

{Embrace}

Summer 2021 | Your inclusion support magazine

Funding!

to break down barriers
to inclusion in your
children's service



Strategies to protect
children against racism

FREE
poster
inside

VICTORIAN
INCLUSION
AGENCY

One For All



For anyone to say 2020 was an easy year, they would have to be living on another planet.

From a year that started with horrific bushfires then moved on to a pandemic, 2020 is one year that many of us are happy to see the end of. Educators and early childhood teachers have repeatedly risen to meet the new normal. With this kind of pressure, it is more important than ever that we check our own wellbeing as well as going that extra mile to ensure all children at our services really feel they belong.

In this issue of *Embrace*, you will find stories that will touch your heart, like hearing how one centre dealt with unexpected grief, and those that will provide you with fresh ideas – could your sensory environment be exacerbating behavioural issues?

I implore everyone to read the front cover article in particular. Innovative Solutions funding exists to help services bring down barriers to inclusion. Take some time to work out what particular barriers you are aware of – could they be dismantled with some extra funding?

May our warm summer days bring each and every one of you some respite and revitalisation for a new, less stressful year.

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 and Training. 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.

{ Contents }

- 04 Coping with grief**
How one education and care service faced grief in their centre

- 08 Sensory overload**
Do your environments impact on children's senses and affect their behaviour?

- 12 Wellbeing – who is looking after you?**
Discover the things you can do as an educator to ensure you build and maintain your wellbeing

- 14 POSTER**
Welcome children and families to your service with this gorgeous poster

- 16 FEATURE Innovative Solutions funding**
How can your service or a group of services use the Innovative Solutions Fund to help break down barriers to inclusion?

- 20 Standing strong in culture**
Two services talk about how they protect children and families against racism

- 23 Getting it right**
How education and care services can engage with the Koorie community

- 26 CHECKLIST How to build a sense of belonging for all children**
Do these things to help all children feel welcome in 2021



VIA Contributors

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

- Lisa Bryant – Guest Editor
- Daniela Kavoukas
- Monica Solomon
- Jacinta Butterworth – Editor
- Faye Sakaris
- Tracey Harris



Memorial service for Rose Kelly, director of Windsor Community Children's Centre.



Smoking ceremony by Jadean, a Boon Wurrung man, at the memorial service.

Early days

It was decided that the children wouldn't return the following day to give us a bit more time. On this day we spent time with our EPA psychologist who sat with us for three hours and began to unpack our pain. As a visual signal to the community that we were grieving and in pain, we placed the four flags outside the building at half-mast and they were left like this until after Rose's funeral.

The following week, the children were back. The families and older children just wanted to cuddle their educators. We allowed this, but it placed a lot of pressure on the educators who are also dealing with their own grief.

With the help of the co-operative and our community, we set up a condolence book for the parents to write in. This was set up in our community garden with plants, soothing music and a quiet table. The children were given the opportunity in the same space to draw their feelings, with an educator there to ask what their drawings meant to them. As educators, we wanted to share our grief and confusion with the children. We couldn't pretend that we were okay. We needed to demonstrate healthy grief that the children could be led by. We also needed to be witnesses to their feelings.

Our director had spent many hours in the kinder room, helping with the children and doing special projects. These children would shortly be heading off to school so we knew we had to help them to understand their emotions and process their experiences while they were still at the centre. These days in the kinder program were long and may have looked unproductive to an outsider. In reality, the educators were allowing the children to express how they felt, holding space for children and each other. When one child said that they missed Rose, we were able to say that we missed her as well and to discuss what we missed about her on that day. This definitely allowed the children to see that these feelings were normal and that it is okay to speak about death and the emotions that come with it.

“ Grief on this level is not a subject that comes up in an early childhood degree or training. ”

With the input from the EPA psychologist and guidance from our inclusion support team, we were able to slowly navigate what was appropriate, what was needed and how to move forward. Some days, educators would have tears in their eyes and there was a knowing among the whole community.

During this time, educators and industry professionals from outside the centre supported us by carrying on with routine tasks so that we could spend the time with the children. We are grateful for these colleagues who helped the days to go smoothly and provided cuddles to us all when needed. This was the village coming together and being one.

Asking questions

As educators, we allowed the children to ask any question, no matter how hard they might have been to hear. We discussed the car accident, we discussed death and how it would feel, we discussed where Rose's body was now and where her 'inner self' was. (Was she a cloud? A star?) We allowed the children to speak and we answered as best we could without allowing our feelings or beliefs to overshadow this process. These questions from the children came up at any time and in ways we would not expect, for example, asking if a moth that had died would go to the same place that Rose was.

We had to move beyond the foundational paradigms that we had inherited through family traditions or society. Grief on this level is not a subject that comes up in an early childhood degree or training. We had not been taught how to deal with this in any course, so we were walking new ground, and found ourselves surprisingly honest in the process.

Continued on next page

Coping with grief

MEL LOWNDES
Windsor Community Children's Centre

How our education and care service faced grief and found a new layer of resilience

At around 7:30 am on the morning of Thursday 5 December 2019, the phone rang at Windsor Community Children's Centre and the certified supervisor took a call from the police – a call that no one should have to take. The police officer stated that our director, Rose Kelly, had been involved in a car accident while on her way to work and had been killed instantly on impact.

The certified supervisor immediately called the assistant director who was also driving into work. Together, they decided to contact the newly elected chairperson of our parent co-operative. He returned directly. The former chairperson had just dropped off his child and was asked to stay. Shortly afterwards, the second senior educator arrived and was told the news. This small group of assistant director, educational leader, two educators and our past and current chairpersons decided that the educators should all be informed as a group.

Children were continuing to arrive at the centre, so the two chairpersons set about calling each family booked to attend that day to ask them to return and collect their children. Without being able to explain the situation, educators were meeting families at the door and turning them away, advising them that the centre's emergency plan had been actioned and that they would be fully informed as soon as possible. After all the children had been collected, the news was broken to all the staff together. It was only then that we really came to the realisation of the truth.





In the weeks leading up to the memorial, we continued to read *The Memory Tree* and discussed what we may see and hear on the day.

During the memorial service, Jadean, a local Boon Wurrung man who had been working with the children in the centre and was well connected with Rose, conducted a smoking ceremony to end his Sorry Business in relation to her death, and to ask Bunjil (creator deity) to take Rose's spirit home. This was a very moving part of the memorial. The formal part of the memorial ended with the children and Rose's family planting a tree in her honour.

After the memorial

In the days and weeks after the service, we sat in small group times, speaking about what the children saw, heard and felt and we looked at the photos of the day as a prompt to the memories. This process was also extended to the conversations that had been ongoing since her passing.

We discussed sending Rose's spirit on, and that she was now with Bunjil and Waa. We still hear many Waa (crows) in the yard, and the children sometimes ask if that is Rose.

Our centre's outdoor bush wonderland and firepit were a passion for Rose. As part of remembering her and processing our grief, we embraced both 'Rose's tree' and the garden as a whole. Each child sat with Rose's tree and drew it using charcoal and grey paper, and spoke to the tree the same way they would have spoken to Rose. After two weeks we then read the book *Waiting for Wolf*. This story spoke about missing someone and the feelings that you have, and talks about how to move on to happier memories.

Learning from the journey

These foundational memories created through our experiences with grief have provided a new layer of resilience in the children. The pandemic has meant that the children have had to deal with their ongoing grief on their own and with their families. They are coping with the loss of their kindergarten year, and missing their friends and the ability to play and visit the park. We hope that the life skills that we encouraged the children to obtain have helped them to grieve for the lack of freedom and normal life in healthy ways.

Our journey through grief has not been easy. It has actually been very hard at times. When you live and work with grief, you can't escape it. Children are so honest and authentic that they ask the difficult questions and then in the next breath are swinging on the monkey bars or climbing the trees. We respect their ability to deeply understand and, in a way, they have helped us adults process our own grief and sadness. It has truly been a journey of community and connection.



Families at the memorial service at Windsor Community Children's Centre.

By the end of the year, the children had a stronger understanding of grief and how to move forward. A new year and new beginnings.

The parent co-operative purchased some wonderful resources, books and toys that allowed us to just be with the children and explore how we felt, through the wonders of reading and listening. These stories allowed the children to look at death in a different manner and take on board the messages in a non-threatening way. The centre's community library was also stocked with books and resources that families could borrow and share, as a way to find the language they needed to unpack their feelings with their children.

Formalising our memories

As the funeral for Rose was a small family-only function, we had started exploring the children's emotions and asking them to draw how they felt about Rose dying without them being able to say goodbye. We started to plan a memorial at the centre to allow the community to say goodbye in a formal manner.



Resources

There are three books that Windsor Community Children's Centre found particularly helpful.



Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes in Between

This book explains what dying is and what living is. This is an important source of information as it looks at all living creatures and explains that they all die.



The Memory Tree

This has become a favourite. The current kinder group miss the interaction they had with Rose, and still ask educators to read this story on a regular basis. The book talks about the finality of death and the impact it has on those who are left behind. On occasion, the story has caused educators to cry as they read. The children have fetched the tissue box, allowing them to display the sense of empathy they have developed and their understanding of how to help others. Feeling comfortable to cry has also allowed the educators to show that they miss Rose as well.



Waiting for Wolf

This book explains the heartache that happens when someone dies and how to move on to continue living. We used this last story to explain the finality of death and talk about the joy of the memories that we carry with us.



Sensory overload

MONICA SOLOMON
and TRACEY HARRIS
Inclusion Professionals
from Yooralla

There's a saying 'You change the environment, you change the behaviour'. So how might your environment be impacting children's senses?

Planning the environment purposefully while thinking of its sensory impact can be part of your behaviour guidance strategies.



It's important that children have a place to relax and space away from loud or busy areas.

Quiet space

Whether you call it a peace corner, cosy corner, thinking space, reflection place, sensory tent, lizard lounge, cool-down spot, chill-out zone or Hawaii (holiday retreat), a quiet space is where a child can escape when feeling overwhelmed and overloaded.

- Room corners can be used as calm spaces. A small tent or a table covered by either a sheet or light curtain also serve as calm retreats.
- Add a variety of sensory supports such as soft toys, various sized cushions, noise-cancelling earphones, coloured beads, prisms, coloured bottles of water, fidget toys, books or weighted toys.
- Have a lava lamp, fish tank, mini waterfall or fountain that children can focus on to relax.
- Lighting also impacts on children's behaviour. If overhead lights are bright, try to turn on only half at a time. Supplement darker areas with lamps that have a soft light bulb. When possible, keep the lights off and bask in the natural beauty of sunlight.

Visual input

How busy does the room look from the children's perspective? Try getting down low and looking around. How does the room make you feel from this angle?

- Many children are easily overstimulated by constant visual input, so try limiting decorations and artwork to a designated art wall.
- Where possible, add plants! They can improve the look of a room as well as balance humidity levels.
- Increase the amount of natural light in the room. Remove any artwork covering windows.
- Create clear and clutter-free workspaces – try and reduce visual distractions.
- Sort resources by colour to create calm and order – for example, have one container for each colour of pencils or textas.
- Give clear forewarnings for transitions using words, visuals and auditory cues together.

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Music and movement activities help children to explore and connect their senses.

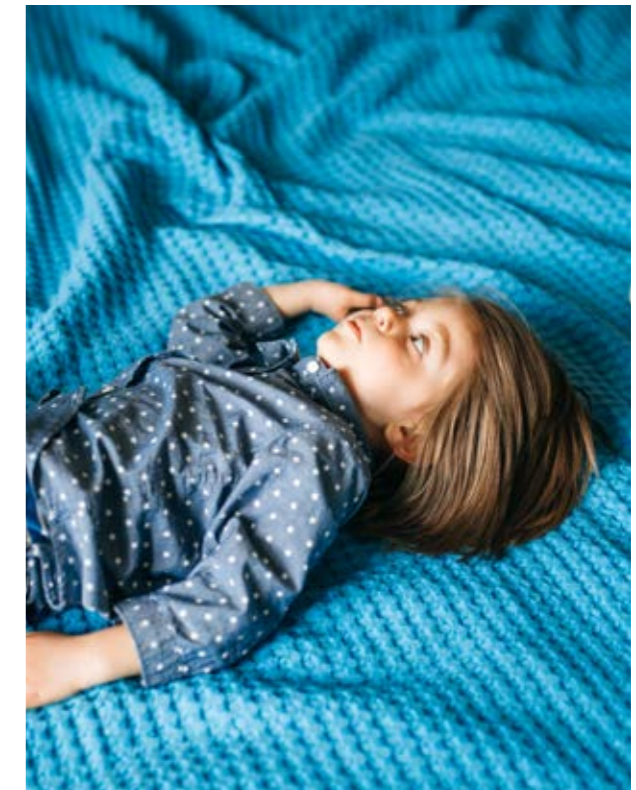
Sound

- The noise level can quickly and easily escalate when several children gather in the one space. The quickest way to calm an overwhelmed group of children is to quieten things down.
- Setting the tone with music can impact both our emotions and our body. Upbeat music with a fast tempo helps us become energised and focused, while music with a slower tempo can relax the mind and body.
- Nature sounds can be calming. Some children do well with classical music, whereas others can become over-stimulated by this. Try different music to see what suits different children.
- Play rhythmic music for whole-group purposeful engagement and transitions.
- Turn music off and have periods of quiet. It can be quite peaceful.
- Yoga and guided imagery provide opportunities for quiet, mindful reflection.
- Noise-reducing headphones may work well for some children.
- Minimise and simplify verbal instructions where possible – can you use picture or word visuals to indicate the schedule? Getting down to children’s level and providing instructions to small groups in a low voice is also very effective and is a great way to connect in gentle ways with each group of children as you go around the room.
- Introduce pleasing ways to gain the group’s attention such as using a singing bowl or chimes to indicate a pending announcement or transition.

Movement

Be aware of when and for how long your group of children is sitting. Provide opportunities to wriggle and jiggle as this is a great way to help children regulate and refocus.

- Include a movement activity in transitions such as walking backwards, walking-on-the-moon steps, heavy stomping, frog leaps, walking while clapping in time, walking like a robot, slowly getting up like a cat waking and stretching, etc.
- Have a movement break just before mat time as this can help calm and regulate children in order to focus.
- Offer a wiggle cushion or fidget toy to provide movement when sitting.
- During group times, sensory-sensitive children may prefer to sit on the outside of a row or at the back of a group where they can assess and monitor what is happening around them.
- Send a child on an errand and/or ask them to carry something heavy such as books or a backpack – this can help calm them by engaging a sense called proprioception (body awareness).
- Have a specific area in your room where children can stomp their feet or pace (crash mats or foam blocks are good).



- Have children undertake practical life activities such as wiping tables, setting tables, sweeping, raking leaves and caring for plants – all of these keep children busy while deepening their concentration skills, providing them with muscle movement and creating a sense of achievement and belonging.
- Provide a range of fine motor experiences such as stringing beads, making pom-poms, threading, cutting with scissors, drawing, sorting, Lego, Connetix, etc.
- Allow children to kneel or stand during activities.
- Provide a variety of gross motor experiences that work children’s deep muscles such as carrying buckets of sand, digging, pushing a child-size wheelbarrow or trolley, wearing a backpack, climbing, balancing, riding a bike or scooter, dancing, doing an obstacle course, stacking chairs, etc.

Touch, taste and smell

Consider the senses of touch, taste and smell in your room and over the day.

- Have a tactile box filled with a variety of fidget toys.
- Consider a bean bag or cushions, pillows and blankets for lounging.
- Allow for oral stimulation by blowing balloons, bubbles or feathers.
- Provide a range of food textures – crunchy and chewy foods, such as apples, carrots and crackers, all help with calming as they provide deep resistive pressure through the jaw.

- Open windows help to decrease distracting room smells.
- Ensure any scents you use in the room are subtle and tolerable. Consider scent-free tissues and soap. Limit the amount of perfume, cologne, deodorant or body spray you use.

Above all, consider how you feel in your environment. If you’re not feeling comfortable and teaching is becoming difficult, then it is highly likely that the children in your room are also feeling negatively impacted by the sensory environment.



Resources

Creating a Calm Environment in a Preschool Setting

www.brighthubeducation.com/teaching-preschool/64580-how-to-create-a-calm-classroom-environment

Creating a Peaceful Environment for Young Children

betterkidcare/early-care/tip-pages/all/creating-a-peaceful-environment-for-young-children

Why Sensory Audits Matter in the Classroom

www.sensoryintelligence.com/why-sensory-audits-matter-in-the-classroom



Wellbeing – who is looking after you?

BE YOU
The national mental health initiative for educators



Wellbeing is about balance in all aspects of your life. It encompasses the health of the whole person – physical, mental, social and emotional. In a mentally healthy community, everyone’s wellbeing matters.

While you’re putting your energy into creating a positive mental health environment for children and young people, it’s also important to focus on your wellbeing and that of your colleagues. Educator wellbeing is critical not only for each individual, but also for the delivery of high quality education.

It’s a shared responsibility

Educator wellbeing is a shared responsibility – shared between the early learning community and individual staff. Early learning services and schools can be stressful environments, and you spend a large part of your day at work. Leaders can act to improve the mental health of all staff by looking at the cultural, organisational and environmental factors within their learning community that might support or hinder wellbeing.

Building and maintaining protective factors

Throughout anybody’s life, there is a range of influences and events – both positive and negative – that impact an individual’s mental health. These influences and events are known as risk and protective factors. **Protective factors** decrease the likelihood of mental health issues and build and maintain resilience, even when risk factors are present.

So what are the actions that educators can take to build and maintain their protective factors?

- **Commit to prioritising your wellbeing** – make time to create a wellbeing plan, and map the action that you’ll take in a way that works for you.
- **Timetable wellbeing activities** – allocate specific times or days of the week for activities which support your wellbeing, so they become routine. This way they are less likely to drop off due to increased work demands or other competing priorities. It might include maintaining a healthy lifestyle by eating well, getting enough exercise and pursuing hobbies or interests.
- **Be proud of your identity and culture** – having a strong sense of pride in your own identity and culture along with positive and realistic expectations of yourself supports your wellbeing.
- **Learn about mental health and wellbeing** – focus on how you are feeling and how you act, and the impact that can have on children and colleagues. We are all interconnected and how you respond to stress will have an impact on those around you.
- **Monitor your stress** – recognise your own signs of stress and identify situations you find difficult, so you can be proactive about managing stress during these times.
- **Learn how to manage your stress in positive ways** – such as through exercise, relaxation, breathing, yoga, positive self-talk or connecting with nature.
- **Be aware of your thinking habits** – challenge negative or unhelpful thoughts.
- **Be grateful** – practise finding one small thing to be grateful for each day; soon it will become a habit.
- **Actively foster and maintain your personal relationships** – a sense of belonging and connection is important for your wellbeing. Be supportive of others without passing judgement.



- **Practise mindfulness** – by focusing your awareness on the present moment by slowing down and pressing the pause button, you can calm your mind and anchor your awareness.
- **Find a mentor** – finding a mentor through your workplace or professional networks can help you grow professionally. Make time to engage in reflective practice about your work and professional development both individually and as a team member.
- **Remember your why** – remember why you chose to become an educator and take steps to ensure you meet that purpose.
- **Reach out for support** – most importantly, if you feel that you aren’t travelling as well as you could, reach out for support. Most of us wouldn’t try to treat a broken leg ourselves, but when it comes to our mental health we sometimes think we can fix things on our own, or hope the issue just goes away by itself. Reach out for support when you need it – from colleagues, friends, family, your GP, a psychologist, an employee assistance program (EAP) through your workplace or Beyond Blue – www.beyondblue.org.au.



Resources

Wellbeing tools

The *Wellbeing Tools for You* section of the Be You website – www.beyou.edu.au/resources/tools-and-guides/wellbeing-tools-for-you – has a wide range of online apps and resources around mental health and wellbeing for yourself, colleagues, children and their families.

Fact sheets

The *Wellbeing Fact Sheets* section of the Be You website – www.beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/wellbeing – has fact sheets about key wellbeing practices.

*You're
welcome
here*



Innovative Solutions funding

A group of services in Melbourne’s north used the Innovative Solutions Fund to help embed Aboriginal perspectives. We speak to the director of Wood Street Childcare Centre, Vanessa Lucantonio, to learn more.



A smoking ceremony was held at the park yarning circle and picnic.



Educators from Happy Hubhub and Wood Street in front of The Nest sculpture on the Spiritual Healing Trail in Darebin Parklands.

Your centre recently partnered with three others to apply for Innovative Solutions funding – why?

Originally, we had begun the process of applying for Innovative Solutions funding by ourselves, but we were finding it very difficult to successfully engage with Aboriginal organisations – and to get the application completed! During a local education and care network meeting with the City of Darebin, the idea to expand the project to include other centres was discussed. Faye Sakaris from the Victorian Inclusion Agency and Margaret Phillips from the City of Darebin lent their support to make the group application happen. The project partners were us, Happy Hubhub, Darebin Childcare and Kindergarten Preston and Darebin Childcare and Kindergarten Reservoir.

What barriers were you seeking to overcome through the project?

Essentially we wanted our services to be more inclusive and welcoming. All four centres have been unsuccessful in attracting Aboriginal families with some families suggesting our services were too ‘white’. Despite reading a range of material about Aboriginal perspectives, we still felt really unsure about how to really embed them in the everyday. We felt this uncertainty was a barrier to the meaningful inclusion of Aboriginal children in our services.

What were the benefits of applying for funding as a group? How did you approach the application process and what were the challenges?

To apply we had to develop a business case. This involved critically reflecting on barriers to the inclusion of Aboriginal families at our centres, sourcing a quote from a reputable supplier and collaborating on a project plan. We also needed to work out what outcomes we expected as a result of the project. The business case took quite a while to complete – but the Victorian Inclusion Agency helped and supported us to complete it. Collaborating with other centres gave us a louder voice and opened the door for the local council and other institutions to help us navigate our way through the process and provide support and encouragement. It also motivated us to keep going! Working as a group of centres gave us more ideas, took us on different paths and the project was better because of it. Our community was broadened and we developed deeper relationships with our partners.

Your group Innovative Solutions application was the first of its kind to be accepted in Victoria. What did you use your funding for?

Essentially, to connect with an Aboriginal elder for mentoring and to get the families from each centre involved in the centres’ reconciliation journeys. We connected with local Elder Uncle Trevor Gallagher and organised for him to visit each centre four times over the next year. During his visits, we sought feedback on

current set-ups and practices, and asked for advice on how we could embed best cultural practices.

We also established biannual yarning circles – one for educators and another for families – led by Uncle Trevor. Our first yarning circle for families was outstanding. A huge interest meant we had to hold it at a nearby park. More than 80 families attended – it became a picnic event with families being able to engage in meaningful conversations with Uncle Trevor. The families especially loved being a part of the smoking ceremony which kicked off the yarning circle and picnic. For most families this was the first time they had the opportunity to engage in such an event.

We also purchased learning resources for educators.

How did Faye, your Inclusion Professional, help?

Faye was amazing throughout the whole process. She helped us develop and implement our plan and continued to connect with the services throughout the year-long journey. She gave us a checklist of reflections and questions to ask Uncle Trevor to enable us to get the most out of our engagement. She also continually asked thoughtful questions to deepen our critical reflection through the project.

What did you learn through this project?

Being able to speak with Uncle Trevor about our fears of ‘teaching the wrong thing’, or being ‘tokenistic’ in our teachings, gave all educators the confidence in what they were doing.

Continued on next page

We had three key goals:

1. For educators to develop knowledge, skills and confidence about Aboriginal perspectives, the impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma, and strategies to facilitate a trauma-informed environment for all children;
2. For all four services to develop lifelong partnerships with Aboriginal-controlled organisations to promote, attract and retain Aboriginal families in our early learning services; and
3. For our educators to gain skills to enable knowledge exchange with families and children to promote a more equitable society for Aboriginal people.





The ganyah (small bark shelter) was created and built by the kinder children from Wood Street, as part of their play and learnings.



Uncle Trevor Gallagher

Probably the biggest lesson we all learnt along the way is understanding that the land is a link between all aspects of Aboriginal people's existence – spirituality, culture, language, family, law and identity. Indigenous people believe that the land is for everybody. The land welcomes all people and offers us its provision. However, we are required to respect the land in return. The concept of honouring this relationship has always been central to the teachings at Wood Street, so the biggest lesson our centre learnt was that in many respects we were already embedding Aboriginal perspectives within our teachings without recognising that this was occurring.

Because the program spanned 12 months, our understandings deepened over time and the teachings provided by Uncle Trevor took on new meanings throughout the length of the project.

How has the funding made a difference to children and their families in the four services?

We learnt not to be afraid to try! By embedding things naturally into our everyday practices, such as books, songs, natural play resources and rituals – such as a daily acknowledgement – and having posters and talking with our children about Indigenous culture, history and current successes, we were able to achieve a lot.

From the beginning, we took our families along on this journey. We thought it was important to include them as this would contribute to a more positive outcome for all. Along the way, we provided them with historical information and created opportunities for them to connect with events being held within our area as well as providing teachings from an Indigenous perspective. For many of our families, this was the first time they had been provided with this opportunity.

Many families reported that they have been inspired to undertake their own journeys to educate themselves about Aboriginal history. One family is now doing an Acknowledgement of Country at home, instigated by their child!

How has this Innovative Solutions project made a difference to educators and inclusive practice at your centres?

This project has reinforced our notions that all children deserve to be members of an equitable society and we continue to advocate for their rights. Above all, the project has given our educators confidence and we now have a deep ongoing relationship with Uncle Trevor.

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

1. Work out what barriers to inclusion your service is facing.
2. Design a project that will help you break down those barriers.
3. Involve the Victorian Inclusion Agency from the start – get help from them if you are uncertain where to access quotes from.
4. Consider doing a group project. Find others who want to go on a journey with you with a shared vision and you will be taken somewhere else and achieve more!



Interested?

What is it? Innovative Solutions Support Funding
Purpose? To fund innovative solutions to inclusion barriers in long day care, outside school hours care and family day care
For who? Children with challenging behaviour, children from First Nations or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children with a language/speech delay, children with a disability, children with medical issues
How much? No limit – however, if your application is for \$10,000 or more, it will be referred onto the Department for approval
How to apply? Get in touch with your Inclusion Professional on **1800 177 017** – they will help you identify and develop a solution to address a barrier/s to inclusion at your service
Ideas? Bi-cultural support, translation, professional development or coaching around challenging behaviours, trauma or educator wellbeing... The more innovative the solution the better!
Timing? Apply at any time
More info? www.idfm.org.au/innovative-solutions or www.viac.com.au/inclusion-development-fund

Standing strong in culture: Protecting against racism

{ KIM STOUSE-LEE AND LEANNE GIBBS
(with Kim Cooke and Miranda Edwards) }



2020 was a year like no other. Despite the challenges the year brought, educators continue as leaders for social justice in their work with young children.

Read on to learn how two leading educators are tackling racism in the early education and care space.

A global health pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests and financial crises bring up questions that are confusing and worrying for children and adults. Educators may not be able to answer all of the questions but they can identify the teachable moments and make curriculum decisions that empower children, supporting them to feel safe and secure.

The issue of racism has been amplified through the recent Black Lives Matter protests and children are central to this movement. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1990) states that children have rights and freedoms free of discrimination or race. Yet, our communities are not free of racism.

In everyday interactions with children, educators can make a difference in shaping a more equitable and fair world with children. This task may seem overwhelming; however, when educators reflect, the opportunity becomes clear. Inclusive educators challenge bias and teach tolerance in every interaction, conversation and the pedagogical decisions they make. Now, more than ever, it is critical to reflect on concepts such as fighting racism and teaching tolerance and apply these principles to equip children with skills to “contribute to fair decision making about matters that affect them” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 26).

We spoke to leading educators about how they address racism within the early education and care sector.

Little Yuin Preschool – Kim Cooke

Little Yuin Preschool is located in the Wallaga Lake community on the far South Coast of NSW. A volunteer Aboriginal management committee runs the preschool. Little Yuin is also part of a network of rural and regional centres that partner with Early Start at the University of Wollongong. This collaboration enriches professional practice to strengthen outcomes for children. The preschool supports the transition from home to preschool with free bus transport, educational resources, affordable fees and healthy breakfast.



Kim Cooke is Little Yuin’s director. Kim spoke to us about racism and the qualities that underpin their work.

What are the principles that inform your teaching?

The principles of our relationships with children are kindness, respect and understanding. These are simple but powerful qualities that underpin our inclusive program. Little Yuin educators are sensitive to the history of our community. It takes time to build trust and depth of knowledge of the culture.

How do you approach fighting racism and teaching tolerance?

I draw on professional development and my lived experience in Arnhem Land. I have a strong commitment to resourcing rather than judging children, families and colleagues. Children are taught about ‘fair play’ and tolerance. Educators are resourced with opportunities for critical conversations to reflect on expectations. Families are resourced by identifying their needs and removing barriers, such as providing the bus and linking to services. At Little Yuin we value children being able to stand strong in their culture and prioritise connection to community.

Lulla’s Children and Family Centre – Miranda Edwards

Lulla’s Children and Family Centre is located in the Goulburn Valley regional hub of Shepparton, Victoria. The Aboriginal board and team lead the integrated service that provides both long day care and kindergarten programs. The team at Lulla’s is dedicated to giving Aboriginal children access to high-quality education and care. Families have access to family support and Closing the Gap community workers based at the centre. These workers connect with Aboriginal children and families from birth.

Continued on next page



Miranda Edwards is Lulla's director and early childhood teacher. Miranda spoke about culture and safe spaces.



What are the principles that inform your teaching?

The principles that underpin our work at Lulla's are providing a culturally safe place where children are loved, nurtured and treated equally. These are the key protective mechanisms. The mantra of 'be proud of who you are and where you come from' underpins the whole approach to early education. The community guides our teaching on culture. We must all respect the land we are on.

How do you approach fighting racism and teaching tolerance?

I draw on my own learnings as an Aboriginal woman, and the local Elder community. The key approach to fighting racism is working collaboratively with the broader community, including the local schools to embed culturally safe practices and language. I am an advocate in the local community, speaking at schools and with other service providers to share the advice that everyday practice at Lulla's can be everyday practice in all centres.

Miranda believes that 'every day is a learning day' for children, educators and the community.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kim Stouse-Lee and Leanne Gibbs are from Early Start. Early Start is a leader in early childhood education, research, leadership and support, and home to the first dedicated children's museum in the world based on a university campus.

www.uow.edu.au/the-arts-social-sciences-humanities/schools-entities/early-start

Resources

Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020)
www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/anti-bias-education

The original anti-bias curriculum has influenced educators for over 30 years. The anti-bias curriculum continues to provide a lens to reflect on stereotyping and discriminatory practice. A revised edition of the anti-bias approach includes brave conversations with children, building collaborative relationships free of bias with colleagues, and how to plan for cultural diversity and fairness in relationships with families.

Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009)
www.education.gov.au/early-years-learning-framework

The *Early Years Learning Framework* is a crucial document for all educators. The principle of 'Belonging' frames educators' practices of inclusion: 'Knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence... Belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who children are and who they can become' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 7).

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1989)
www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* forms the foundation of both the *Early Years Learning Framework* the *Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics*, which guide both best practice and understanding of quality education and care for children.

Getting it right: How education and care services can engage with the Koorie community



One of the questions the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) is most often asked by people working in the education and care sector, is 'How do I engage with the Koorie community?' There is no magical answer – but respect and patience go a long way in getting it right.

VAEAI's Early Years Unit recently invited Aunty Vera Briggs, a long-time advocate for Koorie education and one of VAEAI's treasured life members, to talk to the Victorian Inclusion Agency about community engagement. VAEAI says, 'There aren't many more people we could think of who are in a better position to offer advice about this subject than Aunty Vera'.

Aunty Vera's community engagement advice

Start local

When it comes to advising others about how to engage and work with the Koorie community, Aunty Vera believes that 'knowing who's who in the zoo' is essential. Her advice is to start local and approach the Aboriginal organisations in your area, such as cooperatives and Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs). She also suggests getting out and about during events that are significant to Aboriginal people, to show your support and become a familiar face around community.

Follow appropriate cultural protocols

The next thing Aunty Vera recommends to anyone wanting to engage with Aboriginal people is to follow appropriate cultural protocols. These include:

- **respectful communication** – knowing the correct terms to use when addressing people (such as Aunty and Uncle in some circumstances) and understanding Koorie English (for example, knowing that the word 'deadly' has positive connotations for Aboriginal people)
- **genuine consultation** – making sure you have not only asked about but really listened to the views of local Aboriginal people regarding what they want for their children and community

- **investment of time** – not expecting everything straight away, but being prepared to wait
- **committing to personal education** – understanding that you are an active participant in your own learning and not expecting or relying on Aboriginal people to teach you everything you want to know.

Work in multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral groups

Working in multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral groups is also something Aunty Vera believes is fundamental to achieving successful outcomes in Koorie early childhood education and care. These groups could include individuals from the Koorie Education Workforce such as a Koorie engagement support worker or one of the Koorie preschool assistants, the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, the local council kindergarten coordinator, and Aboriginal Maternal and Child Health services. If positive relationships are formed and common goals established, these individuals can come together to share relevant information and complement each other's areas of knowledge and expertise to benefit the early learning experiences of Koorie children.



Provide a Koorie-inclusive environment and program

Ultimately, early childhood education and care services need to provide a Koorie-inclusive environment and program for Aboriginal families to feel comfortable enrolling their children, so building relationships with the local Koorie community in the areas where services are located is vital to the process of becoming and continuing to be Koorie-inclusive.

Undertake a cultural audit

Aunty Vera believes there is huge value in conducting a checklist or cultural audit at education and care services to identify what staff are already doing well and in what areas they could improve. (VAEAI is in the process of developing a Koorie-inclusive checklist for education and care services, so watch this space.)

Who is Aunty Vera Briggs?

For more than three decades, Aunty Vera Briggs has worked tirelessly in Koorie education and training because of a strong desire to help people in her community widen their available options and pursue new aspirations for education.

Aunty Vera began working in Koorie education in 1970 when she was employed as a kindergarten assistant in Deniliquin. From the mid-seventies Aunty Vera held the position of Koorie educator in Moe, after which she was promoted to the position of Koorie cross sectoral coordinator. She then became a Koorie education development officer (later renamed as a Koorie engagement support officer). Aunty Vera remained in this role until she retired in October 2016.

Aunty Vera has been involved with VAEAI since 1981 when she became a member, and later a chair, of the Morwell Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. She was made a life member of VAEAI in recognition of her significant contribution to Koorie education.

Facilitating community involvement has always been extremely important to Aunty Vera. In recent years she has focussed on working with local families, kindergartens and primary schools to encourage a smooth transition for Koorie children starting school so that they can have a successful prep year and a strong start to formal education.

She is also a proud and loving grandmother and a wonderful role model to seven grandchildren.



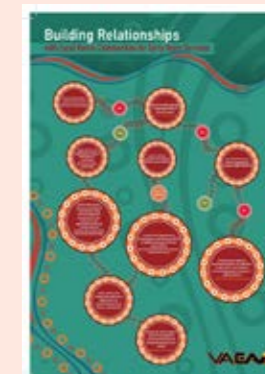
Image courtesy of Latrobe City Council



Resources

VAEAI's Aboriginal Early Childhood Cultural Protocols

www.vaeai.org.au/earlyyears



Checklist: How to build a sense of belonging for *all* children

Every child deserves to feel they belong – use this checklist to create a safe and welcoming environment at your early childhood or OSHC service.

- Do you greet every child by name as they arrive?
- Does every child have their own locker and a place for their hat?
- Are children's names spelt correctly on displays, lists, lockers?
- If your service has pigeonholes for communications, does every family have one?
- Do you know the names of children's guardians?
- Do you know the names of other important people in each child's life? (siblings, other people who collect them)
- Do you know about every child's language and culture – not just the traditions of their culture, but the ones that are meaningful to their family?
- If you use a belonging tree, family photos or child sign-in station, is every child included?
- Does your program include images and resources that are culturally familiar for every child so they can feel connected?
- Does your setting include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives?
- Does your setting include positive representations of diverse cultures?
- Is every child's voice counted in your program?
- Is every child invited to share in the decision-making?
- Do you share information for families in languages that are accessible to them?
- Are your forms written in a way that is inclusive of diverse family situations?
- Do you talk to families about their parenting styles to gain more information about how you can partner together to achieve the best for the child?
- Do you ensure that your social and community gatherings happen at a range of times and days to suit a variety of family members?
- Does your service reflect knowledge and history of your local community?
- Can you name 50 things about every child?

TAKE ACTION

Which ONE action do you want to focus on? What could you do tomorrow? Write it in the box now!

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Rita Pierson

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