



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Supporting babies' social and emotional wellbeing



Introduction: What does social and emotional wellbeing mean?

Social and emotional wellbeing comes from children feeling safe, secure and valued. The sense of wellbeing frees them to explore and learn. They learn ways to communicate their needs, knowing that they can get help and support when they need it. They gradually learn to identify and express their feelings and gain skills and understandings about relating to others.

Social and emotional wellbeing features throughout the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), and is the focus for Learning Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.

The *National Quality Standard* (NQS) Element 1.1.1 requires that curriculum decisions contribute to children's wellbeing. Quality Area 5 focuses on educator-child relationships that promote children's learning and wellbeing.

Although much of the content of this e-Newsletter applies to all children, the particular focus is babies' wellbeing. The perspectives featured come from conversations with three professionals:

- Jo Cole, Clinical Psychologist
- Margaret Nicolson, Family Day Care Educator
- Kristie Ward, Senior Educator, Care and Education Centre.

What tells you that a baby has a sense of social and emotional wellbeing?

Margaret: *Social and emotional wellbeing is about a sense of belonging. Children really feel like this is their group and their space—that's what I want to achieve.*

When they are comfortable, babies do a lot of checking where you are and what you're doing. You're a reference point or anchor for their wellbeing. When my response says 'Yes, I'm here', they feel secure.

Kristie: *The main sign that a baby has a sense of wellbeing is that they are comfortable and relaxed and will engage with you. They show a kind of resilience and openness.*

We aim for them to be the same at home and in the centre. For example, one child was very quiet here, but his family said he was quite loud at home. That told me that he wasn't quite comfortable here. Now he's loud here too. The parents loved hearing that!

Does stress or distress always interfere with wellbeing?

Jo: Even in the most caring environments things happen that cause some stress and distress. These events give babies a chance to learn over time how to manage their feelings. Over time, babies can begin to self soothe, wait and tolerate some frustration. However, they still need a lot of help from adults to regulate their emotions.

The aim is to ensure that what the child experiences is 'tolerable stress'. If stress continues and is beyond the child's ability to cope, it becomes 'toxic stress', which has a negative effect on brain development.

Sometimes a baby simply needs someone to be with them while they are distressed, to help them find ways to feel better. Adults don't have to get it right every time, but the overall message is 'You will feel better and I will help you.'

What role do educators' relationships with children play?

Jo: Through relationships babies learn about themselves. Hopefully they learn that they are valuable human beings who are worth caring about and that if they need something someone will help them. This starts with simple things, like educators knowing what a baby's cry is likely to mean.

A baby who has the experience that no one comes when you cry and that you have to try really hard to get help is learning too—learning negative things about themselves, other people and how the world works.

Educators and babies have to get to know each other. The baby learns that the educator will always try to figure out what they want and need.

Research shows that when babies are being cared for by people who don't know them very well, it can be stressful for them. This means babies need to work harder to communicate what they need.



Margaret: Babies' social and emotional wellbeing comes from their secure relationship with me. I start building that relationship from the beginning and gradually they are more relaxed.

The relationship gives them confidence, a belief that I will respond when they vocalise and comfort them when they are upset. They feel secure.

The relationship and my responses are based on knowing children really well. For example, I have two babies who started around the same time. They are so different. Tia, 11 months, is very chatty and outgoing. If I could measure the amount of vocalising, she'd be off the chart! She's very happy, enthusiastic, noisy (in a good way!) and likes vigorous interactions. Abigail, nine months, doesn't vocalise as much and mostly explores quietly. She doesn't command as much attention from me and isn't as 'out there' as Tia is.

Unless you pick up on their dispositions, likes and dislikes, you can't really please them. Shortly after they began coming I figured out that Tia likes to stay in her cot and talk to herself after she wakes up, so I don't rush in when I hear her. Abigail, however, wants to be picked up as soon as she wakes.

How important is the settling-in period?

Margaret: It helps so much when the family can take time to settle their child in. I really value and learn a lot from watching how parents interact with their child. It's also a time for me to build a relationship with the family. It's important for babies to experience their parent and me being relaxed with each other.

Kristie: We place a lot of emphasis on both the child and the family settling in. Often the child will cope and feel comfortable sooner than the family does. Children are quick to 'get' how things work. Babies' social and emotional wellbeing at the centre has a lot to do with how their families feel about them being here.

It's important when babies start at our centre not to overwhelm them with people. We try to make sure that the person who does the interview before a child commences is the person who makes a connection with the child when they start.



What are some practices that affect babies' social and emotional wellbeing in early care and education services?

Margaret: *Little things matter. For example whenever the doorbell rings, the children rush to the door to greet the visitor. I will pick up a baby who's not yet walking and take her with me to the door, so that she feels a part of it. I always seat the babies near the lunch table close to the older children.*

I individualise children's experience. For example each one sleeps in a different room. It allows me to tailor the sleep routine to fit each child. I can put music on for babies who like it. No one wakes anyone else up. I put a photo of the child's family beside the cot so that they see it when they wake up. Each child has their own blanket or special toy. They think of it as their room.

Routines and predictability are crucial. I talk to the babies throughout the day and they begin to anticipate what's going to happen. The key is to slow down and take the time to notice and respond. You want babies to be able to predict, to know that they can rely on you.

When you know them well and they are unhappy you get a kind of sixth sense about how serious their unhappiness is. Sometimes it's just a matter of making a small adjustment—for example if you're outside, turning them so that they're not facing into the wind. Or you can offer them something new to do or change the environment—maybe bring out the scarves or change their position. As a baby, you can feel very insecure if you can't move yourself to another position.

If a baby is new to the service and a strange person comes into the room, I always place myself between the baby and the stranger. I want the child to know that they are very safe with me.

Kristie: *I try to help parents develop a predictable routine for saying goodbye. It's like our focus on consistency with everything—consistency between practices at home and in the centre—for example in the way a child is helped to settle and sleep.*

How important are partnerships with families?

Jo: *Partnerships with families help educators to get to know each baby and family as individuals. Even though children spend a lot of time at their early learning setting, they still want to be with their families the most. This is a sign that babies have formed secure attachments with their family.*

Educators who aim to establish strong relationships with babies have to keep uppermost in their minds the baby's special relationship with the parent. It's also good for babies to experience the strong positive relationship between their family and educators.

Children know that their family is number one in their lives. Going to an early learning service is like going off to work. It's important, but it doesn't replace family life.

Kristie: *I try to let families know that I understand how they're feeling about having their child come to us—to normalise that it can be stressful. I want families to accept their feelings.*

I make sure I use the time a parent is here to build a relationship with them and with the child. It doesn't help if we just leave them alone together and get on with whatever else we have to do.

I never tell parents that it's time to leave. They can stay as long as they want to.



Jo: Primary caregiving can really meet the needs of babies in care. I understand that there are obstacles and complications and that some services cannot operate full primary caregiving models. But it is fundamentally important for babies to learn that 'someone knows me, likes me, will help me, is looking forward to seeing me and notices if I'm not here.'

Particular practices follow from primary caregiving. If an educator is leaving the room she says goodbye to the children for whom she is the primary caregiver. She uses her relationship with children to help them to build relationships with other educators so that they can function without her.

Kristie: We are currently investigating primary caregiving models. We're discussing an inquiry project to explore how it might work in our service. We have primary carers currently for the first month of a child's participation.

Kristie: Some specific things that we do to promote social and emotional wellbeing include:

- encouraging families to spend a lot of time in the service
- trying to do things the way they are done at home. For example, a child went to sleep every night on his mother's chest, so we figured out together that she should bring in a woollen jumper that she wears a lot. He snuggles into this jumper at story time just before going off to sleep. We also give families the option of bringing bed linen from home for their child.

Conclusion

Jo: You might think that you have to do something in order for babies to learn. They are learning even when educators aren't doing anything. They are learning all the time, not just from what adults plan for—learning through living the relationship.

You can't put learning into boxes—for example, saying that when someone soothes a baby 'that's emotional learning'. The learning is broader than that—it's many kinds of learning.

Kristie: There's a lot of individualisation in our program in the way we interact with each child.

Margaret: It really boils down to knowing the child—really being tuned in. Even when you know them there's a fair bit of guesswork. You have a go, and the better you know them the more likely you are to get it right.

Kristie's, Margaret's and Jo's comments support the fundamental importance of strong caring relationships as the basis for babies' social and emotional wellbeing. Through building these relationships educators get to know babies well as the unique individuals that they are. 'Getting it right' is enormously satisfying for an educator and more importantly leads to babies' learning that lays a strong foundation for life.

Anne Stonehouse

Early Childhood Consultant and Writer

Biography

Anne Stonehouse lives in Melbourne and is a consultant in early childhood. She was a member of the consortium that developed the national *Early Years Learning Framework*.

Coordinating Editor

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Biography

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and has been responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the series since 2012.

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