



## National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



# Evaluating and communicating about children's learning



## Setting the scene

E-Newsletters 39 and 40 discussed two different ways to assess children's learning—formative assessment, which is about the different ways we assess children's learning every day; and summative assessment, which is how we summarise a child's learning at certain points in time across a year or at the end of a year. This e-Newsletter builds on the information and examples provided in those two e-Newsletters.

The *Guide to the National Quality Standard* stresses the importance of educators communicating about learning with children, families and others:

'The frameworks are designed to inspire conversations, improve communication and provide a common language about young children's learning among young children themselves, with their families and the broader community, with educators and with other professionals' (*Guide to the National Quality Standard*, p. 21, EYLF p. 8, *Framework for School Age Care*, p. 6).

The *Guide to the NQS* describes communication as two way process between educators and families. In this 'exchange of information' about a child, educators regularly share meaningful documentation about children's learning in different ways with families at mutually convenient times. In turn, educators listen and learn from families about their views and insights relating to children's learning (*Guide to the NQS*, p. 32).

## What can we communicate about children's learning?

### Holistic and integrated perspectives

While there are five Learning Outcomes in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), children's learning is holistic and integrated. It is not always possible to separate children's learning into different domains or to link it to a single learning outcome. When we communicate with others about a child's learning, it is important to convey the holistic nature of learning. For example, when we observe a child playing with other children in the sandpit, our evaluation of the learning might show that the child is learning how to make friends, solve problems, use his imagination and to express his ideas verbally as well as learning physical skills. Describing and communicating the complex, integrated nature of the child's learning in this play-based experience to colleagues and families leads to deeper understandings.

### Child's interests and strengths

Our judgements about children's learning now focus on children's interests and strengths. In the past, educators often focused on what children couldn't do, rather on what they could do or say or know. If we observed an older toddler painting we may have interpreted 'a developmental deficit' under the physical domain—for example, he wasn't holding the paintbrush with the correct grip. Our planning for this child would have aimed at helping him to use the correct grip through activities to improve his hand-finger strength, flexibility and fine motor skills. By focusing our evaluation on one domain of development, we missed

what the child was learning and what he could do. Using the EYLF, educators evaluating and communicating this learning experience to others, might now recognise the child's creative skills as a painter and his intense engagement and interest in making marks with the paint. The 'what next' planning stage for this child would focus on what he can do and supporting his emerging interest in mark making rather than on a perceived developmental deficit.

## Meaningful learning

Educators can't possibly document, analyse, evaluate and communicate every bit of learning for every child. So the question to ask ourselves is—'Is this important or meaningful learning for this child?' What is important to document and evaluate for one child, may not be so important for another.

Meaningful or important learning might include:

- a child doing or saying something for the first time, such as answering a question in a small group discussion about a story, or when a child begins to feed herself
- a child's mastering of a skill, such as jumping or skipping or riding a bike after weeks of practising
- a child demonstrating evidence of dispositions or attitudes of mind that promote ongoing learning. In the above example, a child's capacity to persist in learning to ride a bike is a valuable learning disposition which we want to encourage for every child
- a child telling or showing you by their words and/or behaviour that they are deeply engaged and that this is important learning for them
- a child demonstrating higher order thinking. For example, being able to work with others to solve a problem when building a complex block construction is a higher order form of learning than knowing the colours of the blocks. Parrots have been taught to recognise colours and shapes for example, but they haven't been able to learn how to show empathy to others, be inclusive in their play, create new words, or imagine fantasy worlds (I say that with all due respect to parrots which are smart birds I'm sure!)
- a child demonstrating learning which shows that body, mind and spirit are all actively engaged. A baby focusing, watching, and hitting the mobile above her head and kicking her legs as she squeals in delight is using her body (legs, arms, hands, eyes) and mind (working out how to focus on the object). Her obvious enjoyment indicates a deep sense of wellbeing (spirit).



## Who do we communicate children's learning with?

The NQS and the EYLF state that educators need to communicate or talk about learning with children, families, each other and sometimes with other professionals, such as an early intervention specialist who works with a child.

Quality Area 6: Collaborative partnerships with families and communities in the *Guide to the National Quality Standard*, talks about 'communication, consultation and collaboration' (*Guide to the NQS*, p. 145).

The following practice example shows how one service shows respect for families' expertise in relation to their children and their right to share decision making with educators in planning for and supporting children's learning and development.





## Practice example 1

At CPS Child and Family centre in Heidelberg West Victoria, educators meet with each family every 12 weeks to talk about children's learning and development and to develop shared learning goals or intentions for each child. Both educators and families talk about how they might support the achievement of particular goals or learning intentions. Notes are kept at these meetings as a record of the discussion and to guide educators' planning decisions for each child. At the next meeting, intentions and progress are discussed with the family. This system is an example of tracking children's progress as learners over time and communicating children's learning with families. It also meets the principle of working in partnership with families to support their child's learning and development.

In Quality Area 5: Relationships with children, it is expected that children are 'able to engage with educators in meaningful, open interactions' that support their learning from and with others (*Guide to the NQS*, p. 123). The following example illustrates this requirement in action.

## Practice example 2

At East Brunswick Kindergarten and Child Care centre, educators talk with children as part of daily conversations about what they are doing and what is happening. These conversations often relate to ideas or interests that the children have as well as issues that arise during the day. In communicating with children each day about their learning, the educators in this centre send children a message that they respect them as capable, confident communicators who know about many things, are interested in learning more about their world, and are keen to contribute to working through issues collaboratively.



## How do we communicate children's learning?

Communicating children's learning is undertaken in different ways for different purposes. Informal learning conversations with children occur across the day, at routine times as well as during planned experiences. These conversations can be with individuals as well as with groups of children. Talking about learning can involve asking questions such as:

- What did you learn when you were doing that?
- How did you learn that?
- Who helped you to learn or to do or know that?
- What might you do differently next time?

Asking these types of questions helps children to think about their learning more deeply (meta-cognition). Educators working with older children can set aside time each day to talk as a group about the

learning that has happened that day and what helped or hindered their learning and what else they want to learn about.

Informal conversations with families occur each day at arrival or pick up times. Typically, these conversations focus on routine matters, such as how much the child ate or whether they slept or rested. Since the introduction of the EYLF and the NQS, many educators are reframing these conversations to focus on the child as a learner across the day. For example, an educator might answer the parent's question about the child's food intake, by saying something like—'Yes, Michael ate well today and he is learning to feed himself with a spoon.' or 'We have noticed that Kiah is learning to regulate the amount of food she can eat when she serves herself.' These conversations with families about learning encourage more shared understandings and partnerships. For example, Michael's mum says, 'Oh, yes we have been encouraging him to use a spoon at home too!' and Kiah's parent says, 'Maybe we could try that at home instead of putting the food on the plate for her.'

## Talking at transitions

More formal communication about children's learning and development occurs when children are in transition, including when they move between rooms to be with a different age group or on to full-time school or another early learning setting. Transition times can be stressful for children and families because of the changes involved, such as developing relationships with new educators and children or learning different routines. Sharing information helps to ensure a smoother transition for children and families.

Transition information should focus on children's interests, strengths and identified needs such as a child's dietary needs, or the need for providing a child with adult support when they are participating in group experiences. Older children and families can contribute to the information that will be communicated to others during transition times. In Victoria, for example, a summative evaluation called a Transition Learning and Development Statement is prepared, with families' approval, for every child moving from Kindergarten to school. Families, children and educators contribute to the Statement. Preparatory teachers in the school are expected to use this information to guide their curriculum decision making and to facilitate children's smooth transition into school. Prep teachers have explained, for example, that they use the Transition Statements to find out what children enjoy doing so that they can provide similar experiences in their orientation program. This helps the children to feel safe and secure in the new setting.

E-Newsletters 39 and 40 provide additional examples of how to communicate children's learning with children, families and others including using portfolios, and summary statements of a child's learning across the five Learning Outcomes at the end of semester or end of the year.

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## References

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### Biography

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### Coordinating Editor

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.



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