

AN ONGOING CYCLE: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Assessment for children's learning refers to the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning. (DEEWR 2009, p. 17)

Planning for children's learning and development is a key responsibility of early childhood education and care services. The requirements that educators develop an educational program for each child are clearly articulated in the *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* and the National Quality Standards.

Educators will be expected, as part of assessment and rating visits, to demonstrate how they use an ongoing planning cycle, and may be asked to discuss how their planning cycle is used to support each child's learning and development. In addition, authorised officers will need to observe how the planning cycle enables educators to make effective decisions and to engage in practices that support learning in the context of the five learning outcomes.

While this is a critical rationale for utilising the planning cycle, it is just one of the reasons we need to attend to this process. When we consider who the planning process is for and what it can deliver, the rationale becomes far more sophisticated and deeply compelling; it speaks to the nature of education and the role of educators in transforming children's lives.

When educators use an ongoing planning process, it is an opportunity to match their professional knowledge of children's learning and development to strong pedagogical practices that support growth and our own continuous improvement.

It is one of the most important tools educators have at their disposal and ensures that we live up to our own and increasingly others' expectations that we play a critical part in the wellbeing of children and families across communities. As well as being a tool to support educators' thinking, this process provides endless options for making children's learning visible. When we gather information, analyse and document, children's learning is revealed to families and colleagues and, importantly, to children themselves.

The most important reason for engaging in this planning process is its capacity to enable and support children's learning. When we gather and analyse information and utilise this data to plan for learning, it is the means through which we can ensure every child's active participation in programs and in learning. It is the only way we can be assured that our actions as educators extend learning and development. Planning then becomes more than a box to be ticked or a job to be done – it delivers outcomes for children and families. The effective use of this process in daily practice enables educators and the sector as a whole to challenge outdated perceptions of our work and proclaim it as an educational opportunity for children that supports them to reach their full potential! There is no prescribed way to undertake this important work and no set equation that will enable educators to determine the 'right' amount of planning. Individual services, management teams and educators must decide locally how they undertake this task. The *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR 2010, p. 12) provides a helpful model that supports services to make effective planning decisions.



Each step outlined in the following sections, contributes to the capacity of educators to plan effectively for children’s learning and development. The best way to ensure we are accountable for the use of this process and to realise its potential is to use it regularly. A good habit to get into is to meet with fellow team members (perhaps quarterly) to go through the planning cycle and check that each step is being addressed effectively and that everyone is able to talk about how it is being utilised to support children’s learning.

Context

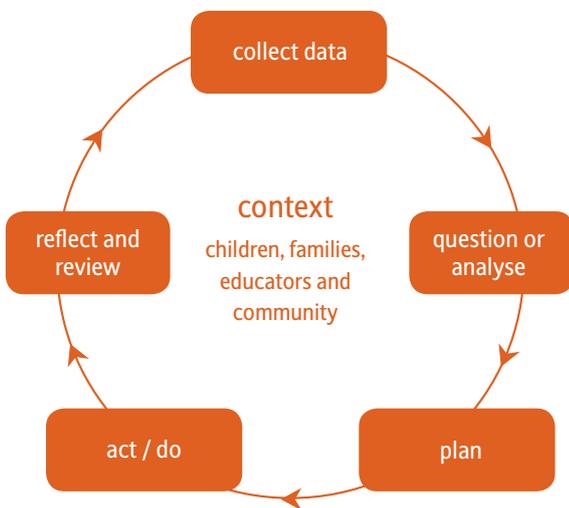
Before we begin to use the cycle to plan for children it is important that the context in which the services are located is well understood. Many things influence what is important to families and children, and this in turn affects the way children learn and grow. When we recognise the context, our curriculum decisions become meaningful and responsive.

Collect information or data

This element is about collecting meaningful information about children and their families and communities. The planning cycle depends on the collection of data or information that assists in making effective decisions about how to progress children’s learning and development. These collections could include observations of children, enrolment forms, photos, records of conversations with children, families and other professionals, notes from meetings, collected children’s ideas and suggestions, children’s work and checklists. Strong data, which describes learning and showcases the way children participate in the experiences, will help educators to make effective curriculum decisions. A plethora of information might not be as helpful as a few indicative records – it’s about quality not quantity.

Question or analyse

This element is about making meaning of the information collected about children, their families and the community. It is a process of interpreting and analysing so that educators can learn about children’s learning and development and in turn make decisions about how to support and extend it. This element relies on educators’ professional knowledge about how children learn and at its best is combined with what children and families recognise. ▶▶



Adapted from *Educators’ Being, Belonging, Becoming: Educators’ Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* p. 11





Plan

This element is about designing experiences and environments to support children's learning and development in the context of the five learning outcomes. It is about responding to children's emerging ideas and planning in advance to ensure that children get the most from the experience. Planning can take many forms – some people like the structure of a table while others are more comfortable with a web or mind map. It doesn't really matter as long as our intentions are clear and they scaffold children's learning and development.

Act and do

This phase is where we see the planning cycle in action.

Its effectiveness depends on using a range of practices to support the program, including scaffolded learning, intentional teaching, strengthening relationships, modifying the environment and having rich conversations with children and their families.

When educators use effective practices and share these with our colleagues, they are more likely to see quality outcomes for children.

Reflect

This element is about evaluating, reviewing and assessing children's learning and development, linked to the outcomes and practice principles. It is also about using critical reflective practice to examine how the program includes and benefits every child. There are many ways to undertake this work, but it should be noted that recording ideas is an important part of the process. Reflection that stays in a verbal form or 'just in our heads' is not as helpful as ideas that are written down with identified action.

Perhaps the most helpful way to understand why educators use an ongoing planning cycle and the role it can play in our work with children is to use it – to see it as a way to gain insights about children, to talk about our work as educators and to make the learning and development of young children a process to be celebrated.

Quality Area 1: Educational program and practice

Standard 1.2: Educators are focused, active and reflective in designing and delivering the program for each child

Element 1.2.1: Each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation.

Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011, Schedule 1 p. 325

REFERENCES



Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, ACT.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2010, *Educators' Belonging, Being and Becoming: Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, ACT.

Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 (No. 653, 2011).