

NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency

Children's Voices

A reflective resource for educators



NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency

Supporting educators in early childhood education
and care services to include all children



"Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously." (United Nations, 1989).

“...Respectful engagement with all children and families, taking a rights-based approach and listening to children, embracing diversity and providing equitable access to education are all critical for quality education and for inclusion.”

(Cologon, 2010, p20)

NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency's Children's Voices Project

In 2019, the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency embarked on a journey to capture the voices of children around the themes of inclusion, diversity and fairness.

The aim of this project was to highlight children's knowledge, feelings and perspectives on these themes and how this can inform educators' reflection and planning both in their everyday work with children and when addressing broader issues of social justice and equity. We also wanted to utilise the voices of children to guide our work in supporting educators to be inclusive of all children.

Giving a voice to children, actively listening and acting on that voice is a skill that educators can cultivate and a process that we can plan for. It is our hope that this resource will inspire you to develop processes for engaging with children's voices in meaningful and authentic ways within the context of your service and community. Under the '*Informing your practice*' sections, you will find information to facilitate discussion and reflection.

How do children's voices relate to inclusion?

Everything a child says and does communicates their thinking and needs and should inform all aspects of our work from policy and philosophy through to the program and practices we use. Inclusion is about meeting all children's needs as well as celebrating diversity. Educators need to be attuned to children's verbal and non-verbal communication, to hear and respect their voice.

This project has prompted us to consider these questions:

What is each child telling us about what they think, know, understand, and feel about the world around them and the issues that affect them?

How can we show children that their voice is heard and valued?

How can our practice be influenced by listening to the voices of children?

Voices about Difference

Children's understanding of difference and their responses to it are largely shaped by and through their relationships with others.

As an educator, your role is to encourage children to understand and respect diversity through planned experiences. Listening to children and knowing how they define and think about difference helps us to develop a curriculum that is responsive to individual needs and values difference in all its forms.

As part of our project, we asked children five questions about difference. What do their responses tell us? How might this influence your planning and practice?

“Do you know anyone who's different?”

- Georgia, 3 years:** “This is Penny, Ada and me. We are playing together. I said anyone is different. No not when we play on the slide. On the slide we are all the same.”
- Jack, 10 years:** “No-one's exact same.”
- Evie, 9 years:** “Everyone.”
- Georgia, 3 years:** “Ada was different because her lunch box was different. Her family made a big dish of rice for us all to taste.”
- Francesca, 8 years:** “We're all different. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being the same.”
- Stephanie, 4 years:** “No. We are all the same. My toy cats are different.”
- Heston, 3 years:** “Oscar.”



“Why are they different?”

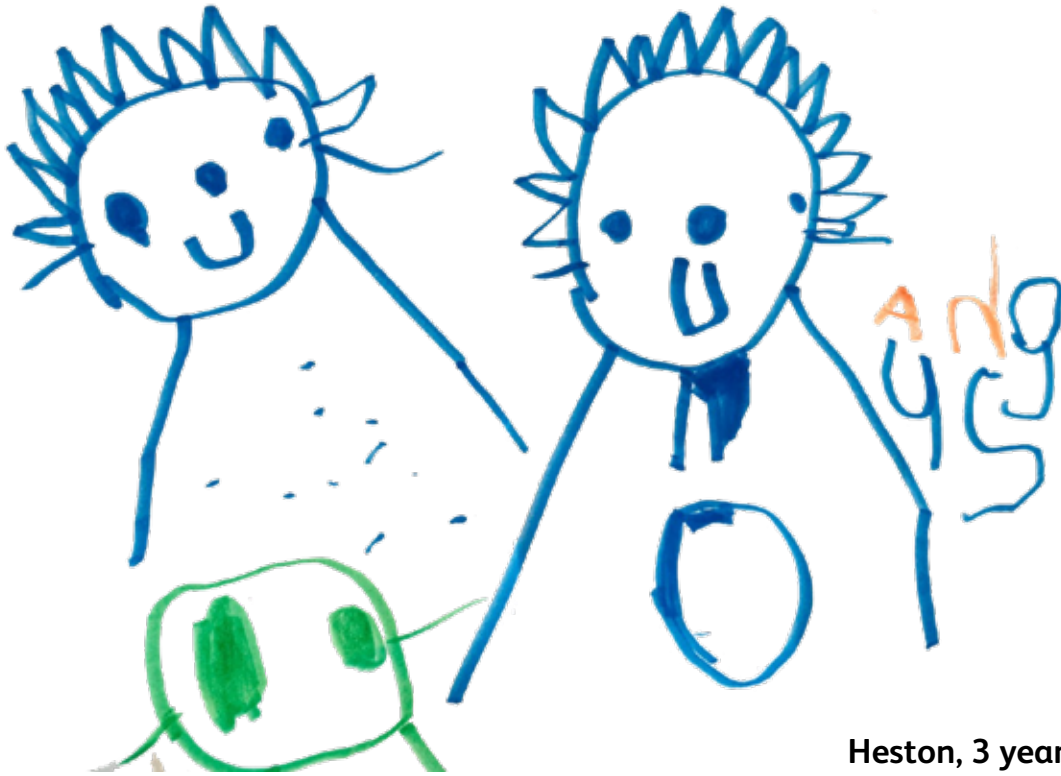
- Tim, 5 years:** “They like different stuff.”
- Nayte, 9 years:** “Because they have a different personality to me, they are different to me.”
- Francesca, 8 years:** “My friend is like dark haired, dark skinned and dark eyed and we’re really good friends.”
- Evie, 9 years:** “I mean, everything makes everyone different...language, culture, um...just who you are...everyone is different.”
- Faresha, 8 years:** “Because they are from another country and another culture.”

“Do you think you are different?”

- Rory, 7 years:** “No, I’m not different ...because we are all from the same culture ...Awabakal.”
- Isabella, 4 years:** “I have English and Chinese words. My brother likes English. He doesn’t like Chinese. Me and my brother like to speak English and Mandarin.”
- Jayden, 4 years:** “I have light brown skin and my hair is black. Cody’s hair is grey and his skin is light pink. I like Cody, he is my best friend.”
- Francesca, 8 years:** “Yes. I’m blondie brown haired, blue-eyed, and like different colours. I’m different to lots of people. I guess you’re born as you are. You can’t change that. Unless you do something unnatural like body paint or hair dye yourself.”
- Faresha, 8 years:** “My parents are from another country, Bangladesh...It is the old country.”

“Have you ever played with anyone who is different?”

- Heston, 3 years:** “Maxie. He always wears his clear t-shirt and Dominic vomited.”
- Amelie, 4 years:** “No, I’ve played with Yimeng. Her doesn’t have the same hair as I have. Her doesn’t have the same clothes as I have.”
- Francesca, 8 years:** “I’ve played with many friends that are different. Even when they look the same they can still have different choices, more freckles, less freckles. I like playing with lots of kids. Tan skin, peach skin, white skin, not many freckles. We all have at least one thing the same. We all have a life and we can have fun together at least sometimes!”



*Drawing of different people,
- Angus, 4 years*

“What is it like to play with friends that are different?”

- Heston, 3 years:** “We played who can be the silliest cockroach in the world.”
- Rory, 7 years:** “They know more skills than us because they come from different countries and teach us different languages”.
- Faresha, 8 years:** “It’s fun. We play and sometimes two of my friends fight. I don’t know. I try to fix it. I try to help both of them. I think. Sometimes when I get too annoyed I tell a teacher.”
- Lexi, 6 years:** “Well we went on the swing over there and then her father and brother came and they spoke a different language together and I didn’t know what they were saying. But we did the same things”.

“Inclusion: involves taking into account all children’s social, cultural and linguistic diversity (including learning styles, abilities, disabilities, gender, family circumstances and geographic location) in curriculum decision-making processes. The intent is to ensure that all children’s experiences are recognised and valued.”

(DEEWR, 2009, p24; DEEWR, 2011, p24)

Listening to voices about difference: Informing your practice

Children’s voices can inspire, surprise and sometimes challenge us. Working as a team creates an opportunity to:

- ▶ Reflect on what you hear; and
- ▶ Plan for how this can influence what you do next

As an example, if you were Rory’s educator, and he said “*No, I’m not different... because we are all from the same culture...Awabakal*”, how would you plan to respond and address issues around sameness, difference and understanding of culture?

The reflective questions below can support you to focus on listening to children and planning your response and relevant learning experiences throughout your daily program.

Reflective Questions for Educators:

How do you support children to have their voice about difference heard by other educators, their peers and families?

How do you support children to translate their voice and views into action?

When engaging in conversations with children, how do you support the conversation to unfold?



Voices about Belonging

A sense of belonging is experienced through inclusion. Supporting children to be and feel included and therefore have a sense of belonging is integral to their learning and development, affecting being and becoming.

As educators your role is to create an environment where all children feel welcome and secure. Facilitating trusting relationships encourages children to express their thoughts and feelings in an empowered way. Listening to children and hearing what belonging means to them, helps us to develop a curriculum that is responsive to individual needs and nurtures a sense of belonging.

As part of our project, we asked children four questions about belonging. What do their responses tell us and how might this influence your planning and practice?

“How do you know when you feel welcome?”

Max, 5 years: “I feel happy when they say hello and they smile at me. “

Monique, 4 years: “I know because it’s somewhere I like to be.”

Lachlan, 8 years: “People make sure I’m alright, they ask me to play with them.”

Sophie, 3 years: “Hi Sophie. Happy.”

Rory, 7 years: “When they let me in.”



“What does it feel like
when you are new?”

James, 5 years: “I feel little.”

Eleanor, 3 years: “I cried when I was new I don’t cry now.
My friends are here to play with me.”

Herbie, 5 years: “Yeah no one else can hear you it’s just in
your brain.”

Dexter, 7 years: “My heart beats a bit faster and I get a bit
excited.”

Samantha, 3 years: “When my baby sister started, I stayed with her
to hug her and play with her. When it was my
first day my big sister was here.”

Alexis, 11 years: “I feel nervous, have butterflies and just feel
horrible.”

“How do you think you could help other people who are new?”

Finnegan, 4 years: “Don’t bite them or hit them they don’t like that.”

Charlie, 5 years: “You can always play, I play with my friends, that makes me feel good.”

Adelaide, 5 years: “Talk to them.”

Sophie, 3 years: “Play with them.”

“What do you think people should do to help new people feel welcome?”

Layla, 9 years: “Talk to them, include them in your games and make them happy.”

Alexis, 11 years: “Be friendly, talk to them and invite them into your friendship circle with your group of friends.”

Ellie, 4 years: “Cushions.”

Rory, 7 years: “Asking them if they want to play.”



“Experiencing belonging
– knowing where and
with whom you belong
– is integral to human
existence.”

(DEEWR, 2009, p7; DEEWR, 2011, p6)

Listening to voices about Belonging

Informing your practice

Children’s voices can inspire, surprise and sometimes challenge us.

Working as a team creates an opportunity to:

- ▶ Reflect on what you hear; and
- ▶ Plan for how this can influence what you do next

As an example, if you were Samantha’s educator and she said: “*When my baby sister started, I stayed with her to hug her and play with her. When it was my first day, my big sister was here*”, how would Samantha’s voice inform your transition and orientation policies and practices?

The reflective questions below can support you to focus on listening to children and planning your response and relevant learning experiences throughout your daily program.

Reflective Questions for Educators:

How can we find out about what it is that helps each child and family feel welcome and that they belong to our service community? Do we sometimes make assumptions?

What can you do to ensure that all children are empowered to express their thoughts and feelings about belonging?

How can children’s voices help you to reflect on whether your environments and practices are supporting every child to feel welcome and included?

Voices about Australia Day

Australia Day is celebrated in services and communities around Australia, commemorating the arrival of the first fleet in Australia and recognising the diversity of the nation today. For many of our First Nations people, this date marks a day of sorrow and mourning and is referred to as Invasion Day or Survival Day. For others it is a day that recognises survival, illustrating the resilience and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples.

As early childhood educators we have a responsibility to promote a knowledge of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Listening to what children know, understand and feel about Australia Day can support and encourage perspectives that are inclusive of every child and family.

As part of our project, we asked children two questions about Australia Day. What do our responses tell us and how might this influence your planning and practice?

“What do you think about Australia Day?”

Lennox, 9 years: “I just wear thongs.”

Clytie, 7 years: “We go to Yabun* with Nanny and some of our cousins and aunties and uncles. There’s dancing and singing. Talking was the boring part. The most fun part I believe was the jumping castle. It’s Survival Day.”

Leyla, 11 years: “People like Australia Day because they can celebrate and can do fun things. Sometimes people don’t celebrate it cause they don’t like it. They might feel bad for the Aboriginals.”

Nelson, 11 years: “It’s when we have a sausage.”

Tara, 7 years: “I think it’s a good day for everyone to celebrate Australia Day and have fun in Australia.”

**Yabun is a large community day held on Gadigal land.*

“What do you think Aboriginal people feel about Australia Day?”



Drawing by Clytie, aged 7 years

Leyla, 11 years: “They might feel a little bit hurt cause Australians took their land away. Some people might celebrate, I don’t really know.”

Clytie, 7 years: “We celebrate survival.”

Nelson, 11 years: “It’s more like England Day because people have overtaken Australia so it’s not technically Australia Day because other countries have just overtaken.”

Cosette, 9 years: “Probably don’t really celebrate it and just think ‘Why are people celebrating it?’”

Lennox, 9 years: “Maybe a bit of sad memories.”

Cosette, 9 years: “Sad because they were already there and then they just came over and then, just, attacked ‘em. Not attacked. Came over and; I don’t know.”

Anvesha, 7 years: “I’m pretty sure they like it because I think they made it. Aboriginals used to live before the Australians.”

Tara, 7 years: “I’m not sure.”

“Educators actively seek out the voices, perspectives, and views of children throughout the day, and draw on this input to develop a child-centred educational program and enhance children’s learning and development.”

(ACECQA, 2020, p112)

Listening to voices about Australia Day: Informing your practice

Children’s voices can inspire, surprise and sometimes challenge us. Working as a team creates an opportunity to:

- ▶ Reflect on what you hear; and
- ▶ Plan for how this can influence what you do next

Reflect on this example from Lennox: “*I just wear thongs.*” When listening to children’s voices, how can we reflect on assumptions we may make based on what they say? What else could you do or ask to find out more? How would you incorporate his voice into your program?

The reflective questions below can support you to focus on listening to children and planning your response and relevant learning experiences throughout your daily program.

Reflective Questions for Educators:

How do we consider all perspectives when planning whether to include activities in your curriculum around acknowledging Australia Day?

How do we respond to what children say if our opinions and values differ?

How do you include families and your broader community in conversations around concepts about Australia Day?



Listening to **children's voices** at your service:

How are you seeking the voice of children and responding to this at your service?

Would you like support to engage with children's voices to strengthen inclusion at your service?

Would your service be interested in being involved in the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency's Children's Voices project?

Contact the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency on **1800 703 382** for more information on Children's Voices.

Children's Voices and the National Quality Framework (NQF)

The National Quality Framework aligns with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), by reinforcing a child's right to be heard.

A guiding principle outlined in the NQF encourages educators to see children as:

"...capable learners who actively construct their own understandings and contribute to others' learning. It recognises children's agency, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their rights to participate in decisions that affect them, including their learning... This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities."

(ACECQA, 2020 p.10).



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