



reflections

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Welcome to the first edition of Reflections for 2022. Reflections is Gowrie Australia's publication for showcasing exemplary work across six Lady Gowrie organisations and a celebration of our connections with children, families, colleagues and research associates.

In this edition, Rob Lister and Lyndsay Healy share the experience of Gowrie South Australia educators and children as they collaboratively balance benefit against risk in relation to tree climbing. This article recognises and honours children as valued contributors to decisions that affect their safety and wellbeing.

Our second article, by Julia Manning-Morton for Gowrie New South Wales, demonstrates how the establishment of a learning circle for practice leaders with toddlers and 2-year-olds has led to sustained and positive changes in practice and provision.

In this edition:

'You Have to Concentrate Really Hard So You Don't Fall': Children's Capacity to Assess and Manage Risky Play

Reflections and Connections in the Toddler Learning Circle



‘YOU HAVE TO CONCENTRATE REALLY HARD SO YOU DON’T FALL’: CHILDREN’S CAPACITY TO ASSESS AND MANAGE RISKY PLAY

Rob Lister and Lyndsay Healy, Gowrie South Australia

Gowrie SA was fortunate to be awarded the Margaret Trembath Research Scholarship by Early Childhood Australia in October 2016 to explore the use of benefit risk assessment with children in nature-based learning.

Gowrie SA teachers were inspired by research surrounding international forest schools. The vision was to implement a bush kindergarten program for children’s learning. Challenges about implementing such a program led to research in developing an understanding of children’s capabilities to assess and manage risk in natural learning environments. There was also a need to better understand educator and family perceptions of children’s ability to assess and manage risk. Our research question became:

‘Can children aged three to six years assess and manage risk and challenge in natural learning environments within their community using a ‘benefit-risk assessment’ tool?’

The sample group of children were composed of three groups. Each group attended three different sites of increasingly natural environments. The children had the opportunity to explore each space prior to collaborating with educators to undertake a benefit risk assessment as a group in the space. This enabled children to voice their understanding of the inherent risks of each space and how they would manage them. Parents and educators also participated in questionnaires to further support our understanding of their perceptions of children’s capacity to manage risk.

As educators analysed children’s responses, they noticed a tendency to be reflective of educator management strategies. Educators began to realise how strongly their introduction of the spaces visited influenced children’s management of risks. Educators particularly found contention in supporting children’s autonomy in risky play while fulfilling their duty of care role.

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From these findings, Gowrie SA educators have become mindful of taking a balanced approach to child led and educator led risk management strategies to ensure they honour the extensive knowledge that children bring with them into the space to manage health and safety.

Since this research, a joint concern arose from families and educators about children climbing trees in the kindergarten. While this had been an experience children have participated in over many years, this year children had started testing their physical limits further than seen before. This prompted educators to reflect on the benefits of children testing their physical limits while fulfilling safety obligations. Educators decided to launch an inquiry with the children and families about children’s capacity to manage their own risk in climbing trees.

The initial stage of inquiry-based learning aims to understand the currently held knowledge of the children. To achieve this, we began informal conversations with the children who were climbing the trees. We asked them whether it is safe to climb them or not. Children shared their thoughts on the subject as they either observed others or ascended the trees themselves. Subsequently, we introduced more formal discussions through our daily group times. We held the group times outside, around the

trees, and we posed four questions from the benefit-risk assessment tool:

What are the good things about climbing the trees?

What could go wrong whilst climbing the trees?

What could we do to make sure these things do not happen?

Is it safe to climb the trees?

Children’s responses included:

“Because it’s fun because it’s tricky to climb.”

“You have to concentrate really hard so that you don’t fall.”

“If lots of people climb the tree it won’t be safe. Maybe just two people.”

“If you hold onto the skinny branches they might break and you might fall.”

This line of inquiry complemented two major findings of our Margret Trembath Research. There were clear discrepancies between the knowledge that children were sharing during the group time discussions and what they were communicating to us when climbing the trees. For example, when children climbed the trees they would talk



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about all the things that they could see now that they had a higher view of the kindergarten.

“I like being up here because it feels like being up a giant monster and I can see the neighbour’s house.”

“It’s good to be up here because I can see all of Melaleuca (kindergarten).”

“I’m not good at climbing this tree, I’m good at climbing that tree. I will show you. See? I’m good at climbing this tree because I practiced and I got more better at climbing it. I use all my muscles because you don’t want to fall down.”

This information was not shared at all when children were asked to consider the benefits of climbing trees in the group time. Similar inconsistencies were noted when observing the risk management strategies that children were employing as they made in-the-moment decisions to ensure their personal safety. The other complementary finding to our initial research was that the majority of knowledge shared by children during the group time discussions was very risk orientated and they tended to catastrophise the events of what might go wrong. This highlights the correlation between children being risk averse and the pervasive image in western society of children incapable of managing their own safety and therefore needing to be protected by adults.

“If you climb high in the tree and fall you could break your back”

“You might climb to the top of the tree and you might fall down. You might die”

We decided it was important to not limit ourselves to the one line of data collection when completing the benefit-risk assessment tool. We sought opportunities for educators to capture children’s voices when they were engaged in tree climbing, take photographs that documented the problem-solving strategies they were using in-the-moment, and to also provide opportunities for them document their own ideas through the arts, which consisted primarily of drawings but also allowed space for children’s re-enactments. These additional data collection processes supported educators to gain much richer data on children’s understanding of the benefits and risks, and their management strategies. All the information was collated by the educators and presented to families in the form of a Floorbook for feedback.

Once the children’s voices had been collected and families had the opportunity to add their voice via feedback, educators then compiled the data. The findings suggested that there was a balanced view of the benefits and the risks, and that the management strategies children either discussed or demonstrated were highly effective in reducing the risks. Educators, however, remained cautious about tree climbing. This feeling mirrored the attitudes prevalent within the previous research project, as the educators were conflicted between allowing risky play and maintaining children’s safety. Educators saw the children as capable decision makers with an effective capacity to manage the risks

they seek out, but also grappled with their duty of care to the children. These conflicting thought processes brought to question the appropriateness of this play despite the inquiry findings.

Although the tree climbing within Gowrie SA’s Underdale kindergarten had taken place for several years, the decision was made to not climb the trees, for now. However, the perceived difficulties in talking to the children about this new rule and then following through with the limit was misplaced. After engaging the children in the group time discussion where we revisited the benefit-risk assessment they completed and explaining that the risks outweighed the benefits, the children were disappointed but respected the judgement we had made as a group. The result was that most children immediately ceased climbing the trees, and if a child attempted to ascend the trunk, other children would step in and remind them that this activity was no longer considered safe.

Gowrie SA’s initial small-scale research project was effective in investigating children’s abilities to identify and manage risk in natural learning environments. Benefit risk assessments have proven to be a very useful tool to support children to identify and manage risks with their environments; however, benefit-risk assessments also have the capacity to allow children to be consulted as fellow researchers and gives them ownership over decisions about their learning. This process of collaboration has meant that children are able to understand and act upon decisions that are made by using their benefit-risk assessment, even if this decision is contrary to their desired outcome. The educators at Gowrie SA are committed to the on-going use of benefit-risk assessments as part of their inquiry-based children’s programs for the reason that they provide multiple voices to decisions.

Rob Lister is an Early Childhood Teacher and Team Leader for Gowrie SA

Bachelor of Early Childhood Education; Graduate Certificate of Early Childhood Leadership.

In his ten years as a teacher at Gowrie SA Rob has gained experience in developing emergent, inquiry-based programs for the kindergartens. He continues to work across the various programs at Gowrie SA to develop professional learning packages sharing his knowledge and experience within the Early Childhood sector.

Lyndsay Healy, Director Children’s Program – Thebarton

Bachelor of Early Childhood Education; Graduate Certificate of Education (Early Childhood Leadership); Certificate IV in Training and Assessment; COS-P facilitator.

Lyndsay has over 15 years’ experience working within many roles at Gowrie SA including Kindergarten Teacher, Project Officer and Director Children’s Program. She is passionate about children’s voices, advocating for high quality education and care, and supporting professional growth and reflective capacity.



REFLECTIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN THE TODDLER LEARNING CIRCLE

Julia Manning-Morton, Gowrie New South Wales

A Learning Circle is a form of collaborative learning that values the existing knowledge and understanding held by participants and honours the collective wisdom of the group. It reflects ideas from Action Learning; that adults learn by making connections to the real-world and real-life experiences, drawing on what they already know, asking questions and reflecting on actions to create deeper insights.

The Toddler Learning Circle was set up to offer a dedicated time and space in which leaders of practice with toddlers and 2-year-olds would be supported to reflect, change, and develop. It took place online, once per month for 10 months, following on from 2 online courses, which I facilitated. These courses had focussed on leading best practice for 2-year-olds. Several Toddler Learning Circle participants had participated in the courses, so there were some pre-existing relationships, knowledge of the group facilitator and established understandings of the key aspects of toddler and 2-year-olds development in place.

The kind of reflexivity inherent to a Learning Circle requires a learning environment where participants can develop trust in the group and confidence to take risks in their thinking. This emerged in the group as educators began to feel comfortable. For example, discussions on key educator relationships led to some deep reflection on personal motivations and influences on practice. Consequently, one participant looked at an observation of an anxious child slightly differently, considering how the anxious communications of the key educator may have been contributing to the child's behaviour.

Using real-world issues through actively gathering 'case study' materials is a key feature of a Learning Circle. Participants in the Toddler Learning Circle were invited to bring observations to each session for discussion and reflection. These usually related to the topic focus of the session, where the four steps used in the Learning Circle process were broadly followed: reflection, learning, planning and action.

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A focus on leading changes in practice, meant that the Learning Circle also aimed to support participants in building confidence and capability through sharing experiences. A common concern that emerged early was about how to share ideas and practice with colleagues to develop a shared vision. Leading change had been a focus on the previous course and, although not addressed directly as a topic in the Learning Circle, the group did reflect on their own and others attitudes to change. Also, the process of observation, reflection and discussion used in the group provided the participants with a model for developing practice within their settings. The positive effect of this was evident at the mid-course review and again at the end when several participants commented on how they were discussing issues in their teams more, sharing observations to explore possible changes and solutions and also leading by example: modelling not just telling.

The other areas of focus initially identified by the group included diverse aspects of practice and provision,

including implementation of the key educator approach, provisioning spaces, use of outdoor space, and supporting children with transitions. This last issue became a major focus, as the COVID19 context of the Learning Circle gave rise to many discussions about 'being together and being apart' in different ways, for children, families and educators. In these discussions, participants made many connections between their own painful feelings about being separated from loved ones and those of the children when transitioning into the setting. For example, one participant shared how these reflections had enabled her to 'stay with' a child during transition, both physically and emotionally and at the child's pace, with a positive result. This led to some careful thinking not only about initial transitions but also daily transitions within the setting and some of the behaviours that arise from children's distress, discomfort or confusion around these times. In turn, this led to fruitful discussions within teams and useful changes made, such as the transition into a separate lunch area



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and the difficulty this seemed to cause some of the children in one setting. What was notable here was the thought given to the emotional impact of the environment on children.

This level of reflection on the emotional dimensions of practice was facilitated by using a holistic observation approach, in which the observer includes notes on their own emotional responses to scenarios. Sharing these in a work discussion forum, enables practitioners to become more attuned to what children may be feeling and to the psychological environment they are experiencing. This approach was reflected in participants' comments on the connections they had made:

'The pain and grief of separation and the importance of transitions'

'The impact of the environment on our emotions'

'Educators motivations from their own lives and what they are looking for in their work'

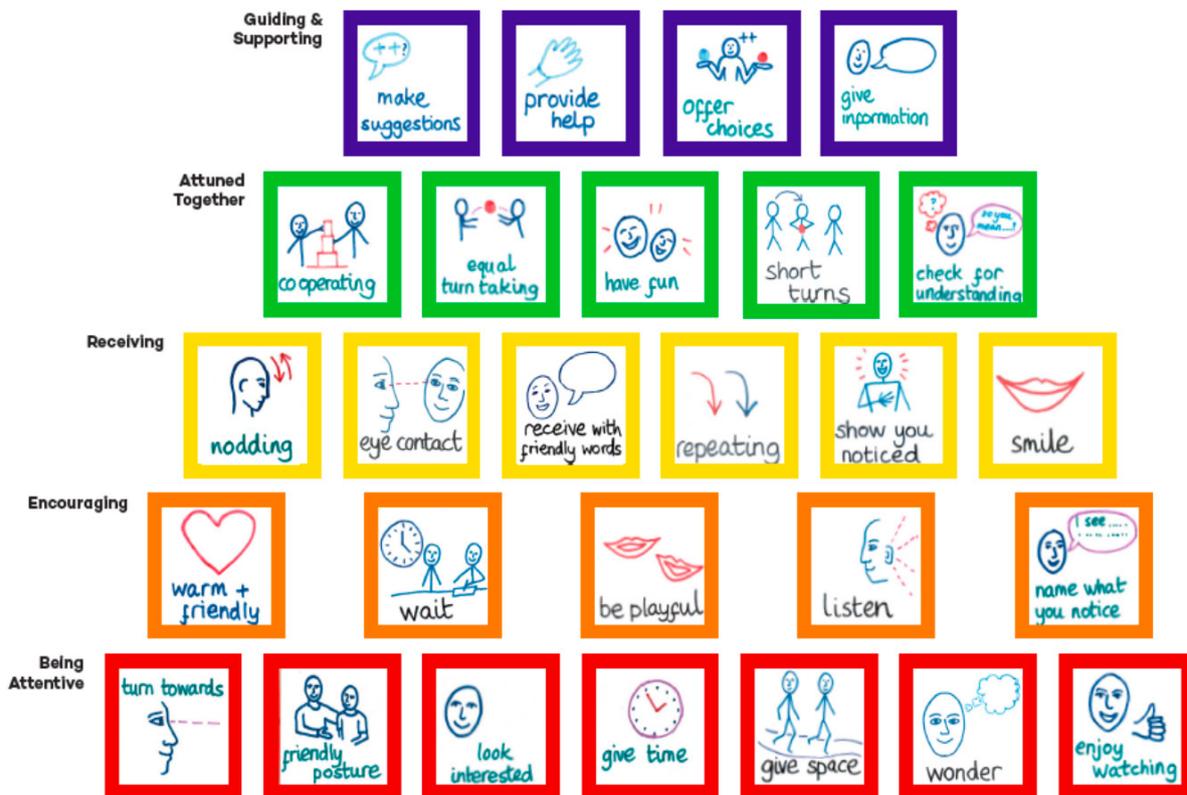
'Sharing and listening in the group with sharing and listening in my team'

A key principle underpinning Julia's work is that learning is a combined process of feeling, thinking and doing and that practitioners who have the opportunity to reflect on the links between developmental theories, children's feelings and their own experiences, values and beliefs are more likely to implement and sustain change because it arises from emotional understanding and connection. A key tool for supporting such reflexivity is the use of a professional journal, so in addition to observation tasks, participants were invited to make reflected notes in relation to each session's focus.

Using reflective journaling as well as observation and group discussion means that educators become better able to understand children's motivations and needs, as they reflect on and understand their own. Therefore, in the Learning Circle sessions, we also explored the links between educators' well-being and the well-being of children; reflecting on participants motivations and emotional responses as part of our discussions of the observations.



Principles of Attunement



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For example, when reflecting on their own wellbeing, one participant noted how their wellbeing outside of and inside work were completely intertwined, 'when my wellbeing in one area isn't being looked after, it affects the other'. And, to sustain a good sense of well-being, I 'need to take care of myself, getting enough sleep....' And 'bringing some of my outside work interests into the workspace, such as gardening, promotes a good sense of well-being'.

The link between the participants' well-being and positive practice was also clearly made; 'I find, when I have a good sense of well-being, I have more patience, feel more in control, have more empathy and am more approachable and fun to be around.'

Arising from our theoretical discussions on attachment, group members not only identified that they had developed a greater empathy and understanding of children's experience but also reflected on their own personal motivations that impact their professional practice; citing this awareness as a key connection they had made in the Learning Circle.

A further connection between the group process and practice is that of taking time to think. It seems that the experience of having a protected space to think and talk had a major impact on the participants approach in their practice. The group discussed ideas in which pausing before taking action, stepping back and thinking about what might be going on became a strong theme. One educator shared a video observation of a child struggling with their anxiety on approaching the physical challenge of using a slide. The educator was able to identify how the child habitually looked for assistance but, on this occasion, the educator paused, still supporting the child with her presence but not immediately stepping in, with the result that the child attempted the challenge more autonomously and with greater self-satisfaction.

In this way 'taking time' and 'slowing down' were a central feature of the group's 'take aways' from the Learning Circle, with an emphasis on 'being present'.

Overall, this reflects that the important connections made by educators in the Learning Circle were focused not just on WHAT they were doing but on HOW they were thinking about their practice.

Julia Manning-Morton

Julia Manning-Morton is an author, trainer and lecturer in early childhood. Her career spans 40 years and diverse roles as a practitioner, manager, adviser and inspector; mostly in London and also as a lecturer in Early Childhood Studies for 13 years at London Metropolitan University. Julia is now an independent consultant and training group facilitator for 'Key Times Professional Development' and an associate trainer for Early Education. She is also a Froebel Tutor.

Despite her long career in early childhood, Julia believes strongly that we should never stop learning and developing, so is currently training to be a Pikler pedagogue and studying for her PhD!

She also believes that we need balance in our lives, so makes sure that she finds time for family, friends, physical activity and creative, mindful pastimes.

As a consultant and trainer, Julia is committed to enabling, empowering and enthusing practitioners to make positive contributions to the lives of babies, young children and their families. Her aim is to promote a sense of professionalism in the early years field that embraces all practitioners, all children and all aspects of their care and learning: Julia's personal and professional values include a strong emphasis on inclusion and anti-bias.

Julia is the author of a number of publications, the most recent being:

Foundations of Being: Understanding Young Children's Emotional, Personal and Social Development. Published by Early Education: <https://early-education.org.uk/publications-resources>

Child care and Education (6th Edition) with Tina Bruce and Carolyn Meggitt
<https://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/Product/9781471863639.aspx>

Two Year Olds in Early years Settings, Journeys of Discovery with Maggie Thorp.
<http://www.mheducation.co.uk/9780335264025-emea-two-year-olds-in-early-years-settings-journeys-of->

Exploring Well-being in the Early Years <http://www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/html/O335246842.html>

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