

{Embrace}

Summer 2021/22 | Your inclusion support magazine



**First aid for
educator burnout**

+

**Respectful end-of-year
celebrations in
children's services**

INSIDE

**A simple
mindfulness
exercise for
children**

**VICTORIAN
INCLUSION
AGENCY**

One For All

As Victoria has been hit by several more waves of COVID-19, juggling work, caregiving, housework and homeschooling has been a daily challenge for many of us.



This year has required us to dig deep into our reserves of resilience. Educators have faced relentless and stressful working conditions, while children have displayed high levels of anxiety due to so much sporadic transitioning in and out of lockdown.

When these challenges – alongside our personal needs and responsibilities in a changing world – feel too large and overwhelming, little things can give us a sense of being grounded. Some people hug trees or take a walk in the quiet morning sunlight. Some eat their favourite food, savour it, and then eat a little bit more. Some of us read an inspiring book, make a piece of art or watch a movie that reminds us of our childhood. Others reach out to their loved ones by speaking on the phone or sending a message to check in. There are myriad ways to find time for ourselves during all this chaos. My favourite grounding tactic is to have my mantra word, 'believe', painted on a special rock on my desk at all times.

Thank you for believing in the power of inclusion and working so hard to ensure every child can thrive, both now and into the future. I hope you are all finding little moments to help ground you in your important work.

Jane McCahon

Jane McCahon
Victorian Inclusion Agency Program Manager
Community Child Care Association

The Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment. As part of the ISP, the Victorian Inclusion Agency is led by Community Child Care Association, and is delivered in partnership with Yooralla and KU Children's Services.

The Victorian Inclusion Agency acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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VIA contributors

We would like to thank the following people for their contribution to this edition of *Embrace*:

Jacinta Butterworth – Editor
Faye Sakaris
Jane McCahon
Kate Kent

Letishia Cole
Michelle Boudrie and the Region 8 team
Ruby Perryman



How accessing Innovative Solutions funding helped restore a centre's confidence

Is your service struggling with burnout and supporting challenging behaviours due to lockdowns and changing restrictions? Keep reading to find out how Inclusion Professional Letishia Cole connected Ivanhoe Co-op to the help they needed.



Embrace: Tell us a little bit about your service...

Ivanhoe Co-op: We are a 44-place co-operative which educates and cares for children from 18 months to school-age. We're governed by a volunteer parent board of directors who oversee how our centre runs.

We have a funded four-year-old kinder room that runs one kinder session per day, a three-year-old room and an 18 months to three-year-old room. We run an indoor/outdoor program for most of the day and the three groups have the opportunity to family group throughout.

Melbourne has had it tough during the pandemic, with more lockdowns and restrictions than any other Australian city. By September 2020 your team was burnt out and under pressure to support children displaying challenging behaviours. Can you tell us about your concerns at the time?

We had noticed a big switch in our team and community after months of lockdown and fear of the unknown. We were all feeling burnt out and our children's behaviour was starting to reflect what was happening in the world. No matter how hard we tried to put on a brave face, life for our community was getting hard.

We had some little people who were particularly struggling with their regular friends and educators not being at co-op due to lockdowns. They started to display out-of-character responses to things that wouldn't have set them off in the past.

We felt helpless for these children and started to feel out of our depth – families were feeling the same. We reached out to our Inclusion Professional Letishia for advice.

Letishia suggested that Innovative Solutions funding could be helpful. How did you access the funding? What were your goals and what changes were you looking to see?

Letishia mentioned that Innovative Solutions funding could be used to have professionals come out and support our team through ongoing training. This struck a chord with me, as I had always felt like there was a gap in our knowledge around supporting children with their big feelings.

For some of our parents we became the only avenue they felt comfortable openly communicating with. Consequently, we became a listening ear most mornings and evenings. The new pandemic situation left us all feeling a bit out of our depth with our own feelings, let alone our children's and families' feelings.

We pride ourselves on being approachable but we were often left with feelings of desperation for our families. We would offer what advice we felt appropriate, but trauma is not a commonly taught subject in education courses. We felt we needed to extend our skills and learn how best to support our whole community. We needed help.

We noticed pinch points throughout the day when energies would run high, so we wanted someone to come and look at our set-up and daily routine. We wanted to feel closely supported by professionals who understood us, our philosophy and our space.

Continued on next page



An occupational therapist (OT) and an accredited play therapist were brought on board to build educators' understanding of trauma and attachment and help bring back a sense of calm. Can you describe how they worked with your team?

We had a very clear schedule set out as part of our funding proposal. We started with three sessions with our whole team at our monthly staff meetings. The professionals went over the basics of self-care during high-stress times, how to co-regulate with children, sensory needs and brain development.

We then broke off into individual group meetings for the last four sessions, where we were able to talk about specific scenarios and have them give tailored advice for our rooms.

Did any of Melbourne's lockdowns interrupt your work with the OT and play therapist?

Yes! We had to use a mix of online and in-person meetings. We were lucky enough to have had the formative sessions face-to-face, so Phoebe and Jean could see our space and meet us in person.

How has the support your service received made a difference in the lives of children and families?

We feel our children have benefited greatly from changes in how we manage behaviours and situations, and how we offer our daily programs – making sure all our set-ups cover the sensory bases was a game-changer.

We have been able to pass on helpful tips and advice to our families to try to smoothen their daily routines also.

How has the support your service received positively impacted your team?

We are very much a more confident team. [Phoebe and Jean] have given us a better understanding of brain development and what children need from certain play situations. It's removed a lot of the frustration or confusion we felt in certain situations as now we understand why they're happening and how to help.

What advice would you give to services looking to follow your lead?

I had been told by my Inclusion Professional about Innovative Solutions funding previously, but I had always put it in the too-hard basket. But with support from Letishia, it was so easy to apply! Just do it. Your team will benefit tenfold.

What's next for your service?

We want to keep extending our skills and progressing in this area of development. We will continue to engage with Play Therapy Hub throughout the year. We are looking forward to three-year-old funded kinder next year and seeing how that will work for our community.



Interested in accessing Innovative Solutions funding for your service?
Call **1800 177 017** today.

Preventing and recovering from burnout

Are you overworked? Exhausted? Have you taken on too much? Here are some tips for taking care of yourself and your team from Be You, the national mental health initiative for educators.



It's perfectly normal for many educators to be experiencing burnout right now. The pandemic has posed many challenges over the past two years and has led to an increase in stress for many people.

There are ways early learning services can restore a sense of wellbeing in their team. There are also strategies we can use as individuals to support ourselves and others when we feel burnt out.

What does burnout feel like?

Burnout can happen when we experience chronic stress. Burnout can include:

- emotional exhaustion
- emotional or mental separation from our job
- a reduced sense of accomplishment at work

This can leave us feeling listless, tired and struggling to cope.

What are some workplace strategies?

There are many things that workplaces can do to build protective factors and reduce risk factors that may lead to burnout. These strategies include:

- Supportive supervision and access to mentoring
- Regular professional learning opportunities, to build educator capabilities and confidence – for example in responding to children's behaviour
- Monitor workloads and reduce them where possible for staff experiencing high levels of stress
- Encourage and support help-seeking
- Foster good relationships between team members



- Support positive relationships between educators and children, and educators and families
- Build a healthy workplace culture based on kindness, collaboration and teamwork
- Mindfulness initiatives (see beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Wellbeing > Mindfulness)
- Extra breaks for educators working in particularly stressful situations, such as supporting children who have experienced trauma
- Individual and team wellbeing plans (see beyou.edu.au > Resources > Tools and guides > Wellbeing tools for you)
- Access to and promotion of an employee assistance provider

A dedicated staff mental health and wellbeing policy is a long term strategy to help prevent burnout. While the pandemic has presented additional risk factors that can contribute to burnout, the wellbeing of educators needs to be supported both now and into the future. There are always high emotional demands on early learning educators due to the nature of the profession, which can contribute to burnout. You can learn how to create a staff mental health and wellbeing policy at beyou.edu.au > About > Stories > Implementation support > Creating a staff wellbeing policy.

What can you do?

An important step educators can take towards reducing their chances of burnout is managing stress. Strategies you could use include:

- Learning about and recognising the signs of stress in your body (see beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Wellbeing > Stress management)
- Engaging in activities that help you unwind such as exercise or mindfulness
- Reaching out to supportive colleagues, friends or family to discuss challenges
- Prioritising sleep and good nutrition

- Building self-advocacy – in asking for help at work and speaking up when role and workplace stressors are impacting your wellbeing
- Giving yourself time and space to work through difficult emotions
- Seeking support from a mental health professional

Support for educators experiencing burnout

If you are concerned that a colleague may be experiencing burnout it is important to start a conversation. Help them to identify stressors that can be reduced and connect them with support if needed.

Equally, if you feel that you aren't travelling as well as you could be, it's important to reach out for support. If you think that you may be experiencing burnout, it is important to talk to a mental health professional as some of the signs of burnout are similar to mental health issues and conditions like depression and anxiety. General practitioners are a good first point of contact to discuss your concerns.

If reading this article has raised any difficult feelings for you, please reach out to your support networks. There is also always someone you can talk to on the end of these phone lines:

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

Lifeline: 13 11 14



Here are some additional Be You resources to help you prevent and recover from burnout

- Staff wellbeing fact sheet: beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Wellbeing > Staff wellbeing
- *Planning for wellbeing: Mine, yours, ours* flipbook for educators: beyou.edu.au > Resources > Tools and guides > Wellbeing tools for you > Be You Planning for Wellbeing: mine, yours, ours

Simple mindfulness exercise for children (and grown-ups!)

Take a moment to pause and notice...

5 things you see



4 things you feel



3 things you hear



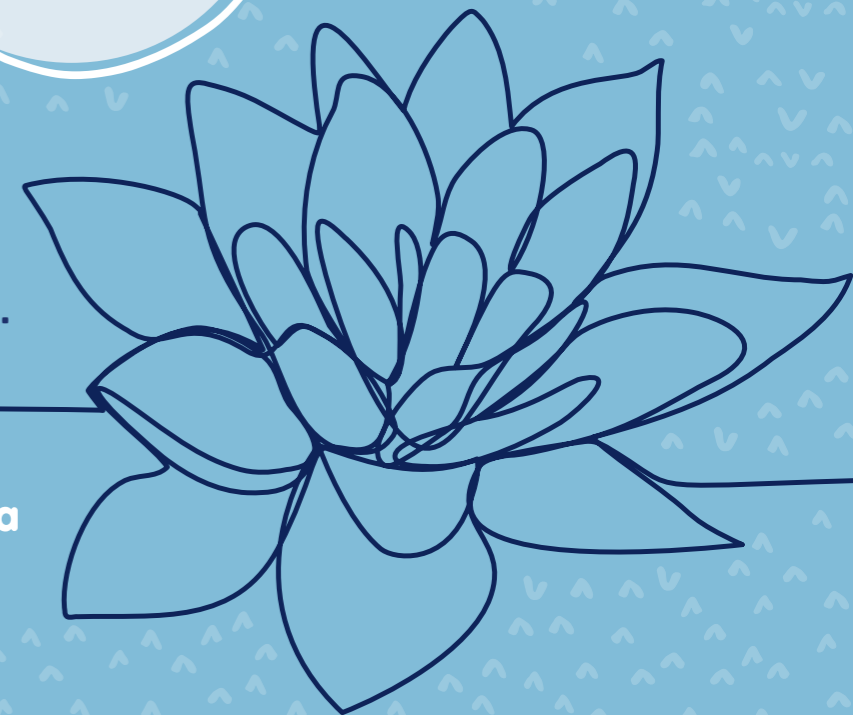
2 things you smell



1 thing you taste



Grounding helps with anxiety, anger and focus.



REFLECTIVE PRACTICE TOOL:

Respectful end-of-year celebrations

December is in full swing! So how can you think beyond Christmas to make sure holiday inclusivity happens in your children's service? Inclusion Professionals Kate Kent and Faye Sakaris pose some helpful questions to reflect on.



Each family has their own culture which they bring with them to your service. What one family may value or believe in may be very different to the next, even if both are from the same cultural and linguistic background. For example, Christmas has different meanings for different people, depending on their values, experiences and beliefs. The same can be said about all celebrations and religious events.

This year, take some time to reflect on the diversity of children and families in your community so you can incorporate celebrations with sensitivity and respect.

Tips for making inclusive decisions about your end-of-year celebrations

- **Have you spoken to all your families about what they celebrate?**
Consider: how can you engage families in this conversation? For example, through translated materials, questionnaires, informal discussions, etc.
- **Have you spoken to all your families about how they celebrate?**
Consider: are you making assumptions about how families celebrate? Do all families celebrate the same event in the same way? Think about the many ways Christmas is celebrated. Do you allow for this diversity across other celebrations such as Diwali, Hanukkah or Lunar New Year?
- **Are there some events families would prefer your service didn't celebrate?**
Consider: sometimes families prefer to celebrate particular events at home as a family group – is this something you need to check in with them about?

- **Have you considered minority groups and their needs or just the majority of families who reflect the dominant culture? If you do this, what is the impact on those families and children?**

Consider: what happens if you have families who don't celebrate Christmas? How can you respect their beliefs?

- **Do you plan to give equal time to all celebrations or has the dominant culture/celebration taken over?**

Consider: if the end of the year becomes all about Christmas, are you inadvertently disadvantaging some families and children? How does this support each child's identity?

- **Have you considered religious aspects of end-of-year celebrations?**

Consider: how can you do this respectfully? Have you sought input from families?

- **What role can children play in your end-of-year celebrations?**

Consider: how can your plans reflect children's voices and preferences? How are child-centred celebrations included at your service?



Need help or advice?

Your local Inclusion Professional can help you to enhance your cultural inclusion practices and support you to respectfully include all families and children. Call **1800 177 017** for free program support.

How diverse is your children's book collection?

Getting diverse books into the hands of young readers promotes empathy and acceptance from an early age. So how inclusive are the books in your service's collection? Take these four simple steps to find out.



STEP 1

Divide your books into those with human main characters and those with non-human main characters (animals, mythical creatures, vehicles, etc.)

STEP 2

Split your books with non-human main characters into gender (where possible)

STEP 3

Split your books with human main characters by:

- Gender
- Race (thinking about representations of both cultural diversity and First Nations Australians)
- Disability representation (thinking about representations of both physical disability and neurodiversity)
- LGBTQIA+ representation
- Family diversity representation

STEP 4

Review your results!
How did your bookshelves stack up?
Are there any gaps?



Extra questions to reflect on

- Do the books in your collection celebrate the diversity of children and families in your community?
- Do they offer a window into the lives of unfamiliar people and places?
- Are any written or illustrated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people? What about people of colour, or people from different nations and religions?
- Think about the subject matter of your diverse books. Do all your books featuring First Nations stories focus on the Dreamtime? Do you have any books featuring diverse characters that are not primarily about race or prejudice? Do any contain hurtful racial or ethnic stereotypes?



TAKE ACTION

Is it time to diversify your bookshelf? What could your first step be? Write it in the box now!



Aboriginal learning activity: Hopscotch for the Mob

Teach children about the intimate connection between First Nations Australians and the natural world with this fun take on hopscotch.

MATILDA DARVALL
Senior Policy Officer,
Victorian Aboriginal Education
Association Incorporated (VAEAI)



Our adaptation of the well-known hopscotch game replaces numbers with animal tracks, and encourages children to use their bodies and voices to mimic these animals.

There are various ways for educators to introduce this activity to children in education and care services. Here are some suggestions:

- Ask the children about the different Australian animals they know, and to describe them (what colour they are, how big they are, how many legs they have, what they sound like, how they move, what they eat, etc.)
- Read the children a book like *ABC of Australian animals* by Bronwyn Bancroft and talk about the animals the children recognise and the animals they may have seen in real life
- Play 'Guess which animal I am', where you give children clues (for example, 'I carry my babies in a pouch', 'The noise I make sounds like I'm laughing') and the children can ask questions (for example, 'Do you have big ears?', 'Can you fly?')
- Watch Aboriginal dancers mimic different animals in their movements, and listen to Aboriginal performers mimic different animal sounds with the didgeridoo
- Sing a song like 'Native animal song' and practice the movements with the children (see raisingchildren.net.au > [Baby karaoke](#) > [Native animal song with lyrics](#))

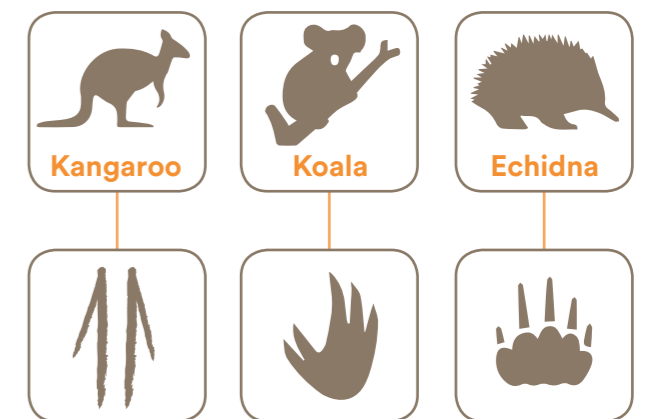
The next step is to talk about the tracks animals leave behind. This includes the footprints that humans make! In fact, footprints are probably the easiest and most recognisable way to introduce the concept of tracks to children. Here are some suggestions:

- Take the children to the sandpit and demonstrate how footprints are made
- Pour some water on the dirt/earth and make footprints
- Trace around your own foot and cut it out to show the children – the children can then practise tracing around their own feet and other children's feet
- Use red, yellow and black paint or ochre to make footprints

When the children are familiar with the idea of footprints, educators can extend the concept to animal tracks. Ask children what they imagine a snake's track might look like. Then ask about other animals like dingoes and emus.



Educators could read *Adventures of the little black trackas* by Merle Hall to the children, and then play a matching game, where children need to find the right track for each animal. For example:



Children could also use decorations like feathers and face paint to dress up as different animals and role play.

Finally, everyone can have a go at playing Hopscotch for the Mob. Use whichever animal tracks the children would like, and you can even draw up the hopscotch design in red, yellow and black chalk for added effect!

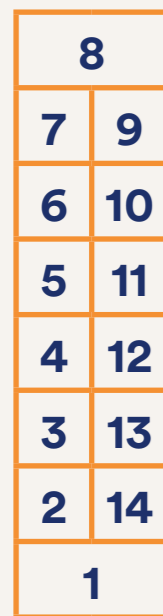
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How to play Hopscotch for the Mob

Setting up

STEP 1

Design your hopscotch course. It can be any shape or any direction. The standard one has 10 squares but it can have as many as you like! Try these different designs:



STEP 2

Draw your design on concrete with chalk.

STEP 3

Replace the numbers with animal tracks. Here are some examples:



Instructions

- 1 Throw a flat stone or similar marker to land on the first square. It has to land inside the square without touching the border or bouncing out. If you don't get it in the lines, you lose your turn and must pass the marker onto the next person.
- 2 The animal track in the square the marker lands on is the animal you have to be while you take your turn. Move through the course, skipping the square the marker landed on. If you step on or outside a line, or step on the wrong square, you lose your turn.
- 3 When you get to the last square, turn around and make your way back through the course. Don't forget to pick up the marker on the way so you can hand it to the next person in line when you finish your turn.
- 4 If you successfully completed your turn with the marker on the first square, throw your marker onto the second square the next time around. Your goal is to complete the course with the marker on each square. The first person to do this wins the game!

Want more Aboriginal education activities like this?
Go to www.vaeai.org.au > Aboriginal education activities



Sign of the times

Lightning Reef YMCA Early Learning Centre prides itself on being a safe space for every family that walks through their door. So when a family from the local deaf community experienced communication barriers and withdrew their child, the Lightning Reef team reached out to their Inclusion Professional Kerry for guidance.

Embrace: *Tell us a little about your service...*

Lightning Reef YMCA: Our centre is located on Dja Dja Wurrung country in Bendigo. It is a 115-place centre that also operates a funded kindergarten program. We offer before and after school care for children attending the co-located primary school. Maternal and Child Health also share the space. We have a diverse community of educators, children and families, and work really hard to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment.

A little while back, a family from the local deaf community withdrew their child from your service because of the communication barriers they faced. Can you tell us what happened?

When the family withdrew, we realised the barriers that families from the deaf community face when accessing early learning services. We worked to understand [what had happened] and found that many of our staff didn't have the training and skills to communicate with the family. We were so disappointed to hear we had let the family down, which is why we decided to provide training to our staff so they would feel confident communicating with all families and making them feel welcome.

The family indicated that they wished to re-enrol their child, so you reached out to your Inclusion Professional Kerry to explore what supports could be accessed through the Victorian Inclusion Agency. Why was it so important to you to be proactive and take this step?

As a service that works very hard to ensure inclusive practices, we wanted to support our team as a whole to engage confidently with this family. Discussions with

Kerry really helped us to identify what steps we needed to take to ensure we could welcome back our family and communicate with them effectively and meaningfully.

After looking at the resources available to you, Kerry suggested that Innovative Solutions funding could be useful. What were your goals and what changes were you looking to see?

With the aid of Innovative Solutions funding, we were able to connect with Bendigo Deaf Hub. Our goals were to strengthen our educators' understanding of the deaf community and for them to learn how to communicate using Auslan.

You used your funding to support educators to undertake Deaf Awareness Training and a 10-week onsite Auslan communication module, which was delivered in each room. How did this make a difference to your environments and educator practice?

We first met with Bendigo Deaf Hub in 2019. Ellie, the founder, met with us to discuss our needs, goals and what options Deaf Hub could provide. This involved the service participating in Deaf Awareness Training (DAT), and Auslan teachers supporting our educators in the rooms. The DAT involved Ellie coming to our service and sharing her story and the story of the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. All educators who attended found this training useful and it provided a platform for them to reflect on their personal and professional experience with families.

The second part of our Deaf Hub support was for Auslan teachers to come into our service each week and support the educators and children to learn Auslan. Educators were shown how to use Auslan in context through role modelling and 1:1 support. The Auslan teachers were able to explain and show in real time how to communicate with the children, and to support all children to communicate with each other and the educators through sign.

Happily, the family who initially withdrew from the service has re-enrolled and is even helping educators to brush up on their new Auslan skills. The use of Auslan has also benefitted children where verbal skills are still emerging. Can you talk us through the strategies that have been put into practice to support children and families?

Each morning, educators use a range of languages, including Auslan, English, German, Karen and Punjabi, when they meet and greet children. This role models different forms of communicating and supports each child to feel a sense of identity and belonging.

In the nursery, educators use sign to support the children during nappy changing, meal times and rest time.

The kinder children are learning the song 'I can sing a rainbow' in sign and are starting to incorporate feelings signs when dealing with emotions.

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Rooms have displays of the alphabet, colours and other basic signs to support sign. There is a welcome poster in Auslan in the foyer and we also display a 'sign of the week' at reception so families can learn new signs to share with their children.

As an outcome of the Innovative Solutions project, what changes have you made that have positively impacted your team?

We have built our confidence to use Auslan to support verbal language when explaining a new situation or supporting play and routine tasks. The Auslan teachers have provided opportunities for all the educators to reflect and learn in a safe space where questions are encouraged and answered with honesty. Some educators have continued on with Auslan training independently to further enhance their knowledge.

Our journey with Deaf Hub has taught us a lot about inclusion and the changes we can make to support those in our community. Our journey has been a positive one, with new skills learnt and new connections made.

What advice would you give to services looking to follow your lead? Do you have any tips?

Reflect on your ideas with your Inclusion Professional and develop an action plan to support your identified needs. Kerry is always happy to help us achieve outcomes through reflective discussions, site visits, contacts and resources – she is a wealth of knowledge. Don't be afraid to ask for advice!

What's next for your service?

Long-term plans include building a video library of information to share with the community and engaging in further Auslan classes to support educators as we progress through our journey.

We are also looking at how we can employ a deaf educator to show our commitment to being inclusive. We believe that having a diverse team results in a rich environment for children to learn and develop a deep sense of equality and understanding.



Interested in accessing Innovative Solutions funding for your service?

Call **1800 177 017** today.

Family day care can be a child's second home

Inclusion Professional Letishia Cole explores the many ways this unique service type can support confidence-building and a sense of belonging for all children.

Run by qualified educators from their homes, family day care (FDC) environments support small groups of children – a 1:4 ratio for under school-age children and 1:7 for school-aged children. With these ratios, educators can spend lots of time with each child every session and closely observe their learning.

What's more, educators can tailor their programs to meet the needs and interests of each child. This might look like four children grouped together doing crafts, or perhaps four individual play experiences happening at the same time.

Because of this flexible and attentive environment, FDC can provide a unique model of fostering inclusion for all children. But how exactly? Keep reading.

Children and families can build close relationships with their educator

Educators and families often form close, tight-knit micro-communities, so children may feel like FDC is their second home. Some children may stay with the same educator from infancy right through to attending after-school care in primary school. This consistency in the educator-to-child relationship can be extremely beneficial for children with additional needs.

Predictable routines and environments and close relationships can reduce children's anxiety, offering them the chance to develop confidence and build on their social and communication skills in a place that feels safe and secure.

Children who may experience anxiety or be sensory-sensitive can thrive in small groups and homelike environments. Noise levels can be kept down and educators can plan for transitions between routines to be slow and progressive.



Having a close relationship with their FDC educator can reduce families' anxiety.

Educators can send regular updates via text, leading families to feel welcome and connected. This helps families feel at ease leaving their child in care, even if their child has medical or high-support needs.

These close relationships also mean children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can feel more comfortable. Educators will often deliver programs in a child's first language and celebrate cultural holidays.

All children can receive individualised support for learning in multiple languages – educators sometimes even share their own language or culture with the children.

Children can build life skills and a sense of responsibility and community

FDC often caters to a multi-aged group, with infants, toddlers and kinder-aged children all playing and learning together. This can provide wonderful opportunities for children to learn from one another.

Older children can develop leadership skills, feeling responsible for their younger peers. Experiences are set up to cater to the different age groups and needs, encouraging collaboration and communication.

Educators often take children on excursions into the community, like to the library, playgroups, parklands or museums. Children get the opportunity to meaningfully interact with people in the community and experience a growing sense of independence and societal inclusion.



The small group supports children with additional needs to have the high supervision and connection with their educator needed whilst out and about. Children get to practice social skills and basic life skills, like crossing roads safely.

The FDC environment can support children to be involved in simple, age-appropriate routine tasks such as setting tables, washing dishes, gardening or hanging washing. All children can feel confident and capable in their environment, developing a strong sense of self and belonging. For children with additional needs, this can provide opportunities to be seen as valued, contributing members of their community.



You've got mail

Fancy a carefully curated, digital dose of educator resources in your inbox between issues? Our **monthly newsletter** for early childhood and OSHC offers just that.

To receive our newsletter straight to your inbox (with the opportunity to opt out at any time), visit viac.com.au/forms/subscribe-inclusion-news

Hurry, 4,000+ educators have already subscribed!





FREE
tool for
respectful
end-of-year
celebrations
inside

*Talk to us today about the ways we can help your service
remove barriers and support the inclusion of all children.*

www.viac.com.au



One For All

