

# INTRODUCTION

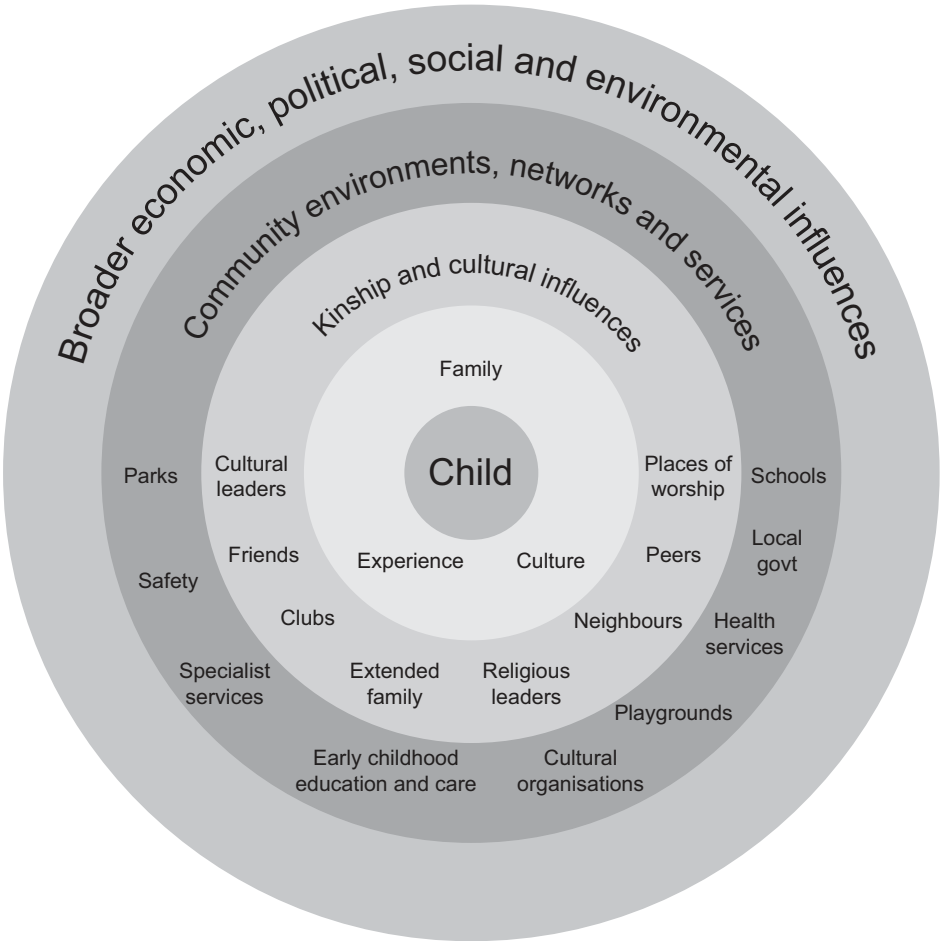
Learning and teaching are two of the most honourable pursuits in life. In the first eight years, a child's learning is nothing short of remarkable, and it is conditioned on the context in which each child lives. This text explores the many opportunities that exist for early childhood teachers to promote, support and maximise young children's learning and development. The authors draw upon contemporary Australian and international research into child development and education, social and educational policy, and professional practice in order to highlight the active ingredients of learning and teaching young children. Forming and sustaining positive and strong learning and teaching relationships is at the heart of human engagement. The quest of any early childhood teacher is to enable every child to progress along optimal and equitable learning pathways as children engage with others, including their families and members of the broader communities in which they live and grow.

Each chapter of this text highlights both conceptual and practical information to support early childhood teachers in their role, especially to promote young children's learning. Collectively the authors of all chapters are drawn together through a broader unity of purpose – the coalescence of evidence-based principles and priorities for working with young children (infants, toddlers, pre-schoolers and children in school). In different ways, the authors profile opportunities for promoting learning in a range of educational contexts that serve children in the first eight years of life. Research, policy and practice case studies are integrated throughout the text to illustrate specific developments and projects, and to highlight the potential intersections of learning, research, policy and practice.

Learning and teaching in the early years is shaped by how we, as teachers, understand the child as a learner. This book is constructed around an image of young children as strong, competent learners with the capacities to be knowledgeable about their worlds and subjects of interest. This image underscores the importance of viewing young children as capable contributors and thinkers who thrive in the context of warm, secure and interesting environments with respectful, knowledgeable and engaged teachers. It speaks to the importance of early childhood teachers promoting children's active participation in the learning process, listening and responding to children's perspectives and lived experiences, and adopting pedagogical practices that support the realisation of the general principles outlined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989).



The context in which young children learn and develop holds the key to every child’s success as a life-long learner. Bronfenbrenner’s systems theory gives voice to an ecological model (see Figure 0.1) revealing the layered personal, social, political and economic contexts surrounding the child, and the opportunities to refine, improve, replenish or refocus the conditions that support young children’s learning, development and well-being. Children are a key part of social systems that aspire to ensure quality of life for all. A Bronfenbrenner-based framework offers teachers a useful conceptual device to consider the unique context of the child and the actions that may be possible or necessary to afford each child the optimal opportunities and conditions for learning. Considering the contexts in which young children learn and develop supports teachers to learn about and engage with the kinship, community networks and cultural environments that shape young children in the first eight years of life. There is integrity in considering the contextual enablers and barriers in young children’s lives and reaching deeper understandings of the ways



**Figure 0.1:** Ecological model of child development (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979; reproduced from the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*, 2016, with permission from the Department of Education and Training (Victoria) and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.



in which young children's learning and development are shaped by personal, family and cultural histories. Teachers can and do create learning environments every day. Those that are inclusive and strong in providing all young children with equal opportunities to learn make a positive difference. Engaging with children, children's families, professional colleagues, organisations and agencies to advocate for optimal life conditions and experiences of young children is an honourable pursuit. Collective effort can deepen effectiveness when there is a clear common vision about supporting young children's learning and development.

Addressing teaching and learning from birth to eight years of age – the major life phase that represents early childhood – is critical. These years are when strong foundations for learning are laid, and where inequalities in learning opportunities can occur and play out throughout young children's lives into adulthood. Ensuring continuity as the child grows emotionally, physically, intellectually and socially across the many educational contexts in which young children and families engage is paramount. Using the findings of research into very early learning and development to guide practice affords the best opportunities for young children to thrive, build a strong sense of identity, contribute in their social worlds, and feel secure and able to progress their learning and communication capacities. Building strong skills, dispositions and outlooks in the early years of life supports young children as they navigate a range of educational settings and contexts throughout their lives.

The process and practice of educating young children in the early years is a specialist area, derived from empirical research into early learning, development, health and well-being. There is a range of theoretical perspectives to inform and guide planning and practice, and a feast of well-defined strategies and approaches that have been found to make a difference. No single method or approach alone will match the individual circumstances of a child's learning. Rather, a variety of teaching and learning strategies that speak to individual children's interests, learning approaches and understandings can be utilised by teachers in their daily interactions with young children. Education is a life-long process for learners and teachers. Teachers who keep abreast of contemporary research and policy are well placed to reflect on their vision of high-quality care and education, and turn vision into effective practice. Reflecting on the joys and challenges of learning and teaching can shape individuals' work practices, and strengthen the capacity of professional learning communities to sustain young children's learning.

Readers will find within this volume information about children and their learning from infancy, about teaching and the strategies that may be adopted, about collaborative relationships with families and colleagues, about the processes and background characteristics that mediate and moderate learning, about leadership, about continuing to learn through questioning, reading, testing, researching or exploring theories, and about advocating for the optimal and sustainable conditions for all children to learn. The first three chapters offer the learning, policy and child frames that are central to rich discussion and debate about the active agents of young children's learning. Research, policy and practice intersections are embedded throughout this book to illustrate



some pathways for teachers working with young children across a range of early childhood settings.

Engaging with contemporary research and theory on learning and teaching in the early years may open new opportunities and possibilities for understanding human learning and development in and beyond the first eight years of life. Exploration, critique, trialling, revising and starting over are what it means to be an effective teacher of young children. The impact of this work cannot be underestimated.

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