

INTRODUCTION

Right from the start

Good to see you!

Nathan has just re-entered the room after having a long and restful sleep. Karen is sitting some distance away talking quietly with another infant, Charlie, as he plays with a container of ribbons.

Nathan sees Karen from across the room and crawls quickly towards her. He approaches her with a wide grin. Karen notices his approach and turns to greet him.



Figure A: Nathan crawls towards Karen

Karen: Hello, Natey. Good to see you!

Nathan puts his hand on Karen’s shoulder and looks into her eyes.

Karen: I haven’t seen you all day. When I came in, you were going to sleep.

Nathan looks content as he sits down next to Karen and scans the immediate environment.



Figure B: Nathan looks up at Karen

Karen strokes Nathan’s hair gently, and he leans into her hand slightly.
Karen: We finally meet again. (She looks at her watch.) It is one o’clock.
Karen watches Nathan closely as he fixes his gaze on the container of ribbons.



Figure C: Karen watches Nathan closely

Nathan reaches and removes the lid from the container. Karen’s gaze follows Nathan’s hand, seemingly mirroring his action with hers.
Karen: What’s this? Hm?
She reaches in and removes a ribbon from the container and holds it towards Nathan, who takes it from her. With Karen’s supportive presence, Nathan is ready to start his afternoon.



Figure D: Karen holds a ribbon towards Nathan

INTRODUCTION

From the moment they are born, infants are active and competent learners. Even before birth, while still in their mother's womb, they perceive and respond to stimuli from the outside world and the people in it. Newborns recognise and respond socially to other people and pay attention to interesting objects and events. Infants are born 'ready to learn', and during their first three years they learn, develop and grow at a faster rate than at any other time in their lives. Rapid physical development enables mobility, exploration and physical manipulation; emerging social and emotional skills foster relationships, wellbeing and belonging; increasing communication and language competences support social interactions, literacy development and learning; and cognitive advancements cultivate critical ways of thinking and understanding. The skills and understandings that infants and toddlers achieve during their first three years form the cornerstone from which all future learning, development and wellbeing is built.

These achievements do not occur in isolation. Very young children are embedded in a social world, and the relationships and interactions that they have with significant others in their lives will shape and guide their learning and development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Young children's families play a critical role as significant others who nurture early development and learning. In addition, for a great many Australian children, these significant others include early childhood educators. Currently, around one in four Australian infants, aged birth to 24 months, attend an early childhood education (ECE) service, and this figure increases to approximately one in two by the age of three years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Early childhood educators are therefore important and influential people in young children's social and relationship networks, and they work in partnership with families and communities to provide experiences that will give infants and toddlers the very best learning opportunities *right from the start* (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014).

INTENTIONAL TEACHING WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS

In its vision for children's learning, the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022, p. 6) presents three fundamental concepts that are expected to be advanced by ECE programs:

- **Belonging** relates to 'knowing where and with whom you belong'. Educators are asked to support children's sense of belonging by establishing close and trusting relationships and engaging in affirming, supportive interactions.
- **Being** relates to the 'significance of the present' and respecting the richness of children's everyday experiences and concerns. As the EYLF states, 'The early childhood years are not solely preparation for the future but also about children being in the here and now.'
- **Becoming** recognises that early childhood is a period of rapid growth, development and learning, and that children are constantly changing and adapting. Alongside families, educators are charged with the responsibility for supporting and enhancing this learning and development.

In the opening vignette, we see how Karen actively supports Nathan's Belonging, Being and Becoming. Nathan is obviously happy to see that Karen is in the room and he crawls eagerly towards her after his sleep. His touch on her shoulder and how he looks into her face reinforces how comfortable he feels in her presence. Notice how Karen responds with a friendly 'Hello', and how her words, actions and touch express care, familiarity and affection. As Nathan moves into active play, Karen seamlessly shifts her attention to guiding and encouraging his exploration. It is evident that Karen and Nathan know each other well and that they are significant people in each other's lives. The opening vignette also demonstrates how Karen uses a number of 'in the moment' teaching strategies to respond to Nathan and to engage him emotionally, socially, physically and cognitively.

This vignette demonstrates the essential role that infant–toddler pedagogies play in supporting very young children's learning, development and wellbeing. The word 'pedagogy' derives from the Greek words *pais* (meaning 'child') and *agogus* (meaning 'leader'), so in its basic form 'pedagogy' refers to the process of leading or guiding the child (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999). In modern interpretations, 'pedagogy' is defined as the science or art of teaching and encompasses a multitude of strategies and approaches that support children's learning, development and wellbeing. The EYLF (AGDE, 2022, p. 12) defines 'pedagogy' as follows:

The term pedagogy in this Framework refers to the art, science or craft of educating. It describes the professional knowledge, practices and creativity that educators use to intentionally foster and nurture children's learning, development and wellbeing.

The concept of educators' intentionality features strongly in this definition. Intentionality encompasses *purpose*, requiring educators to purposefully select and use pedagogical approaches to meet particular goals or outcomes. Intentionality also involves drawing on *professional knowledge, thought* and a *conscious awareness* of the impact of one's actions and decisions on others (Grieshaber et al., 2021). Intentional pedagogy is therefore *responsive and adaptive*, necessitating that educators use their professional knowledge and judgement to 'adjust their practice to suit the learners, the time, place and context of learning' (AGDE, 2022, p. 12).

It is knowledgeable and thoughtful responsiveness that lies at the crux of intentional teaching with infants and toddlers. Skilled and intentional educators form the backbone of high quality infant–toddler ECE programs. The quality of educators' interactions with very young children, and how they craft these interactions to respond to infants' and toddlers' capabilities and contributions, creates effective learning opportunities. With mutual contributions from both educator and young child, interaction quality also forms the basis of relationship building, allowing each educator to connect socially, emotionally and intellectually with the infants and toddlers in their program (Dalli et al., 2011; Degotardi & Pearson, 2014; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2016). Furthermore, the quality of the program is reliant on the provision of a rich learning environment that is well suited to the unique learning styles and processes of infants and toddlers and is able to flexibly cater to the wide range of capabilities within any classroom (Curtis et al., 2013).

The infant–toddler educators’ role is complex and demanding. Effective learning interactions and environments need to be tailored to the interests, temperaments and learning styles of each individual child within the context of the group. This requires knowledge about what and how infants and toddlers learn and develop, and about how to foster learning and development in an early childhood room. Effective teaching with this age group relies on educators’ intentional use of teaching strategies that are both evidence-informed and appropriate for each individual child within the context of their centre and community. It is a *specialised role* that encompasses a motivation and commitment to ongoing professional learning and growth.

THE CHILD IN FOCUS

The concept of intentional teaching places a spotlight on the practices of educators, but this focus is meaningless without a close consideration of how young children contribute to and participate in their own lives and learning. The EYLF (AGDE, 2022) states clearly that the Framework applies to *all children*, from birth to school age, using the term ‘very young children’ to indicate the inclusion of infants and toddlers. While there is no universally accepted definition of the terms ‘infant’ and ‘toddler’, in this book we use three terms to refer to children aged birth to two years. These age ranges overlap, but ‘infant’ is generally used to refer to children from birth to around 18 months, ‘toddler’ refers to children aged 18–36 months, and ‘very young children’ refers collectively to children within these age ranges.

In its introduction, the EYLF (AGDE, 2022, pp. 5–6) centrally positions the child in all decisions that take place around early childhood education and care. Historically, ECE has adopted a child-centred pedagogical approach. The EYLF reflects this and draws on three important contemporary sources for additional inspiration.

1. The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019, p. 4) has as a core goal that ‘All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community.’
2. The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) states that decision-making and actions must be in the best interests of the child. This Convention upholds each child’s right to an education that maximises their potential, their right to be respected and included in decision-making, and their right to play and be active in their own learning.
3. The *National Principles for Child Safe Organisations* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018) promote the need for all organisations to create environments that place children’s safety and wellbeing at the centre of their actions and values.

These position statements translate to the following five core assumptions about infants and toddlers and their learning, development and wellbeing that are reflected throughout this book:

- 1. Infants and toddlers learn best when they are well, safe and feel secure:** At the most fundamental level, infants and toddlers need to be physically, emotionally and psychologically well and safe in order to thrive. Very young children's wellbeing builds mental and physical strength and resilience, confidence, trust and optimism—all of which contribute to the development of positive learning dispositions and skills. By living and learning with adults who are sensitive to their physical and psycho-social needs, very young children form positive relationships with others and develop a strong sense of identity and belonging.
- 2. Infants and toddlers actively contribute to their own learning, development and wellbeing:** Infants and toddlers are capable and active learners who use their developing skills and learning dispositions to engage with their social and physical world. Very young children have unique ways of knowing and thinking that they use during everyday experiences to extend and refine their understandings. When these capabilities are recognised and responded to, infants' and toddlers' active involvement in their learning experiences 'changes what they know, can do and value and transforms their learning and thinking' (AGDE, 2022, p. 50).
- 3. Infants and toddlers learn best when their agency is fostered:** Infants and toddlers have a right to fully participate and be included in experiences that involve and concern them. 'Agency' is defined by the EYLF (AGDE, 2022, p. 64) as 'being able to make choices and decisions to influence events and to have an impact on one's world'. When infants and toddlers are treated as humans with agency, their capabilities, perspectives and motivations are noticed, listened to, responded to and respected. When very young children are supported to participate fully in experiences that are designed to harness their curiosities and capabilities, they become confident and self-reliant learners.
- 4. Infants and toddlers live and learn in a network of relationships and interactions:** As community members, infants and toddlers are connected to culture, community, family and place. The relationships and interactions that they have with significant others in their lives shape their developing identity and impacts how, what and when they learn. The opportunities that very young children are given reflect the values and practices of their communities and contribute to their sense of belonging. Through responsive interactions with others, infants and toddlers develop trust, confidence and new ways of thinking and understanding, thus supporting both 'being' and 'becoming'.
- 5. Infant and toddlers learn continuously and in a wide variety of experiences:** Very young children learn through participation in a range of everyday interactions and activities. From their first days of life, infants learn about themselves and others through face-to-face interactions. Over time, they learn about objects and actions through close observation, sensory exploration and problem-solving activities. Through play, they challenge themselves to develop new ideas and ways of thinking. Their involvement in routines, transitions and caregiving moments strengthens connections with adults, peers and community. When the learning associated with different experiences and contexts is recognised, infants and toddlers have varied and continuous opportunities to learn in holistic and meaningful ways.

THE EDUCATOR IN FOCUS

The educator's role is critical in providing the social and physical environment that will support infants' and toddlers' participation, learning and wellbeing. In this book, we describe a diversity of pedagogies that have been shown to foster different areas of learning and development. By learning about and reflecting on these strategies and techniques, readers can build a toolbox of pedagogies that can be used to enhance their practice.

In the same way that we identify core assumptions about children's learning, we also propose three fundamental values that should be applied to all pedagogical practices (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2017).

1. **Respectful practice** involves viewing and treating infants and toddlers as sentient, or 'thinking and feeling' human beings, with their own identities, opinions, motivations and ways of knowing and understanding. Respectful practice sees each child and their family as worthy and factors their social and cultural heritage, experiences, identities and perspectives into the pedagogical decisions that are made. Respectful practice honours infants' and toddlers' full participation in their day-to-day experiences as educators strive to 'do things with', rather than 'do things to', very young children.
2. **Responsive practice** pays close attention to very young children's cues and communications so that educators can tune in to, and respond sensitively and respectfully to, their unique ways of being and learning. Responsive practice ensures that infants' and toddlers' needs for an emotionally and physically safe environment are met. Responsive practice also acknowledges infants' and toddlers' capabilities and, by encouraging active participation and full inclusion, embraces opportunities for very young children to explore, play, solve problems and create new understandings.
3. **Reciprocal practice** reflects an understanding about the importance of interactions and relationships in very young children's lives and learning. Reciprocal practice requires educators to invest quality time in playing and interacting with the infants and toddlers in their group. It includes supporting and nurturing all the relationships that involve the child: relationships with families, peers and communities. Reciprocal practice involves providing very young children with authentic opportunities to contribute to the curriculum by expressing their own ideas, motivations and feelings through exploration, play and interactions.

THE COMMUNITY IN FOCUS

Infant–toddler ECE programs are embedded within a community that comprises the broader ECE service community, the families using the service and the social, cultural and geographic community in which it is situated. Members from this community will each bring their own culture of beliefs, values and practices. When working with very young children, infant–toddler educators are therefore required to situate their own professional practice within a diversity of opinions, perspectives and practices from families and community members (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014).

The EYLF acknowledges the need to recognise, respect and respond to the diversity of families and communities. Within the core Principle of *Respect for Diversity* (AGDE, 2022, p. 16), educators are encouraged to engage actively with these diverse ways of knowing and being:

Educators acknowledge the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, religions, spiritual beliefs, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families. They build culturally safe and secure environments for all children and their families. Educators value children's unique and diverse capacities and capabilities and respect families' home lives.

When educators respect and embrace diversity, they strengthen children's sense of identity and support the inclusion and participation of all families. Educators, alongside children and their families, are provided with opportunities to broaden their own perspectives and work collectively towards a more inclusive and just Australian community. This is particularly the case with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the significance of which the EYLF acknowledges in the Principle *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives* (AGDE, 2022, p. 16):

The history and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is respectfully and truthfully reflected through community involvement and culturally sensitive practices. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives encourages openness to diverse perspectives, enhances all children's experiences and assists in the authentic advancement of Reconciliation.

Unfortunately, despite Australia's diversity, families from certain populations face barriers to participation in ECE services. This is particularly the case with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and those from migrant, refugee and low-resourced communities. These families often experience a disconnect from, or distrust of, ECE services due in part to a mismatch, perceived or real, between their family and cultural beliefs, values and practices and those of the service (De Gioia & De Gioia, 2015; Harrison et al., 2024; Lamb et al., 2020; Patel & Agbenyega, 2013). Such barriers can be overcome when services develop respectful partnerships with the families and communities that they serve. Writing specifically about enablers of participation of Indigenous Australian families, Bowes and Grace (2014) identify three principles that strengthen inclusion. These principles can equally apply to a range of communities:

- 1. Safe people.** Services acknowledge the importance of consultation with and endorsement from local community leaders. Inclusion is fostered when local Indigenous staff are employed and when cultural awareness is promoted and practised by non-Indigenous staff.

2. **Safe places.** Services are located in areas regarded as safe by the local community and where they have a sense of ownership and control. Safe places provide external cues to community members that reduce perceived threats or barriers to participation. For example, services may be located within a community social hub and may include images and signs that are welcoming to the local community.
3. **Safe programs.** Effective programs recognise and build on the strengths, local knowledges and practices of the community. Services work collaboratively with families and communities to provide positive early childhood experiences and build a sense of local identity. Safe programs incorporate the local languages, where possible, and incorporate experiences that reflect the practices and traditions of the local community.

EDUCATORS AS ETHICAL AND THOUGHTFUL AGENTS

Effective infant–toddler professional practice does not happen by chance but instead is developed with careful consideration of the values, assumptions and principles outlined in this chapter. As a consequence, educators are required to take an ethical stance in their work with infants and toddlers. In their Code of Ethics, Early Childhood Australia (2019, p. 1) states that being ethical ‘involves thinking about everyday actions and decision making, either individually or collectively, and responding with respect to all concerned’. Placing very young children’s interests and rights at the heart of their practice requires educators to recognise that every decision they make in their work with young children will impact the quality of experience for those children. This recognition prompts educators to place infants’ and toddlers’ lived experiences and perspectives at the forefront of pedagogical choices and to be responsible and accountable for the actions they take.

By upholding the Code of Ethics, infant–toddler educators become *thoughtful agents* (Degotardi & Pearson, 2014) who integrate the core assumptions about children’s learning, development and wellbeing with the fundamental pedagogical values detailed above to act, moment to moment, in the best interests of the children in their group. Ethical, thoughtful agents strive to be conscious of their choices, their actions and the impact that their actions have on others. When they reflect on their actions, educators develop a deeper awareness of the assumptions and values that are shaping their practice. This in turn helps them to evaluate their current approaches and generate new ways of working.

Throughout this book, we present Spotlight on Practice boxes that provide real-world examples of learning and teaching for readers to engage reflectively with the ideas and concepts in each chapter. Use the Spotlight on Practice box below to begin this reflective process.

SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

Whose interests are being served?

The examples in Table A illustrate two different approaches to the everyday caregiving practice of preparing to change a nappy.

Table A: Two different approaches to nappy changing

<p>Example 1</p> <p>Educator Marie approaches 14-month-old Carlo, who is playing with a toy car on the floor.</p> <p>Marie: ‘Hi, Carlo. You look very busy there. It’s time to change your nappy soon. Are you ready to come with me?’</p> <p>Carlo looks up and then returns to his car.</p> <p>Marie: ‘Hm—maybe you are not quite ready. I’ll come back in a moment, OK?’</p> <p>Carlo looks back up and smiles, then returns to his car.</p> <p>Marie returns a few minutes later: ‘I changed Lulu’s nappy first. Are you ready now? Would you like to take your car with you? You can show Lulu.’ She holds out her hands in invitation for Carlo to stand up.</p> <p>Carlo picks up his car and, with his free hand, holds Marie’s hand and stands. Together they walk towards the bathroom.</p>	<p>Example 2</p> <p>Educator Sue approaches 14-month-old Jay, who is playing with a toy car on the floor.</p> <p>Sue: ‘OK, Jay. It’s nappy change time. Come on.’ She holds out her hands in invitation for Jay to stand up.</p> <p>Jay looks up and then returns to his car.</p> <p>Sue: ‘Jay—you need to come. You’ve got a wet nappy.’</p> <p>Sue reaches down to pick Jay up, and Jay struggles and pulls away.</p> <p>Sue: ‘Come on, Jay. Don’t fuss. I need to do you now, then Lulu. I don’t have time to wait.’ She reaches again and picks Jay up. In the process, Jay drops the car.</p> <p>Jay protests loudly, struggles and reaches down to retrieve his car. Sue holds him tightly: ‘You can get your car when we come back’.</p> <p>Sue carries the now crying Jay to the bathroom.</p>
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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. Which of the five core assumptions about infants’ and toddlers’ learning, development and well-being are being promoted or repressed in these two examples?
- 2. What evidence of respectful, responsive, reciprocal practice do you see in each example?
- 3. Whose interests are being served in each example? Why do you think these educators had different approaches to the same scenario?

CRITICAL REFLECTION

The practice of reflection is personal and requires educators to carefully consider the values and assumptions that underpin their actions and reactions. The concept of *critical reflection* builds on personal reflection but applies another level of thinking. Critical reflection asks educators to use professional knowledge and theories in order to understand more deeply the connections between their actions, children’s actions and the contexts in which these take place. The EYLF (AGDE, 2022, p. 18) defines the process and outcome of ‘critical reflection’ as follows:

It requires engagement with diverse perspectives such as philosophy, theory, ethics and practice and then evaluating these in context, leading to pedagogical decisions and actions that are transformative.