



Planning for Empowerment: Growing a mentally healthy generation



With delivery partners



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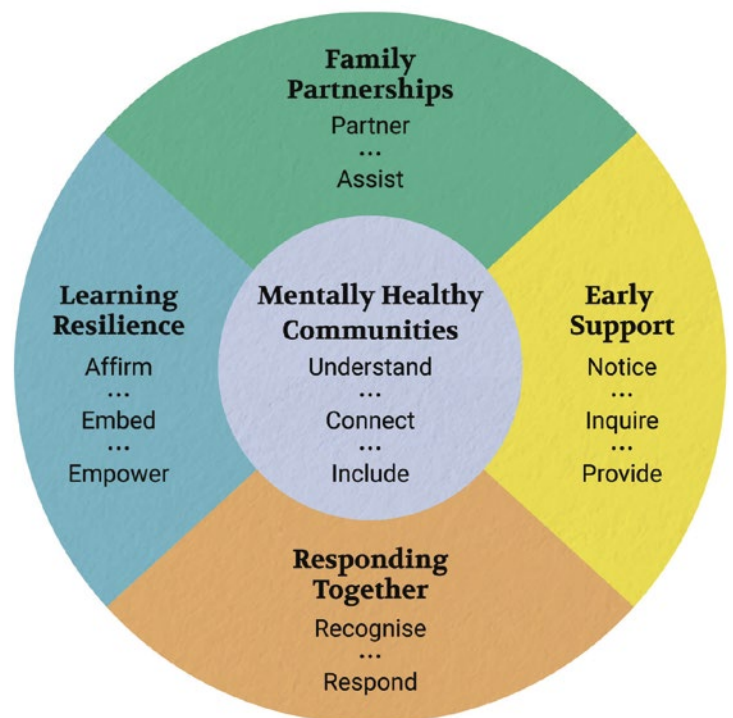
Be You offers a whole learning community approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing in your early learning service or school.

A whole learning community working together can create empowering environments and relationships that promote the mental health of children and families. This underpins Be You’s vision that every learning community is positive, inclusive and resilient—a place where every child, young person, educator and family can achieve their best possible mental health.

Read and reflect on the concepts, ideas and strategies in this resource with your team to:

- create a shared definition of children’s empowerment
- explore what influences children’s empowerment
- understand the rights of children and embed them in everyday practice
- consider empowerment from a child’s perspective
- make practical connections, linking your Be You learning with ways to create empowering environments and the National Quality Standard.

You can also explore these concepts further the next time you check in with a Be You Consultant. Ask your Consultant about the online version of this resource too.



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Understanding empowerment

In the early childhood sector, empowerment is widely considered beneficial to children's learning, development, mental health and wellbeing. This is because children build resilience through making their own decisions and knowing that adults respect, value and listen to them.

Growing a shared understanding of children's empowerment is important.



Reflect together

Consider if everyone in your learning community understands empowerment in similar ways. Reflect on how you know about each other's perspectives and the potential consequences of having different understandings.

Empowerment ...

- understands children as competent, capable young citizens
- promotes children's contributions as well as a sense of agency, visibility and voice
- ensures children participate on their own terms, have influence over decisions that affect them and contribute in their everyday environment
- conveys care, respect and fairness towards children
- exists when children have a positive sense of self-worth, self-acceptance and self-determination.



Key terms used throughout this booklet can be found on the back cover.

Cultivating children's empowerment through critical reflection

Reflecting on relationships, partnerships and pedagogical strategies through the lens of child rights can cultivate children's empowerment. To do this we can consider how our choices and actions communicate the ways power, democracy and ethical positions influence our learning community. We can start by reflecting in the following ways.

Consider our values

Consider what values underpin your perspectives and practices.

Values influence how we understand the world, including how we create the image of a child and our professional identities. When our values position adults as always knowing best, and children as vulnerable, there's a risk that we will overlook children's perspectives, preferences and needs, and reduce their opportunities to demonstrate and grow agency.

Notice unconscious bias

Unconscious bias contributes to advantage and disadvantage in our society. Everyone develops unconscious bias through socialisation, while we learn about and accept unwritten rules about social behaviour and belonging. As well as in individuals, these biases can occur in educational systems.

Unconscious bias can underpin actions that advantage some and disadvantage others. Experiences of advantage, or disadvantage, can interfere with empowerment for all children. This includes children's capacity to know, understand and enact their rights.



Reflect together

What values, beliefs and biases shape our understandings of empowerment?

Think about democracy, power and ethics

Active partnerships between educators, children and families support children's empowerment. Partnerships vary because children, educators and families within a community generate ideas, develop plans and act together in their own unique ways. However, everybody has a voice.

Respecting, valuing and responding appropriately to all voices supports individual and collective wellbeing and aligns with the leading philosophical, pedagogical and practical approaches in early childhood education and care.

How we view democracy and power influences how we listen and respond to voices within the community. Work to establish practices in which all voices are always included.



Reflect together

Consider what democracy means in your community.

Explore the Empower module from the Be You Professional Learning to inform your philosophy and practice.

Put a spotlight on practice, pedagogy, process, philosophy and environment

Promote children's empowerment by regularly considering the extent to which you:

- view children as having rights, including the right to learn about their rights
- know and understand the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- remain curious about how your values influence your thoughts, feelings, and actions
- engage with children about their preferences and provide choices
- examine learning experiences, relationships, routines, rituals and transitions
- reflect on who initially makes decisions, who is privileged, and who is not.

Listen to language

Language is powerful. It can help us identify values, unconscious bias and ethical positions, and understand our perspectives about democracy and power.

Using phrases like 'a child is being empowered' can suggest that empowerment comes from whoever has the most power. Pedagogy that uses language to acknowledge children as actively demonstrating agency in all aspects of their environment ensures empowerment.

Examine relationships and partnerships

Relationships and partnerships enable us to learn from and teach each other, and to facilitate empowering environments that recognise, value and celebrate diversity and difference.

Through inclusion, storytelling and positive relationships, we grow partnerships where everyone can contribute ideas, influence decisions and safely agree or disagree. Everyone can share who they are and communicate their needs, goals, challenges and aspirations.



Reflect together

Be curious and communicate with families, colleagues, children and the community to understand how empowerment looks, feels and sounds.

An empowering environment is one where everyone benefits. It needs to include everyone: children, educators, families and the wider community.

Explore how your community acknowledges, considers, celebrates and learns from diversity and difference. Also, consider actions, processes and practices that could leave children, families and communities susceptible to discrimination.



Creating empowering environments

Adults can promote children’s empowerment—either individually or via organisations and systems—by understanding and acting in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

This includes creating empowering environments where all children are active contributors in matters that affect them and ensuring that, as citizens, they aren’t discriminated against for civil, political, economic, social or cultural reasons.

There are no special recipes or formulas. However, foundational elements for creating empowering environments can include:

- growing positive relationships that support children’s empowerment
- valuing and viewing children as capable and competent learners, decision-makers and active contributors to the world and community
- actively engaging children as partners in all aspects of their daily routines and learning
- providing opportunities for children to take increasing control of decisions and learn about their rights through choices in play experiences
- critical reflection, intentionality and educator actions that connect to philosophy, pedagogy, practices, processes and curriculum.

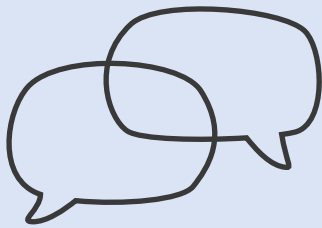


Reflect together

Consider what facilitates, and challenges, empowering environments.

Empowering environments uphold children's rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child explains the responsibilities of signatory countries to protect children's rights. The rights are all equally important, connected and cannot be denied. Children also need opportunities to learn and enact their rights.



**Reflect
together**

How does your learning community's philosophy reflect policies, beliefs and understandings about children's rights?

How is your learning community's philosophy reflected in your pedagogy, practice and processes?

What resources, rules and routines acknowledge children's voices and support their active participation in shaping their learning environment?

How do we listen, hear and respond to children's voices?

How do we know children are learning about, understanding and enacting their rights?

Download

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.

The children's version: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text-childrens-version>.

The children's version as a poster (PDF): <https://www.unicef.org/media/56661/file>.

Planning for empowerment

Empowered children learn about, understand and enact their rights as young citizens.

Fill in and share how you support and witness children ...

Learning about rights



Understanding rights



Enacting rights



An empowering experience case study

Three-year-old Rima was playing on the cargo net, painstakingly climbing higher and higher. She was concentrating on where she placed her feet and smiling as she ascended. Mary, the educator moved closer, trying to maintain a calm but alert demeanour, and continued observing her.

Rima was in her third week at the early learning service. She was starting to be more adventurous in exploring the learning environment. Rima had not spoken since arriving but would nod and smile and tap the educators on the arm when she wanted something. Her aunt, who brought her each day, said she understood some English. Rima was also diagnosed with spina bifida just prior to starting at the service, after an investigation of why she was constantly falling over. She was experiencing numbness in her legs.

Mary, the educator, was still watching Rima closely. Just as Rima stepped to the next rope, she missed her footing and was precariously hanging by one arm and one foot. Mary grabbed her, supporting her, and asked, 'Do you want to come down or do more climbing? Up or down?' Mary gestured with her free hand as she spoke.

Rima smiled, nodded and pointed up. Mary said, 'Okay, but I'm going to stay with you to watch'. She supported Rima to secure her hold on the rope and then stepped back a little. Rima smiled as she moved confidently to the next foothold on the net.

Case study reflection

Think of a time you made a decision to step in, stand back or do something else after observing a child playing in ways you assess as risky.



Why did you make your decision, and would you do anything differently next time?

Having opportunities to exercise agency and autonomy is a protective factor for the mental health and wellbeing of children because this aids the development and maintenance of resilience. While our motivations to intervene, or not, generally come from an intention to protect and a desire to support learning, it is important to have a balanced approach.



Reflect together

Consider what these actions might signal to children about their capability to make decisions and their developing sense of autonomy as a learner.



A child's experience of empowerment

Empowerment is about developing citizens who know they have value and how equality, equity, democracy and privilege are enablers of empowerment.

In an empowering environment, we will observe children:

- being visible, and having a voice
- participating, contributing and influencing their world
- having opportunities to learn about and enact their rights.



Reflect together

- Are children empowered if their peers do not feel valued and accepted?
- What opportunities do children have to learn and develop the capacity for self-determination and agency?

Children learn from hidden curriculum and unconscious bias

The visibility of some and invisibility of others reinforces inequalities and biases that detract from empowered environments. When advantaged by unconscious bias, children receive positive messages; when disadvantaged, they don't. Visibility communicates children are worthy and valued for who they are. This is a protective factor for mental health.

Noticing and valuing individual identity, differences, abilities, background and culture during your interactions and learning experiences supports all children to be visible, and have a voice and a sense of agency.

A good start is critically reflecting on your curriculum.



Reflect together

- How visible are all children in your community?
- Take 60 seconds and try to list the children you work with.
- Think about how well you really know each child and their family.
- Reflect on how children might see themselves as visible and represented in your learning community.
- Consider what it means about visibility and representation if you did not list some children in the 60 seconds, and if symbols and materials in your environment do not affirm children's identities.

How we play matters

Play is essential for children to learn, practise and develop their skills, knowledge and understanding. This requires educators to know when and how to step back or step forward, to allow space for children to explore, practise and grow.

Educators make these decisions in a range of situations, including when children are:

- involved in risky play, such as climbing
- developing new skills or attempting to conquer new challenges like sharing, taking turns, resolving conflict, and eating, drawing, crawling, walking, talking, dressing and related motor skills
- making decisions about matters like play, friendship, sleep and food choices.

Play experiences contribute to and influence children's empowerment through the ways in which:

- the learning environment is presented
- educators collaborate with children in planning
- experiences, materials or equipment offer opportunities for making choices and decisions, and taking risks
- educators assist children to understand themselves, their relationships and the world around them
- educators support children's developing sense of equity, equality and democracy, to enhance, the visibility and advantage of all children

- interactions between children, their peers, families and educators promote a developing sense of self, self-determination and agency
- opportunities are presented to express, regulate and understand emotion in oneself and others.

It is important to acknowledge that not all play experiences positively influence children's empowerment and wellbeing. Educators can often mitigate the negative influence of play experiences, however, through warm, nurturing and responsive relationships and intentional practice.



Reflect together

Identify who benefits most and least from the existing relationships in your learning community and the usual ways of learning, playing and communicating. How can your learning community promote empowerment for all children?



Empowerment and the National Quality Standard

Strategies that support empowerment might challenge existing power relations, and perhaps even how we understand the image of children and our own professional identities.



Reflect together

To what extent do children's rights, and an understanding of children as autonomous, capable and competent contributors to our world, influence how we think and behave as professionals?

When we critically reflect on our collective image of the child and our professional identities as educators, we can consider our role and the children we educate and care for in many ways and from multiple perspectives.

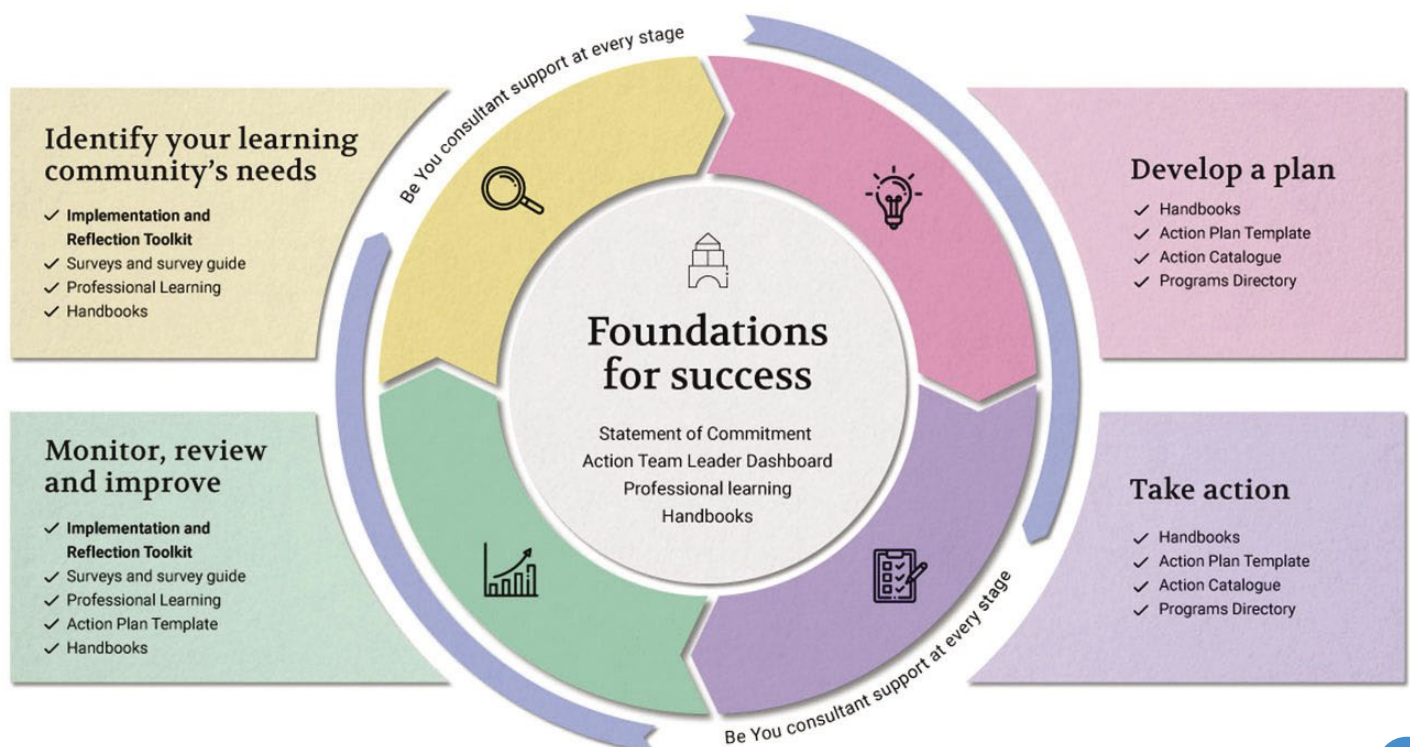
Engaging with the National Quality Standard can also guide this reflection.

The following pages provide Be You tools and resources, and examples of practice that connect your learning and actions to the National Quality Standard. This section demonstrates how educators can create and influence children's empowerment using a whole learning community approach.

Be You aligns with existing national frameworks and standards, and supports the 'Exceeding' themes in the National Quality Standard by embedding best practice, critical reflection and meaningful engagement.

Be You also supports continuous improvement and links with your Quality Improvement Plan.

Services and schools that register with Be You can use the Be You Implementation Cycle and our other tools and resources to guide and strengthen practice across all Quality Areas of the National Quality Standard.



Consider these Be You tools and resources*

Quality Area 1

Fact Sheets: *Why play is important*, *Building confidence in children* and *Self-regulation*; Be You Professional Learning: the Empower module in the Learning Resilience domain; Explore Always Be You resources

Quality Area 2

Wellbeing Tools for Students; Fact Sheets: *Nutrition and mental health* and *Physical activity and mental health*; Be You Professional Learning: the Empower module in the Learning Resilience domain, the Mentally Healthy Communities domain and the Early Support domain

Quality Area 3

News item: *Sensory spaces for mental health and wellbeing*; Planning and Implementation Tools: the *Actions Catalogue* and *Make Be You Visible* posters; Be You Professional Learning: the Empower module in the Learning Resilience domain

Quality Area 4

Mental Health Continuum; News item: *Creating a Staff Wellbeing Policy*; The Share and Extend Guide

Quality Area 5

Be You Professional Learning: the Empower module in the Learning Resilience domain; The Behaviour Emotions Thoughts Learning and Social Relationships (BETLS) Observation Tool; Explore Always Be You resources

Quality Area 6

Fact Sheet: *Communication skills for educators*; Explore Always Be You resources; Be You Surveys; Be You Professional Learning: the Empower module in the Learning Resilience domain

Quality Area 7

The Be You *Statement of Commitment*; The Implementation and Reflection Toolkit; 'Get started' menu on the Be You website: *Supporting your existing priorities*; Be You Professional Learning: the Empower module in the Learning Resilience domain

*Registered Be You Learning Communities can access these resources via the Be You website.

QA1

Educational Program and Practice

One service's educators reflected that while they offered many table-based experiences such as puzzles and drawing, there were fewer opportunities for children to take risks in their play or make independent choices about what they wanted to do. To change this, educators left several tables un-resourced and instead let the children decide how they would use them. The children thought creatively about how to use the space, and worked on solving problems related to access and participation with minimal adult support.

QA2

Children's Health and Safety

A family day care service educator shared with a Be You Early Years Learning Community about their collaboration with children to create an outdoor relaxation area with a waterfall, cushions and a garden. The children now choose how they use the space. Some participate in yoga and others care for the garden by watering the plants and flowers. These empowered children demonstrate autonomy and recognise how they can influence their own health and wellbeing.

QA3

Physical Environment

A school age care educator had high but achievable expectations for children, and worked together with them to build individual wooden creations. The children willingly participated in tool safety training before using real tools to hammer and drill. Their final creations included a birdhouse and a real, functioning gate.



QA4 Staffing Arrangements

After exploring two Be You Fact Sheets—*Staff wellbeing* and *Mindfulness*—an Action Team Leader found educators were more openly sharing how they were feeling and actively encouraging help-seeking behaviours in the community. The Action Team Leader said she felt the *Wellbeing Tools for You* resource had helped create a safe space for educators, which in turn created a more engaged and sustainable workforce.

QA5 Relationships with Children

The Connect module in the Mentally Healthy Communities domain of Be You Professional Learning explores the importance of developing positive and respectful relationships. After becoming familiar with this module, one educator asked children to assist in updating their sleep, play, food and comfort preferences, using forms that had previously been completed by educators and families. In doing so, these empowered children actively participated in communicating their needs and preferences.

QA6 Collaborative Partnerships with Families and Communities

One service created a wellbeing display featuring Be You resources about play, mental health and wellbeing. The increased accessibility to resources and information empowers families to grow community connectedness and mental health literacy.

QA7 Governance and Leadership

A school age care coordinator prioritised educator and child wellbeing by creating a schedule to complete the Be You Professional Learning modules, and ensured professional learning was on the agenda at each team meeting.

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Key terms

Agency: Making choices and decisions to influence what happens in your own world.

Democracy: Social structure where everyone has the opportunity to have their say.

Diversity and difference: Understanding, recognising and acknowledging individuals for their uniqueness along the dimensions of age, race, religion, gender and gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ethnicity and culture, education level, family arrangements and circumstances, personality, interests and abilities, disabilities and physical attributes.

Equality: Everyone is the same in all ways—status, power, access, capacity, and opportunity. This has implications for everyone getting the same regardless of need or benefit.

Equity: Not everyone is the same—status, power, access, capacity, and opportunity. However everyone has access to what they need to participate and belong.

Hidden curriculum: The informal and unintentional teaching about unwritten attitudes, beliefs, values and expectations.

Privilege: Special rights or advantages for specific people or groups.

Self-determination: Making choices independently and taking responsibility for actions.

Unconscious bias: Learning and accepting beliefs that can advantage some and disadvantage others.

Helplines

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

Lifeline: 13 11 14

headspace: 1800 650 890

1800Respect: 1800 737 732

MensLine Australia: 1300 78 99 78

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

Links

Be You: beyou.edu.au

Professional Learning: beyou.edu.au/learn

Empower module of Be You Professional Learning: beyou.edu.au/learn/learning-resilience/empower

Resources (Tools and Guides, Fact Sheets, Always Be You, Events): beyou.edu.au/resources

Register with Be You: beyou.edu.au/register

For more information, contact us: beyou@earlychildhood.org.au



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