduce the stigma that is sometimes attached to mental health difficulties, we displayed KidsMatter and beyondblue posters and made KidsMatter resources constantly visible and available.
- The professional development helped me to identify signs of possible mental illness in families and children and address them in a timely, professional and appropriate way.

Although the pilot is now over we continue to go through each Component just as we did when we were a pilot site. KidsMatter Early Childhood is now embedded in our program, enabling us to reflect and think more deeply about what we do, why we do it and how we can do things even better. The connections between KidsMatter Early Childhood and the National Quality Standards (NQS) have meant I have been able to use our journey as evidence of how we are improving and meeting standards. It has been a wonderful opportunity that has benefited me, as a teacher and a mother, as well as the children/families attending Dover Street Preschool and our community.

Nicole Loveday
Director/Teacher Dover Street Preschool Centre

An extended version of this article was first published in Early Childhood Australia Victoria’s e-Newsletter. www.earlychildhoodvictoria.org.au.
I am writing this article after 10 weeks in my new role as CEO at Early Childhood Australia. This is a good time to pause and reflect. It’s particularly fitting that I have just settled into my seat on the early morning flight to Melbourne—I have become such a regular passenger on this flight that I could help fly the plane if they ever need a hand!

According to my quick calculations, I have attended 42 significant meetings or events, with at least half of those outside Canberra—Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Hobart, Launceston and NSW North Coast, to name a few locations. This amount of travel would be difficult to sustain—my long-suffering diary manager and my children both have strong views! Nonetheless it has been an important part of my induction. I have really valued the opportunity to meet ECA members through the branch meetings, service visits and sector events. In many of these conversations I have asked questions such as: What challenges are you facing? What is ECA doing well and what more could we do to support you? I hope that you will see your answers reflected in my work and that of the national organisation more broadly going forward.

It has also been very valuable to meet with stakeholders from federal and state government agencies, regulators, related peak bodies, consultants, experts, academics and advocates. I am gradually working my way through a small mountain of reading material but find it so much easier when I can place it into context through a conversation with someone involved directly in the work. I have also been asking lots of questions in these meetings—keen to better understand service delivery, quality standards, workforce issues, policy directions and long-term priorities. To everyone who has been generous with their time and wisdom, thank you.

While this has been a learning phase for me, there has been no loss of momentum in the National Office. Some significant recent achievements include:

- The 2012 National Conference Consulting the compass—defining directions in Perth, was one of the best yet with over 140 speakers (including four international keynotes) and 1,100 delegates.
- Our NQS Professional Learning Program is achieving record levels of engagement—over 39,000 people regularly receive newsletters, with all resources developed (videos, forums, articles and interviews) being well utilised.
- The evaluation of the KidsMatter Early Childhood pilot found positive outcomes are being achieved and highlighted the importance of supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children, so the program has now moved into the next phase.
- The publication Your child’s first year at school has been given a fresh look and is proving more popular than ever with primary schools—this is an important resource that early childhood services might also want to provide to parents.
- In conjunction with Early Childhood Intervention Australia, ECA has produced a Position Statement on the Inclusion of Children with a Disability in Early Childhood Education and Care that was launched at the Conference.
- Respect, Connect, Enact: ECA’s Reconciliation Action Plan 2012–2016 has been finalised, with thanks to Catharine Hydon and Reconciliation Australia. We are delighted that Professor Colleen Hayward AM will launch the RAP at the conference.

Before I sign off, I would like to extend my appreciation to Margaret Young who has clearly made an enormous contribution to ECA and to the ECEC sector more broadly—I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to work with her and I am grateful to have had her support during these early days at ECA.

I look forward to building on this initial phase and making a contribution that supports the important work done by early childhood educators on a day-to-day basis in every service across Australia.

Samantha Page
CEO
Early Childhood Australia
Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA) and Early Childhood Australia (ECA) have worked together over recent months to develop a joint statement to describe, inform and promote the inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental delays in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings.

The joint position statement by ECIA and ECA sets out our shared commitment to inclusion in ECEC. Its purpose is to create a vision for high-quality inclusive practices. It will assist everyone in ECEC services, as well as support professionals, to fully include children with a disability and to achieve high-quality outcomes for all children. It will also provide a framework for the development and implementation of policy and programs designed for all young children. The inclusive practices promoted by the position statement are characterised by the strong collaborative partnerships between children, families, early childhood educators and support professionals—a cornerstone of high-quality inclusive practice in ECEC.

Core position
Our position is that children with a disability have the same rights as all children, and additional rights because of their disability. They share with all children the right to be valued as individuals and as contributing members of families, communities and society. Every child is entitled to access to ECEC programs. These programs, recognise them as active agents in their own lives and learning, respond to them as individuals, respect their families as partners, and engage with their diverse backgrounds and cultures. This means that ECEC services and support professionals must be resourced and supported to the level needed to fully include children with a disability, and to achieve high-quality outcomes for all children.

Principles of the statement
The principles which underpin the position statement are:
- the best interests of the child
- the importance of families
- social inclusion
- diversity
- equity
- high expectations for every child, and
- evidence-based practice.

The statement links the codes of ethics of both organisations, to embed the values of social justice and social inclusion. There has been rapid development in knowledge about child development and learning over the past four decades. There is now a large body of evidence which shows that the relationships, interactions and experiences in children’s early lives have a profound influence on early brain development and future life outcomes.

The introduction of Australia’s first National Quality Framework (NQF) (DEEWR, 2012) is a powerful driver for achieving inclusion. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is a core part of the NQF. It provides a strong theoretical and philosophical foundation for respecting diversity and creating equity and inclusion for all children in ECEC programs.

Areas for action
ECA and ECIA have identified that action is required by:
- the ECEC and early childhood intervention professions
- service providers, educators and support professionals
- governments, organisations and institutions, including education and allied health training providers.

One common concern is the need to build the capacity of ECEC, and support professionals to help them provide high-quality inclusion. This calls for relevant undergraduate and postgraduate course content; ongoing professional development (including joint professional development) and mentoring; and the articulation of a shared set of standards for the practice of inclusion.

The joint position statement was launched at the National Conference by the presidents of ECA and ECIA. It is available in its full format at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/pdf/ECA_Position_statement_Disability_Inclusion_web.pdf.

References