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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 61

Fostering artistic and creative expression in children

Combining expressive arts and inclusion secures equity for children and enhances meaningful participation in their own learning.

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Early experience in an arts rich environment which includes visual arts, dance, music making and song, offers broad and playful spaces in which children are free to express and respond.

Arts rich environments also provide children with the opportunity to respond to each other's creativity and desire for recognition of self. In this way a child's emerging sense of belonging and connectedness to people, community and place is fostered and meaningfully reinforced.

Through engagement in artful experiences and environments, children find places which allow them to take risks safely and explore boundless possibility.

With regard to learning environments the EYLF (Early Years Learning Framework) states "environments that support learning are vibrant and flexible spaces" which "invite open-ended interactions, spontaneity, risk taking, exploration, discovery and connection..." (DEEWR, 2009, pp.15-16).

The use of the word 'invite' supports the idea that environments can be of little relevance unless children are supported to engage with them.

When children grow up experiencing real opportunities to engage in exploration, risk, creativity and innovation, they feel a sense of empowerment within their communities and connectedness to their environments. These outcomes are far reaching.

Tips for parents:

- Look for environments which indicate children are having significant access to and authentic involvement in hands on artistic experiences including music making, song, visual arts, drama, expressive dance/ movement.
- Early childhood teams who bring their own enthusiasm or individual expertise in the arts to enrich and support the program and inspire the children around them are ideal.
- Check for visual evidence of children's works displayed with consideration and respect.
- Spaces reserved for art making is essential to testing creativity. Is 'mess' allowed and do children have freedom to create, explore and take appropriate risk in play at various times of the day?

What is EYLF?

The Early Years Learning Framework is a new national curriculum for early childhood.

It provides guidelines for enhancing young children's learning opportunities. Its key themes are 'being', 'belonging' and 'becoming'. All early childhood centres are required to implement the EYLF.

For more information, see www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au.

The EYLF, Outcome 1, highlights the importance that "children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency" needed for a "strong sense of identity" (DEEWR, 2009, p 21).

About us

Learning Links is a charity and non-profit children's learning organisation formed in 1972 by parents and professionals to help children with disabilities and learning support needs.

Our vision is of a community where all children and families have equal access to learning opportunities and quality support.

Our services

Children under 6

- Early childhood intervention for babies, toddlers and preschoolers with a disability or developmental delay.
- Assisting children with disabilities to transition to school.
- Speech therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy.
- Mobile toy library service.
- An inclusive preschool.
- FREE story time sessions at Fairfield Library.

Children attending school

- Specialist assessments to determine your child's educational needs.
- Reading and maths support for children who are falling behind at school.
- Speech therapy and occupational therapy.
- Social skills and anxiety management groups.
- Transition to school groups.
- Counselling.

Parents, carers and families

- Case management services.
- Support to families who have just received a diagnosis of a disability for their child.
- Programs to help parents support their child's communication.
- A range of programs to develop parenting skills.
- Support groups for carers of children with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition (MyTime).
- FREE program for parents living in Cabramatta on how to tutor children of preschool age (HIPPPY).

Workshops

Learning Links also delivers workshops for parents, carers and professionals working with children on a range of topic areas including ADHD, autism, behaviour, child development, children's learning, children's wellbeing, communication, counselling and fine motor skills.

Learning Links has services in five Sydney locations. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, and some programs Australia-wide and in New Zealand. A complete list of locations and contact numbers is on the back page.

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Outcome 2 describes how "children are connected with and contribute to their world" (DEEWR, 2009, p.25). It asks us to find ways to help children "develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities", "respond to diversity with respect" and "become socially responsible ..." (DEEWR, 2009, p.26).

Artistic expression can offer a powerful means by which children learn to affect and respond to their ever expanding worlds in imaginative, positive, constructive (and destructive), dynamic and innovative ways. Through engagement in the arts, important life-long bridges can be established between an individual's sense of agency, their world and its people, resulting in a strong sense of purpose and identity.

Much of what is described in the EYLF "Outcome 4, Children are confident and involved learners" (DEEWR, 2009, p.33) comes back to the issue of time. The creative process itself involves, amongst other things, exploration, experimentation, interpretation and the opportunity to apply understanding. It calls for the kind of time and open-endedness which allows deep immersion and focus.

By building respect for the creative process and tolerance for the open-ended use of materials, we can help deeply satisfying, hands on learning to occur.

Valuing child centred timing is an important way to allow a child to "bring their being to their learning" (DEEWR, 2009, p.33), Outcome 4, EYLF.

Tips for educators:

- How much time a day realistically allows for individual children to become immersed in a creative expressive experience of their own devising?
- How could you refine your routines to increase this opportunity?
- Are there spaces which allow you to feel more at ease about the fervour and physicality of children's art making?
- Can you create these spaces in all the rooms and environments children have access to?

Providing time to fully explore ideas, actions, outcomes and possibilities with children, can naturally ensure a holistic approach to child learning and development. Engaging with them individually, at their own level, is important. Teaming this with appropriate adult coaching and support to follow through will secure the chance, for children of all abilities, to be active participants in their own learning.

Adult ideas of 'misuse' of resources can seriously reduce a child's access to their hands on learning. Even as experienced educators and parents our ideas about risk versus opportunity is very subjective and personal. It is usually linked to our own life experiences and our different abilities to perceive assess and respond to risk.

Once we are challenged by this conflict of risk versus opportunity, the outcome can be seen in the degree of willingness we each have to step outside our comfort zones, be flexible, intentional and responsive in our roles.

Ask yourself these questions ...

- Does the importance of my own ideas about how, where and when resources can be used outweigh risk to the child's interest and his/her sense of agency?
- Can I afford to hinder the teachable moment and those which will naturally emerge from it?
- Also, will a true sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcomes of his/her actions be discovered if we intervene to stop the 'misuse'?

For quality early learning environments and programs, how educators respond to this kind of questioning is paramount. It will make a direct and significant contribution to evidence that the EYLF principles are present and actively informing educators in their decisions. It will show how children are "encouraged to develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating" (DEEWR, 2009, p.35), Outcome 4, EYLF. It can clearly illustrate the intention with which adults join in children's play.

Aside from serious safety reasons, think about how often we stop or intervene in children's play because we feel uncomfortable about the outcomes.

Tips for parents and educators:

- Find ways to reduce adult interruptions in children's play.
- Try to see things from the child's perspective in terms of access to and use of resources for play.
- Remember that mess and creative use of objects and materials will lead to opportunities for intentional teaching.
- Teach concepts of respect, care and restoration of resources in a child-centred way.

As educators we lead by example, modelling how to approach tasks successfully, safely and with respect for our toys and resources. We might happily model how to wash hands, put together a puzzle, stack a pile of blocks or cut with scissors. But, when it comes to painting, for example, a question often emerges for us. 'By showing how I intend to paint this picture, am I undermining or devaluing the child's own attempts at painting?' This question comes from a misinterpretation of the intention of adult modelling and can create a barrier to exploration and learning for both the educator and child.

Modelling how to carefully use a watercolour palette and brush, for example, is sound intentional teaching practice as referred to in the EYLF document. It is not about teaching a child to affect a predetermined adult idea of a finished product.

By engaging with artistic mediums in front of children we can teach their value as a vehicle for expression. For example when we apply paint with a certain gesture, we indicate our mood. When we choose particular colours we also choose to express a feeling. This kind of adult engagement and shared discussion about it does not create risk of adult/child comparison. Instead it promotes interaction, questioning, wonder, exploration and the value of shared creative expression.

This value similarly applies to the use of musical instruments, the creation of song, dance, drama, the telling of stories and any other creative realms. A child needs to first observe others who are engaging with purpose and respect for the process, resources and mediums. Then he/she can relate and apply those expressions of value and respect within their own independent attempts.

Tips for parents and educators:

- When painting, focus more on experimentation and less on how to draw a recognisable picture.
- Be spontaneous in song, movement and dance.
- Explore and express sound and mood through music.
- Use more than digitally recorded music. Strum a guitar, play a piano, drum a rhythm. You don't need expertise to be able to use them effectively with children.

Individual expression through creative, artistic practice can foster inclusion in many ways. Firstly, and most obviously, because artistic expression cannot be right or wrong it provides a way for us to recognise the importance of individuality and being differently able.

In environments where uniqueness is truly appreciated, the importance of individual learning styles can be recognised, diversity is valued and therefore individualised education flourishes.

When children are free, as individuals, to express their intentions and interact creatively with a medium, their development of intrinsic motivation or will is strengthened. Where this wilfulness can be strengthened, a positive relationship to self directed learning can emerge. This leads to the development of expertise. All children have the right to this experience.

If we acknowledge creative arts as a vehicle for the emerging self (who the child is 'becoming') then how do we make sure every child has the support they need for full access to engage in creative/expressive experiences amongst their peers?

As parents, educators and intentional teachers, we discover many ways to help children to join in actively. We continue to learn practical new ways to promote diversity and support inclusion. We explore, learn and apply useful strategies for inclusion in our everyday practice.

We can also practise key word signing (previously known as Makaton) to support and promote meaningful discussion around an emerging visual arts experience. We can create inclusive resources and consistently use them. We can gain the knowledge to create Picture Exchange Communication Systems that will enable a child with hearing and/or speech difficulties to fully participate with his/her peers.

We can learn how to create and tailor a flexible set of Picture Communication Symbols to show a basic step by step process of using resources available to children. In doing so we recognise that this will help the child with planning difficulties to engage more autonomously.

Typically developing peers also benefit by following the sequence from left to right and interpreting the meaning of symbols (both key early literacy skills). This is just one of many ways that all children might benefit from the regular use of inclusive practice in their early learning environments.

Tips for parents and educators:

- Balance between expressive and receptive language aids. ie. ensure the child is given help in expressing themselves and in understanding what is being communicated.
- Include use of visuals within the children's environments which support and relate to more than the daily routines and tasks.
- Make sure some visuals can be used to aid communication about feelings, ideas, responses and creative concepts.
- Model key word signing which relates to descriptive, emotive and expressive concepts.



When expressive art experiences are well integrated with other areas of our inclusive programs, every child's ability to meaningfully express, discuss, reflect, participate and benefit from engagement in the creative arts, can be maximised. In order to achieve this we can do much. We can aim to make our current learning environments ready to include children of different abilities before they arrive in our care, creating cultures of inclusion.

We can share approaches to communication which will promote equity in quality of access, for all children, to the world of artistic expression and play. In doing so we will "continually strive to find equitable and effective ways to ensure that all children have opportunities to achieve learning outcomes" (DEEWR, 2009, p.13) Principle 3, EYLF.

For teams who work with young children, time and space to explore the creative arts together is important but too often, rare. When educators of young children participate in professional development to extend their own understandings and abilities in a wide range of expressive arts, it is likely that genuine respect for children's self expression will be realised and upheld.

In addition, this exposure to one another's creativity can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other. Team cohesion and emotional intelligence can be enhanced through this process and one might say a team which explores together, grows together.

Learning Links offers many workshops which address key areas of parenting and educational practice through informative, practical and reflective sessions. For example **Art, Expression, Inclusion** is an enjoyable hands-on workshop. Its focus is on linking artistic experiences and expressive opportunities with concepts of inclusive practice and the learning outcomes outlined in the EYLF document.

For further information about the Art, Expression, Inclusion workshop and others please visit the Learning Links website www.learninglinks.org.au

Reference

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR]. (2009). *BEING, BELONGING & BECOMING The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Canberra: DEEWR Publishing



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