



Respectful Relationships and Consent in the Early Years

June 2024

Department for Education,
Children and Young People



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community as the traditional and continuing custodians of Lutruwita, where Palawa have cared for their children and prepared them for life since the beginning of time.

Together we live, work, play and learn on what always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

We honour Elders, past and present, and pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, families and friends.

We commit to ensuring every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and young person is known, safe, well and learning.

Acknowledgements

2024 update and Principal Author of Version 3:
Jenny Walsh.

This resource is based on the Relationships Education Early Years – Teaching and Learning Package 2019. It has been informed by:

- early childhood representatives from the Department for Education, Children and Young People
- early childhood representatives from the Tasmanian education and care sector
- local participatory consultations with staff, parents and carers from Austins Ferry Primary School Launching into Learning program
- local participatory consultations with staff from the Chigwell Child and Family Learning Centre.

Key informant interviews were carried out with education and care leaders, teachers, wellbeing staff and a range of service providers.

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For the latest version of this document and additional support materials go to: <https://respectfulrelationships.education.tas.gov.au/>



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Introduction

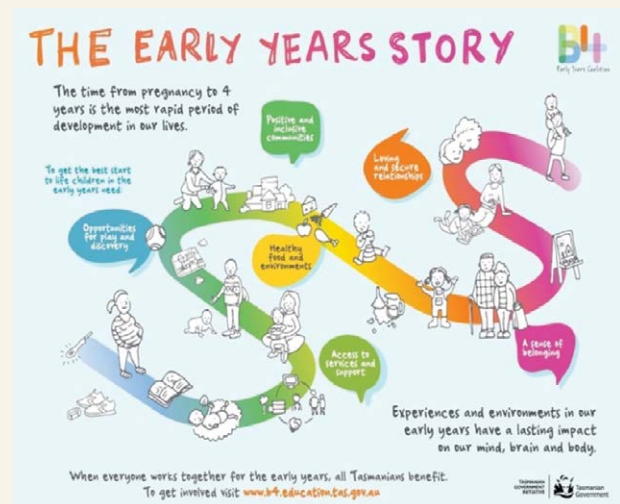
Family, domestic, and sexual violence and abuse are serious and widespread issues in Australia. While there is no single cause, it is preventable, and research tells us that harmful gender norms play a significant role.

It is widely accepted that well designed and delivered respectful relationships and consent education can disrupt stereotypical and harmful biases related to gender and sexual orientation. The need to prioritise respectful relationships and consent education from a young age is vital to equip children with the skills to respond to dangerous situations, report signs of abuse and be protected from harm.

The early years are a critical time in which to help children see themselves in positive ways and learn how to get along with others. Respect for self and others may seem like a natural part of life, but it is a learned behaviour. We can help to foster a safer and more respectful society for our children to live violence and abuse-free futures by promoting a core value: how we treat others matters, and that our own needs and experiences matter too.

This *Respectful Relationships and Consent in the Early Years* package is designed for the Tasmanian community of educators, education and care providers, and organisations dedicated to the learning and development of young children aged 0-5 years. It aligns with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) 2022 and promotes gender equity and inclusion within existing social and emotional skills programs. Fostering a culture of respect and consent early in a child's life is critical. This resource aims to achieve this by building a shared and common understanding of curriculum and practice.

This package is one of four in a suite of resources designed to support respectful relationships and consent education for Tasmanian children and young people from the early years through to Year 12. It acknowledges the early years sector's vital role in the Tasmanian and national plans to eradicate violence and abuse against women and children within one generation.¹



The Early Years Story highlights the importance of giving every child the best start in life - from the moment we are born every experience and environment shapes who we will become.

Educators and teachers play a pivotal role in setting the foundations across learning environments such as:

- Education and care services
- Library Services
- Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs)
- Launching into Learning (LiL)
- Kinder.

Together, families, carers, and staff can prepare children to lead positive and respectful relationships throughout their lives, free from abuse and violence.

¹ Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Social Services) (2023) First Action Plan & Outcomes Framework 2023–2027. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/12_2023/d23-1021235-activities-addendum-accessible-pdf.pdf



Background

In 2022, the Tasmanian Government released a plan to address and prevent family and sexual violence and abuse. *Survivors at the Centre: Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan 2022-2027* identified the need to review and update the Department for Education, Children and Young People's (DECYP) *Respectful Relationships Education Teaching and Learning Packages*. This is to ensure the voices of children and young people are included. It also addresses the Tasmanian Government's commitment to build understanding of consent, coercive control and grooming within the community (see Action 24).

This redevelopment ensures that children and young people receive more explicit education on positive and respectful relationships. It includes consent education, and developmentally appropriate teaching and learning to address coercive control and grooming. This reflects the evolving community expectations concerning the prioritisation of women's safety in Australia. Furthermore, these revisions align to Version 9.0 of the *Australian Curriculum* providing continuity and consistency for children when entering the formal years of schooling.

The *Survivors at the Centre* plan highlights the impact of gender inequity as a key driver of violence and abuse. Women and girls, men and boys, and non-binary people all experience violence and abuse – but they experience it differently. About 95% of all victims experience violence or abuse from a male perpetrator. Other social and cultural factors, including disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity can increase the risk.²

By becoming aware of assumptions and values that sustain inequality, and planning for and implementing strategies to challenge harmful and divisive beliefs and practices about gender, we are creating fairer, more just, and safer communities. This will guide children towards healthier relationship norms.

² Australian institute of Health and Welfare (2023) Family, domestic and sexual violence. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/resources/fdsv-summary>

What do we mean by family and sexual violence and abuse?³

Family violence and abuse refers to violent, threatening and/or controlling behaviour by a person against their intimate partner or ex-partner. It includes:

- verbal and/or sexual assault
- emotional or psychological abuse
- economic or financial abuse
- property damage
- abduction
- stalking
- breaching existing family violence orders.

Sexual violence and abuse refers to a wide range of unwanted, non-consensual, traumatic and harmful sexual behaviours. It includes:

- child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation
- sexual harassment
- technology facilitated abuse
- unwanted kissing or sexual touching
- coercion
- sexual assault including rape
- stealthing (removal of a condom without consent).



Further reading

- [*Our Watch - Preventing violence against women and their children*](#)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics - Personal Safety Survey, [*Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence*](#), 2023 Summary.
- [*Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study*](#), Queensland University of Technology, 2023.



3 Tasmanian Government (2022). Survivors at the Centre: Tasmania's Third Family and Sexual Violence Action Plan 2022-2027. https://www.safefromviolence.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/254734/220157-DoC-Family-Sexual-Violence-Action-Plan-2022-27_wcag.pdf

How to use this resource

This resource covers three focus areas aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). You can use it flexibly across informal everyday interactions, and in more structured and formal educational programs, experiences, activities and environments.

You can work through content sequentially, or select particular focus areas in response to the needs and interests relevant to individual learning settings. It encourages and supports early learning settings to demonstrate their commitment to inclusive principles and practises, as well as the [*National Child Safe Principles*](#).

Each focus area begins with an overview of contemporary theories and research about early childhood development. It also includes program elements that promote positive social values and respectful behaviours. The descriptive style is to support a diverse set of educators to critically reflect on program design and everyday practice to best support the learning and development of every child.

Focus Area 1

Identity – feeling good about me

A healthy sense of identity helps a child to express what's important to them and contributes to setting healthy boundaries in relationships later in life. Gender norms form an integral part of a child's identity, shaping their interactions with the world around them. Feeling comfortable about the ways we are the same and different lays the foundations for how to interact, how to feel good about ourselves and how to respect others.



Focus Area 2

Social and emotional skills – managing feelings and getting along with others

This theme covers naming emotions, skills for coping with emotions, and understanding the emotions of others. Exclusion can have serious lifelong effects on individuals and groups. This means fostering fairness and equity, acceptance of others and inclusivity from an early age is vital. Building the skills for joining in and including others sets a trajectory for positive relationships and respectful communities.



Focus Area 3

Body autonomy – understanding boundaries, consent, and respect

This theme emphasises an individual's right to control their own body and make decisions about personal space. The aim of teaching body autonomy is to promote a deep respect for personal boundaries in themselves and others.



Each focus area contains relevant advice under the following headings:



Overview



Reflective Practice



Learning Intentions



Learning Experiences



Everyday Interactions



Creating Positive Environments



Ideas for Intentional Teaching



Books



Media Resources



What to say when...
(practical tips and considerations in potentially challenging situations)



Spotlight
(a select topic explaining the research behind it, and additional information, strategies and daily practice ideas that promote respectful and safe relationships.)



Further Reading

Supporting respectful relationships in early years settings

A whole-of-setting approach promotes cultural and procedural changes that prioritise respectful relationships and gender equality. The goal is to have every operational and cultural aspect of your organisation grounded in respect and equity. You can ensure that by actively reviewing:

- staff policies and practices
- programs
- staffing
- interactions with parents, carers, families and the wider community.

This is fundamental to modelling the positive attitudes, behaviours, and gender equality that we wish to promote in children from an early age. It is the responsibility of all staff to be mindful of this through their professional practice.

Educational leadership

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in fostering children's learning and growth. It involves educational leaders working with educators to guide curriculum development and effectively implement the cycle of planning. Leaders are pivotal in integrating proven theories and practical evidence, while also valuing the insights of their team and community.

Effective curriculum decision making is a continuous cycle of:

- planning
- implementation
- assessment of learning, evaluation and critical reflection.

THE EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK PLANNING CYCLE

Diagram 2

The planning cycle describes the process educators follow in planning, documenting, responding to and supporting children's learning. Educators make many decisions about curriculum planning based on their professional knowledge, their knowledge of children and local contexts, and their understanding of the Vision, Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes of the Framework. The steps, sequences and components of the planning cycle that are identified and explained in Diagram 2 can occur spontaneously, 'in the moment', throughout the day or over a period. Educators use these 5 components to inform their thinking about children's experiences and improvement of practice to develop and implement a curriculum that is inclusive of all children.

It is important to note that **documentation** occurs at every stage of the planning cycle.



BELONGING, BEING & BECOMING: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia – V2.0, 2022 | 27

The language used by the [*approved learning frameworks*](#) and the [*National Quality Standards*](#) highlights the significance of intentionality.⁴ In the early years context, 'intentionality' applies to the strategies educators use every day. It means being deliberate and thoughtful in all decision making and actions to support the development of all children within their program.

For an excellent resource describing effective practice including critical reflection, mentoring, and dealing with difficult conversations see [*The Educational Leader Resource*](#) (ACECQA, 2019).

Staff wellbeing

Some topics covered in this resource may be emotionally challenging. Discussing issues to do with respectful relationships and consent, such as gender inequity and sexual violence, can be a cause of dissent among staff and parents. There is also a high likelihood that some members in your setting have or are experiencing violence or abuse.

Strong leadership is important in prioritising support and guidance for staff. Professional development opportunities make a significant difference to setting up safe parameters to learn about respectful relationships, consent, gender equity, child sexual development, child sexual abuse, and trauma-informed practices. Establishing work environments that prioritise self-care practices will help manage any emotional responses that may arise. This includes setting boundaries, practicing mindfulness or seeking support from colleagues or counsellors.

DECYP staff can access information and support from the [Staff Wellbeing Hub](#) (Internal DECYP access only) and the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) - phone 1800 650 204.

Mandatory reporting and referral pathways

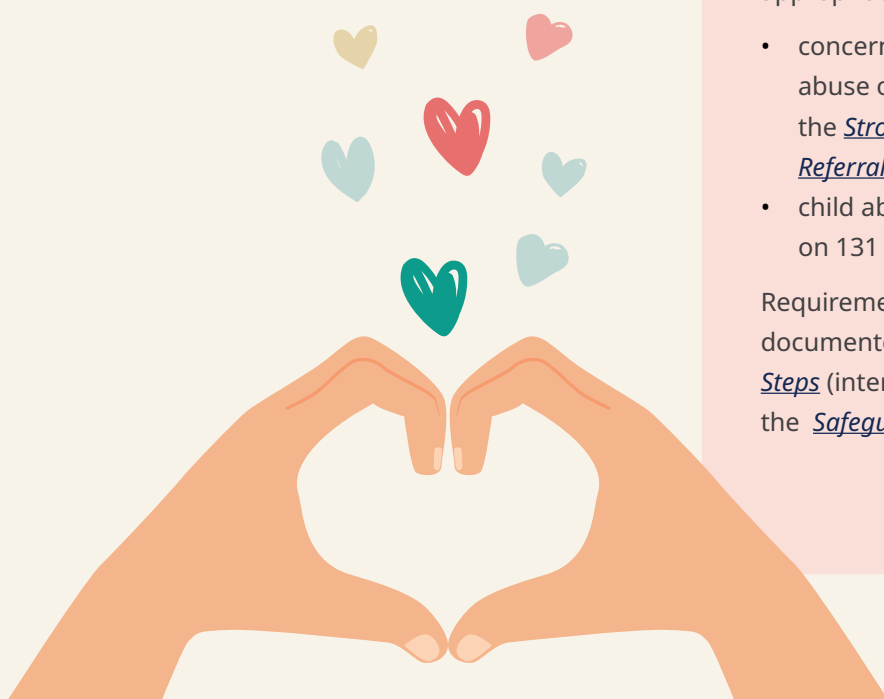
It is essential all staff understand and follow their organisation's policies and procedures to keep children safe. Speak to your program leader or manager to ensure you know where to access this information and additional support if required.

All early learning and education and care organisations must comply with the [Reportable Conduct Scheme](#) under the [Tasmanian Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework](#). Concerns about the safety, wellbeing or abuse of a specific child or children must be reported to the [Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line](#) (ARL) on 1800 000 123.

DECYP workers (staff, volunteers, trainees or students on a work experience placement, contractors or subcontractors over the age of 18), are required to report any belief, concern or knowledge of child abuse and neglect (including exposure to domestic and gender-based violence or abuse) to the appropriate authorities. Staff must report:

- concerns about the safety, wellbeing or abuse of a specific child or children to the [Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line](#) (ARL) on 1800 000 123
- child abuse offences to Tasmania Police on 131 444.

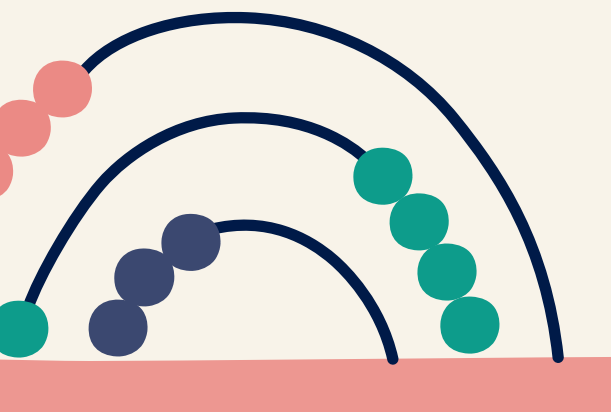
Requirements for DECYP workers are documented in the [Safeguarding Reporting Steps](#) (internal DECYP access only) and on the [Safeguarding Training](#) webpage.



If a child discloses potential abuse or gender-based violence listen and let them know they are believed and that it is not their fault. Use the following cues to guide thinking about the disclosure:

- is the child currently being harmed (verbally, psychologically, physically etc.)?
- is the child likely to be harmed in the future?
- is anyone else being harmed?
- what are the child's overall needs?
- does the child need expert support from professional support staff (e.g. nurse, doctor, social worker, counsellor etc.)?
- does the child need medical attention?

Whilst you must not 'interview' them, you can ask clarifying questions if required. It is important to let the child know straight away that if the information causes concern it will be passed on to others who can help. Under no circumstances agree to keep it a secret. Gender-based violence and abuse thrives on secrecy.



The following organisations provide a range of help sources to support children, young people and their families:

1800 RESPECT

Domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service.

Lifeline

Crisis support and suicide prevention phone and webchat service.

Tell Someone (Tasmanian Government)

Information about the signs of sexual abuse and grooming, and who to contact to seek help.

Sexual Assault Support Service

SASS works towards a future free from sexual assault and child sexual abuse – call the 24/7 helpline on 1800 697 877 for support, guidance, or understanding.

13YARN

Helpline for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are going through a tough time.

eSafety Commissioner

Information to support Australians to stay safe online and help to remove harmful content such as cyberbullying, serious online abuse and intimate images or videos shared without consent.

headspace

Mental health support for young people aged 12-25.

Working It Out

Provides support for LGBTIQ+ Tasmanians and their families, and education and capacity building for government and non-government organisations.

Family violence rapid rehousing

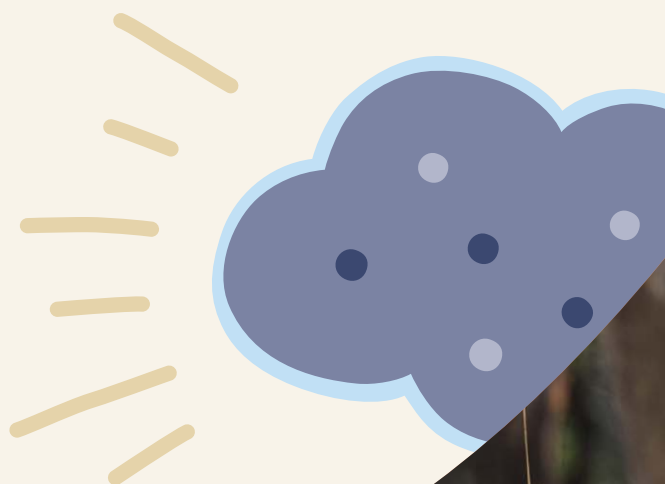
Designed to quickly help vulnerable households experiencing family violence into safe and affordable homes.



Reflective practice

The following questions should be considered at an organisational level. If these questions raise further queries or curiosity, speak to your leadership team to discuss where to go for more information or additional support.

- How do educators navigate the emotional toll of witnessing or suspecting violence and abuse? How do they balance their role as mandated reporters and their desire to offer support to families and children?
 - Where do these sorts of conversations take place in your service?
 - Are there people who never seem to take part in these conversations?
- What training, resources, and support are available for staff, including protocols for reporting, creating a supportive workplace culture, and access to counselling or debriefing services?
- Are staff aware that since February 2023, full-time, part-time and casual employees have the right to access 10 days of [paid family and domestic violence leave](#)?



Frameworks for respectful relationships and consent in the early years

The following two frameworks underpin the *Respectful Relationships and Consent in the Early Years* package:

- [*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia \(V2.0\)*](#).⁵
- [*Respectful Relationships Education in Australia: National Stocktake and Gap Analysis of Respectful Relationships Education Material and Resources Final Report 2022*](#).⁶

This resource is also consistent with the [*National Principles for Child Safe Organisations*](#). The principles reflect the ten child safe standards from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Approved providers and services must have policies that comply with regulations that came into effect in 2023 (Education and Care Services National Regulations 84, 149 and 168).

The National Principles have been adopted and embedded in state legislation as [*Tasmania's Child and Youth Safe Standards*](#) within the State's [*Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework*](#). This framework is further supported by the [*Universal Principle*](#) to uphold Aboriginal cultural safety. This applies equally to each of the standards.

From 2024, all Tasmanian organisations that engage with children and young people must comply with the new and legally binding [*Child and Youth Safe Organisations Act 2023*](#). It sets out clear expectations and obligations required by organisations to prioritise and promote the safety and wellbeing of all Tasmanian children and young people.

Furthermore, *Respectful Relationships and Consent in the Early Years* provides important foundational learning in alignment with Version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum which aims for students to:

“Learn the importance of treating others with integrity, fairness and compassion; value and respect diversity and equality; examine ethical concepts and codes of practice appropriate to different contexts, such as at school, home, in the community, in relationships; learn to make ethical decisions and understand the consequences of their actions”.

Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority - Health and Physical Education: Ethical understanding (Version 9.0)



5 Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] (2022).

6 Pfitzner, N., Stewart, R., Ollis, D., Allen, K.-A., Fitz-Gibbon, K., & Flynn, A. (2022). *Respectful Relationships Education in Australia: National Stocktake and Gap Analysis of Respectful Relationships Education Material and Resources Final Report*. Monash University.

Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia⁷

The EYLF is a national document that guides early childhood educators in developing curriculum and delivering quality programs from birth to five years of age. It provides broad direction for meeting the highest expectations in a child's learning, development, and wellbeing.

Planning and implementing respectful relationships and consent programs, can help to fulfil many of the principles, practices and learning outcomes of the EYLF.

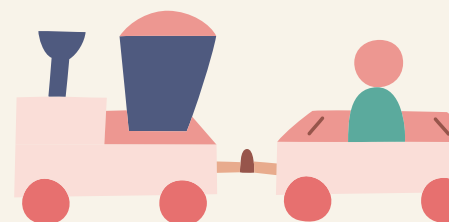
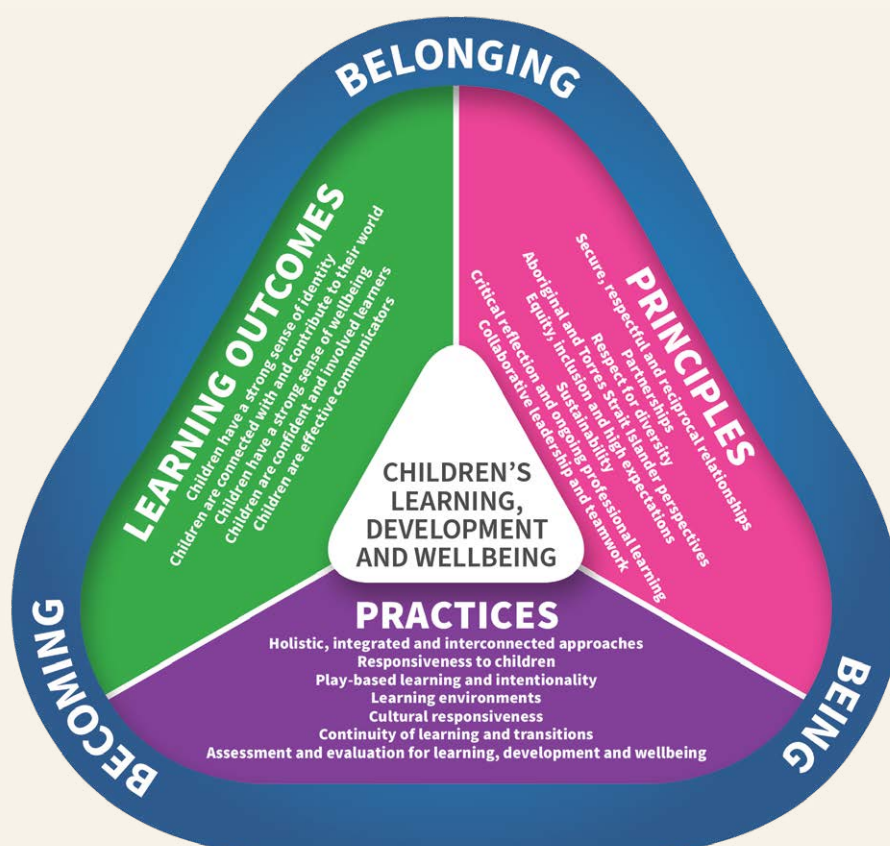


Figure 1: The diagram shows the integrated connections of the EYLF's vision, principles, practices and learning outcomes that centre on children's learning, development and wellbeing. Belonging, being and becoming overlap all these elements.

7 Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE] (2022). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (V2.0). Australian Government Department of Education for the Ministerial Council.

Principles: The EYLF is grounded in principles including:

- 'secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationships'
- 'respect for diversity'
- 'equity, inclusion and high expectations'.

It encourages educators to respect and celebrate the backgrounds and cultures of all children, fostering an inclusive environment where every child feels valued and accepted.

Practices: The EYLF advocates pedagogical practices such as 'responsive relationships' and 'respectful supportive learning environments'. These practices model non-violent, equitable interactions. They promote gender positivity by treating all children fairly.

Learning Outcomes: The EYLF underscores the significance of children developing a strong sense of identity and wellbeing. This includes understanding their bodies and personal boundaries. It encourages children to build respectful relationships, understand diversity and foster fairness. This lays the foundation for violence and abuse-free, gender-positive attitudes. Teaching children to express their feelings and needs, and to be confident and effective communicators equips them with the skills to speak up if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Focus area	EYLF Outcome Elements
Identity – feeling good about me	<p>Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity</p> <p>1.1 - Children feel safe, secure and supported.</p> <p>1.3 - Children develop knowledgeable, confident self-identities and a positive sense of self-worth.</p> <p>Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world</p> <p>2.1 - Children develop a sense of connectedness to groups and communities and an understanding of their reciprocal rights and responsibilities as active and informed citizens.</p>
Social and emotional skills – managing feelings and getting along with others	<p>Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity</p> <p>1.4 - Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy, and respect.</p> <p>Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world</p> <p>2.2 - Children respond to diversity with respect.</p> <p>2.3 - Children become aware of fairness.</p> <p>Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing</p> <p>3.1 - Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing.</p>
Body autonomy – understanding boundaries, consent, and respect	<p>Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity</p> <p>1.1 - Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and agency.</p> <p>Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing</p> <p>3.3 - Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety.</p>

Respectful Relationships Education in Australia: National Stocktake of Respectful Relationships Education⁸

In 2022, the federal government funded a national stocktake and gap analysis of existing respectful relationships education and sexuality education programs. This research tells us the essential elements of programs that make a difference when it comes to promoting respectful relationships and changing negative social beliefs.

Critical success factors	How do they apply in an Early Years setting?
Gender and sexuality transformative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs that aim to challenge and change unfair societal norms, attitudes, and structures related to gender and sexuality. Sets the groundwork for children's future interactions, relationships, and understanding of the world, playing a crucial role in shaping a respectful and equitable society.
Intersectional approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognising the different parts of a child's identity (like gender, ethnicity, or social status) and how they interact. Treating everyone the same doesn't necessarily mean treating them equally. We need to consider each child's unique identity and experiences to ensure true equity.
An ethics-informed approach to relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching a child to consider their own needs, as well as the impact of their actions on others. This approach is foundational to the concepts of personal boundaries and consent.
A trauma-informed approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the effects of trauma can make an enormous difference to how we set up environments and respond to children's needs.
A whole-of-setting approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moving beyond the interactions with children to consider how whole organisations promote the principles of equity, inclusion, and social justice. DECYP and organisational policies, the EYLF and other overarching frameworks provide guidance alongside the National Child Safe Principles and Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework.
A strengths-based approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and building on each child's or a community's strengths. It involves valuing difference and nurturing existing skillsets. In the context of respectful relationships and consent education, an example is building on existing skills for positive relationships rather than teaching only about avoiding violence.
Informed by, and include child and parent/carers and family engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By prioritising children's voices and parent, carer, and family input, we can ensure programs are effective because they are relevant, as well as respectful, equitable, and tailored to each child's unique needs.
Informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The UNCRC emphasises that children should be treated with dignity, protected from harm, and can express their views in matters affecting them, even at a young age, through age-appropriate means such as play, art, or communication.

By fostering an environment of respect, understanding, and consent, we can guide children towards healthier relationship norms and a more inclusive understanding of social identities.



Focus Area 1:

Identity - Feeling good about me



Focus Area 1:

Identity - Feeling good about me



Overview

Identity refers to the way we see ourselves. Social identity refers to the social groups and categories we feel connected to, such as our gender, ethnicity, or appearance and body size.

Children notice difference and similarities, and as young as 6 months old start to categorise people based on gender and skin colour. At 2 or 3 years of age they start to recognise their own gender. They feel good and powerful when they 'get it right'. They know they get it right when they have successfully observed and imitated others. By 3 years old they might begin showing a preference for their own group and may show negative attitudes or behaviours towards others.

Another major dynamic affecting identity formation is that of the visibility or invisibility of certain groups of people. Social identities that are invisible can become foreign and 'other', and our human tendency is to discount the needs of people who are strange to us. Most importantly this can hurt how a child feels about themselves.

Children notice difference, but they learn bias.⁹



A study with children described as gender non-conforming, found a strong link between a child's peer and parental relations and their emotional wellbeing. Children of parents or guardians with gender-stereotyped attitudes, or those less willing to provide a secure environment, showed a

stronger link between gender nonconforming and behavioural and emotional issues. The study highlighted the vital role of supportive social environments and relationships in a child's emotional wellbeing.¹⁰

We can promote children's sense of self at this crucial stage of identity development through the thoughtful selection of books, toys, media, and discussion. Feeling valued, safe and seen within their learning community encourages children to have a positive self-identity.

How does this relate to respectful relationships and consent education?

Stereotypes often shape how children perceive themselves and others, influencing their interactions and relationships. Children can become very keen to police gender, demanding that a person is a boy or a girl, and that 'boy' should look and act in a particular way and so on. These expectations can affect current relationships and those into the future. For example, the stereotype that 'boys can't control themselves' can be particularly harmful to young women and gender-diverse people in dating relationships. It can imply that the burden of preventing sexual abuse and violence falls on the victim rather than the perpetrator, often expressed through comments such as 'they shouldn't have dressed like that'.

Challenging stereotypes and creating opportunities for diverse children to get to know each other can help to promote respect and empathy. A healthy sense of identity helps a child to express what's important to them and contributes to setting healthy relationship boundaries later in life.

9 Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O. (2019). Understanding Anti-Bias Education: Bringing the Four Core Goals to Every Facet of Your Curriculum. *Young Children*, 74(5). National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

10 MacMullin, L.N., Bokeloh, L.M., Nabbijohn, A.N. et al. Examining the Relation Between Gender Nonconformity and Psychological Well-Being in Children: The Roles of Peers and Parents. *Arch Sex Behav* 50, 823–841 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01832-6>



Reflective practice

Before exploring the concept of identity in practice in this focus area, consider the following questions. These are designed to be thought provoking and can be considered individually or discussed as a staff group. If these questions raise further queries or curiosity, speak to your program leader or manager to discuss where to go for more information or additional support.

- Do you accept aggression and roughness as part of being a boy?
- Do you call on girls to be patient, but not boys?
- Can all children see themselves reflected in books, art and environments?
- Are staff free to use their home language other than English? Are children? Are adequate translation support and interpreter services provided to engage families where English is an additional language?
- Are there times when you intervened or supported children in challenging gender stereotypes or other biases? How did these interventions foster a more equitable environment?
- Is feedback sought from families and colleagues about their perceptions of gender equity within our environment? What insights or suggestions have been gathered from these conversations?
- Are you aware of the language you use? Are you unintentionally contributing to gender bias or challenging traditional gender norms?
- What is your understanding of gender diversity? Do you know where to go for more information?



Learning intentions

EYLF Learning Outcomes	This is evident when children, for example:
Children feel safe, secure and supported.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establish and maintain respectful, trusting relationships with other children and educators. confidently explore and engage with social and physical environments through relationships and play.
Children develop knowledgeable, confident self-identities, and a positive sense of self-worth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> feel recognised and respected for who they are. feel safe to participate in all experiences and activities regardless of gender, culture or ability. explore different identities, roles and points of view in pretend play. develop strong foundations in both the culture and languages of their family without compromising their cultural identities.
Children develop a sense of connectedness to groups and communities and an understanding of their reciprocal rights and responsibilities as active and informed citizens.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> begin to recognise that they have a right to belong and contribute to many communities. take action to include and assist children to participate in social groups.





Learning experiences



Everyday interactions

Everyday interactions provide consistent opportunities to reinforce and develop every child's sense of self. By purposefully considering the below ideas and methods, educators, parents, carers and families can empower children to build positive social connections and self-identities.

- Create opportunities for children to help themselves and others. Give them jobs to perform. It helps them to know they are an important part of the community and have a meaningful part to play. Make sure you allocate jobs based on what's achievable for the child, rather than their gender.
- Foster self-esteem by giving children positive feedback on their unique skills and qualities rather than focussing mainly on a girl's appearance or a boy's strength. For instance, you can say, *'You were kind to your friend when she fell'* or *'You were helpful with clean-up today, thank you.'*
- Children can become very keen to police gender, demanding that a person is a boy or a girl, and that a 'boy' should look and act in particular ways and so on. Explain that everyone can be themselves in a way that feels good to them. There are lots of ways to be a child or a grown-up.
- Gender is a way to describe someone's identity. It is not the same thing as their biological sex. People can feel like they are male, female, both, or neither. It is natural for children to explore the concept of gender through play, particularly through the use of clothing. Around the ages of 3-4 years some children insist on wearing the 'right' gendered clothes, and others never care. Others may simply be drawn to the swish or feel of a certain fabric. Either way it is a typical aspect of children's play.¹¹
- Notice and encourage children who stand up for themselves and others. Affirm children's unconventional choices – our job is to support all children in their decisions.
- Avoid creating strangeness or otherness between boys and girls: when we persistently group children based on two genders, we are reinforcing that you can only belong to one group or the other. Small changes, like saying 'children' instead of 'girls and boys' or 'parents and carers' or 'families' rather than 'Mums and Dads' can help to affirm the things we have in common rather than only our differences.
- Talk with children about their interests. Point out times when children's views and preferences may be different to each other's, and when your own are too. It's a joy to have something in common, and interesting to have something that is different.

11 Halim, M., Ruble, D., & Tamis-LeMonda, C., & Zosuls, K., Lurye, L., & Greulich, F. (2013). Pink Frilly Dresses and the Avoidance of All Things "Girly": Children's Appearance Rigidity and Cognitive Theories of Gender Development. *Developmental psychology*. 50. 10.1037/a0034906.

Creating positive environments



Children feel boosted when they see themselves or someone like them in media and in learning materials. The following are suggestions for setting up your learning environment.

- Add to traditional dress-up costumes with a range of materials and fabrics so children can use their imagination to create outfits, and enjoy textures, and colours.
- Create a welcome poster featuring children of different appearances and abilities representing the children who come to you (e.g. children wearing glasses, with curly hair, with hearing aids, with Down's syndrome). Include dolls, books and pictures of people using special technologies or equipment to help them move or talk. Ask children if they have someone in their family who uses special equipment to help them hear, walk, or talk?
- Whose home corner? Talk to parents about their home practices and try to incorporate them into your room set-up. Be open to suggestions and embrace different ways of doing things.
- Label items and provide signage in two or more languages – English and another language spoken by children in the group or class. This helps celebrate linguistic diversity and supports all children's sense of belonging.
- Encourage children to look at themselves in mirrors and discuss skin colour, eye shape, hair texture. Normalise these discussions and answer any questions honestly, keeping age appropriateness in mind.
- Family Wall: Allow children to share photos of their families and pets, encouraging them to share stories about their siblings, relatives, and pets.
- Inclusive Imagery: Display pictures around the early learning environment showing men, women and non-binary people performing various tasks such as bottle-feeding babies, gardening, changing nappies, taking out the rubbish, washing dishes, farming, and hanging laundry.





Ideas for intentional teaching

Concept: ways we are the same and different

Feeling comfortable about difference lays the foundations for how to interact, how to feel good about ourselves and how to respect others. By addressing difference in thoughtful and intentional ways we can get to a place where we all feel safe and welcome, rather than experiencing discomfort, fear or discrimination.

Learning intention:

- Children develop knowledgeable, confident self-identities, and a positive sense of self-worth.

The following ideas are for exploring this concept and learning intention.



Toddlers

All About Me Book

Learning objectives:

1. By recognising their photo and things related to them, children learn about themselves and start developing a sense of identity.
2. Recognising and talking about their likes and dislikes can help toddlers express their feelings and preferences, contributing to their emotional development.

Materials:

- Photos: Collect photos of each child, their family members, their favourite toys, and activities they enjoy.
- Construction paper for book pages.
- Markers for any text, including children's own drawing or writing.
- Glue sticks.
- Hole punch and string, or stapler.

Instructions:

1. This is a time intensive activity, and perhaps most appropriate in small groups – but one where you may be able to use existing photos of children's families and carers, favourite toys and activities.
2. Start by gathering the children in a story time setting. Show them a sample book. Explain that they will each make a special book about themselves. Tell them that the book will have pictures of them, their family, and things they like.
3. Help each child create a simple book with pictures and words about them. Include their photo.
4. Dedicate a special story time session where each child gets to share their "All About Me Book". They can show their peers the pictures in their book.



Pre-schoolers

Colour portraits – we can make a rainbow

Learning objectives:

1. Through observation and a painting activity, children will learn to recognise and appreciate the variety of skin colours in their group, reinforcing the concept that diversity is a natural and beautiful aspect of our world.

Materials:

- Paint: You will need primary colours (red, yellow, blue) and white and black paint. These can be mixed to create a wide range of skin tones.
- Paint brushes.
- Mixing palettes or plates.
- A choice of materials for each child to create a self-portrait (such as paper plates, cardboard or paper of different colours, shapes and sizes), or a pre-cut hand shape.
- Aprons or old shirts.
- Water and cloths for cleaning brushes between colours.

Instructions:

1. Discussion

- Have you ever noticed that we all have different colours of skin? Look around the room. We're like a rainbow! [If the children in your group have similar skin colours you may need another simile, such as looking at beautiful rocks or leaves to show subtle gradations of colour.]
 - Our skin colour is one of the things that makes us unique. It's like nature is painting on us.
 - We have different colours of skin to help protect us from the sun. People have lots of different skin colours.
 - How many skin colours are there in our room?
2. Try and create skin colours by mixing paint that would represent everyone in the group. Depending on the capacity of the group, guide children to create a self-portrait or other picture to reflect their own skin colour.
 3. Arrange the completed work to enjoy the diversity of skin colours together.



Pre-schoolers

Gender and marketing¹²

Learning objectives:

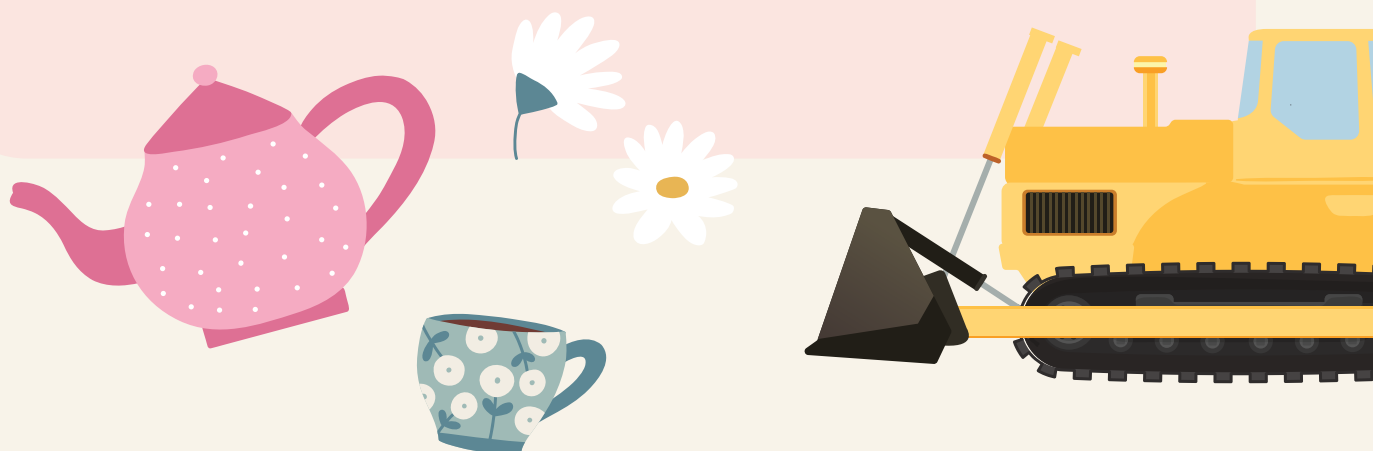
1. Children learn to think critically about how products are marketed towards specific genders and why, fostering their problem-solving skills.
2. By discussing that it's okay for everyone to like different toys regardless of their colour or "intended" gender, children develop respect for individual preferences and choices.

Materials:

1. Small toys: It's helpful to include a wide range, such as musical toys, building blocks, dolls, cars, pretend play sets etc. If physical toys aren't available, you can use pictures of toys.
2. Sorting bins or mats: You'll need something to sort the toys into different categories.
3. YouTube video [Riley on Marketing](#).

Instructions:

1. Ask the children some ways we could sort these toys: musical, building, pretending.
2. Now, sort them by colour. What can we do with this? For example:
A pink teapot. Why did they make it pink? Do only girls like pink? Can boys like pink? Why, why not? Do only women like tea? Can only girls pour tea? Why do you think this is so?
3. Why do the people that make and sell toys make them certain colours? Are there any rules about which toys you can like?
4. Does it matter what colour the toy is?
5. Is it okay for us all to like different toys?
6. Talk about how there are so many different toys in the world for us to enjoy – there is no such thing as 'boys' things' and 'girls' things' – just as we are all different, the toys we all like are different.
7. Watch [Riley on Marketing](#) for a 4 year old's explanation of gender and marketing.



12 Let Toys Be Toys (n.d.) 'Challenging gender stereotypes in childhood', [The Let Toys Be Toys Campaign](http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk), <http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk>



The power of picture books

Fun books that celebrate difference and feeling good about yourself:

- *Am I Small?* (2014) by Philipp Winterberg and Nadja Wichmann. Available in multiple languages, this is a cute, whimsical book about how everyone perceives things differently.
- *Embrace your body* (2024) by Taryn Brumfitt (Author), Sinead Hanley (Illustrator). This book ([and song](#)) encourages everyone to love their body and who they are inside and out.
- *Everybody* (2023) by Elise Gravel. This book highlights how we are all special and unique but also the same in so many ways.
- *Giraffes Can't Dance* (2018) by Giles Andreae (Author), Guy Parker-Rees (Illustrator). A funny story about being yourself and finding your own tune.
- *I am Lupe* (2023) by Sela Ahosivi-Atiola (Author), Yani Agustina (Illustrator). A warm-hearted story about self-worth, identity and acceptance of what makes us unique.
- *I Love Me* (2016) by Sally Morgan and Ambelin Kwaymullina. A joyful, colourful book about loving yourself for being you. It aims to build self-esteem in indigenous and non-indigenous children.
- *Julian is a Mermaid* (2019) by Jessica Love. Julian is a little boy who wants to be a mermaid. Through beautifully colourful illustrations, this story follows a little boy, Julian, who wants to be a Mermaid, exploring the themes of acceptance, identity and love.
- *My Family Doesn't Look Like Your Family* (2019) by Tenielle Stoltenkamp (Author), Go Suga (Illustrator). This book removes focus from roles, race and gender and encourages discussion about what makes every family unique.
- *Pink Is for Boys* (2018) by Robb Pearlman and Eda Kaban. A story describing the importance that boys and girls can love the same colours and have the same interests.
- *Rosa Loves Cars* (All About Rosa Series) (2018) by Jessica Spanyol. A bright colourful book featuring the toys Rosa and her friends are playing with. Focusing on inclusivity and gender equality.
- *Same, but little bit diff'rent* (2012) by Kylie Dunstan. A simple, sweet story celebrating the similarities and differences between two friends.
- *Stay for Dinner* (2023) by Sandhya Parappukkaran (Author), Michelle Pereira (Illustrator). 'Reshma loves dinnertime with her family. Her family eat with their hands – not just finger food type-eating, but hands-on squishy eating. When she's invited to stay for dinner at her friends' places, she finds out that they all eat in different ways...'
- *The Lion Inside* (2017) by Rachel Bright (Author), Jim Field (Illustrator). A feel-good story about a mouse trying to make himself heard and discovering that even the smallest of us has the heart of a lion.





Other media

Bluey models inclusive practice

- In *Mini Bluey*, Bandit and Chilli realise how much they love the differences in their daughters.
- In *Turtleboy*, we meet Dougie and his mum who communicate in *Auslan*.

Play School: Walking Together

Hunter, Rachael and Emma Donovan walk us through our shared histories and the role we all play in building relationships and communities that value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, cultures and futures.

Play School: Where I Belong

We learn about the value of intergenerational friendship and the importance of strengthening community connection, and the contributions we can make at any age!



What to say when...

Practical tips and immediate responses to guide children's understanding to gender stereotypes and noticing 'difference'. The tips below are to encourage open-mindedness, empathy, and acceptance of individual differences.

What if a child says: *'boys can't have long hair', 'girls can't like trucks'*.

- Why do you believe that?
- Some children like to... and others like to do this...
- You can like whatever you want – it's important we can do the things that make us happy.
- These are fun things to do that everyone can enjoy.
- Is it okay to tease someone just because they like something different to you?

What if a child asks why another child who is deaf or hard of hearing 'talks funny'?

- Acknowledge their observation: *I see you've noticed Alex sounds different when they speak.*
- Explain the situation: *They might sound different because they're hard of hearing. That means they hear differently to you. This can affect the way they talk.*
- Promote acceptance: *Just like we all look different, we all sound different too. It's part of what makes us unique and special.*
- Flip the focus: *Have you noticed how Alex uses their hands to talk too? How clever is that?*
- If relevant, and depending on the age of the child, encourage them to think about the timing of their question and encourage empathy: *I think Alex felt embarrassed when you said that in front of everyone. It's not always nice to be talked about. What could be a better way of learning about Alex?*

What do I say to a father who is worried about their son wearing 'girls' clothes?

When 3-year-olds play dress-up, it's a completely normal part of their development. During this age, they are exploring the world around them, including different roles and expressions. It's a way for them to have fun and try on different identities. Sometimes, you may see boys trying on "girls' clothing" or vice versa. This is a way for them to explore and express themselves. It doesn't have to mean anything about their gender identity or preferences in the long term. It's about play and imagination.



Further reading

- Australian Psychological Society: [*Information Sheet - Transgender and gender diverse children*](#)
- Rainbow Families: [*Rainbow Family Stories*](#)
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Community: [*Learning resources*](#)
- [*The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*](#) (4th ed), edited by Dr Red Ruby Scarlet.
- Victorian Inclusion Agency: [*Disability and developmental delay resources*](#)



Spotlight - Superheroes and Princesses

Is it bad to be a princess?

If being a princess equates to conforming to a narrow standard of beauty - characterised by white skin, straight blonde hair, and waiting to be rescued - then it can be problematic. Research has demonstrated that a child immersed in princess culture during the preschool years has decreased body esteem in early adolescence.¹³ Most Disney princesses, including more recent ones, are portrayed as unrealistically slim with large eyes and small chins. In a 2016 study of over 1000 girls:

- 36% aged 7-10 years said 'people make them think that the most important thing about them is how they look.'¹⁴
- 40% of boys aged 6-11 years wanted to be thinner than they currently were.¹⁵

Conversely, boys who engage with princess culture during their preschool years are more inclined to question traditional concepts of masculinity as they enter adolescence.¹⁶

In your daily practice help children to understand that Disney princesses are crafted by artists and storytellers. They do not accurately represent how real people appear or behave. Encouraging conversations about the stories can help children understand that media is something made by people – and so we can have different views about whether we agree with or like the way a character is portrayed.

What about superheroes?

Superhero media often portrays emotions in a gendered way. While female superhero roles have become more 'masculine', male superheroes remain muscular, powerful and assertive, and find it difficult to express emotions or seek help. Research tells us that the more superhero content young children watch, the more likely they are to believe traditional male gender stereotypes, such as "boys are better leaders than girls", and "it is more important for boys than girls to do well in school."¹⁷

13 The Princess Problem: Influences of Disney Princess' Television Exposure on Young Girls' Gender Stereotypes and Prosocial Behavior

14 Ringrose J 2017, Submission of Evidence for Youth Select Committee 2017: Inquiry into Body Image. London: University College

15 Jongenelis, M. I., Byrne, S. M., & Pettigrew, S. (2014). Self-objectification, body image disturbance, and eating disorder symptoms in young Australian children. *Body image*, 11(3), 290–302. 2

16 Childhood Engagement With Disney Princess Media: Associations With Gender Stereotypes, Prosocial Behavior, and Aggression in Early Adolescence

17 Coyne, S., Shawcroft, J., Linder, J., Graver, H., Siufanua, M., & Holmgren, H. (2022). Making Men of Steel: Superhero Exposure and the Development of Hegemonic Masculinity in Children. *Sex Roles*, 86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-022-01293-2>

Using our superhero powers for good!

Superhero shows are about good triumphing over evil. We can harness this message to talk about characters and their actions and the traits they display. When play-battle gets energetic, we can make sure it remains playful and does not become intentionally hurtful. Children can learn to pay attention to others' boundaries and stop when it gets too much.

Marketing and merchandise

We have all experienced the effect of material wealth on the way we feel about ourselves and the ways we are met in different social settings. Many of us might remember the value placed in having say the 'right' shoes or the 'real' toy (not the fake one).

Putting aside the issue of how gender and racial stereotypes may be challenged or reinforced through media and merchandising, how do we stop another kind of exclusion, based on family income? How do we share in a child's joy about their new Superhero costume without reinforcing that a person's importance comes from 'stuff' and the capacity to own it?

Recognise each child's happiness: *"I can see you're really excited about your new superhero outfit. It looks like you're ready to save the day!"*

Encourage imagination: Highlight the fun of pretending to be a superhero, focusing on imaginative play rather than the outfit.

Advocate for inclusion: Encourage children to include others in their superhero games, enabling everyone to join in, outfits aside.

Developing critical media literacy

- In the first instance, limiting the amount of superhero and princess media will make it easier to challenge the messages about slimness equalling goodness, and muscular bodies and emotional ineptitude of the male hero.
- As well as monitoring content, encourage families to watch and talk with their children. Simple open-ended questions that evoke and prompt critical thinking such as "do you think it is a good idea for her to do that?"
- Emphasise that anyone can be creators so that children can create their own heroes and princesses. We can begin to help children understand what they see on TV or in books isn't always real.
- Finally, discuss how different media makes them feel. If a show makes them happy or a book makes them sad, ask why. This begins to develop their ability to critically engage with media.





Focus Area 2:

Social and emotional skills –

Managing feelings and getting
getting along with others

Focus Area 2:

Social and emotional skills

Managing feelings and getting along with others



Overview

Social and emotional skills involve managing feelings and getting along with others. Teaching children to interpret and act on their feelings positively and listen to others leads to healthy communication in relationships.

Factors such as social and ecological influences affect children's expression of feelings and interactions with others. As children grow older, they begin to select which emotions to express, and to whom, and are more likely to conform to gender roles in the presence of peers. Boys tend to display more anger, while girls exhibit more 'positive' emotions.¹⁸ Gender stereotypes can affect how educators and parents respond to disruptive behaviour. This can look like showing fewer negative reactions to risky and disruptive behaviour in boys, and being less likely to encourage prosocial behaviour.¹⁹

How does this relate to respectful relationships and consent education?

Promoting a culture of respectful relationships and consent goes beyond teaching kindness and care. What remains unaddressed are powerful pressures to belong and feel safe in the crowd. Children 'catch bias'. Messages about what's 'normal' have negative effects on people who don't reflect that standard.²⁰ Mental health statistics and records of violent and abusive relationships reflect the impact of stigma on children and young people.²¹

Exclusion can have serious lifelong effects on individuals and groups. For example, national studies of LGBTIQ+ young people found they experience higher rates of bullying, violence, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.²² Although many LGBTIQ+ Australians live healthy and happy lives, research has shown that a disproportionate number experience poorer mental health outcomes and have higher risk of suicidal behaviours than their peers.

The good news is that even very young children, around 3 to 5 years old, can become more inclusive and accepting of others when they are reminded about the importance of fairness and equality. By actively reminding children to recognise and appreciate difference we are nurturing a more positive and inclusive mindset in them for the future.

18 Schroeder, K.M., Liben, L.S. Felt Pressure to Conform to Cultural Gender Roles: Correlates and Consequences. *Sex Roles* 84, 125–138 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01155-9>

19 Saramourtsi, E., Zafiri, M., & Pliogou, V. (2020). Gender Stereotypes in Children's Play, Pro-social and Aggressive Behavior in the Kindergarten Class: The Kindergarten Teachers' Stance. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(12A), 7992-8009. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2020.082587.

20 Skinner, A. L., Meltzoff, A. N., & Olson, K. R. (2017). "Catching" Social Bias: Exposure to Biased Nonverbal Signals Creates Social Biases in Preschool Children. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 216-224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678930>

21 Alcohol and Drug Foundation, (2019) Understanding the impact of stigma. <https://adf.org.au/insights/stigma-impact/>

22 Equality Australia (2021) Submission to the Queensland Legal Affairs and Safety Committee Inquiry into serious vilification and hate crimes. <https://equalityaustralia.org.au>



Reflective practice

Before exploring social and emotional learning and gender in practice, consider the following questions. These are designed to be thought provoking and can be considered individually or discussed as a staff group. If these questions raise further queries or curiosity, speak to your program leader or manager to discuss where to go for more information or additional support.

- Reflecting on your own personal upbringing and societal influences, how have gender norms shaped your understanding of masculinity and femininity?
- In what ways have you observed gender stereotypes influencing children's emotional expressions and the responses they receive? How does this relate to promoting respectful relationships and consent?
- What do you know about how different cultures express emotions?
- How can you practically implement skills that promote fairness, kindness, conflict resolution, gender equity, and inclusion in your everyday interactions with young children?

Learning intentions

EYLF Learning Outcomes	This is evident when children, for example:
Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy, and respect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show interest in other children and their play. • express a wide range of emotions, thoughts and views constructively. • help and offer care to other children.
Children respond to diversity with respect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • notice and react in positive ways to differences and similarities among people. • demonstrate inclusive play – children recognise diversity, such as differences in race, ethnicity or physical ability, but don't allow it to be a barrier. • participate in or celebrate community or sporting events such as different cultural events, the Paralympic Games etc.
Children become aware of fairness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • begin to understand expectations, setting rules and rights of others. • develop the ability to recognise unfairness and bias, and the capacity to act with compassion and kindness.
Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • share humour and laughter with others. • show an increased capacity to understand, self-regulate and manage their emotions. • appreciate the feelings and needs of others.



Learning experiences



Everyday interactions

These practices, when consistently applied, can help children develop a strong foundation in emotional regulation and social skills. Remember, the goal is not to control children's emotions but to provide them with the tools to understand and manage them effectively.

- Children whose social and emotional needs are met by their parents, carers and educators are more likely to manage their emotions well, relate to others and join in. When they attend early learning settings that make efforts to promote inclusivity, and are exposed to different backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, they are more likely to feel like they belong and less likely to hold negative attitudes towards others who are different.²³
- Anger is a natural reaction to frustration, disappointment, or hurt. Even babies feel it. Encourage children to express their anger in safe and acceptable ways. Explain to them that everyone gets mad. But it's not okay to hurt other people. *'It's okay that you're frustrated with Sam. It's not okay to hit them/throw your toys.'*
- Be a role model and talk about your own emotions and how you manage them. Teach children simple coping strategies, such as deep breathing, counting to ten, or using a quiet corner for calming down when they feel overwhelmed.
- Help children to notice other people's feelings and to think about what they might need at the time. For example, *'we made muffins today and we felt good when we could smell them. How do you think Anne will feel when she sees what we've made?'*
- Make social skills visible, rather than a mystery. Tell toddlers what they have been doing: *'Layla and Yasmin were playing in the sand. Layla saw another spade and gave it to Yasmin. Now they are playing together.'*
- Model helping behaviours. A child drops her blocks, suggest that we help her pick them up.
- Model inclusive behaviour. Simple actions can make quite an impact. If you notice a child being left out, you might say, *'Let's find a way we can all play together'*. Show how to take turns and share toys or materials. *'It's Yusef's turn now, but soon it will be your turn, Sarah.'*
- Everything you do has social influence. When you support a child to manage their emotions you are also role modelling kindness, empathy, and your assurance that they can practise self-regulation.
- When you tell stories include some that have positive role models for all genders and abilities. Challenge prejudice, discriminatory comments, and stereotypes. Notice if a child is being excluded and help children learn how to include others.
- Plan for activities and experiences where children can learn from one another, help each other and complete tasks together.

23 Be you, Beyond Blue (n.d) 'Why support connectedness and belonging', Be You Professional Learning, Mentally Healthy Communities Module. <https://beyou.edu.au/>

Creating positive environments



Here are some elements you can include and considerations for the early learning setting to support children in understanding their own emotions and those of others, and to give them tools to navigate social interactions effectively.

- By creating warm, safe, predictable environments with routine we are freeing up the bandwidth for children to learn and observe how to form healthy relationships.
- Do particular areas get dominated by certain groups, or by one gender or the other? Are there changes or movements you could make to encourage children to feel equally free to use the home corner, the reading corner, the bikes, the Lego, outdoor space... Is it about colour coding and signage? Think about the use of certain colours, such as pink and blue, to ensure a balanced approach.
- Include images and books that show children expressing a variety of emotions. Provide books, games, and toys that foster empathy and understanding of diverse experiences and perspectives. For instance, dolls of different races and abilities, or books that explore different family structures and cultures.
- Add emotions charts at children's eye level to the wall so they can talk and identify how they might be feeling. Use open questioning such as *'why are you feeling that way?'* Help children to learn a language and extend their knowledge of different kinds of emotions.
- Help children develop their sense of capability and contribution to the community by arranging materials so that they can find what they need and put it away again.
- Create a *Calming or Reflection Corner* where children can go when they need space and time to regulate their emotions. This area could be equipped with soft cushions, stress balls, quiet music, or mindfulness activity cards.
- Maintain predictable routines and schedules. Knowing what comes next can help children feel more secure and manage their emotional reactions better.
- Use visuals on walls and other surfaces that help to engage children in different ways.



Ideas for intentional teaching

Concept: Managing feelings and developing empathy

Young children often have the instinct to exclude others during play. When they form close friendships, they might exclude others because they think that person might disrupt their pretend storyline, or that saying no to others strengthens their bond. Exclusion of other children also stems from recognising that some people are like them, while others are different.

When considering situations that are important for children, such as not being invited to a birthday party, role-play and puppet stories are effective tools to help children gain insights into the feelings and experiences of others.

The purpose of these activities is to help children understand and self-regulate their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others.

Learning intention

- Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing.

The following ideas are for exploring this concept and learning intention.





Pre-schoolers

You can't come to my party!

Learning Objectives:

1. Through puppet play, children will enhance their ability to identify and manage emotions, particularly feelings of sadness and exclusion.
2. The experience aims to foster empathy and understanding towards others' feelings, and promote problem-solving skills for handling such situations.

Materials:

- 2 x hand puppets or soft toys
- Story script

Instructions:

1. Explain to the children that Teddy has just found out that Bunny is having a tea party. Teddy is feeling sad because they weren't invited. Ask:
 - How might Teddy be feeling right now? This helps children to recognise and name the emotion/s Teddy is experiencing.
 - Why do you think Teddy feels this way/sad? This question encourages children to identify the cause of Teddy's feelings.
 - How do you think Teddy would feel if they were invited to the tea party? This helps children understand the contrast in Teddy's potential emotions.
 - What could we do to help Teddy feel better? This question encourages problem-solving and empathy, emphasising the importance of caring for others' feelings.

2. After children have considered these questions, provide a positive end to the story. For example:

- Another toy friend, Possum, joins in.
- Possum: What's wrong Teddy?
- Teddy: I feel left out because Bunny didn't invite me. We usually play together during playtime.
- Possum: Poor Teddy. It's okay to feel sad. Maybe Bunny forgot to invite you. Or maybe they could only invite a few toys. Let's ask Bunny.
- Bunny: I'm sorry, Teddy. I didn't mean to leave you out. I could only invite a few toys today, but I promise to invite you to my next tea party.
- Teddy: Okay, Bunny. I understand. I was just feeling sad.
- Possum: That's okay, Teddy. Everyone feels sad sometimes. Let's play a game now to cheer you up!

Note: Help children handle feelings of exclusion in a healthy and constructive way. It's not about eliminating negative emotions or experiences, but rather learning how to navigate them effectively.



Toddlers and Pre-schoolers

How to join in - helping a child understand and engage in social interactions

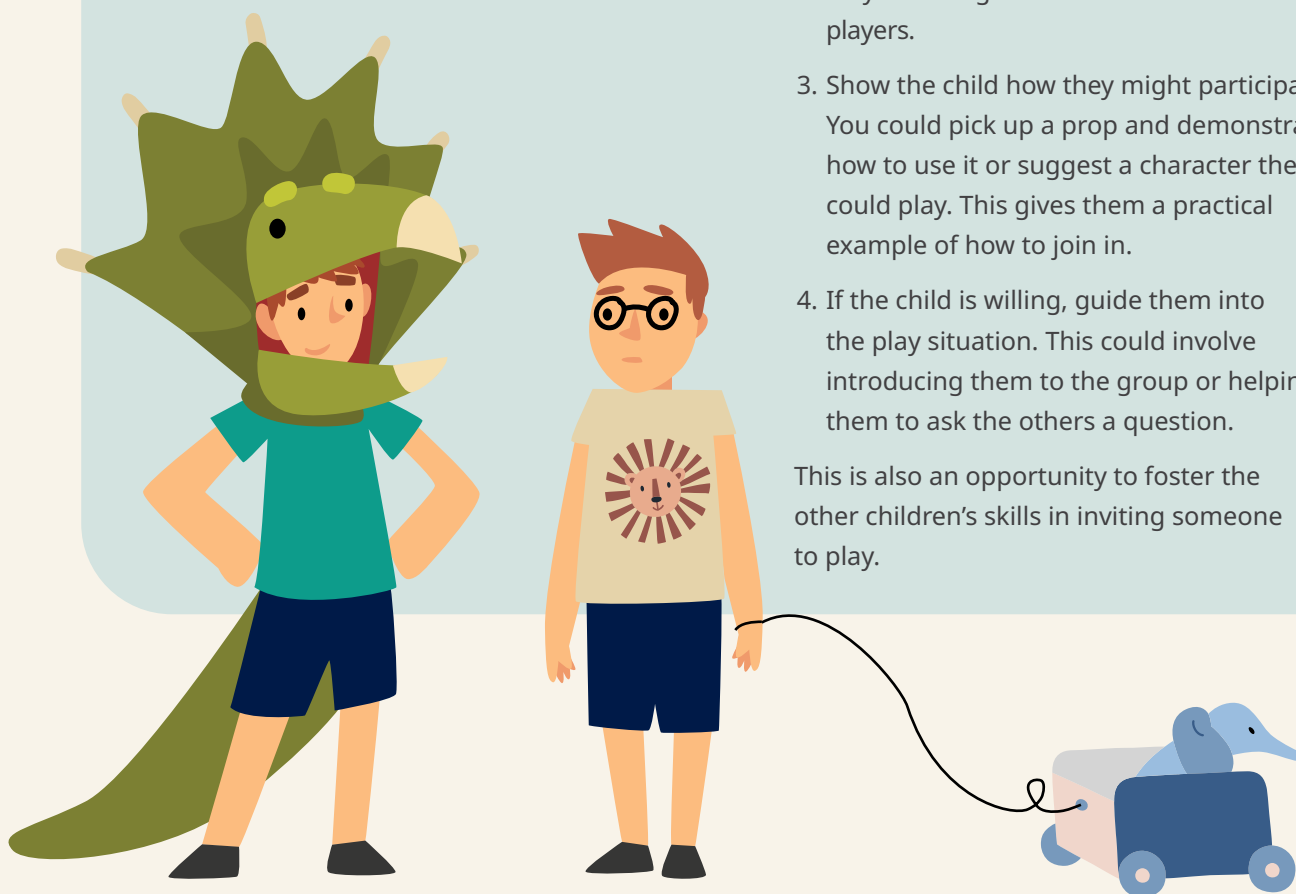
Learning objectives:

1. By observing and having the ongoing play described to them, children will develop a clearer perception of social dynamics and the roles within group play.
2. With guidance and support, children learn how to introduce themselves, and join an activity.
3. By being scaffolded into the play situation, each child will feel included and valued.

Instructions:

1. This is for those children who find it difficult to join in. If other children are engaged in a game, say dramatic play, sit with the child and narrate what is happening. Begin by describing what the other children are doing in their play. This provides the child with a sense of inclusion and understanding. 'I think they're playing schools. Violet is telling the others to write a story. Maybe you could take a seat in the 'classroom'...'
2. Remember there is no rush for the child to join in the way the others are playing. It may be enough to observe and wave to the players.
3. Show the child how they might participate. You could pick up a prop and demonstrate how to use it or suggest a character they could play. This gives them a practical example of how to join in.
4. If the child is willing, guide them into the play situation. This could involve introducing them to the group or helping them to ask the others a question.

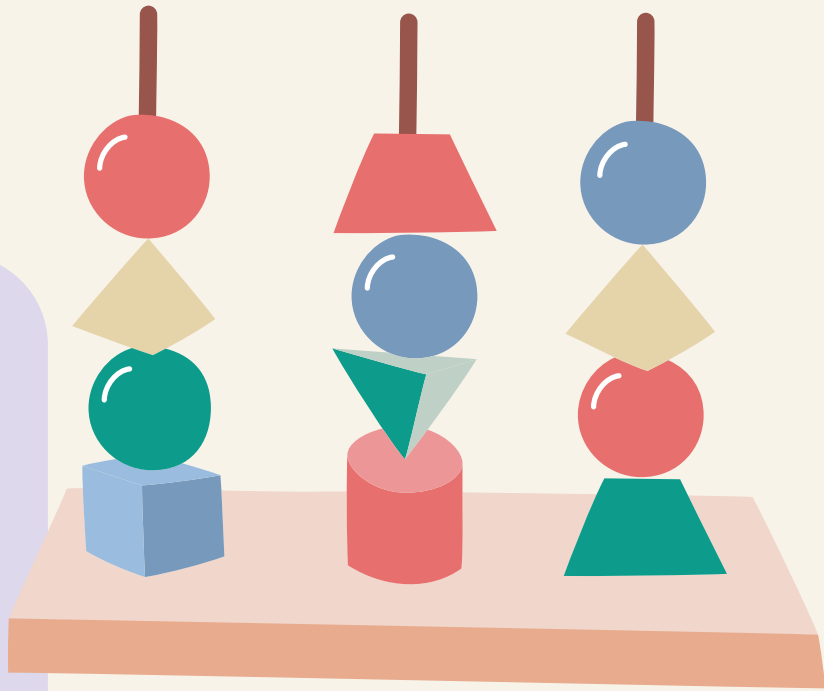
This is also an opportunity to foster the other children's skills in inviting someone to play.



Babies and Toddlers

Turn-taking games

We can trigger the desire of a child of 1-2 years of age to help others by playing simple turn-taking games. When an adult plays a back-and-forth game with a child, such as rolling a ball to one another, the child is more likely to want to help and share with a completely different person later. Conversely, if there is only friendly play but not give and take, the child shows little desire to help. Social experiences are fundamental to help children learn about mutual care.²⁴



- 24 Cortes Barragan, R., & Dweck, C. S. (2014). Rethinking natural altruism: simple reciprocal interactions trigger children's benevolence. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111(48), 17071–17074. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1419408111>





All ages

Helping children to get someone's attention

Young children do not naturally understand the power of saying someone's name. It's simple, but it's the beginning of a child understanding that others are separate to them and have a different perspective. In a circle, give one child a ball and ask them to name a person that they will roll the ball to, and so on.²⁵

25 (K. Cochran (1999) cited in Evidence-based social skills activities for children and teens (with teaching tips), Dewar G, 2023; <https://parentingscience.com/social-skills-activities/>)



The power of picture books

Fun books to support children in understanding their own and others' emotions and help to navigate social interactions effectively:

- *All My Stripes: A Story for Children with Autism* (2015) by Shaina Rudolph and Danielle Royer. Zane has autism. He is 'different' and has many unique talents and traits.
- *Egg* (2022) by Clare Atkins (Author), Harrison Vale (Illustrator). When a strange egg drifts ashore the other eggs are fearful and unsure. A thoughtful story of friendship, fear, kindness and acceptance.
- *It's Okay to Be Different* (2009) by Todd Parr. This brightly coloured book celebrates differences and encourages children to accept themselves and others.
- *My Brother Charlie* (2010) by Holly Robinson Peete, Ryan Elizabeth Peete and Shane Evans (Illustrator). A girl whose twin brother has autism, emphasising his strengths and the things that make him special.
- *Nothing Alike* (2023) by Zewlan Moor (Author), Peter Cheong (Illustrator). A wry and clever book that tackles the issue of race, perceptions and stereotyping.
- *Ruby Finds a Worry* (2021) by Tom Percival. The theme of anxiety and worry, teaching children that it's okay to have worries and how to manage them.
- *Should I Share My Ice Cream?* (2023) by Mo Willems. This book teaches children about the importance of sharing and considering others' feelings.
- *Something Else* (1994) by Kathryn Cave (Author), Chris Riddel (Illustrator). A story about being and looking different, and finding belonging in the world.
- *Strictly No Elephants* (2016) by Lisa Mantchev. A boy and his pet elephant are excluded from the local pet club. It teaches children about inclusivity, friendship, and standing up against unfairness.
- *The Big Umbrella* (2018) by Amy June Bates. There's always room for everyone under the big umbrella.
- *The Feelings Book* (2009) by Todd Parr. A wide range of emotions and reassurance that all feelings are okay.
- *Two Can* (2016) by Smriti Prasad-Halls (Author), Ben Javens (Illustrator). This book highlights the joys of sharing and what can be achieved when playing together.
- *We're Amazing 1,2,3! A Story About Friendship and Autism (Sesame Street)* (2017) by Leslie Kimmelman. This introduces the topic of autism in a child-friendly way.
- *What to say when you don't know what to say* (2022) by Davina Bell (Author), Hilary Jean Tapper (Illustrator). With no narrative, this is a great book providing ideas and ways to navigate emotions in common uncomfortable or challenging situations through a sequence of scenarios.



Other media

The Wiggles

If You're Happy and You Know It and *Rock-a-Bye Your Bear*. In collaboration with Christine Anu, *Taba Naba Style!* which encourages children to navigate their ocean of emotions.

Little J and Big Cuz

Animated series (available on SBS on demand) follows the adventures of Little J and Big Cuz, two Aboriginal children who live with their Nanna and Old Dog. Through the gap in Nana's fence, the pair embark on adventures, exploring their environment and gaining a deeper understanding of their cultural identity.

Bluey

Animated series. Bluey is a six year-old Blue Heeler dog, who loves to play and turns everyday family life into adventures, developing her imagination as well as her mental, physical and emotional resilience. In the episode titled *Chest* we see Bluey including her little sister Bingo in a game of chess, modelling simple ways to care for others and include peers.

ABC Kids Listen

Radio station featuring programs like "Little Yarns" and "Story Salad," where stories and songs are used to explore emotions and experiences.



What to say when...

Practical tips and immediate responses to guide children's empathy, expressing their own needs, and acceptance of individual differences.

'No boys allowed!'

Consider the situation: two children are playing in their special place and a third child tries to join them. If a child wants control over their play space, they may be worried about others disturbing it. We respect children's choices in making friends, while also ensuring no one's feelings are hurt and space is available for another child to connect and feel included elsewhere. For example, we can say, 'Those words might be hurtful – it sounds like you think all boys are terrible and not allowed. Why are no boys allowed? Can you express what you mean in a different way?' or 'Are you trying to say, 'I just want to play with her right now?'.

Encouraging children to share and make room for others can help support inclusiveness and develop empathy.



Further reading

- Be You - national mental health and wellbeing initiative for learning communities in Australia: *Educator's handbook: early learning services*.
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): *Transformative SEL*.



Spotlight - Neurodiverse children

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that encompasses a spectrum of cognitive variations. It includes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and various learning disorders. Neurodivergent individuals, particularly children aged 0-5 years, can face distinct challenges in their social and emotional development. This can include difficulties with emotional regulation, sensory sensitivities, and social interaction.

Strengthening self-regulation

Self-regulation refers to a child's ability to manage and regulate their inner sensations, behavioural or emotional state in response to their social environment.

Neurodivergent children can often experience heightened emotions or struggle to express their feelings. Knowing this, we can support children with visual tools and other strategies to build their sense of competency and agency.²⁶

Social interaction is another area where neurodivergent children may face challenges.

Understanding and interpreting social cues can be complex which can impact their ability to make friends. For children with autism, learning social skills might not come as naturally and may need direct guidance. Using tools like stories, puppets, and role-play can be an effective way to teach them about social interactions, emotions, and the consequences of their actions. It's also helpful for them to practice these skills with their peers, giving them a chance to apply what they've learned in different social situations. This approach supports their social development in a nurturing and inclusive environment, ensuring they gain the essential skills needed for meaningful connections.²⁷

In the same context, we can support that child's peers to understand that we are all different – that we have different strengths and challenges. In fostering children to understand diversity, we are encouraging them to feel good about themselves, know where they fit in the world and appreciate differences in others. Remind children that we want everyone to know that they belong, and that each child can learn ways to support and respect others' needs.

26 Beheshti, A., Chavanon, M.L. & Christiansen, H. Emotion dysregulation in adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: a meta-analysis. BMC Psychiatry 20, 120 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-2442-7>

Lawson, W.B. (2017) Women & Girls on the Autism Spectrum: A Profile, Journal of Intellectual Disability - Diagnosis and Treatment. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wenn-Lawson-2/publication/320437843_Women_Girls_on_the_Autism_Spectrum_A_Profile/links/5aba21e-10f7e9b1b79f96c90/Women-Girls-on-the-Autism-Spectrum-A-Profile.pdf

27 Supporting social and emotional competence for autistic children, <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/supporting-social-and-emotional-competence-for-autistic-children>. August 9, 2022

Sensory sensitivities are another common challenge for neurodiverse individuals leading to sensory overload. Low sensory zones where a child can retreat to when they feel overwhelmed create an environment where they can feel a sense of safety and autonomy over their own bodies.²⁸

To support neurodivergent children, particularly those with autism, in their social and emotional development, the following strategies can be used:

1. **Understanding social cues:** Social cues encompass signals like body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye contact. The interpretation of these cues can vary greatly among individuals with autism. By clearly explaining rules and expectations, or using stories to rehearse these scenarios, we can reduce a child's stress. Consider specific actions such as:
 - When communicating, slow down and allow additional processing time.
 - Use visual supports.
 - Ensure the child knows they are being spoken to – we can't take this for granted.
 - Keep communication short, literal, and clear.

2. **Managing meltdowns and shutdowns:**

Meltdowns and shutdowns are not choices but signs of distress. A child may withdraw from or avoid challenging situations. When these occur:

- Give time and space – particularly if the child is in sensory overload.
- Adapt the environment to meet the child's sensory needs: for example, dim the lights or reduce noise.
- Reduce language.
- Allow just one person to communicate with the child.
- Consider the use of visuals.

3. **Recognising signs of agitation:** Learn to identify these signs and importantly, help the child to recognise them too. If developmentally appropriate, brainstorm ideas with the child to make them feel more comfortable or to redirect their activities.



28 'Supporting children with autism in preschool settings'
<https://www.learninglinks.org.au/resources/autism-in-preschool-settings/> (nd)



Focus Area 3:



Body autonomy – Understanding boundaries, consent, and respect

Focus Area 3:

Body autonomy

Understanding boundaries, consent, and respect



Overview

This focus area relates to two important concepts:

- instilling respect for personal boundaries
- child sexual abuse.

Educating young children about the boundaries of their own body and those of others is an essential part of a child developing self-awareness, confidence, and understanding of how others should treat them. Our bodies are a source of pleasure and joy, including loving touch. Encouraging children to acknowledge joy, pleasure and contentment is as important as helping them identify when they are feeling discomfort or even fear. Promoting the concepts of self-care and care for others is dependent on a capacity to make informed decisions about their own body. For instance, they can choose to engage in activities that bring joy and avoid those causing discomfort.

Our actions in early childhood settings can help to both prevent child sexual abuse and stop it if it's currently happening. The most important interventions are to do with organisational practices and policies such as employment and supervision, the provision of staff training, and complaints processes. In addition to this, a crucial part of necessary culture change is our own capacity to talk about sexual body parts and sexual behaviours - with children, families, and colleagues.

It is important to acknowledge that many of us did not grow up with sexuality education. We may have learnt negative and shaming messages which can contribute to extreme discomfort in observing and talking about children's sexual behaviours. More importantly, it affects our willingness to speak up if we see something of concern. Everyone has a responsibility to protect children from sexual violence and abuse.

Early years education and care services can access training and advice to help develop an understanding and awareness of child sexual abuse, as well as training on healthy sexual development. This provides an opportunity for staff to build essential knowledge and skills, rehearsal for talking about sexual matters, and guided reflection on personal attitudes and values.

Community organisations offer a range of education and professional learning opportunities, and DECYP employees can visit the [Safeguarding Training webpage](#) to view relevant internal training opportunities.

How does this relate to respectful relationships and consent education?

From infancy children are learning to communicate about their body and needs. It's important to use anatomical language for their body parts, so that we have a common language. By naming body parts: vulva, vagina, breasts, penis, testicles, and bottom, you are contributing to an open environment where children know they can come to you. Teaching children these words is also a sign to potential predators – these children are not left in ignorance.

Young children often have few boundaries about their bodies and will absent-mindedly touch themselves during story time or have great curiosity in other people's bodies. It's important to help them to retain that pleasure and curiosity whilst learning what is okay and what is not. Helping children communicate assertively and effectively in the early years will set them up to take care of themselves later in life.

Instances of abuse are most commonly carried out by someone close to the child, so we need to be clear about which behaviours are okay and which are not. We are striking the balance between recognising that children should feel safe with everyone they know and the knowledge that sexual abuse does not always feel 'unsafe'.



Reflective practice

Before exploring concepts around body autonomy, consent and respect in this focus area, consider the following questions. These are designed to be thought provoking and can be considered individually or discussed as a staff group. If these questions raise further queries or curiosity, speak to your program leader or manager to discuss where to go for more information or additional support.

- When it comes to discussing healthy sexual development, it's important to reflect on our own knowledge and training. Do you feel adequately prepared to address this topic? Are there supporting professionals to consult or services to access to build staff confidence and knowledge?
- Anatomical terminology is a key aspect of sexual development. Are you comfortable using words such as penis and vulva for sexual body parts?
- It's crucial to address any issues or questions related to genitals or inappropriate touching. Have these topics ever come up in discussions or relationships? If so, how did you approach these and what would/could you change for next time? If not, are you prepared and confident to address such questions?

Learning intentions

EYLF Learning Outcomes	This is evident when children, for example:
Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn how to stand up for themselves in appropriate ways.
Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a sense of body autonomy and boundaries. • learn ways to ask for and provide consent during everyday play. • distinguish safe and unsafe touches. • notice and label feelings in themselves and others. • learn how to tell or communicate to a trusted adult about things that upset them, make them uncomfortable or sad.



Learning experiences



Everyday interactions

By integrating these methods into everyday interactions, educators and families can play a significant role in preventing sexual abuse by empowering children with knowledge, autonomy, and ability to communicate effectively about their body boundaries.

- Use appropriate language for body parts and teach children to do the same. This helps create a comfortable environment where children can express themselves if something makes them feel uneasy.
- Display policies that outline your commitment to using anatomical terminology and inform families prior. Consider displaying in multiple languages to ensure all families are included and informed.
- Teach children that saying 'no' is okay when they are uncomfortable with something. Reinforce that their 'no' should be respected by others, just as they should respect a 'no' from their peers.
- People often overstep a child's reluctance and expect physical affection, even when the child isn't comfortable. Support children who express that they do not want touch.
- Role-play is an effective technique for teaching young children about body boundaries. By acting out scenarios, children can learn how to react when their personal space is invaded and how to communicate their discomfort.
- Nappy changes are opportunities to reinforce that we treat their bodies respectfully. Rather than picking up a child without warning, give them a moment to ask if they are ready. Invite toddlers to help with the process. Can they hold the clean nappy, or get a wet wipe from the pack?
- Ask, would you like me to pick you up, or would you like a cuddle?
- Encourage decision-making in daily activities. This could be as simple as letting them choose their snack or deciding which experience to engage in next. This fosters a sense of control over their own actions and decisions.
- Children should also be taught to respect others' boundaries. Experiences and activities that involve sharing or turn-taking can help demonstrate this concept, showing that everyone has a right to their own space and possessions.





Creating positive environments

The below considerations are some ideas that can assist in fostering children's autonomy and safety within the early learning setting.

- In addition to books, visual aids like signs and posters can be effective tools for reinforcing these concepts. For instance, a poster displaying "My Body, My Rules" or "It's Okay to Say No" can serve as daily reminders for children to assert their boundaries and autonomy. These signs and posters can also serve as constant reminders for adults about the importance of respecting children's body autonomy and promoting assertive communication. Consider displaying posters and signs in multiple languages to ensure all families are included and informed.
- There are lots of books for young children that promote body autonomy and assertive communication about body boundaries. Check out Australian author [*Jayneen Sanders' website*](#) for books, as well her as [*free posters and teaching ideas*](#).
- Room organisation can significantly impact a child's confidence in seeking help from adults. Think about the physical arrangement of furniture and items in your setting. Make sure any adult areas are within easy reach to make adults more approachable to children as this can boost their confidence in seeking help.



Ideas for intentional teaching

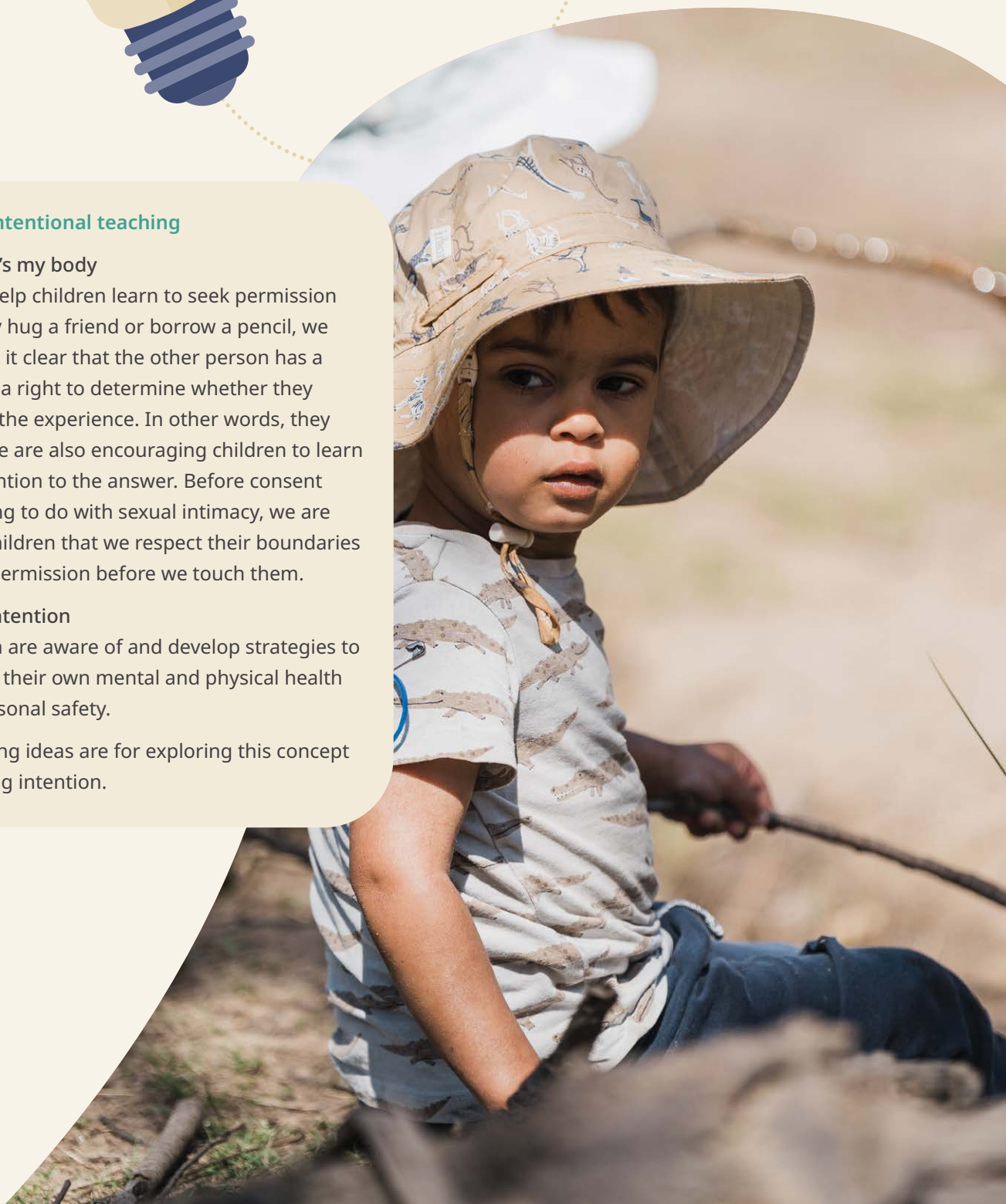
Concept: It's my body

When we help children learn to seek permission before they hug a friend or borrow a pencil, we are making it clear that the other person has a choice and a right to determine whether they are part of the experience. In other words, they consent. We are also encouraging children to learn to pay attention to the answer. Before consent has anything to do with sexual intimacy, we are teaching children that we respect their boundaries by asking permission before we touch them.

Learning intention

- Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety.

The following ideas are for exploring this concept and learning intention.



Pre-schoolers

Don't Hug Doug!

Learning Objectives:

1. Children will identify their own comfort levels with physical touch and express these preferences clearly and confidently.
2. Children will develop the skills to navigate situations where someone may not respect their boundaries. They will understand when and how to seek help from a trusted adult.
3. Children recognise the personal boundaries of others.

Materials:

- Make or download a [Hug, High-five, Handshake Poster](#)
- Create four large picture cards, one with a picture of a hug, a high five, a smile, or a wave.
- A book such as Don't Hug Doug (He Doesn't Like It) – Carrie Finison (2021). See booklist below for further suggestions.

Instructions:

1. Explain to children that we are going to learn to say 'hello' in ways that people feel safe and welcome.
2. Ask: what are different ways we can say hello?
 - Words (hello, g'day, ahlan, ya pulingina, ni hao, Auslan: watch [Emma Memma: Hello, How Are You? \(Auslan\)](#))
 - Facial expressions and movements (smiling, eye contact, nodding, waving)
 - Touch (hug, handshake, high five).
 - Note that we don't all like to say hello the same way.
3. Display the Hugs, Wave, Smile, High Five picture cards in four corners and explain that the children can choose a corner depending on what they would like to do today.
4. Read Don't Hug Doug, or any of the other stories about taking account of other's boundaries.

5. Discussion:

- Doug has a rule about touching. What is it?
- Comment: He is in charge of his body, and he knows what he prefers. He feels comfortable when he tells people what he prefers, and they listen.
- Doug said 'no thanks' to a range of people. How did he say or indicate 'no thanks'? [A: he said 'no thanks', he offered a high five instead.]
- It's hard to say 'no thanks' to some people. What could Doug do if no one listened to his no? [A: get help from a safe adult.]
- How do you feel about hugs? Are hugs okay, or 'not okay'? [Some people love hugs, others don't. It can depend on who is giving the hug, or how you are feeling that day.]
- Comment: Your body belongs to you, and their body belongs to them, so it is kind and thoughtful to pay attention to each other's feelings and rules.

6. Display the [Hug, High Five, Handshake Poster](#). Explain that we're going to practise asking how someone would like to say hello. Explain that you must both be happy to say hello in a particular way.

7. Ask for volunteers to come forward to show which option they might choose today.
8. Demonstrate different ways of asking and accepting the response, of suggesting an alternative if that is appropriate, and of negotiating with each other.
9. Practice time: enable children to circulate the room where they may like to choose to practice and model these new skills. Invite children to say hello to one person they don't normally play with.
10. Keep the poster on display for morning greetings.

Note for adults - watch this video for inspiration on how it's done: [Preschool handshake ritual is everything right in the world.](#)

Pre-schoolers

Everybody's got a bottom

This idea provides you with an example of talking about rules about sexual touching.

Other components of a protective behaviours program for young children include naming body parts, the concepts of public and private, identifying trusted adults, and practice at asking for help. Some excellent age-appropriate resources (see pages 56-57) cover all these components so that you can revisit these skills and the issue remains present and part of your setting.

Learning Objectives:

1. Children will understand their body autonomy, learning to distinguish between safe and unsafe touch, with a focus on personal boundaries.
2. Children will acquire strategies to respond to potential unsafe touch or viewing situations, understanding when adults may make health or safety decisions about their bodies.

Materials:

- Body Safety books such as *Everyone's Got a Bottom*, by Tess Rowley (2007)

Instructions:

1. Read (or watch) a book to children about 'private' parts, such as *Everyone's Got a Bottom*.
 - Note that some body safety books do not refer to screen use. If that is the case, add 'on screens or in real life' to your explanations of body safety rules.
2. Ask the children what are the main messages of the story?
 - My body belongs to me and nobody has the right to touch my whole body without permission.
 - My penis, testicles and bottom, or my vulva and bottom are private, so if someone bigger or older than me, including a big kid or any adult, wants to touch or see my private parts or show me theirs, on screens or in real life, that

is not okay. This is 'unsafe touch', and 'unsafe viewing'. If someone wants to touch or see my private parts tell them to stop or say a big strong NO, move away, and tell an adult you feel safe with.

- Sometimes adults make decisions about a child's body - to keep safe and healthy (such as holding hands to cross busy roads, applying sunscreen or going to the doctor. If a child's vulva or penis and testicles are sore or itchy a safe adult such as a parent, carer or doctor (in the company of a parent or carer) might need to look at them.

3. Reiterate that some ways of touching a child are wrong. No-one should ever touch a child's private parts without good reason. It's not always easy to know what to do, so this is a story to give you advice.
4. Finish the activity by asking children to practice telling someone that they do not like that kind of touch. Practice yelling a powerful NO! (Following sessions will focus on practice at seeking help and identifying safe adults).

My Safety Network

- Identify 'safe adults': A safe adult is someone you trust, who you can talk to about anything, will believe you and help you.
- Children trace around their hands and draw and write in 3-5 safe adults. Title the drawing My Safety Network.

eSafety

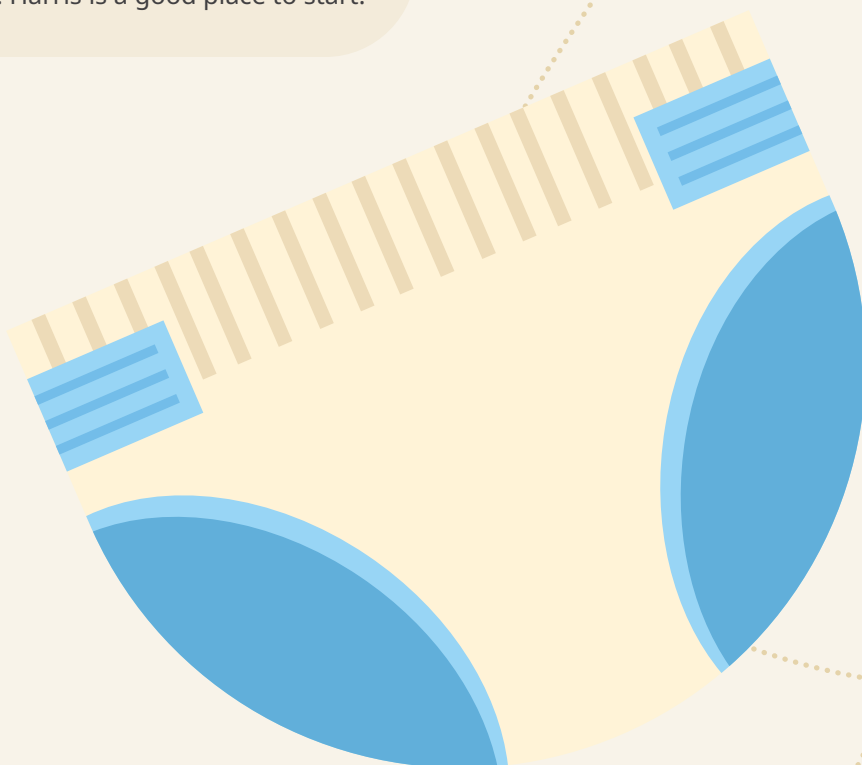
- Read or view the eSafety Commissioner's online safety picture book [*Swoosh, Glide and Rule Number 5*](#). This is a story about a family of sugar gliders who have a sleepover with their cousins. The story shares some of the common technology experiences of children, including what to do when something 'not nice or fun anymore' turns up onscreen.
- The key message is: Turn it off, put the screen away, and tell a safe adult.



Infants and Toddlers

Body parts

- Nappy change and toileting are all good times to go over the names of body parts.
- Books about anatomy are good tools, too. *Who Has What? All About Girls' Bodies and Boys' Bodies* (2011) by Robie H. Harris is a good place to start.



Who has what? A note about gender.²⁹

It's common for children to have questions about genitals and how bodies look different for boys and girls. While the simplest answer is that girls have vulvas and vaginas, and boys have a penis and testicles, that answer isn't true for every child. Boy, girl, man, and woman are words that describe gender identity, and some people with the gender identities "boy" or "man" have vulvas, and some with the gender identity "girl" or "woman" have penises/testicles. Your genitals don't make you a boy or a girl.

Keep in mind that it is especially important to use inclusive language if there are gender-diverse children, or children with an intersex variation.

One way to explain it to children is to say that most girls have vulvas/vaginas, and most boys have penises/testicles, but not everyone. You may want to emphasise that it doesn't matter too much what parts someone has – that doesn't tell you much about them.

Children with an Intersex variation

To have an intersex variation means a person's biology differs from what people typically think of as being female or male. Intersex is an umbrella term that represents over 40 variations affecting sex-linked chromosomes, hormones (i.e. testosterone/oestrogen) and/or the development of the genitals and reproductive organs.

29 Planned Parenthood (2023). How do I talk with my preschooler about their body?
<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/preschool/how-do-i-talk-my-preschooler-about-their-body>





The power of picture books

Fun books that explore self-awareness, personal boundaries and consent designed to empower body autonomy in young minds:

- *Everyone's got a bottom* (2007) by Tess Rowley. This book uses correct anatomical terms and emphasises that children can always talk about their bodies or any concerns they may have with their parents or another trusted adult.
- *Don't Hug Doug (He Doesn't Like It)* (2021) by Carrie Finison. Doug's an ordinary kid who doesn't like hugs. This fun and exuberant story aims to spark discussions about bodily autonomy and consent.
- *Don't Touch My Hair* (2019) by Sharee Miller. This storybook is about Aria, a young girl who's always fending off people trying to touch her hair. After running away from curious mermaids and Martians, she's had enough – and puts down boundaries for herself and her space.
- *It's My Body!* (2024) by Elise Gravel. This book celebrates bodies of all shapes, sizes, and colours and different abilities, with the simple message to love and respect all bodies.
- *It's My Body: A Book about Body Privacy* (2019) by Louise Spilsbury (Author), Mirella Mariani (Illustrator). Providing simple and clear explanations, this book covers body privacy, secrets and encourages children to speak up if feeling uncomfortable.
- *Little BIG Chats* (2021) by Jayneen Sanders is an excellent series for this age group. Titles include *Consent*, *My Safety Network*, *My Early Warning Signs*, *Private Parts are Private*, and *Secrets and Surprises*.
- *My Body, My Rules* (2023) by Nicki Esler Gill (Author), Dasha Riley (Illustrator). This book introduces consent and body personal boundaries in a fun and empowering way.
- *Rissy No Kissies* (2021) by Katey Howes. Rissy is a lovebird, but kisses make her uncomfortable. Her friends and family wonder if she's feeling bad or being rude - but she shows them that we can choose to show love, and be close to others, in lots of different ways.
- *We Say What's Okay series* (2020-2022) by Lydia Bowers. Titles include *We Are In Charge Of Our Bodies*, *We Listen To Our Bodies*, *We Ask Permission*, *We Check In With Each Other*, *We Can Say No* and *We Accept No*.
- *Will Ladybug Hug?* (2018) by Hilary Leung. This board book is about Ladybug who loves hugging her friends. When she goes on a trip, she wants to hug her friends goodbye - but she learns that not everyone wants hugs all the time, and that's okay.



Other media

Educate to Empower

Free posters including 'My Body Safety Rules', Auslan Feelings Cards, 'When to begin consent and body safety conversations'.

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Talk PANTS with Pantosaurus and his PANTS song #TalkPANTS (song and video) UK.

Teeny Tiny Stevies

Boss of My Own Body (song and video), ABC Kids Music.



What to say when...

Parents and carers may ask you how to deal with family members and friends who may be offended if a child doesn't want to hug or kiss them.

One strategy you can offer them is to explain to other family members that the child's 'early childhood program' promotes healthy boundaries from a young age and that all people have the right to refuse unwanted touch. This isn't about personal offence but about respecting individual preferences and autonomy.

What if a child asks you where do babies come from?

Inevitably children will ask some variation of this question. Simple is generally better at this age. A basic answer like, 'babies grow inside a special place next to the tummy, and then come out of the vagina,' might be enough information. *Family Planning Tasmania* have great age and stage information sheets, and the *Talk Soon, Talk Often* guide for parents provides comprehensive advice for parents and carers to talk to children about sex.



Further reading

- National Office of Child Safety, *About child sexual abuse*
- Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania: *Talk Soon, Talk Often Booklet – a guide for parents talking to their kids about sex*, 2018 by Jenny Walsh.
- Family Planning Tasmania:
 - *About Childhood Sexual Development*
 - *Talking to kids about sex*
- Raising Children Network: *Intersex variations: babies, children and teenagers*
- Australian Centre for Child Protection: *Continuum for Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviours*, 2022 by Patton and Bromfield.



Spotlight Child Sexual Development

Child sexual development is a natural and integral part of growing up. It encompasses a range of physical, emotional, and social changes that occur from infancy through adolescence. This process includes the discovery and exploration of one's own body, an increasing awareness of gender differences, and the development of feelings of attraction towards others.

From the earliest years, children exhibit curiosity about their bodies and those of others, which is a normal aspect of their development. As they grow, it is common to see behaviours that can be classified as 'sexual' in nature, but these are typically exploratory and a part of learning about their environment and themselves.

Sexual development and sexual behaviours

Children and young people develop sexually, just as they do emotionally, mentally, cognitively and physically. The range of normative, age-appropriate sexual behaviour changes as a child and young person grows and develops.

At times, children may exhibit sexual behaviours that do not align with what is expected for their stage of development. These behaviours may be

described as 'concerning', 'very concerning' or 'serious/extreme'. 'Concerning' sexual behaviours are often not due to a background history of sexual abuse. Age-appropriate sexual behaviours can become disrupted in children and young people for several reasons including accidental exposure to sexually explicit material, or loss of significant others. Behaviours, however, that seem compulsive, aggressive, and rough, and the child seems distressed, can indicate that the child may need support.

Getting advice

If in doubt, seek support and professional help, such as from the Child Health and Parenting Service, School Health Nurse or from the [Sexual Assault Support Service](#).

If a child discloses potential abuse or gender-based violence, ensure you follow your organisation's mandatory reporting procedure. Where staff have concerns about the safety, wellbeing or abuse of a specific child or children contact the [Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line](#) on 1800 000 123.



Table 1: Sexual behaviours – what to expect^{30, 31}

Age group	Behaviours	How to respond (if at all)	Understanding 'why'?
Babies and toddlers (0-3 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying being naked and showing interest in their own and others' bodies. • Touching their private parts. • Showing interest in the private parts of familiar people when bathing or using the toilet. • Being curious about body parts and how they work. • Playing games that involve nudity like doctors and nurses. • Repeating words or phrases about going to the toilet, body functions, or body parts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss public and private body parts, differences, and names. • Use proper terms for body parts. • Redirect attention if necessary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleasure from touch. • Learning about touch and social acceptability. • Curiosity about different bodies. • Trying to understand how bodies work. • Learning and using new words.
Children aged 4-6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring their bodies, which could include touching themselves in a way that feels good. • Asking questions about boys and girls, sexuality, where babies come from, and other related topics. • Looking at or touching the private parts of familiar people when bathing or using the toilet. • Talking and joking about going to the toilet, body functions, and body parts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about public and private body parts, differences, and names. • Calmly distract them or find a different activity if they display inappropriate sexual behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pleasure from touch. • Learning about touch and social acceptability. • Curiosity about different bodies. • Trying to understand how bodies work. • Trying to understand families and relationships. • Learning and using new words.

30 Raising Children Network, (20-2-24), Childhood Sexual Development and Sexual Behaviour: 0-3 Years, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/development/sexual-development/childhood-sexual-behaviour-0-3-years>

31 Raising Children Network, (21-3-24), Childhood Sexual Development and Sexual Behaviour: 4-6 Years, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/development/sexual-development/childhood-sexual-behaviour-4-6-years>

Table 2: Concerning behaviours

Age group	Concerning sexual behaviours	Possible causes
Babies and toddlers (0-3 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continually touching or rubbing their genitals despite distractions. Masturbating in ways that hurt their genitals. Persistently playing sexual games. Persistently trying to touch others' genitals. Using sexually explicit language or actions during play. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional management issues. Learning difficulties. Exposure to pornography. Experiencing abuse.
Children aged 4-6 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent public masturbation. Using sexually explicit language. Playing games with sexual themes. Persistently trying to touch the genitals of others. Forcing others into sexual behaviour. Watching or showing pornography to others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exposure to pornography. Experiencing abuse. Emotional management issues. Learning difficulties.



Further reading

- [*Family Planning Tasmania – advice and information for parents and carers*](#)
- [*Age-Appropriate Sexual Behaviours in Children and Young People Information for carers, professionals and the general public*](#), 2017 by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault & Family Violence (SECASA).
- [*Continuum for Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviours*](#), 2022 by Amanda Patton and Leah Bromfield from the Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia.

If a child discloses potential abuse or gender-based violence, ensure you follow your organisation's mandatory reporting procedure. Where staff have concerns about the safety, wellbeing or abuse of a specific child or children contact the [*Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line*](#) on 1800 000 123.





Definitions

Body autonomy (also known as bodily autonomy) is defined by the [United Nations](#) as the power and agency a person has over their body and future, without violence or coercion. In other words, understanding and promoting body autonomy can play a crucial role in supporting a child's healthy relationships. It empowers them to set personal boundaries and to understand and respect the boundaries of others.

Cisgender is a term used to describe people whose gender is the same as what was presumed for them at birth [male or female]. 'Cis' is a Latin term for 'on the same side as'.

Family violence³² - in Tasmania, family violence refers to violent, threatening and/or controlling behaviour by a person against their spouse, partner, or ex-partner. An intimate partner is another person with whom the person is – or has been – in a marriage or 'significant' relationship. Under the [Family Violence Act 2004](#), in Tasmania family violence means violence that occurs in a marriage or significant relationship between two adults, or between two people where one or both are aged 16 to 18 years.

Family violence includes a range of behaviours:

- physical, verbal and/or sexual assault
- emotional or psychological abuse
- economic abuse
- property damage
- abduction or stalking
- breaching existing family violence orders.

Gender is a social, psychological, and cultural construct and it is developed in the process of socialisation. Different societies and cultures have different understandings of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Gender is usually identified using the words girl, boy, woman, man. Other gender identities include non-binary or gender-diverse people.

Gender-based violence refers to any type of violence, abuse or harm directed towards a person or group of people because of their sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It also refers to violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately.

Gender diversity is a term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth. Western cultures, like in Australia, often presume a child assigned female at birth will grow up to be a girl, and that a child assigned male at birth will grow up to be a boy. Although this is the case for most children, for some their identity does not align with the sex or gender they were assigned from birth. Gender diverse individuals may identify as transgender or trans, gender-diverse or non-binary - there are many different words people use to explain their gender identity.

Gender norms are often limited to notions of masculinity and femininity. These change over time but are usually based on the idea that there are two sexes (genders) and they are attracted to each other. People who do not appear to fall under this binary notion of gender often suffer from exclusion, discrimination, abuse and violence.

32 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (15-02-2024). FDSV summary. Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/resources/fdsv-summary#:~:text=Both%20family%20violence%20and%20domestic,example%2C%20intimidating%2C%20humiliating>).

Harmful sexual behaviour is developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people. It encompasses a range of behaviours, from problematic to abusive. These are directed towards other children and young people or adults, and may be harmful to those displaying the behaviour as well as those to whom it is directed.

Intersex - if a baby is born with body parts that are different from typical male and female body types, they may be identified as having an intersex variation. These differences can affect genes, chromosomes, genitals, reproductive organs, and hormones.

Sex refers to biological differences that define humans as female or male (e.g. gonads, sexual organs, chromosomes, hormones). Sex is usually assigned at birth (there are examples when it is assigned later, when sex characteristics do not clearly indicate the sex of the baby, for example in the case of 'intersex' people).

Sexuality encompasses all aspects of sexual behaviour, including gender identity, orientation, attitudes, and activity.

Sexual violence is a behaviour of a sexual nature directed towards a person that makes them feel uncomfortable, distressed or threatened, and to which they have not consented. It includes a wide range of unwanted, non-consensual, traumatic and harmful sexual behaviours.

Sexual violence includes sexual harassment, technology facilitated abuse, unwanted kissing or sexual touching, coercion, sexual assault including rape, child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, and stealthing (removal of a condom without consent).

Trauma occurs when someone has an experience that overwhelms their ability to cope causing their neurological system to be affected and unable to process the stress. Trauma can cause short-term and/or long-term effects on the body and mind. Trauma-sensitive interactions and trauma-informed practice emphasise creating a safe and secure environment, building trust through consistency and transparency, and empowering children by offering choices, thereby addressing their need for safety, reliability, and control.

Violence against women - the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women provides the following definition:

*'The term violence against women means any act of **gender-based violence** that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.'*

[The National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children](#) targets two main types of violence against women – domestic and family violence, and sexual assault.

Further reading and resources

Child Sexual Abuse

- Grace Tame: [*The Six Signs of Grooming*](#)
- Raising Children Network: [*Signs of sexual abuse in children 0-11 years*](#)

Child Sexual Development

- Australian Centre for Child Protection: [*Continuum for Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviours*](#), 2022 by Patton and Bromfield.
- Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania. Talk Soon, [*Talk Often – a guide for parents talking to their kids about sex*](#), by Jenny Walsh.
- Family Planning Tasmania:
 - [*About Childhood Sexual Development*](#)
 - [*Talking to kids about sex*](#)
- Raising Children Network:
 - [*Preschoolers: sexual development*](#)
 - [*Intersex variations: babies, children and teenagers*](#)

Equity and Inclusive Practice

- [*The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*](#) (4th ed), Edited by Dr Red Ruby Scarlet.
- Rainbow Families: [*Rainbow Family Stories*](#)
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Community: [*Learning resources*](#)
- Victorian Inclusion Agency: [*Disability and developmental delay resources*](#)

Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence (including child sexual abuse)

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: A summary of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey, [*Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence*](#), 2023.
- [*Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study*](#), Queensland University of Technology, 2023.

Online Safety

- The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE): [*Preventing online child sexual exploitation*](#)
- [*eSafety Commissioner*](#): Education about online safety risks and help to remove harmful content such as cyberbullying and cyber abuse, and intimate images or videos shared without consent.

Social and Emotional Learning in Early Childhood

- Be You - national mental health and wellbeing initiative for learning communities in Australia: [*Educator's handbook: early learning services*](#)
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): [*Transformative SEL*](#)

Transgender and Gender Diverse Children

- Australian Psychological Society: [*Information Sheet: Transgender and gender diverse children*](#)
- Parents of Gender Diverse Children: [*Language used to affirm the identities of trans and gender diverse people*](#)
- Transcend: [*Trans, gender diverse, non-binary and gender questioning children: Guide for Parents & Carers*](#)

Trauma-Informed Practice

- [*The Australian Childhood Foundation*](#): Literature reviews on a trauma-sensitive approach for children aged 0–8 years, which aims to enhance existing knowledge of child development through concepts related to attachment, neurobiology, and the impact of trauma on learning.
- Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University: [*Guidelines for trauma-informed family-sensitive practice in adult health services*](#)
- Early Childhood Resource Hub, Education Services Australia: [*Trauma-informed practice*](#)
- Kids First Australia: [*Trauma informed practice in early learning*](#)

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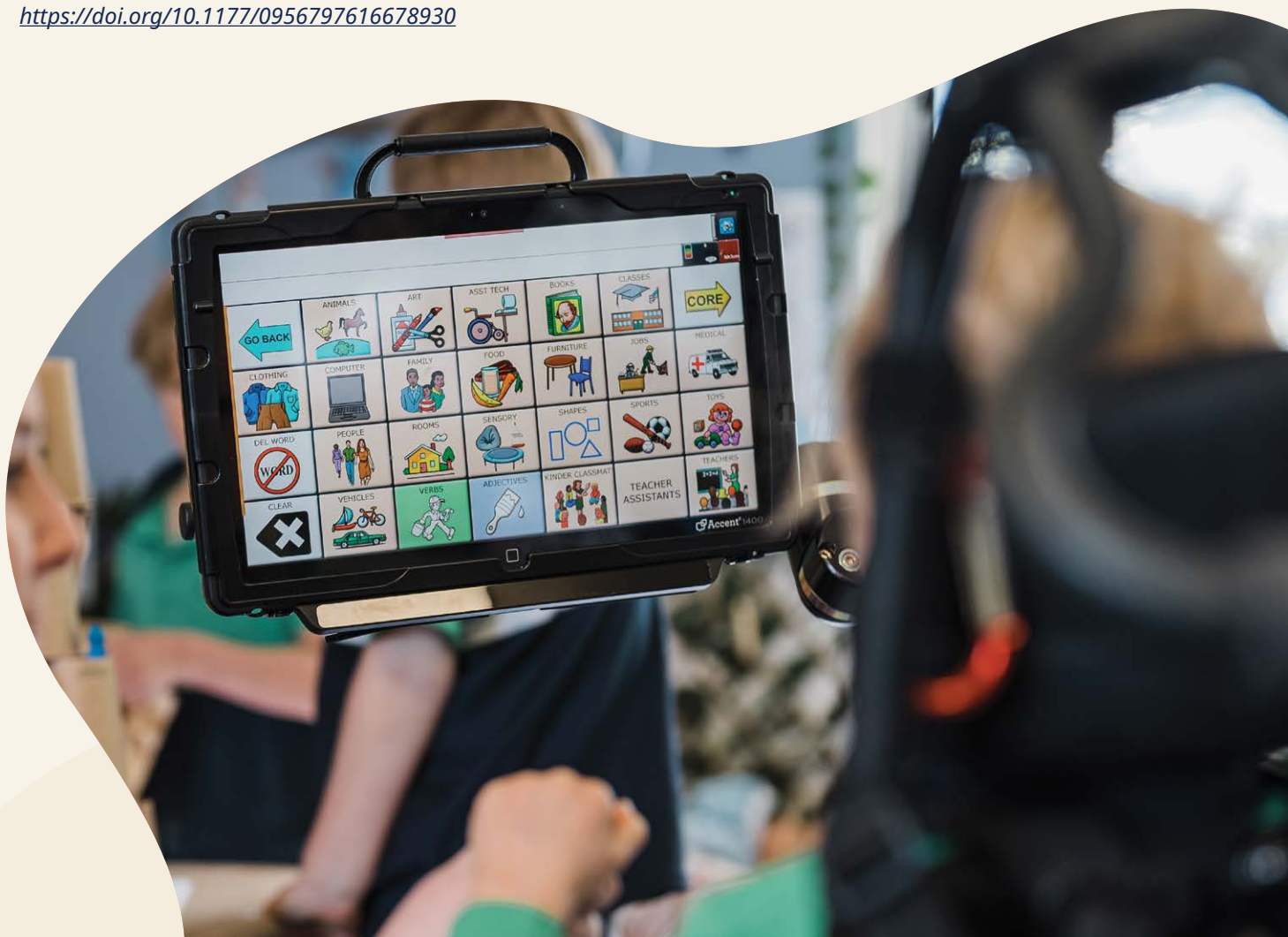
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