

# InSights

SUMMER 2016



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*It's about you. Always!*  
**Communities@Work**

**CENTRE OF PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING & EDUCATION**

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# Editorial

Dear Educators,

Welcome to the summer edition of InSights Magazine, the magazine published specifically to provide the education and care sector with a valuable resource that inspires progressive pedagogy, while supporting a community of thinkers. In addition, the InSights magazine is an extension of the professional development and support that Communities@Work's Centre of Professional Learning and Education (CPLE) offers the sector.

With the New Year upon us it is a great opportunity to reflect on the year that was and consider the learning possibilities for 2016. As early and middle childhood professionals it is vital that we reflect on our own beliefs, understanding and practices, considering where these beliefs and understandings have come from and how they impact on our work with children. Here at Communities@Work's Centre of Professional Learning and Education, we believe there is much to be shared and discovered from the ways others work. This might be the early learning centre down the road or another children services organisation. There are so many fantastic and unique practices happening in the ACT region, all we need to do is open our doors and embrace sharing and collaboration.

If we are to truly become reflective of our own practices, we must break down the gates between our services and programs and connect with each other. In connecting with each other we can hope to discover other ways of working and being. Considering multiple perspectives and worldviews will only deepen our understanding of pedagogy, practice and people, allowing us to better analyse our own, understandings, practices and ways of being (Fasoil, 2003).

The intent of InSights magazine is to showcase exceptional education and care programs and practices that are happening in the ACT and surrounding region. The services and program within InSights have opened the doors and offered to share their ways of working with children and families.

We'd invite each and every one of you to throw open the gates, share your knowledge and see what you learn in return!

*From the Communities@Work's Centre of Professional Learning and Education Team.*



# Embracing the 'P' word at meal times

By Alicia Marshall, Communities@Work's  
Centre of Professional Learning and Education

You may have heard of the term 'progressive meal time' which has been creating some provocative and reflective conversations among some services and educators in our industry, but what does it mean? The concept identifies the importance of meal times within the day as opportunities for children's own expression of agency and competency; smooth, calm and respectful transition times; and vital learning and awareness opportunities for children around understanding their own health and wellbeing needs.

A progressive meal time is a routine time that allows children within an early learning or out-of-school hours setting to choose when they are interested in eating a meal throughout the day. In following with the definition of routine (a sequence of processes or actions that are regularly followed)

*A progressive meal time is a routine time that allows children within an early learning facility to choose when and if they are interested in eating a meal throughout the day.*

a progressive meal time is not stipulated by the clock, a timeframe or even an educator! Instead, a progressive meal time refers to the processes of the meal, e.g. setting up the meal, informing children when it is ready (if they have chosen not to participate in setting up for the meal), serving oneself, eating and engaging in social interactions and cleaning up after the meal. When a meal time is truly progressive, educators allow children the time to choose when they are ready to eat, if they are ready to eat and by

talking to children individually and encouraging them to identify and recognise their own bodily functions and needs in order to make their own informed decisions. This concept encourages children to eat when they are hungry, not because of the time,

which creates a healthy attitude towards food and nutrition. Furthermore, progressive meal times demonstrate respect for children's play and learning as educators do not take part in interrupting children's engagements in order to have them all sit down and eat together.

Several theorists have recognised the importance of routine times for children (Jerome Bruner, Emmi Pikler, Rudolf Steiner for example) as being consistent and predictable processes for children that then help them extend upon these ideas in further learning and exploration. More recent research by Ruffin (2009) and Rodriguez-Gil (2010) outline the importance of routines for children as emotional regulators that decrease stress, anxiety and conflict. Providing meal times that value the children's sense of agency, competency, natural rhythms, current learning, play interests and social interests assist in creating transition times that are free from stress and anxiety. When a child feels understood and heard by an educator when they demonstrate they may not be ready to eat yet, this child feels respected and valued which will then increase their own self confidence. Really, what kind of message are we sending children when we tell them that they need to stop their play and wash their hands for a meal time, even if they are not hungry? Our own Early Years Learning Framework and My Time Our Place documents talk about how children that feel safe, secure and supported will "use effective routines to help make predicted transitions smoothly" (EYLF, 2010, pp. 21; MTOP, 2011, pp. 20).



### Some of the benefits of progressive meal times include:

- Limited interruption of children's play and learning
- Encourages self-help skill development
- Provides children with a sense of ownership, responsibility and agency over their own needs and daily actions
- Provides more meaningful social interactions as routine times are not hurried or rushed and children are given the time and space to be
- They also provide opportunities for children to solve their own challenges;
  - Take risks in trying new foods, mixing foods, eating in different ways, etc;
  - Develop fine motor skills;
  - Develop literacy and language through conversation and discussion; social skill development, e.g. turn taking, conversation, listening, sharing the food amongst peers
  - Acquire mathematical knowledge, e.g. measuring and dividing available food
  - Develop self-efficacy in their capacity to choose, serve and act upon their own desires
  - Be open to intrinsic motivation
  - Self-regulate

*We visited two services that are in two different stages of their journey towards implementing progressive meal times. Their case studies can be found on pages 6-11.*

## Case Study One Communities@Work's Isabella Plains Child Care and Education Centre

Communities@Work's Isabella Plains Child Care and Education Centre is a forty place long day care service located in Tuggeranong that prides itself on an ongoing connection with the natural world around them, through their kitchen garden project and pet family. In the preschool room, Justin Hiatt and the team leader Julie Young, have made the move towards progressive meal time routines for all three of the main daily meals.

### 1. What inspired you to start implementing progressive meal times?

The idea came about after Justin had done some reflection on the meal time routines, "it was just a hectic struggle and we were taking time away from the children in order to serve and then to wash the dishes". With two educators in the room, finding the time to allow one educator to leave the room to wash dishes was unrealistic. "We felt like we were serving take away meals, dishing up the servings and handing them out in order to make it time effective but this was just not working," Justin explained. Taking the concept of a progressive meal time routine to Julie, the team then reflected upon the reasons why meal times were not working; what the educators and the children valued in a meal time; and how they could create a more progressive, smooth and peaceful transition. The pre-schoolers have been engaging in progressive morning and afternoon tea for some time now and have recently started implementing a more progressive lunch time routine as well.

*"We felt like we were serving take away meals, dishing up the servings and handing them out in order to make it time effective but this was just not working."*



### 2. Tell us about your journey in creating these routine times.

Once the decision to try a progressive meal time routine had been made, the first couple of weeks consisted of "children swarming around the meal table all at once, still in the habit of all eating together in one massive chaotic group". The team again reflected on why the children were still choosing to move to the meal table all together and acknowledged that this would be a learnt behaviour as the "children had been used to the routine of being required to all eat together in one large group". The team also acknowledged that their methods of communicating to the children about meal time availability were probably impacting the effectiveness of the transition. Educators were still calling out to all of the children at once when a meal was ready. Together, Justin and Julie decided to take on a more respectful and individual approach by letting each child or group of children know that a meal was ready by engaging in a conversation with the children and then letting them know that the food was ready if they were interested in eating. They also modelled and encouraged this new way of communicating with the children to their other educators who came in and out of their room.



*“Would you like some morning tea Jovan?” - Justin*

*“No, I am doing digging” – Jovan*

*“Oh wow, I can see that you are enjoying your digging. Well if you would like some morning tea feel free to wash your hands whenever you are ready.” - Justin*

*“Ok Justin” – Jovan*

I asked Justin and Julie how they ensured that the children had washed their hands before they served their own meals and ensured that the children also engaged in safe food handling? “It is quite easy actually, as the team communicates and ensures that one educator situates themselves near the meals table during the process and they are responsible for supervising the children, recording that they have eaten and engaging in conversations with the children about healthy eating”. The meals table is always set up so that the educator supervising can easily see the bathroom and who washes their hands. The other educator moves around the spaces and engages in asking the children if they would like to eat. “We also talk to the children about healthy practices everyday” Julie mentioned, describing how important it was to include the children in the process so that they had a sense of ownership and responsibility over their own routines.

*For the majority of the time, children are eager to sit and eat with their peers and so they encourage one another to eat at some stage.*

What about children that choose not to eat, how do you approach this scenario? Justin mentioned that there are some children who choose not to eat and this is not an issue. If they do not want to eat they probably aren't hungry. There are a number of reasons that you have to consider, for instance they may have just eaten breakfast before they arrived and don't need to eat again, or they may not be feeling the best and need to just let their stomach's rest". The fruit did go rather quickly during the morning tea session and I asked Justin how they accommodated any child who chose to eat after the fruit had already gone. “We just go to the kitchen and select another piece of fruit. It does not often happen though. We try and make it a stress free time for the children and ourselves. If a child feels that they have to rush what they are doing to make sure that they don't miss out then this increases their level of anxiety around meal times and play”. For the majority of the time, children are eager to sit and eat with their peers and so they encourage one another to eat at some stage. The option for the children to choose where they would like to sit to eat their meals has also encouraged more active participation during meal times. “They can have their own social outings by choosing who they want to sit with and where”. The team also encourages the children to keep coming back to the meal table, even if they have decided to play in-between sittings, if they are still hungry and interested in food. “This has reduced the level of stress we noticed in some of the children to hurry up and eat” mentioned Julie.



### 3. What were some of the challenges that you had to overcome?

The main response from other educators was that the change would be too difficult and that the children would not be able to do it. With further reflections and team conversations, Julie decided to do some further investigation by asking the children how they have their meals at home. The children were eager to share their home meal time routines with Julie and one another. The main theme that resulted from these conversations was around using knives and forks, crockery, and having time to sit with the family to chat. From these conversations with the children the educating team decided to give morning and afternoon progressive meal times a try. It can still be difficult when a casual educator comes into the space though, “often we find that they struggle to understand the concept or do not believe in it. We find that it can disrupt the whole transition time”.

Moving towards a progressive lunch time routine was slightly more difficult. As food preparation takes place in the kitchen the room does not have a microwave or fridge and so saving lunch for children who choose not to eat whilst it is still hot requires an educator to leave the space and go to the kitchen. The team has identified this hurdle and will acquire these items so that they can extend the time frame and progressive opportunity for children more effectively.

Talking about the families’ reactions to the change, Julie commented on how the families have really

enjoyed the journey towards more progressive meal times. “We thought that some families might be anxious around their child not eating because they are too busy playing, but once we explained the process and our beliefs behind the change, everyone was on board and supportive.”

### 4. How did you involve the children in the process?

Julie and Justin spoke about how they chose not to necessarily organise a whole class group time to discuss the process of moving into progressive meal times; instead they chose to take a more individualised and practically relevant approach by speaking about the change during everyday conversations and routine times. The team asked the children what they thought and discussed how they could continue to play if they were engaged or choose not to eat if they were not hungry. “Once the children noticed the change and understood the process it did not take them long to utilise the progressive concept to suit their own learning and play, it really only took about a week”.

The children enjoy their pack away and clean-up process as well, using their food scraps for the worm farm which they themselves organise. The children even engage in their own rinsing process after lunch time where a warm bucket of soapy water, scrubbing brushes and dish rack are made available for the rinsing of their dishes before they go down to the dishwasher.

*More children are now eating, when they were reluctant to eat meals before*

## 5. What are some of the results?

The whole routine process is so relaxed and calm, the children are more engaged in their play experiences and are even more proactive in choosing which foods they would like to eat or trying new foods. More children are now eating, when they were reluctant to eat meals before. “We have even noticed that the level of food wastage has decreased as the children now have a choice as to how much they eat and whether they want to go back for seconds or even thirds”. The children are also initiating their own conversations about food, nutrition, and healthy eating as they serve themselves. “These conversations are currently focusing on serving size and being aware of sharing the food with all of our peers”.

There are a couple of children who have just started at the centre and have been reluctant to eat. With the new progressive meal times, educators have noticed that these children are starting to try certain foods and engage in meal times. “Sometimes we even notice that they may start with just a piece of bread at lunch time and then come back for seconds and try some of the main meal” explains Justin. “One of the children, who has some difficulties with social interactions with peers and prefers to engage independently in play, has even begun to choose to sit with some peers during meal times and has started to initiate conversations.”

*“I used to have to eat to much and it used to make me feel sick. Now I take a little bit of chicken. Its better and I can always get more.” Chloe*

*“It tastes more lovely and I like washing the dishes.” Sophie*

*“I was very excited when they first told me,” Mary enthused. “I am new to the industry and spend time with the pre-schoolers when covering the educator’s lunch time breaks. I thought, about time. The children just weren’t interested in eating sometimes and now the atmosphere is more relaxed and those children who previously were reluctant to eat, now find the time.”*

## 6. Where do you plan to go from here?

There are several plans on where to go from here. The first would be to buy small jugs for the milk and cutlery and crockery, as the service currently only uses plastic bowls and spoons. There is also the idea to purchase a choice of different utensils and various cultural tools to extend upon the ideas of social meal times around the world. There are also a goal of organising a fridge, microwave and dishwasher for the room to address some of the current challenges to a truly progressive lunch time routine.

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## Case Study Two

### Miles Franklin

### Out of School Hours Care

#### 1. What inspired you to start implementing progressive meal times?

After receiving the Assessment and Rating report (A&R), Molly and the team at Miles Franklin OSHC noted that the afternoon routine wait times were long and needed to be re-thought. Through a reflective process, the team watched the children and identified that the children's behaviour was indicative of a need for change. Through engaging with Communities@Work's Centre of Professional Learning and Education (CPLÉ), Molly and her team were able to come up with several strategies to reduce the wait times, increase the flexibility of the routines and transitions, and ensure the children were enjoying a calm and relaxed environment.

#### 2. Tell us about your journey in creating these routine times

Molly spoke about the initial process of engaging in change after the A&R and how a team meeting was arranged and facilitated by the CPLÉ. In this meeting

the team unpacked where they wanted to go from here. Discussing potential ways to reduce the wait times and increase the flexibility of the afternoon routines was the main priority and initial focus.

Engaging in conversations with the children by asking them what aspects of the afternoon routine they disliked and what aspects they liked was the next step and by using all of this information the leadership team (Director and Coordinators) set about creating a plan. With a rough plan

documented, the leadership team went back to the educators and sought their perspective before formalising a solid plan for change.

As the changes were significant the service decided to implement them over two stages and are currently up to reviewing the first stage. Molly mentioned that when they begin the review process, the leadership team plan to consult educators, children and families to ensure a well-rounded perspective.

Focusing on determining the positives (and making sure those are celebrated), Molly hopes to then discuss any challenges, identify some solutions and make decisions on the next steps.

After the first stage of change, the routine at Miles Franklin OSHC involves the children signing in and washing their hands and then choosing whether they would like to eat or to play. Children are able to move between the spaces available, accessing a range of equipment or resources.

*Through a reflective process, the team watched the children and identified that the children's behaviour was indicative of a need for change.*

### 3. What were some of the challenges that you had to overcome?

Ensuring all educators were on board with these changes and making sure they were feeling positive about the new routine plan was the main challenge Molly and the leadership team addressed during the process. In order to address this challenge, Molly and the team unpacked their A&R report as a whole team, discussing the children's responses to the original routines and also engaged with the CPLE, who helped answer any of the questions about challenges. Ensuring that the process was collaborative and that there would be opportunity to review the changes down the track, has helped educators to feel positive about the changes, feel heard and valued as a part of the process.

### 4. How did you involve the children in the process?

Ensuring that children were involved in the process through having conversations with them about the original routine, was a main priority for Molly and the team. When the changes were implemented the team continued to have conversations with children about how they felt about the changes, what they liked and didn't like. In some instances a few alterations were made on the spot, whilst others will be reviewed with the team in the review process. Children will also play a big part in the review process ensuring their voices are heard.

### 5. What are some of the results?

Stage one has been implemented for 8 weeks now and Molly feels that the changes have reduced the lining up, reduced the wait times and increased the flexibility. Before the changes were made, the afternoon routine was very 'stop-starty' with many lines and making choices for children rather than allowing the children to make choices for themselves. With the changes made, children are able to enjoy a calm, flexible and relaxing environment. They can choose when they would like to eat and how much they would like to eat.

- Children are able to engage in more sustained play opportunities and less time waiting or stopping and starting again.
- Children have been arriving promptly after the bell goes whereas before they would trickle in spending time hanging around outside before coming to the OSHC program.
- Children are eating more of the food that is supplied which has seen a marked reduction in our wastage.

- Children are happier, more relaxed and calm. They seem to be enjoying the outside space more than they were before. The team feels that this may be because it is more relaxed and flexible and they have access to equipment now as well.
- Molly and the educator team have seen a huge improvement in children's behaviour with less behaviour guidance needing to occur which has made the educators feel more comfortable, relaxed and calm in the space. Our educators are happier and enthusiastic in their roles each afternoon!

*"It's more fun, we get to play for longer and don't line up as much!"*

*"I like getting my own food and not having to line up."*

### 6. Where do you plan to go from here?

The whole team plans on reviewing stage one of the changes at the end of September where they will focus on the positives and any challenges that have been faced/are facing. The plan for stage two will then be addressed to determine how it will be implemented and if it needs any adapting. Some of the challenges Molly spoke about in regards to implementing stage two are keeping track of children washing their hands before they eat which will include supervision and encouraging children to take responsibility for this. Molly spoke about the possibility of looking into a token system to begin with, where children are given a token to indicate they have washed their hands, which is handed to the educator supervising the meal.



# Mindfulness for children

## KidsMatter – Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative

Thanks to KidsMatter for allowing us to republish  
this article from their website [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a whole body-mind state of awareness that involves ‘tuning in’ to the present moment, with openness and curiosity, instead of ‘tuning out’ from experience. Mindfulness is a state of being fully awake to life – being aware and undistracted in the present moment. It is about focusing attention on the present, rather than thinking about the past or worrying about the future- which is often our brain’s default mode.

Mindful awareness is something that we all possess and that can be strengthened through practice. Mindfulness can be developed through formal sitting meditation practices, or through informal everyday mindfulness activities that use the senses to anchor the attention: such as mindful walking, listening to music, eating or conversation. Mindfulness is a clinically proven tool to support wellbeing and mental health by reducing stress and allowing life to be experienced more fully.

*Mindfulness is a state of being fully awake to life – being aware and undistracted in the present moment.*

### Why practise being mindful?

The way we interact with our kids has a huge impact on the way they think about themselves and their levels of personal resilience. Ellen Langer and team, a world-renowned mindfulness researcher found that children not only prefer to interact with mindful adults, but actually devalue themselves following interactions with mindless adults (Langer, Cohen & Djikic, 2010).

### The benefits of mindfulness with children

- Research shows that mindfulness training increases connectivity in the frontal lobe of the brain, which is linked to improved attention, memory processing and decision making abilities.
- Mindfulness training involves tuning in to internal and external experiences with curiosity resulting in increased self-awareness, social awareness, and self-confidence.

- Mindfulness training increases children’s ability to self-regulate their emotions, especially difficult emotions such as fear and anger, through breathing and other grounding techniques.
- Mindfulness has been shown to improve empathy or the ability to understand what another person is thinking or feeling, which improves children’s awareness of others and helps them to build positive relationships.

### Mindfulness and childhood mental health

- Mindfulness training has been shown to reduce the severity of depression, anxiety and ADHD in children.
- Mindfulness builds resilience by giving children skills to help them to cope better with stress, as well as engage more fully with themselves and the world.

### Mindfulness for parents

The best thing parents can do to help their children become more mindful is to commit to some regular mindfulness practices themselves! The more present and mindful you are with



your children, the more happy, mindful and resilient they will be. Mindfulness training can assist parents to remain in the present moment and engage more fully when interacting with their children. Research shows that parents and carers who practise being mindful around their children, contribute to improving their child's sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

#### ○ Mindful play:

Dedicate a window of time each week to mindfully play with your child or children. Turn off all other distractions such as TV, and put your mobile away and on silent. Try to give them your full attention during this time and if your mind wanders off to all the things you should be doing, that's fine – that's just what minds do! Use your child as an anchor to come back to every time your mind wanders away.

#### ○ Mindful cooking:

Cooking together can be a great way to spend quality time. Help your child notice the colours, smell and taste of the ingredients as you

add them to the meal, and the touch of the different items as you cook.

#### ○ Mindful dinnertime:

Create a time for your family to appreciate and savour their food at the start of a meal by spending the first few minutes of dinner in silence,

just eating and enjoying the food. It's a surprisingly nice activity to do with the whole family, and done regularly, can become a lovely ritual.

#### ○ Mindful teeth brushing:

Getting kids to brush their teeth can be a challenge, so why not make it a challenge, by inviting them to try to do it mindfully with you? Invite them to pay attention to the feel of the brush in their mouth and the sensation and taste of the toothpaste. Ask them three things they noticed that was different about their brushing tonight than from the previous night.

### Mindful learning environments

- Teachers and early childhood educators can influence student wellbeing and

learning by understanding, embodying and embedding principles of mindfulness into their learning environments.

- Teachers and early childhood educators who are encouraged to develop mindful awareness in their own life will positively influence their whole community.

### A mindful partnership

KidsMatter has joined forces with Smiling Mind, a free program that helps develop Mindfulness Meditation skills in children.

#### References

[www.kidsmatter.edu.au/mental-health-matters/mindfulness](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/mental-health-matters/mindfulness).

KidsMatter is an Australian mental health and well-being initiative set in primary schools and early childhood education and care services. It is a partnership between education and health sectors and is funded by the Australian Government and beyondblue. More information and resources can be found online [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au).



# The Whisper of Giants:

## Engaging children in meaningful programming and planning

By Matthew Balken

Programming. The word makes educators shudder. To them, it means mountains of paperwork, endless hours spent desperately analysing what exactly the children learned when they spontaneously decided to all jump into that particular mud puddle. It makes sense then, following this type of reaction, that programming is also something that children aren't necessarily involved in—it is for the adults to determine the various learning opportunities and extensions that could come from a child's play. Children are just meant to, well, play.

Too many times as adults, we are removed from the play going on—instead of viewing play as a wonderful path to a child's imagination, we are experiencing play through our 'Documentation Glasses', when we should just be in the moment. When planning and creating a program, the same problem continues. How many educators can relate to phasing out a particularly messy, chaotic or otherwise "problematic" activity, in favour of something a little less so—I mean silent ball...Really? We're not even trying to cover up our motives now. Too often we replace things that actually challenge children in favour of things that are "better for educators", not realising that we are slowly falling into the trap of programming for our needs rather than children's.

Going one step further, if we were to truly be programming for the child's best interests, we would, in fact, be programming the child's interests. That is, how can we truly create a child-centric program a month, or even just a week, in advance. How do we actually know that what the child is interested in today will capture their interest tomorrow? In this way, I advocate "programming in the moment"—who cares if the schedule says tomorrow is cooking extravaganza day? If the children are dead-set on learning all they can about planes, run with it. Or rather, fly with it. Listen to their whispers—the sometimes obvious and sometimes painfully subtle clues children give us daily—and let those whispers become yells, shouts and screams. Take their ideas as far as they can possibly go.

*Listen to their whispers—the sometimes obvious and sometimes painfully subtle clues children give us daily.*

The real reason I altered the way documentation was done within my YMCA Outside School Hours Care service was to minimise the time educators spent away from the children. By allowing the various risk assessments, programming templates and other sorts of documentation to be completed by the children (with the educators nearby to offer assistance if needed), I found that the process took less time, gave educators the ability to always be present on the floor, and allowed the children to be heard. In the room, I took down the paperwork and documentation that too often clutters the walls of services and child-centric spaces, and replaced them with the children's own artwork and creations, as well as a few images and quotes the children and I thought appropriate. Suddenly, the room was much more inviting to enter. I did away with the staff desk, because in a child's play area, there should be no areas that are off-limits. Who are we to limit where a child's imagination will take them? Who are we to say, this is my desk within your space, which you cannot play with?

With the experiences that were set up in the space, the children were able to extend on them when and where they wished. In every "area" of the room, there was a piece of paper next to it that allowed the children to write down what they wanted. In a way, it was a sort of wish list. In the kitchen area, where we would conduct our science experiences, they were able to write down what experiments they wanted to try next. In the home corner, they were able to make a list of the items they wanted for their shops. I found that by allowing the children to write down what they wanted while still in that frame of mind/play, I avoided getting generic requests and instead found that they were asking for specific items to further their play in that moment. All of these papers were placed at their level and within close distance of textas, so that whenever inspiration or imagination struck them, they could write it down. Sometimes they dreamed bigger than our budget would allow for, but instead of being defeated by this, it taught us to think outside the box with our resources...or just use the box that those resources arrived in.

Ultimately, the way I altered documentation within our service allowed for the children to have a greater voice. Instead of being just whispers in the grand scheme of programming and planning, those adult-centric areas suddenly became all for and all by the children. And they were not the only ones to benefit—in life it is too easy to be caught up in the rush, and by letting the children lead, the service was able to remember to just stop and play. Because play is a serious business.



# Curious Minds

By Rod Soper,  
Thinkers Inq

Do you remember the first time you met someone you really liked? Like most of us, you probably found everything they said and did super interesting!

The reason we find everything about them interesting is because they matter to us. We notice their smiles, laughter, cares, passions, interests, insights, likes and dislikes. We often enjoyed their fresh perspectives, learning their ways of thinking and doing old and usual things and we embraced their insights and attitudes. All this change occurs simply because they matter to us...pretty powerful stuff.

It is this notion of finding everything interesting that I want us to pause and think about, for it is this concept which is at the heart of a curious mind. The

*The key to finding everything interesting is to never dismiss anything!*

curious mind encourages us to respond to the world around us with awe and wonderment, just as we do when we fall head-over-heels. It is all about finding the world awesome, mysterious, being intrigued with phenomena and getting excited about beautiful, life changing moments.

It is important to note here that the people we work with have these life-changing moments every day and by finding everything interesting we are setting ourselves up not to miss a single one.

The key to finding everything interesting is to never dismiss anything! It is one simple formula, but it is a real game changer. Having this curious mind means always being inquisitive and valuing our natural instinct to engage in exploration.

The action of finding everything interesting or having this curious mind helps us to explore deeper

and for longer because of the type of thinking it generates. When we are working with a curious mind we remain in an open mindset rather than a fixed or closed thinking frame. Professor Carol Dweck from Stanford University has done some lovely work around how a fixed mindset minimises a curious mind (2006). Her research called the Growth Mindset puts us in a healthy thinking frame so that we can find everything interesting and remain truly curious at every point in our lives. The table on the following page explores the two mindsets for an educator.

*When we are working with a curious mind we remain in an open mindset rather than a fixed or closed thinking frame.*

## Developing a curious mind using the Growth Mindset (2006)

When it comes to...	A fixed mindset says...	A curious mind says...
<b>Challenges</b>	I am going to avoid that challenge because I don't want to fail trying and feel silly. I don't want to let myself down any more.	I am going to give that challenge a go. I wonder what I already know to get myself started? Who else might be able to join with me to keep me growing?
<b>Obstacles</b>	I will do everything I can to avoid this obstacle so that I won't need to worry about failing and feeling bad about myself.	This obstacle in my way is an opportunity for me to ask more about my environment, learn new things about myself and develop some new skills. I am going to have a conversation with my Educational Leader to help me explore for a solution
<b>Effort</b>	I am not certain if I will grow by putting in a lot of effort, it's too hard to know. The safest thing for me to do is to avoid the issue and avoid the required effort.	All this effort I am applying in this situation is going to help me to become a better person, a more skilled educator and be able to offer even more insight due to my new level of mastery. I need to connect with my team so that together we can achieve our goals.
<b>Criticism</b>	Any criticism of my skills and abilities has to be a criticism of me personally. There can rarely be any good found in criticism. I certainly don't grow from negative feedback.	This negative feedback and criticism is information for me to learn from. It's tricky but I will evaluate it, be curious about it and learn from its possibilities. I am going to start with my mentor and discuss the information
<b>Success of Others</b>	I am feeling threatened by other's success and consequently I might avoid them, or attribute their success to luck or even find objectionable issues around the success so I can avoid it.	I am excited by this success. I am keen to learn about how it was achieved. I am going to ask lots of questions about what made it possible. I am also going to reflect on how I can be inspired to grow myself.

As you can see there are some powerful opportunities offered to the person who has a curious mind. There is a greater sense of freedom and agency for those who consistently practise this mindset. For those who choose to not use a curious mind there is less opportunity to achieve true potential due to the fact that their choices have already predetermined their world-view and so often their outcome in life. A common response I hear from people with a fixed mindset, “we don't do things like that here!” or “we tried that once, a long time ago!”

So how do we develop a curious mind? This is a great question and by genuinely investigating this we have already begun on the journey of shifting our mindset. In my life I have found asking curious questions, at every point and in every situation, has helped set me up for success and they keep me ready for growth. Curious questions enhance the habit of finding everything interesting. They provide a headspace for us to think deeper and purposefully, because to find the answers we have to genuinely explore for them. This means the process of inquiry is often hard work and requires deep, thoughtful reflection.

*There is a greater sense of freedom and agency for those who consistently practise this mindset.*

**A few examples of genuinely open-ended questions are:**

- I wonder where that came from?
- That looks amazing, can you tell me about that?
- Are you able to help me understand what you have found interesting about this?
- Look at that, tell me what is it?
- Where did the idea for that come from?
- I am so impressed with your thinking, how did you do that? Where did you start?
- Are there any other ideas you want to tell me about?

The key to gauging whether you are asking a truly curious question is: do you already know the answer? If you know the answer then it is a closed question. Here is an example for you: A closed

question – did you build that? A curious question – tell me about your design? The more curious or open the question is the deeper the investigation can go.

You can also use a great thinking tool called de Bono's Six Thinking Hats to develop truly curious questions. Each of the six hats has a job to do to help questioning and thinking go further and deeper. Children, and many adults, enjoy a little bit of dressing up and this is a great way to have lots of fun and think deeply all at the same time. This link is a great place to start learning about the six thinking hats so you can further develop your capacity to be curious: [http://](http://www.debonothinkingsystems.com/tools/6hats.htm)

[www.debonothinkingsystems.com/tools/6hats.htm](http://www.debonothinkingsystems.com/tools/6hats.htm)

So in wrapping up, having a curious mind means we will find everything interesting at each and every opportunity. The result of this thinking means you are positioning yourself to explore, grow, change and reach your potential. It means as you are becoming the best that you can be those you work with are being challenged to change, be open for possibility and experience a great model of success for their own life. I challenge you to make the shift today to a curious mindset and share your successes with those who are important to you. Make no mistake; this change isn't the easiest but it will deeply impact your life for good. **#makeitcount**

*Rod is the co-founder and director of Thinkers.inq Consulting. He has been leading in the education and change space for the past decade and is excited by every possibly of change which makes a purposeful difference in people's lives.*

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# Who's that man?

## What are the barriers, myths and joys of being a male educator?

By Philip Butler. B.Teach (EC), B.ED(EC), M.ED (EC), Semann & Slattery



I have a firsthand understanding of what it means to be an early childhood male educator. I have been “that man” in the early childhood sector for over two decades now. I have also provided training and mentoring to other male educators in the sector, most recently with the city of Penrith earlier this year. This article combines my personal experience and contemporary

research and theory around what men in education and care have to offer. This article summarises my findings around the following questions: Does gender make a difference to the pedagogy of our settings? What are these differences, and how can we celebrate them? What are the barriers to engaging more men in the education and care sector, both real, and perceived?

### Does having a male educator in your setting make a difference?

Yes. Does having a male educator in your setting make it better? Not necessarily. Whether any new educator to your setting adds to your program, is as always, up to the individual skills of the educator and the team they are surrounded by,

and little to do with their gender. Children are affected by both the presence, and the absence, of male educators. In order to avoid exclusion of men, education and care services should resolutely strive towards a ‘multiplicity of gendered identities’ (Cameron, Moss & Owen, 1999). Put simply...

education and care services would best serve the communities if their educators are not merely one

*...education and care services would best serve the communities if their educators are not merely one dimensional.*

dimensional. This relates to more than just gender, but also ethnicity, culture, and abilities. Each of these identities are required to reflect the multiple ethnicities, abilities, backgrounds and cultures of the children we are educating and families we are engaging with on a daily basis. It is my opinion that we should be striving every day to ensure that diversity in our educators is the norm, not the exception.

### Barriers to engaging more men in the early childhood sector

When looking at some of the barriers to male educators working in education and care we need to remember there are two types of barriers, the real, and those that are perceived. Let’s start with the real barriers out there. Some of the barriers which I have either had personal experience with, or have heard from colleagues are: education and care education is traditionally seen as women’s work; negative media perceptions of men working with young children; lack of role models in the sector; the

solo presence of a male educator can be seen as tokenistic; and the existence of misguided policies and procedures. Luckily for us, these barriers are slowly being addressed by society as a whole, and it’s my hope that going forward, none of these will be seen as a hindrance to males entering the sector.

The perceived barriers are also interesting, in that while they may not be founded in regulations or best practices, they can still be very powerful in stopping men from entering the sector. Some of these perceived barriers are: males can’t be left alone with children; men can’t change nappies; men are not caring or nurturing by nature; and the relatively low pay and work conditions in the sector (I only see this last one as being a perceived barrier because if you really want to work in the sector the relatively low pay will not stop you, as it doesn’t hinder the females presence). While I will be the first to respond that none of these perceived barriers should exist as none of them are stated or mentioned in any regulation or framework, they are still having a negative effect on males entering the sector. These perceived barriers are the ones that all educators need to lean into those challenging conversations with our families, colleagues, and even sometimes ourselves. We need to lean into the discussion, supporting what’s best practice for children, not simply what society perceives best practice should look like.

### What can our colleagues and leaders do to promote males working in the education and care sector?

- Whenever possible and appropriate, employ more than one male educator. This is to avoid the tokenistic ‘that man’ phenomenon, and to reduce the sense of isolation one male educator may experience in an otherwise all female setting.
- When advertising for educators advertise that you are a male-friendly workplace...”males encouraged to apply”.
- Let your casual educator supplier know that you are happy to have male educators in the setting.
- Lean into challenging conversations with families and the community around this topic.
- Disseminate any written positive and supportive information around this topic to families and encourage discussion.

### What can male educators do to support the role of men in education and care?

- Positively promote yourself when in the setting through genuine conversations and discussions, be your own advocate, politely challenge unrealistic norms and expectations.
- Don’t try and be ‘one of the girls’. We need to remain true to ourselves and not change our personalities or characteristics because we are trying to fit in with the rest of the (female) team.
- Remain respectful and professional at all times.

- Ensure you meet new families during orientations (the same as the other educators). Sometimes we can try and blend into the background when visitors are coming through the setting as we might feel it could lead to a challenging conversation.
- Remember social referencing...if you display a sense of unease or uncertainty about being there, then others will pick up on that and reflect the same uncertainty.
- Be aware of the regulations, policies and procedures in relation to your career. If there is a specific policy or procedure which is only for you as a man, and it doesn't apply to other educators (such as a 'no man is to change nappies'), you need to challenge why this policy has been implemented, and if it's appropriate. From a regulation point of view there are NO male-specific rules or regulations in the education and care sector.
- Be confident in your everyday interactions and conversations.
- Assume the best from others, not the worst.

### Positive outcomes from the involvement of males in our education and care settings

So what are the positive outcomes that we can expect to see from the involvement of males in our education and care settings? Put simply, a holistic approach to pedagogy. By having both males and females involved in the design and implementation of the learning environments and pedagogy we have more of an opportunity to

meet the diverse needs of all of the children. There are some key advantages that a male educator may have the opportunity to develop in your settings, which may not be as easy for a female educator to do. One example of this may be to model and reinforce appropriate gender equity and communication strategies throughout the daily program and interactions. This can be achieved by supporting equitable play and relationships and implementing positive gender approaches. All of this is being accomplished every day in settings without males in them; however it can be made that much easier when a male educator, or two, are part of the team. Research has shown us that in settings that employ one or more males, the relationships between boys and girls have become more equal and the children tended to play together more.

Males have often been seen as a positive role model for children who don't always have a male role model in their life. I have experienced this myself. However

it is important to remember what enormous responsibilities this can place upon our male educators. To know that you are the only one representing 'maleness' in a setting, and that everyone expects you to be the 'perfect male role model' for all males, can be very daunting for some educators. In extreme cases, this responsibility has led

to male educators leaving the sector because of unrealistic expectations and the pressure to be something they may not feel they can live up to.

Having the presence of male educators can also encourage male family members to attend their child's centre more often. Male family members (in general) might find it easier to be engaged in education and care settings when they know they can talk to a male educator as opposed to always talking to females. This may not always be the case, and certainly shouldn't be the case, but it is the reality in some circumstances. By simply having a male educator available it can dramatically change and add to your family's communications and involvement. Having a male educator can also offer some male parents/family members the opportunity to seek assistance/guidance in a dynamic which

they may feel more comfortable in. We are also able to provide positive role modelling of respectful and positive interactions between females and males. In some cases, your setting might be the only time some of the children

*By having both males and females involved in the design and implementation of the learning environments and pedagogy we have more of an opportunity to meet the diverse needs of all of the children.*

in your care see positive male/female relationships and communications.

These positive outcomes and many others like them will only be possible if we in the sector are the advocates for change and improvements. Such change will not happen overnight. Moss (2003), states that "a quick fix" cannot work, and advocates for sustained policy commitment

and priority in this area. Such change is also likely to require a combined effort from those within the sector alongside key stakeholders from outside the sector.

On a personal note, I spread the good word to all men who are interested at every opportunity I get. I've loved every minute of my years in the sector and have loved working with very diverse teams in a

*Having the presence of male educators can also encourage male family members to attend their child's centre more often.*

variety of settings. In my current role as a trainer in professional development in the education and care sector, I continue to be moved and amazed on a daily basis by the educators I meet. I am also very happy to report that an increasing number of settings that I visit have a greater presence of males and I'm hearing less often those infamous words 'that

man'. As we in the sector know, it's certainly one of the most rewarding careers you can have, with the potential to literally change lives on a daily basis.

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## What about Positive Behaviour Support?



By **Chantelle Piefke-Williams**,  
Communities@Work's Family Programs

As an educator of young children, you have most likely heard, and probably used terms such as positive behaviour support to refer to managing challenging behaviour. But what is positive behaviour support?

Throughout my career, I have worked with countless families, workers and educators experiencing challenging behaviours from their children and young people, many of whom came with labels and descriptors such as “troublesome”, “naughty”, “horrible”, “difficult”, “violent”, “aggressive”, “extreme”, “hopeless”, “disobedient”, “oppositional”, “defiant”. What was common in each of these stories was that the child was rarely

*We need to shift our focus from the frustrations we experience as a consequence of the behaviour to why the behaviour occurs.*

seen with the potential for change, development and learning. These children were bombarded with negative messages about themselves that only served to reinforce the existing behavioural challenges without investigation into the causes and opportunities.

Often we rely on the strategies and practices that we are most familiar with. The ones we have been taught, seen and used. We rely on our experiences to tell us what to do. They come naturally to us and are “on hand” in the heat of the moment (this is as true for our children as it is with ourselves). When I walk into a home or an education centre, I am often faced with frustrated and overwhelmed adults. Caring individuals who are feeling that they have no strategies left and that “nothing works”. But what do we do when our tried and true strategies don't work?

This is a question faced by many when working with children and young people.

When faced with a child's overwhelmingly challenging behaviour, it can be common for people to see the child as a "problem" needing to be fixed. We need to shift our focus from the frustrations we experience as a consequence of the behaviour to why the behaviour occurs. Children are not the problem, they are on a journey of self-discovery and of learning how the world works. They have not had many years of experience and so, do the best they can with what they have. Unfortunately for some of the children we work with, their short life experience has taught them some very tough lessons about how people manage their emotions and what behaviours 'work' for them. In many cases, what assists these children are changes to the environment in conjunction with the responses of well-attuned adults and peers to accommodate the individual's learning and communication styles. The Positive Behaviour Support framework gives us a sound method to evaluate behavioural responses and to develop a supportive and collaborative plan for learning.

Positive Behaviour Support is based on the philosophies and models of Gary La Vigna and Thomas Willis of the Institute for Applied Behavioural Analysis in Southern California. Rather than approaching challenging behaviour as the "problematic child", we look at what opportunities there are for learning, to adapt our strategies to meet the child's needs and to support new skills. Positive Behaviour Support is a framework for seeking to understand the influences on and purpose of behaviour and addressing it in a positive and non-punitive manner to teach and support the child to adopt more socially acceptable behaviours. The framework utilises scientific method to observe, evaluate and assess the behaviour and then to develop strategic supports for the child's development.

We know that children do not exist in isolation and we know how each setting has differing impacts and influences on them. Keeping this in mind, the Positive Behaviour Support model insists on a collaborative approach to succeed. Positive Behaviour Support brings all people involved together in assessing the behaviour, planning strategies and supporting one another. At the centre is always the child or young person who is very much a contributing member of this team. The approach is one of "doing with" the child rather

than "doing for" or "doing to" which is crucial in providing meaningful supports for the child. The child or young person helps us to understand what is happening for them, and indeed, what helps. Those around the child are then in positions to be supporters, coaches, cheer squads, and advocates for the child learning a new skill.

It can be easy to get caught in the emotion and stress of dealing with challenging behaviour, especially if you have had to manage it for an extended period of time without sufficient support and resources. One of the many positives from adopting the Positive Behaviour Support approach is that there is a recognition and value of existing resources and supports that merely need "tapping into". We must ask ourselves, how are we contributing to this behaviour as we are in a position of powerful influence over the children in our lives. The Positive Behaviour Support framework provides us with clear steps to break-down and understand the behaviour and to come up with solutions and strategies.

The training in Positive Behaviour Support framework is broken into 12 main modules: Introduction to the framework, What is behaviour, influences on behaviour, Purpose of behaviour, Effective communication, Positive behaviour strategies, Evidence based research, Environmental supports, Positive behaviour support planning meetings, Rights and responsibilities, Monitor review and evaluation, and Legal and ethical responsibilities. Learning how to interact with these principles by using the framework will add to your basket of "go to" strategies. It is an approach that can be adopted by teachers, educators and parents alike, and is an invaluable tool that you can draw on throughout your work and life with children and young people.

*Positive Behaviour Support brings all people involved together in assessing the behaviour, planning strategies and supporting one another.*

*If you are interested in learning more about Positive Behaviour Support, please contact The Centre of Professional Learning and Education for training opportunities.*

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