

Defining **VALUES** in Early Childhood Education

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Australian values have been a focus of discussion over the past few years as Governments, institutions, community groups and individuals debate what they are and why they are important. Whenever a country or a community faces challenging times, value discussions seem inevitable. Why is this so? Values provide the ethical foundations for the way a society defines itself and understands what it is experiencing. This happens all the time, but in difficult times, these foundations seem to move and shake and so we reconsider what it is we value and whether our values have changed or ought to change. In a multicultural society such as Australia this is a very complex matter because of the diversity of ideas on what matters.

In the field of early childhood, debates on issues are common although we often overlook the values embedded in them. For example consider the beliefs which underlie issues such as:

- Refugee children in detention centres
- Inclusive policies and practices
- Culturally & Linguistically, Diverse (CALD) children's linguistic rights

These are '**big picture**' ethical issues that the early childhood sector ought to be discussing. This article however, will focus on the '**local**' rather than the broader contexts of values in early childhood as these bigger issues are beyond the scope of this editorial.

What are values?

Before we can begin to define our values we must first establish what it is we mean by the term '**values**'. Values can be defined as deeply held principles which commit us to action, for without action they are simply empty words with no real meaning. Unfortunately, in Early Childhood Education (ECE), as in other education sectors, the focus for much discussion is on '**what works**', rather than what matters to us as professionals in the field, which is understandable given the economic constraints and the emphasis by governments on narrowly defined and assessable outcomes. Therefore whilst most of us are interested in ethics and values, there seems little opportunity or widespread willingness to really debate the difficult yet important matters which relate to our field.

How can early childhood services promote discussion about values?

The following are suggested strategies to ensure that we are aware of what it is we value in our work and more importantly that our values are reflected in the policies and practices in early childhood education:

- First, reflect on your centre philosophy or mission statement and collaboratively identify the core values contained in that document. Often the voices of the children and families are silent in the development of policies and practices which have a direct impact on them. Yet collaboration ought to include families and children, as well as staff and management. Consider whether the underlying values of these documents are still relevant to your service, whether or not you want to recommit to them, add to them or change them completely. Identify the specific actions that you will adopt as a result of these commitments. In the centres in Reggio Emilia, Italy, charters of rights for children, teachers and parents have been developed through collaboration with everyone and agreed to as shared values and commitments.
- Second, utilise the revised Early Childhood Code of Ethics 2006 (www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au) as a working document to support and clarify the values which feed your policies, philosophies and ultimately the centre practices. For example, one principle from the Code could be the focus at every staff meeting. Staff could examine how they interpret the principle and then identify the practices which reflect the principle or the changes that might be necessary to do so. Families could be invited regularly to contribute their ideas on principles particularly relevant to them. The Code is not a recipe, but serves as a guide to ethical decision making about policies and practices.
- Finally draw on the United Nations Convention (1990) on the Rights of the Child to examine service policies and practices in line with the Convention's value statements.

For example:

Does every child have the opportunity to play every day? Are CALD children supported to maintain their first language, cultural heritage and traditions?

Avoid STEREOTYPING

Stereotyping families, children and colleagues is an occupational hazard in ECE. Stereotypes develop from unexamined and outdated value positions including being fearful of, or unfamiliar with differences or needing conformity. These values tend to breed attitudes leading to stereotypes and are evident in statements such as:

'All the Chinese families.'

'All new graduates....'

'All childcare children....'

Any time the word **'all'** is used to define a group or to make value judgments about a group we should be sceptical, and courageous to speak up: Do you really mean **all**, or do you mean **some**, or do you mean a **particular one**?

Another way to challenge cultural stereotypical positions by a group is to ask the question: What or who is a typical **'Anglo- Australian'**?

There will be as many answers to this question as there are people in the discussion. Is a typical Australian a Christian, a white person, a sportsperson (count me out), an outdoor type (me out again) a cosmopolitan (me in), or a battler (me out) and the list could go on and on. Silly question really! Yet we have no qualms grouping CALD families and children in our centres as if they are members of some well defined **'type'** or category which is just as silly as trying to say **'ALL AUSSIES ARE OUTDOOR TYPES'**. **'Single mothers'**, **'Vietnamese families'**, **'Muslim families'**, **'ADHD children'**, – are further examples of stereotypical labels that ignore the diversity within any group of people. Such labels ignore everyone's right to be treated with respect and to be listened to.

Another strategy to help people confront their bias or stereotypes is to think about the idea of **'the Other'**. Using a capital **'O'** in this word is deliberate as it highlights a new understanding of otherness. Often we want to make **'the Other'** like ourselves so that we can feel comfortable or we try to understand **'the Other'** from our own perspective: 'how would I feel if I was in their shoes?' The new understanding of **'the Other'**, is to focus on understanding how they feel and act, not to change them, or to shift it to how we would act in the same circumstances, but to listen and respect their position.

This requires being comfortable with differences and discord at times. To understand or recognize **'the Other'** in this way has been called **'Other regarding'** which is the opposite of **'self regarding'**.

An example of **'Other regarding'**

A common scenario could be when early childhood staff express concerns about a family that doesn't provide or read picture books to their children. Using **'the Other'** approach, the focus would be on trying to understand why the children do not have books or stories read to them, rather than on trying to **'teach'** the parents about the value of books and story reading for children's literacy learning.

In this scenario staff would listen and learn about the family, and at the same time recognize that their ideas on the value of picture books are as strange to the family as the family's failure to provide books is strange to them. The message sent to the family would then be that their ways are not wrong, just different, and that staff are not making negative assumptions, but are seeking to understand. And if children's books and story reading do not become part of the family tradition, the staff value that choice and can provide book experiences in the centre.

Through the process of trying to understand **'the Other'**, staff may also discover that the children do have valuable literacy experiences through other means such as the family's religious observances which could include daily Koran readings, prayers and stories about their faith history. In this instance the literacy skills and pleasure associated with exposure to books would instead be gained through the family's faith practices which are still providing the child with an awareness of the power and purpose of print, participation in the rhythms and forms of oral language, knowledge of story formats, and enjoyment of the beauty of the language.

This is only one example of how we can demonstrate respect for Australian families from CALD backgrounds. Promoting an interest in and engaging in ethics and values discussions at the local level is a first step to shifting the current focus on **'what works'** and **'how we can do it'** to focusing on **'why we are doing what we are doing'** and **'what it is we value'**.

'WHY' questions are the best ways to challenge taken-for-granted practices, stereotypes, bias and other **'self regarding'** practices.