



# Strengthen child safety in your early childhood setting: A message for service leaders

Recent cases of the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children in early childhood settings have been shocking and devastating. The extensive media coverage and social discourse have brought the safety of all early childhood services into question and has damaged the confidence and trust that families and communities have in the early childhood sector.

If being an early childhood educator, teacher or leader is part of your identity and usually provides you with a sense of pride and fulfillment, it is natural that you may be feeling betrayed, overwhelmed and upset. It may feel inconceivable that anyone employed as an educator would deliberately harm children and that this could occur in an early childhood education and care service, despite regulatory frameworks meant to protect children and support professional practice.

Within your team, educators may be experiencing disbelief, dysregulation and deep distress. Families may be feeling scared, they may have lost trust in your team, they may be demonstrating heightened anxiety, and this may impact on children and their feelings of safety or security. It is a very difficult time.

There will be significant national and state government responses, but within all of this we understand that service leaders need to act in the short term to demonstrate professionalism and to build or rebuild confidence among staff and families.

## Returning to the foundations

Before we leap into unknown territory and take on a swath of new practices, let's find our feet on steady ground.

In times of great challenge, one of the most essential things that professionals can do is return to the foundation of our practice. What we know from well-understood research and evidence, combined with our practice wisdom, is that this is in the best interests of children, families and those who care and educate.

Leaders can support their teams to respond to difficult circumstances by inviting them to return to our professional foundations. Early childhood professionals in Australia have a significant collection of resources from which to draw. One of the most important guiding documents is the **Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics**. Many educators first encounter this document during their studies, and it is often displayed in staff rooms across countless early childhood services.

In times of uncertainty, it is our values and principles—not rigid rules, restrictions or reactive responses—that lead us toward clarity and the right path.

We need to restore our moral compass and strengthen our principled decision-making. These resources help us determine how we act as ethical professionals committed to the rights and best interests of children and their families.

These decisions are different from what is required under the law by authorities and regulators. There will be many directives from government departments and other authorities specifying what you must do.

However, there are many other times when you and your team, as professionals, must choose the right course of action. No one can make these decisions for you. By using the ECA *Code of Ethics* as a guide, and by collaborating with your colleagues, you can thoughtfully consider and decide what the right action is in each unique situation.

For example, there may be times when it is important to join together with colleagues to advocate for actions that protect children. In other circumstances, it may be necessary to step back and ensure that those with the right or responsibility to speak are heard. Throughout, it is crucial to understand and follow legal requirements because of the regulated nature of our work. At the same time, the ECA *Code of Ethics* can help you reflect and decide what you ought to do in each circumstance, supporting thoughtful, ethical practice.



Click here to find the Early Childhood Australia *Code of Ethics* and links to resources to help embed the code in your service.

## Why do I feel so bad?

When your profession—one to which you have devoted countless hours, days and weeks—comes under deep scrutiny, it can feel like a shock. When someone who you thought of as a colleague betrays your trust and undermines the credibility of a sector's work, it feels like a body blow.

The fundamental principles and daily commitments you and your colleagues have upheld, day in and day out, through Covid-19, staffing challenges, sector reforms and the plethora of complexities that make up service delivery, seem to be brushed aside for a narrative that we do not recognise.

We are navigating **professional grief**—and it's okay to feel the full range of emotions that come with change and uncertainty. Acknowledging these feelings is an important step towards collective healing, growth and renewed purpose. We feel:

- **anguish** for the children and families affected by this terrible event and others like it
- **despair** that all our efforts to promote our professional identity seem to be slipping through our fingers
- **rage** that individuals who called themselves one of us could use our profession to harm children
- **shame** that this could happen on our watch.





## Take action

Three core actions will help us maintain our professional dignity and strength in challenging times:

### Fidelity:

Do what we say we will do, with integrity, persistence and excellence, every time.

### Consistency:

Show up and deliver high-quality care and education for every child and every family, day after day, despite any worries or concerns.

### Communication:

Clearly and respectfully articulate what we do and why we do it. Share our story—one of best practice and advocacy for all children—not just as a reaction, but as a testament to our values and expertise.

So, what should early childhood professionals do when the integrity of their work is challenged, especially when various stakeholders—some with good intentions and others seeking to push their own agendas—enter the conversation? How can we show our commitment to the values that our predecessors fought to establish?

The answer is both straightforward and demanding: We must embody the highest standard of our professional selves. This means, in every possible way, demonstrating and communicating what it truly means to be a professional in early childhood education.

It means being our best professional selves.

It does not require inventing something new or adopting the latest trend; rather, it calls for a return to our professional foundations—the principles and practices that research and experience prove enrich the lives of children and their families. These foundations are not hidden away; they are present in the everyday philosophies, policies and practices of early childhood educators across Australia.

By consistently demonstrating exemplary practice and showing how we support children to thrive, we can restore confidence in our profession and stand firm against those who would undermine our work and place in society.

*Each setting may look different, but together we stand up for children's rights and dignity, ensuring they grow, learn and are equipped for life ahead.*

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