



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Communicating with families about children's learning

Educators and families have always communicated when necessary, for example, when a child's behaviour is a concern or symptoms of illness appear. Current thinking about good quality practice extends communication beyond such everyday essentials, as families, educators and children collaborate to support children's learning.

The national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (DEEWR, 2011) highlight such partnerships.

Communication in the NQS:

Element 6.1.2: Families have opportunities to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions (DEEWR, 2011, p. 11).

Standard 6.2: Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected (DEEWR, 2011, p. 11).

Element 6.2.1: The expertise of families is recognised and they share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing (DEEWR, 2011, p. 11).



Communication in the EYLF:

Principle: Partnerships (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12)

Practice: Assessment for learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 17)

The Learning Outcomes and other concepts in the EYLF—for example, *belonging, being and becoming*, agency and dispositions towards learning—are the focus for collaborative conversations through which educators communicate more than 'what the child did' to talk about what each child appears to be learning.

The aim of communication is not for families to become familiar with the language and terminology in the EYLF. The *language* in the EYLF is for educators; however, the *concepts* are for everyone who supports children's learning.

The content that follows contains quotes from two educators and a parent:

- Denise is the coordinator of Boroondara Kindergarten, a community-owned and-managed service located on the edge of a public housing estate in Melbourne.
- Michelle is the manager of Children's Programs, Gowrie Victoria Docklands, a centre that provides care and education daily to 150 children in the Melbourne CBD.
- Emily is the parent of three-year-old Della. They began using family day care when Della was nine months old and now use a centre-based service as well.

Everyone benefits from communication

When families', educators' and children's perspectives, insights and information combine, everyone benefits, particularly the child. Communication builds for everyone a more complete picture of the child's interests, needs, learning progress and uniqueness. This more complete picture informs the child's experience both in the early childhood setting and at home.

Denise spoke about combining perspectives:

What we're trying to do is to give families a snapshot of what their child is like at kindergarten so that we have a shared understanding. We encourage them to share what the child is like at home. Some do and others don't. We ask questions about what we see and know about that child. We want to know how that matches with what they know and see.

Sharing information makes learning more visible.

Emily spoke about gaining insights about Della's learning:

Janani, my family day care educator, helps me to see so much more than I would otherwise. For example, I might just see Della playing in the sandpit, and Janani will tell me about what she's learning—how she's experimenting with materials, using her imagination and planning ahead.

Families are reassured that their child is known, valued and treated as an individual. Trust and confidence in the early learning setting they have chosen for their child are enhanced.

When we first started I felt a bit guilty and unsure. I thought she might be missing out on experiences. I quickly began to see the opposite—how she was having wonderful experiences and opportunities that she wouldn't have if she wasn't in care.

What I love are the personal stories about Della. I knew early on that Janani could only know those things if she really paid close attention to Della. (Emily)

Educators can normalise behaviour:

As a new parent you get anxious if your child's not doing something that other children are doing. Janani was always telling me about the range of normal or common behaviour. She has worked with many children, so when she says 'This is common—don't worry about it' I know she knows what she's talking about! (Emily)

Families can learn how educators are helping their child prepare for school and life when they talk about the skills and understandings children gain through the curriculum, including those related to literacy and numeracy.

Michelle explains:

One of our challenges is to broaden families' notions of what readiness is—to help them see that school readiness begins at birth by supporting a child's sense of agency, allowing them to make some decisions and take some responsibility for their learning, supporting them to become confident and flexible. We try to help families see the learning that is occurring—for example to see that lunchtime isn't just about eating, but offers so many opportunities for various kinds of learning.

Michelle summed up the aim of communicating:

What we're aiming for with families is for them to have the knowledge and confidence to make informed decisions about their children. It's not about us educating them or telling them what to do—we want them to be involved thinkers and problem-solvers.





How do educators communicate with families about children's learning?

The short answer to the question above is 'in a variety of ways':

We communicate about learning in many ways—display boards, emails, newsletters, notes on an easel outside the room, notes in information pockets. We found out from a survey that families have different preferences. We will never be 100 per cent successful no matter how wide the ways of communicating. There will still be families who don't get information or who don't think there is enough communication. Part of the reason for this is that families are busy—they don't have time to read everything. We need to reflect on what communication families really need and want. It's not as simple as the more the better. (Michelle)

While all ways of communicating have value, a face-to-face chat, when possible, is best. The key to effective communication is doing everything you can to make families feel welcomed and establish a positive relationship.

When families are welcomed, they witness our relationships with children, they see that we engage with them. We don't have to tell them we care about their child. They can see that. (Denise)

Let's focus on some specific points about communicating:

Communicate as much as possible in families' first language.

Our kindergarten chooses to employ staff who speak the range of families' first languages. This is so important, especially if we have a concern or need to tell a family about something that happened. (Denise)

Tell families about your practices—why you do things the way you do, changes you are considering or have made—and their impact on children's learning.

Consider the value of projects that extend over days or weeks. Works in progress can provide tangible evidence of children's learning.

Share information about the EYLF and the NQS, and make records of children's learning available. Recognise and respect that there will be varying levels of interest in this information. Think carefully about the distinction between records you might make for yourself and your colleagues and those that have meaning and are useful for families.

Use photos to illustrate what children do, but recognise their limitations as a means of communicating about learning—a picture on its own isn't worth a thousand words; words are a necessary addition.

Seek families' advice about their child.

Set the stage for the 'habit' of communicating and building a relationship with the first encounter:

We start the process of building relationships at the enrolment interview. Our first question is 'What is something your child does that makes you proud?'

We ask about issues during pregnancy and birth, who looked after the child in the first year and who helped the family during that time. We've found that information to be really helpful in getting a picture of the child's health status as well as the family's connections and supports.

We ask if they are happy with the way the child eats and sleeps.

Questions like these aren't confronting. They demonstrate to families that they can tell us things we need to know. This sets up the idea that we want to know what they know about the child. Of course we accept that some people won't want to tell us their story and we respect that. (Denise)

Give all the positive feedback you can—about children's progress, interests and achievements.

Anything positive we will share straight away—if it's good news, why delay? Say it then and there. (Denise)

Think carefully about whether or not you need to talk to families about a concern, and if you decide to do so, use empathy to consider how you will talk about it.



Denise reminds that discussion isn't always necessary:

We are professionals—we can tell if something is wrong—we don't have to ask. We can observe a child and use what we know about that child to follow up. We respect families' privacy and their decisions about what to tell us.

We follow up straight away if there's something we need to talk about. These follow ups are usually teacher-initiated. We can tell if a family member has a concern. For example, if a parent frequently asks 'How's he going?' or 'Did she hit anyone today?' we know that they are concerned. We are aware that families don't want to hear repeatedly about problems or concerns. We have a family of a child with a disability who keeps postponing meetings that we've scheduled. We understand—the meetings they have to attend about their child probably exhaust them.

We try to frame things positively. For example, we might say 'Your child is a fantastic decision-maker, but once he makes up his mind it's difficult to change it,' rather than talking about the child being inflexible. After all, being able to make decisions is a good thing—a child initiating their own learning.

Convey both optimism and honesty when communicating about a concern you have about a child. Even when you are struggling to find a solution, aim to communicate a firm belief that a solution can be found.

Keep in mind that communication about children's learning includes both general information and information about a specific child.

Share with families both general information about children's learning and information about their child.

One of the things we should always be reflecting on is improving educators' abilities not only to recognise and support children's learning but also to articulate it in ways that resonate with families. We want to go beyond just talking about routines with them—how much the child ate or how long she slept—to include daily discussions about what they are learning or have learned. (Michelle)



Denise shared a story that captures many significant points about communicating with families:

J is a five-year-old child who has experienced trauma and chaos in the early years of his life. His grandmother is raising him. J behaves erratically and aggressively at times, without apparent provocation. One day he injured another child. The ensuing conversations with parents of the child who was hurt unfortunately occurred publicly. J's grandmother was upset to hear about J's behaviour, apologised to the affected child and parent and said she would talk to J about the incident.

The following day, J returned with a 'big boy haircut'. His grandmother farewellled him, reminding him to 'find other things to do if you are feeling angry'. Later conversations with the teacher revealed that the grandmother was clearly concerned about J's behaviour. She said that she:

- *trusts the teachers and did not blame them for what had happened*
- *did not seek to apportion any blame on the other child involved*
- *can't be cross with J*
- *needs to help J find other ways to manage anger*
- *wanted to show him that, in her words, 'I believe in you and you are a big boy and you are going to learn to find another way when you are feeling angry'.—That's why he had the haircut*
- *was open to any advice or support available.*

It was clear to the teachers that the purpose of the haircut was to show J in a tangible and lasting way that his grandmother believed in him. She is wise enough to know that berating or punishing J and making him feel worse will not help him change his response to anger. She is actively working to encourage positive behaviour and will not let J be defined by his disruptive actions. She is teaching us ways to manage, encourage and support J and other children.

Conclusion

Communication is two-way. It is not only about educators imparting information to families but is also about encouraging families to share insights and information. Educators really listen, demonstrating to families that what they share informs the child's experience. Communication with families is not the same thing as 'educating' parents or dispensing 'expert' advice. Families have as much to tell educators as educators have to tell families.

The key to effective communication is in the relationship you have with families. That relationship begins with families feeling welcomed and comfortable in the service. A critical component of building and strengthening relationships is educators being accessible.

We make ourselves available to mingle and talk with families at the beginning and end of the session by planning informal play at those times. If you schedule a group time you miss that chance. We make sure we greet and farewell every child and every family member.

The key is making families feel welcomed. A parent said recently, 'It's so nice here—everyone says hello with a smile.' We have to keep in mind that we might be the only person outside of their cultural group that they speak to.

It's about welcoming, talking and demonstrating in our actions that we want a partnership.
(Denise)

Finally, Emily, the parent, captures what matters most:

The thing I value most is Janani's respect for Della as an individual. This has helped our family to see our daughter as a unique little person destined to be exactly who she is, not to be moulded into what we think she should be.



Reflective questions

Do you communicate more with families about what their child is *learning* or *doing*? If the latter, how can you redress the balance?

How do you use your knowledge of the Learning Outcomes and other key concepts in the EYLF to help you talk more effectively with families about their child's learning?

How do you encourage families to tell you what they know about their child's learning? How do you demonstrate to them that you value that information and that you use it?

Do you communicate more with some families than others about their child's learning? If so, why? How can you ensure that you communicate with all families?

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

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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