



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Responding to children's play

Setting the scene

This newsletter focuses on three of the key practices highlighted in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF)—*responsiveness to children, learning through play and intentional teaching*. These practices closely link to element 1.2.2 under the *National Quality Standard* (NQS)—*Educators respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend children's learning*.

These three practices meld together—when watching a highly effective educator you can see them move seamlessly from creating a play situation, choosing different ways to be involved with children and their ideas, and drawing out the potential learning in the situation through their challenges and provocations which develop the play further. If we see intentional teaching as something we do sometimes, and other times, we just let children play, we miss many opportunities to respond to children's ideas and interests. In the same way if we think that responsiveness to children involves just waiting for them to have an idea or a question for us to respond to, we may be limiting children's experiences. In fact, we can be responsive and intentional all the time.

Being responsive and intentional

A toddler arrives at family day care with a builder's tape measure in her pocket. She is keen to show her friends and they are all intrigued with the pull out and snap back action of the tape. The educator watches the children play with the tape and later in the morning she sits with them and asks if they will show her the tape and tell her about it. Together the children share their

ideas about the tape and the educator asks some key questions, such as: Who owns the tape measure? What do they use it for? What could we use it for? The children don't appear to know what it is used for but one child wants to see how long it is. The educator helps the children to pull out the tape realising that the room that they are in will not be long enough to fully extend the tape. Together she involves the children in problem solving and one of the older children suggests that they go outside. The play continues throughout the day with the children taking the tape to different places in the house and yard to see where it will fit. The educator takes some notes about the play and the children's ideas. She thinks about ways to extend on this play tomorrow—perhaps drawing the children's attention to the numerals or challenging them to think what the tape can be used for.

In this example, the educator is both intentional and responsive. She listens and watches and allows the children to explore the tape in their own way. She doesn't wait for the children to ask a question or struggle with the tape—rather she sees an opportunity to sit and listen to what the children already know. The children lead the play with their idea to see how long the tape is. While it may have been tempting for the educator to simply tell the children what the tape is for and explain how it is usually used, she allows the children to play in their own way and investigate their own questions—in this case—how long is the tape? Her strategies are both responsive and intentional—listening, questioning and enabling the problem solving. She recognises the learning potential of the tape and thinks intentionally about ideas for follow up.



Thinking about the National Quality Standard

As you work your way through the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) and in the recently released Assessment and Rating Instrument (which you can view here: http://acecqa.gov.au/storage/NQS_Assessment%20and%20Rating%20Instrument_120412_%20FINAL.pdf) you will notice how closely the NQS draws on the Principles, Practice and Learning Outcomes of the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). When thinking about Quality Area 1, it will be useful to read over the EYLF Practice section—in particular the sections on play, intentional teaching and responsiveness to children (see pages 15–18).

The EYLF suggests that the educator's role in play experiences for children is more than just providing toys and resources that we know children enjoy. To provide rich play-based learning experiences, we need to focus on an active role for the educator. While unstructured play can result in valuable learning for young children, it is the shared experience and the involvement of the educator that really maximises the potential for learning through play.

Recent Australian studies about pedagogies that support learning through play (e.g. Edwards and Cutter Mackenzie, (2011) suggest that play-based learning needs to:

- recognise children's existing and cultural competencies
- include active involvement of adult educators to link to particular learning ideas
- promote teacher planning based on intentions for learning.

Contemporary thinking about play-based learning breaks away from the idea that play is either totally child centred—that romantic idea that play is whimsical and natural—or that it is directed totally by adults. The NQS reflects this approach to play-based learning, reinforcing the interconnections between play, intention and responsiveness. Consider the learning potential of the following scenarios.



Scenario 1: Track problems

You are the educator in a room for four-year-old children. You notice that two children have been playing with a train set for much of the morning. You are busy with another group of children but in scanning the environment you see that these children appear to be having some difficulty. They remain engaged at the experience but you sense that their play is about to fall apart. You wander over and ask them about their play and one of them tells you that they can't get the track to connect into a full loop. They don't seem to care much and you are still busy working with the other group of children. What might you do?

Alternative perspectives: If you are thinking from a child-led perspective you may do nothing. You may rationalise that the children have achieved some success and they have now lost interest. You suspect that they may revisit that experience another day. You do not feel the need to follow up on the experience because the children did not suggest anything further, they have not expressed a deep interest in trains in your conversations with them and the families have certainly not reported any interest in trains.

If you are thinking from an intentional teaching and responsiveness perspective you may think differently. Perhaps you could ask another staff member to work with the other group for a short time. You could sit with the train players and find out what they already know about how this track works. You might encourage them to investigate why they are having problems and brainstorm possible solutions—are there missing pieces? Have they used the pieces they have effectively? You might suggest that the children draw a plan of the track and then match track pieces to the plan. You might suggest that they use a camera or ipad to capture different configurations and discuss possible options. By getting involved in the play you have opened up new possibilities for problem solving and learning. The play has gone beyond what the children themselves can learn from the experience and your involvement shows an intention to consider possibilities for learning in relation to *developing confident and involved learners* or *effective communicators*. The children plan out their solutions, use literacy and numeracy and shared conversations to solve a play-based problem.

Scenario 2: Pop-up play

There is only one baby awake and you are taking the opportunity to fill out the daily diary. You are sitting on the floor with the baby and she crawls over to you bringing a plastic pop-up toy. She positions herself close to you and then holds the toy up to her face and begins to suck on different parts of it. She then puts it on the floor and feels the toy with her hands and her feet. She occasionally looks up at you and attends to the writing you are doing on the page. She is very content and does not show any need for your undivided attention.

Alternative perspectives: If you are thinking from a child-led perspective, you are probably relieved that she is contented and that you can get on with the daily diary. You know that her play is developmentally appropriate and that she is playing safely with a suitable toy. You recognise her need to spend her own time with the toy and explore through her senses. It seems enough for her to be in close proximity to you.

If you are thinking from an intentional teaching and responsiveness perspective, you might stop writing for a few minutes and really watch her and how she manipulates the toy. You might recognise that she doesn't know how to make the parts of the toy 'pop up' to reveal different animals and so investigating the toy on her own is limiting her understanding of how it works. You sensitively engage her attention and place the toy upright to show her how to make the animals pop up. She is delighted at the pop-up and laughs. You share in her delight and push all the parts down to show her again, pausing each time to share in her delight and waiting to see if she wants to try it for herself. *All this time you are talking about what you and she are doing.* She seems happy to let you do the pop-up action but after some time you take her hand and guide her in the action. After a few failed attempts she gets one of the animals to pop up. She looks up at you in surprise and again you share in her delight saying 'you did it!'



Intentional teaching happens with babies too!

Intentional teaching is not something that we only do with older children. Recognising the play situation and the potential for learning, the responsive educator follows the child's interest in the toy but soon realises the limitations of the child's own investigations. While the child's sensory explorations were totally appropriate and children do need time to explore for themselves, the actions of the educator sensitively watching and then modelling the use of the toy provided a richer piece of learning. Involving the baby in this exploration gave the baby a sense of agency and control, it created a warm connection between the baby and the educator, building trust and reciprocity, and it exposed the baby to language and thinking as the educator explained how the toy worked.

In summary

When thinking about 'responsiveness to children,' 'intentional teaching' and 'play-based learning,' be sure to think about smooth and seamless connections between these three practices. Avoid setting up some experiences as only 'free and child-led' and others as 'teacher-directed'. Try and see the potential for all play to be a site for educator involvement. While you may not be able to respond to each and every play opportunity, research suggests that children will benefit when you can and do.

Earlier editions of this e-Newsletter—see issues 1, 3 and 4—have explored issues of play and intentional teaching. You might like to revisit these e-Newsletters when thinking about the scenarios shown here.



References

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Biography

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