

# reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION • SPRING 2014 • ISSUE 56



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Parent & Baby Groups Supporting Families  
Responding Positively to Sexual Behaviours

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The opinions expressed in *Reflections* are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of Gowrie Australia. By publishing diverse opinions we aim to encourage critical reflection and motivate practitioners in Early Childhood Education and Care Services to respond. Gowrie Australia's privacy policy precludes the use of children's names. Fictitious names are substituted.

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Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the spring issue of *Reflections* and a new wave of articles to inspire practice, to challenge thinking and provoke reflection and self-evaluation.

We start with Sue Southey who introduces a new way of thinking about maths that is creative and fun, and supports children to make discoveries that will enrich their maths experiences through their years of study and beyond.

Melodie Glass shares a conversation with Ursula Kolbe, questioning her about her new book, "Children's Imagination: creativity under our noses". Ursula gives an insight into the writing process, talks about the skills involved in observing children, the power of creative thinking and the importance of nurturing it.

This issue also features three articles focusing on infants and toddlers. Osanna Giang describes a reflective journey involving an exploration of Magda Gerber's work and the process of enquiry and self-evaluation as her team work to implement the RIE (Resources for Infant Educators) approach as a basis for respectful caregiving. Chelsea Hallion and Eleanor Scrafton discuss the many advantages of an integrated infant and toddler program including the central view of children as highly capable. Finally, a not-for-profit organisation Communicare Inc, describes a series of Baby and Parent Groups aimed at supporting families, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, with weekly discussion, play and activity sessions.

Casey Rendell, Megan Corbell and Suzy Piwen share their experience of embarking on an action research project focusing on writing and documentation. Based on the work of Wendy Lee their project, "Building Successful and Passionate Writers", brought many challenges but unexpected and ongoing learnings.

Melanie Grabski from Family Planning Queensland describes a program for identifying and responding positively to children's sexual behaviours. The information in this article will support practitioners to focus on this subject with a more confident view.

The early childhood education and care sector continues to experience change through a range of reviews and reports. The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning draft report is one of great importance to the sector and was made available publicly for scrutiny and comment. This has provided the opportunity for educators, families, and the broader community to have further input into the inquiry by ensuring that all points of view that have been put forward are considered. Further information on the Productivity Commission Inquiry is available on the website: <http://pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/childcare>

The success of any inquiry or review depends upon the participation of people and organisations, which means taking an active role in Australia's public policy formation. All those working with young children during the most formative years of their development, and committed to supporting the best possible outcomes for children, must continue to advocate and respond to reports to ensure the rights of all children are at the forefront of policy and practice.

For those readers who may be attending the Early Childhood Australia Conference in Melbourne in September, Gowrie Australia will have a booth in the exhibition area. Please come along and introduce yourself to the team. We look forward to meeting and speaking with you.

**Jane Bourne**

on behalf of Gowrie Australia.

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## Maths is more than Counting

**Sue Southey**  
Co-Director  
Springwood Community  
Kindergarten, Brisbane

Curriculum reforms both in Australia and overseas are promoting increased emphasis on numeracy education in the early years of children's development (van Oers, 2009). Teachers are expected to prioritise numeracy and literacy education in an attempt to ensure that children are not left behind academically, and to improve Australia's results on international comparisons of numeracy and literacy performance outcomes (Petriwskyj, O'Gorman, & Turunen, 2013). This emphasis on outcomes is placing pressure on before school educators to develop mathematical skills and knowledge in young children (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009).



The way in which educators understand maths strongly influences the types of learning experiences they provide. In the rush to prepare children for school based learning, some early childhood educators are reverting to 'skill and drill' practices that do not align with the intent of the Early Years Learning Framework. An emphasis on numeracy leads educators to value rote skills such as counting and naming shapes. An alternative framing of mathematical thinking is as a language that allows children to see their world using particular processes and ways of working. This view supports a much wider range of learning experiences that link children's everyday experiences with mathematical concepts.

Mathematical thinking takes time to develop and requires educators to understand their role as maths teachers. There are key processes that enable young children to make meaning about their world mathematically:

### Mathematical ways of working

As a language, maths has particular processes and ways of viewing the world. In contrast to literacy or creative arts, a maths framing seeks to limit information about objects and reduce complexity. For example, when viewing a flower from a mathematical perspective, attributes such as shape, colour, height, and number of petals may be important information, however the environmental impact of the flower, its spiritual significance or biological name may not be relevant. This does not mean these things are not important, but from a mathematical perspective they provide too much information to think abstractly about the flower.

### Building a mathematical language

Language is the key to supporting children to describe and to be able to think abstractly about objects. Educators can support children from a very early age to begin to think mathematically by being present in their play. As they interact with children they provide the descriptive language that links the children's sensory experience to the vocabulary that describes it. This scaffolding of children's experience allows children to build a vocabulary that enables them to attend to attributes of objects in their world. This is the beginning of thinking about objects in abstract ways.

### Supporting children to see relationships and patterns

By reducing the amount of information that children attend to, they begin to see new patterns and relationships. These relationships are often abstract and require children to "chunk" information to think about objects in new ways. These relationships include:

- attaching number to a group of objects;
- matching objects or sets of objects;
- seeing relationships between objects or groups of objects, for example, comparisons of size, weight, volume or spatial position;
- creating hierarchies based on an attribute, for example placing rocks in a series from large to small;
- predicting the likelihood of an event occurring (probability);
- creating patterns.

To allow children to make these mathematical connections they need both opportunities for play with open-ended materials and intentional teaching that introduces these mathematical concepts in fun and engaging ways.

### Valuing maths in our everyday lives

Children recreate their experiences of their everyday lives in role play, for example, talking about time, pretending to cook, imitating adults measuring or using cash registers in shopping play. While children may not fully understand the maths underpinning these real life applications, they are beginning to experience the importance of numeracy in their everyday lives. Educators can respond to teaching possibilities in this emergent play by building mathematical conversations and instigating mathematical investigations.

### Representing their thinking

As children begin to show an interest in drawing and 'mark making', they can be encouraged to represent their mathematical thinking using drawings, marks and symbols. In contrast to visual arts representations, maths graphics reduce the amount of detail to record minimal amounts of information such as tallies, personal graphics or simple drawings. According to Carruthers and Worthington (2006), children's mark making allows children to record their mathematical discoveries in individual and personal ways. This mark making supports children to think and record their discoveries and investigations. With experience children move to standard written symbols that align with school practices.

### The interplay of play and direct teaching

Mathematical thinking takes time to develop. Some children are intuitively drawn to organised and mathematical ways of working, while others need adults to model this way of working. Educators in early childhood services are in an excellent position to provide mathematically rich play opportunities, as well as intentional teaching around concepts and ways of working. This intentional teaching, rather than being didactic, can flow from discussions about children's play projects, stories, games and children's personal experiences. Finger plays and action games, for example, can occur daily as part of routines and transitions. When educators understand the language of maths and mathematical ways of working, daily life in early childhood services is full of opportunities for mathematical conversations.

### Summary

Maths is seen by many educators as a narrow way of thinking that does not easily align with creative and flexible thinking that underpins our early childhood philosophy. However, maths is a creative language that allows us to see the world in new and exciting ways. It is exciting for children to make mathematical discoveries and to feel competent as mathematical meaning makers.

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# Children's Imagination: An Interview

**Melodie Glass**

Manager  
Professional Learning and  
Development, Gowrie NSW

Renowned Author Ursula Kolbe has recently published her third book, **“Children’s imagination: creativity under our noses”**. Along with much loved titles, “Rapunzel’s Supermarket: All about Young Children and Their Art” and “It’s Not A Bird Yet: The Drama of Drawing”, this final book completes a trilogy of work about young children.

In the following interview, Melodie Glass speaks with Ursula Kolbe about her book, documentation, supporting children’s creative development and tips for keeping the creative spirit alive in adulthood.



*Through my work in early childhood both in Australia and abroad, I am aware of how respected and valued your work is in many countries. So firstly, on behalf of the global early childhood community, thank you for writing again! Can you tell us, after your first two books, what led you to focus on children's imagination for this third book?*

Focussing on children's imagination was not how I started. It was only after writing many drafts, deleting thousands of words, that I understood what my anecdotes were telling me to write about! The idea of a third book started years ago when my publisher suggested I write a small one for parents. Unsure where to start, I thought I should learn more about what happens in children's homes. So I invited families to share with me anecdotes and photos of their children engaging with ideas, materials and objects of all kinds. I learned a lot but still a book did not emerge. After almost abandoning the project, it finally dawned on me to ask: *What sparks the imagination?* And that got me going!

As the book progressed I became increasingly aware of how today's pressure on parents and teachers is sidelining play. Being passionate about the importance of imaginative play as the foundation of learning, I saw that I needed to emphasise this aspect throughout the book.

*Your new book is full of enticing and fascinating vignettes of children's experiences and learning. How do you identify a moment that is worth capturing?*

Even the most 'ordinary' observation can reveal something significant. Anything children do or say that furthers my understanding of their thinking fascinates and inspires me to write about it.

Often it's only when I've had time to reflect on my notes and photos that I grasp the underlying significance.

*What suggestions can you give to educators who may feel overwhelmed about what and how much to capture in documentation?*

Begin without expectations. Focus on only one or two children. Write down key points of what you see and hear over a limited period; take photos if possible. Accept what you have observed and give it enough attention to find value in it. What did you learn?

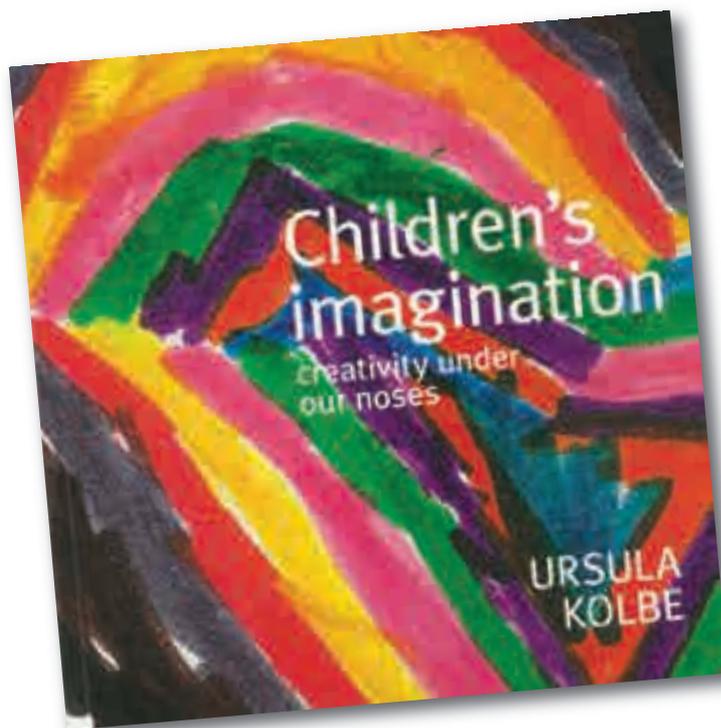
Be aware that your sense of being 'overwhelmed' may affect children. If you're not focussed, relaxed and enjoying the experience, children are unlikely to be happily engaged. Observing is a two way process: you are being observed acutely too! As Aniella (4 years) once said to me, "You like watching me don't you?" Or when Corey (3 years) suddenly said to me, "It's not a bird yet" to make quite sure that I didn't get the wrong idea!

*In your ongoing conversations with Susan Whelan, who provides an insightful commentary from the perspective of a parent in the first part of the book, you often return to the role of the adult. What is your advice to educators and parents in supporting young children's creativity and imagination?*

Listen and watch with interest and empathy, but try to remain quiet (particularly with under-threes, but also under-fives). Educator John Matthews describes this as doing "a special kind of nothing". The warmth of your company says much. Provide unhurried and uninterrupted time for self-invented play, and a limited selection of open-ended materials that can be used in many different ways. See yourself as a co-explorer rather than an instructor.

*In the final pages of the book you encourage the adult reader to "develop your own ways of wondering and imagining" (p85). What is the secret to keeping the creative spirit alive in adulthood?*

Curiosity! As long as you can keep alive a sense of curiosity that inspires you to try something new, you are encouraging yourself to think creatively.



**Ursula Kolbe, "Children's imagination: creativity under our noses" (Peppinot Press, Byron Bay, 2014) is available from Gowrie NSW [www.gowriensw.com.au](http://www.gowriensw.com.au) or Pademelon Press [www.pademelonpress.com.au](http://www.pademelonpress.com.au)**



## Respectful Caregiving with Infants and Toddlers

**Osanna Giang**  
Director  
Nanbaree Child Centre,  
Gowrie NSW

During our centre's recent assessment and rating, we received a rating of 'Exceeding' in the area of relationships with children. After further reflection, and with a desire to continually improve, we made a decision to strengthen our practices by linking and grounding our work to theory and research - we had previously been acting on what felt "right" and what was in the best interests of the child. We connected with Magda Gerber's RIE (Resources for Infant Educators) philosophy with its emphasis on respectful caregiving, relationships and trusting the child – all elements which align with our centre philosophy. The Early Years Learning Framework also identifies secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships with children as one of the principles that underpin good practice (DEEWR, 2009). Relationships, including whether or not children feel safe and supported, directly affect how children form their own identity and, ultimately, their sense of belonging. The principles of Magda Gerber's work and the Early Years Learning Framework have intertwining fundamentals.

We started this journey with all educators doing a self-reflection on their own values when working with children. Typically, everybody wrote the word "respect". When pushed further about what the word 'respect' actually means, educators were not really able to answer. This led to a discussion of how we could respectfully care for infants and toddlers when we had no concept of what "respectful caregiving" actually meant. Educators began their own personal journeys exploring the word and looking carefully at their current practices. A culture of questioning had already existed, and this helped support the new learning and reflections.

To begin with, we carried out a deep analysis of our current practices and reflected on whether or not our practices were respectful of young infants. For example, we discovered that there were times when infant cues were being missed, resulting in overtired or hungry children. Our reflections led to questions:

- *How is this a respectful mutual relationship if we are not regularly meeting the needs of children?*
- *How does this justify a rating of 'Exceeding'?*
- *How can we ensure that children's cues are not missed and their needs are being met?*

This, in turn, led us to reflect on the primary educator system. We know that for children to feel safe and secure, they need to have a strong attachment and connection with a caring adult. The presence of a familiar, primary caregiver reduces stress and can be a supporter of the child and parent attachment relationship (Marty, Readdick, Walters, 2005). We reflected deeply on how we treat young children. For example, do we talk to children about a nappy change or do we just pick them up off the floor, without saying anything? If our philosophy and values state that we respect children, what does that actually look like? We had a lot of work to do, reflective discussions to have, and many practices to improve. As we were examining our own assumptions and practices relating to how we treat children, we worked to keep families involved and to communicate with them. As a team, we discussed and agreed on how we would communicate our practices to families to ensure consistent information was being shared.

As the RIE philosophy is based on being respectful of children, families were intrigued and indeed, there are some aspects of the approach that can be challenging for some adults. For example, this approach values freedom of movement. This implies that children should not be placed in a position that they cannot get into themselves - the idea being that children will naturally get into a position (for example, sitting) once they are ready and have developed the necessary muscles and balance. As this approach can be very different to how families do things at home, we see our role as following children's cues and helping parents to understand why we follow certain practices at this centre.

The RIE philosophy believes that young infants should be given passive objects to explore and engage with rather than active toys. For example, open-ended, everyday objects such as stainless steel bowls, plastic cups, balls and egg cups can be used in a variety of ways while a single purpose object, such as a pop up toy, can only be used as a pop up toy. We started to question the validity of purchasing active toys that do not encourage imaginative play. This thinking has changed the way that we purchase resources and what we do with existing "toys". Any toy that we deem as close ended, we donate to charitable organisations. We also purchase open-ended objects from charitable organisations, thus embedding sustainable practices into our environment. Not only do we donate unwanted goods to people who want them, we also purchase other people's unwanted goods - a real life example of one person's trash being another person's treasure! Someone's unwanted goods became literally our treasure. Magda Gerber (1986) states, "play objects for infants need to be those which the infant can look at, touch, grasp, hold, mouth, and manipulate endlessly, never repeating the same experience. It is easy to find such objects in your own kitchen or in a dime store."

Access to research and documentation helped to support educators in exploring and understanding the information and the changes required, while a mix of readings, team meetings, videos and role modelling helped to cater for all types of learners. In addition, we kept a team reflective journal so that we could follow and reflect on our own

learning journey. Some issues that were raised were easy to overcome, others took more time and discussion as staff worked to understand the concepts of respectful caregiving.

To make this journey more interesting and personal for staff, they were also given the responsibility to do their own research. As Director, that put me in a vulnerable position - what if staff found research that contradicted the RIE approach? But I felt that I needed to trust my team, to believe that all the learning and reflecting that we had accomplished so far had made an impact, and that we all shared the same vision and direction.

The work that we are currently undertaking with infants and toddlers supports our core values of:

- basing our practice on evidence and research;
- being open to new ideas and approaches;
- leading by example.

While our relationships with children have always been strong we feel that historically infants and toddlers have not been treated with the same respect as older children. We needed theory to support and ground our practices and our management has been very supportive in budgeting and organising for two educators to attend the RIE foundations training in New Zealand. This was a substantial expenditure and demonstrated support and commitment to creating quality and respectful environments for all children.

We only embarked on this journey six months ago and we have already seen a dramatic difference in practice. Children are calmer and have a sense of independence and confidence because their primary educator is close by and will meet their individual needs when required. Educators are much more attuned to children's needs and their cues, and are able to meet their emotional and physical needs. Overall, we have found that respectful caregiving promotes responsive and trusting relationships with children and their families. Through this experience, children quickly understand what to expect and predict and, as the new environment and relationships become more familiar, are able to relax, explore and take risks in their learning.

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## Planning for Integrated Infant and Toddler Programs

**Chelsea Hallion**

Educator

Acacia Infant-Toddler Room

**Eleanor Scrafton**

Children's Program Leader

Gowrie SA Child Centre, Underdale

In January 2011, Gowrie SA integrated our infants with our toddler-aged children to create rooms which offered integrated programs for children from birth to three years. Since this change, there has been time for educators to reflect on what planning looks like for children within this age range. Rather than addressing planning for children within isolated developmental ranges, it has made us plan for a holistic child, one who is a competent and capable learner. We have come to see planning a program of learning for children as an ever-evolving journey, where we can never stand back from our programs and see them as a finished piece of work. We see key elements for planning in this way as: keeping in mind the image of a capable child; appreciating the environment as the child's third teacher; and working together in partnership with children, families and the broader staff team.



## Children as Empowered Partners in their Learning

Children enter the world of our Centre having travelled a whole journey of their own. They bring with them a background of learning about the world, the foundations of which their families have set up. When we are planning the program for children at our site, we try to hold in our mind this idea, and our planning reflects our vision of children as capable, competent, respected and valued citizens. When families join a room, the initial steps in planning for their child's learning is for the primary educator to sit down with the family and learn about their home life. We want to learn about each family's hopes, dreams and desires for their child and share this ideal as well, so that we are fostering these in our everyday actions with their child.

In order to engage children as partners in planning for their learning, our educators recognise their role in listening to children. It is important for educators to listen to children, and not just hear their verbal language, but recognise the unspoken, or the not yet spoken (Gandini 1998). We do a lot of work around capturing the voices of our toddlers in Talking and Thinking Floorbooks, but we also wonder whether we are always capturing the voices of the infants in our programs. When people ask us about how we provide an integrated infant and toddler program, they often see a challenge in finding the balance in meeting an infant's needs and those of a toddler's. In our infant-toddler rooms, one can see an infant crawling inside to find their primary educator, while next to them a toddler has created a campsite out of sourced twigs. In this moment, our educators look at both children and see them as equally capable in their own way at leading their learning. We have found that having our door open to the outside throughout the day, has enriched our programs and empowered children to lead their own initiatives, through

choice, unhurried time and space for learning and exploration. With the door open for most of our day, children are supported to make choices to guide their own learning and they are not limited to educator expectations of what happens in a particular space at a particular time.

## Challenging Learning Environments

Our environments reflect the high expectations for children that we hold in our minds, and grow out of the children's ideas and interests we have documented. In the Acacia Room, one child's interest in creating a space to have a campfire has since grown into some project work, with the group of children becoming engrossed in the learning and creation of spaces that reflect camping and campfires. We first created a campfire space outside, which led to the introduction of a makeshift boat to catch fish to cook on the campfire. This has since led to an outdoor kitchen space near the campfire, sourcing of a real tent for our indoor play space, and the invitation for families to contribute ideas, equipment and photos from any experiences they have of camping. The ongoing learning and extension of play spaces has created a world for children to explore their ideas and provide the opportunities for educators to scaffold and extend children's learning. There is a value in creating sustained and purposeful environments so that children have the opportunity to revisit and reinforce their learning over time.

Viewing children as highly capable makes us create challenging opportunities for them. Because we recognise infants as equally capable as older children, we know that they will be able to negotiate an environment that includes experiences that are targeted towards older children, and we recognise our role in supporting them at their own level to negotiate this world. In our outdoor learning space, we recently sourced large tractor tyres to create sustainably sourced climbing opportunities.



Although the children who are still crawling are not ready to stand on the top, like some of our children love doing, they are able to crawl through the holes and explore their bodies in the space. Our indoor spaces reflect this vision of children through the materials which are on offer to them, such as scissors, glue, paint and the purposeful way they are set out in the room. For example, setting mirrors on a low table with a vase of flowers and paper and pencils, supports some children to explore still life drawings and others to experiment with the reflection of themselves and flowers in the mirrors. Essentially, we aim to create an environment which can be a third teacher for children (Strong-Wilson & Ellis 2007). Through these examples, there is a common thread of sustainably sourced materials and real tools which enrich the program and learning environments.

### The Journey of the Educator through the Planning Process

Shared responsibility and vision is integral in the holistic nature of the room. In bringing together a new team recently, the Acacia Room embarked on a journey to come up with a shared vision for the room, based on concepts of what we wanted the room to look like, feel like and sound like for children, families, educators and the community. After bringing this together in the form of a chart, we distributed it to families to add comments, curious to collaborate with them around creating a shared vision and an intentional space for their children. Families fed back to educators on a range of concepts, wanting the room to maintain its aesthetic appeal, a focus on nature and outdoor play, the daily inclusion of messy play and a range of challenging experiences for their children. This form of “ongoing and deep reflection on practice” (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013:124) engages and empowers educators to take ownership over spaces and the learning occurring within them.

Planning for infant-toddler programs required educators who had entered into the shared visioning process to come together and understand the pedagogical theory of natural environments and challenging experiences in order to put it into practice. This allowed all staff to value and appreciate this change and the possibilities of growth it presented to children. The planning cycle is seen as a continual process of change, where educators are set up with a mindset of constant reflection, evaluation and improvement. Educators are always thinking about individual children and whether they are being seen and responded to, and if the current documentation is meeting their needs. Educators in the Acacia Room were wondering how they could foster the growing understandings around feelings and emotions for the children within the room. By intentionally exploring this challenge, educators came up with the idea of facilitating an ongoing project to explore feelings with the children.

Educators’ acknowledgement of their own challenges, concerns and wonderings allows them to see themselves on an ongoing learning journey, just as children are. Educators in any setting have the potential to view the child as a holistic, capable individual and create a stimulating and challenging environment for them, regardless of age.

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# An Action Research Project Inspires and Motivates

**Casey Rendell,  
Megan Corbell & Suzy Piwen**  
St Morris Community Child Care Centre,  
Adelaide

As part of an invitation to develop and explore an action research project relevant to their own service, educators were invited to be part of an exciting opportunity to meet with Wendy Lee, an educator with over 40 years of experience, and a worldwide reputation for excellence. Many services responded, and undertook an exploration of documentation, curriculum, pedagogy and communication. The journey involved two meetings as a group, and innumerable hours of research, development and collaboration within and between services.



What follows here is a snapshot of the journey undertaken by educators from St Morris Community Child Care Centre Incorporated, a community based centre with an enrolment of approximately 120 families. Three educators undertook an action research project entitled “Building Successful and Passionate Writers”.

Initially, the team had many questions:

- How can we involve and inspire staff, families and children with our project?
- How can we encourage all educators to write stories that are descriptive, meaningful and have depth?
- How can we go about sharing stories with other educators?
- What can we include in children's individual folders?
- How can we change our way of thinking about Learning Stories and how they are written and presented within our setting?

Through discussion the team identified three main points of focus:

- involving parents
- involving children, and
- involving staff.

At the conclusion of the formal stage of the project the lead educators, Megan, Suzy and Casey came together to offer their thoughts and reflections on their learning journey throughout the project.

## The project

After settling on a focus of writing and documentation, “Building Successful and Passionate Writers”, we struggled a bit to come up with what to do next. To give us some guidance, we developed and sent out two questionnaires, one to families and one to educators, and we used the data from the questionnaires to highlight the areas we could improve in. Once we had this direction and a plan, we found that the project flowed well.

We began by sharing some of our stories with each other at staff meetings so that we could all see different formats, styles of writing, language and ideas – a practice that had such benefits that we have continued to share stories on a regular basis. We initially faced a number of challenges, particularly around the areas of inspiration and motivation. At times we would find inspiration easy to come by, at other times we would find it more difficult. Having each other to bounce ideas off of was useful and helped us to keep our motivation.

We are still working on how we can get children involved in adding to their portfolios as this was something that we found challenging over the course of the project, especially with the younger age groups. We also believe it is important that children have access to their portfolios throughout their time at child care, and we are currently working on how to do this with each age group.

### **Following an interval of approximately six months, once the formal aspect of the project had been completed, we came together to share and record our critical reflections:**

- The biggest impact for our team is in terms of our connections with families. When we communicate with our families, our interactions are much richer. With some families, in particular, where in the past they would only communicate to us about sleep and hats and missing socks, they are now writing their own stories, and we are writing back. The communication and interactions are more meaningful, and the connections between home and our service are stronger. These stronger connections mean that we are thinking more deeply about the documentation process and about our audience. When writing now, there are questions in our minds such as, “Who am I writing this for?” and “What does this piece of documentation add to the story of this child’s journey?”
- As a result of these connections, we feel that both educator and family documentation is more powerful. We are noticing the journey of the children through the service more, and this has impacted on the way in which we conduct transitions. The folders support the transitions of the children during their time at St Morris, but also when they leave the service to join the world of school. Many families tell us that the children who used to attend the service are still accessing their portfolios well into middle childhood.

- We have become co-learners with the families who are showing us new ways of laying out our documentation and giving us different ideas about what our documentation might look like. Through seeing the stories families give us, our focus has been sharpened, and some of the things noticed and celebrated in families give us ideas of dispositions for learning and child led interests to watch out for.
- We are sharing inspiring stories and examples at our staff meetings, so that our personal learning is reaching the whole staff team. We have implemented a buddy system for writing and sharing our stories, and we offer constructive feedback about them, both within our buddy pairs and as a whole staff team. This has helped to shape us as a community of learners – we are being more reflective and reading our stories through several different lenses, for example, the parent, the child, the new educator.
- One of the ideas Wendy suggested was to place some information about new primary caregivers into folders when children are making transitions from room to room. We have since implemented this, and feel that it has enhanced our connections to families – it's like pieces of a puzzle coming together. Having our pictures on the wall and on the doors of the rooms is facilitating this connection too. Families are talking with their children about who will be in the room that day, and which room they will be moving to next, which is also supporting peaceful transitions.
- The connections with families that are new to our service have also been more positive since we began this way of working. We are able to share examples of existing documentation with new families, and the new families can gain a feel for our philosophy and way of working through the documentation we share. As parents and children become more settled within the service, parents become proud of sharing pieces of their home life with us – they can see the value in what we're working on with their children during the day, and we can see what learning and living is celebrated at home.

### Highlights

From the beginning, the biggest highlight for us was getting the chance to meet Wendy Lee who was such a big part of the development of Learning Stories and how they are used in early childhood education sites throughout the world. We found Wendy inspirational and passionate and we were very excited about getting the opportunity to learn from her 'first hand', and to then bring her level of inspiration and passion back to our staff team. We really enjoyed getting to look at all of the examples that Wendy brought with her from the different sites and people she has worked with. It gave us new perspectives and ideas to reflect on.

Throughout the action research project we were lucky enough to meet educators from different sites that were also involved in the project. By sharing presentations and

examples we were able to get ideas of different environments, different ways of working and documenting and to see pictures and video footage of the learning happening at other sites.

Another big highlight for us was being asked if our presentation could be used as an example in future training by both Wendy Lee and The Gowrie Training Centre. In our own centre educators are continuing to use room email accounts to exchange documentation between parents and educators, and part of each staff meeting continues to be dedicated to reflective thinking and discussion about documentation and what has inspired us.

Undoubtedly, the biggest highlight for us has been the response of our families. Families' engagement with portfolios has seen them not only adding documentation to the portfolios and sharing information with us, but also involving their children and reaching out to involve extended family members.

### Where to from here?

We believe that learning is a continuous, life-long process and we will always be looking for ways to improve and expand on what we do, how we document, and the sources of our inspiration. This project offered us, above all, a great opportunity to extend our learning. In the future we would like to network with other centres to see what their documentation processes look like. We're also interested in exploring how other centres foster and grow connections with their families and communities and how they get feedback from their parents and families. We will be sending out a survey to parents who have been a part of the journey over the past 18 months, to get some ideas about how parents feel about the process and if their sense of connection to us, and the service has grown. We would like to know what has changed from their perspective. Long term, perhaps in 2015 or 2016, we would like to gather together with the other participants in the Wendy Lee action research project group, to see how their projects have impacted on their practice and in their communities.



# Parent and Baby Groups Supporting Families

**Brenda Chew &  
Martine Pitt**  
Communicare Inc. WA



The 2009 implementation of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC formerly known as the AEDI) has generated productive partnerships across education, health and community services. The information made available through the AEDC has influenced early childhood initiatives at every level, with targeted programs contributing to better outcomes for children.

The results of the 2012 AEDC indicated that there are high numbers of children in the suburbs surrounding Karawara, Perth who are developmentally vulnerable in two or more of the AEDC developmental domains. In addition, the SEIFA index (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) for these suburbs registers as 'high', signifying a population with large numbers of families from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Both the AEDC and the SEIFA data highlight a need to offer particular support to families and children in these suburbs, and past initiatives have shown that appropriate programs will have a significant, long-term impact on children's health, wellbeing and development.

Acting on this information Communicare Inc., a not-for-profit organisation, in partnership with Medicare Local, has designed and is delivering ten Parents and Babies Groups in the South-East Metropolitan Perth suburbs. The participants are local families, parents and children (from birth to 18 months) and their siblings (below school age). Each Parent and Baby Group session is delivered for two hours per week, 48 weeks of the year with each session supporting parents to interact with other families and engage with their children in developmentally appropriate play experiences. In addition, based on the needs and interests of the parents, a range of parenting issues are discussed and special topics are explored during the sessions. These topics may include:

- health including immunisation, breast feeding, nutrition etc.
- attachment
- sleep routines
- early brain development
- Australian Early Development Census
- the value of play
- promoting early literacy and numeracy
- language and communication
- budgeting

### Some feedback from the program

One of the Parents and Babies Group sessions at Karawara included a toy-making workshop. With the participants keen to be involved in a creative activity, the facilitators designed a workshop with benefits for both parents and children and with an added twist – a toy-making workshop with toys to be made from everyday recycled products. Sensory bottles, beans bags, rattles and fine motor toys were made from water bottles, empty containers, ribbon and wrapping paper.

Besides providing an opportunity for participants to express themselves creatively, participants also learnt about the benefits of play for their children. The simple, non-commercial toys provided opportunities for children to

practise and master skills. The non-directed play showed participants that it is okay for children to explore without any particular goal in sight, and that free play supports children to develop self-concepts and promotes self-esteem.

Facilitators were able to talk about the many other benefits of play including the development of sensory awareness, social and pro-social skills, cognitive skills, physical skills, expressive and receptive language, imagination and creativity.

### Feedback from the workshop

The workshop, which helped to bring the group closer together, was met with enthusiasm from the participants. Feedback included:

*“ I really enjoyed the toy-making workshop. It had been a while since I have done anything creative (which I love) so it definitely got me inspired to start again. Since the workshop I have been keeping empty containers and tins, its amazing what you can create with some tape, ribbon and just simple household items. Definitely more affordable and entertaining for my child and the good feeling I have made it for them too! ”*

*“ I have little time for crafts at home so it was nice to have the opportunity to be creative. ”*

*“ We all left with a toy and I gained confidence about my ability to create crafts. ”*

*“ It is easy to make toys from recycled items – what a great way to find another use and save the environment! ”*

**As this workshop was such a success it was repeated at the Bentley Parents and Babies Group and the Cannington Parents and Babies Group. The latter group in particular includes a number of families who speak English as their second language. Through this toy-making activity all the participants were able to share their interests, regardless of their culture and language. Communicare believes that activities like this toy-making workshop help to reduce barriers, build confidence and strengthen relationships.**

# Responding positively to sexual behaviours helps protect children:

## Tips for early childhood professionals

**Melanie Grabski**  
Early Childhood and Parenting  
Education Coordinator  
Family Planning Queensland

Each state and territory is likely to have their own courses for educators regarding child protection issues. It is important to use state based information first when considering exploratory and sexual questions and behaviours of children in your service, and whether they are appropriate or not. Another very important factor is to ensure you are having conversations with families about the types of information and language that they find appropriate for use with their children. These conversations then guide how you respond to children's questions, behaviours and play, as well as building up the trusting relationship with families needed if you have to have more difficult conversations together. This article discusses a program developed in Queensland which may provide useful additional information.

Has a child ever asked, "How does the baby get in mummy's tummy?" Have you noticed that when you change a nappy the child's hand goes straight to touch their vulva or penis? Perhaps a child in your group pulls their pants down or attempts to touch the private parts of others. If you are concerned about a child's safety because of their sexual behaviour or knowledge, how should you respond?

First of all, don't panic. Children do not suddenly become sexual beings when they reach puberty or turn 16, 18 or 21. Their sexual development is ongoing from the day they are born and most sexual behaviours are a normal, healthy part of a child's development. The key is to be confident and comfortable in responding to children's behaviour. This creates a positive, protective environment that supports the child's development, while meeting the child protection requirements of the National Quality Framework.

Admittedly, this is easier said than done. An important step for many adults is to acknowledge the concept of childhood sexuality. This helps because sexual behaviours can be mapped by age, enabling early childhood professionals to identify age-appropriate sexual behaviours. It is possible to remove the guesswork, support healthy sexuality and provide protection from harm or abuse. This is supported by the Traffic Lights® guide to responding positively to sexual behaviours.

## The Traffic Lights® guide: Responding positively to sexual behaviours

The Traffic Lights® guide provides a framework for adults to identify, understand and respond to children's sexual behaviours. It uses the traffic light colours green, orange and red to categorise sexual behaviours and help adults to respond.

- **Green** represents developmentally healthy sexual behaviours and provides opportunities to talk, explain and support.
- **Orange** represents sexual behaviours that give cause for concern and require further observation and targeted support.
- **Red** represents sexual behaviours that are problematic or harmful and indicate a need for immediate protective intervention.

The Traffic Lights® guide can be used to help identify if a sexual behaviour is green, orange or red, it helps to explain why the behaviours may be happening and it gives suggestions about what can be done in response to that behaviour. Here are some examples of how the Traffic Lights® guide can be used to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours.

### Green Light scenario

Melissa (aged 3) points to Jose (aged 3) while he is going to the toilet and asks "What's that?" This would be green light behaviour. It is understandable that young children are curious about bodies. They are surrounded by them! To respond to Melissa's curiosity, answer her question briefly, factually and positively by saying something like, "That is a boy's private part called a penis." You can provide further support and guidance by talking with all children about the names of private body parts, the rules about touch and who they can talk to about bodies. The resource package *Where do I start?* can help with this.

### Orange light scenario

Ari (aged 4) will regularly follow Kay and Marg to the toilets. He says he likes to watch them 'wee'. Marg says that he sometimes tries to touch her 'down there'. Although it is normal for children to be curious about other people's bodies, the key words in this scenario, 'regularly' and 'sometimes tries to touch' mean that this is an orange light behaviour. Ari needs to know clearly that it is not okay to touch other people's private parts. It is important that Ari has an opportunity to learn about bodies in an age appropriate way and that he learns the rules about touch. The book, *Everyone's got a bottom* can help with this. Ari will also need to be monitored when he uses the bathroom to ensure that he is following the rules about touch. Other children would also benefit by learning the rules about touch and who to tell. Communicate with your centre management to work out how best to monitor and support Ari and the other children.

### Red light scenario

Lila (aged 3) shows you her new teddy and tells you that her mummy's boyfriend gave it to her because she has been a good girl and not told anyone about their touching game. This is a red light scenario. It must be investigated and you need to follow through with reporting requirements.

This can be stressful for all involved so providing support where you can is important. Using the Traffic Lights® guide to communicate with staff can help you navigate through a situation like this, step by step. Don't forget to also provide positive and universal relationships and sexuality education to all children in your centre.

### Talking about relationships and sexuality helps protect children

Relationships and sexuality education is incredibly important. It helps protect children from sexual abuse. It improves sexual health outcomes. Finally, it provides information and experience in talking about these topics in a supported way. It helps children feel more comfortable and confident in their bodies, which will be vital later as they negotiate relationships with friends, health professionals and partners.

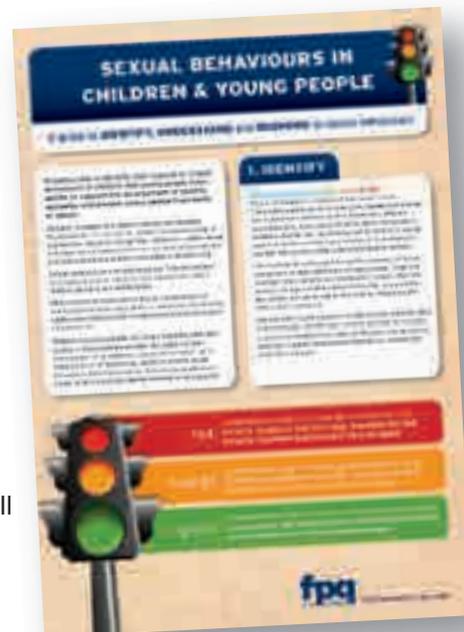
Ultimately, it is worthwhile for early childhood services to proactively identify and develop their approach in supporting healthy sexual development. It will be easier for the educators at a centre to respond confidently and comfortably if they are familiar with the subject matter and the developmental 'trajectory' of the children in their care.

### Resources that can help

- Family Planning Queensland's (FPQ) Traffic Lights® resources and training include webinars, a brochure and a resource book called *Is this normal?* These and other resources to support children's sexual development are available through the FPQ's website, ([www.fpq.com.au](http://www.fpq.com.au)).
- The Raising Children Network ([www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)) provides general information on raising sexually healthy children.

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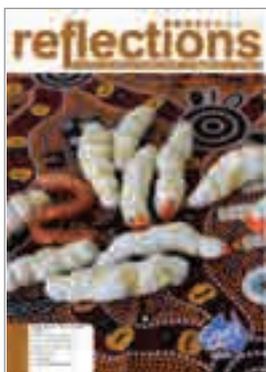
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# National and International CONFERENCE UPDATE



Summer 2013



Autumn 2014



Winter 2014

## 29th Early Childhood Australia National Conference

*Seasons of Change*

4 – 7 September 2014

Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, Melbourne, Vic

<http://www.eacaconference.com.au>

## ISSA 2014 International Conference

*Creating a society for all: re-considering early childhood services*

10 - 12 October 2014

Danubius Hotel Flamenco, Budapest, Hungary

<http://www.issa2014.hu/>

## 2014 Family Day Care Australia Symposium

*Visions for Leadership*

24-25 October 2014

Stamford Grand, Glenelg, Adelaide, SA

<http://symposium.fdca.com.au/>

## 2014 Australian Association for Environmental Education National Conference

*Sustainability: Smart Strategies for the 21C*

2 - 4 November 2014

Hotel Grand Chancellor, Hobart, Tas

<http://www.aae.org.au/about/conference-2010/>

## Department of Child Law of Leiden University

*International Conference: 25 Years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*

17-19 November 2014

Leiden Law School, Leiden University, The Netherlands

<http://law.leiden.edu/organisation/private-law/child-law/25yearsccr/>

## 2014 Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity Conference

*Embracing diverse identities*

21-22 November 2014

The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Vic

[http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/ycr/honoring\\_child\\_equity\\_conference\\_2014/](http://web.education.unimelb.edu.au/ycr/honoring_child_equity_conference_2014/)

## Gowrie Australia

Promoting and supporting quality  
services for all children.

## Our Mission

Nationally committed to  
optimal outcomes for  
children and families.

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Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to the spring issue of *Reflections* and a new wave of articles to inspire practice, to challenge thinking and provoke reflection and self-evaluation.

We start with Sue Southey who introduces a new way of thinking about maths that is creative and fun, and supports children to make discoveries that will enrich their maths experiences through their years of study and beyond.

Melodie Glass shares a conversation with Ursula Kolbe, questioning her about her new book, "Children's Imagination: creativity under our noses". Ursula gives an insight into the writing process, talks about the skills involved in observing children, the power of creative thinking and the importance of nurturing it.

This issue also features three articles focusing on infants and toddlers. Osanna Giang describes a reflective journey involving an exploration of Magda Gerber's work and the process of enquiry and self-evaluation as her team work to implement the RIE (Resources for Infant Educators) approach as a basis for respectful caregiving. Chelsea Hallion and Eleanor Scrafton discuss the many advantages of an integrated infant and toddler program including the central view of children as highly capable. Finally, a not-for-profit organisation Communicare Inc, describes a series of Baby and Parent Groups aimed at supporting families, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, with weekly discussion, play and activity sessions.

Casey Rendell, Megan Corbell and Suzy Piwen share their experience of embarking on an action research project focusing on writing and documentation. Based on the work of Wendy Lee their project, "Building Successful and Passionate Writers", brought many challenges but unexpected and ongoing learnings.

Melanie Grabski from Family Planning Queensland describes a program for identifying and responding positively to children's sexual behaviours. The information in this article will support practitioners to focus on this subject with a more confident view.

The early childhood education and care sector continues to experience change through a range of reviews and reports. The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning draft report is one of great importance to the sector and was made available publicly for scrutiny and comment. This has provided the opportunity for educators, families, and the broader community to have further input into the inquiry by ensuring that all points of view that have been put forward are considered. Further information on the Productivity Commission Inquiry is available on the website: <http://pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/childcare>

The success of any inquiry or review depends upon the participation of people and organisations, which means taking an active role in Australia's public policy formation. All those working with young children during the most formative years of their development, and committed to supporting the best possible outcomes for children, must continue to advocate and respond to reports to ensure the rights of all children are at the forefront of policy and practice.

For those readers who may be attending the Early Childhood Australia Conference in Melbourne in September, Gowrie Australia will have a booth in the exhibition area. Please come along and introduce yourself to the team. We look forward to meeting and speaking with you.

**Jane Bourne**

on behalf of Gowrie Australia.

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## Maths is more than Counting

**Sue Southey**  
Co-Director  
Springwood Community  
Kindergarten, Brisbane

Curriculum reforms both in Australia and overseas are promoting increased emphasis on numeracy education in the early years of children's development (van Oers, 2009). Teachers are expected to prioritise numeracy and literacy education in an attempt to ensure that children are not left behind academically, and to improve Australia's results on international comparisons of numeracy and literacy performance outcomes (Petriwskyj, O'Gorman, & Turunen, 2013). This emphasis on outcomes is placing pressure on before school educators to develop mathematical skills and knowledge in young children (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009).



The way in which educators understand maths strongly influences the types of learning experiences they provide. In the rush to prepare children for school based learning, some early childhood educators are reverting to 'skill and drill' practices that do not align with the intent of the Early Years Learning Framework. An emphasis on numeracy leads educators to value rote skills such as counting and naming shapes. An alternative framing of mathematical thinking is as a language that allows children to see their world using particular processes and ways of working. This view supports a much wider range of learning experiences that link children's everyday experiences with mathematical concepts.

Mathematical thinking takes time to develop and requires educators to understand their role as maths teachers. There are key processes that enable young children to make meaning about their world mathematically:

### Mathematical ways of working

As a language, maths has particular processes and ways of viewing the world. In contrast to literacy or creative arts, a maths framing seeks to limit information about objects and reduce complexity. For example, when viewing a flower from a mathematical perspective, attributes such as shape, colour, height, and number of petals may be important information, however the environmental impact of the flower, its spiritual significance or biological name may not be relevant. This does not mean these things are not important, but from a mathematical perspective they provide too much information to think abstractly about the flower.

### Building a mathematical language

Language is the key to supporting children to describe and to be able to think abstractly about objects. Educators can support children from a very early age to begin to think mathematically by being present in their play. As they interact with children they provide the descriptive language that links the children's sensory experience to the vocabulary that describes it. This scaffolding of children's experience allows children to build a vocabulary that enables them to attend to attributes of objects in their world. This is the beginning of thinking about objects in abstract ways.

### Supporting children to see relationships and patterns

By reducing the amount of information that children attend to, they begin to see new patterns and relationships. These relationships are often abstract and require children to "chunk" information to think about objects in new ways. These relationships include:

- attaching number to a group of objects;
- matching objects or sets of objects;
- seeing relationships between objects or groups of objects, for example, comparisons of size, weight, volume or spatial position;
- creating hierarchies based on an attribute, for example placing rocks in a series from large to small;
- predicting the likelihood of an event occurring (probability);
- creating patterns.

To allow children to make these mathematical connections they need both opportunities for play with open-ended materials and intentional teaching that introduces these mathematical concepts in fun and engaging ways.

### Valuing maths in our everyday lives

Children recreate their experiences of their everyday lives in role play, for example, talking about time, pretending to cook, imitating adults measuring or using cash registers in shopping play. While children may not fully understand the maths underpinning these real life applications, they are beginning to experience the importance of numeracy in their everyday lives. Educators can respond to teaching possibilities in this emergent play by building mathematical conversations and instigating mathematical investigations.

### Representing their thinking

As children begin to show an interest in drawing and 'mark making', they can be encouraged to represent their mathematical thinking using drawings, marks and symbols. In contrast to visual arts representations, maths graphics reduce the amount of detail to record minimal amounts of information such as tallies, personal graphics or simple drawings. According to Carruthers and Worthington (2006), children's mark making allows children to record their mathematical discoveries in individual and personal ways. This mark making supports children to think and record their discoveries and investigations. With experience children move to standard written symbols that align with school practices.

### The interplay of play and direct teaching

Mathematical thinking takes time to develop. Some children are intuitively drawn to organised and mathematical ways of working, while others need adults to model this way of working. Educators in early childhood services are in an excellent position to provide mathematically rich play opportunities, as well as intentional teaching around concepts and ways of working. This intentional teaching, rather than being didactic, can flow from discussions about children's play projects, stories, games and children's personal experiences. Finger plays and action games, for example, can occur daily as part of routines and transitions. When educators understand the language of maths and mathematical ways of working, daily life in early childhood services is full of opportunities for mathematical conversations.

### Summary

Maths is seen by many educators as a narrow way of thinking that does not easily align with creative and flexible thinking that underpins our early childhood philosophy. However, maths is a creative language that allows us to see the world in new and exciting ways. It is exciting for children to make mathematical discoveries and to feel competent as mathematical meaning makers.

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*Through my work in early childhood both in Australia and abroad, I am aware of how respected and valued your work is in many countries. So firstly, on behalf of the global early childhood community, thank you for writing again! Can you tell us, after your first two books, what led you to focus on children's imagination for this third book?*

Focussing on children's imagination was not how I started. It was only after writing many drafts, deleting thousands of words, that I understood what my anecdotes were telling me to write about! The idea of a third book started years ago when my publisher suggested I write a small one for parents. Unsure where to start, I thought I should learn more about what happens in children's homes. So I invited families to share with me anecdotes and photos of their children engaging with ideas, materials and objects of all kinds. I learned a lot but still a book did not emerge. After almost abandoning the project, it finally dawned on me to ask: *What sparks the imagination?* And that got me going!

As the book progressed I became increasingly aware of how today's pressure on parents and teachers is sidelining play. Being passionate about the importance of imaginative play as the foundation of learning, I saw that I needed to emphasise this aspect throughout the book.

*Your new book is full of enticing and fascinating vignettes of children's experiences and learning. How do you identify a moment that is worth capturing?*

Even the most 'ordinary' observation can reveal something significant. Anything children do or say that furthers my understanding of their thinking fascinates and inspires me to write about it.

Often it's only when I've had time to reflect on my notes and photos that I grasp the underlying significance.

*What suggestions can you give to educators who may feel overwhelmed about what and how much to capture in documentation?*

Begin without expectations. Focus on only one or two children. Write down key points of what you see and hear over a limited period; take photos if possible. Accept what you have observed and give it enough attention to find value in it. What did you learn?

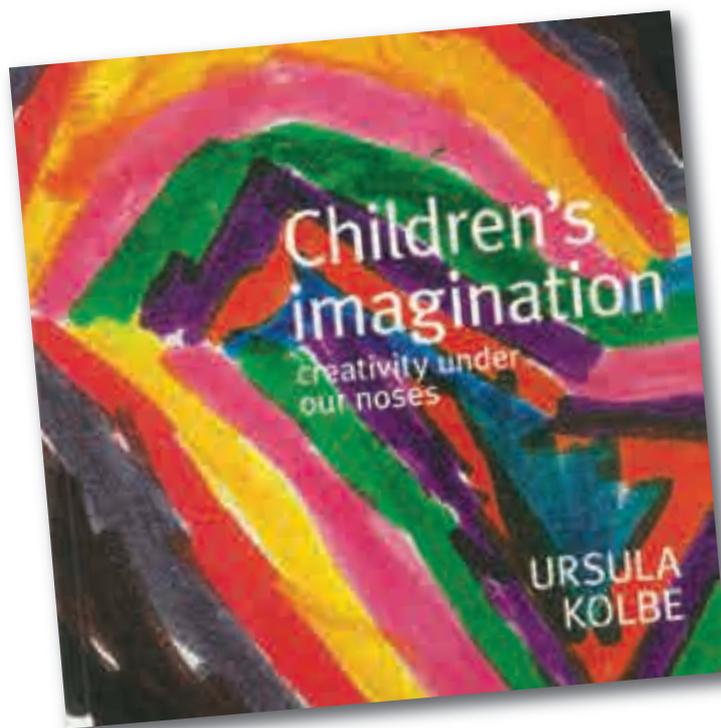
Be aware that your sense of being 'overwhelmed' may affect children. If you're not focussed, relaxed and enjoying the experience, children are unlikely to be happily engaged. Observing is a two way process: you are being observed acutely too! As Aniella (4 years) once said to me, "You like watching me don't you?" Or when Corey (3 years) suddenly said to me, "It's not a bird yet" to make quite sure that I didn't get the wrong idea!

*In your ongoing conversations with Susan Whelan, who provides an insightful commentary from the perspective of a parent in the first part of the book, you often return to the role of the adult. What is your advice to educators and parents in supporting young children's creativity and imagination?*

Listen and watch with interest and empathy, but try to remain quiet (particularly with under-threes, but also under-fives). Educator John Matthews describes this as doing "a special kind of nothing". The warmth of your company says much. Provide unhurried and uninterrupted time for self-invented play, and a limited selection of open-ended materials that can be used in many different ways. See yourself as a co-explorer rather than an instructor.

*In the final pages of the book you encourage the adult reader to "develop your own ways of wondering and imagining" (p85). What is the secret to keeping the creative spirit alive in adulthood?*

Curiosity! As long as you can keep alive a sense of curiosity that inspires you to try something new, you are encouraging yourself to think creatively.



**Ursula Kolbe, "Children's imagination: creativity under our noses" (Peppinot Press, Byron Bay, 2014) is available from Gowrie NSW [www.gowriensw.com.au](http://www.gowriensw.com.au) or Pademelon Press [www.pademelonpress.com.au](http://www.pademelonpress.com.au)**

This, in turn, led us to reflect on the primary educator system. We know that for children to feel safe and secure, they need to have a strong attachment and connection with a caring adult. The presence of a familiar, primary caregiver reduces stress and can be a supporter of the child and parent attachment relationship (Marty, Readdick, Walters, 2005). We reflected deeply on how we treat young children. For example, do we talk to children about a nappy change or do we just pick them up off the floor, without saying anything? If our philosophy and values state that we respect children, what does that actually look like? We had a lot of work to do, reflective discussions to have, and many practices to improve. As we were examining our own assumptions and practices relating to how we treat children, we worked to keep families involved and to communicate with them. As a team, we discussed and agreed on how we would communicate our practices to families to ensure consistent information was being shared.

As the RIE philosophy is based on being respectful of children, families were intrigued and indeed, there are some aspects of the approach that can be challenging for some adults. For example, this approach values freedom of movement. This implies that children should not be placed in a position that they cannot get into themselves - the idea being that children will naturally get into a position (for example, sitting) once they are ready and have developed the necessary muscles and balance. As this approach can be very different to how families do things at home, we see our role as following children's cues and helping parents to understand why we follow certain practices at this centre.

The RIE philosophy believes that young infants should be given passive objects to explore and engage with rather than active toys. For example, open-ended, everyday objects such as stainless steel bowls, plastic cups, balls and egg cups can be used in a variety of ways while a single purpose object, such as a pop up toy, can only be used as a pop up toy. We started to question the validity of purchasing active toys that do not encourage imaginative play. This thinking has changed the way that we purchase resources and what we do with existing "toys". Any toy that we deem as close ended, we donate to charitable organisations. We also purchase open-ended objects from charitable organisations, thus embedding sustainable practices into our environment. Not only do we donate unwanted goods to people who want them, we also purchase other people's unwanted goods - a real life example of one person's trash being another person's treasure! Someone's unwanted goods became literally our treasure. Magda Gerber (1986) states, "play objects for infants need to be those which the infant can look at, touch, grasp, hold, mouth, and manipulate endlessly, never repeating the same experience. It is easy to find such objects in your own kitchen or in a dime store."

Access to research and documentation helped to support educators in exploring and understanding the information and the changes required, while a mix of readings, team meetings, videos and role modelling helped to cater for all types of learners. In addition, we kept a team reflective journal so that we could follow and reflect on our own

learning journey. Some issues that were raised were easy to overcome, others took more time and discussion as staff worked to understand the concepts of respectful caregiving.

To make this journey more interesting and personal for staff, they were also given the responsibility to do their own research. As Director, that put me in a vulnerable position - what if staff found research that contradicted the RIE approach? But I felt that I needed to trust my team, to believe that all the learning and reflecting that we had accomplished so far had made an impact, and that we all shared the same vision and direction.

The work that we are currently undertaking with infants and toddlers supports our core values of:

- basing our practice on evidence and research;
- being open to new ideas and approaches;
- leading by example.

While our relationships with children have always been strong we feel that historically infants and toddlers have not been treated with the same respect as older children. We needed theory to support and ground our practices and our management has been very supportive in budgeting and organising for two educators to attend the RIE foundations training in New Zealand. This was a substantial expenditure and demonstrated support and commitment to creating quality and respectful environments for all children.

We only embarked on this journey six months ago and we have already seen a dramatic difference in practice. Children are calmer and have a sense of independence and confidence because their primary educator is close by and will meet their individual needs when required. Educators are much more attuned to children's needs and their cues, and are able to meet their emotional and physical needs. Overall, we have found that respectful caregiving promotes responsive and trusting relationships with children and their families. Through this experience, children quickly understand what to expect and predict and, as the new environment and relationships become more familiar, are able to relax, explore and take risks in their learning.

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## Children as Empowered Partners in their Learning

Children enter the world of our Centre having travelled a whole journey of their own. They bring with them a background of learning about the world, the foundations of which their families have set up. When we are planning the program for children at our site, we try to hold in our mind this idea, and our planning reflects our vision of children as capable, competent, respected and valued citizens. When families join a room, the initial steps in planning for their child's learning is for the primary educator to sit down with the family and learn about their home life. We want to learn about each family's hopes, dreams and desires for their child and share this ideal as well, so that we are fostering these in our everyday actions with their child.

In order to engage children as partners in planning for their learning, our educators recognise their role in listening to children. It is important for educators to listen to children, and not just hear their verbal language, but recognise the unspoken, or the not yet spoken (Gandini 1998). We do a lot of work around capturing the voices of our toddlers in Talking and Thinking Floorbooks, but we also wonder whether we are always capturing the voices of the infants in our programs. When people ask us about how we provide an integrated infant and toddler program, they often see a challenge in finding the balance in meeting an infant's needs and those of a toddler's. In our infant-toddler rooms, one can see an infant crawling inside to find their primary educator, while next to them a toddler has created a campsite out of sourced twigs. In this moment, our educators look at both children and see them as equally capable in their own way at leading their learning. We have found that having our door open to the outside throughout the day, has enriched our programs and empowered children to lead their own initiatives, through

choice, unhurried time and space for learning and exploration. With the door open for most of our day, children are supported to make choices to guide their own learning and they are not limited to educator expectations of what happens in a particular space at a particular time.

## Challenging Learning Environments

Our environments reflect the high expectations for children that we hold in our minds, and grow out of the children's ideas and interests we have documented. In the Acacia Room, one child's interest in creating a space to have a campfire has since grown into some project work, with the group of children becoming engrossed in the learning and creation of spaces that reflect camping and campfires. We first created a campfire space outside, which led to the introduction of a makeshift boat to catch fish to cook on the campfire. This has since led to an outdoor kitchen space near the campfire, sourcing of a real tent for our indoor play space, and the invitation for families to contribute ideas, equipment and photos from any experiences they have of camping. The ongoing learning and extension of play spaces has created a world for children to explore their ideas and provide the opportunities for educators to scaffold and extend children's learning. There is a value in creating sustained and purposeful environments so that children have the opportunity to revisit and reinforce their learning over time.

Viewing children as highly capable makes us create challenging opportunities for them. Because we recognise infants as equally capable as older children, we know that they will be able to negotiate an environment that includes experiences that are targeted towards older children, and we recognise our role in supporting them at their own level to negotiate this world. In our outdoor learning space, we recently sourced large tractor tyres to create sustainably sourced climbing opportunities.



Although the children who are still crawling are not ready to stand on the top, like some of our children love doing, they are able to crawl through the holes and explore their bodies in the space. Our indoor spaces reflect this vision of children through the materials which are on offer to them, such as scissors, glue, paint and the purposeful way they are set out in the room. For example, setting mirrors on a low table with a vase of flowers and paper and pencils, supports some children to explore still life drawings and others to experiment with the reflection of themselves and flowers in the mirrors. Essentially, we aim to create an environment which can be a third teacher for children (Strong-Wilson & Ellis 2007). Through these examples, there is a common thread of sustainably sourced materials and real tools which enrich the program and learning environments.

### The Journey of the Educator through the Planning Process

Shared responsibility and vision is integral in the holistic nature of the room. In bringing together a new team recently, the Acacia Room embarked on a journey to come up with a shared vision for the room, based on concepts of what we wanted the room to look like, feel like and sound like for children, families, educators and the community. After bringing this together in the form of a chart, we distributed it to families to add comments, curious to collaborate with them around creating a shared vision and an intentional space for their children. Families fed back to educators on a range of concepts, wanting the room to maintain its aesthetic appeal, a focus on nature and outdoor play, the daily inclusion of messy play and a range of challenging experiences for their children. This form of "ongoing and deep reflection on practice" (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013:124) engages and empowers educators to take ownership over spaces and the learning occurring within them.

Planning for infant-toddler programs required educators who had entered into the shared visioning process to come together and understand the pedagogical theory of natural environments and challenging experiences in order to put it into practice. This allowed all staff to value and appreciate this change and the possibilities of growth it presented to children. The planning cycle is seen as a continual process of change, where educators are set up with a mindset of constant reflection, evaluation and improvement. Educators are always thinking about individual children and whether they are being seen and responded to, and if the current documentation is meeting their needs. Educators in the Acacia Room were wondering how they could foster the growing understandings around feelings and emotions for the children within the room. By intentionally exploring this challenge, educators came up with the idea of facilitating an ongoing project to explore feelings with the children.

Educators' acknowledgement of their own challenges, concerns and wonderings allows them to see themselves on an ongoing learning journey, just as children are. Educators in any setting have the potential to view the child as a holistic, capable individual and create a stimulating and challenging environment for them, regardless of age.

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What follows here is a snapshot of the journey undertaken by educators from St Morris Community Child Care Centre Incorporated, a community based centre with an enrolment of approximately 120 families. Three educators undertook an action research project entitled “Building Successful and Passionate Writers”.

Initially, the team had many questions:

- How can we involve and inspire staff, families and children with our project?
- How can we encourage all educators to write stories that are descriptive, meaningful and have depth?
- How can we go about sharing stories with other educators?
- What can we include in children's individual folders?
- How can we change our way of thinking about Learning Stories and how they are written and presented within our setting?

Through discussion the team identified three main points of focus:

- involving parents
- involving children, and
- involving staff.

At the conclusion of the formal stage of the project the lead educators, Megan, Suzy and Casey came together to offer their thoughts and reflections on their learning journey throughout the project.

## The project

After settling on a focus of writing and documentation, “Building Successful and Passionate Writers”, we struggled a bit to come up with what to do next. To give us some guidance, we developed and sent out two questionnaires, one to families and one to educators, and we used the data from the questionnaires to highlight the areas we could improve in. Once we had this direction and a plan, we found that the project flowed well.

We began by sharing some of our stories with each other at staff meetings so that we could all see different formats, styles of writing, language and ideas – a practice that had such benefits that we have continued to share stories on a regular basis. We initially faced a number of challenges, particularly around the areas of inspiration and motivation. At times we would find inspiration easy to come by, at other times we would find it more difficult. Having each other to bounce ideas off of was useful and helped us to keep our motivation.

We are still working on how we can get children involved in adding to their portfolios as this was something that we found challenging over the course of the project, especially with the younger age groups. We also believe it is important that children have access to their portfolios throughout their time at child care, and we are currently working on how to do this with each age group.

## **Following an interval of approximately six months, once the formal aspect of the project had been completed, we came together to share and record our critical reflections:**

- The biggest impact for our team is in terms of our connections with families. When we communicate with our families, our interactions are much richer. With some families, in particular, where in the past they would only communicate to us about sleep and hats and missing socks, they are now writing their own stories, and we are writing back. The communication and interactions are more meaningful, and the connections between home and our service are stronger. These stronger connections mean that we are thinking more deeply about the documentation process and about our audience. When writing now, there are questions in our minds such as, “Who am I writing this for?” and “What does this piece of documentation add to the story of this child’s journey?”
- As a result of these connections, we feel that both educator and family documentation is more powerful. We are noticing the journey of the children through the service more, and this has impacted on the way in which we conduct transitions. The folders support the transitions of the children during their time at St Morris, but also when they leave the service to join the world of school. Many families tell us that the children who used to attend the service are still accessing their portfolios well into middle childhood.

- We have become co-learners with the families who are showing us new ways of laying out our documentation and giving us different ideas about what our documentation might look like. Through seeing the stories families give us, our focus has been sharpened, and some of the things noticed and celebrated in families give us ideas of dispositions for learning and child led interests to watch out for.
- We are sharing inspiring stories and examples at our staff meetings, so that our personal learning is reaching the whole staff team. We have implemented a buddy system for writing and sharing our stories, and we offer constructive feedback about them, both within our buddy pairs and as a whole staff team. This has helped to shape us as a community of learners – we are being more reflective and reading our stories through several different lenses, for example, the parent, the child, the new educator.
- One of the ideas Wendy suggested was to place some information about new primary caregivers into folders when children are making transitions from room to room. We have since implemented this, and feel that it has enhanced our connections to families – it's like pieces of a puzzle coming together. Having our pictures on the wall and on the doors of the rooms is facilitating this connection too. Families are talking with their children about who will be in the room that day, and which room they will be moving to next, which is also supporting peaceful transitions.
- The connections with families that are new to our service have also been more positive since we began this way of working. We are able to share examples of existing documentation with new families, and the new families can gain a feel for our philosophy and way of working through the documentation we share. As parents and children become more settled within the service, parents become proud of sharing pieces of their home life with us – they can see the value in what we're working on with their children during the day, and we can see what learning and living is celebrated at home.

### Highlights

From the beginning, the biggest highlight for us was getting the chance to meet Wendy Lee who was such a big part of the development of Learning Stories and how they are used in early childhood education sites throughout the world. We found Wendy inspirational and passionate and we were very excited about getting the opportunity to learn from her 'first hand', and to then bring her level of inspiration and passion back to our staff team. We really enjoyed getting to look at all of the examples that Wendy brought with her from the different sites and people she has worked with. It gave us new perspectives and ideas to reflect on.

Throughout the action research project we were lucky enough to meet educators from different sites that were also involved in the project. By sharing presentations and

examples we were able to get ideas of different environments, different ways of working and documenting and to see pictures and video footage of the learning happening at other sites.

Another big highlight for us was being asked if our presentation could be used as an example in future training by both Wendy Lee and The Gowrie Training Centre. In our own centre educators are continuing to use room email accounts to exchange documentation between parents and educators, and part of each staff meeting continues to be dedicated to reflective thinking and discussion about documentation and what has inspired us.

Undoubtedly, the biggest highlight for us has been the response of our families. Families' engagement with portfolios has seen them not only adding documentation to the portfolios and sharing information with us, but also involving their children and reaching out to involve extended family members.

### Where to from here?

We believe that learning is a continuous, life-long process and we will always be looking for ways to improve and expand on what we do, how we document, and the sources of our inspiration. This project offered us, above all, a great opportunity to extend our learning. In the future we would like to network with other centres to see what their documentation processes look like. We're also interested in exploring how other centres foster and grow connections with their families and communities and how they get feedback from their parents and families. We will be sending out a survey to parents who have been a part of the journey over the past 18 months, to get some ideas about how parents feel about the process and if their sense of connection to us, and the service has grown. We would like to know what has changed from their perspective. Long term, perhaps in 2015 or 2016, we would like to gather together with the other participants in the Wendy Lee action research project group, to see how their projects have impacted on their practice and in their communities.



The results of the 2012 AEDC indicated that there are high numbers of children in the suburbs surrounding Karawara, Perth who are developmentally vulnerable in two or more of the AEDC developmental domains. In addition, the SEIFA index (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas) for these suburbs registers as 'high', signifying a population with large numbers of families from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Both the AEDC and the SEIFA data highlight a need to offer particular support to families and children in these suburbs, and past initiatives have shown that appropriate programs will have a significant, long-term impact on children's health, wellbeing and development.

Acting on this information Communicare Inc., a not-for-profit organisation, in partnership with Medicare Local, has designed and is delivering ten Parents and Babies Groups in the South-East Metropolitan Perth suburbs. The participants are local families, parents and children (from birth to 18 months) and their siblings (below school age). Each Parent and Baby Group session is delivered for two hours per week, 48 weeks of the year with each session supporting parents to interact with other families and engage with their children in developmentally appropriate play experiences. In addition, based on the needs and interests of the parents, a range of parenting issues are discussed and special topics are explored during the sessions. These topics may include:

- health including immunisation, breast feeding, nutrition etc.
- attachment
- sleep routines
- early brain development
- Australian Early Development Census
- the value of play
- promoting early literacy and numeracy
- language and communication
- budgeting

### Some feedback from the program

One of the Parents and Babies Group sessions at Karawara included a toy-making workshop. With the participants keen to be involved in a creative activity, the facilitators designed a workshop with benefits for both parents and children and with an added twist – a toy-making workshop with toys to be made from everyday recycled products. Sensory bottles, beans bags, rattles and fine motor toys were made from water bottles, empty containers, ribbon and wrapping paper.

Besides providing an opportunity for participants to express themselves creatively, participants also learnt about the benefits of play for their children. The simple, non-commercial toys provided opportunities for children to

practise and master skills. The non-directed play showed participants that it is okay for children to explore without any particular goal in sight, and that free play supports children to develop self-concepts and promotes self-esteem.

Facilitators were able to talk about the many other benefits of play including the development of sensory awareness, social and pro-social skills, cognitive skills, physical skills, expressive and receptive language, imagination and creativity.

### Feedback from the workshop

The workshop, which helped to bring the group closer together, was met with enthusiasm from the participants. Feedback included:

*“ I really enjoyed the toy-making workshop. It had been a while since I have done anything creative (which I love) so it definitely got me inspired to start again. Since the workshop I have been keeping empty containers and tins, its amazing what you can create with some tape, ribbon and just simple household items. Definitely more affordable and entertaining for my child and the good feeling I have made it for them too! ”*

*“ I have little time for crafts at home so it was nice to have the opportunity to be creative. ”*

*“ We all left with a toy and I gained confidence about my ability to create crafts. ”*

*“ It is easy to make toys from recycled items – what a great way to find another use and save the environment! ”*

**As this workshop was such a success it was repeated at the Bentley Parents and Babies Group and the Cannington Parents and Babies Group. The latter group in particular includes a number of families who speak English as their second language. Through this toy-making activity all the participants were able to share their interests, regardless of their culture and language. Communicare believes that activities like this toy-making workshop help to reduce barriers, build confidence and strengthen relationships.**

# Responding positively to sexual behaviours helps protect children: Tips for early childhood professionals

**Melanie Grabski**  
Early Childhood and Parenting  
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Family Planning Queensland

Each state and territory is likely to have their own courses for educators regarding child protection issues. It is important to use state based information first when considering exploratory and sexual questions and behaviours of children in your service, and whether they are appropriate or not. Another very important factor is to ensure you are having conversations with families about the types of information and language that they find appropriate for use with their children. These conversations then guide how you respond to children's questions, behaviours and play, as well as building up the trusting relationship with families needed if you have to have more difficult conversations together. This article discusses a program developed in Queensland which may provide useful additional information.

Has a child ever asked, "How does the baby get in mummy's tummy?" Have you noticed that when you change a nappy the child's hand goes straight to touch their vulva or penis? Perhaps a child in your group pulls their pants down or attempts to touch the private parts of others. If you are concerned about a child's safety because of their sexual behaviour or knowledge, how should you respond?

First of all, don't panic. Children do not suddenly become sexual beings when they reach puberty or turn 16, 18 or 21. Their sexual development is ongoing from the day they are born and most sexual behaviours are a normal, healthy part of a child's development. The key is to be confident and comfortable in responding to children's behaviour. This creates a positive, protective environment that supports the child's development, while meeting the child protection requirements of the National Quality Framework.

Admittedly, this is easier said than done. An important step for many adults is to acknowledge the concept of childhood sexuality. This helps because sexual behaviours can be mapped by age, enabling early childhood professionals to identify age-appropriate sexual behaviours. It is possible to remove the guesswork, support healthy sexuality and provide protection from harm or abuse. This is supported by the Traffic Lights® guide to responding positively to sexual behaviours.

## The Traffic Lights® guide: Responding positively to sexual behaviours

The Traffic Lights® guide provides a framework for adults to identify, understand and respond to children's sexual behaviours. It uses the traffic light colours green, orange and red to categorise sexual behaviours and help adults to respond.

- **Green** represents developmentally healthy sexual behaviours and provides opportunities to talk, explain and support.
- **Orange** represents sexual behaviours that give cause for concern and require further observation and targeted support.
- **Red** represents sexual behaviours that are problematic or harmful and indicate a need for immediate protective intervention.

The Traffic Lights® guide can be used to help identify if a sexual behaviour is green, orange or red, it helps to explain why the behaviours may be happening and it gives suggestions about what can be done in response to that behaviour. Here are some examples of how the Traffic Lights® guide can be used to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours.

### Green Light scenario

Melissa (aged 3) points to Jose (aged 3) while he is going to the toilet and asks "What's that?" This would be green light behaviour. It is understandable that young children are curious about bodies. They are surrounded by them! To respond to Melissa's curiosity, answer her question briefly, factually and positively by saying something like, "That is a boy's private part called a penis." You can provide further support and guidance by talking with all children about the names of private body parts, the rules about touch and who they can talk to about bodies. The resource package *Where do I start?* can help with this.

### Orange light scenario

Ari (aged 4) will regularly follow Kay and Marg to the toilets. He says he likes to watch them 'wee'. Marg says that he sometimes tries to touch her 'down there'. Although it is normal for children to be curious about other people's bodies, the key words in this scenario, 'regularly' and 'sometimes tries to touch' mean that this is an orange light behaviour. Ari needs to know clearly that it is not okay to touch other people's private parts. It is important that Ari has an opportunity to learn about bodies in an age appropriate way and that he learns the rules about touch. The book, *Everyone's got a bottom* can help with this. Ari will also need to be monitored when he uses the bathroom to ensure that he is following the rules about touch. Other children would also benefit by learning the rules about touch and who to tell. Communicate with your centre management to work out how best to monitor and support Ari and the other children.

### Red light scenario

Lila (aged 3) shows you her new teddy and tells you that her mummy's boyfriend gave it to her because she has been a good girl and not told anyone about their touching game. This is a red light scenario. It must be investigated and you need to follow through with reporting requirements.

This can be stressful for all involved so providing support where you can is important. Using the Traffic Lights® guide to communicate with staff can help you navigate through a situation like this, step by step. Don't forget to also provide positive and universal relationships and sexuality education to all children in your centre.

### Talking about relationships and sexuality helps protect children

Relationships and sexuality education is incredibly important. It helps protect children from sexual abuse. It improves sexual health outcomes. Finally, it provides information and experience in talking about these topics in a supported way. It helps children feel more comfortable and confident in their bodies, which will be vital later as they negotiate relationships with friends, health professionals and partners.

Ultimately, it is worthwhile for early childhood services to proactively identify and develop their approach in supporting healthy sexual development. It will be easier for the educators at a centre to respond confidently and comfortably if they are familiar with the subject matter and the developmental 'trajectory' of the children in their care.

### Resources that can help

- Family Planning Queensland's (FPQ) Traffic Lights® resources and training include webinars, a brochure and a resource book called *Is this normal?* These and other resources to support children's sexual development are available through the FPQ's website, ([www.fpq.com.au](http://www.fpq.com.au)).
- The Raising Children Network ([www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)) provides general information on raising sexually healthy children.

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