



## The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



# Voices from the field

## Setting the scene

This series of e-Newsletters is being prepared to support practitioners working in early education and care settings across Australia to engage with the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF). In collecting material for the e-Newsletters, we want to show what this early engagement looks like in different places and to represent the voices of practitioners. So far, early childhood educators in Brisbane, on the Gold Coast, in Northern NSW and in the Townsville area have provided experiences in coming to know and use the EYLF.



## First responses to the EYLF

Practitioner responses to the EYLF vary enormously according to their very different contexts. Educators who had opportunities to ask questions while being involved in trials of the draft EYLF; those working in a strong supportive professional team; and those who have regular training and review sessions in relation to the EYLF, are excited by the Framework.

Such practitioners said:

*The EYLF values me as an educator, not as 'a baby sitter.'*

*It demonstrates for parents that we are professionals who do important work with young children.*

*It has helped me make meaning of what we already do and to question why we do some things with children, and why we ask them to do some things which may not be that valuable.*

*The EYLF reflects our foundational beliefs and understandings about 'best' EC practice; it affirms children's right 'just to be.'*

On the other hand, some practitioners who came to the document 'cold' said that their initial reaction was 'confused, overwhelmed and unclear about how to use the EYLF'. Others expressed 'mixed apprehension and excitement' and some commented that 'it's easy to see children over three in the EYLF, but we need to look at our babies and toddlers to find how it relates to them'.

One centre with over 30 staff talked about the challenges of making sure all staff, including relief and part time, Inclusion Support Staff and Aboriginal workers, are 'on the same page'. They also noted that 'not everyone is a writer, so you have to find different ways for staff to notice and record children's learning'. They have found that some staff instinctively capture an important moment of learning in a digital photo and they need to be given time to talk with a colleague to caption the photo to provide a lasting record of a child's learning.

## Getting started with the EYLF

Again, educators have different ways of getting the conversation about the EYLF started. One brand new centre, for example, has been able to build commitment to using the EYLF into the recruitment of staff and enrolment of families. Narelle, at Ballina, has put information about how educators use the EYLF and about its future role in accreditation into the first editions of newsletters for families. In subsequent newsletters, she used quotes from the EYLF, alongside photos and news about children's experiences, to build familiarity with EYLF terminology and purposes.

Another centre, which has had many changes in ownership, leadership and approach over the last eight years, is starting by going to the roots of staffs' personal philosophies and reasons for choosing to work with children:

*You need to start with what you personally hold dear; it takes soul searching and passion and it's not easy; being reflective takes honesty and courage and you have to trust that your colleagues will treat you and what you say with respect before you can disclose personal beliefs and experiences.*

At this centre, senior staff have decided to start with the context and intent of the EYLF—what it is and what it isn't—to help reduce staff fear about 'this new burden' well before looking at its content.

*Adjust the starting point to suit where people are up to in their professional lives and how they feel about dealing with new requirements.*

At a preschool in NSW with a relatively small staff of four, the Director gave out the books before the Christmas break last year and now provides breakfast for staff to come together regularly to discuss their interpretations and concerns. Karen says:

*It's important to include all staff and to give the genuine message that we're all grappling; there are no experts here.*

*We looked closely at 'belonging' in the centre; talked with staff, children and extended families about what helps them to feel they belong. We asked families to create a fabric square with their child representing important things about the child and the family's interests. One of the grandmothers sewed the squares into a wall hanging; we're going to do that again for next year's children.*

A number of messages about getting started with the EYLF have emerged from conversations with practitioners:

- Absorb the document first!
- People may want to leap in and start applying the Outcomes. Stop them!
- It's best to chip away in your own way!
- Start with the '3 Bs'. Ask ourselves: How do we help children and families feel they belong here? How can we make sure staff feel they belong?
- Put up a Y Chart (see Figure 1)—What does 'belonging' look like, sound like, feel like around here? Invite families to add to the chart from their perspectives.
- Put up children's pictures, families' pictures, staff pictures; change them regularly to show changing experiences and children's growth; link them to the 3 Bs.
- Map the 3 Bs, the principles and practices of the EYLF against our current operation; identify gaps and inconsistencies; display our programs and the EYLF together; admit 'it's a journey and we're just starting—come with us!'

## Challenges and risks

A number of people have commented that 'the biggest risks are putting old wine in new bottles—saying we're already doing that' or superficial adoption of the EYLF—simply changing the language of planning and recording, but not looking critically at routines and practices.

Practitioners mentioned other challenges:

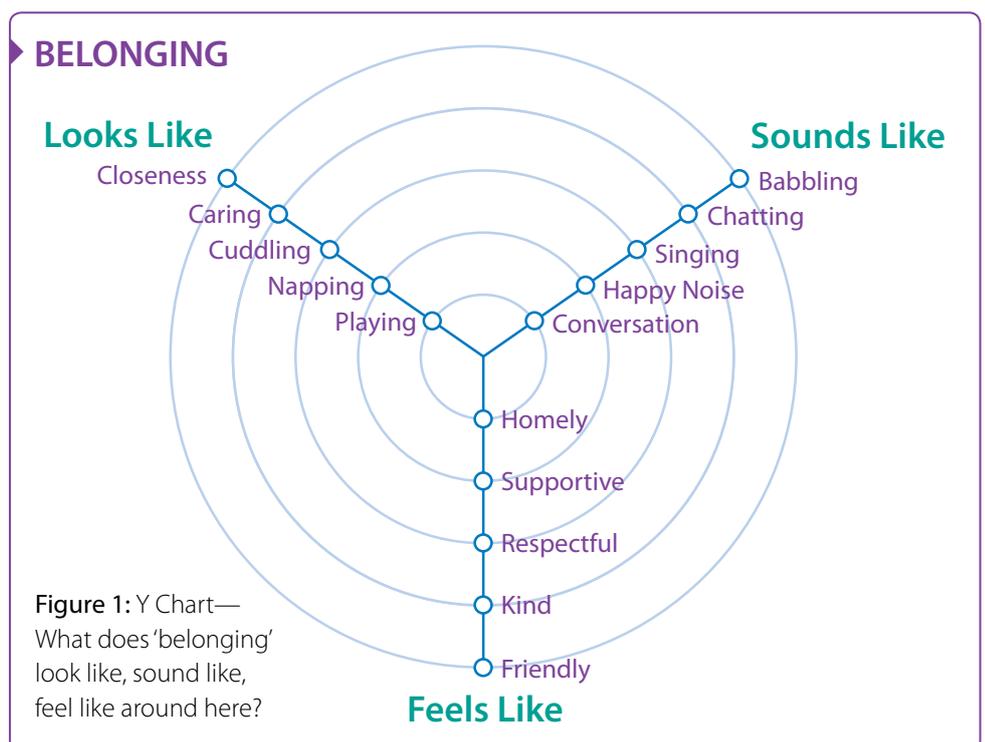
- There was some concern about whether 'intentional teaching' contradicts 'emergent curriculum approaches', 'but we've realised that the EYLF means that we don't always just sit back and watch children play; there should be a balance between child-led discovery and adult-led learning'.
- Some settings are facing the very real pressure of competing curriculum and accreditation requirements. For example, some preschools are working with state curriculum documents, with the EYLF and with the forthcoming Australian Curriculum for Schools as their children move into the first years of school.
- Finding ways to assess, document, record and report on children's learning in ways that inform planning and intervention and do not become a massive burden, remains a challenge for all.

## Dealing with the language of the EYLF

The language of the EYLF has been quite daunting for some staff. People have struggled with terms such as 'pedagogy', 'agency', 'scaffold' and 'reflexivity'.

Educators in QLD and NSW suggest some strategies:

- Have a 'word of the week' on the fridge and invite people to write their 'best guess' meaning for it; then check it against the Framework and its Glossary and add meanings in balloons around the word.
- Ask team leaders to go through the document, highlighting possible issues or concerns; find time for them to confer as a group to 'translate' and make personal meaning of some of the new terms, so they can lead others in making sense.
- Begin to use the language of the EYLF regularly in professional conversations and in documenting observations of children's learning.



Unfamiliar language often becomes real through examples:

Educators display a high level of 'professional practice' or 'pedagogy' when they help a child to join a group, help them to 'make a note for mummy' when they have separation problems and when they help children to investigate 'where water comes from and where it goes to' because families are talking about the drought or floods.

Educators 'scaffold' learning when they support a child to 'write' a story under a painting and when they find a book on the life cycle of a frog when a child brings tadpoles.

'Scaffolding learning' of course, can happen between children, as is evident in this photo: (from Stepping Stones C & K, Townsville, QLD)



Educators build children's 'reflexive capacity' when they talk with them about what they've learned and remind them that 'you used to be nervous about the big swing, now you can swing high like Isobelle'.

Educators give very young children 'agency' for example, when they put shelves at standing height for toddlers and put toys in clear containers so babies can choose their favourites.

## Working with outcomes in the EYLF

In some places, there was also initial concern about terms such as 'outcomes' and 'assessment'. People expressed the fear that 'this is back to school; it's not good early childhood practice; it could lead to a deficit approach and checklists'.

Educators at Gowrie Brisbane centres suggest that we talk about '*promoting outcomes*' rather than '*achieving outcomes*' and that we make sure we focus on what children can do and their progress towards important goals as we observe, interact and record children's learning.

*Take the time to read the dot points under Outcome components and add to the 'This is evident when...' lists examples that reflect your children's learning. It was a fair bit of work, but it made the EYLF real and we could begin to see it in action in our daily practice.*

These issues will be canvassed in future e-Newsletters with examples of how people are dealing with them in daily practice. There have been two e-Newsletters on 'intentional teaching', for example, and two are planned around 'learning outcomes'.

Perhaps the overall message coming from the field as educators engage with the EYLF is: ***Take the time it takes; start with what you believe and care about; connect what you know and do with new information; and find ways to get collegial support on the learning journey—either within your setting, or with colleagues up the road. Remember: There's no one right way!***

Jenni Connor

Early Childhood Consultant and EYLF PLP writer



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children

The EYLF Professional Learning Project is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.