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**Manuscript category:** Commentary

**Promoting the development of children's emotional and social wellbeing in early childhood settings: How can we enhance the capability of educators to fulfil role expectations?**

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## **Abstract**

*This article discusses the expectations implicit in both EYL and NQ Frameworks regarding the role of early childhood educators in promoting the development of children's social and emotional wellbeing. There is a specific focus on factors that may impact on the ability of early childhood educators to successfully adjust their practice to meet these expectations. Suggestions are made in relation to the training and education of pre-service teachers and the professional development of the current early childhood workforce to ensure that all early childhood educators are able to promote the development of social and emotional wellbeing in children.*

**Keywords:** early childhood; childcare; social and emotional development; wellbeing.

## Introduction

The Australian early childhood (EC) sector is currently being remodelled under the guidance of two new national frameworks: *Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (ACECQA, 2011a). The adjustments made in the sector in response to these frameworks will directly affect the 651,000 Australian children aged between birth and five years who are estimated to attend formal EC settings each week, and the 65,000 EC educators employed in these settings (ABS, 2008; OECECC, 2010). The majority of these children (81%) attend long day care centres, with 5,758 of these centres spread across Australia (ABS, 2008; OECECC, 2010).

The EYLF was developed in response to the growing body of evidence indicating the importance of EC learning and development for positive life outcomes (DEEWR, 2009), such as the strong evidence demonstrating that social and emotional (SE) wellbeing during early childhood affects the health, wellbeing and competence of individuals throughout life (Barblett & Maloney, 2010; Gluckman, 2011). The EYLF was also informed by recent findings demonstrating the significance of brain development during early childhood and research indicating that early learning outcomes are affected by factors such as the quality of attachment with caregivers, emotional regulation, and wellbeing (Edwards, Fler & Nuttall, 2008).

The influence of these research findings are evident in the five overarching Learning Outcomes outlined in the EYLF, and in the interrelated Principles and Practice guidelines provided to assist EC educators in facilitating the attainment of the Learning Outcomes by children in their care (see Table 1).

\*\*\* Table 1 about here \*\*\*

The *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA, 2011a) and accompanying *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2011b) were similarly developed in recognition of the importance of

early education and care for the wellbeing and positive life outcomes of individuals. Of primary interest to this article is *Quality Area 5: Relationships with Children* (see Table 2).

\*\*\* Table 2 about here \*\*\*

Evident in both of these sections of the Frameworks is the expectation that EC educators understand the development of SE wellbeing in childhood, are able to successfully identify and implement strategies and work practices to achieve such an outcome, and will actually engage with the implementation process to adjust their work practice as needed. Also central to the Frameworks is the idea that the development of children's SE wellbeing within early childhood settings hinges on the EC educators' relationships with the children. It is assumed that these role expectations are consistent with the training and education of the EC sector workforce and with the professional identity of EC educators. These role expectations, and the complications associated with them, are discussed below.

### **Understanding and promoting the development of social and emotional wellbeing**

The EYLF and NQF documents (DEEWR, 2009; ACECQA, 2011a, respectively) and accompanying *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2010) and *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2011b) do not delve into specifics about how to support the development of SE wellbeing in children. This lack of specificity, while promoted as allowing EC educators to apply the Frameworks flexibly to their specific setting, is likely to be related to the fact that strategies to promote the development of SE wellbeing, and the barriers that may be encountered, have not been well-documented or researched (Davis et al., 2011). In part, this is because the existing body of knowledge on the development of SE wellbeing is complex and at times subtle, thus making the translation of this information into the practical realm a difficult leap, even for those very familiar with the theory, evidence and implications. There is, therefore, a sizeable gap that the profession must grapple with to ensure that the guidelines are translated into everyday practice.

Further, as noted by Sims (2010), the evolving expectations associated with the EC educator role mean there is a need to determine how to best help those already working in the field to improve their skills.

### ***Improving skills in the current workforce***

The decision made by each EC educator to either engage with or reject the changes in practice necessitated by the Frameworks will evidently impact on whether or not the transformation of the EC sector will be successful. Burgess, Robertson and Patterson's (2010) research suggests that the individual educator's decisions will be based on three key factors: 1) the availability and accessibility of relevant professional development activities and the provision of adequate support structures; 2) the content of the Frameworks; whether the EC educators deem it to be a priority; and 3) issues such as workload at the time of implementation, which may lead to any practice change being viewed negatively.

In relation to the first point, relevant professional development is currently available to EC educators through programs such as Early Childhood Australia's *National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program* (see: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/)) and KidsMatter's *Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative* (see: [www.kidsmatter.edu.au/ec/](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/ec/)). These programs focus on increasing EC educators' understanding of childhood development and provide examples of strategies and work practices that may be useful for educators. While Early Childhood Australia's program is broad in scope, covering all aspects of the EYLF and NQF, the KidsMatter program is specifically targeted at mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention in early childhood. The Hunter Institute of Mental Health's *Response Ability* (see: [www.responseability.org/site/index.cfm?display=134392](http://www.responseability.org/site/index.cfm?display=134392)) program complements the KidsMatter program by also considering mental health promotion in early childhood, but being targeted at tertiary sector educators to assist in their training of pre-service teachers. However, until the effectiveness of the programs and their implementation in EC settings has been evaluated, we will not know how successful these approaches are for supporting the workforce or what proportion of the EC workforce is actively engaging with this process.

The need for organisational support to ensure that professional development opportunities are accessible and accessed by the workforce is also made clear by Burgess et al. (2010). However, Davis et al. (2011) identified a number of barriers to gaining access to this sort of training, including the ability of EC settings to manage the time and costs associated with staff participating in professional development activities, which are typically only available off-site and during normal working hours. More concerning, perhaps, was the common perception among EC centre directors that the training available was not relevant to work roles, thus adding to their disinclination to support staff wanting to pursue further training.

A factor that may impact on centre directors' and individual educators' perceptions of the relevance of professional development activities and training in line with the Frameworks is the issue of professional identity. Throughout the literature, a number of identity labels are used; these are most typically 'early childhood teacher' or 'early childhood educator', and rarely 'child care worker'. This indicates that those writing about the area primarily see the role of those working in early childhood settings as being that of a 'teacher' or 'educator', rather than that of a 'carer'. This identity issue is reflected in the change in wording from the initial discussion paper released in relation to the EYLF (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008), which used the term 'early childhood education and care professionals', to the final document (DEEWR, 2009), which refers to 'early childhood educators'. While this change ensures that the wording of the EYLF is in line with the broader literature (which is why the term has been used throughout the current article), it may also contribute to a mismatch between the professional identity of those working in the sector and the role now expected of them.

Those who consider themselves 'teachers' or 'educators' may perceive the realm of social and emotional development to be primarily relevant to the role of a 'child care worker', thus inhibiting the engagement of these individuals in the implementation process and decreasing their inclination to seek opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills. Elfer (2010), for example, has noted that the preoccupation with educational outcomes means that early childhood educators overlook emotional issues. This could be a concern because Ortlipp, Arthur and Woodrow (2011) demonstrated that the EYLF is overwhelmingly framed in relation to education, teaching and learning, almost to the complete exclusion of the traditional aspects of care and nurturing. Ortlipp et al. found

these changes were challenging for those in the workforce with vocational training, who did not necessarily see themselves as 'educators', and also for those who felt more comfortable with the traditional view of being a 'carer'. However, because the EYLF illustrated how common work practices related to early childhood development, some individuals experienced an increased sense of professionalism (Ortlipp et al., 2011).

As such, it is probable that the professional identities of those working in EC settings, or training to do so, will have some impact on their willingness to engage in practice changes necessitated by the Frameworks' implementation. It is also possible that the preparedness of the workforce to work with families and children to foster SE wellbeing may be related to their professional identity.

### ***Pre-service education and training***

Sims (2010) states that, owing to the evolving EC educator role, dramatic changes are needed within the curriculum of pre-service education and training to adequately prepare future professionals. The changes suggested by Sims include increasing the years of training required for entry into the EC sector, with the revised curriculum including topics such as attachment, child mental health, family dynamics, social disadvantage, crisis intervention and conflict management, counselling and advocacy skills, and information on other social issues.

Further, the ability to provide individualised program planning to promote SE development in EC settings will depend on the ability of educators to integrate relevant knowledge of childhood development, strategies and work practices with their knowledge of each individual child and the child's SE knowledge, skills and dispositions (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). This requires more than just the knowledge and skills that are traditionally acquired through pre-service training; personal qualities such as interpersonal skills and empathy are also required. Sims (2010) suggests that these individual factors should also be a focus of pre-service training. Supporting this position are the findings of Weare and Gray's (2003) research, which demonstrated that the behaviour and attitudes of primary school teachers influenced their students' development of SE wellbeing. The authors concluded that *'there is good evidence that teachers cannot transmit emotional and social competence and*

*wellbeing effectively if their own emotional and social needs are not met'* (p.7). These issues will be discussed in more detail below in relation to the educator–child relationship.

### **The educator–child relationship**

The two Frameworks and accompanying documents indicate that it is the EC educator's role to support the child's growing sense of identity, belonging and competence, and to assist in the development of successful methods for interacting with others (ACECQA, 2011a & b; DEEWR, 2009 & 2010). This is to be achieved by the educator developing a warm and responsive relationship with each child, leading to the development of trust—in other words, the development of a secure attachment between the child and the educator.

### ***Secure attachment relationships***

The importance of a secure child–caregiver bond for the child's development is explained by Attachment Theory. Warm, responsive and consistent caregiving has been found to lead the child to feel safe in relation to both their physical and social environments and thus to be securely attached (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). This sense of safety enables the child to explore and learn, assisting in the development of feelings of competence. The nature of the caregiver–child relationship leads the child to feel valued, thus developing feelings of self-worth, and to view other people as being reliable, caring and trustworthy. As such, securely attached individuals tend to feel positively about themselves and other people, and to view the world to be a generally safe place (Bartholomew, 1990).

A secure attachment style lays the foundation for SE wellbeing throughout life. For example, individuals with a secure attachment style are more likely than those with an insecure attachment style to have a low level of risk for depression, anxiety and burnout (Mickelson, Kessler, & Shaver, 1997; Pines, 2004, Priel & Shamai, 1995; Simmons, Gooty, Nelson & Little, 2009) and to have good social skills and high emotional intelligence, being flexible and constructive in their interpersonal relationships by demonstrating compassionate feelings and values, engaging in altruistic behaviours, and being responsive to others (Kafetsios, 2004; Mikulincer, 1998a). Additionally, securely attached individuals are more likely to

utilise functional coping strategies when stressed and are more able to regulate their emotions appropriately, including exhibiting lower anger-proneness (i.e. reporting more adaptive responses in anger episodes and attributing less hostile intent to others), than are insecurely attached individuals (Mikulincer, 1998a & b; Mikulincer & Sheffi, 2000; Ognibene & Collins, 1998).

Professional development programs aimed at assisting EC educators develop secure attachment relationships with children have been implemented in Australia and internationally. Although designed to assist the development of secure parent–child relationships, the Circle of Security intervention (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002) was used as the basis of the Benevolent Society’s Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) program (Valentine, Thompson & Antcliff, 2009) and Lady Gowrie’s Through the Looking Glass (TtLG) project (Colmer, Murphy & Rutherford, 2011). For PIEC, this included providing early childhood educators with training and supervision in relation to understanding the relationship needs of children and their behaviour, and was found to be successful in both increasing the quality of educator–child relationships and decreasing children’s problem behaviours (Thomson, Longden, Harrison & Valentine, 2007). Similarly, the outcomes of the TtLG project included more settled children and a calmer, less stressful environment (Colmer et al., 2011). Consistent with this are the findings of Emmett (2011), who followed the professional journeys of 15 pre-service teachers undertaking an attachment-focused initiative in the final year of their studies. The initiative not only investigated attachment conceptions and relationship issues, but facilitated participant reflection upon their interactions with young children and their own attachment history in a safe learning environment. Findings revealed that ‘the inclusion of material about personal attachment history, with its emphasis upon self-awareness and insight, strengthens the capacity of the participant to operationalize attachment-focused practice’ (p. 328).

Elfer and Dearnley (2007) successfully employed a program, based on psychoanalytic approaches to understanding attachment relationships, to assist EC professionals integrate attachment principles with daily practice. The authors noted that this process was difficult to implement and maintain, being dependent on appropriately skilled trainers and sufficient organisational support. They concluded that there was also a need for attitudinal changes in relation to the necessity of adequate time and space for reflective practice for any changes

in work practice to persist over time. These sentiments are supported by Colmer et al. (2011), who also note the importance of maintaining continuity and stability in staffing. Valentine et al. (2009) similarly stress the importance of support for staff implementing PIEC-related changes in their work practices, and the need for changes in organisations to facilitate this. Thus, while it is possible to implement programs that are successful in training EC educators in strategies for the development of secure attachment relationships, the organisation and management of EC services need to be adjusted to facilitate and sustain changes in practice (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).

### ***The social and emotional wellbeing of educators***

Even with the intensive training and procedural changes discussed above, the ability of EC educators to develop and sustain secure attachment relationships is likely to be affected by their own SE wellbeing, including their own attachment style. For example, there is evidence in the literature on primary school teaching that teachers' emotional wellbeing is integral to effective teaching (Pugh, 2008). This is because the teacher's emotional state sets the classroom 'climate', influencing their ability to interact positively with students and respond appropriately to their needs, affecting the way discipline is maintained in the classroom, and altering teaching style—warm classroom environments are associated with happy, engaged, and emotionally secure students (Andersen, Evans & Harvey, 2012). It is probable that the SE wellbeing of EC educators has a similar impact on the climate of EC settings, with similar outcomes likely for the children.

This would certainly be consistent with the evidence in the literature which demonstrates the impact of an individual's SE wellbeing on their attitudes and behaviour, such as how they interact with others. To be specific, individuals with high positive affect are more likely than individuals with low positive affect (and/or high negative affect) to interact positively with others, being more generous and friendly, responding flexibly, constructively and creatively to challenges, engaging in more cooperative, helpful and pro-social behaviours, and regulating their own emotions (Ashby, Isen, & Turken, 1999; Burns et al., 2008; Fredrickson, 2001; Isen & Baron, 1991; Isen, Daubman & Nowicki, 1987). Additionally, individuals with high levels of autonomy, competence and relatedness are more likely than those with low levels of these qualities to have high levels of psychological wellbeing and

positive affect, be intrinsically motivated, have enhanced self-motivation and self-regulation, are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviours, have a secure attachment style and thrive at work, having a lower level of risk for burnout, depression and anxiety (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte & Lens, 2008).

The impact of poor educator SE wellbeing on the quality of interactions with children and associated learning and developmental outcomes has not been extensively researched within the EC sector. However, it is widely recognised that EC settings can be extremely stressful workplaces (Baumgartner, Carson, Apavaloaie & Tsouloupas, 2009), with burnout (Nobel & MacFarlane, 2005) and staff turnover (Jovanovic, 2012) likely to adversely impact on educator–child relationships. Burnout occurs when emotional exhaustion follows a prolonged period of stress (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Hence burnout is associated with stressful environments as well as the emotional labour needed in caregiving and teaching such as dealing with the children’s distress and the intensity of their needs (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007), the prioritisation of the children’s needs over the educator’s own needs (Jovanovic, 2012), and having to display emotions that are inconsistent with actual feelings, such as pretending to be happy when one is not (Maslach et al., 2001). Within the primary school sector, burnout has been found to render teachers ineffective, impeding high-quality programming, leading teachers to have fewer interactions with students and adversely affecting their SE wellbeing (Rentzou, 2012). It is likely that EC educators experiencing burnout would encounter similar negative impacts on their work practices.

### ***Education, training and support***

To summarise briefly, the quality of the educator–child relationship is central to promoting the development of SE wellbeing in children in EC settings. EC educators can be successfully supported to effectively implement strategies for fostering secure attachment relationships with children. However, the ability of EC educators to develop and sustain the warm, responsive and consistent relationships necessary for secure attachment is likely to be affected by their own levels of SE wellbeing and organisational support, procedures and culture. The findings of the Emmett (2011) study accentuate the importance of each educator within the early childhood service constructing a solid, attachment-focused

conceptual framework if attachment-based practice is to be firmly embedded in the centre-based childcare context. Moreover, Emmett draws attention to the idea of educators internalising the established and customary patterns of thinking, believing and acting in the early childhood centre community and argues that it may have been very difficult for participants within her study to challenge existing practices in the workplace environment.

Weare and Gray's (2003) assertion that the SE wellbeing of future primary school teachers should be addressed through pre-service teacher education programs is equally relevant for the training of pre-service EC educators. Palomera, Fernandez-Berrocal and Brackett (2008) and Hristofski (2011) support Weare and Gray's suggestion that, for the wellbeing of the future teachers, such programs should include information on SE wellbeing principles and curriculum that develops these competencies. We would add that such programs should also provide sustained training in strategies for the development of secure attachment relationships and include information on coping strategies and other skills and knowledge associated with burnout prevention, such as balancing personal and professional needs, providing and accepting social support, and understanding beneficial organisational procedures and management styles (Boyer, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001; van Dierendonck, Schaufeli & Buunk, 1998).

Programs containing such education and training should also be developed for those who are currently working in EC settings. These programs should be provided through in-services, external workshops and/or online as appropriate. For this process to be successful, however, organisational support and culture change will be necessary.

### **Summary and conclusions**

The introduction of the EYLF and NQF necessitate changes in EC practice, potentially requiring increased skills for many (or all) of the 65,000 EC educators in Australia. The implementation process will need to be successfully managed by the 5,758 long day care centres across the country, as well as other EC services such as preschools, kindergartens and family day care. Additionally, the training and education of pre-service teachers must be

revamped to ensure those entering the workforce are appropriately equipped to practise in line with the Frameworks.

The increase in the current EC workforce's knowledge of the development of SE wellbeing in early childhood settings is currently underway. However, there is a need for research investigating the efficacy of these existing strategies, practices and programs, and to determine the best methods by which to provide professional development. Further, attention must be paid to the evidence indicating that increased knowledge and skills alone will not be sufficient to ensure that EC educators are able to successfully assist children in their development of SE wellbeing.

The quality of the educator–child relationship is central to the development of SE wellbeing in children. To enhance the capacity of EC educators and pre-service teachers to develop warm, responsive and consistent relationships with the children they work with, the SE wellbeing of the EC workforce must be supported. The best methods for doing this need to be determined, but are likely to include personalised education about an individual's triggers for negative emotions, the impact of one's own emotional state on interactions with others, and the development of strategies to deal with these, as well as methods to reduce stress, alter negative mood states, and prevent emotional exhaustion. This education and training should be incorporated with pre-service courses, as well as being provided to the existing EC workforce via appropriate methods which will need to be determined.

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Table 1.

*The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*

<b>Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Principles</b>	<b>Practice</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children have a strong sense of identity</li> <li>• Children are connected with and contribute to their world</li> <li>• Children have a strong sense of wellbeing</li> <li>• Children are confident and involved learners</li> <li>• Children are effective communicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• High expectations and equity</li> <li>• Respect for diversity</li> <li>• Ongoing learning and reflective practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holistic approaches</li> <li>• Responsiveness to children</li> <li>• Learning through play</li> <li>• Intentional teaching</li> <li>• Positive learning environments</li> <li>• Cultural competence</li> <li>• Continuity of learning and transitions</li> <li>• Assessment for learning</li> </ul>

(DEEWR, 2009)

Table 2.

*The National Quality Framework, Quality Standard 5: Relationships with children*

5.1	Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child.
5.1.1	Interactions with each child are warm and responsive and build trust relationships.
5.1.2	Every child is able to engage with educators in meaningful, open interactions that support the acquisition of skills for life and learning.
5.1.3	Each child is supported to feel secure, confident and included.
5.2	Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.
5.2.1	Each child is supported to work with, learn from and help others through collaborative learning opportunities.
5.2.2	Each child is supported to manage their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviours of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.
5.2.3	The dignity and the rights of every child are maintained at all times.

(ACECQA, 2011b)