



Being a professional in challenging times



Being a professional is easy when the sector you are part of is going well. When you are well trained and well supported, when the community you serve understands what you do and why, and there are systems in place that maintain the safety and wellbeing of all involved and support your knowledge and expertise, you can feel rightly proud of who you are and what you have achieved.

But when the opposite is the story of the times, when saying you are an early childhood professional brings unwelcome commentary and questions you cannot answer, then what?

It's not time to hide – it's time to step up and claim the best of who we are and reject those who undermine or question our place in the community. We must be at the side of children, supporting them to thrive.

Professional identity

Defining our professional identity is an ongoing collective and individual responsibility, but perhaps the work of Joan Faragher and Glenda MacNaughton (professional giants in the history of early childhood in Australia) is a good place to start. Let's take a look at their advice in the light of recent challenges:

Be autonomous—be able to decide the best course of action, not to be dictated to

Your email inbox will be full of solutions and deals, and many people will want to tell you what should happen. Pay attention to what you are required to do by the National Law and Regulations to comply with and seek authoritative evidence-based insights. Then decide the course of action.

Abide by the Code of Ethics

Reactivate your commitment to the ECA *Code of Ethics* and use the Code to make decisions about your practice.

Ensure standards of high quality are always used and never compromised

It might go without saying, but not for professionals. Check and double-check and then check again—high standards and uncompromising commitments to quality keep children safe.

Be altruistic—provide a high quality of service beyond paid hours

No doubt, many professionals have put in the extra hours to reassure families and colleagues that children are safe and that practices are strong. This commitment needs to be balanced by taking time to look after your own wellbeing and turn it off.

Commit to ongoing professional learning—sustained engagement in quality training takes place in credible institutions and is continuous

The credibility of training and ongoing professional learning is critical—look for people and places you trust. Make sure that the time dedicated to learning builds confidence, skills and expertise of the team; otherwise, don't waste your time and resources.

Have specialised knowledge—strong, clear knowledge of children and their families

Qualifications matter—they always have, but now more than ever. Celebrate the knowledge, verify the achievements, and respect the results.

Do work that is considered socially necessary—society is better for the contribution

Remember that early childhood education contributes to the wellbeing of whole communities—this is now well understood and overwhelmingly evidence based.

Maintain a professional distance from the client

Now more than ever. Work out who the 'client' is and establish strong professional boundaries. Talk about it often with everyone.

Supporting male educators



Supporting male and male-identifying early educators in early childhood education and care is about three things: discrimination, ethics and collegiality.

In times when the role of male educators in early childhood education is being questioned, early childhood professionals must be mindful of the laws in place to prevent discrimination. No educators can be discriminated against based on their gender. Early childhood education has worked hard to create places where everyone is welcome. It would be a backwards step if we allow negative commentary and exclusion requests to create environments where men are not welcome in early childhood education.

Early childhood professionals must be aware of the rights of employees to actively participate and not be discriminated against. We must all work to ensure that discrimination is not given a foothold or allowed to escalate in challenging times, or indeed ever.

Stand up against discrimination—be clear as you speak to others that negative talk and calls to treat men differently in our practice is discrimination.

Ethics—including and welcoming male educators into early childhood education is a matter of ethics. The Early Childhood Australia *Code of Ethics* specifically articulates the need for early childhood educators to respect and welcome diversity in all its forms. Failure to welcome and cultivate diversity in our settings erodes the way we welcome and include children and their families.

Managing family anxiety



Stand up for diversity—be clear that by welcoming male colleagues into early childhood practice, we make space for different ways of knowing and being, and this is in the best interest of children.

A commitment to diversity is a commitment to welcoming and a sense of belonging for all children and their families and educators. By welcoming diversity in all its forms into early childhood education, we offer children and families more ways to feel supported and empowered, and to thrive.

Be welcoming—welcoming male educators into early childhood education and care contexts and supporting them to be the very best versions of themselves is a matter of collegiality. It is a matter of making sure that we, as a team of collective professionals, support each other to practise well, to reflect on our ways of knowing and being in the best interests of children and their families, and to challenge each other in terms of best practice.

Supporting male educators should be everybody's responsibility and should be an opportunity for us to demonstrate the way in which the team has each other's backs and welcomes conversations around the complexity—as well as the possibilities—of working in early childhood education.

Stand up for colleagues—be clear, strong and public in your support for male colleagues—in fact, all colleagues. This means speaking up in the face of discrimination, promoting the benefits of diversity and welcoming robust reflective dialogue about what is right for children.

Much of the current anxiety about male educators is coming from families who may be feeling highly anxious and somewhat powerless to ensure their children are safe in early childhood settings. Reaffirming practices that keep children safe can help families to rebuild trust in the service and the education team.

It may be helpful to talk to families about:

- the environment and how children are always in sight
- staffing patterns and levels that ensure there is always a team working with children and educators are not left alone
- the way the team works to always communicate with each other and check in with every child
- the program and how it supports routines and practices that safeguard children from potential harm
- child safe culture in your service, including how children are actively encouraged to exercise agency, and the team are vigilant in monitoring signs that a child doesn't feel safe or comfortable
- communication practices that ensure families are informed if an incident or safety risk has occurred.

This will help ensure families have confidence in the whole team and do not inadvertently harbour concerns about one or two educators based on characteristics such as gender, cultural background or age.

Reference

J. Faragher & G. McNaughton, *Working with Young Children: Guidelines for Good Practice* (TAFE Publications, 1990), p. 202.

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