The Early Years Learning Framework: Getting started

Joy Goodfellow
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Membership, publishing and general enquiries

Early Childhood Australia Inc.
PO Box 86 Deakin West ACT 2600
T: (02) 6242 1800
F: (02) 6242 1818
Sales line: 1800 356 900 (freecall)
E: eca@earlychildhood.org.au
   publishing@earlychildhood.org.au

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About the Author

Joy Goodfellow, an early childhood educator and researcher, is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at Charles Sturt University and member of the consortium responsible for the development and trialling of the Early Years Learning Framework. She is widely respected for her capacity to support and mentor those involved in practitioner inquiry as a source of professional development. Her recent publications include a focus on the regulatory environment and its impact on educators’ professional decision-making.
# Contents

1. Introduction

5. Essential understanding underpinning the EYLF

7. Getting started

13. Understanding the learning outcomes

18. Sharing understandings about the EYLF

25. Assessment for planning

26. Conclusion

27. References
Introduction

Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) on 2 July 2009. It is the first early learning framework to be nationally endorsed for use by educators in a range of early childhood settings.

The Early Years Learning Framework (also referred to as ‘the Framework’) is a guide for early childhood educators, yet it speaks to all Australians—to children, to families, to community members and to other professionals who work with young children and their families. It acknowledges the diverse nature of Australian society and strongly supports inclusive practices.

The following reaction to the launch of the Framework reflects the views of many educators:

A national curriculum framework is a wonderful idea. A nationally consistent document to guide the provision of learning environments for children across the country excites most educators of young children. (An early childhood educator’s comment submitted to an online forum.)

‘While this book is for educators, it may also be of interest to families and others who work closely with young children.’

This book, the first in the Research In Practice Series about the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to be published by Early Childhood Australia, is specifically designed to both introduce and support early childhood educators in coming to know about, understand and then work with the EYLF.

The EYLF uses the word ‘educators’ to include all early childhood practitioners who work directly with children. While this book is for educators, it may also be of interest to families and others who work closely with young children. It explores the central understandings upon which the Framework has been built, and looks at the why and how of educators’ engagement with the ideas and understandings that can be found within the EYLF.
What is the Early Years Learning Framework?

The EYLF outlines the key principles and significant practices that underpin and guide the work of all early childhood educators and clarifies current understandings about how young children learn.

The EYLF:

◆ outlines the kinds of environments in which children’s learning is facilitated
◆ highlights the desirable knowledge, skills and attitudes held by early childhood educators
◆ addresses ways children’s learning opportunities may be enhanced.

The goal is to enrich children’s learning experiences through purposeful actions by educators in collaboration with children and families. The early learning environments the Framework applies to are services that cater for children in the birth to five age group, such as preschools, kindergartens, family day care, home-based care, occasional care, playgroups and long day care. It also encompasses home care, mobile services and multifunctional Aboriginal children’s services.

Why have a curriculum framework?

The word ‘curriculum’ is sometimes used alongside the term ‘framework’. The glossary in the Early Years Learning Framework document defines curriculum as:

‘All the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development.’ (p 45)

That is, curriculum in early childhood settings refers to all the things that children experience. What children experience may be the result of something intentional or planned. However, children have many experiences that are unplanned—they occur informally and often spontaneously. While the Framework does have a structure underpinned by a vision for children and their development during the early years, the structure is quite flexible to enable educators to respond to the wide range of children’s learning needs.
The development of the Early Years Learning Framework is timely for a number of reasons. These include:

- an increased understanding of early brain development
- a heightened appreciation of the importance of the early years as a foundation for longer-term development
- greater insights into how young children learn best
- increasing numbers of young children who are now participating in early childhood settings
- more informed families who have higher expectations about ‘child care’ provisions
- an accumulation of international research providing evidence to support professional practices
- the current Australian political climate in which policy decision-makers are giving increased attention to early childhood education, and there is a greater appreciation of the nature and importance of the early years.

The Framework was developed following extensive consultation with educators and leaders in the early childhood field, as well as being resourced by current research and understandings drawn from extensive reviews of the literature. The consultation process included two national symposiums, national public consultation forums, focus groups, an online forum and case-study trials. A draft document was trialled in a range of early childhood settings at 28 sites across the country. Educators were also encouraged to provide written feedback through submissions and an online forum.

Educators have been enthusiastic in their responses to having a national Early Years Learning Framework, and this enthusiasm is reflected in the montage in Figure 1 (on p. 4). The energy captured within these comments suggests that the Framework is a relevant and nationally important document with the potential to make a substantial contribution to Australian society.
This is a chance we have at the moment to make significant change for our children and our society.

The Framework is pivotal to how you work with young children.

Fantastic – long overdue. It embraces everything that we know about how children grow, develop and learn.

The Framework gives all of us a common language to advocate for the value of our work.

Having a nationally consistent document that guides the provision of learning environments for young children across the country excites early childhood educators.

I can really identify with the key themes: belonging, being and becoming. I can engage with them as well as the outcomes.

The learning outcomes have the potential to generate possible changes in practice.

I am glad that it is sufficiently flexible to allow a range of approaches.

It’s inspirational.

It’s made us think about equity more, and updated our perspectives which could easily have been developing along the lines of hidden and unchallenged assumptions.

I can’t wait for my next opportunity to reply to the statement, ‘Oh, you are a teacher in preschool, that must be nice and easy for you’ with something like, ‘Well, in fact, teaching young children to practice peaceful and inclusive ways of resolving conflicts or achieving co-existence takes more careful preparation, relationship-building and responsive teaching than you can even begin to know.’
Essential understandings underpinning the EYLF

The Framework is about children and children’s learning. It is structured around a central view of children living within the context of family, community, culture and place. It recognises that, from birth, children live in an environment of ongoing relationships with their family and are significantly influenced by them.

The three interwoven concepts in the Framework

The three interwoven ideas or concepts in the Framework about children’s lives are: belonging, being and becoming. These concepts run like rivers of thought through the Framework and represent the nature of life itself. While it is possible to talk about each of the three separately, one does not exist in isolation from the other, because they represent life and living.

A sense of belonging

‘Belonging’ is about feeling that you are a part of a group, a family—a feeling that you are connected and have a meaningful relationship with others. As one educator said:

*Children should feel that they belong to a service and that it is not just a place where you get dropped off.*

Educators may first observe children’s sense of belonging to a family through the child’s recognition of family members. However, belonging can also relate to how comfortable a child feels in an early childhood setting. That sense of feeling comfortable is provided through:

- the establishment of stable/consistent relationships that foster a sense of trust and security
- the creation of safe and predictable environments
- environments that allow children time to engage in sustained learning.

‘Belonging can also relate to how comfortable a child feels in an early childhood setting.’
Many implications for planning within early childhood settings are associated with children’s sense of belonging. For example, educators may examine how they plan for the day in order to foster relationships between individual children, between children and themselves, and between themselves and family members. These actions provide a sense of continuity in children’s lives.

Educators may also think carefully about those outcomes in the Framework that particularly relate to children’s sense of security and belonging, because children who feel secure and have a sense of belonging are more inclined to be open to learning. Such children feel more confident and free to explore, to be creative and to immerse themselves in sustained learning.

A sense of being

The second concept, ‘being’, is about the present. It is about living, and how we experience the ‘now’. For children, it is about knowing that other children and the adults they come in contact with care about them—‘they accept you for who you are’. For educators, it means that they need to show respect for children and for each other in their relationships: their greetings, their conversations, their actions, and the ways they show they are listening to what children say. It also means that, when engaging with children, educators need to be aware of how young children are experiencing a moment of engagement, and be sufficiently flexible to respond accordingly.

A sense of becoming

‘Becoming’ is the third concept. It refers to change—experiencing being in a different place or space. It also reflects children’s growing understanding of different situations, and their growing ability to meet challenges associated with learning to participate as a member of a group, whether it be family, the community or a particular culture.
Getting started

The Framework is like the skeleton that gives shape to our bodies, or the physical support that holds a building together. It is a conceptual skeleton that not only forms the way educators view children, their capabilities and how they learn, but is also a planning framework that provides the shape for, or scaffolds, the ways educators think about and work with children and their families.

Like a skeleton or building, the EYLF document has a structure provided by the key elements of the Framework: the ‘principles’, ‘practices’ and ‘learning outcomes’. After building an understanding of what belonging, being and becoming are about, educators can start at any part of the document; it’s wise to begin with something that interests the educator.
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The Early Years Learning Framework: Getting started is specifically designed to both introduce and support early childhood educators in coming to know about, understand and work with the EYLF.

Author Joy Goodfellow, a member of the consortium responsible for the development and trialling of the EYLF, explores the central understanding upon which the Framework has been built, and looks at the why and how of educator’s engagement with the ideas and understandings that can be found within the Framework. Topics covered include:

- Essential understanding underpinning the Framework
- Getting started with the EYLF
- Understanding the learning outcomes
- Sharing understandings about the Framework with other educators and families
- Assessment for planning

The Early Years Learning Framework: Getting started is the first in the Research in Practice Series about the EYLF to be published by Early Childhood Australia.

While this is a practical guidebook for educators, it may also be of interest to families and others who work closely with young children.

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