

{Embrace}

Winter 2025 | Your inclusion support magazine



Supporting sensory
needs in early
learning and OSHC

+

Practical ways to
engage with culturally
diverse families

VICTORIAN
INCLUSION
AGENCY

One For All

{ Acknowledgement of Country }



The Victorian Inclusion Agency acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Custodians 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 and present. We acknowledge the strength of family connection and kinship within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their ongoing dedication to educating and caring for children. Sovereignty of these lands was never ceded. We support Treaty.

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Contributors

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

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Tip sheet: Embed meaningful and appropriate Koorie perspectives into your early years programming



If you want to include more First Nations perspectives in your practice, it can be tricky to know what content is community-endorsed and relevant to your local context. The [VAEAI](#) Early Years Team has put together this tip sheet to help you evaluate resources that include Aboriginal content and ensure they are meaningful and appropriate.



1

Tip 1: Reach out to VAEAI's Early Years Engagement Program (EYEP)

If you want to develop partnerships with your local Koorie community, VAEAI's Early Years Engagement Facilitators (EYEFs) are here to help.

The [EYEP program](#) is funded by the Victorian Department of Education from 2024 to 2028 to work with 65 pre-established Early Years Learning Networks (EYLN)s. VAEAI's eight place-based facilitators work within these networks, attending services to better and more appropriately connect early years services to local Aboriginal organisations, services, and resources.

2

Tip 2: Consider a professional development session

VAEAI runs professional development sessions for early childhood educators. These sessions have already helped hundreds of early childhood educators to feel confident in embedding Aboriginal content in their services.

State-funded early years services can access funding to attend these professional development sessions through the Department of Education's [School Readiness Funding model](#).

3

Tip 3: Think local

The first step in meaningful teaching is knowing what information to share and why you should share it.

Australia is a vast continent that Aboriginal people have occupied for tens of thousands of years. Over 200 Aboriginal language groups exist, each with its own customs and traditions.

For people unfamiliar with Aboriginal history, that diversity of language, customs and ancestry may not seem that important. But imagine if we were in a different context. Say, we are talking about European history. If someone asked you for a history of Italy, you wouldn't give them information about Germany and think, 'eh, that will do...'

We teach local Aboriginal history because it is true to the rich history of Aboriginal people and to the history of Australia.

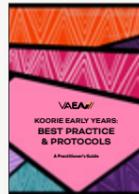
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Tip 4: Read about Koorie protocols and practices

When you have your professional development and resources in hand, you can always refresh your knowledge of protocols and practices by referring to VAEAI's reference materials.

Early childhood educators can access [VAEAI's Koorie Early Years: Best Practice and Protocols – A Practitioner's Guide](#). Use this hand-in-hand with [VAEAI and VIA's Walking Together inclusion support and protocols resource](#).

Read these guides for assistance on how to form connections with your local Aboriginal community, and who to consult when looking for resources and education activities.




Educators can access community-endorsed learning resources from places such as:



The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI)

VAEAI has produced a [Koorie Early Years Resource Guide](#) with approved learning resources, activities and directory of contacts.

The [VAEAI Koorie Education Calendar](#) includes year-round ideas on activities and significant dates that can be adapted to the early childhood context.

Koorie Heritage Trust

Find out about Koorie history, culture and art through the [Koorie Heritage Trust](#).

Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre

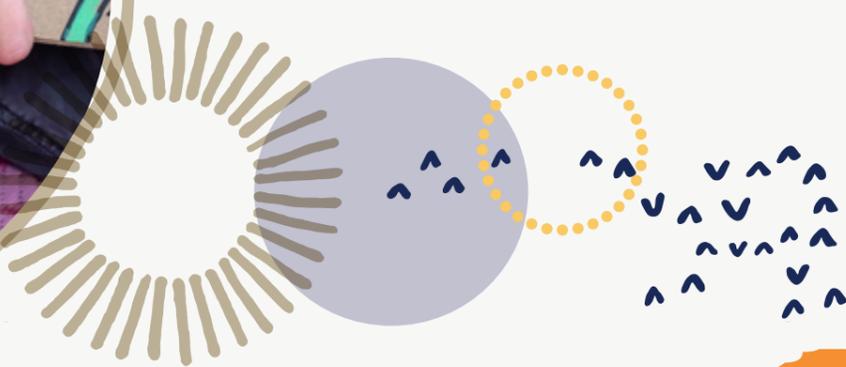
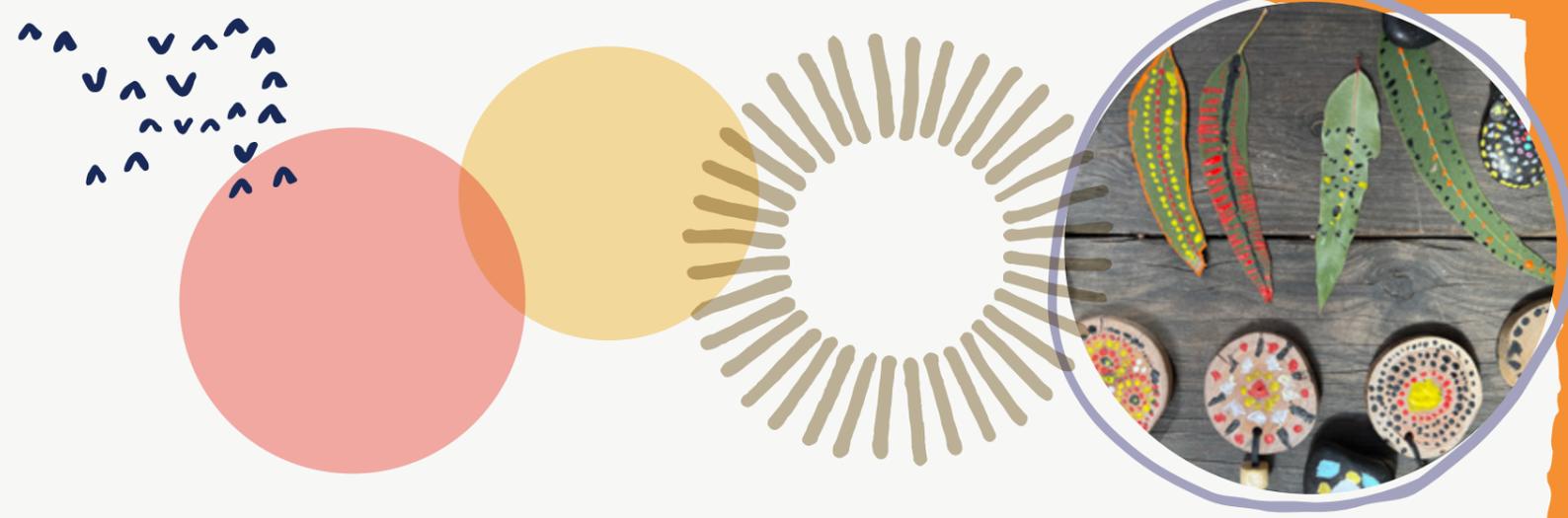
Located within the Melbourne Museum, the [Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre](#) provides an excellent, interactive overview of the history of Koorie people in Victoria.

The Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL)

[VACL is the peak body](#) for Aboriginal language revitalisation across Victoria.

Kinya Lerrk

[Kinya Lerrk](#) is an Aboriginal owned and operated local business based in Preston, where you can purchase Acknowledgement of Country plaques, room plaques, stationery, books, puzzles, homewares and more.





Supporting sensory needs in early learning and OSHC

In this insightful interview, Inclusion Professional Sam Williams speaks with Robyn Papworth, a respected developmental educator and exercise physiologist. Robyn shares practical strategies and real-world examples for supporting sensory and heightened needs of children in early years and OSHC settings.

Sam Williams: *When we visit services, we often get asked about sensory needs and behaviours that are challenging practices and programs. So, when we're talking about 'sensory needs' in early years and OSHC settings, we're looking at how children respond to what they smell, taste, hear, see, and feel in their environment. Can you explain how sensory needs impact a child's behaviour and learning in an education space.*

Robyn Papworth: Absolutely. Imagine a child who hears every little noise, like the ticking of a clock or the rustle of paper, at an amplified level, or finds even normal lighting too bright or certain fabrics too irritating.

These children can feel overwhelmed, leading to behaviours that might seem out of place.

For example, a child might cover their ears and scream during a fire drill because the noise is too much for them to handle, or they may become distracted by the constant flicker of a light that others do not notice. They could even repetitively take off an item of clothing. This sensory overload can significantly impede their ability to focus on learning tasks, making it crucial to address their sensory needs thoughtfully and comprehensively.

Sam: *Are there any effective strategies educators can use to reduce sensory overload for children? What about specific elements that should always be included or avoided when designing a sensory-friendly environment?*

Robyn: One effective strategy is to create a quiet corner in the room where children can retreat when they feel overwhelmed. This space can include noise-cancelling headphones, soft cushions, and fidget toys, which can help to calm a child's nervous system. These tools provide sensory relief, helping to reduce overstimulation and allowing the child to regain focus and composure in a more predictable environment.

It's also helpful to be mindful of the room's sensory environment: Consider the lighting, noise levels, and overall layout.

Natural light is preferable, but if that's not possible, using soft indirect lighting can help. Avoid overly stimulating decorations. One teacher used calm, neutral colours and minimal decorations to prevent sensory overload. For example, rather than bright banners and complex displays, she chose pastel tones and simple visual aids, enhancing focus for all children, not just those with sensory sensitivities.

Any learning environment should have areas that cater to different sensory needs, such as a quiet zone, a tactile area with various textures, a movement space or using soft music to create a calming atmosphere.

Another useful approach is using visual schedules and social stories to help children navigate challenging transitions within the routines and activities of the day.

Social stories are brief narratives that illustrate social cues and appropriate responses, helping children understand and anticipate routine events. For educators hesitant to implement these changes, it's worth noting that these adjustments benefit the entire room by improving dynamics and engagement. Gradually introducing these tools allows teachers to see their positive impact over time.

Sam: *I've read that 'heavy work' activities can support children who find participating in the program challenging. What are some effective heavy work activities or other sensory-supportive activities that educators can implement in their learning environments? Could you also explain briefly what 'heavy work' entails?*

Robyn: 'Heavy work' refers to activities that involve pushing, pulling, or lifting, providing proprioceptive input that helps regulate a child's sensory system.



For example, simple tasks like carrying a stack of books, pushing a heavy cart, or rearranging chairs can be beneficial. Setting up an obstacle course that allows children to crawl through tunnels and jump over mats also offers valuable sensory feedback. These activities help children engage their muscles and joints, which can be calming and can help children regulate their sensory needs.

One time, I saw a teacher set up an obstacle course with tunnels and mats, allowing children to crawl, jump and roll, which gave them both proprioceptive and vestibular input. Signs that a child might benefit from these activities include seeking out intense physical play, appearing fidgety or having difficulty sitting still.

Sensory needs glossary



Proprioception: your body's sense of where it is. It helps you know where your arms and legs are without looking, like when you close your eyes and touch your nose.



Vestibular: your balance sense. It helps you stay upright and know if you're moving or standing still, like when you're on a swing or spinning around.



Interoception: your body's sense of what's happening inside. It helps you feel things like hunger, thirst or when you need to go to the bathroom, as well as noticing your heartbeat or if you're breathing fast.

Continued on next page



Sam: *What are some of the common challenges educators face when they start to apply strategies that support children's sensory needs?*

Robyn: One common challenge is the misconception that all children need the same type of sensory input. What works for one child might not work for another, so it requires a lot of observation and adjustment. Another challenge is integrating these strategies into an already packed curriculum. Educators might feel they don't have enough time or resources to implement sensory activities.

Sam: *Could you provide examples of overcoming these challenges in various educational settings?*

Robyn: In one early childhood service I visited, the teacher noticed that some children thrived with sensory breaks outdoors with semi-structured obstacle courses, while others did not need them. She overcame this by creating individualised sensory plans and incorporating short, scheduled sensory breaks into the day, which didn't disrupt the overall schedule.

In another setting, a teacher used everyday materials creatively, like filling a tub with rice for tactile play or using gym mats for safe, indoor obstacle courses, which helped manage costs and resources effectively.

Sam: *What types of sensory resources should be made readily available in a learning environment? How can educators ensure these resources are accessible and engaging for all children?*

Robyn: Sensory resources, such as fidget toys, tactile bins and noise-cancelling headphones, are not only crucial for children with specific sensory sensitivities but can be beneficial for all children. Introducing these resources when children are calm allows educators to

explain their purpose and demonstrate how they can be used when necessary. This approach ensures that these tools are associated with self-regulation (not as a punishment). To make these tools accessible and engaging, one educator placed them in labelled bins at child-friendly heights, which encourages independence and ease of access. Another effective strategy is to rotate these sensory tools periodically, which keeps all children interested and engaged in using them.

Sam: *How can educators work with families to reinforce sensory strategies at home?*

Robyn: Families play a crucial role in reinforcing sensory strategies at home. They can create sensory-friendly spaces similar to those at their child's service, ensuring consistency. For example, one parent I worked with set up a quiet corner at home with soft pillows and a weighted blanket, just like the one their child had in class. Families can incorporate sensory activities into daily routines, such as having their child help with household chores that involve lifting or pulling, which provides valuable proprioceptive input. Communication between educators and parents is key; regular updates and sharing of strategies can help maintain a supportive environment for the child both at home and in early years and OSHC services.



If you're unsure about how to accommodate children with sensory needs and sensitivities, contact your Inclusion Professional who can work with you to develop strategies to support them.

Finish this sentence...



When it comes to inclusion, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. We asked long-time Inclusion Professional Di Bewsell to 'finish the sentence' and tell us about the values, tools and ideas that guide her practice.

I am passionate about inclusion because...

it is all about human connection and understanding. Alongside passion is commitment, and a commitment to inclusion allows for more thoughtful and informed partnership with others. It's an active choice to respect, value and advocate for children to truly be, belong and become.

A rewarding moment in my work was...

recently when an educator discovered that one of the non-verbal children in her group knew how to communicate through sign, when they signed the meaning of a visual to her as she held it up. She and the rest of the group are now learning sign and have added sign to the way they communicate with each other. It's small changes in understanding and perspective like this, that keep me turning up each morning. I get to work with educators who are open to change, trying things in different ways and who share the delights of an included child.

My favourite tools for educators to support inclusion...

(alongside committed respectful relationships!) are books on diversity and visuals. Use them every day, multiple times a day, across your programs.

In my experience, the most important factors for successful inclusion in education and care are...

curiosity, generosity and patience. **Curiosity** allows you to understand children and how they can be supported to thrive, **generosity** for others on their own inclusion journey and **patience** – because as someone wise said to me once, 'Inclusion is a life's work, not a 12-week project!'

A new resource, book or idea I've come across lately that has influenced my view on inclusion is...

First Knowledges Innovation: Knowledge and Ingenuity by Ian J Niven and Lynette Russell. This was recommended to me as it references some of the cultural heritage of the traditional lands of the Wotjobaluk Nations where I live, work and play. The complexity, nuance and deep understanding of Country that First Nations People had, have and continue to reconnect with is mind blowing.

Something new I've learned recently about inclusion in education and care is...

referring to our cultural lens and biases as the 'cultural algorithm' we feed ourselves. A neat and very contextual way of explaining it!

The most fulfilling part of my job is...

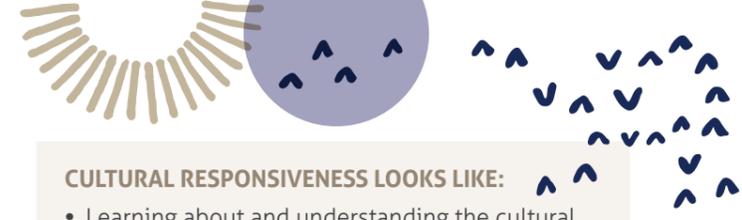
the relationships I have with educators and my team. Early childhood is filled with the most amazing people who everyday turn up and commit themselves to making the lives of young children everything they can be.

To maintain a balanced approach to work and wellbeing, I...

practice what I preach – curiosity, generosity and patience with myself! Seek knowledge, be kind to yourself and give yourself time to reflect.

On the weekend you'll find me...

out in the garden or greenhouse, in the fresh air, tending and delighting in growing things!



Engaging with culturally diverse children and families

BY LAURA CAROLAN AND JODIE SIGNORINO
Inclusion Professionals,
Community Child Care Association

The families who come through our doors each day have many different beliefs, values and traditions. Inclusion Professionals Laura Carolan and Jodie Signorino have some guidance on how educators can help families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to feel safe, valued and included.

CALD – What does it really mean?

Let's explore how to build a more inclusive service by breaking down the acronym.

C is for Culture.

Culture is about the way we live. [The Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia](#) describes culture as 'what we create beyond our biology. Not given to us, but made by us'. Here's an example: all humans need to eat – that's biology. But the kinds of foods we eat, the time of day we enjoy our meals and the utensils we use are shaped by our culture.

The families and children at your service all have cultural backgrounds influenced by their ethnicity, country of origin, religion, class, abilities, gender, age, friendships, hobbies and much more! Culture can shape everything from the way a child likes to communicate to the goals a family has for their child's education.

REFLECT AS A TEAM: How do you currently support the diverse cultural backgrounds of the families and children at your service? What else could you do to make them feel valued and safe?

A is for And don't forget yourself.

Culture isn't just something to recognise and celebrate in the families and children at your service. As an educator, you can incorporate aspects of your own culture into your practice.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Think about your culture and what's important to you. How can you share these parts of yourself?

L is for Linguistically diverse.

When we talk about families and children who are linguistically diverse, we mean those who might speak a different language at home to the one you use in your service, including those who use more than one language. It's important to consider because language and communication are at the core of connecting with others, building strong and respectful relationships and helping children and families feel welcome, safe and valued.

REFLECT AS A TEAM: How are you currently communicating with families? Do you have information available in other languages? Do you use visuals such as photos to support communication with children and families? Do you encourage educators who speak community languages to use these languages in your practice?

D is for Diverse.

When you're providing education and care to children and families who share nationalities or backgrounds, it is important to remember that each family unit is different. Each family – and child – at your service will have their own unique preferences and needs. By understanding this and not making assumptions, you can have the most effective impact.

REFLECT AS A TEAM: Think about the families at your service. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? How can you respectfully enquire and seek to understand their differing perspectives and needs?

How to be a culturally responsive educator

Our culture is shaped by the people around us. This means your values influence the culture of the children in your care, just like their families and friends.

We can promote a culturally responsive environment by nurturing and celebrating the culture of the children at our service.

Keen to learn more? Delve deeper with these insightful resources handpicked by our Inclusion Professionals: Chimamanda Adichie, [The Danger of Single Story](#), 2020. Child Australia, [Welcoming Conversations with CALD Families](#), 2012.

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS LOOKS LIKE:

- Learning about and understanding the cultural context of each family and child
- Actively [embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives](#) in all parts of the curriculum
- Implementing [anti-bias approaches](#), including social justice approaches, to address racism and bias in the care environment and community
- Working with colleagues, children and young people, families and their communities to build culturally responsive and safe environments.

Practical ways to support CALD families:

- Provide enrolment and service information in different languages, and offer use of an interpreter if needed
- Learn and use key words in the family's preferred language
- Incorporate visual cues and gestures when talking with families and children to support verbal communication
- Plan time to get to know and engage with all families on an ongoing basis, not just during enrolment
- Encourage families to share their culture with you if they are comfortable. For example, they might share key words in their language or write a message in their preferred language to decorate your service environment
- Ask families if they would like to give feedback about events or processes at your service
- Find out about local services or organisations that can support CALD families and have this information available at your service
- Ensure that resources such as books, dolls and puzzles represent all the children and families in your service (check out our Planning for a Multicultural Environment Checklist on [page 16](#) for more ideas for your learning space!)

WANT A VISUAL REMINDER?

Print out this FREE ['What do we celebrate'](#) poster and display it at your service where your team and families can see it.



Did you know we have lots of helpful resources on our website? Check out [viac.com.au/resources/cald](#) for printable posters, checklists and more to support cultural inclusion at your service.



Not an 'add-on': Inclusive practice when a child needs significant support



Explorers Early Learning Croydon prides itself on inclusion by focusing on strong relationships and seeing the

whole child. Educational Leader Megan Binns recently caught up with Inclusion Professional Dani Campbell to share some examples of their inclusion practices and how they ensured a child with complex needs could meaningfully participate in all areas of their program.

Explorers Early Learning Croydon is a 130-place long day care and kindergarten. The service has a strong philosophy of inclusion and related inclusion policies. Megan believes these documents – along with their identity statement on relationships – have guided the team's proactive planning for authentic inclusion at their service.

'Relationships are very prevalent within our stance on inclusion,' says Megan. 'We understand we need to build a meaningful relationship with children to understand their needs and how we can be diverse within our practice and curriculums to support their inclusion.'

This approach was imperative when, two years ago, a family enrolled their child Ollie*, into the service. Ollie requires significant support with his mobility, communication and participation within the education program.

Language is key

'The language we use and the way we represent children within our discussions has a significant impact on the view we have of children and the way we approach relationships,' shares Megan.

Children are also keenly aware of educators' approaches to a child with disability, or 'special rights,' as is the preferred language in the Reggio Emilia Approach adopted by Explorers Croydon. This approach

acknowledges children have various, and sometimes complex, needs and encourages every effort to support their participation in all experiences and activities with other children.

When educators at Explorers Croydon use strengths-based language, centring around each child's capability, participation and agency, their attitudes and perspectives on what the child can achieve shift. This brings awareness to how they can celebrate every achievement.

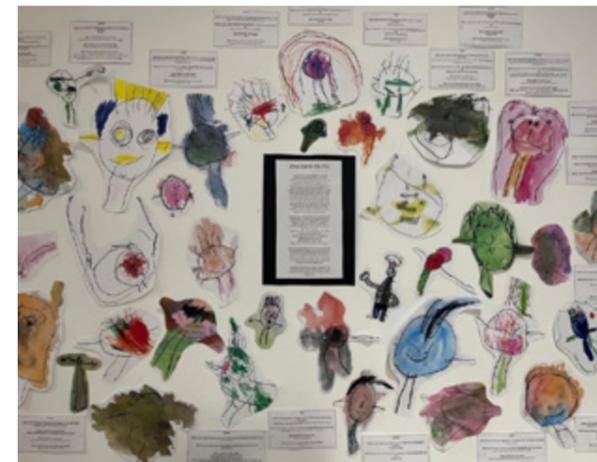
'The children's perceptions and inclusiveness of Ollie have really stemmed from their observations of educators and the way that we have approached inclusion within our curriculum ... it hasn't been an add-on. It is something that is embedded,' Megan explains.



Although your service may have a policy around preferred language or terms, people with disability often have very strong preferences for either identity-first or person-first language. It's important that services are led by, respect and follow the choice of language each individual child with disability and their family use about themselves.

Enrolment and orientation

When Ollie enrolled at the service, the Explorers Croydon team had many discussions with his family to understand Ollie's current capabilities, the different aspects of his needs and the family's goals. The team undertook a lot of research on how to support Ollie. The team engaged with Ollie's allied health professionals and the service's Inclusion Professional to understand how to implement the same or similar strategies to those used at home to support his growth and progress while ensuring his inclusion within the program.



Slowing down the enrolment and orientation process benefited both the service and Ollie's family. These critical moments were an opportunity to collaborate with the family and build trust, security, mutual understanding and awareness.

Megan recommends encouraging the child and family to explore the program during orientation. Educators can also directly participate in activities alongside the child to build the relationship and gain an understanding of the child's strengths and interests. This is a key time to reflect with the family about any adaptations you might need to make to the environment to promote access and participation, as well as learning the child's communication and play preferences.

Environments and experiences

The Explorers Croydon team continually reflect on their environments and practices, reviewing the room layouts, walkways and outdoor spaces and making adaptations so that Ollie can access all areas in his walker for learning and play.

'We really want Ollie to lead those play experiences and lead his day. We invite his opinion rather than thinking for him,' explains Megan.

Being responsive to Ollie and his communication preferences, the team created a book of visual aids like the one he used at home. This increased Ollie's ability to express his wants and needs clearly to educators and peers. The team then developed a permanent communication board outdoors (pictured) so Ollie could point to different areas or activities he would like to participate in. This enhanced his communication with peers when playing outdoors, without needing to bring the book of visuals outside.



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*This name is used as a pseudonym to respect the privacy of the child.



Outdoor play often involves supporting Ollie out of his walker and into the sandpit with his peers. When Ollie chooses the slide on the communication board, two educators work together to support him to safely get on and use the slide.

It is important to Megan and the team that Ollie 'can engage in all of those different play experiences and spaces and he is not left behind from his friends.'

Transitions and routines

Mealtimes are a part of the day when Ollie requires significant support. The team reflected on how they could meet everybody's needs during these moments while ensuring all children's rights and dignity were respected. Specialist equipment supports Ollie's access and comfort during prolonged periods of sitting for meals. Progressive mealtimes were introduced so educators could sit alongside children and have ongoing conversations, role model and support all children while meeting Ollie's manual feeding and support needs.

The experience is relaxed, and children are not rushed. 'That way, Ollie is really included in the moment,' says Megan. 'He is supported to build on those relationships with other children and take part in all of those daily routine and transition moments throughout the day.'

Excursions

When researching excursion locations, an inclusive lens was used to ensure access and participation for all members of the Explorers Croydon learning community.

Before excursions, Megan engaged with Ollie's family to understand what they perceived as potential risks. They worked collaboratively to develop strategies to overcome any identified to ensure Ollie's participation. For walking excursions, Ollie's stroller from home is used to provide comfort and meets his needs. Before the excursion, his walker is stored at

the destination so that when they arrive, Ollie can immerse himself in the experience with his peers, 'ensuring he has the capabilities and opportunities to engage in those fun moments as well.'

After Ollie's successful inclusion in excursions at Explorers Croydon, the local kindergarten he now attends has engaged with Megan and the team to share knowledge and strategies so Ollie can also participate in excursions there.

A community of young advocates

The children at Explorers Croydon have become an active group of young advocates both inside and outside the service.

During an excursion to the local reserve to connect with Country, the children identified no equipment at the adjoining park that Ollie could play on. The conversation continued to the next day. During the 'Children's Committee' the topic was raised again. Megan used this opportunity to build children's knowledge about what play might look like in these spaces for someone who needed opportunities to sit, lay or wheel into play. Megan and the children researched inclusive playground equipment, printed out pictures and illustrated their interpretations before writing a letter to the local council advocating for inclusive equipment and spaces in the local area.

Inclusive early years programs, like Explorers Croydon, provide all children with the opportunity to understand and respect diversity and develop empathy, understanding and respect.



If you need further advice and support to include children in your program [reach out to your local Inclusion Professional.](#)

Mindset matters: Using critical reflection to shape educator attitudes to support children with disability

To create an inclusive environment, we need safe spaces for all children and their educators. Inclusion Professional Aarti Sharma invites you to explore what 'othering' and 'ableism' can look like in education and care and provides key areas of reflection to support you and your team shape an inclusive attitude towards children with disability.

We all want to give the children in our care the best chance to learn, develop, and thrive.

As an educator, you are likely used to caring for children with a wide range of skills and abilities. Even so, you may feel out of your depth sometimes when supporting a child with complex support needs.

When planning and implementing programs, you may have questions or concerns about the children with disability in your care and wonder if they will be able to meaningfully and actively participate. These thoughts and feelings are common when we want to meet all children's needs and abilities but are unsure how.

What is 'othering'?

We 'other' someone when we treat them like they are not part of the group. We might label children in our care as 'other' if we find them too different or challenging due to their abilities. This can happen whether we mean it to or not.

It's important to think critically about when we might label children as 'other' in the education and care environment and how this can impact their sense of belonging and identity.

Continued on next page

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- Who has the power to label children in your care as 'other'? Who does it benefit?
- How might labelling the child as 'other' impact how they are treated by staff and children?
- Would families be comfortable knowing their children are labelled as 'other'?
- Will labelling children have any long-term effects? What might these look and feel like for the child?
- Can children have a voice in how they are labelled? What might they say?

Use these questions to prompt an open discussion with your team about how you think and talk about children with disability at your service.

What about ableism?

You may know about ableism or have heard it mentioned in your learning. An ableist mindset believes people with disability need to be 'fixed' and should change themselves to fit in.

In education and care, this can look like treating children with a disability differently to their peers in a way that makes them feel 'less than' or excluded. For example: leaving them out of group time or activities.

It's important to acknowledge that these beliefs can exist even if we aren't aware of them, as most of us are used to living in a world designed for people without disability. What matters is recognising our own bias and taking steps to shift our perspective.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Consider these scenarios with your team:



Ableist ideas might be at play...

A more inclusive approach...

✗ You feel sad or sympathetic towards the child with a disability

✓ You have open conversations with the child's family and your colleagues to see things differently and recognise the child's strengths and abilities

✗ You don't invite the child with a disability to group time as they don't usually join in

✓ You adapt the way you deliver group time based on the interests and needs of each child

✗ You insist that a child with sensory sensitivity try a new and unfamiliar food

✓ You learn more about sensory processing and offer a safe space for exploring new foods without pressure

✗ You interpret direct communication as being rude

✓ You have a curious mindset and think about *what* the child is communicating instead of *how* they are communicating it

✗ You withhold a comfort item until the child makes a verbal request or says please

✓ You recognise the child's need for safety and regulation, so ensure easy access to comfort items

Think differently about disability

To support the needs of children with disability in our practice, we need to rethink what it means to be inclusive. This can be achieved by taking these steps:

- **Explore** what you already do well as a team to include children with disability
- **Investigate** where children with disability have faced barriers to learn or join in
 - Ask children and their families about times when they have felt included and times they have felt left out
- **Think about** any harmful conversations or mindsets you may have had
 - Consider how you could reframe the conversation or your thinking in future
- **Take action** and consider what resources can help you
 - Connect with the children in your care and their families
 - Seek support from specialist teams and check in regularly to track progress
 - Update your strategic inclusion plan (SIP). Reach out to your Inclusion Professional for resources and support with your SIP

- Get to know your community resources like Preschool Field Officers (PSFOs), local council's children and family services and supported playgroups
- Advocate! If you see or hear something that's not okay, make time to discuss different perspectives. Children count on adults around them to speak up for them.

Remember, learning and growing is a journey. By taking a step in the right direction, you and your team can increase awareness of your mindset and actions so all children can flourish.



Curious to find out more? Check out these helpful resources to support disability in education and care:

Reframing Autism, [Challenging Ableism in Education](#).

Victorian Government, [The social model of disability](#), 2022.

Department of Education, [Disability Standards for Education](#), 2005.

CHECKLIST:

How multicultural is your learning environment?

Use this handy checklist, from Inclusion Professional Nahah Hussain, to see how well you embed diversity and inclusion in your education and care service.

✓ Children:

Our staff are aware of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children in their care

Our staff are encouraged to enhance their understanding of the cultures represented in the service and other diverse cultures

We have staff who speak more than one language and encourage them to use their language with the children who speak the same language

We involve local council and community groups to gain inspiration and better support children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

Children are encouraged to develop awareness of their identity and express interest in the cultural heritage of others

We provide small group experiences to teach children their language

Resources, materials, and activities reflect the cultural diversity of our children and families.

✓ Families:

We embrace the interests and cultural backgrounds of families, making sure they feel valued and understood

Families are involved in decisions that impact their children

Families can share information about their child's needs, routine, key family events and the family's cultural practices

We understand the cultural demographics of the area of our service

Our Visual Orientation Booklet illustrates how informative and engaging our service can be. Presenting it to CALD families helps build connections and enhances our understanding of their needs.

✓ Visual displays:

We share posters, notices, and pamphlets in relevant community languages

The cultural identity of children at our service is visible in the learning environment, and children and families are encouraged to contribute

We have pictures and display boards that reflect multicultural Australia

We display people of diverse backgrounds engaged in familiar everyday activities

We have visual representations of a diverse range of cultures and in different languages to ensure families feel culturally safe and welcome.

✓ Cultural safety:

We have zero tolerance for discrimination

We have policies and procedures in place to address cultural inclusion

We provide training to educators and staff on cultural competency

Our educators use the information gathered in enrolment forms to support and promote children's cultural learning

We use interpreters to support engagement and planning with families

Bilingual children are encouraged to communicate in a variety of ways

We celebrate and participate in culturally diverse special events.

✓ Educator development:

We support educators with professional development and training on cultural diversity and inclusive practices

We regularly reflect on practices relating to diversity and inclusion



We seek out local services and collaborate with others in the community to support cultural inclusion and diversity

We seek out bicultural support from agencies when we need extra help.

✓ Programming and activities:

Our educators plan and implement programs that reflect the cultural diversity of children and families

We learn songs, dances and play music from a mix of cultures and hold group times and tell stories in the diverse languages of our families

We use visual and tactile resources that reflect the multicultural backgrounds of our community

The clothing in our home corner represents different cultures. We include a mix of everyday wear, festival and celebration attire, seasonal clothing, pieces of fabric, shoes, hats, and jewellery

Children can make and try foods from other cultures

We use cooking and eating utensils commonly used in the homes of people from diverse cultures, like a wok, chopsticks, or coffee pot. We also have diverse representational food, like wool spaghetti and cloth pita bread.



Need help with any of the above?

Call **1800 177 017** for free mentoring and program support from our expert Inclusion Professionals.



Concerns about a child's development? Simple steps to talk to the family

BY KAREN YOUNG AND MICHELLE LESTER
Victorian Inclusion Agency
Yooralla

Families dream about their child's future from their earliest moments together.

Will my child make friends?

Will they enjoy school?

Will they be artistic, musical, or sporty?

These dreams are woven with hopes and aspirations, reflecting a deep sense of care and responsibility. Families naturally worry, question themselves, and seek guidance from trusted professionals. After all, most families are doing their best.

Fast-forward a few years, and their child is now in your care. As an educator, you might notice something in their development that seems outside the typical range. Raising these concerns with families is a sensitive but vital step to ensure the child receives the support they need to thrive. However, poorly communicated concerns can feel like a challenge to the picture families have lovingly created for their child, making these discussions deeply confronting.

Let's explore why and how educators can approach these conversations with professionalism, empathy, and inclusivity.

Why talking about concerns matters

Early identification of developmental or behavioural differences is critical for timely intervention. As educators, we observe children in ways that may highlight patterns not as apparent at home. By sharing our observations, we advocate for the child and work collaboratively to prioritise their wellbeing.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) emphasises the importance of partnerships with families, recognising them as the most significant influence on their child's development. Open communication fosters trust, aligns support strategies and connects families to additional resources. Avoiding these discussions risks missed opportunities for early intervention, potentially affecting the child's long-term outcomes.

Steps for sensitive and effective communication

1 Build your relationship first

Strong relationships based on trust create a solid foundation for difficult conversations.

Communicate regularly: Share updates about the child's progress, interests, and experiences. Allow time at drop-offs and collections to greet families without rushing and share information about the day.

Be approachable: Create an environment where families feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. Be open and friendly when approached by families. Show interest in the lives of families outside of the learning environment.

Show empathy and understanding: Acknowledge families' challenges and offer genuine support. Sandwich difficult topics in between positive feedback and encouragement.

2 Document observations thoughtfully

Record specific behaviours or patterns, linking them to developmental milestones or the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

Avoid subjective language and focus on clear, objective details to guide the discussion. Use factual statements like, 'Jethro is standing at the water play station with two other children and is smiling,' instead of making a judgement like, 'Jethro is happy when playing with water with his friends.'

Use examples to explain your observations. For instance, instead of saying, 'Your child struggles to focus,' say, 'I've noticed that during group story time, [child's name] often finds it hard to sit still and engage.'

Use these observations to guide conversations with families to show patterns in behaviour.

3 Choose the right time and place

Select a private, calm setting for the conversation, and avoid busy times like drop-off or pick-up.

4 Begin positively

Start by highlighting the child's strengths and achievements to show that you see them as a whole, not just in terms of the concern.



5 Stay in your lane

Your role as an educator is to share observations, not to diagnose. Position yourself as a part of the child's team in their development journey, offering insights rather than conclusions.

6 Ask before telling

Invite families to share their perspective:
'Have you noticed anything similar at home?'
'What has your journey been like so far?'

7 Provide resources and support

Be ready with actionable suggestions, such as consulting a GP or accessing early intervention services.

Provide information about local resources to help families navigate next steps. This might include Maternal and Child Health Services, council-run playgroups or programs, or relevant reputable online forums and groups.

Talk to your Inclusion Professional to explore what is available in your area.

Continued on next page



8 Listen without judgement

Families may feel shocked, defensive, or even relieved when you share any challenges their child is experiencing. They might want to share their own concerns or experiences. Using active listening can help them process the information and feel supported.

Encouraging prompts: Use phrases like 'I see', 'go on' or 'that must have been difficult' to encourage the speaker to continue.

Clarifying questions: Ask open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding, such as, 'Can you tell me more about how that makes you feel?'

Paraphrasing: Restate what the speaker said in your own words to confirm understanding, such as, 'So, you're saying that you're worried about how your child is adjusting?'

Remember, families are the experts on their child. Let them know that you have heard them and understand where they are coming from.

9 Building professional capacity

Equip yourself with the tools and knowledge to navigate these conversations effectively. Attend professional development, engage with resources, and seek mentorship from colleagues who are experienced in this area.

Talk to your Inclusion Professional to find out what professional learning opportunities are available to you.

10 Follow up

Remember to ask the family how things went after your meeting or conversation. Did they make an appointment or access a local resource? How did it go? Do they want to discuss anything further?

Discussing developmental concerns with families is a fundamental aspect of early childhood education.

By fostering strong partnerships, maintaining professionalism, and embedding inclusive practices, educators can create environments where every child – and their family – feels supported and empowered. Together, we can embrace the diversity of children's needs and ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive.



Interested in reading more? Extend your practice with these great online resources:

Raising Children, *Effective communication with parents and carers: for professionals*, 2024.

Be You, *Preparing for difficult conversations with families*, 2023.

National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, *Preparing for challenging conversations with families*, 2020.



You've got mail

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