

Intentional teaching in early childhood education and care

Intentional teaching is purposeful practice where early childhood educators, teachers and leaders develop clear intentions for children's learning and make deliberate decisions about how to best support it.



Intentional teaching *is*



Teaching with a clear purpose behind every decision. This includes how the environment is set up, conversations throughout the day and how to respond to children in the moment.



Both planned and spontaneous. It includes pre-planned experiences and in-the-moment responses to teachable moments that align with learning intentions.



A process of setting intentions, selecting strategies and reflecting on outcomes. The insights then inform what comes next.



Shaped by deep knowledge of each child. Intentional educators attune to children's interests, curiosities and funds of knowledge, recognising them as capable and agentic learners.

Intentional teaching *isn't*



In opposition to play-based learning

Play is the primary context for young children's learning, and where intentional teaching most often happens. The question isn't whether the teacher or educator should be involved, but instead *how much* and *when*.



The same as adult-directed instruction

Intentional teaching draws on a wide repertoire of strategies. Joining play, observing quietly, asking an open question or arranging the outdoor environment are all intentional acts.



Limited to planned group times

Many rich intentional teaching moments occur in everyday routines, such as mealtimes, transitions and outdoor play. These are not gaps between learning – they are learning opportunities.



Fixed and unchanging

Intentional teaching relies on purposeful, flexible decision-making. Knowing when to adjust the original intention is part of the practice, not a departure from it.

Why it works

- **Adult-child interaction is the active ingredient.** The quality of educator-child interactions is a defining feature of high-quality learning environments. Rich conversations and responsive exchanges directly support children's linguistic and cognitive development.
- **Attunement enables better decisions.** When educators know each child well, they make more effective choices about when to step in, when to stand back and which strategy fits the moment.
- **A culture of intentionality deepens practice.** When teams build shared language and reflect together, educator knowledge improves and children's learning benefits.

In practice

During a nappy change, an educator talks quietly with a 14-month-old, naming what she's doing as she does it, pausing to give the child time to respond. When the child reaches toward a nearby basket of toys, she follows his gaze, names what he's reaching for and waits again. Later, she notes in her reflective journal that this child is initiating more joint attention, and sets an intention to create more opportunities for this during caregiving routines throughout the week.

A teacher is observing outdoor play when she notices a child repeatedly trying to wedge a large cardboard tube through a gap in the fence, becoming frustrated when it won't fit. She moves closer, resists the urge to help and asks 'What else do you think you could try?' The child pauses, rotates the tube. The educator notes the persistence and spatial reasoning she observed, and sets a learning intention around problem-solving to revisit with the child during the week.



For more about intentional teaching, explore [AERO's Early Childhood Intentional Teaching Model and resources](#).

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