One of the biggest issues early childhood educators face today is the increasing complexity experienced by families coming into the centres, with young children expressing ‘big’ behaviours. It’s often beyond the scope of what most early childhood educators were prepared for in their training.

Before starting primary school teaching, I completed a psychology degree and was working in a psychology clinic. This experience has helped me in the classroom and informed the way I have developed support programs for early learning professionals at The Benevolent Society over the last 11 years.

We were first approached in the early 2000s to help an inner city Sydney learning centre that was really struggling with the complexity of children’s behaviours coming into the centre, as well as social problems experienced by the parents. When we started to work with the staff, they were dealing with three- and four-year-olds who had very big tantrums—outbursts that could hurt other children and educators. The staff had very poor opinions of these children and their behaviour, and even believed the children were acting violently intentionally to upset them.

When we started to work with the staff, we invited the leaders of the centres into the centre to support the staff for 12 hours a week has been so effective. They coach and support the staff in the approach of being more socially and emotionally available to children and to support their development.

Another program that we run called Strengths Based Practice (SBP) is very successful because it brings educators together, to talk, to implement new approaches together and to change their practice. The first time we ran the SBP program we worked with 45 centres in Eastern Sydney. We invited the leaders of the centres into learning circles to discuss how they could implement new strategies in their centres over a period of 12–18 months. This enables them to be responsive to the needs of the community, the needs of parents, the needs of children, and build the capacity of staff at the same time.

In our most recent PIEC project working with childcare centres in South Australia, one early childhood professional described her own revelation:

‘... when a child behaves in that way, they’re actually not having a good time, they’re distressed ...’

The Benevolent Society, we’ve found that the biggest challenge for early learning educators in developing this more empathic approach to their students is integrating a relationships-based approach from child psychology and social sciences with their own early childhood education training.

That’s why we’ve also found putting a Family Support worker in the centre to support the staff for 12 hours a week has been so effective. They coach and support the staff in the approach of being more socially and emotionally available to children and to support their development.

One example of a new approach is asking educators to call the parents of each child in their class and tell them something that they appreciate about their child. At first parents are a bit shocked about getting a call out of the blue, but most of our educators said that the next time they saw the parent they said, ‘Thank you, that really made my day’. Even that simple practice started to change the expectation of parents about hearing from the early childhood centre—that it’s going to be good news, instead of bad—and that’s improved positive relationships between staff and parents.

We’re really keen to help shift thinking and practice so that we all see early childhood education centres as being key sites for early intervention—of putting in a range of supports for children and families before problems escalate.

Greg Antcliff
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The Benevolent Society

Reference