



# Supporting Vulnerable Families

## Self-Guided Learning Package

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## About Self-Guided Learning Packages

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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 [pvc@gowrievictoria.org.au](mailto:pvc@gowrievictoria.org.au)

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## Supporting vulnerable families

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You have chosen to complete the 'Supporting vulnerable families' package. The aim of this package is to provide you with an opportunity to consider new and different strategies which you can incorporate into your program to ensure that it meets the needs of vulnerable children and their families who are attending your service.

### Introduction

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#### What is a vulnerable family?

All families who use children's services bring with them a wide range of experiences, values, beliefs and needs. It is the responsibility of children's services' educators to ensure that the programs that they provide are able to meet the needs of these families. While most families are able to function as a unit and provide strong supportive and nurturing relationships for children, there are some families who may experience events or stresses which may cause these relationships to deteriorate. These families may become vulnerable.

The Oxford Dictionary defines vulnerable as 'able to be hurt or injured; exposed to danger or criticism' (Australian Oxford Dictionary, 2004). It is these vulnerable families who require intensive support from children's services educators to ensure that their needs are met.

#### What makes a family vulnerable?

There are many situations which may cause families to become vulnerable. These situations may be brief, depending on the ability of families to deal with and recover from these stresses or they may be ongoing. Factors which can cause families to become vulnerable include:

- Divorce/separation
- Poverty
- Substance abuse
- Illness (physical and mental)
- Homelessness
- Physical and emotional abuse
- Migration and visa status e. g. Asylum seekers, Refugees and Visa holders

When services are able to meet the needs of vulnerable families:

- There is a harmonious atmosphere
- Children appear calm and relaxed
- Family members and educators are able to talk openly about any issues of concern
- Educators feel confident to be able to refer families on to support services
- Programs for children are flexible and responsive
- Time is set aside for discussion by educators about the ability of the service to meet the needs of vulnerable families
- Information is provided about support available to families in the local community

#### Effective programs for vulnerable families and children



## **Developing strategies to support vulnerable children and their families**

*'When educators create environments in which children experience mutually enjoyable, caring and respectful relationships with people and the environment, children respond accordingly' (EYLF, 2009, p. 25).*

In order for the child to be psychologically and physically healthy, they need:

- safety
- a warm, caring acceptance and permanent relationship with at least one adult.
- to be a part of a family in which relationships enable the child to develop a wholesome personality and sense of self.
- to be a part of a community which supports the child's development as a member of society.

Children's services' educators can play an important role in ensuring their services are able to foster and nurture the development of resilient children by focusing on supporting the above areas.

### **Safety**

- Provide consistent clear limits for children which are communicated in a sensitive manner
- Ensure there is a sense of predictability about the day and expectations of the children
- Provide opportunities for children to be able to take risks and experiment with the environment without the fear of being ridiculed or disciplined

### **Permanent relationship with at least one adult**

- Ensure that there is a regular educator working with the child
- Ensure that educators actively form strong trusting relationships with the children
- Ensure family members are supported in their parenting role through referral to relevant support services
- Ensure programs for children are developed in recognition of the ability of children to develop strong relationships with their peers and with educators

### **To be part of a family that supports the development of a strong sense of self**

- Provide family members with information about children's development
- Encourage the ability of family members to be positive through positive reinforcement
- Role model positive child/adult interactions

### **To be a part of a community that supports the child's development as a member of society**

- Ensure that activities that are provided are developmentally appropriate and based on an approved Learning Framework
- Empower children to be able to communicate their wants and needs

**Self Help Question 2**

Which aspects of your program currently support vulnerable children and their families?

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Why do you think they work?

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Which parts of your program do you think need to improve in order to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families?

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Why do you think they need to improve?

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**Developing flexible programs**

The development of flexible programs, with clear and consistent expectations, is intrinsic in the ability of services to support vulnerable families. Families who are vulnerable may often have additional needs that services may not have previously had to consider. This flexibility will ensure that educators are able to meet the varying needs of family members. Flexibility in program provision needs to occur in all aspects of the program, from routine and transition times, to the availability of educators to meet with family members.

Take this checklist to work with you. As you progress through the week tick any of the following that you achieve.

- I asked the children to choose some activities from the store room
- I thanked the children for their help
- I tried to minimise the amount of time that I spent cleaning and tidying by involving the children in this task
- I offered alternatives for children who did not wish to sleep or eat
- I communicated transition times to the children individually rather than moving the children as a group
- I allowed the children to finish their tasks before they had to pack away.
- I ensured that I was available to chat to all of the family members at either the beginning or the end of the day

If you managed to achieve any of these items during the week, then you probably your experience and the children's experience more enjoyable and rewarding.

### **Family member participation**

*'Learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families' (EYLF, 2009, p. 12).*

Consultation with family members about what they actually want and need from the service is crucial. This consultation can occur both formally through the use of surveys, interviews and orientation processes, and informally during spontaneous conversations. Family members who are actively involved in the service usually feel more comfortable to access support from educators, they are more able to talk to educators about their needs and concerns than those family members who do not participate in the service.

*'In genuine partnerships, families and early childhood educators:*

- *Value each other's knowledge of each child*
- *Value each others' contributions to and roles in each child's life*
- *Trust each other*
- *Communicate freely and respectfully with each other*
- *Share insights and perspectives about each child*
- *Engage in shared decision making' (EYLF, 2009, p. 12).*

Developing a positive relationship with family members by providing a warm welcoming environment provides educators with the ability to work jointly with family members to develop strategies to support the child, ensuring that children receive clear and consistent messages from both the home and child care environments.

It is important to value every contribution from every member of a child's family, without making judgements about the particular contribution, nor comparing contributions between different individuals and families. This is part of respecting the diversity of the families who use your service. For example, one family member might only sign their name on the communication book, however this may be all they are capable of doing at that time, for any number of reasons. By welcoming and showing appreciation for any and all contributions, educators can encourage further contributions from that person and family, thereby assisting in developing a trusting and open partnership between the educator and the family.

**Self Help Question 1**

Write a list of methods that you could utilise to involve family members in the program

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**Case Study**

Julie has recently enrolled her 4 year old daughter Shai in the local children’s service. Julie seems quite jumpy and anxious and tells the educator that she has had to move lots of times and that Shai does not have contact with her father. During Shai’s first week at the centre, she is extremely aggressive with the other children and the educator. She grabs toys, pushes children away from her, pulls other children's hair and verbally lashes out at the educator and children. As the educator begins to talk to Julie about Shai's actions, Julie bursts into tears and tells them that she cannot cope with Shai, that she does not know what to do with her.

What sorts of strategies would you implement to guide Shai’s behaviour?

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What sorts of experiences and activities would you provide in your program to support Shai?

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What sorts of strategies would you implement to support Julie?

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## Reflection - Review and Develop Your Own Work Performance

*'Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice. Its intention is to gather information and gain insights that support, inform and enrich decision making about children's learning. As professionals, early childhood educators examine what happens in their settings and reflect on what they might change' (EYLF, 2009, p. 12).*

It is important that educators recognise and acknowledge the extra challenges that meeting the needs of vulnerable families can involve. Understanding and recognising your own limits in terms of knowledge, skills and emotional stress enables educators to develop strategies and seek out support when required.

By looking at your own work performance, you take an honest look at the areas in which you may need to access support and information to be able to support vulnerable children and their families in a professional manner.

### Setting Personal Goals

Goals are very useful, but sometimes difficult to achieve. Your first priority is to set achievable goals. Start simple. Make a concerted effort to:

- Ensure that you make time to chat with family members at the beginning and the end of the day
- Talk to your coordinator or fellow educator about how you are coping with stressful situations
- Gather and display as much information that you can about relevant support services in your local community

### Self Help Question 4

List some of the things that indicate to you that you are stressed

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Reflect on a time a vulnerable family and their child was not supported as well as they could have been by your children's service

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What do you think was the reason they not supported as well as they could have been? (i. e. stress, lack of time, frustration, educator’s lack of confidence, lack of relevant information)

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On reflection: what steps could have been taken to better meet the family’s needs?

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It is important to continue to review and develop your program. By recognising the stressful and challenging times during the day and developing strategies to address these you can continuously improve your program.

### **High expectations**

*‘Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children’ (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10).*

*‘Early childhood educators who are committed to equity believe in all children’s capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities. Children progress well when they, their parents and educators hold high expectations for their achievement in learning’ (EYLF, 2009, p. 12).*

It is important when educators are thinking about making changes to their programs and the types of support that children and families may require, they focus on the positive things children and their families bring to the service. All children are extremely rich in potential. With encouragement, guidance and support they can move from becoming vulnerable to becoming strong resilient individuals. It is the role of children’s services educators to nurture and encourage this potential within all children and to empower families to be able to develop cohesive and supportive relationships. Therefore any changes that are implemented should begin from the premise that all children are strong and competent, that they all have the ability to overcome whatever issues surround them and that it is the role of educators to provide programs which enable them to do this.

**Self Help Question 5**

Focus on one particular aspect of your program and consider what small changes could be made to encourage children to reach their full potential

What aspect did you choose and why?

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What small changes could be made to encourage children to reach their full potential?

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What do you think may be the outcome for the children/families in the service?

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**Conclusion**

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Supporting vulnerable families involves knowledge and reflection on the part of the educator and service. It can be challenging to work with families who are experiencing vulnerability; however children deserve the opportunities which come through positive interactions and partnerships between educators and families.

Educators must develop knowledge of the support services available in the local community and to provide information openly, as well as referral when needed, as this assists families to access the services. Different family members will interact with the service in a variety of ways and it is important to value the diversity each family and child brings to the service. You need to consider new and different strategies which you can incorporate into your program to ensure that it meets the needs of vulnerable children and their families who are attending your service.

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## Assessment Task

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1. List at least three circumstances that may make a child or family vulnerable?
2. List at least three ways in which the program, activities and environment that you provide meets the needs of vulnerable children and their families.
3. List at least three ways in which educators work to build positive relationships with family members.
4. Suggest three different or additional things you could consider to enhance the service to meet the individual needs of the children and families
5. Explain why you feel your suggestions could benefit the children and their families.
6. Research some of the services in your area that educators or families could access for additional information or support. List at least five services, including contact details, information about the services they provide and any restrictions or qualifications for using their services.