Individual programs for children – an EYLF perspective on best practice

by Heather Barnes

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) encourages educators to develop individual programs for children that recognise, respect and value each child's current place in their world, and promote belonging, being and becoming. The Learning Outcomes of the EYLF support and guide individualised learning programs for children.

The five Learning Outcomes 'provide early childhood educators with key reference points against which children's progress can be identified, documented and communicated to families, other early childhood professionals and educators in schools' (EYLF, 2009, p.17). The Outcomes are relevant to children of all ages and acknowledge that their learning progresses at their own rate. So it is important that they are not used as a checklist.

The Outcomes also recognise and support the role of play in children's learning and place emphasis on the importance of the relationships that develop between children and their educators. They encourage educators to track what children can do, not what they can't.

The importance of close relationships and meaningful interactions with children

Establishing a close relationship with each child is essential to developing individual programs. Sensitive and responsive educators build strong bonds with each child so that they can follow their interests and support their learning. Educators who engage in 'sustained shared thinking' with children – where they contribute their ideas, listen to the child's ideas and extend their thinking through questions and instruction and join in as a partner in the play – are promoting children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Through meaningful interactions and careful observations educators can gain in-depth knowledge about individual children, as well as the group in which they spend their time. This knowledge assists educators to develop programs that respond to children's interests and which are therefore the basis for meaningful learning.

> **This article relates to:**
> FDCQA Principles: 2.1-2.2, 3.1-3.7 and 6.2
> OSHCQA Principles: 1.1-1.2, 4.1-4.4, and 5.1-5.4
> QIAS Principles: 1.4-1.5, 2.2, 3.1-3.3 and 4.1-4.6

Curriculum decisions

Some educators in child care services will not have used the term 'curriculum' in the past as it may have seemed too prescriptive to describe play-based programs. The EYLF reassures educators that the term curriculum 'means all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children's learning and development' (EYLF, 2009, p.46).

Curriculum decision making includes professional knowledge about how children learn and develop, and extensive knowledge of each child and the family and community with whom they belong. The EYLF encourages educators to see the curriculum as an ongoing cycle. Assessment of children is seen as part of the day-to-day process of interacting with and teaching children, noting their interests, dispositions, strengths and capabilities. Reflecting on, or analysing what has been learned, can then be used to promote ongoing learning. Working in partnership with families, educators use the Learning Outcomes to guide their planning for children's learning.

Developing individual programs

Review your current approaches to programming to see if they support the vision, pedagogy, principles and practices of EYLF

The EYLF accommodates a diverse range of approaches to program planning, so there is not a prescribed way to plan for children's learning.

It allows educators to use their professional judgement to design assessment practices that work best in their context but at the same time are aligned with the principles and practice that are based on current theories and research.

Use the Learning Outcomes to guide planning for individual children

This does not mean inserting the Learning Outcomes into a planning format to replace developmental domains. It does mean observing and tracking each child's progress against the Learning Outcomes so that over time it will form a comprehensive summary of their learning and development. After reflecting on children's participation in the program, it may be evident that certain experiences and/or strategies need to be incorporated into the program so that children's learning is supported and extended.

Promote learning through the environment

Reflect on how the physical and social environments, including the flow of the day, contribute to children's learning. An inviting environment encourages children's engagement, stimulates interest in exploring and investigating, and provides opportunities for children to follow their interests and take a lead in developing play ideas. It is essential that the environment supports all children's involvement, including those children with additional needs.

Encourage children to be actively engaged in their own learning and decision making

Educators can help children to understand their own actions and experiences through commenting on their play and being a playful participant. Responsive educators follow each child's interests to build upon and support their learning. They pick up on cues from very young children to support their learning. Older children enjoy the opportunity to give their suggestions, ideas and opinions.

For example, consider holding a meeting with older children and encourage them to raise issues and become decision makers. They often enjoy the ritual associated with a 'meeting' especially if their ideas are recorded.

Documenting children's conversations, ideas and interests, as well as taking photos of interesting aspects of their learning, shows children that educators value what they are doing and are interested in them. Listening carefully to children's thoughts and ideas enables educators to ask 'what if' questions, which encourage children to discover answers and solve problems for themselves.

Further develop partnerships with families to enhance and individualise programs for children

To ensure that programming is responsive to children's sense of belonging to their families and communities and is culturally appropriate, it is helpful to consult families and include their views. Encourage families to share observations of their children's learning at home, as well as the family's expectations or suggestions for extending this learning.

Communicating children's learning in a range of ways, depending on the context of the setting, means that more families may be involved in sharing their children's learning progress.

Encouraging children and families to evaluate the program also helps them to feel that they belong in the service and that they have rights and responsibilities within the program. When everyone becomes involved in assessing learning the result is a program that is reflective, responsive and focused on furthering individual children's learning ∎

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: **Children have a strong sense of identity**
- Outcome 2: **Children are connected with and contribute to their world**
- Outcome 3: **Children have a strong sense of wellbeing**
- Outcome 4: **Children are confident and involved learners**
- Outcome 5: **Children are effective communicators**

Case study: Using the Framework to improve practice

In this case study, Heather Barnes interviewed a child care service that has developed processes and strategies for enhancing children's programs by using the Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

Homestead Child and Family Centre, managed by Hume City Council in Victoria, participated in the national trial of the EYLF during 2009. They began their journey by reading the document and becoming familiar with the language.

The centre's Director, Michelle Gujer, said that reading and reflecting on different theories about early childhood was instrumental in informing and reviewing their approach to professional practice. As the team became more familiar with the Learning Outcomes, it provided them with a vehicle to engage more confidently with families, inspired conversations and improved communication with each other.

The educators reflected on their program planning processes and whether they needed to be refined to further improve outcomes for children and families. They are currently implementing new programming formats which allow educators more flexibility in the way they observe and record observations, as well as documenting planning, which emerges from children's interests and daily life. In one example, the child care team designed a meeting space in each room to consult with and listen to children, to acknowledge children as having rights and giving them an opportunity to co-construct their ideas with educators.

In the under three years rooms, educators acknowledged and extended children's verbal and non-verbal interactions, and recognised joint attention episodes as an important part of engagement with infants. The meeting spaces included digital photo frames which displayed scanned learning stories, photographs from home and the service, and children's art work. These have helped to extend children's sense of belonging to the service and the community.

As the team became more familiar with the Learning Outcomes, it provided them with a vehicle to engage more confidently with families...

Families have commented that their children appear happier, have an increased sense of wellbeing and that they now have a greater understanding about their children's learning.

Michelle said that they spent time in the beginning getting the team involved and excited about the journey. She reported that educators have commented that the Framework is a "fantastic tool" and that they have "absolutely embraced it".

References and further reading

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