

**Early Childhood Australia Biennial Conference Canberra 3-6 October 2008**  
**Paper – Look at me and all that surrounds me.**

**1/ Introduction....**

This paper will focus on the importance of the social and emotional wellbeing of children in a socio-cultural context. It will explore the relationships between children, early childhood educators, families, and the community. Engaging with the personal identities of children and their family living experiences contributes to a child's sense of self and belonging. A child-centered approach acknowledges children's personality, individuality and cultural background; empowering them to develop a sense of ownership in their environment and community.

The socio cultural context of the child relates to adult interactions within the child's environments; the home, community and early child care settings. Recent research underscores the importance of the early childhood years as an imperative period for the development of a child's future mental health and self-esteem. It's been known for more than 100 years that a child's emotional well being strongly influences his/her interpersonal relationships, behaviour, and learning.

*“For success, satisfaction and happiness in life a positive self concept can be seen as important. People who like themselves, have confidence in their abilities are more likely to approach life with an open mind therefore unlock many doors. These people are more likely to take criticism without falling into a heap, take risks when attempting new skills and facing new situations; will be able to challenge others views and resolve problems in new and innovative ways.*

*(Dianne Nixon & Katy Gould, Extending child development 5-12 years 2003)*

Vygotsky's socio cultural theory for children highlights the need for children to engage through adult interaction and learning from a cultural perspective in addition to becoming a central part of the community.

Should we be questioning how we support the social and emotional wellbeing of children...?

“Should educator's practices reflect a child-centered approach to learning to cater for children's individual strengths and care needs?”

“Should the educator be directive in their approach to engaging children?”

We propose the key link is both, with the educator being a support to learning with a directive approach showing a commitment to interacting and learning with the child. Educators must interact openly with the child, engaging in conversations, focusing on extending learning through their questions. Children propose the questions for educator's and families to answer. This reflective child centered approach increases their sense of self, empowering them with the ability to be apart of their own learning. Secondly, it is by developing collaborative supportive relationships with families. The philosophy and principles of educators should be focused on the importance of working closely with families on behalf of the child.

*“Practitioners have ultimate responsibility to do the planning, but they do it in collaboration with children and families. We think the best programs for children happen when practitioners get their ideas not only from their own expertise and experience but also from children's interests expressed and observed, parents ideas, and events and issues in the community”*

*(Anne Stonehouse & Janet Gonzalez-Mena, Making Links 2004)*

## 2/ collaborating holistically with families...

Building bridges between educators and families on behalf of the child is the heart of quality care. The family is the most significant influence on the child's well being. They have the "complete picture" of the whole child; the child's identity, strengths, needs, interests and cultural background. Developing a trusting relationship with a child means collaborating effectively with the family. Establishing a relationship of trust, respect, sensitivity and open communication shows educators value the family's individual input. It is this connection between the family home and the care service that is imperative for a child to develop trust, security and a strong sense of self while in care.

How do educators develop relationships with families, involving them in the decision making for their child?

Involving families goes beyond sharing daily events and programs. We must truly want to know the families ideas and concerns and be dedicated to putting them into practice. Sharing and learning from families talents and resources deepens a child's experience in care and enriches a parent's feelings of contributing to their child's developmental years. Our underpinning statements from Early Childhood Code of Ethics guide our practices and our attitudes towards making families the integral link in understand their child.

*II. In relation to families I will:*

*3. Develop positive relationships based on mutual trust and open communication*

*4. Develop partnerships with families and engage in shared decision making is appropriate*

*5. Acknowledge the rights of families to make shared decisions about children*

*6. Respect the uniqueness of each family and strive to learn about their cultural, structure, life style, customs, language, beliefs and kinship systems*

*Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (2006)*

Principles, practices and guidelines must not be all that underpin our practices with families. Educators need to have a commitment to valuing families and understand the qualities they can bring to the child care setting. In the same context, the child must also be valued for their involvement in their learning

### 3/ engaging in reflective conversations with children...

Children's environmental experiences are the memories they carry with them throughout their journey into adulthood. Early childhood educators need to consider children's choices and engage in their thoughts and ideas.

*When children are confident that they will be well looked after they tend to explore their environment more, persist with solving problems and be interested in learning. As a result their thinking and social skills are enhanced and they are more likely as adults to be comfortable with intimate relationships.*

Peterson, 1996

Empowering children to become actively involved in their learning outcomes helps to shape strong and capable learners. A reflective approach encourages educators to ask questions from a child's perspective. What do you think children would ask for to feel safe and secure in their environments while in care? Consider: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1986), he stated that a child's basic human needs revolved around food, security, esteem and belonging. If we asked a child what they might need to feel happy, content and protected in their environment, would they say their friends to laugh and smile with, the sandpit to explore and investigate in or would they need their carer for cuddles of comfort.

When educators have questioning minds, we are more objective to a child's view. Learning together with children creates a wholesome learning environment. Educators must bring themselves into the child's learning environment and focus on building relationships of inquiry in their day. Remember curriculum is everything that happens in your time with children. Your keen eyes and ears must tune into seeking the child's point of view, extending conversations, and engaging holistically into their learning. Scaffold a world of learning for children by asking reflective questions giving children the chance to respond to you about what they want to learn. In essence, what we are saying is that educators need to dig deeper to learn with children.

*"What if we were to assume that children came to school more rather than less, able to communicate their thinking about the world? Why not assume that when the child enters school, he or she presents us with enormous number of innate tools to acquire knowledge. What effect might this assumption have on our approach to what the languages of learning are?"*

Karen Gallas, 1994

As Gallas speaks, "the languages of learning" she highlights the importance of looking at children as capable learners. She reminds us that children's expression of knowledge and tools for learning should not be reduced to adult agenda's and narrow academic outcomes. Teaching with respect for children's competencies requires us to engage our mind with the child's mind. Our actions lead to extend the child's knowledge and experiences, making this the most valuable source of meaningful learning. However, the child and the family at the service do not exist in isolation; they are all a part of a larger, more diverse community.

#### 4/ developing a sense of community...

The best outcomes for children are achieved when strong community links happen...

*“A community is a group of individuals who have a serious stake in each others wellbeing and who can accomplish together that which they could not do alone... Practices that ignore the reality of children’s deep need for a sense of community are educationally unsound”.*

*Katz and McClellan, 1997*

When exploring curriculum we need to be sure that it represents knowledge, culture and the individual needs of children, families, educators and the community. To work effectively with children, educators must know not only the families and children in their care, but the communities the families belong to. Only when we bring these areas of knowledge together, can we work in partnership to guarantee quality experiences for children. It is the uniqueness of the community in which the service is situated and the diversity of the families within that will provide the richness of learning for children. It is important to provide children with the opportunity to become a part of their community. Community members need to be identified, valued and encouraged to share their knowledge, information and resources to provide children with a sense of belonging. Every environment offers opportunity for children to learn, explore and feel a part of where they live.

Adults observe and utilize the local community on a daily basis. We see the shops, schools, libraries, parks and health and community services, such as doctors and police stations. As we drive into our streets, we feel a sense of familiarisation and anxiousness looking forward to the comforts of home and the safety of what our community provides. If we posed the question to a child and asked them when they look to their community and all that surrounds them, what is it they see? Would they wonder in amazement? Would they find the adventure challenging? Would the smells engage their senses of curiosity and learning? Would traffic noises build their excitement or would the gentle rain relax them?

A service that fosters community will provide information about community resources to meet the needs of all children and their families. The service may have a list of relevant community services, events and resources for staff to extend children’s understanding through visits and excursions. Staff provide experiences for children to become aware of their own community by acknowledging, respecting, accepting and celebrating diversity. Everyday things in life can be celebrated: Spring, new babies, local football team’s; dress up day etc. These occasions make children feel that they belong. Making community connections to children’s lives is vital for their continued feeling of well being.

## 5/ the closing chapter...

In summary we propose the social and emotional well being of a child is reliant on....

1. the collaborative and supportive relationships we have with the families

Being approachable, interested and honest when communicating with the families shows children we respect and value families, building a relationship of trust and security. Continuity between a child home and the child care setting is vital to developing a child's social and emotional well-being.

2. the open and interactive partnerships educators develop with the children whilst in care

These principles coupled with educator's ability to be reflective in practice, becoming child focused to engage in their learning; asking open ended questions and scaffolding thoughts, is imperative to understanding and developing the uniqueness of the social and emotional wellbeing of the child.

3. the opportunity for involvement in the community

Involving children in the community supports the child to develop a sense of belonging and ownership of their surroundings. When educators provide opportunities for children to meet members of the community, explore their community around them and visualise the diversity around them they learn to appreciate the uniqueness of the world around them.

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