Educating Young Children

Learning and teaching in the early childhood years

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of all the lands that we live on, work on and travel through together. We pay our respects to their Elders, present and emerging for they hold the memories, the spiritual connections, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. We recognise their strength and resilience and their long history of caring for and educating children here. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this region. We recognise the importance of continued connection to culture, Country and community to the health and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

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Kim Walters

From the President

Welcome to the last issue of Educating Young Children for 2020. This year has been a challenge for early childhood professionals across the world, with a switch to online learning and play opportunities for children being severely restricted. Our hope is that in 2021 children and adults alike will have more opportunities to play with family and friends face to face.

All early childhood professionals know the importance of play, especially in the early years. In this issue we have gathered articles that focus on the topic of play in early childhood settings. We continue to feature articles from our 2020 ECTA Early Childhood E-Conference.

At our AGM this year, we were pleased to have current committee members renominate for next year. This is a clear indication that we all enjoy our roles and demonstrates our continued commitment to advocating for our members on early childhood issues at local, state, and national levels.

I am so proud of our ECTA team for pushing their skillsets during the year to support our members, by opening webinars to regional group members and promptly moving our conference online. This allowed regional groups to network virtually and for members to plan their participation in the E-Conference.

In early November, the ECTA Conference Committee met online to select presenters for the 2021 ECTA Early Childhood E-Conference. With the 2020 E-Conference being such a huge success, we will be using our expanded skills to create an innovative 2021 Early Childhood E-Conference on Saturday 26 June 2021.

To allow for maximum participation across the state in a COVID-19 uncertain world we are planning a hybrid event, with the option for presenters and members to attend virtually via ZOOM or meeting at a metropolitan or regional hub - with the option to switch between face to face and virtual participation prior to the event. Numbers will be limited at hubs so early registration is highly recommended. It all sounds very exciting and we are all looking forward to the challenge.

ECTA's commitment to maintain early years connections during the pandemic was showcased at the Early Childhood Stakeholders Forum attended by the Education Minister, Deputy-Director General and other key early childhood stakeholders from across Queensland. It was fitting that the ECTA Vice-President Jodie Riek presented our strategies at the forum from the USA via ZOOM.

Thank you to our secretary Joanne Young for coordinating the webinars for 2020. These have been a key strategy to support and stay connected with our members across the state. Joanne selected presentations from the 2019 and 2020 conferences. Feedback from all webinars has been extremely positive. We will continue to feature conference presenters from the 2020 E-Conference in webinars in the first semester next year.

Total ECTA membership for 2020 was 588. This included 207 Organisations, 269 Individuals, 73 Students,15 Concessional, 8 Graduate, 2 Overseas Individual and 14 Life Members.

2021 memberships are now open online. We ask all members to log in to the website then click the JOIN tab. Select your membership type and add your membership level to the cart. Open the cart to pay or select the option to receive an invoice. If you require any help phone Kim on 0418 157 280 anytime or email ectaqld@gmail.com. For those who do not wish to log in you can also email us to request an invoice.

2021 Organisation Members can set up ECTA teams to allow their staff unrestricted access to all the resource and professional development materials. Choose Organisational Membership and set up the 'Team Name' before adding to the cart. Organisations can add new members to their team at any time by logging in, selecting My Account > Teams > Add Members.

With COVID-19 more contained now, we hope you all get a chance to relax, connect face to face and play with family and friends over the holidays. All the best.

Yours in Early Childhood.

Kim


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The ECTA Early Childhood E-Conference has been held on the first Saturday of the June/July State School holidays since 1975 Conference attendees will come from all areas of the early childhood sector including early years and lower primary sectors.
A hybrid event, with the option of presenters and members attending virtually via ZOOM or meeting at a metropolitan or regional hub (with the option to switch between face to face and virtual participation prior to the event).
Numbers will be limited at hubs so early registration is highly recommended.
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Belinda Rule

C&K Eimeo Road Community Kindergarten- Our Kindy's Journey Navigating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Perspectives

Belinda Rule noticed a rise in the number of children who had high level-needs coming into kindergarten, so she made the courageous decision to introduce Millie—the assistant therapy dog—and there's been no turning back since. The strategy is one of the reasons the Eimeo Road director and teacher were this year's recipient of C&K's Excellence and Innovation Award for Professional Excellence, and the organisation's overall Emeritus Professor Mary Mahoney AQ Excellence Education Childhood and Care Award.

Our journey to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives at C&K Eimeo Road Community Kindergarten started a few years ago with the introduction of *Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Early Childhood.* There are nine members of my diverse team, and they are wonderful, passionate educators from European, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and South Sea Islander backgrounds. The degree of knowledge varies around our First Nations people, and we acknowledge our journeys are at different stages. We keep in mind that our Indigenous staff are uncovering their culture, and it is important we do not place unnecessary pressure on them to tell us all they know. The only constant in our practice is to evolve and to believe that all children come first, removing as many barriers as we can for families. Importantly, we focus on being okay with not knowing everything and being open to anything.

We are a two-unit stand-alone kindy located in Mackay. In the last two years, we have seen an increase in enrolments from families that identify. We are proud to say that, in 2020, we again have high numbers, and we are humbled that they have chosen us. At this stage, we are not an "at-no-cost kindy", which speaks volumes to us because it suggests the community believes we are culturally safe, and their babies are welcomed with big, open arms.

At the beginning of our journey, we set aside Wednesdays as our cultural day, wearing our Indigenous shirts and focusing on activities that related to our learning at the time. Hanging the flags within the service was one of the first things we did. Now, as we have evolved and grown in confidence, we wear our shirts throughout the week, and it is natural for us to weave Indigenous perspectives into what we do each day.

Within our classrooms we offer different types of materials—fabrics, pillows, resources, the map of languages, our acknowledgment, kangaroo skins, natural loose parts, symbols on stones, cowhide pillows, storybooks and so many more "simple" things. We are aware of the need to avoid tokenism, and we need to be authentic and meaningful in everything we do. We seek feedback from our families and community about our program. There is deep thought about connecting with the learning that takes place.

Our Bush Tucker Garden was refurbished by a local business. One of the business's workers is Aboriginal and helps with meeting the needs of the children. Many plants from this garden are used in the playdough to engage the senses, including their berries which change the dough's colour. We are always trying to add plants to this area as well as to our Explorers' Club space on our kindy property. Busy or not, embedding ourselves within the community is

equally as important. For the first time last year, we were invited to attend the NAIDOC celebrations and learned more about our community.

There are many things that now just happen as a part of our daily practice. We have a bus which gives families access to the kindy. We use credible and well-balanced resources which help us to continue with our journey. The Acknowledgment is said each day, and we talk about our connections to our environment, also making our kindy newsletter available to our Elders and making a deeper connection with our community partners. This includes our local high school and university and being available to support their students. Our local Bunnings store donates goods to the service to strengthen our program and open up opportunities for the children. In another established project, "Containers for Change", the money raised helps to fill lunchboxes and tummies. Our local bakery has committed to set aside loaves of bread when we need them. Our "Christmas Hamper" project began a few years ago, which evolved through critical reflection about our connecting with the Mackay Children and Family Centre. Our children are heavily involved and reflect on what it means not to have anything.

We have put ourselves in touch with the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, and this is where we were invited to attend the Binbi Tok community meeting. This strengthens our stance in the community and therefore helps build deeper connections with our families.

We also fundraise so that all children have the opportunity to participate in the incursions and excursions relating to the community. The goal each year is to raise $8,000 so each child has a chance to be involved. We see ourselves as a holistic kindy to help support all families.

We talk to the children about hard yakka, which is a term we use to describe hard work. Our children are accepting of us, just as we are accepting of them. It is

reciprocal and heartfelt, and we truly learn from them. We reflected on our signing-in process and changed from dots to grey solid Queensland Beginners font because we were reminded that many of our current families use this form of art in their daily lives.

I am proud of what we have achieved in this time. What's next? It is not about "getting an Elder in" to do activities with the children; it is about building these precious relationships with the community. We always invite them into the service. When they feel safe and not pressured to come in, I believe they will visit. There is no end date; the day we stop and think, "We have nailed this" and "Let's stop the innovation," is the day I, as a leader, need to move on.

Nicole Halton

Read It Like You Mean It

There is nothing quite like a good story. Stories can sweep you away into another world, to capture the imagination, inspire creativity and a sense of wonder. This is why reading is still such a popular pastime with the advent of digital devices and visual/ auditory storytelling (such as podcasts); millions of people still read books every single day.

Nicole Halton is the co-founder of Inspired EC, Inspired Family Day Care and TimberNook Newcastle, and is a former early childhood educator and director. For over ten years Nicole has shared her passion for the early years through workshops, conferences and consultancy. A highly regarded writer, Nicole writes regularly on the Inspired EC website, as well as guest writing for other publications, and has had several books published by Teaching Solutions. Nicole is an advocate for children's rights and has a particular interest in positive school transitions, nature play and working with infants and toddlers.

My love of reading began as a child. Curled up with my mum, she would read book after book after book. Sometimes she would read the same book again and again. I still have some of those books—they are so well loved that the pages are torn, and the stitching is barely holding pages together.

When I found myself in the early childhood sector—as an 18-year-old student on work placement—I gravitated towards this space. I spent many hours reading to children, delighting not only in new stories but in the magic of the picture books of my childhood. I relished this time connecting with these children—in fact, I found that it helped bridge the sense of awkwardness that I felt as each day I would need to introduce myself to a whole new bunch of little ones and face questions like: "Why are you here? Are you a teacher? Are you someone's mum?"

When I began working in my first "real" position in a preschool room, I loved reading books with the children. The children would ask me to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and I would cringe and think "Why me?", but hand me a copy of The Three Billy Goats Gruff and I would launch into that story with character voices and suspenseful pauses.

When I became a director, it became apparent to me (although I had begun noticing it earlier) that not everyone shared my love of reading with children. I was horrified—how could you not want to spend hours reading books with gusto?! As I began talking to my educators and reflecting on the situation, I began to realise that in many cases it was not that the educators did not want to read to the children; rather, they did not feel comfortable and, in some cases, they did not realise how important things such as tone, inflection, volume, speed, and connection were in the language development of children. In fact, research (Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1995) shows that reading to children is one of the most important activities for developing the knowledge to support eventual success in reading. Reading to preschoolers has been found to be related to language growth, emergent literacy and reading achievement (Bus et al., 1995).

When the early childhood consultancy Inspired EC was born in 2007 and I began spending more time visiting services and providing consultancy and support, I noticed that this "problem" was widespread. I would walk into rooms and see educators rattling off the words in a book in a monotone voice, flipping the pages without any pauses and seeming, quite honestly, disengaged with both the book and the children. Do you know what happens when the educator is disengaged? The children become disengaged too. This type of story session—where educators look and sound like they are wishing they were elsewhere—is usually accompanied by a bunch of children rolling on the floor, poking at one another and, quite simply, not connecting to the story. And so, what happens then? It becomes a vicious cycle—the educator seems disinterested, then the children seem

disinterested, and then the educator needs to stop at every page and "correct" behaviour, which leads to further disinterest and more children drifting off from the story.

What we need to be doing as educators is seeing the incredible value that comes from reading with children and ensuring that we implement strategies to enhance the experience. I can almost guarantee that, when you make the experience more enjoyable and engaging for children, it becomes more enjoyable and engaging for you too. It is important to note that, for some educators, there may be other factors that impact on their ability to comfortably read with children, such as having English as a second language, or lower literacy skills. It is vital that these educators are provided with additional support to build their skills and confidence.

Strategies to Support You to "Read It Like You Mean It"

1. **Become familiar with the books you are reading.** It can be challenging to feel confident reading a story and getting the character voices or tone right if you are not familiar with it. After reading the children's favourite books for many years, like Wombat Stew, I can read these books to children.

2. **Listen to good storytellers and readers.** Take your cue from others. If there is a colleague who reads well with the children, observe them and take notes on how they do it. There are also some great clips online of people reading children's books. Watch a few and identify what works and how you can do that.

3. **Slow down.** A lot of the time when I see educators reading to children, they are moving way too fast—turning the pages so quickly that the children are not having the time to process what they are seeing and hearing.

4. **Change your tone.** This is a big one. Monotone voices are not superexciting to listen to, and your voice can give cues to children about the tone of the story. A cheerful, enthusiastic voice may not be suited to a story where a pet dies for example.

These are just a few simple strategies that you can use to enhance your reading with children. The most important thing is to pick up a book and start reading. Select good quality stories that engage children and stories that are a delight to read aloud (and try to groan only on the inside when you are handed a book for the four hundredth time in a week!).

REFERENCE

Bus, A. G., van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Pellegrini, A. D. (1995). Joint book reading makes for success in learning to read: A meta-analysis on intergenerational transmission of literacy. Review of Educational Research, 65(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543065001001

Robyn Papworth

Children Sitting During Circle Time at Kindergarten: From an Exercise Physiology Perspective

Robyn Papworth is a Masters qualified developmental educator, exercise physiologist, and certified trainer, who empowers educators to understand how children learn and develop motor skills and play skills. Robyn shares her experiences and strategies as a therapist, and as a mum of a little boy with developmental delay. This makes her relatable to parents who are feeling overwhelmed and stressed about their child's development. Through Robyn's workshops and online resources, she helps educators to learn 'red flags' for developmental delay, as well as discover how to modify the environment, play stations, and learning objectives, to suit the needs of children with developmental delay.

Through my work as a developmental educator and exercise physiologist, I have been fortunate to observe children's learning and development throughout many long day care and community kindergarten classrooms, seeing many creative kindergarten teachers engage children during large-group discussion and circle-time activities.

In this article, I share my observations of

- what strategies have worked for most children's learning and development during large-group circle times
- the benefits of sitting for children's learning and development during a kindergarten session
- the common misconception that some parents may have where they believe that children should be learning to sit in preparation for school
- the importance of finding a healthy balance between sitting and play during the formative kindergarten year.

When educating teachers and parents about children's sitting behaviour, I start by highlighting the importance of children being actively involved in gross motor activities (i.e. crawling, climbing, jumping, running, etc.) at home and in early childhood classrooms, before participating in seated learning activities.

> *At the moment our children and teenagers are spending hours per day in a seated position. Even adults are sitting for longer durations than what their body is designed for.*

Without knowing the concerns of sitting for long periods of time, some parents are placing their babies into a seated position in highchairs and strollers before their babies can roll or maintain a strong tummy-time position. In addition, adults are spending a record number of hours sitting at a desk or slouching in a lounge chair every day (do not worry; that is me included).

Our spine is designed to bend, reach, move, lift, and stretch daily—within a safe range of course. Yet we have a generation of toddlers, children, teenagers, and adults sitting still while staring at screens, rather than actively running around, playing outdoors, and moving every day.

This article is not designed to make parents feel bad for placing their babies into a seated position too young or make parents and teachers

feel disheartened about encouraging children to sit still in a cross-legged position for learning. We all have the best intentions for supporting our children's learning and development, so my purpose here is to raise awareness, not make judgement.

More specifically, this article is designed to start the conversation about how we can find a healthy balance between play-based learning and structured learning in the classroom, to support children to develop the necessary gross motor skills and core strength that they need to be able to sit for longer durations (10 to 15 minutes) once they start primary school.

We all know that children will inevitably need to develop the strength, focus, and endurance to be able to sit for longer durations of time for primary school, high school, and work. However, there are many variables to a child's ability to achieve this. For example, the learning material needs to be at the appropriate level for the child to feel interested and engaged in; the environment needs to be set up so that the child feels comfortable to sit for long periods of time; the child needs to have the muscular strength and endurance required to hold the body up against the forces of gravity for long periods of time.

As I searched for literature and evidence-based practice around children sitting at kindergarten, I found very limited results. The general consensus among early childhood and primary school teachers was that children should be sitting during circle time for the duration of their age plus two minutes. This equation means that most preschool-aged children should be sitting for six to seven minutes with a movement or activity break in between each seated interval.

The discussions that I found in the early childhood space when it came to talking about sitting included: At what age should children start sitting for learning? How long should children be sitting for? Is sitting for long periods of time (greater than 10 minutes) necessary for learning?

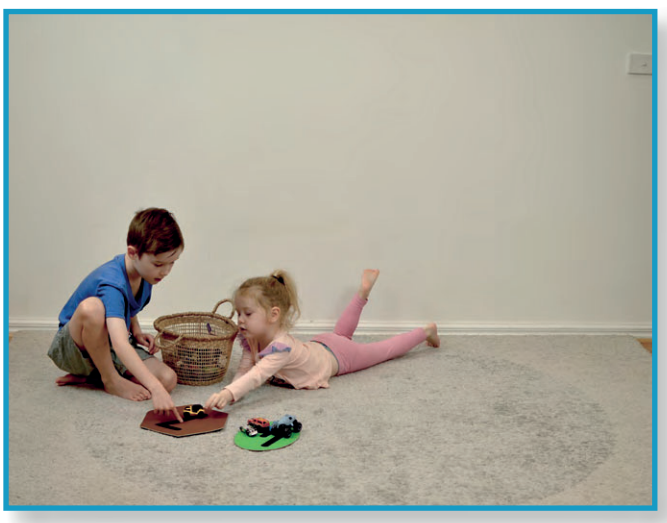
In my own personal practice, I try to avoid encouraging early sitting for babies until the baby is able to hold their head and chest up off of the floor during tummy time and is able to roll in both directions from left to right and right to left. Saying that, though, my son had developmental delay (pictured bottom left), and the only way I could catch my breath with a cup of tea was to sit my son up among cushions for five minutes. It took six months for my son and I to work on building up his tummy time strength to be able to sit independently. My son loved sitting upright to be able to see what was happening around him and cried when we first started playing in tummy-time position.

When I talk about sitting with families, I understand that every family has a different situation; every child has a different personality; some families are trying to juggle the needs of multiple children. The positive message that we need to give to families is about trying the best you can to improve a child's core strength and muscle tone while also putting the mental health of the family unit as top priority.

As a developmental educator and exercise physiologist, what I love about children sitting in circle time is watching the children's social interactions with their peers, educators, and teachers. During large-group discussions, children are able to

- talk about the fun activities that they did on the weekend
- describe the features of their special show-and-tell object with their peers
- explain the procedures and outcomes of their latest project, etc.

It is during these large-group discussions that children share active listening, social turn-taking, respect the needs and interests of others, and practise personal-space skills.



From a motor skills perspective, I use the routines and activities during circle time to observe children's gross motor skill development. For example, during circle time, I can see children who need more support with improving their core strength because they are struggling to maintain a cross-legged position or are leaning on their neighbouring peers or educator; I can see children who are sensory seeking tactile, proprioceptive, or auditory input. I see this in the way that they fidget with the objects in their environment or in the way that they interact with their educators and teachers during daily classroom rituals. I am also able to see children who are struggling to calm and self-regulate their bodies, often laying in unusual positions or distracting peers nearby during circle time. Lastly, I can see children who have poor muscle tone appearing "floppy" while sitting at circle time.

The first question that I often ask kindergarten teachers about sitting during circle time is, *"Is the seated position of 'cross-legged' necessary during circle time for preschool-aged children?"*

Some kindergarten teachers talk to me about the limited space in the classroom being the main reason that the children sit in a cross-legged position. Other teachers are unsure of why they sit children in a cross-legged position. It is possible that this style of sitting is part of our education culture. For example, the term "crisscross applesauce" is known in most kindergarten classrooms throughout Australia.

The question that I wish to highlight in this article is: "Why are we encouraging children to sit in a cross-legged position?" If we look at the anatomy of the spine and the body, the body benefits mostly from engaging in activities which encourage movement as much as possible, or resting in a tummy-time position. Other positions that the anatomy of the body would prefer include

- sitting with the legs stretched out straight in front
- walking while having a group session (similar to a tour-guide session)
- standing with both feet evenly on the ground while singing/listening
- varying the seated position every six to seven minutes so that the body receives the circulation and movement that it needs.

In my opinion, sitting in a cross-legged position is a better option for children's anatomy than sitting in a W-sitting position because, when we sit in a cross-legged position, only our bottom and our ankles are touching the ground. This small surface area encourages our core muscles to do the work to keep our body sitting upright against gravity.

Conversely, a W-sitting position involves the person having their bottom, thighs, and the top of their feet touching the ground. W-sitting has a larger surface area touching the ground, so the core muscles do less work to keep the body upright against gravity, and the leg muscles are taking most of the person's body weight during sitting. With cross-legged sitting, the core muscles are doing most of the work to hold the person's weight upright. When brainstorming with kindergarten teams about implementing different circle-time seated positions, I often feel their nervousness and hear their comments about

- "What happens when a parent comes to observe our session and the classroom seems wriggly and chaotic?"
- "Some parents feel that a calm and quiet classroom is learning more than a busy and messy classroom."
- "Some parents want us to teach their child how to sit for school next year."

I know that it may not always be possible to take all of the children on a "walk-and-talk" adventure. I also can appreciate that finding the space for all children to be positioned on their stomach is challenging and may be impossible, so these recommendations may be best facilitated during small groups or as a suggestion for families to try at home. My goal for sharing these strategies is to start the conversation about how we can incorporate more movement and more changes in body postures into the classroom, without hindering your kindergarten programs.

It is important for us to review the comments above and have conversations with our team, our kindergarten community, and our kindergarten families about the research that supports the importance of movement as well as the evidence that messy, loud, and busy

play is giving children the opportunity to express their emotions and creativity. A relaxed classroom environment where children can move comfortably and freely will have more benefits for their learning and development, compared to children sitting still and quiet.

I commend the improvements that we have all made over the last few years as W-sitting has become more prevalent for many teachers, and I hear a large number of teachers and educators gently encouraging children to sit in cross-legged rather than a W-sitting position. It is important, though, to mention that both cross-legged and W-sitting positions place children's hip joints in an external rotation. As children's hip joints rotate out towards the side of their body, their hip joints are not in the position that the anatomy prefers.

Spending long durations sitting in cross-legged and/or W-sitting positions may cause difficulties for the joints long term, so it is important that we encourage children to build up their core strength to endure a range of different postures such as tummy time, standing with both feet evenly on the ground, kneeling up tall with the bottom off the ground, crouching, and sitting with the legs stretched out in front.

I believe that breaking up circle-time durations into six-to-seven-minute intervals, alternating between seated learning sessions by the following means, can be beneficial for children's learning and development

and, most importantly, provide children with the movement, strength, and endurance that is crucial for a healthy life:

- two-to-three-minute music and movement breaks
- changing body positions (i.e. sitting, tummy time, kneeling, standing)
- walking and talking with the group around the outdoor area
- engaging fine motor skills with puppets, props, and small whiteboards.

Over the last five years, I have observed that early childhood teachers with extensive experience supporting children's developmental needs do the following during circle-time sessions:

- **Schedule heavy movement activities before sitting down (i.e. completing a gross motor skills climbing obstacle course on the way to the mat, carrying heavy learning resources, packing up tubs of toys and rearranging furniture).**
- **Break up the duration of circle-time sessions with action songs every 6 to 7 minutes.**
- **Involve children in hands-on learning activities during circle time using props and puppets.**
- **Provide children with cushions or sit spots to sit on during circle time to teach children about personal space.**
- **Provide children with small white boards or notepads to draw or jot down their ideas.**
- **Use small sensory toys that children can interact with in their lap while sitting down.**
- **Provide children with visual charts or timers to help some children self-regulate by knowing how long they need to sit and what activity or routine is happening next.**

As teachers, educators, and parents, we can only do the best that we can to help children to be ready for school. We know that children are engaging in screen time more than we did as children. We know that children are presenting at kindergarten with weak core muscles, low muscle tone, poor fitness levels, and lethargy. We cannot stop children using technology or make them go outside and play like we used to, but we can talk to parents, teachers, educators, and principals about the importance of gross motor movement for children. It is important to raise awareness about children's gross motor skills, physical activity levels, and sitting durations as well as highlight the fact that children learn just as much, if not more, when they are moving, compared to when children are sitting still and quietly.

I encourage children every day to participate in gross motor activity transitions such as hopscotch, throwing a ball at a letter or word, completing an activity in tummy-time position, skipping across five strips of masking tape, and jumping with both feet at the same time from one hula hoop to the other.

Incorporating gross motor activities into your day will help children to build up the core strength that they need for sitting but, most importantly, it will build up the physical literacy skills that they need to live a healthy and active life.

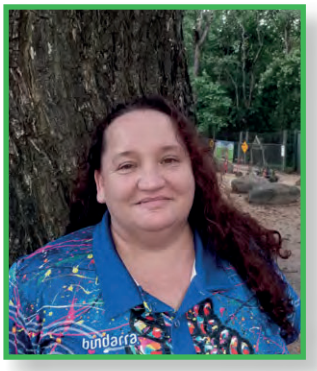
Louise Kelly

Risky Play: Embrace the Challenge

Why is Risk so Important in the Early Childhood Setting?

The process of establishing a philosophy that encourages risk taking can be a long process of critical reflection for all relevant parties. Understanding that risky play is important also means understanding that someone could get hurt.

My most treasured childhood memories of play all involve the thrill of risk and adventure; the bumps and bruises that occurred along the way have been long forgotten. The potential for risk is what made play so enticing. It is also how children develop skills to work as a team. They also begin to foster resilience and learn confidence and problem-solving skills, all of which are vital tools for school readiness.



Louise Kelly is currently a kindergarten teacher at Natural Beginnings Childcare in Gordonvale. She has been working in the early childhood profession since 1993. She holds a Bachelor of Education - Early Childhood from The University of New England. Her professional interest includes the educational projects of Reggio Emilia, nature pedagogy and the benefits of risky play. Louise bases her philosophy and pedagogy around the belief that children must be taught how to think, not what to think.

Becoming a Risk Taker

In 2016 I became a risk taker. I am an early childhood teacher for Natural Beginnings Childcare in Gordonvale in north Queensland, and I had recently attended my first Gordonvale Australian Early Development Census workshop where we unpacked the latest census results. It soon became apparent that many of the children in our community were developmentally vulnerable. I began reflecting on my role as an early childhood teacher and how I could effect change. I believed that introducing experiences that challenged the children by promoting risk would help reduce the vulnerabilities within our service—and in turn the wider community. I did not realise the journey that I was about to embark on could be so frustrating and at times demoralising but could also be absolutely awe-inspiring. At the start of this journey, I believed the toughest obstacle would be convincing the parents to let me take their children on bush walks and leap out of trees. I was wrong. Our families wholeheartedly embraced this change. The biggest and most challenging roadblock has been my fellow educators.

No play space can ever be completely risk free; there will always be obstacles and uncertainty. As advocates for the benefits of risky play, we must engage in difficult and often uncomfortable conversations with families and peers. Asking colleagues to drastically change their pedagogy can sometimes be perceived as a judgement on their teaching style or philosophy. They may be concerned about the repercussions of allowing children to engage in play that might hurt them. It is important to note, though, that children who want to take risks will continue to do so, especially if it is forbidden. This can spiral into a situation where children do not understand how to take risks safely and are unprepared to monitor their own actions effectively.

Encouraging Others to Become Risk Takers

When I began incorporating risky play into my kindergarten program, I also began advocating for a wider change to our service's philosophy at Natural Beginnings Childcare. This was met with enthusiasm by the owners and management team. What I failed to recognise was that changing my fellow educators' perspectives and pedagogy was not going to be easy. I had to engage in some difficult conversations, and at times I felt extremely frustrated and misunderstood, as I am sure my colleagues did as well. The turning point for me was after a tense discussion about the service's popular vacation-care program. I realised that I needed to stop pushing educators towards a level they were not comfortable with or ready for; rather, I needed to be mindful and respectful of each educator's

comfort levels regarding risk. Therefore, educators are now encouraged to proceed at a pace that they are comfortable with. Some embraced the challenge and were soon providing environments and experiences that were rich in challenges; others have proceeded at a slower, more cautious pace. Eventually after years of education, action, and reflection, all our educators' philosophies have begun embracing the notion that risk taking is an essential part of every child's play. Within six months of that tense conversation about the vacation-care program, the educators had teamed up with our local State Emergency Service, and the children climbed to the top of Walsh's Pyramid.

Risk and Challenging Play in Practice

Since our journey started in 2016, our indoor and outdoor play spaces have undergone some drastic transformations. Some have been temporary, some permanent; all have been done after consulting with the children, educators, and families.

At Natural Beginnings Childcare, we have implemented learning opportunities such as

- providing educator-supervised woodwork benches with real tools and accessories such as hammers, nails, and saws
- allowing loose-parts play, providing children with items such as plastic pipes, milk crates, large reels, ropes, pulleys, wooden boxes, sticks, logs etc. (By far our most popular loose-parts experience involved large hay bales. The children made cubby houses, mazes, water slides, and climbing frames with them. These materials encouraged the children to work together as a team. They became inventors and builders; they began looking at their play experiences with a sense of wonder)

- allowing fire pits, where children cook damper, marshmallows, and popcorn under the supervision of our educators. (During these experiences, we engaged with families who are members of the local fire brigade. The children were taught about the value of fire and that the respect of its power must always be remembered)
- providing children with opportunities to climb, jump, and challenge their unique individual physical skills. (Climbing is perfect for allowing children to explore their abilities in a safe environment. Once a child learns to face their fears, they can experience the emotional high that occurs when they master any challenges that they encounter)
- encouraging children to use climbing apparatus in nontraditional ways, such as going up the slide, not down
- introducing children of all ages to bush kindy by accessing a creek that runs adjacent to our centre right at our back door. (One of the unique challenges the children face when using this educational space is that they must make their way down a steep incline using a rope as a guide. The children are encouraged to roam, climb, swing from tree branches, and discover nature. Spending time outdoors is itself scientifically proven to reduce stress, and connecting physically with nature helps children develop a healthy respect for it. Another great benefit is that children have the chance to develop other outdoor interests and learn about the natural environment)

- supporting children to problem solve by being involved in the design process and decision-making when creating their own swings and assault courses using recycled timber, tyres, and rope
- providing the children with opportunities to engage with a variety of animals such as lizards, snakes (pythons) and goats. (Observing and caring for an animal instils a sense of responsibility and respect for life. A pet brings increased sensitivity and awareness of the feelings and needs of others—both animals and humans).

Life is full of risk, and it is our role as educators to provide opportunities that enable children to engage in risky and challenging play in a safe learning environment. Important lifelong skills are learned and refined during risky play. Skills such as problem-solving, understanding consequences and actions, balance and coordination, reliance, and confidence in their decision-making process are not only important during a child's early childhood education journey but will also set them up to deal with a variety of challenges that they may encounter during adulthood.

Hayley Bates

Conquering Barriers to Inquiry-Based Early STEM Education

Hayley Bates has an insatiable thirst for learning – about everything! Her sheer joy of discovery and passion for professional development makes her ideally suited for the role of head trainer, and leader of the national certification program – the Little Scientists House program – with equal dedication. Her enthusiasm is complemented by her extensive background in science, education and maths. Hayley has taught for 25 years across continents, from preschool to tertiary, and in a variety of not-for-profit, community-based and corporate organisations such as botanic gardens and museums.

In a rapidly changing world, our education system must adapt. We need to equip children with vital life skills for the future, including self-confidence, the ability to reflect, problem-solving and critical thinking, social and communication skills, and resilience.

The gap between the knowledge generated in the education system and the skills demanded by employers and individuals is widening. Overcoming these limitations requires a priority focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), including the development of workplace skills in STEM. Future careers will also rely heavily on "21st century skills"—for example, critical thinking, creativity, cultural awareness, collaboration and problem-solving (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).

Inquiry-based STEM learning delivers these skills. Skills, not knowledge. STEM is so much more than facts. But early childhood professionals still feel that they are not equipped to deal with early childhood STEM. How can we change this?

Well, the good news is that we are not being asked to do anything any differently. In fact, working with the early years, we are doing hands-on, inquiry-based STEM already. We just have to spot when we are. We are not asking you to do anything different, just think about it in a different way.

The key to start with is to spot STEM opportunities in the everyday and build on them. This is a matter of practice. Try this scenario: The children are playing at washing up. Where's the STEM? Floating and sinking perhaps is an obvious one. Bubbles? One of the tricks we use is to look at it through different lenses. Think:

Mathematics: What shape are the bubbles? Actually, bubbles in a washing up bowl are not usually round, especially if we blow into the mix with a straw. What is the most common shape you can spot?

Chemistry: What bubble mix works the best for bubbles? Why do we need washing up liquid to get rid of oil?

Design and Technologies: How could we clean the plates if we didn't have access to water?

Engineering: How can we get the plates dry?

Optics: Why do bubbles have rainbow colours on the outside?

Air: Why do bubbles float and not sink?

There is a video on our website that helps you develop your skills in spotting the STEM in everyday situations.

So, once we or the children have spotted the STEM in the everyday, what do we do with it? We need to know what the children's prior knowledge is so we can scaffold the next steps. Knowledge sharing is important. It comes back to developing those vital STEM skills—you may even want to call them life skills. As early childhood educators, we should see ourselves as learning coaches—we are here to help the children communicate what they already know about a topic. I used to work in a natural history museum, and I still don't know more than a five-year-old child knows about dinosaurs. I have never stopped being amazed by prior knowledge that children have and can quite skilfully communicate.

Taking a step back and listening to the children explain their opinions and knowledge is a wonderful thing to do. It increases their self-efficacy and independence. It helps children and educators improve their listening skills.

Psychologist Albert Bandura has defined self-efficacy as "one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task" (1997). Our sense of self-efficacy can play a major role in how we approach goals, tasks, and challenges. Children can be involved in the planning and implementation of their early childhood service. Allow the educator to be a part of the team and an interested participant rather than the project lead. By being part of the team, you can help children develop their leadership abilities, communication skills, negotiation skills, organisational skills and many other of those vital STEM and life skills that are going to be needed in the future. Allowing the children to take different roles within a STEM activity or project can help increase their self-efficacy. Why not take a step back and let the children plan the next STEM activity or project—co-construction in practice? Building on other people's knowledge and sharing the process with each other, constructing the process together.

Confidence is what is required—confidence and practice. High-school systems by necessity discourage copying and cheating, which means that co-construction, building on the knowledge of those around you, might not be as highly valued. This may discourage children and educators from adopting this habit. It is quicker (and seen as more efficient) to explain to someone that the angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees than allow them to inquire into it themselves and discover it. High school and university, and even primary schools, often have a demanding curriculum where there is an emphasis on imparting the facts as quickly as possible. This is a shame. It robs children/students of the joy of discovery. This is the process where those important skills are developed. Inquiry-based learning means that it is ok to say, "I don't know." But it can then be quickly followed by, "Let's find out together!"

In fact, asking children what they think is a great way of flexing those self-efficacy skills and letting the child take the role of leader or teacher. "Let's explore the world together."

At Little Scientists, I oversee the national certification program called Little Scientists House. As a result, I visit many different early learning services. Let me share a special visit to St Joseph's Memorial Preschool in Adelaide a few years ago. When I arrived, there was what I thought was chaos—a happy, noisy chaos. It was magical, messy chaos. I was wrong. I looked around and every child was interested and engaged. The children were called to the mat but asked to clear up first—as if by magic the room cleared within minutes to be tidy and functional. Not chaos at all. Everyone knew what they were doing and where things went and, if they didn't, they asked. It was a joint effort. Those who finished clearing away first helped the others, with the occasional suggestions from the educators.

I was introduced: "This is Hayley from Little Scientists; she is a scientist. Has anyone got a question for her?" My heart fell; this is something I always dread, being asked to produce an answer on the spot to a question that has no meaningful answer to it. But this isn't what happened. The educator had other ideas. "Great question, David. How are you going to find out the answer? Who would like to help him with that question? What equipment do you need? How do you want to organise it? Who is going to do what?"

Right there, developing self-efficacy in the children. Validating ideas, organising a team, assigning roles, and using an inquiry-based approach. AND I didn't have to provide the answer because, the next day, the children solved their own problem with a bit of scaffolding from the educator—magical, real-world STEM in practice. But it was obviously something both the educator and the children had done before. Confidence and practice.

At Little Scientists, we use the inquiry cycle to help scaffold the STEM inquiry process for educators and children. This forms the base for the scientific method

that is just like the process grown-up scientists use. There is an emphasis on sharing knowledge at the start and talking through hypotheses. There is collaboration during explorations and discussion of results and observations. This has been proven to help increase communication skills.

Making the process explicit, obvious to both educators and children, and discussing it also highlights and makes explicit another useful skill: metacognition, the process of thinking about one's thinking. Metacognition refers to the process used to plan, assess, and monitor one's understanding and results. Using an inquiry cycle and talking about the process of inquiry with educators and children helps develop the critical awareness of oneself as a learner and highlights to children their own thinking and learning. Discussing why they think a STEM activity has resulted in a particular outcome, such as why they think an object will sink or has sunk, and comparing it to a differing point of view is a process that can highlight their own metacognition. That ability to reflect on what has happened within the STEM activity, and to reflect on one's own learning, is another skill which we at Little Scientists believe is vital.

At Little Scientists, we support early childhood educators in creating inquiry-based, co-constructed environments because we believe that this is how those STEM skills are being developed. Those skills—self-confidence, the ability to reflect, problem-solving and critical thinking, social and communication skills, and resilience—are important to our future and our children's future. Change starts with us so we encourage you to explore these life skills and break down barriers to STEM education—and as educators we are in the wonderful situation to do this in a co-constructed way together with our next generation!

So what should we tell our children? … to stay ahead, you need to focus on your ability to continuously adapt, engage with others in that process, and most importantly retain your core sense of identity and values. For students, it's not just about acquiring knowledge, but about how to learn. For the rest of us, we should remember that intellectual complacency is not our friend and that learning—not just new things but new ways of thinking—is a life-long endeavour (Sheppard, 2017).

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Sue Lewin

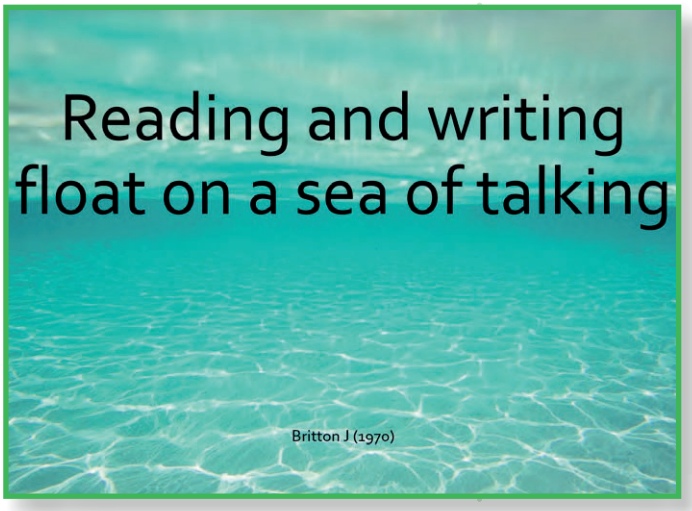
Rhymers Will Be Readers: How Rhymes Lead to Early Literacy

Sue Lewin is an early childhood teacher, musician and songwriter. She has produced eleven music CDs for young children. Her collaborations include Indigenous educator and singer Sharron Lindh, well known children's musician Mike Jackson and performer and songwriter Peter Stewart. Sue's musical, 'Dancing the Boomchacha Boogie' (based on the picture book by award winning author/illustrator Narelle Oliver), was staged as a children's musical in London. She is passionate about early years' music education and the links between music and self-regulations development.

"Nursery rhymes provide comforting rhythms in children's lives ... they are a natural extension of the heartbeat" (Fox, 2001).

When travelling to many early childhood settings in the past couple of years, it has been very evident that fewer and fewer early years educators have a good knowledge of, and confidence to use, rhymes, songs, finger plays, and to tell stories. Understanding why rhymes are important for young children may help to encourage educators to learn them, practise them, and use them, even if at first it might seem brave and challenging.

It has been established that those who struggle to rhyme may also often have trouble with later learning to read.



"A strong, highly specific relationship was found between knowledge of nursery rhymes and the development of phonological skills" (Bryant, Bradley, Maclean, & Crossland, 2009).

Among other skills, nursery rhymes

- develop listening skills
- help children to remember words and actions
- create word pictures.

Develop Listening Skills

Even very young babies can hear the way that songs or rhymes are meant to scan and roll on. If you try singing a well-known song like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" to a young child, say a six-month-old, they will anticipate where the song is going and, when each line finishes, join in if you leave off the last note.

You may have taught a child with English as an additional language: Rhymes are an effective way to learn how the structure of English works and develop new vocabulary. My three-year-old Turkish neighbour knows very little English but can recite "Humpty Dumpty" and "Incy Wincey Spider."

At three years old, listening to the following rhyme or one similar, and

completing the rhyme, leads to concentration and recognition of sounds:

"Wibbly wobbly we, an elephant sat on me,

Wibbly, wobbly woo, an elephant sat on you,

The next line includes rhymes of the children's names:

Wibbly, wobbly watthew, an elephant sat on Matthew,

Wibbly, wobbly wace, an elephant sat on Grace."

Four-year-olds love the song "Throw It Out the Window" (Lewin & Jackson, 2017). In this song, the words to favourite nursery rhymes are sung to a different tune, the last two lines involving throwing the character in the rhyme out of the window. For example, "Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey. Down came a spider and sat down beside her—and she threw it out the window." Not only does this song assist with listening, but also the self-regulation skill of inhibitory control. Children must concentrate on many things all at once to achieve this.

Mem Fox (2001) famously says that "Experts in literacy and child development have discovered that, if children know eight nursery rhymes by the time they are four years old, they're usually among the best readers by the time they're eight."

Help Children to Remember Words and Actions

If you were asked how many days there were in August, the chances are that the old memory rhyme would come into play:

"Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November … "

As adults, we employ several rhymes to jog our memories or recite well-known adages.

This is also an aid to children. Stories with rhyming refrains such as "Gingerbread Man" or cumulative rhymes such as "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly" are great aids to working memory, and their repetition helps to seal this.

Committing things to memory through rhymes is an age-old tradition that began with oral tales and wisdom passed down through generations. Rhymes were often linked with visual images, for example "Leaves of Three, Let Them Be", to warn children to keep away from poison ivy; rhymes were used to remember historical facts such as "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." By using rhyming, our brains can encode information more easily (acoustic encoding).

Create Word Pictures

Think of some of the deliciously descriptive words of nursery rhymes such as "Hickory Dickory Dock" or "Hey Diddle Diddle, the Cat and the Fiddle." These are the results of long oral traditions and have been memorised by generations. It would, in my opinion, be so sad if the next generation of children lost them forever.

Repertoire can be rhymes to which parents bounce their children on their knees, nonsense rhymes, counting rhymes, games, lullabies, finger plays, and songs. As a parent says the rhyme, "This Is the Way the Gentlemen Ride", knees become the horse and the

child is galloped, trotted and finally goes "down in the ditch" physically as well as orally.

So, What Is Stopping Us?

In talking with many educators, there seem to be barriers to using rhymes with young children. This includes perceived lack in confidence, resources, repertoire, knowledge, and understanding. It is easier to put on a YouTube song or Spotify playlist than to source, practise, develop, and present good-quality rhymes and songs.

It is often thought that literacy development is about writing, mark making, and phonics. While these are all important, Britton (1970) believed since the seventies that "Reading and writing sit on a sea of talk".

The term "big six of reading" was coined by Deslea Konza (2004) and is now a generally held model. If you look at the model, you will see that all of the six are components that early years educators use on a daily basis—especially oral language. (Early years educators will tell you how much they talk and listen during a day with children.)

What can we do?

- Seek out the Mother Goose anthology at the back of the centre cupboard and remind yourselves of some forgotten favourites. (Of course, be selective—it is no longer appropriate to chant about an old woman in a shoe who beat her children soundly and sent them to bed.)
- Listen to experienced and confident educators leading nursery rhyme sessions.
- Practise one or two rhymes at home in front of a mirror until they are so familiar you can sing them in your sleep.
- Think about what will happen to this wealth of stories, rhymes, and songs if this generation does not teach and use them.
- Listen to and learn good-quality children's music on CDs or TV (not just YouTube).
- Use rhymes incidentally throughout the day, when changing babies, or going from one situation to another.

Finally, be someone who cultivates the practice of having "a song in your heart and a poem in your pocket" and be willing to pass on these gems to younger or new educators.

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Jodie Riek, Ph.D. and Bill Strader, Ed.D.

Keeping Play Alive in the Curriculum

Dr. Jodie Riek has been involved in early childhood education for more than 20 years, through a range of education environments including childcare, primary education, vocational and higher education. Jodie began her career in Australia working in childcare centres for over ten years in a variety of teaching and management positions within the sector. In 2012 she began working in higher education and is currently an Assistant Professor in teacher Education at the University of Wisconsin – Superior. Her current research interest areas are restoring play pedagogy in early primary classrooms; early literacy; and the impact of pedagogical learning communities on the practices of early childhood teachers.

Through play, early childhood professionals can become the conduit for a child's learning by connecting them to opportunities to enhance problem-solving skills, develop flexibility in their decision making, improve socialisation, and support their acquisition of language and numeracy skills. Play enables different levels of movement, enhances motor skills, and allows children to explore their surroundings, in turn driving cognitive development. However, play itself should focus more on the process than the end product. The job of educators is less about rushing to judgement and narrowing the options to the one "right way" and more about providing a smorgasbord of enjoyable activities that encourage children to engage in learning. This will ultimately lay the foundation for a child to become a curious and excited learner throughout life. Without the deep emotional connections attached, which come through a child's own choice, the experience is simply an activity; it is not play.

Importance of Play in Early Primary Classrooms

Young children's growth and healthy development occurs as they interact and explore the concepts of self, others, and the environment around them through play. However, it goes deeper than this, and play should be recognised as a learning right. UNICEF (1990) advocates these rights in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, where Article 29 states, "Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities", and Article 31 states, "Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities."

Children are naturally wired to do the very things that will help them learn and grow. According to Nell and Drew (n.d.), "The impulse to play comes from a natural desire to understand the world." It is this innate desire to learn through play that makes it such a foundational piece to early childhood education. While there are many current issues and trends which impact early childhood professionals' work with young children, it is the increasingly powerful demand for student data to be improved, so that higher standardised student learning outcomes are produced earlier, that has had the greatest effect on educators' work. This pressure to increase student outcomes earlier has often resulted in the loss of developmentally appropriate practices and play pedagogies. Branscombe, Burcham, Castle, and Surbeck (2013) state, "Many teachers today, concerned about test scores view work as important and play as a waste of time, because they perceive that children are not accomplishing set goals in play" (p.149). However, play is not the antithesis to learning; rather, it is a critical part of the pedagogy. Moreover, the play aspects support engagement in curriculums and help learners to make the required connections to the content.

Reflecting on Our Own Theory of Play

In order to successfully develop play opportunities within the curriculum, educators must first reflect on their own theory of play. Early childhood educators can have a profound impact on this journey. When reflecting on your own play pedagogy, consider the following questions:

Dr. Bill Strader, is a Professor of Early Childhood Education and brings over 20 years of expertise to his presentations; Dr. Strader works with a variety of organisations to educate them on leading methods to bring education and play together. With a Master of Education and a Doctorate of Education, he held positions at various colleges and universities with their Departments of Education. In addition to teaching, Dr. Strader is the founding coordinator for the New England Symposium on Play, an organisation that aims to support early childhood professionals in promoting and implementing practices that highlight the importance of play in the lives of young children (birth to age eight years).

- Why do you think children play?
- What do you believe is the purpose of children's play?
- How does this purpose work? How does it increase flexibility or imagination, social skills, or whatever you believe to be the purpose of play?
- What is the relationship between play and learning?
- To what extent should young children play? For what ages is play important?
- Should play be encouraged in early childhood programs? Schools? Home?
- What role should the teacher play in the process?

Play provides opportunities for children to make sense of their world. Through play, children process what they experience and add this to their personal gamut of information. These experiences help them to build upon their current knowledge, test out new theories, grow their understanding, and enhance skills.

Finding Play Spaces in Standardised Curriculum

While early childhood professionals hold play pedagogies as an important aspect of their pedagogical beliefs, how they define this is slightly different and dependent on the context of their work. A recent study (Riek, 2018) found that, while Queensland early childhood teachers were each taking different pathways to include play approaches in their teaching, they are taking steps to move away from traditional didactic teaching methods to deliver more physically and actively involved learning experiences. Teachers are creative, thoughtful, and purposeful in developing play-learning experiences across the standardised curriculum, which meet both the standards and developmental needs of students. Some teachers discovered the gap for introducing play into their daily program through the use of "you know [those] hands-on manipulative materials that are just so important" by taking learning outside the four walls of the classroom and including "a lot of outside investigation". Most commonly, teachers described those opportunities as being "hands-on, it's movement, it's not paper and pen, it's out of our desks" (Riek, 2018, p.111). Some of these methods and approaches are described below.

Mathematics

As existing scholarship recognises (Howard, Perry & Conroy, 1995; Marshall & Swan, 2007; Marshall & Swan, 2008; Swan, Marshall, de Jong, Mildenhall & White, 2007), the use of manipulatives in the area of mathematics has a long history in Australia. Therefore, it is probable that mathematics is a space within the curriculum where teachers feel enough self-confidence to attempt to include play pedagogies as they can legitimately demonstrate they are addressing a high priority standardised learning area through these approaches. Students are provided time to explore math manipulatives, such as Base 10 Blocks, unit blocks, attribute blocks, pattern blocks, and counters in their play, which allows young students to develop authentic understandings of how these materials may represent mathematical concepts. This provides time within mathematical rotation groups to "play" with the materials independently, as well as to work with the children to guide their use of these materials so that math concepts are developed authentically.

Kinaesthetic Movement Activities

Another approach to finding space for play is the use of movement activities such as obstacle courses, playground forts, hopscotch and rob the nest, in addition to activities within the classroom, such as games with dice, building with learning materials, and large mat games to meet curriculum

standards. Some examples are taking the lesson outside the classroom to learn directional and positional language by playing on obstacle courses and playground forts. Playing hopscotch reinforces phonetic knowledge/sight words when the children say the word/phoneme aloud as they jump on them. Alternatively, they can have a mathematical focus playing calculator hopscotch. The hopscotch is drawn like the face of a calculator and the first player jumps from square to square to indicate an equation. For example, the student might jump onto these in order: 4 + 3 = . The next player jumps to the answer, then jumps to a different equation. The player after her solves that, and so on. Rob the nest is a great outdoor math game where students rob the nest, but they do not know the value of the eggs until the end when they need to add the value up to calculate who won.

Board Games

Board games are a great way to foster the development of social-emotional skills among students while still addressing the standards. Games such as Scrabble, Boggle, Scattergories, and Upwords are great to develop spelling and vocabulary. Games such as Yahtzee, Monopoly, Trouble, and Backgammon promote many mathematical concepts such as arithmetic, number concepts, and budgeting. Board games can be easily sourced by asking the community and families to donate them, searching local op-shops and, of course, purchasing at the local department store. The key to using board games is to identify which concepts and standards they address, then print these and stick them to the board game themselves so that how these games address the curriculum is explicitly stated. What is great about these learning experiences is that many of them can be also done at home with families, so they are perfect for homework learning experiences.

Teachers' Role in Play

Early childhood professionals have an important role in fostering play, not only as role-models for play but as champions of play as a pedagogy. Using a play-pedagogy approach not only supports children's motivation as it centres on specific areas of interest and relevance for each child; it also provides an opportunity for educators to observe their play to assess their development in meaningful and authentic contexts. As such, this approach allows early childhood professionals to plan curriculum and effective instruction for their learners to explore, tinker, trial, and reimagine the world around them. It will also encourage them to take the kinds of risks necessary to strengthen life-long learning, taking initiative, focusing attention, and unlocking the power of curiosity and wonder. Primarily, the role of the teacher is to guide instruction within play through positive interaction and proactivity. Through reacting and interacting with children on their terms, sharing the initiative, and enabling the learners to be creative and playful in their thinking, the early childhood educator can build an imaginative environment where learning can thrive, and educational objectives can be achieved.

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Tash Treveton

Creating High-Quality Environments for Babies: Do They Really Need all the Stuff?

Tash Treveton started her career as an untrained casual and since then has studied and gained experience as an Educator, Educational Leader and a Nominated Supervisor, before co-founding Inspired EC in 2008. Happiest when creating natural, risky and engaging outdoor play spaces for children, Tash enjoys sharing the importance of outdoor play and does so regularly in her role as an approved trainer for Claire Warden. Helping people that engage with children to understand the importance of their role and ability to be a positive impact is what she lives for. Tash is the managing director and primary trainer for Inspired EC and has co-authored several books.

I vividly remember being a first-time parent almost 20 years ago. With the excitement of a new arrival, I wanted to feel prepared, to ensure that my child had everything that they needed. At every turn the "must-haves" were marketed: prams, bouncer, walker (no judgement—this is 20 years ago, remember!) rattles, light-up cause-and-effect toys, and a range of products designed to make my baby a "mini genius" apparently. With each product came the worry that, if I did not have that particular thing, my baby would be uncomfortable, or unhappy, or would not develop in the way that they were supposed to. So, like many new parents, I got all the things.

What I wish I knew then, which I am relieved to know now, is that the most important thing that my baby needed was the one thing that I could not get at any giant baby store. It was not promoted for its brain-building qualities, nor its ability to make life with a baby easier. It was not something that I could add to a baby shower registry or suggest to an over-eager aunty with a bulging wallet and a desperate need to "spoil" my little one. The most important thing that my baby needed was me.

I look back now at all of these must-haves that I had for my first child and can see that, in an attempt to make life with a baby easier or more engaging, I actually made it more difficult. Each of these things cost money—often a lot of money—they took up space and probably took up more time cleaning, moving, setting up, and packing away than they were actually used. In fact, they took precious time away from my child—time spent doing all the above could have been much better spent simply laying with my baby.

In 2002, I began working in an early childhood service. As an untrained casual, this was my first foray into this sort of environment, and I quickly thought that this must be what it is like to have quads and several mothers-in-law to impress with my tidy house and happy baby! Of course, the early childhood setting is indeed quite different to having your own child at home, and I soon began to see the differences. However, there were similarities too. Now, 18 years later, as I visit services in my role as a consultant, I still see infant spaces where the light-up cause-and-effect toys and activity stations feature prominently. Many services have a bunch of unnecessary equipment that costs a small fortune and does little to enhance the development and wellbeing of the infants who they are caring for. I believe that they purchase these with the absolute best of intentions, like a first-time mum hoping to spark curiosity and provide the very best for children.

Over the years, I evolved as an educator. I gained a deeper understanding of play, of environments, of our role as nurturers. I love to immerse myself in books, articles, videos, and professional development that challenges my thinking and enhances my practice. In the last few years, however, my understanding has been further rocked and shaped by the work of Pennie Brownlee and Nathan Wallis—both New Zealanders.

Connection and the Brain

In his work on brain development, Wallis makes repeated mention of the crucial importance of the first 1,000 days of a child's life. While it would be near impossible to sum up Wallis's work in a few sentences—and if you get the chance to attend one of his events, I would strongly recommend that you do—this little nugget of wisdom helps to put things in perspective:

Essentially, it is the dyad—or key adult-child relationship—that provides the attunement, safety and predictability that enables the "right conditions" for the frontal cortex to develop. Put another way, its [sic] relationship security that throughout human evolutionary history has calmed the brainstem so that the frontal cortex can develop (Wallis, 2015).

What this means is that it is not the light-up, pop-up toys or the flash cards that make babies smarter; it is connection with a key adult. While in the home, that key adult will no doubt be a parent; when infants are in our care, we take on the incredibly important role as a key adult. This is why it is vital that we build authentic relationships with children. Often, I hear educators worried that infants become too attached to one educator, worried that they will not settle if that person is not there. Yet, it is that very attachment that will support infants to feel safe and secure and to therefore develop—after all, if the brain is so busy protecting from perceived danger (fight or flight), it cannot develop.

In 2019 I spent time in New Zealand at an intensive program with Pennie Brownlee. As Pennie shared her work, research, and insight into the way that we, as a society and an education and care community, work with babies, I found myself almost wanting to have another baby and do it all differently! Pennie spoke of the importance of relationships, of connection with the infant being key to their security, wellbeing, and development. While I knew some of this already on some level, this life-changing experience opened my eyes even further. Ultimately, what infants need is connection. They need loving adults who are prepared to hold them and be with them and sing to them and talk to them and laugh with them and see wonder in the world with them.

What Does Connection Mean for Our Programs?

As educators, and services, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to have the perfect environment and program. Let us be honest—that does not exist. While we are so busy trying to create the perfect environment and program—setting up elaborate playscapes, purchasing equipment, planning detailed programs that cover all areas of development—we might be missing countless opportunities to build deeper connections with the children in our care.

Many of the infant spaces that I visit have a shrunken preschool program. They set their room up similarly—just smaller. They write their program similarly—and wonder why it feels hard or why they did not actually get to do the things that they had planned. Educators lament that "I don't have time for the program because I am so busy with the care stuff." Well you know what? The care stuff is the program. That time spent changing, feeding, rocking, cuddling, laying on the floor or on the grass—that time is where development is taking place. Sometimes we can get so focused on "doing art" or seeing how the infants respond to the dolls being placed in the home corner that we miss these incredible moments of care and connection, and we fail to see the value in these.

It is vital that we slow down, take a step back and then a step in—towards the children, not the program. Make time to really get to know the infants in your care and the abundance of flashing pop-up toys will become unnecessary. Care and connection will become the curriculum.

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Bronwyn Thomson and Priscilla Carmichael

Traces, Transforming Practice, and Pedagogy with Babies

Bronwyn Thomson holds a Diploma of Creative Arts-Visual Arts; Graduate Diploma in Primary Education; and a Bachelor of Early Childhood (Honours). She has had extensive experience as an early year's teacher in both state and private schools and in the early years education and care sector. Currently, Bronwyn works as Queensland Curriculum Lead for Guardian Childcare and Education where she supports teams of educators to deliver exceptional early education and care experience for young children and their families. Throughout her work with young children and their families, Bronwyn has been continually inspired by the research and practice of Reggio Emilia.

During 2019, we embarked on a professional collaboration to explore the learning experiences of babies, reflecting on early childhood curriculum construction and the image of babies. This research with babies took place in long day care settings in New South Wales and Queensland. The key focus for research included exploring how the image of baby and teacher orients the relationships and curriculum that is designed with, and for, babies in early childhood settings.

"As adults, we need the same freedom, as well as much more competence, curiosity, imagination than we have demonstrated up to now, in order to offer children, and build with them, the opportunities for learning and knowing" (Malaguzzi, as cited in Rinaldi, C, 2006).

Everything in a Togetherness

Throughout our collaboration it was a priority that we would research, talk, act, talk, analyse, and talk again. The time we gave to our dialogue reflects the value we place on professional partnerships, which includes listening to others, to ideas, and to contexts in order to understand.

We questioned practices with babies (and any child), which include "activities" such as handprints, colouring in and other product-driven experiences. The popularity and provision of these experiences is worth questioning, both from an intentional teaching perspective and from an image-of-the-child perspective.

The understandings we had of generative rather than emergent or thematic curriculum decision-making as a strategic way of working were important.

We understood that generative and dynamic curriculum decision-making

- situates learning within the complexity and multiplicity of relationships and contexts
- is carried out through observation, documentation, and dialogue
- accepts doubt, error, and uncertainty as important resources in the evolution of thought and action.

Throughout our inquiry, the processes of questioning, observation, analysis and critical reflection brought with them the potential of uncertainty and surprise and further insight into the rich capacities of children and adults.

What Is the Image of the Baby?

We understand that the image of the child (and there are hundreds of them) orients the relationships and curriculum that is designed with and for children in early childhood settings. Every educator (and adult) carries with them an image of the child which directs the ways in which they relate to children.

"Childhood, we know, is a cultural interpretation, and construct. Every society, and every historical period defines its own childhood in determining what is meant by, expected of and dedicated to childhood" (Rinaldi, 2006, p.17).

Our long-held image of the baby is that babies are born with rich competencies and potentials.

We began to develop and share video observations which clearly highlighted the research strategies of babies and the potentials of dynamic and generative curriculum design,

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which we described as an "intra-active pedagogy." This pedagogy was a way of working with babies and materials as dynamic, sensitive to communicative rhythms, and it honoured and valued the establishment of authentic, trusting, respectful, and responsive relationships.

A deeply personal outcome from this research was that we re-examined our image of the baby, as time and time again we saw babies reaching out to the world in highly responsive, complex, and sophisticated ways. As we began to really see these generous offerings of relationship and the invitations for exchange from babies, we also clearly saw our adult responsibility to listen, understand, and meet babies with corresponding generosity and focus.

What Understandings Are Held of How Babies Learn?

Babies are the keenest of observers, attentive to everything, and constantly learning through the security of trusted connections. Familiar relationships, daily care rhythms, and welcoming places support each baby's learning and development.

There are many perceptions of how babies learn, and these are linked with the image we each hold of the baby. Historically, babies have been seen as highly dependent and vulnerable, lacking in self-awareness and the agency to learn and develop with autonomy, reliant on adults for knowledge. A societal image of baby may include adjectives such as cute, vulnerable, helpless, dependent, and phrases such as "blank slate" or "sponge for learning."

Babies may be viewed through a developmental lens and their learning defined as a series of generalised stages which include walking, talking, and developing social and critical thinking skills. When the image of baby and baby learning is one of deficit and dependency, then the offerings we make to babies are simplified and diminished.

Observation and Slow, Considered Offerings

Instead, close, careful observation of babies enables the revelation of hidden complexities—the traces that children leave with us. There is sophistication to their relationships and learning. There are tender touches and gentle ripples of connectedness through relationships with each other, with materials, with the world.

Observing Onyx (9 months)

Urgency

Onyx has watched other babies exploring the tissue paper, and he cries. At first, I think he is tired or hungry as this is an insistent cry. The teacher moves him closer, and I realise that Onyx's cry is a request to be included. Onyx is communicating his urgent interest and, because he is not yet crawling, he requires the attentive adult in the role of interpreter to provide him with the proximity he needs. With hands that are opening, closing and arms pumping with excitement, Onyx explores with urgency and focus: "Aaahh! Aaaahh! Aaaaahh!"

This is the subtlety of babies and, when we reveal this subtlety, we also reveal the pressure teachers feel to teach, to be worthwhile in their roles, to meet expectations—perhaps leading to an over-intervention in our striving to be intentional.

"The urge to 'teach' is probably instinctive but is also prompted by an outmoded image of the baby as the 'empty vessel' waiting to be filled with knowledge" (Kolbe, 2014, p. 70).

We asked—How can we listen to the baby first, in a focused and sensitive way, **before** making decisions about our intentions as a teacher?

An intra-active pedagogy embraces the knotty mess of relationships within which experiences occur. This develops our understanding of the subtlety involved and an appreciation that the worth of an experience does not have to be linked to grand gestures or obvious epiphanies or a clear, linear link between the teaching of the teacher and the learning of the child.

Small moments matter.
Small movements matter.
Small decisions matter.

Revisiting the Image of Baby

This baby is ...

A citizen of the now, a researcher of the world who encounters
with hands, with body, with wholeness ...
with a joy to understand.
This baby is deserving of beauty, softness, comfort, and safety.
Of a place that builds my identity through connections to my family, my culture,
community and the natural world.

This baby belongs ...

And is cradled within a family who is strong and connected
I learn through my security with you.
My first experiences are delight.
Be with me in this moment.
Now is my gift.
Through me, you see anew the wonder of light, of hope, of love

This baby knows ...

I have a place here with you, and my identity is strong.
You are my heartbeat through which I understand the rhythms of each day.
Small moments matter.
Small movements matter.
Small decisions matter.
I am generous and have so much to share with you when you slow down ... . Listen ..
My movements are talking to you.
Talk to me too ...
Words and actions repeated form patterns for me, and I come to know the rhythms
of people, place, and time.
I find my place through you and with you, so take time with me.

Transforming Practice

Our use of video documentation as a strategy enabled us to witness the silencing of babies and the power relations inherent in our experiences with children. We could also see the need for an ethical response regarding our values—our image of child, our image of materials, our image of our role as teachers.

For us, this research made visible the generative learning processes of our babies' interior world. We reflected on the way we ourselves had been transformed and on our re-imagined image of the baby—richer, more nuanced, more layered—more in so many ways!

. . . their complex processes of learning

. . . their sophisticated strategies, their subtlety

. . . their generosity of spirit, inviting us in to see and experience the world as they do—through their eyes, their hands, their voice, their expressions.

If we listen sensitively and responsively to babies, our offerings back to them as teachers ought to recognise, uphold, and celebrate this image.

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Fiona MacGregor

Leading and Facilitating Change to Pedagogical Documentation

Keeping up with the pace and expectations of contemporary pedagogical documentation in early childhood services is challenging for early childhood educators and educational leaders on many fronts. Any change in this area is heavily influenced by the service's context and culture, the organisation's structures and processes, as well as the support provided by management for educators to engage in professional development, to learn new approaches, to take risks, and challenge the status quo.

Fiona MacGregor is an early childhood teacher with 25 years of experience working in early childhood services in NSW including preschools, long day care, before and after school care and tertiary education. Fiona is currently a teaching-director in a preschool in Sydney as well as a lecturer at TAFE NSW. Fiona has a strong interest in leadership and is currently studying for her Master of Educational Leadership.

Our Context

Waterford Preschool is a small community-based service sponsored by Waverley College in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. We run a co-educational sessional preschool for children aged 3–5 years of age. The team is longstanding and consists of experienced diploma- and degree-qualified educators. I have been the teaching-director and educational leader at the service for the last eight years.

In 2019, our team began to deeply reflect on the way it documented children's learning, development, and wellbeing. We had made many improvements to the preschool program over time, including a focus on our documentation processes and practices. Yet, it seems this is one area that demands continual review and evaluation. This is undoubtedly a result of learning new approaches, engaging in professional dialogue, reflecting on constraints to time, energy and resources, and trying to remove barriers through innovative practice.

Our previous approach to documentation involved creating a portfolio for each child/family, including photos and detailed observations or learning stories—each educator documenting, on average, up to six observations per child per term. These were shared electronically with families at the end of each term. On top of this we also created a daily "reflection on learning" that outlined a significant group-learning experience, which we also emailed on a weekly basis. We found that this approach, although comprehensively meeting the regulatory requirements and favoured by some of the educators and families, was time consuming, stressful in terms of the quantity produced, and often individualistic in nature. As well, the approach primarily focused on facts relating to the children's skills, knowledge and dispositions, rather than deep investigation into how children learn.

Changing systems and practices is not always an easy undertaking for leaders, especially if the system is working well on the surface. Yet, under close examination, there were certainly areas of practice that required improvement and/or restructuring to meet the competing needs of all stakeholders. Hence, the impetus for change was not necessarily to fix what was not broken but to explore new ways of creating meaningful and manageable documentation that benefited the educators, the families, and the children.

The Pitch

As the educational leader, the aim was creating a new approach that reduced the written workload, which was non-linear, yet at the same time inspired teacher agency and a renewed passion for documentation. The change, although professionally driven by an interest in contemporary

practice, was also heavily influenced by improving the wellbeing and mindsets of the educators. I wanted the educators to see documentation as a joy and give them the motivation to stretch both their knowledge and their skills. As a teaching-director involved in the process, I also had a good understanding of some of the pressures felt by educators to complete ongoing, meaningful documentation for all children. It was through observations and professional conversations that I became acutely aware of the importance of relieving some of the stress and anxiety caused by constant documentation.

After some recent professional development, it became clear that the benefits of an inquiry-based approach, which involved a strong focus on the children's curiosity and thinking, was worth pursuing. I was also very motivated to increase the quality and visibility of our pedagogical documentation so that the educational processes and children's learning were given a high priority and profile. My aspiration was that the change in both structure and style would allow the educators to be creative and innovative in their approach, rather than rely on individualistic outcomes-based methods.

My challenge was to convince the team (as a whole) that, firstly, the change was necessary and worthwhile in terms of improving pedagogy and, secondly, that the change would also have tangible benefits for them as educators. Of course, change is complex and challenging for most, and I learned that my initial rational approach was not going to sway those who were uninterested in change. For those who were interested, there was a need for clarity and details of how this would look in practice before they would fully engage. To facilitate this ambitious change, I needed to address issues related to the team's values and beliefs, create opportunities for learning, review current structures, and examine our current documentation expectations.

Team Culture

Our team is a very diverse group of enthusiastic educators who put a lot of time into their pedagogical practice and even more time into their documentation. For some, collecting data, analysing and interpreting it, and planning and evaluating children's learning, is well understood, and the written aspect of their role is one of professional identity and pride. For others, the task can be onerous, challenging, and a source of anxiety. With this in mind, it was important to address the needs of all educators in a differentiated and supportive way.

We began by validating what we currently did well and what we intended to keep. It was then appropriate to engage in one-on-one conversations with the educators to gain an insight into what aspects of the change needed clarification and how best to support their development. The outcomes of these meetings illuminated a need to provide the educators with more autonomy and a greater sense of agency into how they produced documentation, how frequently, and for what purpose. This is counter to the approach we have used in the past. What became evident was that we had been working towards an equality-based approach rather than an equity-based approach.

Learning Opportunities

In light of the need to provide an equitable learning space for all educators, I found that mentoring and coaching were the most valuable professional development tools. In a small stand-alone service, opportunities for mentoring and coaching can be limited simply by the sheer nature of the work that we do. However, finding the time to walk the educators through the process and support a shift in their thinking was very worthwhile. Other learning opportunities included

- sharing professional readings and videos at meetings and via an online platform
- collaborating and sharing ideas, resources, and observations during regular planning meetings
- organising in-service professional development opportunities relating to documentation
- visiting other services which are using pedagogical documentation.

Structural Issues

The environment

All early childhood programs are undertaken in very dynamic and unpredictable learning environments in which care and education are inextricably intertwined. Educators are busy interacting, forming relationships, supporting socialisation, assisting with routines, as well as scaffolding children's learning. The opportunity to stop, to listen and engage in conversations, and co-construct learning with children is often fractured by routine and unexpected events. Some of the ways we have modified our environment include

- introducing an indoor-outdoor program for the majority of the day to provide the educators with the time and space to fully engage with the children
- engaging an additional educator to effectively cover programming time, rather than utilising current educators

- reducing group sizes so that interactions are more fluid and interpersonal
- being cognisant of the amount of educator-led experiences set up in a day so that educators can focus and be present during learning
- reducing the amount of "teacher talk" during learning experiences so that deep and respectful engagement can occur
- ensuring that collaboration around planning and programming is a regular part of our practice.

Time

Educators often have limited time off the floor to gather their thoughts, write observations, analyse and interpret this data, devise strategies, plan learning experiences, and reflect on each child's progress in a cohesive and meaningful way. To increase time for educator research and creativity, we have redesigned our approach by

- replacing our portfolios with pedagogical journals which remain unpublished and are used to guide the educators' future planning. These journals contain developmental notes, strategies, parent conversations, and planning ideas
- replacing our daily reflection with a weekly reflection that tracks learning over time
- writing and displaying our educational program fortnightly, allowing more time for educators to complete the cycle of planning
- introducing floor books that can be completed with the children during the course of the day.

Expectations

Style and quantity

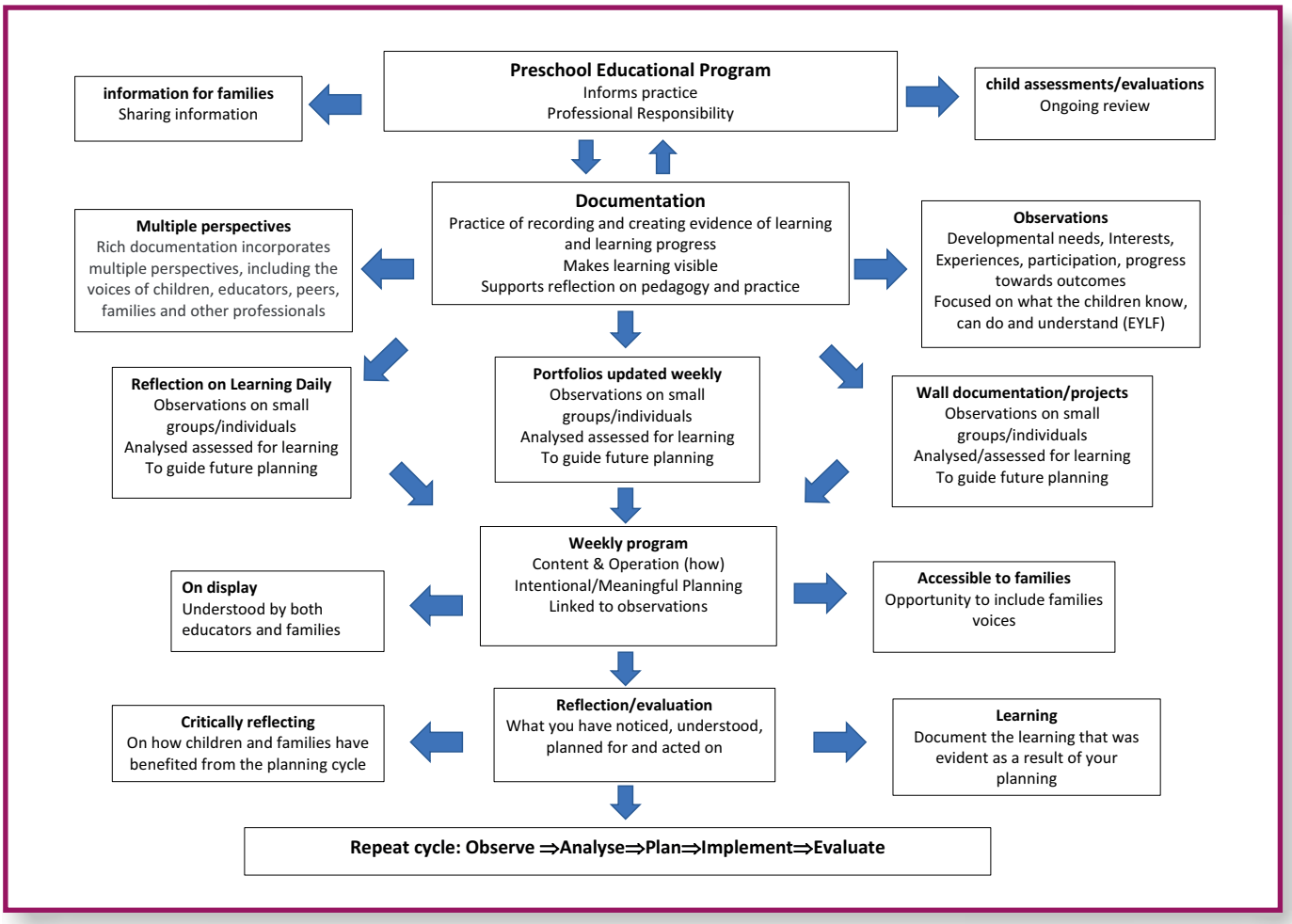
The quantity and tracking of documentation for each child can be overwhelming even for the most experienced educators. The style and number of observations produced by educators are often mandated by the leadership team and/or the organisation. This leaves little scope for educators and teachers to demonstrate agency, innovation, and creativity in their written work. A one-approach-fits-all doesn't take into consideration the diversity of skills, knowledge, and motivation of all educators. In order to increase agency, we have implemented the following:

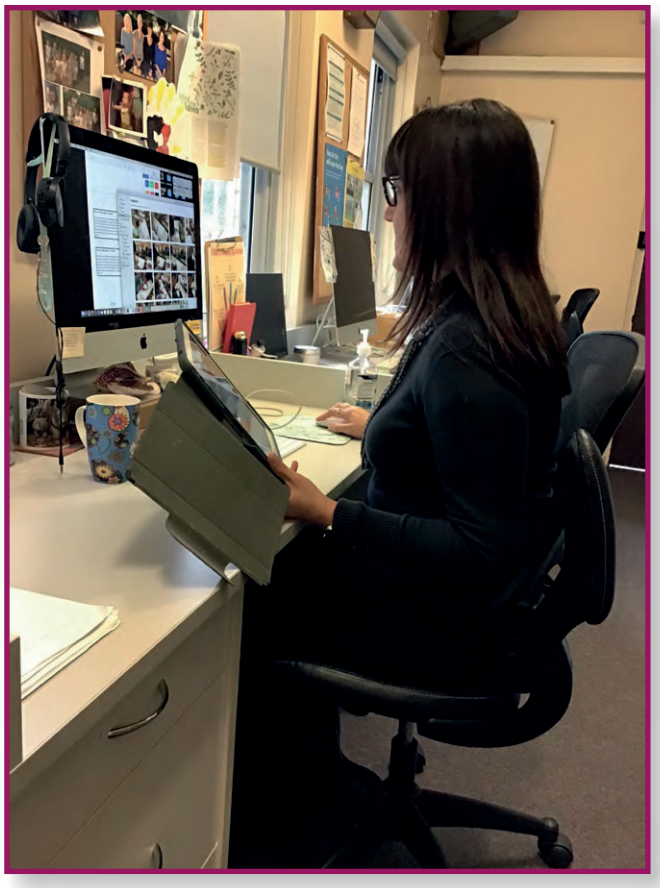
- removing the expected number of observations required for any one child as these will vary, depending on the child's needs and strengths
- encouraging educators to work on projects and lines of inquiry that they are interested in and passionate about
- promoting the use of a socio-cultural approach when documenting children's learning as the individual's learning can also be tracked through small-group work
- supporting a range of evidence of learning, including documentation panels, floor books, iMovies, and photo collages
- using all approaches to inform our understanding of the child.

In Conclusion

We are often stretched by the range of stakeholders we need to produce documentation for, including the regulatory body, families, ourselves as educators, our colleagues, and the children. We are required to keep records and track children's progress towards the Early Years Learning Framework outcomes. We use documentation to share our perspectives on pedagogy with families, and contemporary approaches encourage us to share documentation with our colleagues and children in order to include everyone's voice.

Critically examining the structure and the process of documentation, including the needs of the educators within the team, provides services with a more holistic view of how to move forward. Change in this area will be ongoing as the needs, knowledge, and interests of stakeholders change. Creating meaningful documentation is a dynamic process which provides leaders and educators with the autonomy and space to engage in innovative practice and rich professional development.


Preschool Educational Program
Informs practice
Professional Responsibility
information for families
Sharing information
child assessments/evaluations
Ongoing review
Documentation
Practice of recording and creating evidence of learning and learning progress
Makes learning visible
Supports reflection on pedagogy and practice
Multiple perspectives
Rich documentation incorporates multiple perspectives, including the voices of children, educators, peers, families and other professionals
Observations
Developmental needs, Interests, Experiences, participation, progress towards outcomes
Focused on what the children know, can do and understand (EYLF)
Reflection on Learning Daily
Observations on small groups/individuals
Analysed assessed for learning
To guide future planning
Portfolios updated weekly
Observations on small groups/individuals
Analysed assessed for learning
To guide future planning
Wall documentation/projects
Observations on small groups/individuals
Analysed/assessed for learning
To guide future planning
Weekly program
Content & Operation (how)
Intentional/Meaningful Planning
Linked to observations
On display
Understood by both educators and families
Accessible to families
Opportunity to include families voices
Reflection/evaluation
What you have noticed, understood, planned for and acted on
Critically reflecting
On how children and families have benefited from the planning cycle
Learning
Document the learning that was evident as a result of your planning
Repeat cycle: Observe ⇒Analyse⇒Plan⇒Implement⇒Evaluate



Sarah Cavallaro

Developing Play Skills in Babies and Toddlers in Early Childhood Settings

Sarah Cavallaro is the Senior Occupational Therapist in the Health and Wellness clinic based at the Mater hospital. This is a private clinic working with children in the community. Sarah has over 16 years' experience as a paediatric therapist and has a special interest in working with girls on the Autism Spectrum. She has had additional training in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, DIR Floortime, positive and relationship-based approaches to managing behaviour, and sensory processing. Sarah loves working with families and teachers to support children's participation in daily life.

Introduction

Play is the basis of all early childhood development and is one of a child's main daily occupations. As such, play forms a large part of the day for babies and toddlers in early childhood. Anecdotally, early childhood educators report that children can't play "as well as they used to." The research also tells us that less of a child's day is spent on play now than in previous decades (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). This article will discuss the theory of play and the development of play in babies and toddlers, as well as provide suggestions for enhancing play opportunities in early childcare settings.

What is Play?

"Play is what children do," (Bjorklund, 2007, p. 140). Play is a constant theme for many animal species that transcends history and cultures. It is often considered the defining activity of childhood.

Play is hard to define in concrete terms. However, there seem to be some characteristics of play that are universally accepted (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018). Play is

- an activity that a child is intrinsically motivated to do (voluntary)
- an active process
- joyful, fun, and spontaneous.

Why is Play Important?

Research over the last century has helped us understand why play is so important. Play underpins

- cognitive development of later language/literacy and numeracy skills (Krafft & Berk, 1998), as well as problem solving and creativity (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018)
- social skills, mental health, and emotional regulation (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006)
- physical health and growth (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998)
- executive function skills, for example, memory and learning, the pursuit of goals, and the ability to deal with distractions (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states in Article 31 that "Children have the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of leisure activities" (UNICEF, 2006).

What Does the Literature Tell Us About Play?

There are thousands of studies on play in children and, for that matter, on play in the animal species. Play-deprived rats demonstrate difficulty with problem-solving skills, showing us a suggested link between play and behavioural adaptation (Einon, Morgan & Kibbler, 1978).

Research also tells us that play and stress are intertwined: "High amounts of play are associated with low levels of cortisol, suggesting either that play reduces stress or that unstressed animals play more" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2018). Play also stimulates the brain's chemical production of norepinephrine (Wang

& Aamodt, 2011). This chemical is involved with regulating our sleep-wake cycle, modulating our emotions, and monitoring our heart output and blood sugar levels (Hormone Health Network, 2020).

Research also links success in adult life to play in childhood. Play that builds creativity, problem solving, teamwork, flexibility, and innovations seems to have the biggest impact on job success and fulfilment in later adult life (Golinkoff & Hirsch-Pasek, 2016).

Why Are We Seeing a "Decline" in Play Skills?

Over the past half century, we have seen many societal and environmental changes that have affected children's play skills.

Screens

Babies are born into homes with multiple screen technologies. From the first days of their lives, they are exposed to regular passive usage. Mums scroll through social media while they are breastfeeding and video-call far away friends and relatives so that they can meet their precious new arrival. As babies reach the end of their first year, many of the presents they receive at their first birthday party will be electronic in some way. There has been a huge growth in the production of technology aimed at children under three years (Garrison & Christakis, 2005). Access to screens themselves is not necessarily bad but, when babies and toddlers are accessing screens, they are not building their fine, gross, and sensory motor skills like they would with free play. Media encourages passivity, and what kids need at this age is active learning and creativity.

Use of technology in the home

A 2012 study compared mother-child interactions when playing with age-appropriate technological and nontechnological toys. There were significantly lower scores on the PICCOLO for the interactions when toddlers were playing with the electronic toys. The PICCOLO is a relatively new assessment that was developed as an observational measure of parenting behaviours. Mothers were both less responsive and less encouraging when playing with the electronic toys, and there was also a distinct lack of language and pretend play from the child (Wooldridge & Shapka, 2012).

When you look at the baby section of any online toy store today, you will see electronic and talking books, animated figurines, digital cameras for toddlers, DVDs for babies, and many, many toys that require batteries. Because parental responsiveness is directly related to a child's self-regulation, it makes sense that playing with these sorts of electronic toys on a regular basis is going to impact on a child's social-emotional development.

Lack of book reading

There was a study conducted in 2019 (Logan, Justice, Yumus, & Chapparo Moreno et.al.) that claimed that children who were not read to at home had heard 1.4 million less words when entering kindergarten than children who were read to at home. Having exposure to books and being read to impacts literacy and academic achievement down the track (Roskos & Christie, 2013), but having exposure to the brilliant worlds of books builds pretend-play skills too. Educators know the power of this when they read a story to the children in their care in the morning and then see these same children re-enact this story in their play all day long!

Lack of green time

Natural environments not only help people relax and deal with stress, but time outside spent in nature is also linked with the development of creativity, motor competence and self-confidence (Louv, 2008). Children are exposed to less "green time" these days due to smaller house blocks, less time spent at home, and an abundance of extracurricular activities that invade afternoons and weekend times.

Decreased free play and play across ages

Over the past half century, we have seen decreased opportunities for children to play outside with their peers (Gray, 2011). Daily play time for school-aged children has been falling since the early 1980s (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). In addition, children don't often have the opportunity to play with others of different ages. In free neighbourhood play, a two-year-old learns the basics of pretend play when a seven-year-old directs her to be a character in the game.

Increased time in care

Data on child-care usage in Australia consistently demonstrates an increase in centre-based care since the 1980s (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019). Early childhood care facilities in Australia must adhere to standards that are evidence based, and our quality of care in Australia is impeccable. But there is no denying that play time at day care is more structured and less focused on family routines than home-based play.

Underlying neuro-sensory deficits

Children who have underlying developmental difficulties may also struggle to develop their play skills appropriately. These can include

- visual or hearing impairment

- autism, ADHD, or developmental delay
- physical disability (e.g. cerebral palsy)
- cognitive impairment
- language delay.

Play Ideas

Below are some play ideas that you can use in your centre for children under the age of three years:

Object play

We all know the benefits of loose-parts play for preschoolers, but there are also tremendous advantages for babies and toddlers too. You can make up some safe loose-part baskets for babies and toddlers to explore, using things such as

- utensils and crockery
- scarves or large pieces of different textured materials
- wooden balls and rings
- plastic eggs and empty egg cartons
- blocks and cardboard rolls.

Sensory play

Edible sensory play ideas include

- oats
- spaghetti
- coloured water
- home-made scented play dough
- discovery bottles.

Language play

- board books
- songs and rhymes (may be with or without props)
- concrete items or puppets available for story re-tell
- peek-a-boo
- make a laminated photo album or DIY board book

Cognitive play

- matching colours (e.g. blocks and balls)
- blocks with letters or numbers on them
- ball runs
- rattles or other toys that make noise
- peg puzzles

Pretend play

- incorporate edible sensory play materials with cars or animals
- cars and roads
- dress ups
- home corner
- doll/teddy play

Gross motor play

- tummy time
- ball play
- climbing
- bubbles
- ride-on toys

Fine motor play

- threading with cardboard tubes
- edible fingerpaints
- posting
- Duplo
- drawing and painting

Spatial/maths play

- shape toys
- wooden blocks with or without patterns
- obstacle courses where you use spatial language
- free play with different size containers and lids
- stacking cups

Remember that early intervention for play skills difficulties is both highly effective and achieves better outcomes in the long-term. Referral to an occupational therapist in your local area is the best thing to do if you are concerned about the play skills of the babies or toddlers in your care.

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Title:

The Dingle Dangle Jungle

Author:
Mark Carthew

Illustrator:
Dave Atze

Publisher:
Ford Street

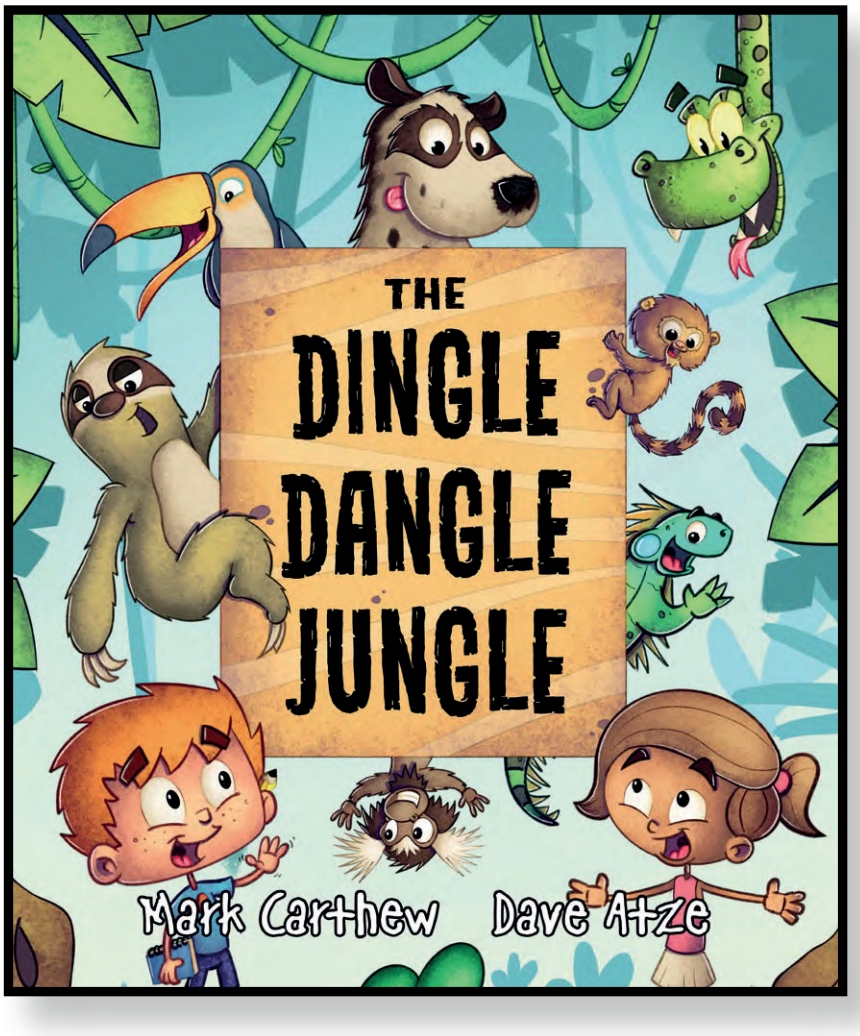
ISBN: Hard Back:
9781925804409

Reviewed by:
Babs Newton

Such a delightfully playful book for family and educational settings.

My grandson, who is nearly four years old, was very taken by the pictures which are clear, colourful and pop off the page. I used it with a group of five-year olds who were asked to look for the rhyming words; this worked very well in a small group setting. The vocabulary on most pages is varied and out of the "normal" range for this age group, which gave plenty of opportunities to develop young children's word banks. The rhythm of each page is consistent so makes it easy for the rhyming to be found.

The subject of the Amazon is also something different for Australian audiences thus providing the opportunity to develop a broader world understanding. It was easy to use the internet to build on the curiosity of the children about what the Amazon jungle is and where it is. The back page has a reference list of which animals are included on each page, which could be of use to teachers. The Dingle Dangle Jungle is definitely a book worth having in the library.



Title:

Baby's First Jailbreak

Author:
Jim Whalley

Illustrator:
Stephen Collins

Publisher:
Bloomsbury

ISBN: 978-1-4088-9181-0

Reviewed by:
Sue Webster

This is the second instalment for Baby Frank the zoo animal lover.

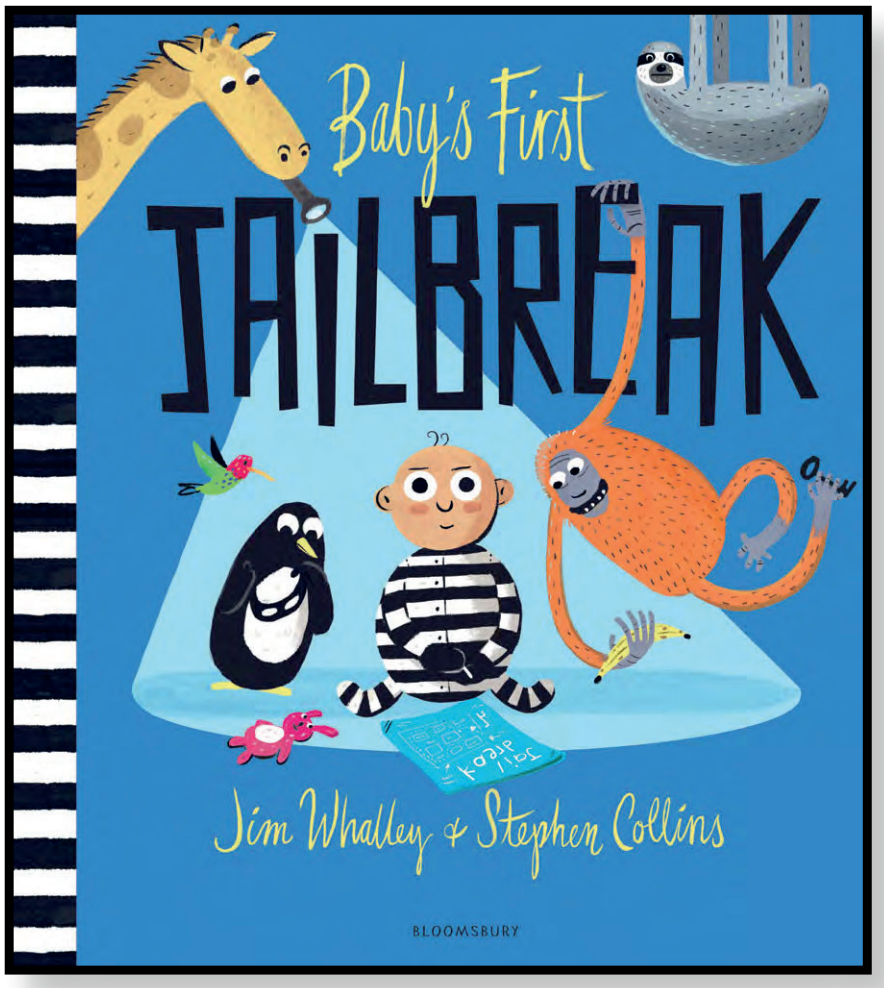
In the first tale, Baby's First Bank Heist, Frank steals money from the bank to fund his love of animals. He then secretly purchases so many zoo animals that his parents turn their home into a zoo to house them all and to help pay back the money he stole from the bank.

In this second adventure Frank's zoo is a very popular destination until rich Baby Bruce's parents build a bigger and better zoo that takes all of Frank's customers. Frank and his parents do not know how to compete with dancing penguins and the likes. Things change when an escapee penguin from Bruce's zoo appeals to Frank for help. Bruce's animals do not enjoy being treated like machines and want out. A plan is hatched, and Frank's zoo animals are put to work, to break out their compadres. All the zoo animals unique skills and talents are put to good use to get over tall fences, pick locks and climb walls.

You will have to read the book to find out if the escape was successful but – heads up – it all turns out well.

Collins has done a marvellous job of illustrating this rollicking adventure. You can see that he is a cartoonist at heart and this style fits well with the theme and fun of the story. Each page is rich with colourfully detailed illustrations that bring fun and joy to each page.

This is a good feeling rhyming adventure. It highlights problem solving and helping others. All children young and old will enjoy this funny tale. A book that can be read over and over.



Title:

Bedtime, Daddy!

Author:
Sharon Giltrow

Illustrator:
Katrin Dreiling

Publisher:
EK Books

ISBN: 9781925820386

Reviewed by:
Julie Jones

I absolutely loved this book, which turns the traditional tale of putting a child to bed, upside down. In Bedtime, Daddy! the author Sharon Giltrow, takes us on an engaging journey where little bear is trying to put daddy bear to bed. It is a story that we can all relate to, recalling the excuses we would use to prolong the bedtime routine or that our children, grandchildren and children everywhere are continuing to use. For book lovers, it is a celebration of the central role that books still hold in the bedtime routine.

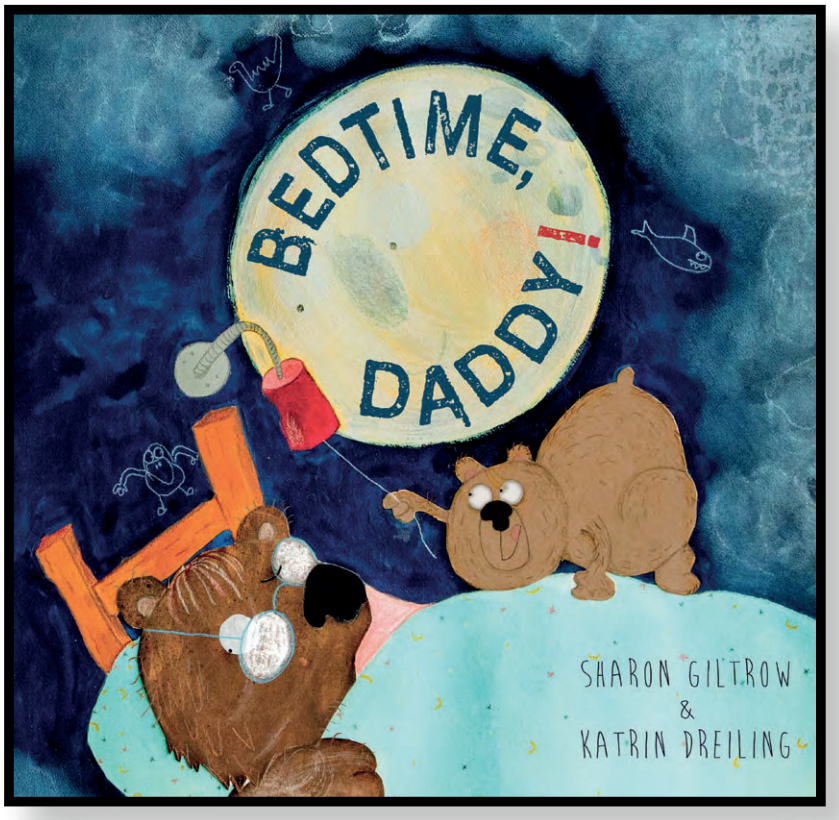
Bedtime, Daddy! beautifully celebrates the bedtime routine, including

- the lead up... "When you see your daddy rub his eyes and stifle a yawn, announce, Bedtime, Daddy!"
- the delaying tactics ... "Give your daddy his favourite dinosaur pyjamas. He will think it is funny to wear them on his head. Try not to laugh and wrestle him into them."
- the tricks the reader often tries ... "Read one more story but skip a few words or even a few pages."

Finally, at the end of the story someone falls asleep, though perhaps not the intended bear!

The author, Sharon Giltrow, is an early childhood educator, working with children displaying Developmental Language Disorder. Sharon's language in the book is targeted perfectly towards young children - full of humour and very relatable. The predominantly mixed media illustrations by Katrin Dreiling are full of expression and were sustainably created using mostly recycled paper.

The publisher, EK Books provide teacher notes on their website, giving an extensive amount of learning extension ideas. In the kindergarten setting, Bedtime, Daddy! is an ideal book to go on a picture walk with. The recommended audience age is 3-8 years and I can imagine children of this age really enjoying this book, and adults too! This would be a wonderful book to read on Father's Day.



Guidelines for writers

The EYC editorial panel welcomes articles and ideas for possible inclusion in the journal.

One of the journal's strengths is in the variety and individuality of contributions. These style guidelines should help you to prepare your contribution in the EYC 'style'.

Style

We like to maintain a uniformity of approach within the journal. Here are some examples of the preferred 'house' style.

- Use Australian spelling in preference to American.
- Write numbers up to twelve as words; figures are used for numbers 13 upwards. (For example: one, eleven, 18, 200.) Exceptions are where numbers appear in a table, list or refer to a measure. (For example: Anne was seven-years-old when she walked 5 kilometres to school.)
- Use the following examples to help you write dates and times:
  15 February 2006, 1900s.
  She left at 7.25 am in order to catch the seven-forty train.
- Usually, you would write amounts of money in numerals. (For example: 20c or $0.20, $120 and $88.15.) Words may be used in approximations such as 'he made millions of dollars'.
- Use italics for titles. For example: *The Australian* rather than 'The Australian'.
- Use a single space after full stop.
- Use single quotes.
- Use an en dash between spans of numbers.
- Aim for a style that is free of jargon or slang (unless this is relevant to your contribution).
- Don't assume that your audience has prior knowledge of your topic. For example, it is possible your readers will not be familiar with an acronym that you use every day. You should use the full reference the first time, followed by the acronym in brackets as shown here: Early Childhood Teachers' Association (ECTA).
- Advertorial should not be included.

Referencing

If your contribution concludes with a list of references, you should check these carefully as the editor may only pick obvious typographical errors. A search on Google usually brings up any reference you do not have to hand.

Maybe you need help with referencing. If so, ... The preferred style for the *ECTA Journal* is the author-date system (pp. 188–208 of the *Style manual for authors, editors and printers, 6th ed.*).

Example of in-text citations: This approach (Smith 1995; Tyler 2002) suggests ...

Example of book referencing: O'Hagan, M 2001, *Early years practitioner*, 4th edn, Harcourt, London.

Example of journal referencing: Bredekamp, S 2006, 'Staying true to our principles', *Educating Young Children*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 21–4.

Direct quotations within your article should be in italics and referenced with name of author and the source.

Specific terminology

We are presently compiling a standardised list of frequently used terms. Examples are:

- day care (rather than daycare or day-care)
- child care (rather than childcare or child-care)
- preschool (rather than pre-school)
- the Preparatory Year or Prep (rather than prep)
- Year One, Year Two/Three (words rather than numbers)
- 'the staff members are' (instead of the awkward singular noun 'the staff is ...')
- five-year-olds (i.e. age with hyphens)

The journal committee reserves the right to undertake some minimal editing or rewriting in order to maintain conformity of 'house style'. If an article is provisionally accepted, but fairly major changes are required, we will contact you to discuss this.

Length of contribution

- Article: 1200 words • Book review: 300 words • Regular article: 650 words

Form of submission

Your contribution should be submitted via email to info@ecta.org.au Photographs may be submitted digitally – minimum 3 megapixels on the highest resolution. Art works should be scanned. Photographs require a release agreement. A hard copy should also be included.

Author release forms must be signed and a hard copy forwarded to ECTA 20 Hilton Road, Gympie, Qld. 4570. Where original artwork or material has been submitted it will be returned at the contributor's request. All contributors will be sent a copy of the journal.

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