

# Learning Practice Guide



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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> _____	<b>3</b>	<b>Reflective scenario 4: Every educator matters</b> _____	<b>19</b>
Purpose _____	3	Key points for professional learning _____	19
How to use this guide _____	3	Questions for reflection _____	19
<b>Learning in the early years</b> _____	<b>5</b>	Outcomes for children _____	19
What is learning? _____	5	VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	19
<b>Strategies for supporting children to be confident and involved learners</b> _____	<b>6</b>	Scenario _____	19
Executive function _____	7	<b>Reflective scenario 5: Assessing for developmental delay</b> _____	<b>21</b>
Problem-solving _____	7	Key points for professional learning _____	21
Social skills _____	7	Questions for reflection _____	21
Motor skills _____	7	Outcomes for children _____	21
Confidence _____	8	VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	21
Involvement _____	8	Scenario _____	21
<b>Assessing children as confident and involved learners</b> _____	<b>9</b>	<b>Reflective scenario 6: Belonging as a foundation for learning</b> _____	<b>23</b>
Principles for assessing children as confident and involved learners _____	9	Key points for professional learning _____	23
Tools to support an understanding of children's learning _____	10	Questions for reflection _____	23
<b>Reflective scenarios</b> _____	<b>11</b>	Outcomes for children _____	23
<b>About the scenarios</b> _____	<b>11</b>	VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	23
<b>Using reflective scenarios</b> _____	<b>12</b>	Scenario _____	23
<b>Reflective scenario 1: A new way of describing learning</b> _____	<b>13</b>	<b>Reflective scenario 7: Confident transitions to school</b> _____	<b>25</b>
Key points for professional learning _____	13	Key points for professional learning _____	25
Questions for reflection _____	13	Questions for reflection _____	25
Outcomes for children _____	13	Outcomes for children _____	25
VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	13	VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	25
Scenario _____	13	Scenario _____	25
<b>Reflective scenario 2: Building confidence to learn</b> _____	<b>15</b>	<b>Reflective scenario 8: Learning with the natural world</b> _____	<b>27</b>
Key points for professional learning _____	15	Key points for professional learning _____	27
Questions for reflection _____	15	Questions for reflection _____	27
Outcomes for children _____	15	Outcomes for children _____	27
VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	15	VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	27
Scenario _____	15	Scenario _____	27
<b>Reflective scenario 3: Moving water and wondering</b> _____	<b>17</b>	<b>Glossary</b> _____	<b>29</b>
Key points for professional learning _____	17	<b>References</b> _____	<b>31</b>
Questions for reflection _____	17		
Outcomes for children _____	17		
VEYLDF Practice Principles focus _____	17		
Scenario _____	17		



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# Introduction

This *Learning Practice Guide* supports the implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

The VEYLDF describes five Learning and Development Outcomes. The information and reflective scenarios in this guide will help professionals engage with key concepts of the VEYLDF, particularly the Learning and Development Outcome: *Children are confident and involved learners*. This Outcome has the following four key components of learning:

- Children develop dispositions for learning, such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity.
- Children develop a range of skills and processes, such as problem-solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating.
- Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another.
- Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.

A summary of research about the four components, and how they can be assessed, is available in *Assessment of Children as Confident and Involved Learners in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review* (Cloney, Jackson & Mitchell 2019). This guide complements the *Literature Review*, by describing how the Outcome can be supported in practice.

This *Learning Practice Guide* focuses primarily on the Practice Principle: *Assessment for learning and development*. Its relevance also extends to the other seven principles, reflecting the integrated nature of early childhood practice. The effective assessment of children's learning and development can provide a strong evidence base for early childhood professionals' critical reflection; conversations with families or other professionals about children's progress; and efforts to improve equity and responsiveness to diversity.

## Purpose

The purpose of this *Learning Practice Guide* is to:

- strengthen early childhood professionals' understanding of the importance of children's confidence and involvement as learners
- support practices that strengthen children's confidence and involvement as learners, in services for children aged birth to eight years, including early childhood education and care and the early years of school
- promote practice that strengthens children's knowledge and self-awareness of their own confidence and involvement as learners
- guide early childhood professionals in implementing quality assessment, reflection and pedagogical decision-making, especially in relation to the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome: *Children are confident and involved learners*.

## How to use this guide

The first section of the guide reminds early childhood professionals of the theory and pedagogy that underpins day-to-day practice, and helps them find ways to recognise children's confidence and involvement in learning as a key component of their professional practice.

The second section describes scenarios to prompt professional reflection, and illustrate ways in which early childhood professionals can improve their practice in relation to the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome: *Children are confident and involved learners*.



# Learning in the early years

## What is learning?

The VEYLDF describes confidence and involvement in learning as follows.

*Children who are confident and involved learners have positive dispositions toward learning, experience challenge and success in their learning and are able to contribute positively and effectively to other children's learning (DET 2016, p. 21).*

This section defines the three components of the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome: *Children are confident and involved learners*. The three components are set out in Figure 1, which shows the central place of learning, supported by the associated components of confidence and involvement.

**Learning** refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are not only learnt in their own right, but also lay the foundations for future learning. In keeping with the literature review, this *Learning Practice Guide* focuses on aspects of learning that are referred to as 'domain-general', meaning that they are not tied to a specific subject or academic domain, such as reading or maths. These skills are first acquired in early childhood, as the foundation for later domain-specific learning, and continue to grow throughout the life course.

Four domain-general aspects of learning are addressed in this *Learning Practice Guide*:

- executive function
- problem-solving
- social skills
- motor skills.

**Executive function** is 'a specific set of attention-regulation skills involved in conscious goal-directed problem-solving' (Zelazo, Blair & Willoughby 2016, p. 2). There are three accepted components of executive function, and each of these develops significantly in the early years:

- **cognitive flexibility** (or mental flexibility) involves thinking about something in multiple ways – for example, considering someone else's perspective or solving a problem in various ways
- **working memory** involves both keeping information in mind and, usually, manipulating it in some way – for example, when playing a game or listening to a story, a child might remember several pieces of distinct information or ideas, and integrate them into a coherent whole
- **inhibitory control** (or self-control) is the process of deliberately suppressing attention (and subsequent responding) to something – for example, ignoring a distraction, stopping an impulsive utterance or overcoming a highly learnt response (Zelazo, Blair & Willoughby 2016, pp. 2–3). The construct of self-control can encompass a broad range of attributes, such as impulsivity, conscientiousness, self-regulation, delay of gratification, inattention, hyperactivity and willpower (Moffitt et al. 2011, p. 2693).

Pre-academic skills, such as pre-reading skills, are also components of early learning, although they are not specifically addressed in this guide.

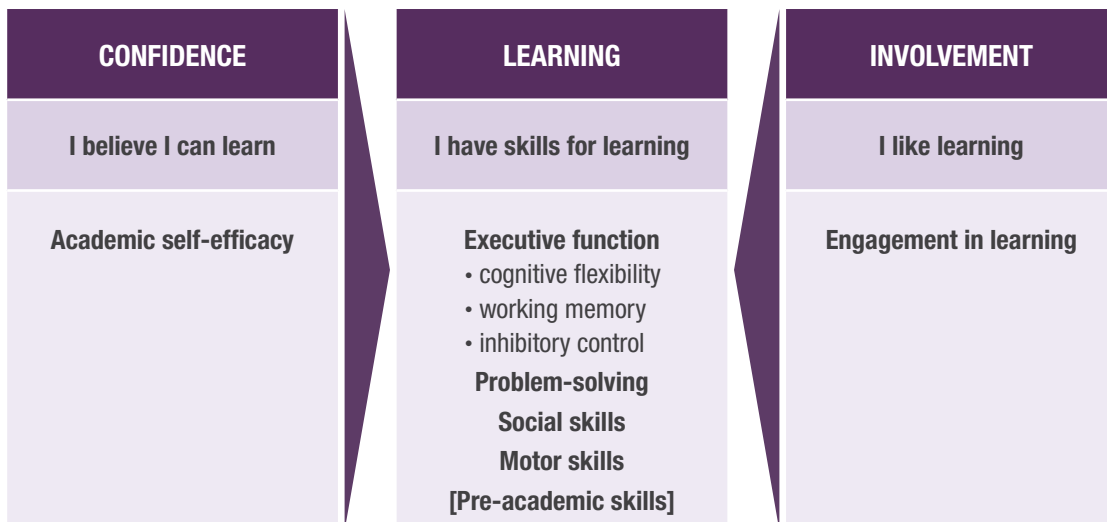


Figure 1: Three focus areas of confidence and involvement as learners

**Confidence as a learner** refers to children's belief in their ability to learn, including their academic self-efficacy, and belief that success in learning is associated with effort (known as locus of control). Higher levels of academic self-efficacy are associated with success in learning throughout a child's education (Lamb et al. 2015). Conversely, low levels of confidence may inhibit children's progress in learning, if children do not believe that they can succeed.

**Involvement in learning** refers to children's involvement, or engagement, in the learning process. While this is closely related to confidence in learning, it is a distinct concept in theory and research. Even a child who is confident in their learning ability must be involved, in order to learn.

These three components of learning provide a frame for understanding the many different ways in which learning may be described. The VEYLDF associates many additional terms with the concept of learning, including hypothesising, experimenting, investigating, knowledge transfer and metacognition (VEYLDF, p. 21).

The focus on domain-general skills ensures that this *Learning Practice Guide* is relevant to early childhood professionals working with very young children who are not yet acquiring pre-academic skills associated with specific learning

domains. The foundations for learning are laid well before a child enters formal schooling and continue to grow alongside domain-specific learning. Infancy is a time of critical development, with birth to three years as the optimum learning period. Early identification of learning capabilities and challenges is essential to support children's long-term social and educational outcomes.

As the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes are closely related, this guide may also assist in monitoring progress towards other Outcomes. For example, confidence in learning is closely associated with children's sense of wellbeing and identity, while the development of problem-solving skills (a key component of learning) expands children's ability to connect with and contribute to their worlds.

### **Strategies for supporting children to be confident and involved learners**

The following section outlines strategies that early childhood professionals can consider in supporting children's development as confident and involved learners. The strategies are organised under the components of learning discussed earlier. The learning scenarios in the following section provide additional strategies, presented in an integrated and practice-based context.

Executive function is important for learning and development in many areas. The Wellbeing Practice Guide (VCAA 2016) and Communication Practice Guide (VCAA 2018) both focus on the critical role of executive function and the Learning and Development Outcomes:

- **Children have a strong sense of wellbeing**  
[www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf)
- **Children are effective communicators**  
[www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf)



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## Executive function

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The three functions of cognitive flexibility, working memory and inhibitory control interact to coordinate all learning and social behaviour. Executive function is such a critical skill for independence in daily life as well as learning, that it warrants particular attention.

Support for the development of executive function involves paying attention to children's ability to get along with others; to remember routines, and to keep trying in the face of obstacles. Activities that help children to focus, filter distractions and build working memory all build executive function.

Early childhood professionals can support children's cognitive flexibility by sensitively mixing up simple routines to introduce an element of surprise and fun, or switching characters in a familiar story. Helping a child see a scene from multiple perspectives, or make up stories from a stimulus picture can extend cognitive flexibility.

Remembering instructions, taking messages and playing memory games are everyday strategies that develop working memory. With a repertoire of short memory games, activities and songs, early childhood professionals can provide fun ways to develop children's working memory almost anywhere.

Controlling impulses is a difficult but essential skill for children to develop. Strategies include developing age-appropriate language and signals for 'wait' or 'stop and look'. For an older child this may extend to 'stop and think' strategies, or setting time by a clock. Talking through decisions and choices aloud with a child provides them with an adult modelling this skill.

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## Problem-solving

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Problem-solving (also called fluid reasoning) is the ability to apply knowledge across contexts, the awareness of cause and effect, and the ability to use existing knowledge to build new knowledge. It includes the ability to experiment using different strategies, and to interpret and generalise.

Problem-solving can be supported by routines and everyday interactions. This includes opportunities for play with a rich range of materials as well as drawing children's attention to patterns, relationships and new phenomena. Problem-solving is a core component of early years mathematics and science activities.

Problem-solving is also important for everyday living and social interaction. Children need a stimulating, secure environment in which to develop concepts of cause and effect and experimentation. Providing children with 'clear and predictable' sequences and procedures, as well as opportunities for challenge and change, can help them apply their existing knowledge to new situations.

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## Social skills

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Children require social skills to be aware of self, family and community, and to be accepted and experience positive reciprocal relationships. Understanding and trusting others leads to the development of empathy. Controlling impulses and cooperation are two important prosocial behaviour traits for success in group situations. Jones and Yudron (2016) focus on three specific elements of social competence: understanding social cues, resolving conflict and cooperating.

Early childhood professionals help children daily to develop skills in each of these areas by talking about feelings and behaviours. Strategies for sharing, taking turns and playing well with others are one part of developing the social skills for learning. Helping children develop language to express their needs and to understand others is another support for this kind of learning.

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## Motor skills

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A child's brain 'develops rapidly through physical explorations' (VEYLDF, p. 21), with active learners exploring the world through touch, sight, sound, taste, smell and movement. Motor skills are essential for cognitive development and exploratory learning, including for the youngest children. Research evidence shows that greater physical activity is associated with more confident and engaged learners (Becker et al. 2014; Carson et al. 2016; Sibley & Etnier 2003).

Common strategies for supporting children's developing motor skills include lots of outdoor play in a stimulating environment where there is space for crawling, running, jumping, climbing, and ball play. Fine motor development is also critical for learning and for autonomous living. Early years learning environments that provide craft materials, puzzles, cooking, and books for children to turn pages have many opportunities to observe and build children's fine motor skills.

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## Confidence

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Confidence as a learner refers to a child's belief in their ability to learn. Children learn best if they believe that they can, and if they understand the iterative, potentially frustrating but ultimately rewarding nature of the learning process.

Confidence as a learner appears when children 'realise that learning is exploratory', 'reflect on their own thinking processes and approaches to learning' and 'understand that failure is a valuable part of learning' (VEYLDF, p. 21).

Support from others around them is important in helping children's confidence to grow, and helping children talk about themselves as learners can provide them with strategies to help them cope with failure and learn from their mistakes.

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## Involvement

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Children's involvement, or engagement, in the learning process is fundamental and relates directly to learning outcomes. A significant amount of research highlights the link between motivation and metacognition; that is, that motivation for learning leads to higher-order

thinking (Whitebread et al. 2009). In order to be involved, children need to 'feel included and respected, find learning relevant, interesting, engaging and challenging and become effective in learning what they value' (Ginsberg 2011).

Early childhood professionals can be alert to signs of children's involvement, including during routines. This can be recognised by their facial, vocal and emotional expressions, the energy, attention and care they apply, and the creativity and complexity they bring to the situation (Department of Education and Children's Services 2008).

Early childhood professionals can prioritise involvement when planning early learning programs. By allowing time and space for children to immerse themselves in learning experiences that relate to their interests, early childhood professionals can create opportunities for involvement in learning to be demonstrated in the way the VEYLDF describes.

*A state of intense, wholehearted mental activity, characterised by sustained concentration and intrinsic motivation. Highly involved children (and adults) operate at the limit of their capacities, learning to change ways of responding and understanding, leading to deep-level learning (VEYLDF, p. 36).*

The definition of executive function identifies some important skills that help to prepare children for later learning. Recognising these skills can help early childhood professionals to intentionally support children to develop them, rather than attributing difficulties in learning to personality or other factors.

In order to be involved, children need to 'feel included and respected, find learning relevant, interesting, engaging and challenging and become effective in learning what they value' (Ginsberg 2011).

## Assessing children as confident and involved learners

Having described the elements of learning in early childhood and some strategies for supporting children to develop confidence and involvement in learning, the question emerges of how to assess children's learning. This section provides a set of principles to guide assessment decisions, and some tools to support an understanding of children's learning.

Assessment is the practice of monitoring children's learning through systematic observation. Observation and documentation of children's learning is a regular practice for most early childhood professionals. Whether informal or formal, this is assessment. Purposeful and systematic observation of children using a validated tool is not to be seen as a labelling exercise. Within a strength-based approach to learning, this data provides additional evidence for educators to support a child's next stage of learning.

*All children benefit when assessment reflects a whole-child approach that may include their health and wellbeing, reveals their strengths, and shows what might next be learnt* (VEYLDF, p. 13).

If assessment is going to provide accurate information about a child's learning, there are a number of underlying principles to be considered. These principles apply to those developing assessment and as well as to educators who are using or administering assessment. Considering these principles will help you select and plan appropriate and useful learning assessment activities for your context

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### Principles for assessing children as confident and involved learners

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*Assessment of Children as Confident and Involved Learners: Literature Review* (Cloney et al. 2019) identifies six principles specifically relevant to assessing children as confident and involved learners.

- Assessment addresses established components of children's learning.
- Assessment enables early childhood professionals to describe a continuum of learning.
- Assessment is valid, reliable and fair.
- Assessment is conducted in a way that enhances engagement and relationships.

- Assessment includes children's self-assessment.
- Assessment involves the child's community and informs professional partnerships.

The first three principles relate to the purpose and design of assessment. The first principle highlights a core element of assessment: that it is designed to support learning, and must be grounded in an adequate, research-based theory of learning (Shepard & Penuel 2018, p. 52).

This underlines the importance of ensuring that assessment measures one of the defined components of learning identified in research. Also important is that it measures what it says it measures. These components (sometimes called domains) are often related to other domains. This is particularly true of executive function (or pre-academic skills) discussed previously, such as cognitive flexibility, working memory, inhibitory control and problem-solving.

The second principle reinforces the real value of assessment: that it enables early childhood professionals to see where children are on a continuum of learning. This allows early childhood professionals to both identify next steps in learning for a child, and to describe a child's progress over time.

The third principle speaks to the importance of assessment that is valid and fair: in other words it is fit for purpose.

The final three principles focus particularly on the context in which the assessment takes place. This is where the knowledge and expertise of the assessor becomes vital. Choosing the most appropriate time and place to assess development is a key consideration, and there is strong agreement that seeking information about child development over time should occur wherever possible in a natural setting (ECEA-SCASS 2004).

This is reinforced in the general assessment principles outlined in the VEYLDF.

Early childhood professionals assess children in ways that:

- include the perspectives, knowledge, experiences and expectations of families
- provide families with information and ideas to support the child's learning at home and in other services

- value the culturally specific knowledge about children and their identity, wellbeing, learning and development that is embedded in their communities
- are transparent, giving all adults close to the child access to best 'next steps' in promoting a child's learning and development (VEYLDF, p. 13).

Reflecting on each of these principles, and incorporating them into assessment of learning helps practitioners ensure their approach to assessment is holistic and child-centred, as well as evidence-based.

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### Tools to support an understanding of children's learning

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*Assessment of Children as Confident and Involved Learners: Literature Review* (Cloney et al. 2019) identifies a set of 10 tools that can be used to assess children's confidence and involvement in learning. The specific focus of these tools is reviewed, noting that while each tool can be used to assess a key aspect of children's learning, no one tool assesses all age groups, across all domains of learning.

An overview table, and the discussion of each tool can assist early childhood professionals to match their use of an assessment to when and why it is most appropriate for particular children, and for investigating a particular domain of the very large domain of learning.

Assessment of executive function typically involves asking the child to perform a task that has been designed specifically to measure an element of learning. Carefully structured activities are designed to indicate the extent to which a child can, for example:

- switch between one 'rule' in a game and another
- remember sequences of numbers or words, and present them in a different order
- ignore distractions
- draw a square.

Confidence and involvement in learning are generally assessed via observation of children by educators or parents, and completion of a validated assessment tool. These tools are usually linked to a coding system that is used to position the child along a developmental progression.

Early childhood professionals should have confidence in an assessment tool when it has been well-constructed to measure learning, and when they know the activity or assessment tool has been used and completed as intended. In this way, they maximise the valid and reliable assessment of a child's learning.

At the same time, assessment tools do not have to be administered to be helpful, and can simply provide new ways to recognise and think about children's learning.

Collecting information on children's outcomes from a wide variety of sources can help educators assess and plan more effectively. The child's community, particularly their immediate family, plays a vital role in children's learning and development ... The context, including the health and wellbeing of the family and community in which the child is situated, is an important consideration when assessing a child's learning.

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# Reflective scenarios

## About the scenarios

The following eight reflective scenarios are designed to inspire all early childhood professionals to think about new ways of supporting children to develop as confident and involved learners, using the cycle of observation, analysing learning, documentation, planning, implementation and reflection. The scenarios highlight the important role that meaningful assessment of children's learning and development has in this cycle – recognising that assessment can take many different forms.

This cycle can occur in all kinds of early childhood settings, responding to the many different challenges and opportunities that they offer. The VEYLDF Early Years Planning Cycle (VCAA 2018) describes the cycle as occurring within or around a particular context, as shown

in Figure 2. The context may be defined by many factors, including the type of early childhood service; the age and characteristics of the children; the knowledge, skills and values of the early childhood professionals; and the needs and aspirations of the community. All of these factors affect how the planning cycle will happen in each specific context, with no two cycles ever looking the same.

The concepts, scenarios and reflective questions in this *Learning Practice Guide* align with the National Quality Standard (ACECQA 2018), and support early childhood professionals to engage with the scenarios in a way that shows a commitment to ongoing quality improvement. Those who are responsible for professional development can choose how to engage with the guide, so their specific setting and team are supported.



Figure 2: VEYLDF Early Years Planning Cycle

## Using reflective scenarios

The scenarios are designed to provoke rich and meaningful conversations. To build valuable background knowledge before engaging with the scenarios, you may find it helpful to become familiar with the *Assessment of Children as Confident and Involved Learners in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review* (Cloney et al. 2019). The literature review focuses on evidence-based tools to help you understand and assess the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome: *Children are confident and involved learners*, and may therefore be another useful resource to inform your team's reflections about the planning cycle.

The scenarios describe the planning cycle in action, across diverse contexts. They illustrate:

- different components of learning, as described in the first section of this *Learning Practice Guide*
- different early childhood settings, and different early years professionals
- different philosophies about children's learning, and how it can be assessed and supported
- different situations arising for individual children or groups, at different stages of development.

Each reflective scenario begins with key points or 'take-aways' for professional learning, and poses questions for reflection to keep in mind while reading and reflecting on each scenario.

Each scenario also identifies the outcomes for children and VEYLDF Practice Principles that are most strongly illustrated in the scenario. This will help you to select a scenario that is relevant to current priorities for the children in your setting, and the issues that you are currently facing in your practice. However each scenario covers multiple outcomes and practice principles, due to the deeply integrated nature of children's learning and development, and of professional practice.

None of these scenarios represents 'ideal' practice, simply because there is no such thing. You are encouraged to question, debate, affirm or critique the decisions that the early childhood professionals make in these scenarios, and how they are implementing the planning cycle in their context. Reflection on the scenarios is particularly effective when it occurs collaboratively, so that different points of view can emerge, and colleagues can support each other's professional learning.

... each scenario covers multiple outcomes and practice principles, due to the deeply integrated nature of children's learning and development, and of professional practice.

## Reflective scenario 1: A new way of describing learning

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### Key points for professional learning

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- Executive function is an important component of early learning that supports later development in a range of developmental domains, including academic learning.
- Early childhood professionals can use a variety of assessment approaches, in combination. Holistic assessment methods, such as learning journals, can exist alongside structured assessments.
- Reflecting on their own progress, from a strength-based perspective, can encourage children to develop their confidence as learners.

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### Questions for reflection

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- Have you experienced pressure from families to focus on preparing children for school? How have you responded and managed these expectations?
- How could these expectations be used to open up a conversation about different aspects of learning, ways of assessing, and strategies to support learning through play?
- How can we talk about learning in a way that focuses on progress, not just what a child can or can't do at a particular point in time? How can we help all children recognise their progress?

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### Outcomes for children

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- Executive function
- Confidence as a learner

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### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

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- Assessment for learning and development
- Partnerships with families
- High expectations for every child

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## Scenario

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Elena had just started working in a long-day education and care centre. She was allocated to the Blue Group (three-year-old) leader, working with an experienced co-educator, Nina. When she arrived at the service, Elena completed a meet-and-greet with the parents of all of the children in Blue Group. One of the common themes from parents, which was evident in their questions and stated expectations, focused on school readiness and children 'getting a head start'. They were excited about three-year-old kindergarten, so the children could start even earlier.

Elena was caught on the back foot during those conversations, as she hadn't expected parents to be so achievement-oriented. She reflects that many of the parents she met expressed high academic aspirations for their children, and an apparent expectation that kindergarten represented the commencement of formal learning for their child.

Elena recognises the importance of child-directed play and learning, and of using assessment and pedagogical documentation to guide her planning cycle, not just checking whether children are 'ready' for school. The service's approach to assessment focused on learning journals, based on its philosophy of following children's interests and ideas.

Discussing the issue with her co-educator Nina, Elena reflected that their commitment to partnership with families meant that they had to find a way to meet families' needs. They also reflected that the families' focus on readiness for school was missing some important ingredients. Most of the families were asking about literacy and numeracy skills, like writing letters and numbers. Not many parents seemed to realise that children also need to develop general skills that underpin later success in domains like reading and maths.

There was also scope for educators at the service to become more aware of these skills. Looking at examples of children's learning journals, Elena reflected that these read more as a record of activities and interests, than as a way of documenting children's learning. No wonder parents were pushing for children to do more learning – they couldn't see that it was already happening. Elena decided they needed a new way to communicate learning.

Elena wondered whether a simple assessment task might help parents bridge the gap between their expectations of learning and assessment (as they happened in schools), and the broad skills base that their children were developing through play-based learning. Elena reads regularly (as part of her 20 hours of professional learning) and remembered seeing an assessment task with a strange name: Dimensional Change Card Sort (DCCS) (Zelazo 2012). Elena was puzzled about the name, and watched the video online. She was amazed that such a simple tool could assess something as complex as executive function.

Elena and Nina agreed to focus on executive function in their observations of children's learning in the coming week. They quickly realised that the children who were most successful at meeting their families' expectations were not necessarily good at planning their learning, or staying focused on a complicated task. Some of them were very good at repeating sequences, like letters or numbers, but became flustered with less-familiar tasks.

Elena drafted a letter for parents explaining the importance of executive function, its composite skills (problem-solving, working memory, and cognitive flexibility), and how executive function provides the foundation for learning, including at school. She also explained that executive function was one of the skills that children develop through play-based learning, so she wanted to show how children were developing. She told families that she would be using a simple assessment task to track children's progress.

Elena and her co-educator undertook the DCCS one-on-one with each child over the course of a week in term one. It only took five minutes, so Elena and her co-educator could fit it into the program without too much difficulty. Most children thought it was fun, and only one said it was boring. Elena and her co-educator thanked each child for participating, regardless of how many cards they sorted, and kept a simple table of each child's results.

In reviewing the results for individual children, Elena and Nina felt it validated what they had noticed in their observations. They began to build more activities to develop executive function skills into their program. They created play-based learning experiences that required children to set goals, plan strategies, and focus. They provoked children to use their working memory by following sequences of instructions, such as providing directions to buried treasure in the sandpit. Once the children had followed the instructions forwards, they had to follow them backwards again, and then give instructions to another child. They noticed how the children became better at sequencing information, and remembering what they had been told.

In term two, Elena and Nina repeated the DCCS with each child. They were excited to find that many children had made progress, evident through their involvement in the task and improved results. When she shared this observation with the children, they were excited too. Some children began to look forward to the next DCCS, because they believed they could do even better. Others just saw it as a fun game – but nobody was discouraged.

Now was the moment to share this excitement with families. Elena and her co-educator wrote about children's progress on the DCCS in their journals, using strength-based language. They talked about how their observations of executive function skills in children's play-based learning were aligned with the results they saw in the assessment.

Of course, the achievement-oriented families in her service community wanted to know how their child could get better results next time. Elena used these conversations to encourage families to provide play-based learning opportunities at home for children to develop executive function skills.

Elena and Nina's assessment helped families to go beyond more widely understood elements of learning in the VEYLDF, like early literacy and numeracy, to develop a deeper understanding of how skills like executive function can support learning.



## Reflective scenario 2: Building confidence to learn

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### Key points for professional learning

- Children learn best if they are confident that they can learn, and if they understand the iterative, potentially frustrating but ultimately rewarding nature of the learning process.
- Learning is social, and children's confidence can be affected by their context and environment.
- Collaborating with families can help them to actively support their children in building confidence or handling difficult transitions, using a strength-based approach.

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### Questions for reflection

- Can you think of children who were experiencing challenges in their learning because they were not confident in their own abilities? How have you supported these children?
- Have you ever spoken to anxious parents who were hoping a problem would just 'go away'? How did you build their confidence in their ability to support their child to make progress?
- How do you talk about success and failure with your children? Do you celebrate effort, persistence, and experimentation, and see failures as opportunities to learn?

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### Outcomes for children

- Confidence as a learner
- Involvement in learning

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### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Partnerships with families
- Reflective practice

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### Scenario

Harry was six years old and had recently moved interstate with his family. He came into Year One at his local primary school halfway through the second term, and was one of the youngest students in the class. Harry's parents were both in the army, and this was his second move interstate in the past five years. He seemed optimistic about school but missed the friends he had left behind.

Harry's new teacher, Rob, noticed that he was friendly, though somewhat reserved. His parents told Rob that Harry was a very outgoing child, who had no issues academically or socially in his first year of school. Moving came with the job, they explained, and Harry would adjust quickly.

Rob expected that the transition may present challenges for Harry and kept a close eye on how well he was coping at school. Over the course of term two, Rob noticed that Harry got extremely frustrated when he couldn't write, draw or build the way that he wanted. In the playground, this often resulted in him leaving an activity and a group, frustrated, to start something else.

In class, Harry would aggressively scribble out writing or drawings he was unhappy with, sometimes starting over several times and becoming increasingly frustrated. Rob also noticed Harry praising a friend's drawings, and asking his friend to draw outlines, which Harry then coloured in.

Rob spent some time with Harry while the other children were writing, to explore what might be going wrong. He noticed that Harry made smooth, purposeful movements while writing and drawing, and concluded that his motor skills weren't presenting a barrier to learning. With support and encouragement, Rob noted that Harry could make a mistake then re-attempt a writing task. He reflected that Harry seemed much more comfortable working one-on-one than in a group.

Rob started to reflect that Harry needed to build his confidence, before he could start building his learning. He saw that Harry's outbursts were the result of a cycle in which fear of failure led him to stop trying. Trying to fit in, Harry seemed especially sensitive to how other children might see him.

Rob headed down to Harry's basketball training one day after school, to see him in a different context. Just as Rob arrived, Harry walked off the court in tears and stormed towards the toilets. It was 10 minutes before the assistant coach coaxed him back onto court, and training was nearly finished.

Rob knew that his best chance of helping Harry would be to get his parents on board. Although their reflections were right – that Harry's behaviour was understandable for a young child managing a major life transition – Rob knew that supporting Harry earlier could avoid problems later on. Rob invited Harry's parents in for a chat, and invited them to bring Harry along.

Harry's parents decided not to bring him along, which made Rob realise that they were more anxious about the situation than they might have admitted. In the discussion, Harry's parents agreed that Harry was getting more frustrated than his peers when things didn't go his way (drawing, writing, playing games or sports) and reflected that this had escalated since they moved. But they seemed eager to keep things light-hearted, saying that things would 'sort themselves out'.

Rob suggested that it might be useful to have a conversation with Harry, to see how he was feeling. He encouraged them to think about supporting Harry to gradually increase his confidence, rather than waiting for the problem to 'go away'. He talked about the signs that would indicate Harry was becoming more confident in his learning and in his own abilities. They agreed to help Harry realise that it's OK to find things difficult, and to praise his efforts, not just his success.

Rob shared his experience at the next meeting of teachers in the junior school. It provoked a valuable reflective discussion about how children's confidence in their abilities as learners is vital to their ability to learn. Rob invited each teacher to identify one child in their class who was struggling with their confidence, then reflect on how these children could be better supported. The teachers reflected that children express their lack of confidence in different ways, including anger or refusal. They realised that building children's confidence as learners might be a valuable strategy for classroom management, not only for more successful learning.

A common theme in the reflections was that the teachers tended to give feedback to children on the end products of their work, not the process. The teachers resolved to be careful about over-praising success rather than effort, especially in group situations, and even to celebrate failure, as long as it's followed by another attempt. They also decided to try modelling failure and resilience in their own learning, and set themselves a challenge to 'fail at something' before the next meeting. The following meeting yielded a lively conversation of teachers' failures, and children's responses.

Based on this conversation, Rob decided it would be useful for him to model failure, resilience and self-talk in the classroom. When making a mistake explaining a task to the children, or writing something on the whiteboard, he would acknowledge the mistake out loud, sometimes laughing, and saying he'll try again and is pleased with himself when it works. When the class discusses their holidays, he talks about how he learned to snowboard, and how difficult and sometimes frustrating it was at first, but how proud he was when he did his first run without falling off. Rob sees this starting to pay off when he overhears several children, including Harry, remark on their mistakes and immediately re-attempt without becoming frustrated.

Rob noticed a marked improvement over the next month, with Harry able to spend more time on tasks. In a quick after-school chat, Harry's basketball coach also reflected that Harry seemed to be grasping the importance of practice, persistence and staying calm in the face of adversity. Harry still has occasional 'meltdowns' at school and at home, and Rob still offers him extra support when he needs it. But Harry's renewed confidence also means he has more successes, and Rob can see that the cycle of trying and succeeding means Harry's learning is heading in the right direction.

## Reflective scenario 3: Moving water and wondering

### Key points for professional learning

- Assessment can involve early childhood professionals listening, documenting, and discussing ordinary moments during the daily activities, to make thinking and learning visible.
- Ordinary moments provide information on understanding children and contribute to curriculum building.
- Documenting ordinary moments recognises children as capable, as well as providing information for discussions with families, children, and other professionals.

### Questions for reflection

- How can you document ordinary moments with children in a way that makes their thinking and learning visible? How does this help you see children as capable learners?
- How does your documentation of children's learning reflect the unique context of your early childhood setting? How might it look different in a different context?
- What role do you think pedagogical documentation can/should play in children's learning? What role could it play in strengthening relationships with families?

### Outcomes for children

- Involvement in learning
- Wondering and hypothesising
- Exploring the environment

### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Partnerships with professionals
- Equity and diversity

### Scenario

It is a warm Wednesday morning on Wadawurrung Country, the place where this four-year-old kindergarten is located. It is Gwagal Moronn season, when the summer heat disappears and is replaced with cool breezes, but today the temperature is unusually warm and many of the children have moved to the outdoor play space.

Sam, Molly, and Catherine gather around the big basin central to the outdoor play space. Water is moving from the light warm breeze, diagonally across the basin, making an intriguing ripple of movement.

Molly runs her hand on the surface of the water, barely touching, trying to copy the movement. Catherine and Sam lean over the edge of the basin, trying to get a closer look. Noses almost touching the water, both are squinting as if trying to read why the water is moving this way. Could they have a theory about this movement?

Hands fly through the water disrupting the movement causing water to bump and turn. The diagonal pattern disappears for a moment as Molly, Catherine and Sam move back to the edge of the basin, hands grabbing the edge and eyes watching. The water slows down, and then it happens again. The water starts to travel diagonally across the basin again! Molly looks at Catherine and Sam and points, 'Look! Look! Look! It's happening again!'

Silently, Molly, Sam, and Catherine watch the movement. Their bodies are still, waiting for the pattern to change. Suddenly, Catherine slaps the water with her hand. Molly and Sam join her in the slapping. Laughter and water move through the air, and then all three stop and move back to the edge, watching to see what happens next. The water slows down, and then starts to move diagonally across the basin again.

Later that afternoon, Alice, the lead educator in the classroom, shares the photos and short videos of the water moving and her version of the moments around the basin this morning with her team of teachers. She asks her colleagues what they notice from the artefacts collected (photos and written observation by Alice). Her colleagues immediately notice how the group of children seem to be trying to understand the movement. This is evident in how the actions of the children, the watching, the slapping of the water, and moving back to watching the water.

John, another teacher in the room, wonders if the children might have theories on how water moves and how the teachers might help the children make this thinking visible. Anne adds, 'What about asking the children to draw how they think the water moves?' Alice queries this idea back to the group of educators, 'Do you think the children can make this visible with just paper and a pencil? Are there other materials that might help more?'

Anne, the lead educator then offers, 'I am intrigued about the method for how they are trying to figure this out – watching, disrupting, and watching again. Is this a problem-solving technique we should see if other children in the room use?' This offers the teachers another possibility to consider. They begin to discuss what opportunity they could offer next for the children to consider.

Finally, a proposal is shared across the group, 'I wonder if we should offer the films and photos to the whole group of children to consider. Do you think everyone in the class might have a theory on the water movement?' The group agrees to present the videos and photos at morning assembly and ask the children what makes the water move in the diagonal pattern.

The next day the children gather in an assembly on the carpet with Alice. The assembly is part of the daily classroom routine and is a place to share ideas, theories and questions for both the educators and children. Alice positions the television at the front of the assembly. She has created a short film of the water moving from the previous day at varying speeds and using different filters. The children sit and watch the movie several times.

Then, Alice proposes a question to the group. 'How do you think the water moves?' John is sitting with the group with his computer open acting as the documenter. He is writing down the theories the children share in the assembly as Alice leads the discussion. The artefacts of the discussion will be discussed later in the day by the educators in the classroom, as they see the children's theories and the interpretation of the teachers of these theories as critical to what happens next in the curriculum.

## Reflective scenario 4: Every educator matters

### Key points for professional learning

- Warm, responsive relationships are an important part of supporting children's learning.
- Assessing and planning for learning can be part of everyone's day-to-day work.
- Educators may need support to develop their own confidence in professional learning.

### Questions for reflection

- How do you develop skills for learning in younger children, such as problem-solving and cognitive flexibility? Can you recognise how young children might demonstrate these skills?
- Who contributes to the planning cycle in your setting? What is the role of the children in contributing to the planning cycle? How can you enable everyone to contribute in a way that allows them to build on their strengths?
- How do your own experiences as a learner influence your practice in supporting children to become confident and involved learners? How can you support your colleagues?

### Outcomes for children

- Problem-solving and cognitive flexibility
- Executive function
- Confidence as learners

### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Equity and diversity
- High expectations for every child
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches

## Scenario

Abir recently started her first job at a long-day education and care centre, while actively working towards completing her Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. She was delighted to be allocated to the Echidna Room with the two- and three-year-olds, because she loved the caring, nurturing relationships that she could form with that age group. Abir saw herself as a natural carer, and the children readily warmed to her gentle manner and responsive interactions.

After she had settled in, Abir had a meeting with her room leader, Nirmala, which made her worry. Nirmala asked Abir if she could contribute to the documentation of children's learning. Nirmala explained that this was a responsibility of everyone in the room, regardless of their qualifications. The service used a 'key educator' model, so Abir was responsible for observing 'her' children.

Abir was enjoying the modules on child development in her Certificate III course, but did not feel ready to contribute to observations. She felt especially worried about observing children's learning. Abir had never been an especially confident learner herself, and associated 'learning' with feeling overwhelmed in her schooling. She felt much more confident talking about children's social and physical development, and was often delighted at observing children's progress in these areas.

Nirmala noticed that Abir had been quiet during their conversation, and called on the Educational Leader, Karla, for advice. They agreed that Abir had plenty of reasons to feel confident in her observational skills, and decided to start by focusing on her strengths. Nirmala reflected that Abir often spoke to her enthusiastically about children reaching physical milestones, or when she noticed a child improving in their ability to share with others, or interact in a group.

Abir had another valuable skill – the ability to speak Dari, also spoken by some children and families in the community. The other educators in the Echidna Room sometimes felt that they missed aspects of these children's learning, as they found it hard to engage them in sustained two-way interactions. They decided that this was where Abir could start developing her skills.

Nirmala had already assigned Abir as the 'key educator' for the two Dari-speaking children in the room. She asked Abir if she could make

some observations for these children for the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome: *Children are confident and involved learners*. She asked Abir to engage the children in experiences that explored their problem-solving ability, and cognitive flexibility. When Abir looked puzzled, she suggested playing games that challenged the children to think in unexpected ways.

Abir was relieved to feel that she could contribute in a way that fitted with her values. She could continue building playful, caring relationships, and enjoy using her own language with the children. She knew that the Dari-speaking families had been worried too that their children were missing out on important learning because of their different language background. Abir reflected that she could reassure the families much more if she could describe the children's learning more precisely.

Using ideas from her colleagues and the students in her Certificate III class, Abir became more intentional in her everyday interactions with the children. She started playing around with the Dari songs that they had been singing, muddling words or introducing unexpected actions. She talked with the children about changes in their routines, encouraging them to wonder what might happen next. She also invented problems for the children, such as hiding small objects for them to find, and shared the children's delight when they solved the problem.

When Karla visited the Echidna Room the following week, she was pleased to see Abir deeply engaged with the children. First, she saw the Dari-speaking children giggling with surprise when Abir introduced some funny faces into the song she was singing. Later, she noticed other children becoming interested in Abir's quest to find a favourite doll, which had somehow gotten 'lost' in the home corner. Abir switched between languages, so all children could join the hunt.

Nirmala noticed that Abir had introduced more variety in her interactions with children, and their intense involvement in their shared play. In their next chat, she encouraged Abir to tell her the reasons for what she was trying. Abir was shy about answering – it was easy to have fun with the children, but much harder to explain to her room leader why it was worthwhile. It just felt right.

Nirmala didn't want Abir to feel pressure from someone she worked with every day, so she asked Karla to extend the conversation. Karla

talked to Abir about how young children learn to recognise patterns and routines, and how learning to deal with disruption to expected patterns can support cognitive flexibility. They also talked about problem-solving, and how Abir had noticed that some children were getting better at guessing where the item might be hidden. Had she, therefore, made it harder to find? Yes of course! Together, they wrote this on a sticky note, to share with Nirmala.

The sticky note became Abir's system for communicating observations to Nirmala. Scribbling ideas on something that could be thrown away was less daunting than writing in the observation book. Nirmala reassured her not to worry about her English – it was the thought that counted, after all.

As Abir's confidence grew, she learned to recognise problem-solving in the simple moments when children explored the world around them independently, not only in the experiences that she had planned. Most importantly, she stopped feeling worried about having to choose between her warm relationships with children, and her support for their learning. When Abir received her Certificate III, she reflected that it was not just the children whose confidence as learners was growing.

## Reflective scenario 5: Assessing for developmental delay

### Key points for professional learning

- Sustained concentration is an important component of involvement in learning, and can be supported by modelling and engaging with children in sustained play and interactions.
- Support for children at risk of developmental delay can start before assessment for diagnosis, including through using intentional teaching strategies that are effective for all children.
- The Early ABLES assessment tool (DET 2015) was designed to support children with disabilities and developmental delays, but also has potential to support individualised learning for all children.

### Questions for reflection

- Do your current assessment and documentation practices provide sufficient information and insight to identify the particular needs of each child, and when to provide extra support?
- When you notice a child who might need additional support, how do you work with other early childhood professionals to explore how you can support the child in your practice?
- How can you help children to sustain play and develop concentration skills? How do you make the most of the thinking and conversation opportunities generated by sustained play?

### Outcomes for children

- Problem-solving
- Social skills
- Involvement in learning
- Confidence in learning

### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Partnerships with professionals
- Assessment for learning and development
- High expectations for every child

### Scenario

Daisy had been a room leader for four years at a community-managed long-day education and care centre, caring for and educating around 13 children along with her colleagues. The centre operated four rooms with a shared outdoor area, and Daisy was a member of Team Pascoe, the three-year-old room.

Billy, aged three-and-a-half, attended the centre three days a week. Daisy had been observing for some months that Billy seldom engaged in sustained play, and frequently asked for help from her and other educators with basic things that other children his age were doing independently.

Daisy worked together with Billy on an activity in an effort to support his development and his capacity to concentrate and become immersed in activities. They spent half an hour cutting and pasting at the collage table, resolving challenges as they went. The following week, Billy asked Daisy to help him do a collage again, and she suggested that he might like to have a go at starting one by himself. Billy burst into tears and demanded her help.

Daisy reflected that this kind of interaction was happening on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis with Billy. Even with all her team's efforts, Billy didn't seem to be making a lot of progress in relation to his ability to concentrate and be involved in activities without an adult's help.

Daisy referred to the VEYLDF and identified several areas of concern. Billy's frequent help-seeking almost certainly indicated a lack of confidence. Daisy reflected it could also indicate developmental delays in terms of Billy's problem-solving skills and social skills, particularly considering that his confidence, involvement and concentration had not developed substantially over the past few months. This was despite Daisy's intentional modelling of sustained play, and their conversations about the importance of independence in learning and practising new skills.

Another alternative occurred to Daisy – perhaps Billy's lack of engagement in sustained play, and constant asking for help, could potentially be a learned behaviour. It's possible that Billy may be exhibiting the same lack of concentration and involvement at home, and his family may be doing a lot for Billy that he's capable of learning and doing himself.

Daisy wondered whether it might be useful to undertake some kind of formal assessment of Billy. She knew that a developmental assessment should have taken place at Billy's 3½-year Key Ages and Stages visit with the local Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurse, assuming he attended that check. Daisy knew that she couldn't ask the MCH nurse about Billy without talking to his parents, and she didn't yet want to start a conversation that she knew would worry them. She would be better equipped to have that conversation if she could describe exactly what she had observed.

Daisy called Miranda – an experienced MCH nurse who worked a few blocks away – and asked some general questions about when additional assessment might be appropriate. Miranda described the screening assessments that are routinely conducted at the 24-month and 3½-year visits, noting that they don't pick up all aspects of children's learning and development.

Miranda could sense that Daisy was concerned about something that might not be covered by the routine tools, so mentioned the Early ABLES assessment. Miranda had read that Early ABLES can be a useful tool for early childhood educators, given that it supports not only assessment, but also development of learning plans and strategies, as well as monitoring progress.

Daisy investigated online. The process of registering and gaining access to Early ABLES was quick and simple, and there were no costs involved. She was pleased to see that it could assess and describe children's progress in their learning and development across all the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes. She reflected that this could be a handy way to think about all children's learning.

In relation to Billy, the description of 'learning dispositions' in Early ABLES really caught her eye. The Early ABLES tool described how children demonstrate skills related to attention, memory and independence – all of which led to an increased sense of confidence as a learner. Daisy found that it was straightforward to complete an assessment of Billy, based on her own observations and knowledge. The online tool generated a learning report, which summarised the skills and abilities that Billy is currently developing and those that Billy might learn next.

Daisy reviewed this with her colleagues who work with Billy and they developed a plan to support Billy in increasing his independence and sustained involvement in activities and play over the coming months. Daisy also talked to Billy's parents about their plan, and suggested ways to support his learning at home. She reflected that it was much more encouraging to talk to parents about the progress she hoped Billy would make, rather than the problems that she had observed.

Daisy planned to do a second Early ABLES assessment at the end of term, which could generate a profile report mapping Billy's learning progress across two consecutive assessments. If she still felt concerned at that point, she would have another conversation with Billy's parents about options. This might lead to a diagnostic assessment and, if so, she now had a clear idea of what she would say to the early childhood intervention practitioner about Billy's skills for learning. She also had a new way of describing all children's progress, across all the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes.



## Reflective scenario 6: Belonging as a foundation for learning

### Key points for professional learning

- Fostering a sense of belonging helps children to develop their confidence as learners.
- The components of learning are deeply integrated, especially for very young children.
- Focused collaborative reflection on 'ordinary moments' can help make learning visible.

### Questions for reflection

- How are children and families welcomed into your setting? What practices, policies, and structures exist to support the setting as a welcoming space?
- What kinds of learning do you see arising in moments of welcome? How does creating a sense of belonging build children's confidence to explore, interact and learn?
- How can learning materials, such as books, clay, and natural resources (sticks, leaves, pods), welcome children and families to connect with a setting and the local place?

### Outcomes for children

- Confidence
- Social skills

### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Equity and diversity

### Scenario

On this crisp morning in Wurundjeri Country during Waring (Wombat) season, the cold air nips at the nose of Finn, a 12-month-old, and his mother, Marie, as they enter the education and care service for the first time. Marie carries Finn down the long hallway and together they enter the studio, a place of welcome for all the children and families in the centre. Several children are gathered on the soft carpet with the studio teacher, Carmen.

Finn and Marie join the group, as Carmen opens the book *Yurri's Manung* (Atkinson & Sax, 2013). The text, set on the traditional lands of the Yorta Yorta people in northern Victoria, tells the story of Yurri, a nocturnal marsupial searching for a warm place to sleep in the Barmah Forest. Finn snuggles into his mother, as they listen to the story of Yurri, who asks her friends for a place to sleep. Her friends are not able to help Yurri and she is left in the cold. The story changes when the Aboriginal Elder advises Yurri's friends to work together to build a Manung or shelter to keep Yurri warm. Community, connecting to place, and belonging are central to the story – and very appropriate, as Finn and Marie are also searching for community, connection, and belonging with this new place.

As the story ends, Carmen leads the children, including Finn and Marie, through the glass door outside the studio to green space surrounding the centre. Together they gather branches and leaves and start to build a large Manung in the corner of the outside area. Marie waits and watches for a few minutes and then begins to help the children lean the branches against the tall fence, making a Manung that all the children can fit into with Yurri. Some children have piled leaves and smaller sticks into pillows and bedding. Finn, with playful encouragement from two older children, gathers nuts and pods for food for Yurri. A new community is emerging for Finn and Marie, as the group collaborates to create a place of belonging for Yurri and for the children. Carmen takes photos of the ordinary moments of building, noting how the children's hands are working and feet are moving, and also how Finn and Carmen are connecting to the place and community.

The children squat and crawl to enter into the Manung but Finn's attention is still focused on the art studio. Carmen notices his interest and gently guides him back into the room. When Finn points to the book about Yurri, Carmen also shows him the small puppet of Yurri that

she uses to tell the story. Carmen encourages Finn to carry the book and the puppet back to the Manung, to connect the old space and the new. At the Manung, Finn crawls in next to the rest of the group, pulling his mother, Marie, with him. Carmen takes several photos of Finn's movements, including his inclusion of Marie into the group. He hands his mother the book, and Marie begins to read to the group in the newly created Manung. Now the Manung is a place of welcome for Finn, Marie, Yurri and the children.

In the afternoon Finn's room educators and Carmen, the studio teacher, gather together. Carmen has printed off the photos she took in the morning and placed them in the centre of their meeting table. The teachers spend time looking and wondering together about how Finn and his mother Marie are beginning to make connections to their new place, even on the first day. The teachers had already created the education and care setting as a place of welcome and now the teachers are wondering if they have set the conditions within the space for welcome as well.

A conversation between the teachers begins, provoked by the photos.

'The story seems to have engaged Finn and his mother – look how their bodies are relaxed and listening as Carmen reads the text to the group,' says one teacher.

'I am intrigued by this later photo during the sharing of the story. Look how Lucy is leaning on Finn's mother. There are some connections happening here,' observes another.

Carmen shares how Lucy's movement seemed to not affect Finn. 'Finn seemed to just share his mother in the moment,' she says.

'Finn's mum is not in the first few photos of building the Manung. I wonder if she was hesitant to join in? Do you think maybe she thought she was not as welcome?'

'But then, I see her actively part of the building in these later photos – she seems to be co-participating with the children.'

The teachers wonder if the conditions supported Marie to build a relationship with the community and if her belonging is as important as Finn's belonging.

'I notice that Marie is given time – time to engage with the small group, time to find her place in the building, time to build a relationship – with the children, the story, the materials, the outdoor space. This makes me wonder how we offer time as a part of welcoming,' one of the teachers suggests.

The teachers agree and they begin to think about how to further support Finn and Marie in the classroom through practising community, belonging, and connection to place. At this point, Carmen wonders how the Manung building might offer another opportunity to collaborate and wonder together towards creating community.

'I wonder how the addition of clay could welcome the children, including Finn and Marie, into more connections with this place and community, especially if the clay is offered for an extended period of time.'

The teachers decide to place a large block of terracotta clay next to the Manung in the morning and leave it throughout the day. The clay in this situation is another way of welcoming the group – the established children and families and Finn and Marie.

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This scenario applies concepts developed in Hamm, C & Boucher, K 2017, 'Engaging with place: Foregrounding Aboriginal perspectives in early childhood education', *Found in Translation: Connecting Reconceptualist Thinking with Early Childhood Education Practices*, Yelland, N & Frantz, D (eds), pp. 58–75, Routledge, New York. DOI: 10.4324/9781315165042.

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## Reflective scenario 7: Confident transitions to school

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### Key points for professional learning

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- Discussions around the skills required for learning can be a valuable focus for collaboration between early childhood professionals working with preschool and school-age children.
- Discussions with children on what they know and can do is an important tool for learning that supports reflection and promotes motivation and involvement.
- Young children are capable of contributing to and positively influencing other children's learning.

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### Questions for reflection

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- How does your transition program support and empower children? To what extent does the process focus on developing positive relationships with children, parents and carers? Does it engage effectively with the professionals working with children in their year before school?
- Have you ever experienced a significant gender imbalance in a class or group of children? Have you developed strategies to manage this, and how effective have they been?

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### Outcomes for children

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- Social skills
- Problem-solving
- Executive function

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### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

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- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches

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### Scenario

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Alice was nearing the end of what felt like a very long second term with her new Foundation class. Many children were exhibiting issues with self-regulation and concentration, which meant more time was being spent on classroom management than she would expect at this point in the year. Alice knew that being able to control impulses and focus are particularly important skills as children adjust to school, and she spent a significant amount of time helping the children to build these skills. Several of the Foundation teachers agreed with Alice that this year felt more challenging than usual, and had made similar observations about children's skills for learning.

Over the school holidays, Alice reflected on these challenges and how they might be addressed. The school's transition program, while not perfect, was well structured and engaged with both of the feeder kindergartens in the local area. The program brought in all new students, with their parents and carers, for five sessions over a week in term four. The children spent this time in classrooms, while parents and carers participated in sessions with staff on the curriculum, school policies, and strategies for families to support transition.

The kindergarten also brought the children over to the school for several sessions, to explore the playground. Teachers spent time reviewing transition statements and meeting with parents in term one. Alice felt there was a widespread understanding that a successful transition for children was everyone's responsibility.

Nevertheless, Alice's observations of the children's challenges led her to look for ways in which the transition process could be even better. Engagement between educators at school and the kindergartens was limited to the production (by kindergarten teachers) and review (by Foundation teachers) of transition learning and development statements. While this provided useful information on individual children, the process was limited in its capacity to assess group dynamics, which would be very helpful to Foundation teachers receiving several children from the same kindergarten program. Alice also reflected on how the children could be playing a stronger role in informing that process.

Alice thought it would be worthwhile discussing this with the four-year-old kindergarten teachers. She also decided it would be useful to hear her class's reflections on their experiences; they hadn't discussed transition since early in the

first term. She knew that self-assessment could be a powerful tool to help children manage their learning, enabling them to reflect on and learn from their knowledge and experience.

Alice explained to her class that she wanted to hear about their experience of moving from kindergarten to school. She was particularly interested in anything that had surprised them (and they wished they'd known), or things they found difficult to manage. The class responded enthusiastically, and the children readily identified challenges in relation to managing their emotions, and adapting to new structures and routines. Alice was particularly pleased when the conversation shifted to how these challenges could be effectively addressed, indicating a willingness to engage in problem-solving. One of the children, Rosie, suggested that they could do a talk at her brother's kindergarten, to help them understand what to expect next year.

Alice thought this was a great idea, envisaging a small group of Foundation children running sessions at one of the local kindergartens, as a pilot that could potentially be scaled up next year. She spoke to her principal and the lead educator at the kindergarten, Rohan. Rosie's mother had already discussed the idea with Rohan, who was also keen to start these visits. Rosie's mother had offered to help coordinate the process. She could see how the session might help Rosie's adjustment to school, and could also help her brother to adjust in future.

The visits took place in term four, after a lengthy planning process led by Alice's class, and supported by Alice and Rohan. The four-year-olds in Blue Group listened and watched the older children intently, and were full of questions. One session focused on what's in a school bag, what the items are for (reader satchels, library bag, art smock), and how the children take responsibility for packing and looking after their bags. Alice noted the usefulness of the activity in exercising the children's working memory and planning skills. Another session focused on structure, rules, and consequences, and Rohan explained how the children would be doing a lot more group work on the mat compared with kindergarten, so it was just as well they'd been practising this year. Overall, Alice reflected that the sessions had a strong focus on self-regulation, enabling the younger children to learn from older peers through discussion, demonstration and modelling.

As Alice anticipated, the exercise also yielded significant benefits for the school children who had contributed. Throughout the planning process, she observed them taking on responsibility for planning and presenting, increasing their confidence in what they had learned. They also demonstrated empathy and an understanding of the perspective of the younger children, both important social skills that had been a challenge across the group earlier in the year.

Alice asked the children to give a talk about their transition project to the rest of their class. She said that they should be really proud of coming up with the idea and doing the work to make such an important project happen, which could benefit future Foundation classes. She also spoke to the principal about the feasibility of scaling this up as part of next year's transition, and they discussed how professionals at the school and kindergarten could work more collaboratively throughout the transition process. Alice wrote down her ideas to share with the Foundation teachers and wellbeing coordinator as a next step, with more planning to follow.

## Reflective scenario 8: Learning with the natural world

### Key points for professional learning

- Engaging children in planning experiences can support development of executive function.
- Engaging children in reflection on their experiences can make learning more visible.
- Learning can occur within child-directed exploration with the natural environment.

### Questions for reflection

- How can learning be made visible in stories of children's experiences? What's the difference between just describing what happened, and showing the learning that occurred?
- How can reflecting with children on their experiences help them see themselves as confident and capable learners? How can their questions and provocations guide your program?
- How can outdoor play help foster a sense of connection to place and the environment? How could this help you incorporate Aboriginal world-views as part of your daily curriculum?

### Outcomes for children

- Involvement in learning
- Executive function
- Social skills

### VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Reflective practice

### Scenario

Rainy days were the best days at June's house, because they meant that Creek would be full and flowing. June had been providing family day education and care to four-year-old Rory, five-year-old Teghan, her sister Maggie (three-and-a-half) and three-year-old Hui for almost a year, and Creek had become like part of the family. The children called Creek by name, and it frequently joined in their play and learning, along with Tree, Rock and Bank, its neighbours. Creek ran along the bottom of June's yard and to the park, connecting the children to the world around them.

On this day, Rory bounced eagerly by the front door as the rain drizzled down. Teghan, the methodical one, helped her sister into gumboots while June helped Hui. June and the children discussed what they might encounter as they walk with the rainy day towards Creek. Immediately, Teghan thought her feet might get wet but then realised her feet were covered by the gumboots. She exclaimed, 'No need to worry, Maggie! We can walk through the rain and puddles and maybe even Creek without getting our feet wet!' June laughed to herself, realising that what might be thought of as a 'risk' was actually a benefit to everyone.

'Have we got everything Rory?' June called out. Rory raced to the sign on the wall with pictures of what they needed: a first-aid kit, a phone, snacks, towels and hats (in case the sun came out). June found that the list had helped to engage Rory in planning for his favourite excursion. His mum had created a similar sign at home for coming to family day education and care, and told June that mornings were much less stressful now that Rory had become interested in the planning process.

Trudging down to the water, the children joined June in making patterns with their feet: step, step, jump! Step, step, jump! The older children experimented with more complex patterns and jumped higher and higher. June noticed that Rory and Teghan had both learnt a lot from each other in the past year, despite having very different personalities. She gave herself a quiet pat on the back for the efforts she'd made to develop their collaboration skills as a foundation for their learning.

Once they reached Creek, June faded into the background while the children relished the opportunity to explore. June reflected on how each child interacted with Creek in different ways. Rory was intent on building dams of

sticks and fallen bark, while Teghan arranged stones according to her own system. Maggie and Hui, playing close to June, flicked fingers through wet grass and scrambled across a large branch that had fallen from Tree, Creek's tall neighbour. The rain continued to gently drizzle, as June and the children enjoyed all the wonders that Creek could offer them.

Back at the house, the four children sat at the table in their dry change of clothes, while June cut fruit for their late afternoon snack. The rain drew patterns on the window pane outside.

'What will we write in our book today?' asked June. This was a favourite part of the children's daily routine, to write up the day's events before the parents came to collect them.

'We saw Creek!' called Hui. 'And what else?' asked June. A chorus of responses indicated that the children had noticed Tree, Crow, Pigeon, Ladybird and plenty of interesting pebbles.

'I saw a turtle!' cried Maggie. 'You did not!' Rory retorted. June reflected that Maggie had noticed a rock in the middle of Creek that looked like the turtle shell in the book they had read last week. While discussing this with the children, June noticed how well Maggie was able to transfer learning from one context to another, sometimes with imaginative results.

'Rory lost his gumboot!' said Teghan, the stickler for good behaviour. June turned the accusation into an opportunity for hypothesising. 'Why do you think that happened, Teghan?'

'It got stuck in the mud,' Rory responded. 'Creek tried to eat it!' giggled Maggie.

Rory's lost gumboot became a topic of animated discussion, and June fetched the playdough tub and a plastic doll wearing the closest thing to gumboots she could manage. The children re-enacted the event, testing how deep into the dough the boot could go before it was 'eaten'.

As the children chatted, June wrote their questions in their shared diary, for later exploration. What else might Creek try to eat in future? Was Creek hungry only on rainy days? Would Creek give back the things that she had eaten, if they asked her nicely? Or had they disappeared forever?

The diary that June and the children were writing together was in pride of place near the sign-in book, for all parents to see. At pick-up time, Rory's dad paused to ponder the questions that the children had asked. June hoped they would spark some rich conversations on the way home.

The book served as June's own record of the children's learning, as well as a demonstration of her own philosophy in practice. She viewed the children in her group as capable and contributing citizens, and saw herself as a co-participant with the children in their learning. Together, she and the children had made a commitment to building a deep relationship with the place in which they live, with the intention of creating a community that cares for the environment.

The story also made visible the learning that occurred in each adventure. By reflecting with the children on what they had seen, heard and felt, June was able to witness the complexity of their thinking skills, and extend these by offering provocations that further build deep thinking for the children. She was also able to see her own thinking as she participated each day with the children. Working with Creek and friends as fellow teachers, she was seeing four confident and capable learners emerge.

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This scenario applies concepts developed in Iorio, JM, Hamm, C, Parnell, W & Quintero, E 2017, 'Place, matters of concern, and pedagogy: Making impactful connections with our planet', *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 121-135. DOI: 10.1080/10901027.2017.1306600.

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# Glossary

**cognitive flexibility:** Human capacity to adapt mental processing strategies in the face of new conditions, to switch between different concepts, to think about multiple concepts simultaneously, or to think about something from another perspective. With working memory and inhibitory control, it is a key element of executive function.

**construct:** A theoretical idea, such as a quality or attribute that, while not directly measurable, can be assessed if broken down into observable properties.

**early childhood professionals:** Includes, but is not limited to, maternal and child health nurses, all early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood education and care settings (educators), school teachers, family support workers, preschool field officers, inclusion support facilitators, student support service officers, primary school nurses, primary welfare officers, early childhood intervention workers, play therapists, health professionals and teachers working in hospitals, and education officers in cultural organisations.

**executive function:** A specific set of attention-regulation skills involved in conscious goal-directed problem-solving. These skills include cognitive flexibility, working memory and inhibitory control.

**fluid reasoning:** The capacity to think logically and solve problems in novel situations, independent of acquired knowledge.

**inhibitory control:** The process of self-control that enables a person to purposefully ignore a potential distraction, and to modify their response. With working memory and cognitive flexibility, it is a key element of executive function.

**involvement:** Participating in an activity at a level of engagement that exhibits sustained concentration, intrinsic motivation, focus and learning.

**motor skills:** Ability to manipulate and control limb and body movements to enable physical exploration and active engagement with the environment using both large movements, and precise hand and finger control.

**school readiness:** The cognitive, physical and psychosocial maturity required for learning in a school setting, and the ability of schools to positively engage with and support children and families.

**skills:** A child's ability to do specific mental and/or physical activities that may require practice in order to be performed proficiently. Skills can be both taught and learnt.

**social skills:** Competence that facilitates interpersonal communication and appropriate behaviours in a social setting.

**subdomains:** Broad areas within a domain.

**transition:** The process of moving between environments or routines, including between home and early childhood settings.

**working memory:** The ability to hold and manipulate distinct pieces of information over a short period of time. With cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control, it is a key element of executive function.





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