

Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in early childhood education and care

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A strong sense of belonging in the early years has fundamental benefits for children and flow-on effects for their learning, development and wellbeing. This guide outlines best-practice approaches for improving a sense of belonging and connectedness in children aged birth to 5 years. Educators and teachers working across diverse early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings can use the guide to support their practice and inform their future planning.

Belonging and connectedness are central themes in the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF V2.0)* and underpin most other aspects of wellbeing, including physical, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing.¹ The EYLF V2.0 states that ‘**belonging** acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities.’² **Connectedness** is a component of this sense of belonging and is reflected in a child’s sense of connection to the ECEC environment.

Related frameworks

Early Years Learning Framework V2.0

Principles: Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships

Partnerships, Respect for diversity, Critical reflection and ongoing professional learning

Practices: All practices

Outcomes: 2, 3

National Quality Standards

- Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3
- Quality Area 2 – Children’s health and safety: 2.1
- Quality Area 3 – Physical environment: 3.2
- Quality Area 4 – Staffing arrangements: 4.1
- Quality Area 5 – Relationships with children: 5.1, 5.2
- Quality Area 6 – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities: 6.1, 6.2

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

- Focus area 1.3 (Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds)
- Focus area 1.4 (Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students)
- Focus area 4.4 (Maintain student safety)
- Focus area 6.2 (Engage in professional learning and improve practice)

Using this guide in your setting

You can use this guide to support critical reflection in your own practice and in your service. Individuals or educational leaders can also draw on this resource to support collaborative discussion and reflections during team meetings. The guide highlights a variety of evidence-based practices that support children’s sense of belonging, recognising that learning and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing. You can use these practices alongside the work you are already doing, to complement existing practices and ongoing critical reflection.

You and your service may already be using the evidence-based practices in this guide. Reflection questions for each evidence-based practice will help expand your thinking and identify opportunities to enhance practice.

Benefits for children

Children aged birth to 5 years develop a strong sense of belonging and connection to people and place through interactions with their peers and responsive adults, exposure to well-designed learning environments and opportunities to be active agents in their own learning.³ For a child, a positive sense of belonging includes feeling that:

- their teachers, educators and peers like, value and accept them
- the curriculum is interesting and relevant
- they are capable of succeeding
- their cultural identity is welcome and valued
- they can ‘be themselves’ within appropriate boundaries.⁴



Evidence review

The practices in this guide have been classified using AERO's [Standards of evidence](#). Our review of the research and approaches include a mix of papers with medium, high and very high confidence.

The practices in this guide cover how ECEC services can foster belonging and connectedness through creating authentic connections with children and families, providing culturally safe and responsive environments, empowering children's agency and voice and planning for play-based learning with intentionality. An ongoing commitment to critical reflection and continued professional learning will also enable teachers and educators to enhance children's sense of belonging.

Research into practices that improve the belonging of children is relatively new and not as well explored. It also includes a larger focus on qualitative and international research. Not all academic research captures the valuable information that teachers and educators regularly collect about children, families and their services to inform practice. The ECEC sector would benefit from further research into whole service approaches and their impact on belonging and connectedness for children.

Belonging and connectedness in practice

Research studies on how well each practice improves children's belonging or connectedness have been assessed against AERO's [Standards of evidence](#). AERO's assessment of these studies were then aggregated to produce an overall confidence rating for the practice. The ratings provided below do not reflect the quality of underlying studies, but rather the overall confidence you can have that the practice will work in your context. You can find more information about the research studies reviewed in the annotated reference list.

AERO evidence reliability key:

● = Medium confidence

● = High confidence

● = Very high confidence

● Create authentic connections with children and their families

Strategies

Design and use **routines and rituals** to help children feel safe, secure, supported and connected. Everyday rituals (such as those seen at greeting and departure times) that reflect children and families' needs and preferences support children to be recognised as important individuals in the community.⁵ Familiar routines help to develop children's sense of predictability, consistency, agency and confidence, as they can observe and become aware of the routines before becoming an active participant.⁶

Cultivate time to be **emotionally and physically close** to young children to help them develop secure attachments and to feel safe in their environment. You can connect with very young children by being attuned to their needs during everyday routines and rituals, including nappy changes, feeding rituals and while sitting them in your lap for stories and songs.⁷

Work in **partnership with families** to understand individual children's routines and rituals, cultural background, likes and dislikes and particular ways of being. You can use these insights to shape learning experiences and strengthen your connection with children.⁸

Plan for **how children enter and leave and the service**, and how families are welcomed. Familiar arrival and departure routines, along with maintaining a culture of reflection, contribute to responsive approaches to transitions.⁹

Reflection questions

- How do you make time for slowing down, building emotional closeness and connection, and responding to children?
- In what ways do you develop relationships with families? What strategies work well and what other ideas might you have for developing relationships with families?

Snapshot of practice

Six-month-old Elani is new to family day care. The educator, Jasmine, initiates a conversation with Elani's father, Andreas, to gain insights into the family's home routine and rituals, as a way of promoting continuity in her care. Andreas shares information about their home routine as well as special books, songs and experiences that Elani enjoys. He shares tips on how to soothe Elani to sleep, and the foods she is currently trying. Together, they come up with a plan to provide extra support for Elani's first few days in the service and agree to communicate openly and adjust strategies as needed. Jasmine incorporates these rituals into Elani's daily routine at the service to support the familiarity of Elani's home routine. To foster attachment and connection with Elani, Jasmine spends time holding Elani, talking with her and repeating familiar actions in her day. Physical proximity and familiar routines assist Elani with developing a sense of belonging and connectedness at the service.

● Provide culturally safe and responsive environments

Strategies

Consider how to connect to and celebrate culture, language and identity when designing play spaces, planning routines and transitions, and communicating with children. Use the space with items supplied by families, such as pictures and personal artefacts, to **reflect the diversity of children and families**.¹⁰

Plan carefully to support children to understand their own and others' cultures by using material items, texts or symbols throughout the service that **represent their culture**.¹¹ Cultural artefacts should be accompanied by information about their heritage and significance as part of learning experiences.

Support children to **transition with peers**.

Drawing on established friendships as a secure base will relieve transition-related stress and strengthen children's connections with peers and teachers and educators.¹²

Plan transitions and orientations at a service level to ensure children feel supported and their dispositions, ideas and theories are catered for.¹³ This includes planning for transitions between rooms throughout the year, and at the beginning and end of year.

Reflection questions

- How do you know your environment is culturally safe? What do you look for and who do you seek feedback from?
- How do you engage in meaningful dialogue about embedding First Nations perspectives?
- How do you find out about children and families' cultural and linguistic background? What opportunities do they have to share their background with others in the service?

Snapshot of practice

A small community-based service located in an urban community is creating a reconciliation working group with their families, staff and community members to help foster a culturally sensitive and responsive environment for children and their families. Through these partnerships, a philosophy is being developed to recognise reconciliation and articulate the services' commitment to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum, routines and learning environment. At this service, connection to culture and Country underpins the learning experiences for children. Educators and teachers work in partnership with community members, who share traditional knowledge of bush food and medicine, share culture through dance, music, art and ceremony, and foster children's responsibility and connection to Country as they learn about the land and cultures through local walks.

● Empower children's agency and voice

Strategies

Involve children in **curriculum decision-making**. This may include co-designing the curriculum, or parts of it, with children or using a visible and accessible style of documentation where children can contribute to planning and revisit their learning.¹⁴

Include children in **discussions about service policies and procedures**, such as where they would like to have their meals, to encourage them to use their voice.¹⁵

Plan and create indoor and outdoor learning environments that promote children's **agency and ownership** over the resources that support their play, including the placement and movement of equipment.¹⁶

Provide opportunities for children **to exercise choice** in situations where their decisions can be accepted. For example, ask children what they would like to play with on arrival, or offer a choice of experiences based on the child's ideas and theories, to engage them in meaningful and relevant opportunities for learning.¹⁷

Recognise very young children as capable and active participants in routines. This could include encouraging them to find their cup, providing spoons for self-feeding, and choosing where to sit or which book to read.¹⁸

Reflection questions

- How do you support children's agency throughout the program?
- How do you support children's voice throughout the program?
- In what ways are children able to make decisions about how they use spaces and identify what spaces they prefer to spend time in?
- How do you identify and respond to the dispositions and curiosities of very young children? How do you include your knowledge about children in the program and routines to support learning?

Snapshot of practice

Educators in a 3- to 4-year-old room notice that when transitioning to indoor time, many of the children are hiding at the top of the fort and do not want to come down. Some children have also started to run outside at different points during the day. To address this, the educational leader provides some questions to guide reflection during a team meeting. The reflection helps educators realise they were following a routine established at the beginning of the year, which no longer meets the children's needs. The team decides to re-evaluate the children's needs by asking them about their experiences directly, and in doing so, discover that the children want more time outside to explore, relax and play games. Collaboratively, the educators and children hold discussions on how to adapt their routine to provide more time outside and include more of the children's ideas and experiences in future. The revised routine involves educators regularly checking in with children about how they are spending time outdoors and when they are ready to transition inside. Educators reflect that children are feeling more connected to the program as they are involved in decision-making within the service and their own routines. This can be an ongoing negotiation with children.

● Plan for play-based learning with intentionality

Strategies

Intentionally **plan for children to experience play** individually, in pairs, in small and larger groups, and across age groups. This will help young children become more aware of what it means to be a member of a community and build connections and relationships with peers.¹⁹

Plan for **socio-dramatic play** opportunities through environments that encourage children to set up their own play or be guided by resources.²⁰ Consider including natural resources and loose parts to strengthen learning and support children's active decision-making.²¹

Embed **language- and literacy-rich experiences** such as reading books, listening to and telling stories, and setting up dramatic play spaces. This will foster children's understanding of others and provide time for emotional closeness.²²

Include tumble zones, open floor space and cubbies in your **indoor environments** to facilitate physical activity, exploration and play.²³ Using resources such as low tables and chairs and soft cushions promotes fine and gross motor physical play, periods of rest and relaxation, and connection with peers and adults.²⁴

Reflection questions

- How do the indoor and outdoor environments of your service support children's connection and belonging? Does a walk-through with a trusted friend or mentor provide you with any other thoughts on your service's physical environment?
- In what ways could you share with families the importance of play and how this supports children's belonging and connectedness?
- How do you know children are developing a connection with their peers? What do you look for as evidence of these connections?

Snapshot of practice

Rumi and Ben are playing outside. Rumi tells Ben he has a new puppy. He asks Ben to pretend to be a puppy so he can take care of him. An educator, Sally, overhears the boys and asks Rumi about his puppy (referring to Ben). She bends down to pat Ben and says, 'Rumi, he is a lovely puppy. His fur is so soft.' To extend the game, she asks Rumi, 'How do you take care of a puppy? What do you need to look after him?' Rumi explains that Ben needs a bed, water and food. Sally asks Rumi what they could use for a bed, water bowl and food. She collects the items so the boys can continue the game. Over the week, Ben and Rumi arrive at the service excited to continue to play the puppy game. They invite Sally to join them. She continues to help them gather additional resources from the centre and home to extend the play. She also assists the boys to connect with others by introducing more children to the game, so they can participate as other puppies, and dog owners and trainers in response to the boys' evolving ideas. Outside the game, Sally notices the children begin seeking each other out during mealtimes, circle times and story times.

🕒 Engage in critical reflection and ongoing professional learning

Strategies

Participate in professional learning that contributes to your **knowledge and development of practices** around children's belonging and connectedness. Learning can be formal or informal and can include reading, on-the-job mentoring or collaborative discussions with colleagues. Relevant topics include listening to children, supporting agency, responsiveness and relationships, and creating active learning environments.²⁵

Critically **reflect on all aspects of pedagogy and practice** to ensure children are active participants in their world and are empowered to use their voices.²⁶ Critical reflection through dialogue with colleagues by using reflective journals with prompts, or by debriefing with a trusted mentor or critical friend, are all ways to deeply think about how your practices contribute to children's belonging and connectedness.



Reflection questions

- In what ways do you reflect with children on their experiences within the service? How might children's experiences inform your programs?
- What professional learning might you do to support children's belonging and connectedness?
- How do you engage in critical reflection on your own or with your team? In what ways do you make your thinking visible?

Snapshot of practice

Sunita wants to learn more about supporting children's belonging and connectedness in the 4- to 5-year-old room. She engages in professional reading and creates a shared journal for recording observations and reflections. Sunita encourages her colleagues to respond to her thinking by adding their thoughts to the journal. The educational leader, Hazel, notices the rich comments appearing in the journal, and supports Sunita's participation in an online workshop on children's agency. The workshop encourages Sunita to begin a visual display of spaces the children feel connected to. She poses the question, 'What spaces at preschool do you like to spend time in and why?' to the children. The children are excited by the question and want to take photos and draw the spaces they most enjoy. The service shares these photos and drawings with families through a documentation wall. Sunita feels the professional learning she engaged in deepened her connection with the children and her colleagues, while also enhancing her professional practice.

Next steps

Consider which of the scenarios in the table below most closely resemble your current practices for supporting belonging and connectedness.

We're already using some or all of the approaches	We're just starting to think about how we can improve belonging for children	We're using other approaches not covered in this practice guide
<p>That's great – the evidence suggests these are good approaches to try. You could focus on embedding, sustaining and monitoring quality practice. For example, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicitly consider implementation barriers and enablers • focus on tailoring your approaches to meet the diverse needs of children • share your approaches, challenges and successes with other colleagues or leaders – this could include modelling practices for your peers • monitor and review how these approaches are going (for example, by collecting data and consulting with colleagues and families about what is and what is not working, and what adjustments could be made to improve outcomes). 	<p>Children's belonging has been linked with positive outcomes for learning, so it's great that you're looking for strategies to try. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • select which of the approaches you could first focus on to meet these needs • identify the elements of connectedness that you already do but could improve, and consider how you can develop staff capacity in these areas • emphasise the importance of a whole-of-service approach to increasing connectedness to all staff • assist service personnel in engaging with the practices covered in this guide – how can leadership support the integration of these practices into everyday work? • browse AERO's resources. 	<p>Wellbeing covers a range of elements and can involve many different activities. Your approach may not yet have been tested by researchers or may have been tested in studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria for this guide. You could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflect on your approaches and why you are doing them – how do they link to learning? • continue to monitor how your approach is going – is anything not working? Use data to support your understanding • try some of the approaches mentioned in this guide • review the evidence for your approach by using AERO's Research Reflection Guide.

Further reading

A collection of further belonging and connected resources can be accessed via the [AERO website](#).

References

A full, annotated reference list from this resource is available on the [AERO website](#).

- 1 DoE (Australian Government Department of Education), 2022
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- 5 Puroila et al., 2021
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- 7 Hännikäinen M., 2015
- 8 Eun McDevitt S. & Recchia S. L., 2022
- 9 Eun McDevitt S. & Recchia S. L., 2022
- 10 Puroila, 2021
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- 12 Eun McDevitt S. & Recchia S. L., 2022
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- 15 Robinson et al., 2019
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- 25 Cleland P. et al., 2018
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