

# reflections

GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION ISSUE 4 2017



## CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO BE INCLUDED

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At Gowrie South Australia we were privileged to hear Margy Whalley's thoughts on children's rights, particularly in relation to inclusion. As we were recently granted the Inclusion Agency tender for South Australia, a Commonwealth Government funded programme, we have been considering the idea of children's rights to inclusion and how this connects with the philosophy and values that underpin our organisation and our work.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child proposes that all children have the right to an education, which in turn supports children's rights to inclusion. This simplistic idea is incredibly complex when you begin to unpack it. What is inclusion? How do we uphold this right to inclusion without a clear definition of what it means to be included, and what it means to belong?

"Inclusion is a philosophy of acceptance and belonging to the community so that education settings are structured to meet the needs of all children" (Gal, Schruer and Engel-Yeger, 2010). Children have a right to feel accepted and feel a sense of belonging in education settings. "Inclusion supports children's rights. Every child should be valued as an individual and as a contributing member of their family, community and society" (Early Childhood Australia, 2016). It is important to provide an environment and a curriculum that supports children to feel this sense of belonging.

The idea of inclusion relates to all children, but within the Inclusion Support Programme, a further consideration is that some of the children we work with may be at risk of social exclusion. Children who are vulnerable have the same rights as other children to a sense of belonging, to

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feel accepted by their peers, to develop strong and secure relationships.

We can begin by thinking about children in a different way; consider how we perceive children's vulnerabilities and whether our language may disempower children and their families. We need to think of every child and family as capable and engaged, recognising children and families' experiences and work with them. Language can be powerful, and the more we use deficit based language, the more we exclude children. We need to view all children as capable.

It is the responsibility of all of us, both as educators and as a community, to ensure that vulnerable children have the same access to these fundamental ideas as anyone. We have a community responsibility to be engaged citizens and to educate our peers, families, and children to share this responsibility.

During a lecture on the topic of Children's right to be included given at the Gowrie SA closure day, 2016, Margy Whalley talked about how this journey begins with warm, reciprocal relationships of respect. We can start by focusing our settings on children at risk of exclusion and building services around them. If we keep vulnerable children at the centre of our focus, our service will be accessible to everyone. Keeping vulnerable children in the forefront of your mind creates a truly equitable setting for all children.

Focusing our service around all children requires adopting a holistic approach. This involves considering the complexities that exist within each family unit, and how each of these can impact upon families' willingness and ability to get involved, to contribute, and to communicate. Margy Whalley poses the idea that families want to be involved, but the approach needs to focus on their needs rather than ours. This involves considering what the family would like to gain from the process; what experiences they may have had which impact on their current relationships and how you can then create a trusting relationship which enables joint planning around children's inclusion.

Once we rethink how we talk about children and how we view children, as well as how we engage with their family, we can begin to create goals that support them. We can have high expectations for the children in our settings and high aspirations for our families. Creating a change in thinking that vulnerable children have the same capabilities as those children not at risk supports the provision of quality, inclusive education and care.

It is important that educators and families understand the rights of the child; both the legal rights they are entitled to and ethical rights. Providing education and support to understand the law and ethics regarding children with special rights also supports the need to advocate for children who are at risk. This concept seems complicated but services need to dream big. If you have big dreams it will have an emancipatory effect on your service.

So, what can you do now to ensure children's rights to belong and be included are met? Margy has inspired us to consider the following:

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- Invite children in.
- Find families in your community and reach out however you can.
- Offer families a safe space.
- Don't say no, find a way for children to access your service.
- Adapt your service to fit the needs of the children and families.
- Change your practices to meet the needs of individual children.
- Reconsider the language you use when talking about children – how does it empower children and families?
- Know your legal obligations, and endeavor to teach others.
- Advocate for children and families

Inclusion is a community responsibility. All children have a right to education. This applies to everyone whatever their race, religion, abilities, whatever they think or say, and whatever type of family they come from (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990).

### REFERENCES

- *Early Childhood Australia 2016, Statement on the inclusion of every child in early childhood education and care, Early Childhood Australia, viewed 13 October 2016, <<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Statement-of-Inclusion-2016.pdf>>.*
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- *Brown, B. (2012), Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead, Avery, USA.*

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