



## National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



# Talking about practice: Recognising and supporting babies' and toddlers' belonging, being and becoming

## A conversation with Samantha Small, Lindsey Street and Kristie Ward

This video is part of ECA's *Talking about practice* series (TAPS), designed to support discussion and reflection on the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) and its links with the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF). The series is intended to support lively discussion among educators as they reflect on their practice and identify 'what next?' actions as a result of their discussions.

This video includes a conversation with three educators and vignettes filmed in their services. The video consists of five interconnected 13–20-minute segments.

Although the filming took place in centre-based settings, the ideas apply to family day care as well. Similarly, many of the ideas apply to older children as well as babies and toddlers.



## Introduction

Some educators find it challenging to see the application of many of the ideas in the national *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and *National Quality Standard* (NQS) programs for babies and toddlers. One reason is that much of babies' and toddlers' learning is subtle. Unless you observe closely and reflect critically, you may not appreciate or even notice it.

Educators who know babies and toddlers well see evidence every day that they are learning in all five Learning Outcome areas of the EYLF. These educators appreciate the important roles they play in that learning. The more educators know about young children's learning, the more effectively they can support it.

This video aims to highlight:

- examples of some of babies' and toddlers' learning
- ways that educators encourage and support learning.

The TAPS is organised around the vision for childhood in the EYLF—*belonging, being and becoming*. Part 1 focuses on *belonging*, Part 2 on *being* and Part 3 on *becoming*. *Belonging, being and becoming* are interconnecting themes that appear throughout the EYLF Learning Outcomes.

*Before showing the video, ask participants what 'belonging, being and becoming' mean as they apply to babies and toddlers.*

### Links to the NQS and the EYLF

The breadth of the topic of this video means that it links to many ideas in the NQS and EYLF. Participants are likely to recognise many other links in addition to the following:

#### **NQS:**

Quality Areas 1, 3 and 5

## EYLF:

*Belonging, being and becoming*

Image of the child

Definition of program or curriculum

Principle: Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships

Principle: Ongoing learning and reflective practice

Each area of Practice

The five Learning Outcomes

*Throughout the use of this video, ask educators to think about how the content links to specific parts of the EYLF and to particular Elements in the NQS.*

*Also ask them to link the content of the video and the discussion around it to their own practice, and to jot down examples of babies' and toddlers' learning that they observe and how they support such learning. In other words, encourage ongoing critical reflection.*



## Part 1: Belonging

*Before showing Part 1, explore the meaning of 'belonging' as it applies to very young children. Ask participants to listen to what each educator in the video says about 'belonging,' and compare responses.*

Children belong from the time they are born—and even before birth—to their family, culture, community and heritage. *Belonging* reminds us that relationships are the foundation for learning and living. Children learn about *belonging* as they participate in their families, in the community and in their care and education service.

The concept of *belonging* has at least three direct implications for practice:

- supporting children's *belonging* to their family, culture and community. Educators do this through their relationships and collaboration with children's families and through the conversations and learning opportunities they provide for children
- recognising the central role of strong, positive relationships between educators and children as the foundation for all learning and development
- building a sense of *belonging* to the group, through conversations, learning opportunities and helping children learn to relate positively to each other.

The discussion in this segment focuses on specific topics:

- arrivals, settling in and reunions
- use of photos
- rituals and traditions
- building relationships from the beginning.

Sam's example of babies and toddlers greeting and welcoming other children and families is an interesting way to both demonstrate a sense of *belonging* and strengthen others' sense of *belonging*.

*Ask participants if they have noticed this happening in their group.*

*Talk about the arrivals and departures depicted in the video. How do they compare with what occurs in your setting?*

*How do you contribute to positive reunions and departures that affirm children's and families' sense of 'belonging'?*

Anne mentions that families sharing stories about their child—non-essential information—may be evidence that they know that you are interested in their child.

*How do you demonstrate to families that you are interested in their child?*

The point is made that it's not just *having* photos of children and photos of their families that matters, but rather how they are used to support children's sense of *belonging*.





*If you don't have photos of both children participating in the service and children with their families, might you want to include them? If you do have photos, how do you use them? How do these uses compare with what the educators in the video say?*

The educators stress the importance of greeting and saying goodbye to children and families by name, involving children in daily routines and allowing children to help.

*Discuss the ways educators can encourage children to take an active role in their own experiences. How can babies and toddlers help? Point out that this supports their sense of agency. How does helping contribute to a sense of 'belonging' to a group?*

The segment of moving the mat is a simple example of taking the time to allow children to help.

*Discuss how babies and toddlers can contribute to setting up the environment.*

*Belonging to the group starts with the first encounter. The educators discuss the fact that families' sense of belonging links to children's sense of belonging. New families will be reassured by observing educators having strong, positive relationships with other children and families.*

*Explore how educators can communicate to families that they understand that it will take time for them to trust them.*

*What practices during the settling-in period help to develop and strengthen families' and children's sense of 'belonging', trust and strong, positive relationships with educators? What about on an ongoing basis?*

*Finish the discussion of Part 1 with a general question such as: What have we learned that we can apply to our work with babies and toddlers?*

## Part 2: Being

*Before showing Part 2, explore what 'being' means as it applies to very young children. Compare responses with what Anne and the educators say.*

The concept of *being* is about:

- valuing children as human beings in the present, rather than for who they will be in the future
- focusing on strengths—what children know and can do
- nurturing characteristics such as children's drive to learn, creativity, sense of wonder and awe
- acknowledging in practice each child's uniqueness.

*Ask participants to identify some unique characteristics of the children they work with.*

*Do you agree that sometimes educators who work with older children think that the younger children are, the more they are the same? If so, why do you think this is the case?*

Sam mentions that educators can help families see their child as a unique individual.

*How do you communicate to families that their child is unique?*

*How do you take account of babies' and toddlers' individual differences? Give specific examples. Think about how you welcome them and help them settle in, the learning opportunities you offer, their participation in routines and how you interact and communicate.*

*How flexible are routines? Do you adapt them to meet the needs of individuals? What gets in the way of being flexible?*



*Belonging and being* are closely related, as illustrated in this quote from the EYLF:

*Children's connectedness and different ways of belonging with people, country and communities helps them to learn ways of being which reflect the values, traditions and practices of their families and communities. Over time this learning transforms the ways they interact with others (p. 25).*

Anne makes the point that some children find *being* in a group challenging. They need opportunities to have quiet time on their own.

*Are there some children in your group who need time on their own? If so, how do you provide that?*

Kristie makes an important point about creating smaller spaces within larger ones and encouraging educators to spread out, because children tend to cluster around the educators. When educators stay close to each other crowding occurs and interferes with play, learning and positive interactions.

*Do you and your colleagues need to be more conscious of where you position yourselves?*

*Being* also reminds us to sometimes just let children *be*—give them space and time to dream, to relax, have fun and enjoy themselves.

Anne makes the point that sometimes it is enough for children to just have fun—that educators don't have to worry about always linking everything to the Learning Outcomes. This is a controversial issue that may lend itself to misinterpretation.

*Discuss the point above. Ask participants their views about how using*

*the EYLF and NQS can add to the quality of learning opportunities. Can the need to make connections—to be seen to be 'educating children'—also detract from quality?*

*How do you create opportunities for children to just 'be'—to enjoy each other's company and just have fun?*

The edited segment showing an educator over a long time (around 25 minutes) helping a baby go to sleep may also prompt discussion. Some educators are likely to dismiss the practice as unrealistic because of ratios and other demands.

*What principles does this episode illustrate? In what ways does it acknowledge the child's 'being'? What can you learn from it that you can apply to your own practice?*

The segment ends with the three educators and Anne listing some practices that support children's sense of *being*. Ask participants:

*What would you highlight at the most important practices that support each child's sense of 'being'?*

*Finish the discussion of Part 2 with a general question such as: What have we learned that we can apply to our work with babies and toddlers?*

## Part 3: Becoming

Note: Part 3 is divided into three segments:

- *Becoming*—overview of learning
- Environments that support *becoming*
- Interactions that support *becoming*.

Each segment is around 15 minutes long, so you may want to use them individually.

The discussion in Part 3 focuses mainly on babies' and toddlers' learning and how educators support it. The vignettes in Part 3 can be used to discuss the difference between what children are *doing* and what they are demonstrating that they are learning or have learned—an important distinction.







Before showing the video, ask participants what 'becoming' means to them. Compare their responses with those of the educators and Anne.

## Segment 1: *Becoming*—overview of learning

The mystery of babies and toddlers refers to them not being able to communicate their intentions and the meaning of experiences and behaviour in words. It is important for educators who work with very young children to attend carefully, reflect critically and use information from colleagues and families to get to know children well. The EYLF Learning Outcomes guide thinking about what children's behaviour means.

Supporting babies' and toddlers' *becoming* means that educators need to respect and enjoy babies and toddlers, recognise their learning and know how to support it.

*What are ways to promote enthusiasm and increasing knowledge among educators of babies and toddlers?*

*After watching the vignette of the boy pulling the riding toy up a slope, ask what learning is evident.*

*Ask participants to look for other examples of perseverance and effort by children. Some participants may have examples to share.*

## Segment 2: Environments that support *becoming*

This segment addresses briefly several features of environments, equipment and materials that support babies' and toddlers' learning.

*Before showing the segment, ask for ideas about the most important considerations in creating a good learning environment for babies and toddlers.*

Some of the elements discussed in the segment include:

- attention to aesthetics

*Ask participants how much attention they pay to including beauty in the physical environment. What more could they do?*

- creating spaces where children can be safely on their own or with another child (and still be supervised)



*Do your indoor and outdoor spaces offer opportunities for children to hide, to be safely own their own? How can you improve these opportunities?*

- natural, open-ended and 'found' materials

*What is the balance of closed and open-ended materials in your program?*

*What are some popular open-ended materials for babies and toddlers?*

*How can you use natural materials—stone, shells, cones, for example—to support children's learning?*

*What are examples of materials and objects that don't cost anything, are safe, appeal to very young children and provide learning opportunities?*

- being organised and setting up the environment again when it becomes too messy

*How do you display materials, toys and other 'invitations for learning'? Are you thoughtful about using baskets and bins? How can the ways you group materials affect children's learning and engagement?*

*What's the noise level like in your group? Are there times in the day when there's too much noise? If so, what can you do about it?*

It is important for participants to understand that the footage at the end of this segment—the pink pig footage—is presented to encourage reflection about the characteristics of equipment and materials that make them appealing to babies and toddlers.

*Ask participants to comment on why they think this toy might appeal. Ask for examples of other unlikely yet popular play materials.*

*Point out that, in commenting on the use of the pink pig, the educators in the video are engaging in critical reflection—wondering about what is happening and what it means for children. They are looking beyond the obvious—and that's what all educators, especially those who work with babies and toddlers, need to do!*



Segment 2 finishes with the statement that the environment isn't a backdrop for learning—rather it actually creates the opportunities for learning.

*What does this statement mean?*

### Segment 3: Interactions that support becoming

Educator–child relationships are the foundation for children's feelings of security. These relationships free babies and toddlers to explore, meet challenges, persevere and learn.

In addition, these relationships allow educators to play a variety of important roles in supporting children's learning. This segment highlights some of these roles.

*Ask participants to name some roles they play in babies' and toddlers' learning. Add to this list as you watch the segment.*

Sam's point about focusing on what children may be trying to learn rather than on what you can teach them is an interesting one.

*Discuss the difference between a focus on what children are trying to figure out or learn and on 'what can I teach them?' What is an example?*

Educators need to see possibilities that turn up unexpectedly and take advantage of them.

Emphasise the importance of a flow of natural, two-way conversation, even with babies who aren't yet using words. This requires educators to really 'tune in' to babies and toddlers, and to try very hard to figure out what they are trying to communicate.

The 'dance' that characterises the interactions that skilled, sensitive educators have with babies refers to interactions where roles of leader and follower alternate. The 'burying spiders' vignette illustrates the 'dance', showing an educator participating in a child's pretend play in ways that support it but do not dominate it.

*Before showing the vignette, ask participants to focus on what the educator says and does that contributes to the child's learning. What could he have done differently?*

This vignette also illustrates the power of one-to-one encounters. Educators value and take advantage of every opportunity to have them.

*Do you prioritise one-to-one interactions with the children you work with? What gets in the way? What can you do to increase the number and improve the quality of one-to-one interactions with each child?*

Educators are mindful in everything they do about the importance of contributing to children's sense of agency—giving children choices and letting them make decisions.

*What choices do you intentionally offer to children in your group? What decisions do they make about their experience?*

Routines offer many learning opportunities. This means it's really important for educators to plan to make the most of them.

*Are the routines in your program carried out in ways that support babies' and toddlers' learning? What kinds of learning opportunities are there in arrivals and departures, eating and sleeping? What changes can you make to offer better learning opportunities?*

*As a way of summing up, ask participants what they see as the most powerful ways of supporting babies' and toddlers' 'becoming'.*

*Finish the discussion of Part 3 with a general question such as: What have we learned that we can apply to our work with babies and toddlers?*

#### Closely linked resources:

'I can do it!' Supporting babies' sense of agency. *Talking about practice* series. Early Childhood Australia National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program, Canberra.

Stonehouse, A. (2011). 'The more you know the more you see – Babies' and toddlers' learning and the EYLF'. *Research in practice series*, vol. 18, no. 3. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

Stonehouse, A. (2013). *Supporting babies' social and emotional wellbeing*, e-Newsletter No.61, Early Childhood Australia National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program, Canberra.

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