



Communicating with families

Over the last decade or so, progress in translating early childhood science and research evidence to everyday action has resulted in improved early childhood service quality across the board.

Most early childhood services do provide quality education and care for young children—they have well planned education programs and monitor and document children's development and learning. All centres have Quality Improvement Plans and evidence of their educational programs is provided to regulatory authorities.

Families have every right to be informed about educational programs and the ways in which an educational program supports their child's development, and especially preparation for school. When I talk with families though, some seem quite confused about what's actually happening in their centres. I sense there tends to be less focus on providing them with meaningful information about educational programs and children's development and learning progress.

While there has long been sensitivity in some areas of early childhood about 'school readiness' activities—and no one wants to see early education equated with 'worksheets' and other formal school-like activities—parents want to know what their children are learning, especially in the year or two before school. Given that a major goal of early childhood education, especially in the 'preschool' year, has been and should be supporting children's transition to school, families rightly want to know how this support is delivered.

Just last week a concerned parent was telling me about the inability of her four-year-old daughter's early childhood educator to provide meaningful information about the centre's educational program. Not unreasonably, this parent wanted assurance that the program was designed to support her child's language development and early literacy, problem solving and social development and specifically 'readiness' for school.

Unfortunately, the educator she spoke with seemed unable to provide this information. The educator kept insisting that the program was 'play-based' but couldn't provide any details or explanation of what 'play-based' meant in terms of the child's learning. She was unable to talk about the educational programs, learning activities, how they were planned, or the intended development and learning outcomes. There was no mention of the *Early Years Learning Framework*, how the centre planned for learning, or how children's progress was tracked and documented, and the centre did not appear to have a relationship with a local school.

While this might be an isolated incident, my long experience in the early childhood sector tells me it is not. Too often educators are unable to articulate the nature of relationships between development, curriculum and pedagogy, and how (and why) we plan for and assess children's learning in an early childhood context. Yet, communicating

our programs effectively to families must be central to our educational repertoire if we are to engage with families and work in partnership to support and optimise each child's development. Too often, I get the sense that some educators believe that only 'pushy' parents want details about what and how their children are learning.

The *National Quality Framework* aims to ensure more consistent quality across early childhood services and suggests a more professional and consistent discourse and terminology around development, curriculum and pedagogy. As we well know, each early childhood context is culturally unique and the *Early Years Learning Framework* requires educators to interpret outcomes and enact programs and modes of engagement in ways that work for their communities, families and for individual children.

Whatever focus a centre takes, the role of communicating our policies and practice is critical—we must be able to articulate both what we do and the value of what we do. We must talk with families and other stakeholders about the important role of an early childhood program in stimulating development and building the structures and constructs for learning, including transition to school.

Communicating effectively about child development and early learning is critical to our work. Extending the task of communicating with families is that of communicating with other stakeholders. Of particular interest in this issue of *Every Child* is Martel Menz and Anthony Semann's article—Advocacy: It's everyone's business. Their call to re-focus on advocacy work in early childhood education and champion its role in promoting the importance of early childhood is spot on. Grasping 'the opportunities for advocacy and activism' and making it 'our professional responsibility' requires us to articulate the value of early childhood science to everyday action and the key role of early learning to optimise developmental outcomes. As usual, all the articles in this issue relate to building and maintaining excellent programs in early childhood but we need to ensure that we can articulate operational, 'on the ground' dimensions of quality educational programs to families as well as to regulators.

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A very useful ECA free article 'Why play-based learning?' is available on the ECA web site and provides lots of good ideas about ways to communicate the value of early childhood curriculum and pedagogies.

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/every-child-magazine-play-based-learning-article/