

A matter of respect: Recognising young children's right to privacy

by Anne Stonehouse

Children's right to privacy is an important issue to consider in child care. Respecting individual children's and families' privacy and confidentiality may require looking critically at some common everyday practices.

While the right to, and desire for, privacy are generally recognised for older children, they are not always thought of in relation to younger children, especially babies and toddlers. This is sometimes because adults do not acknowledge very young children's agency – that is, that they have their own ideas, preferences and opinions and can communicate them. The challenge for adults is to be sensitive to these communications and to respond respectfully.

Privacy and the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)*

The importance of respectful relationships between educators and children is a cornerstone of the EYLF and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, on which the EYLF is based. Respect includes taking into account a child's right to privacy, which may be undermined when adults, including educators and families, do not understand or recognise these rights.

Implicit in the EYLF is an image of children, whatever their age, as having a right to 'be active in all matters affecting their lives' (EYLF, 2009, p.5). Children are agents, active initiators and participants in their own experience. As partners with children, educators encourage them to express their needs and wants and take these into account in planning and practice. When they cannot provide the privacy a child wants, educators offer the child an explanation. It may be particularly challenging to honour the right to privacy of very young children before they are able to verbally state their views and make requests.

Respecting children's privacy in everyday practice

Acknowledging privacy requires educators to use their skills and qualities of empathy both to respond to each child and to take the initiative to act in ways that take into account children's right to privacy.

This article relates to:

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| FDCQA Principles: | 1.1-1.3 and 3.3 |
| OSHCQA Principles: | 1.1, 2.2 and 2.3 |
| QIAS Principles: | 1.1-1.4 |

Maintaining confidentiality of personal information and records. This means, for example, keeping developmental and enrolment records private and accessible only to the family concerned and relevant staff.

Educators need to balance a child's right to privacy with the need to share information about their specific health requirements, a medical condition, a health management plan or behaviour management plan with others in the service.

It is important to carefully consider what information is displayed and where this is placed. While displaying information in the staff room may aim to promote a child's wellbeing, this may compromise their and/or their family's right to privacy. Displaying this information, even information about food allergies or medication, in the children's room can also deny a child's right to privacy.

By working sensitively and openly with children and their families, educators can identify appropriate and respectful ways to effectively share important information about children.

Displaying children's work. It is important to respond when children express a preference or request about displaying their artwork. Educators who respect children's privacy ask children's permission and allow them to make the decision.

Sharing personal information. When an educator knows that something significant has happened in a child's life – for example, moving house, a new baby in the family, celebrating an important religious festival, family visiting from overseas – respecting privacy will sometimes lead to waiting for the child to tell others rather than the educator announcing it.

Guiding behaviour. Guiding a child's behaviour quietly and discretely demonstrates respect for the child. Using empathy can help educators guide a child's behaviour respectfully.

No one, including children, likes to be corrected or have their mistakes identified in front of other people.

Public attention. Some children are not comfortable with being singled out for positive public attention. When educators really know each child, they know which ones enjoy attention and those who do not. The aim is to avoid embarrassing children.

Respecting personal space. Children differ in their comfort with physical closeness. Even a young baby can express a wish not to be picked up or held, and this communication should be respected.

Removing clothing, toileting and bathing. Some children are more modest than others. Older children particularly may be self-conscious about their bodies. It is important to ensure that children who want it have sufficient privacy when toileting or being bathed, and educators will need to think carefully about children dressing and undressing in front of other adults and children for routines such as nappy changing, rest and sleep times.

Observing children and documentation. Adopting a respectful approach to observing, recording and using children's conversations and interactions with others for planning purposes involves securing their permission. Educators who are mindful of privacy consult with children about the information being collected, and explain why observations, records of their conversations or samples of their work are being collected and how they will be used.

Many of the examples discussed above mean asking children's permission whenever appropriate and possible. Even babies and young toddlers, who may not be able to express consent in words, can often indicate their preferences, wants and needs very clearly, and educators need to be sensitive and responsive to these communications.

Partnerships with families and the issue of children's privacy

Two-way communication between educators and families about children is essential in ensuring that each child has good quality experiences in child care.

However, this communication needs to be undertaken with respect for children's right to privacy. Educators should consider the following:

Conversations about children. Hold conversations with colleagues or families about a child away from other children, and either with the child involved in the conversation or when the child is not present. Talking about children as though they are not there is disrespectful.

Places for private conversations. Provide spaces for private discussions with families about issues concerning their children.

Essential information. Be mindful of what is really necessary to know about a child and the child's family. Avoid pressuring families to divulge everything that is going on at home that may affect their child's behaviour, as this may be private information that the family would prefer not to share with others. Understand that some families will be much more willing than others to share information about their child and family.

Sharing stories. Be mindful of sharing 'amusing stories' with families or other educators that may be embarrassing for, or disrespectful of, the child. While adults may enjoy these stories, they can make a child feel uncomfortable and self-conscious.

Conclusion

Showing respect in ways that are set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EYLF requires educators to honour children's dignity. Respecting children's right to privacy is fundamental to offering good quality child care and is an approach to practice that affects many aspects of the program. Educators can benefit from reflecting critically about whether or not this approach is captured in the service's philosophy statement and policies and, most importantly, in everyday practices and interactions ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

References and further reading

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming – the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra: Author.
- *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. (1989). Retrieved 23 July, 2010, from <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>