



## Critical thinking

Principle 5 (Ongoing Learning and Reflective Practice) of both the EYLF and the FSAC speak strongly about the value of critical reflection in the practice and pedagogy of educators. The Frameworks define critical reflection thusly: “critical reflection involves closely examining all aspects of events and experiences from different perspectives. Educators often frame their reflective practice within a set of overarching questions, developing more specific questions for particular areas of enquiry.”

The Frameworks challenges educators to critically review traditions and practices in light of new understandings about children, learning and optimal early childhood provision for the twenty-first century.

This summary exists to share with educators, and other interested people, some key findings about critical thinking – what it is, how to undertake critical thinking, and its value for children and educators. Critical thinking and the processes associated with it, supports educators to provide the children in their care with the best possible outcomes.

### Let’s look at some key points about how critical thinking and its impact on practice:

- Critical thinking is conscious, rational and empathetic. It influences behaviour – both our own and that of others.
- When we think critically, we need to have self awareness (knowing what our perspectives are, knowing why we think the way we do) and engage in self reflection (what did I bring to this interaction? What role do I play?)
- Critical thinking involves communication – when we only reflect internally or on our own, we run the risk of operating in an echo chamber.
- Critical thinking involves reflecting on the past, present and future with the intention of growing from past experiences, reflecting in the present moment, and planning ahead to how you might approach a situation differently in the future.
- Critical thinking doesn’t have to be written down – the Framework calls on educators to ‘engage with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice’ – this doesn’t happen in a specified manner or template
- Time and space are vital elements of the critical reflection process. It is important for educational leaders to support their educators by providing modeling, time and space for engaging in reflection. This may take the form of guided discussions and prompting.

### How do educators undertake critical thinking?

Critical thinking is at the core of most intellectual activity. When educators think critically, they are able to recognise or develop an argument, use evidence in support of that argument, draw reasoned conclusions, and use information to solve problems.

Examples of critical thinking skills are interpreting, analysing, evaluating, explaining, sequencing, reasoning, comparing, questioning, inferring, hypothesising, appraising, testing and generalising.

Educational leaders can help to cultivate these skills in other educators by explicitly modeling critical thinking, providing provocations to support critical thinking, allowing time and space for educators to engage in critical thinking and supporting educators as they engage in the critical reflection process.

Learning to collaborate across difference, listening to views that may differ from our own, strengthens the capacities and capabilities of early childhood educators. Critically reflective practice broadens educators ways of listening to children, families and colleagues. Critical reflection allows educators to broaden their minds and think beyond their own perspectives.

### So what do these findings mean for educators?

They mean that the experiences children have while in our care are important – they impact on their brain development, and are part of the important “relationship learning” that helps brains grow. They mean that, while knowing about developmental milestones is important, educators need to be aware that each child is an individual – having a good relationship with children and families will help you be more attuned to when something might be a concern. They mean that educators should be aware that children are learning to manage their own feelings, and that this learning – which involves trial and error, and sometimes behaviours that challenge us – is hugely important to how their brains are growing, changing and forming. The findings also, perhaps most importantly, remind us that children need to experience a wide range of moments – happy and sad, easy and

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difficult – in order to build a strong and healthy brain. Children need to experience risk, to make decisions, to try and to fail, sometimes over and over again, in order to form vital connections in their brain, connections that will impact on them for life.

Parents are, obviously, the main influence on how a child develops – we know that parents are children’s first teachers, and the people who have been with the child from birth. It is important that we, as educators, support parents in their journey. Parenting practices, such as reading to children, using rich language, and having warm and responsive interactions are all associated with greater brain development outcomes.

For some parents, an awareness of brain development and what they “should” be doing can be overwhelming – parents can feel afraid that they are damaging their child by not providing enough – or can feel pressured into needing to make every experience “optimal”. It is important for educators to reinforce the message that brain development occurs when children are included in the everyday rhythms of life – that children are loved, talked to, played with, and well nourished.

Environments, experiences, relationships and genetics all play a role in who a child will become. By having an understanding of brain development, those who work with and care for children can provide experiences to allow children to learn, explore, play and grow. ■

## Further Resources

To access more resources around brain development in the IPSP online library ([www.ipsplibrary.net.au](http://www.ipsplibrary.net.au)), search for terms such as “brain”, “developmental” or “child development”. For ideas on setting up experiences and environments to support learning, you could search for “play based learning” or “environments”, and for information on working with families, try searching “families” or “parent”

Read more about brain development from:  
**Zero to Three National Centre for Infants, Toddlers and Families:** <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/brain-development/baby-brain-map.html>

The Center on the Developing Child – Harvard University:  
[http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief\\_series/inbrief\\_the\\_science\\_of\\_ecd/](http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/inbrief_series/inbrief_the_science_of_ecd/)

Or hear from Dr Bruce Perry, child psychiatrist, on improving outcomes for at risk young people: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXdBFfph2QQ>

If you would like further support, please email the project officer, at [enquiries@gowriesa.org.au](mailto:enquiries@gowriesa.org.au)

## References

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Brookes, F, Green, J & Hopkins, L 2013, ‘Books, bytes and brains: The implications of new knowledge for children’s early literacy learning’, Australian Journal of Early Childhood, vol. 38, no. 1.

<http://www.cscentral.org.au/Resources/Publications/pathways-of-possibilities.pdf>

<http://www.gowriesa.org.au/sites/default/files/Gowrie%20SA%20Early%20Childhood%20Program%20Examples.pdf>

[http://files.acecqa.gov.au/files/National-Quality-Framework-Resources-Kit/belonging\\_being\\_and\\_becoming\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework\\_for\\_australia.pdf](http://files.acecqa.gov.au/files/National-Quality-Framework-Resources-Kit/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf)

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/GeneralCapabilities/Pdf/Critical-and-creative-thinking>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkqBDUyNblc>

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-shmuly-yanklowitz/a-society-with-poor-criti\\_b\\_3754401.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-shmuly-yanklowitz/a-society-with-poor-criti_b_3754401.html)

[http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/EYLFPLP\\_Thinking\\_about\\_practice\\_Planner\\_Screen.pdf](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/EYLFPLP_Thinking_about_practice_Planner_Screen.pdf)

<http://earlyyearstraining.com.au/blog/becoming-a-critical-reflector/>

[http://epubs.scu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=ccyp\\_pubs](http://epubs.scu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=ccyp_pubs)

[http://www.partnersintraining.com.au/wp-content/uploads/CHCECE009\\_Student-Workbook\\_July-2014.pdf](http://www.partnersintraining.com.au/wp-content/uploads/CHCECE009_Student-Workbook_July-2014.pdf)

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