

Collaborating with Children for Effective Programming

Self-Guided Learning Package

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About Self-Guided Learning Packages

Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email psc@gowrievictoria.org.au

Collaborating with Children for Effective Programming

You have chosen to complete the 'Collaborating with Children for Effective Programming' package. The aim of this package is for the learner to develop an understanding of the importance of collaborating with children for effective programming. It will also assist the learner to consider the value of collaboration and plan a range of strategies to collaborate with children in aspects of the program. The learner will also explore collaborative approaches to planning and reflect on ways to use these ideas in practice.

A high quality early childhood program involves the collaboration of children, families and educators in planning and developing meaningful learning experiences. When children actively contribute to the program, they are more likely to be engaged in play that responds to their interests, abilities and strengths. 'Authentic curriculum requires educators to find out about children's worlds. Strong and authentic partnerships between educators and families provide many opportunities for educators to find ways to connect to children's worlds and incorporate them into the early childhood curriculum. Children are then able to utilise their expertise and investigate their passions, resulting in authentic and dynamic curriculum opportunities' (Arthur et al, 2003, p9).

Collaboration with children means consulting with children in ways that are developmentally appropriate and meaningful to the child. It also requires adults to provide children with opportunities to express their views and be genuinely listened to by caring, responsive adults. Educators working in early childhood settings need to ensure they provide children with many opportunities to express their ideas and views in ways that are meaningful to children. This view enables children to be active participants in the planning of authentic and relevant curriculum.

Self Help Question 1

What does collaboration mean to you?

What is collaboration?

The Oxford Dictionary of English (2003) defines collaboration as: 'the action of working with someone to produce something' (p338).

Collaboration has also been described by a number of early childhood researchers to reflect the nature of meaningful work that is undertaken by children and adults or children and their peers.

Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena (2004) describe the following aspects as being vital to effective collaboration with children.

- Interactions and relationships have priority
- Diversity and individuality are honoured
- Children are viewed as partners.

Self Help Question 2

In what ways does the Early Years Learning Framework encourage us to collaborate with children?

What characterises genuine collaboration?

Stonehouse and Gonzalez-Mena (2004) suggest the following criteria are critical to genuine collaboration and partnerships:

- Mutual respect
- Trust
- Sensitivity to the other's perspective
- Ongoing, open communication
- Recognition and valuing of the unique contribution and strengths of the partner
- Shared decision making.

Self Help Question 3

Describe a situation in which you have collaborated with a child or another adult in your service.

The Early Years Learning Framework

The EYLF (2009, p11) refers to *pedagogy* as 'the holistic nature of early childhood educators' professional practice (especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships), curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning. When educators establish respectful and caring relationships with children and families, they are able to work together to construct curriculum and learning experiences relevant to children in their local context. These experiences gradually expand children's knowledge and understanding of the world'.

'Educators' professional judgments are central to their active role in facilitating children's learning. In making professional judgments, they weave together their:

- professional knowledge and skills
- knowledge of children, families and communities
- awareness of how their beliefs and values impact on children's learning
- personal styles and past experiences' (EYLF, 2009, p11).

'They also draw on their creativity, intuition and imagination to help them improvise and adjust their practice to suit the time, place and context of learning. Different theories about early childhood inform approaches to children's learning and development. Early childhood educators draw upon a range of perspectives in their work which may include:

- developmental theories that focus on describing and understanding the processes of change in children's learning and development over time
- socio-cultural theories that emphasise the central role that families and cultural groups play in children's learning and the importance of respectful relationships and provide insight into social and cultural contexts of learning and development
- socio-behaviourist theories that focus on the role of experiences in shaping children's behaviour
- critical theories that invite early childhood educators to challenge assumptions about curriculum, and consider how their decisions may affect children differently
- post-structuralist theories that offer insights into issues of power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings.

'Drawing on a range of perspectives and theories can challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, and encourage educators, as individuals and with colleagues, to:

- investigate why they act in the ways that they do
- discuss and debate theories to identify strengths and limitations
- recognise how the theories and beliefs that they use to make sense of their work enable but also limit their actions and thoughts
- consider the consequences of their actions for children's experiences
- find new ways of working fairly and justly' (EYLF, 2009, p11).

Collaborative approaches to planning for children

The following approaches reflect a range of current practices in early childhood education that are based on socio-cultural theory. This theory emphasises the importance of recognising the child in varied contexts and collaborating with the child, family and community to develop responsive early childhood programs. 'Socio-cultural perspectives suggest that children learn best when curriculum is connected to their everyday lives and interests. Effective programs are flexible and responsive to children's ideas...and enable children to engage in processes of exploration, investigation, problem-solving, and discovery in collaboration with others' (Arthur et al, 2003, p10).

Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach places particular emphasis on the image of the child, the environment, relationships and documentation. The curriculum is designed to support collaboration and flexible planning, and uses documentation as a way of facilitating and monitoring children's learning. The child is seen as capable and resourceful with the emerging skills and knowledge to discover and research their own surroundings. When the environment is rich and responsive, young children can make meaning of the world in collaboration with their peers, educators and families. 'The development of meaningful relationships both within and between groups of children, parents and teachers' (Millikan, 2003, p34) is central to the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia.

The Reggio Emilia approach also offers families and the community meaningful ways to participate in their child's learning and redefines the role of the [educator]. 'The children's learning is shared in reciprocal connections...to form a 'mutual community of learners' amongst all protagonists' (Fraser and Gestwicki, 2002, p45).

The role of the educator is therefore to facilitate and support children's learning and to work with children in making sense of the world around them. The diverse range of meaningful methods used to observe and document children's learning are an integral part of the Reggio Emilia approach and have influenced the

work of many educators in redefining the way they plan children's programs. Documentation in the Reggio Emilia program includes written observations, conversations, photos, video and audio recordings, portfolios, diaries and samples of children's work. It serves to capture everyday experiences, children's understandings, project work and most importantly, what is significant and meaningful to the children, families and educators within the community. It is a collaborative process with children and families actively involved in determining, interpreting and discussing what is to be documented.

Emergent Curriculum (Jones and Nimmo)

Emergent curriculum focuses on the spontaneous and incidental curriculum that evolves as children's interests are explored. It is also based on negotiation and collaboration with educators and families. 'There is a strong emphasis on communities of learners as children, families, communities and educators investigate, explore, create and learn collaboratively' (Arthur et al, 2005, p175).

In this approach, the sources for curriculum planning include the following:

- children's interests
- educator's interests
- developmental tasks
- things in the physical environment
- people in the social environment
- curriculum resource materials that can be adapted
- the serendipity of unexpected events that spark children's interest
- the conflict resolution, care giving and routines associated with living together
- the values held in the school and community, families and culture' (Jones and Nimmo, 1994, p127).

In this approach, children's interests, ideas and questions are valued through engaging experiences that have real connections to their everyday lives. This enables children to explore and react to people, places and things in meaningful ways.

Educators can support children's learning by using the following strategies:

- 'noticing what children are doing and what is happening in the early childhood and local community
- inviting children to become engaged in investigation through experiences, excursions and books
- responding to children's interests and ideas
- provisioning materials in collaboration with children and families to encourage investigation and representation
- connecting past explorations to new learning and considering opportunities for future connections
- conferring with children about what is happening, what they have learned and what they would like to do next
- reflecting on children's learning and their own learning and teaching practices' (Arthur et al, 2005, p175-176).

An emergent curriculum still requires purposeful planning, it is much more than simply letting the children use the materials and experiences that they want to.

The Project Approach (Katz)

The 'project approach' developed by Katz in the United States has a similar approach to early childhood education as the work of Reggio Emilia. Project work is defined as an 'in depth study of a particular topic. The key feature of a project is that it is an investigation – a piece of research that involves children in

seeking answers to questions they have formulated by themselves or in cooperation with their teacher or peers' (Katz and Chard, 2000, p2). The project approach emphasises four types of learning:

- knowledge – information, concepts, relations and meanings
- skills – basic academic skills such as literacy and numeracy, scientific and technical skills, social skills and personal relationships
- dispositions – habits of mind such as curiosity, approaches to work such as persistence
- preferences (cooperative or solitary learning) and feelings (competence).

The project approach promotes children's active participation in the planning, development and assessment of their own work as they explore selected aspects of their experience and environment. This view reinforces the belief that children's learning experiences are enhanced when they are co-constructors of their own learning. (Katz and Chard, 2000)

The role of the educator is to support children's interests as they emerge and become increasingly more complex. However, it is the child that is 'encouraged to take initiative and responsibility for the work that is undertaken' (Katz and Chard, 2000, p4). The curriculum is not determined by what children need for the next stage, i.e. school but rather, what is meaningful at the time of the experience. Family involvement is also an important part of the project approach, enabling children, families and educators to share what is meaningful and important in the child's life.

Self Help Question 4

What is the value of collaborating with children? List the benefits you consider valuable for children and educators.

Consulting with children

'Responsive learning relationships are strengthened as educators and children learn together and share decisions, respect and trust' (EYLF, 2009, p15).

Consulting with children, sharing information and listening to each other's cues and perspectives has a strong and long lasting influence on children's sense of belonging and sense of self.

Educators working with infants need to be sensitive to their non-verbal cues and respond to their needs through nurturing interactions and environments. As children become more physically active and begin to use verbal language to communicate, educators need to be responsive to their actions and emerging language. By using collaborative interactions, educators can extend on the interests of toddlers and plan experiences that build on their interests and emerging abilities. As preschool children can express themselves more easily, educators need to consult them on a wider range of issues and provide materials that enable them to express themselves in many different ways. Experiences that encourage self expression and conversations between children and adults are critical to working collaboratively with children.

'Children actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others' learning. They recognize their agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning. Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities. Educators' practices and the relationships they form with children and families have a significant effect on children's involvement and success in learning. Children thrive when families and educators work together in partnership to support young children's learning' (EYLF, 2009, p9).

To genuinely engage children in making choices it is essential that educators are prepared to share their power with children, and trust that children are competent decision-makers.

Involving children in decision-making entails educators recognising that all children, including babies and toddlers, have the right and ability to make choices about their daily experiences and activities. To effectively facilitate children's decision-making, the experiences, routines and physical environment need to be arranged so that children have many real opportunities to make choices about what they do and when they will do it.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has two articles that relate to children having opportunities to freely express themselves. Article 12 discusses children's right to express their views regarding matters that directly affect them and Article 13 focuses on their right to freedom of expression in ways that are relevant to them. ***Read and reflect on these articles as to how this is demonstrated in your practice.***

Self Help Question 5

How do you consult with children in your care about issues that directly affect them?

Strategies for working collaboratively with children

- Enable children to participate and collaborate in everyday routines, events and experiences and have opportunities to contribute their ideas to decisions which affect them (EYLF, 2009).
- 'Recognise and value children's involvement in learning' (EYLF, 2009, p34).
- 'Respond to children's displays of learning dispositions by commenting on them and providing encouragement and additional ideas' (EYLF, 2009, p34).
- 'Listen carefully to children's ideas and discuss with them how these ideas might be developed' (EYLF, 2009, p34).
- 'Provide opportunities for children to revisit their ideas and extend their thinking' (EYLF, 2009, p34).
- 'Reflect with children on what and how they have learned' (EYLF, 2009, p34).
- 'Encourage children to make their ideas and theories visible to others' (EYLF, 2009, p34).
- Establish dialogues between families, educators and children to include the voices of children and families in the processes of documentation and decision making;
- Provide opportunities for children to investigate, create, reflect on and share ideas with others;

- Provide experiences, projects and learning centres that involve in-depth investigations of children’s questions and ideas, and promote links to families and communities;
- Plan for large blocks of time and a range of resources that enable children to pursue their interests, investigate ideas, to construct understandings and represent their thinking;
- Provide opportunities for small group experiences that promote peer and adult-child conversations and the co-construction of knowledge and understandings; and
- Document children’s learning that celebrates their competencies, which focuses on the processes children engage in, and that provides opportunities for educators, families and children to participate in and reflect on children’s learning and to plan for further extensions of strengths and interests.

Educators working with young children can use all aspects of the program to collaborate with children. Other ideas include the following:

- Have daily ‘sharing circles’ for children to voice their ideas and concerns
- Conduct group meetings about issues that directly affect the children
- Involve children in designing and setting up the environment
- Encourage children to create their own play spaces
- Provide learning opportunities that are open – ended and flexible
- Invite children to choose materials and equipment
- Encourage children to initiate their own play and determine how resources are used
- Allow children to make choices about who they will interact with and for how long
- Use informal routines to respond to children needs and cues, and create opportunities for small group interactions
- Invite children to consider ways of making routines more effective
- Involve children in determining limits and consequences
- Involve children in solving problems that affect the program
- Encourage children to be responsible for their own learning
- Initiate projects that stimulate children’s interests
- Introduce new ideas and concepts to extend children’s interests and abilities

When programs are relevant and authentic, they are more likely to support children’s learning. A relevant program captures the unique aspects that make each child, family, community and therefore each early childhood setting, different. Relevant learning experiences are also based on children’s interests or are offered to children in ways that will make sense to them and capture their interest. Authentic experiences are linked to children’s contexts, including what happens within the early childhood setting as well as what occurs in family life and the community. These connections will ensure that the program reflects a collaborative approach to care and education.

Self Help Question 6

List strategies you use to collaborate with children in your program

Collaborative conversations

Collaborative conversations with children enable educators to gain insight into children's knowledge and interests. These understandings can assist educators in planning experiences and providing materials that expand children's thinking and interests.

Current socio-cultural theories emphasise the importance of social and cultural factors in children's learning. The role of the educator is therefore critical in establishing relationships that enable children to construct and co-construct their understandings of the world.

The daily interactions that occur between educators and children in an early childhood setting provide many planned and spontaneous opportunities for learning.

Intentional Teaching: Intentional teaching is deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful. Educators who engage in intentional teaching recognise that learning occurs in social contexts and that interaction and conversations are vitally important for learning. They actively promote children's learning through worthwhile and challenging experiences and interactions that foster high level skills. They use strategies such as:

- modelling and demonstrating
- open questioning
- speculating
- explaining
- engaging in shared thinking and problem solving to extend children's thinking and learning (EYLF, 2009)

When these strategies are used to facilitate discussion and shared dialogues, children are able to begin using these techniques in the conversations they initiate with others. These techniques also encourage children to develop the cognitive processes of thinking, creating, problem solving, analysing, remembering, categorising and symbolising in their everyday interactions and play.

Self Help Question 7

Describe two situations when you have been 'intentional' and have been able to engage children in collaborative dialogue

Collaborative documentation

Documentation and planning are an important part of working with young children. In order to effectively meet their needs, educators need to consider practical and meaningful ways to document what they notice and how they can share this information with children and families. When documentation is a shared experience between children, families and educators, it has many benefits for all.

'Educators use a variety of strategies to collect, document, organize, synthesize and interpret the information that they gather to assess children's learning. They search for appropriate ways to collect rich and meaningful information that depicts children's learning in context, describes their progress and identifies their strengths, skills and understandings' (EYLF, 2009, p17). 'Assessment for children's learning refers to the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning' (EYLF, 2009, p17).

'More recent approaches to assessment also examine the learning strategies that children use and reflect ways in which learning is co-constructed through interactions between the educator and each child. Used effectively, these approaches to assessment become powerful ways to make the process of learning visible to children and their families, educators and other professionals' (EYLF, 2009, p17).

'It is important because it enables educators in partnership with families, children and other professionals to:

- plan effectively for children's current and future learning
- communicate about children's learning and progress
- determine the extent to which all children are progressing toward realising learning outcomes and if not, what might be impeding their progress
- identify children who may need additional support in order to achieve particular learning outcomes, providing that support or assisting families to access specialist help
- evaluate the effectiveness of learning opportunities, environments and experiences offered and the approaches taken to enable children's learning' (EYLF, 2009, p17).

The following strategies can be used to enable children to be active participants in the documentation process.

- Encourage children to decide how they want their interests and investigations documented
- Provide children with a range of materials to document their learning in different ways
- Encourage children to bring meaningful items from home to add to the documentation
- Encourage families to contribute to children's documentation

- Encourage children to reflect on individual and group documentation

The following methods of documentation provide an extensive range of techniques that educators, children and families can use to document and share children’s learning.

- **Narratives:** running records, anecdotes, learning stories, jottings, diary, journal, educator’s self reflections, children’s self reflections, parent reflections
- **Samples:** work, artefacts, time samples, event samples
- **Language Transcripts:** word lists, transcripts of conversations, interviews, transcripts of reading, retelling and creating narrative texts, jointly constructed texts, webs, maps
- **Visual Representations:** photographs, diagrams, sketches, video / audio recordings, visual diaries, checklists

Self Help Question 8

Provide three examples of how children are currently involved in documenting their learning

Conclusion

When children are active participants in their learning, they are more likely to gain new understandings about the world around them. Educators need to consider ways of collaborating with children to provide meaningful programs that are relevant and engaging. This can be achieved when educators *‘develop content that builds from what children know, honours their cultural experience and knowledge and extends children’s capacity to be active in their own learning. In this approach, curriculum is not ‘unplanned’. Instead, the educator seeks to ground curriculum in children’s lived experiences, interests and concerns and to reflect on the consequences – for themselves and for the children’* (MacNaughton and Williams, 2003, p197).

Working collaboratively with children needs to become part of our everyday interactions and conversations with infants, toddlers and preschoolers. This enables educators to develop trusting relationships with young children and engage them in meaningful ways. It also encourages children to develop their own style of collaborative communication with others and actively learn about the world around them.

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Assessment Task

1. Describe what you think collaboration means in the children's services setting
2. List three key aspects of a collaborative approach to planning programs for children.
3. Describe five ways of collaborating with children for effective programming
4. Describe five benefits of collaborating with children for effective programming
5. Document a conversation you have recently had with an individual or group of children (please attach). Reflect on the conversation and consider your ability to collaborate with children by answering the following questions
 - a) List three ways you encouraged or could have encouraged the child/ren to offer their own opinions and ideas? Describe the language and/or strategies that were used or could have been used.
 - b) Describe how you responded or could have responded to and followed up on the children's ideas and suggestions?
 - c) How did the child/ren lead and influence the conversation? List ways you supported or could have supported this?
 - d) What do you think the child/ren learnt from the interaction?
 - e) List three things you learnt about the children's interests from this interaction?
 - f) Suggest five ways you could improve your interactions with children to foster collaboration in the future?

Questions taken and adapted from: Hutchins (1999, p.8)