

{Embrace}

Winter 2020 | Your inclusion support magazine

How to promote children's sense of belonging



Strategies to help children manage their feelings and bring back a sense of calm

FREE
poster
inside

VICTORIAN
INCLUSION
AGENCY

One For All



As we've been putting this issue together, a coronavirus spike has forced Melbourne back into lockdown.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed with anger, fear, sadness and despair in times like these. But amid all the emotions, we ask you not to lose sight of hope.

That's why inside these pages you'll find stories of strength and resilience from leading early and middle childhood services. We hear how bush kinder is helping children and educators cope with the trauma of bushfires. And we share powerful strategies you can use to foster belonging and nurture children's resilience.

As educators, the most valuable resource we have is each other. So whether you're changing the world or just making it through, we believe the positive voices in these pages will resonate. If anything, they're a timely reminder that practical action – big or small – can lead to real change, which is where hope truly emerges.

Jane McCahon

Jane McCahon
Victorian Inclusion Agency Program Manager
Community Child Care Association

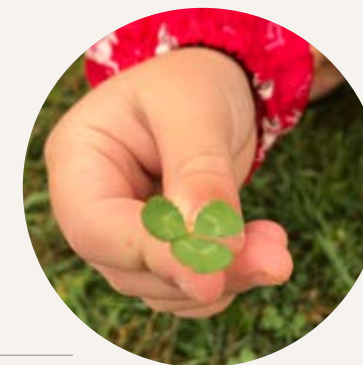
The Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. As part of the ISP, the Victorian Inclusion Agency is led by Community Child Care Association, and is delivered in partnership with Yooralla and KU Children's Services.

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The Victorian Inclusion Agency acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

{Contents}

04 Finding hope in the ashes

How bush kinder is helping children and educators cope with trauma



08 **FEATURE** *I am whole, I am worthy, I am enough:* Practices to foster belonging

The best ways to support children's and educators' sense of belonging



12 **POSTER** 19 positive affirmations for children

Research tell us that using affirmations nurtures a positive self-concept and acts as a protective factor and coping skill when life gets tough

14 Teaching children to reach for the silver lining

Powerful strategies educators can use to nurture children's resilience



17 **GRAPHIC** 5-finger breathing

Use this simple breathing exercise to help children focus, manage their feelings and bring back a sense of calm

18 Be a strength-based educator

An educator reveals the strategies she uses to help all children shine



21 Talking to children about natural disasters

How you can support children in the aftermath of a traumatic event like Australia's Black Summer

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We would like to thank the following people for their contribution to this edition of *Embrace*:

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Talking about spitfires (sawfly larvae) helps the children to self-assess risk. The next week, the children remembered this clump and went to investigate, noting the clump was no longer on the tree and the area was safe.



Finding hope in the ashes

How bush kinder is helping children and educators cope with trauma

Black Saturday still haunts the community of Kinglake, where 120 lives were lost in February 2009. While trees have grown back and many houses have been rebuilt, trauma is never far from the surface.

In 2016, Kinglake Ranges Children's Centre was at a crossroads. Educators were observing 'extreme levels of very challenging behaviour' in children across the centre, and knew it was time to make a change.

Bush kinder is born

Through critical reflection, educators identified bush kinder as a program that would support the development of strong mental health in children. The centre launched its bush kinder pilot program in January 2017 with an opt-in or opt-out option for families.

A rise in resilience

Educators have been 'absolutely astounded' by the growth in children attending the bush kinder program. Adopting a 'guidance approach' instead of outdated behaviour management techniques has been a key to success. Teacher Linda Price says, 'Children have developed the ability to keep trying in the face of adversity – they fall over and get back up, and they help and encourage each other.'

Educators have also been pleased to observe a rise in mixed-gender play, with children at bush kinder interacting outside of their normal social circles. 'Many parents have commented on the emotional growth of their children, and one of our local primary schools has noted the increased resilience and overall school readiness of children who have attended bush kinder,' says Linda.

The benefits of the bush

The great outdoors has many learning experiences to offer. 'Through close observation of the natural world, children are noticing tiny details in the environment, from a dew-laden mosquito, to the crackling of dry leaves under their feet,' Linda explains. 'As their observations become more detailed, so too do their drawings.'

Linda says bush kinder has created a space for children to flourish. 'Each child's vocabulary has expanded significantly. Children are applying learning from one context to another in ever-complex ways. They are learning how to resource their own learning and play with loose parts. Through this process, their level of creativity and problem solving strengthens from year to year.'

These anecdotal observations are reflected in data. Before 2017, children from the Kinglake Ranges lagged behind state and national averages in all developmental domains, according to Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. Things have definitely turned around since then, with the same census in 2018 placing children from the community above state and national averages and, in some instances, significantly above these averages.

Fostering strong community connections

The centre has a strong working relationship with Parks Victoria, which provided critical advice about their choice of site and environmentally sustainable activities. Linda explains, 'We are in touch with Parks Victoria each week and their local team is an invaluable asset. They have come to our sessions, worked with the children, taught us all about looking after our parklands and helped to instil a love of the land. In turn, the children have passed on their learning about bush tucker and bush medicine to our rangers and forged community connections that they otherwise would not have.'

Learning about bushfire recovery

Bush kinder has given children the chance to establish a positive relationship with fire. Linda explains that children learnt about Wurundjeri ways of managing Country with fire during a visit from Dixons Creek Primary School. Inspired by *Parent Trees Are Talking* – an ebook the school created with Uncle Dave Wandin – educators and children took the opportunity to explore the parklands, identify the damage caused by the fires and observe how the trees and bush were regenerating.

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Going on a poo walk! Using our tracking skills and a handy booklet to compare the scats, habits and habitats of different animals. Here, Isla has reasoned that the poo belongs to walert – the possum.

Linda says, 'We spoke about "good smoke" (white, cool, low smoke) and "bad smoke" (black, damaging, hot smoke) and how Australia's First Peoples have used good smoke to look after the land, keep it healthy and prevent damaging bushfires. We learnt about upside-down trees, a term used in the book to explain the standing dead trees left from the fires – these trees look like someone has flipped them upside-down so their roots are in the air. Our Parks Victoria ranger explained the importance of protecting the tree bark as it is crucial to their recovery. This kind of learning is a great way to work positively and with optimism after bushfire devastation.'

Embedding Aboriginal perspectives

Thanks to bush kinder, the children exhibit a strong connection with the land. Linda explains that their interest in Aboriginal cultures and perspectives has taken the centre on a wonderful journey of learning, which expands year on year. 'Through the Taungurung Language App and other cultural resources, we have integrated Taungurung language into our day, and this is now being embedded into all levels of our service. Families are mentioning how children are coming home from bush kinder and teaching them what they have learnt, including Taungurung and Wurundjeri language.'

Bush kinder highlights

- ✓ The children constructing an Acknowledgement of Country, which is now embedded into the daily routine at bush kinder
- ✓ The children advocating for wildlife through submissions to parliament and a social media campaign to help drought-affected possums
- ✓ The children tackling pollution in our national parklands by creating posters asking others to take their rubbish with them – this was entirely their idea, their words and their thoughts, and the community feedback has been extremely positive with many people commenting that 'there is hope for the future with amazing children like this around!'



Exploring 'nature's showers' – shaking the water from the trees. Looking at the shape of the leaves and the size of the water droplets, we are hypothesising whether the shower will result in a little sprinkle or a thorough soaking. Pure joy to be had!

The centre is proud to see the ripple effect of their efforts in their community. 'We're beginning to achieve the cultural inclusion and respect for diversity that we were striving for,' says Linda.

Bush kinder today

Three years on, the centre has integrated bush kinder as a standard part of their four-year-old kinder program. They are piloting bush kinder with three-year-olds and exploring options for incorporating 'beyond the gate' bush play for all children, including babies.

There have also been some unexpected benefits for educators. 'We're more resilient,' Linda explains. 'Our mood has lifted, our ability to deal with the unexpected has improved, and our improved mental health has enabled us to be more present and supportive for children undergoing strong emotions – this is critical for anyone working with young children.'

From Black Saturday to the Black Summer

The Black Summer of 2019–20 was characterised by catastrophic bushfires, with eighty per cent of Australians impacted. Linda says, 'As early childhood educators, we are in a unique position to support children and families through challenging times.'



There are many resources, professional services and grants to help us achieve this. However, one of the most impactful and practical ways we can help support families and children is to look after ourselves. In the words of Dr Stuart Shankar – international self-regulation expert – "Be kind to yourself... We need you to recognise that if you are over-stressed, if you are in a state of low energy, high tension, it's going to be very hard for you to help a [child] who needs your help. So, start with you."



Resources

Parent Trees Are Talking ebook

www.schools.aidr.org.au > Disaster resilient education > Resilient Australia School Award > Firestick Project > Parent Trees Are Talking

Taungurung Language App

www.vaclang.org.au > Resources > Apps > Taungurung



I am whole, I am worthy, I am enough – Practices to foster belonging

RENEE WRIGHT
Team Leader
Community Child Care Association

A sense of belonging is the foundation for children’s wellbeing and learning. Our very own Early Years Learning Framework reaffirms this in its title – you can’t ‘be’ if you don’t belong, and it’s tricky to ‘become’, live your best life and reach your full potential if you don’t feel a true sense of belonging to place, people and, ultimately, yourself!

With one in seven children experiencing mental health issues¹ and up to 180 educators leaving the workforce every week², it’s time we start really supporting belonging. Are you with me?

Let’s get started!

Practices to foster educators’ belonging

Educators – not just children – need to feel belonging. Research shows that workplace belonging leads to a 56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk and a 75% decrease in employee sick days.³

The basics

It seems obvious, but the small things count! Make the effort to always say hello and connect with your colleagues. This is a basic courtesy and an enabler of teamwork and wellbeing.

Departures count too! If it’s been a tough day, acknowledge this and thank your team anyway. *‘Wow, today was a challenge. Tomorrow will be better – it takes time for children to settle. Thanks for all your hard work.’*

Make your workspaces welcoming

Is there a suitable space for all educators to store their personal belongings? Pay attention to lunch and planning rooms too. A comfortable table and chairs, vase with some flowers or a painting or two don’t have to be expensive and will really brighten up the space. Your local op shop or Kmart have got you covered!

Build a strong workplace community

In our enthusiasm for pursuing community connections, we can forget about our most important community – our team who is caring for and supporting children and families. How are you holding this space? What does community look like in the context of your rooms and the wider service? Discuss in groups what you can stop, start and continue doing to support your community of educators.

Lead by example

Strong leadership equals strong teams. How can your service foster this intentionally throughout the year? A few simple examples:

- Organise shared lunches or group dinners once a term. If your budget doesn’t stretch or there is low engagement due to family commitments, at the very least, make sure you provide snacks and refreshments for every staff meeting.
- Explore community volunteering projects, hands-on resource making workshops or even a lunchtime walking group to foster wellbeing and teamwork.

Show appreciation

How do you communicate appreciation to your educators? How might you consider celebrating the successes of individuals and groups during staff meetings, formal celebrations such as end-of-year celebrations, or established morning teas?



Help your team learn and grow with specific, immediate feedback. Instead of saying ‘You’re doing a great job’, try ‘I really think you have a superpower around making new educators feel welcome’ or ‘Something I really appreciate about you is the wonderful way you engage with the children in the outdoor space.’

Acknowledge and encourage your team by having ‘successes’, ‘good news stories’ or ‘shout outs’ as a standing agenda item at meetings.

Set a benchmark for belonging

Lead by example and ensure your philosophy reflects your vision. Adapt your policies to help guide practice, and revisit these guiding documents with groups and individuals to ensure they’re embedded.

Be prepared to call out undesirable behaviour – for example, an educator excluding another colleague by not acknowledging them at arrival.

Remember, true leadership is a picture, not just words. If you’re not leading by example, you’re not leading!

Continued on next page

3 Evan W. Carr , Andrew Reece , Gabriella Rosen Kellerman and Alexi Robichaux: hbr.org/ > **The Value of Belonging at Work**

1 The Resilience Project: theresilienceproject.com.au > Media > Resilience and happiness depend on gratitude, empathy and mindfulness

2 Professor Susan Irvine: theconversation.com/au > One in five early childhood educators plan to leave the profession



Practices to foster children's belonging

Now that we've got our awesome educators covered, let's review a few practical strategies to support children's belonging.

Promote positive transitions

It's essential to work with families to facilitate children's successful arrivals. Why? Children's arrivals that are rushed and not supported by empathetic and understanding adults, or by a rotation of adults, don't set children up to be successful in early learning.

We want children to feel safe, participate and transition from home/school to your service as positively as possible. A few things to try:

Consistent staff

- Have the same educators complete the morning 'arrival' shift for an extended period. Three to six months is ideal.

Who's the best fit?

- Convenience and acknowledgement of other personal and family commitments are important but try and balance this with the 'best person' for the shift. It's ok that some educators may find upset children and families a little too emotionally taxing long term so perhaps they may be more suitable for a late shift. Focus on the strengths of your team.

A welcome space and ritual

- Have a connection space/ritual which you maintain during all arrivals so children know what to expect.
- Avoid too many toys, which can be a distraction and prevent children from 'being'.
- It's OK if children need to express themselves by crying or releasing energy in their body (by going for a sprint outside, for example) to reduce their stress levels and keep everyone safe.

- Help children feel secure with a warm, open facial expression and by using language to name their feelings. Remember, to support children's mental health we've got to name it to tame it.

Scripts to try

- 'Lily, I'm so happy to see you.'
- 'Zia, I've been waiting for you.'
- 'Khanh, I know it's hard to say goodbye to Mum. I'm here with you and will keep you safe.'
- 'You look sad, Mia – you have tears in your eyes. Can Justin give you a cuddle?'

Create a warm and embracing space for children

Think of yourself as a host at a party and your job is to support others to connect. Acknowledge children's arrivals, successes and contributions to play. Scripts to try:

During circle time

- 'Friends/my special people... Arial is here today [smile and acknowledge child] and something very special happened in Arial's family. Arial, would you like to share...'

During mealtime

- 'Let's see who we have at the table. There's [pause and encourage older children to identify themselves] Katie, Emina, Finley and Youssef. Katie and Youssef are eating tabbouleh wraps, and I can smell something very delicious coming from your lunch box, Emina...' [continue by discussing the diversity of children's food in a positive way and promoting curiosity about cultural origins, how food was made, flavours, etc.]

During art

- 'Jesse, I love the way you've painted the fish mouth with a tiny nose like a beak. Why don't you share your painting with one of your friends and show them what you've been working on.'

Provide inclusive environments

Have a variety of experiences and consider how you foster belonging for all children, especially for those with less common play interests or an increased appetite for specific play. For example, how does a child who has a high need for movement (hopping, running, skipping, climbing) manage to belong if tabletop activities are over-represented and outdoor play is time-limited or low levels of teacher engagement are provided (for example, supervision is prioritised over scaffolding Serena's ball skills so she can play throw and catch with greater confidence)?

Incorporate children's voices

Remember to get children involved in designing play spaces and evaluating. Be inspired by Rinaldi's *The One Hundred Languages of Children* and encourage children to be artists, painters, sculptors, photographers...

Work with children to display, publish and present their creations – or not, if that's their preference. For example, you might have a photo display where children hang pictures of things that make them happy, or a word cloud of situations that make them feel frustrated or angry.

Incorporating children's voices authentically to support belonging means letting children represent themselves fully and not just the highlights!

Consider young children

When young children enter the world of your early learning service, they leave their families, homes, pets, routines and familiar ways of being. Don't take their dummies and blankets if they need them to self-soothe or just 'be'. Always be kind, make room for their personal belongings and advocate for their rights.

Partner with families

Get to know families and make it your mission to find out more about children's home lives – routines, traditions, weekend adventures.

Without really investing in getting to know families and the children we've been entrusted to care for, there is a risk that supporting belonging may be reduced to generalist pedagogies as opposed to truly individual inclusive practices.

Showcase family photos and artefacts, and explore projects with children that focus on appreciation of their similarities and differences. You might incorporate a type of passport club, which focuses on the different food and meal rituals of children's families or explores the diversity of homes children live in (e.g., apartment, unit, house, farm) and the people who occupy them (e.g., nuclear, same-sex, blended and/or extended family).

And finally...

Show some love!

Yes, really – familiarise yourself with love rituals which can be facilitated with babies to enhance attachment, and with older children to promote wellbeing and group belonging. Don't underestimate the power of touch and song!

Remember, you want children's inner voices to exclaim, 'I am whole, I am worthy, I am enough...'

And so are you! All the best when it comes to enhancing your culture of belonging!

Did you know that your service can access FREE program support and mentoring to ensure the inclusion of all children?
Call 1800 177 017 today.

19 positive affirmations



{ WE ARE
SAFE }

♥♥♥
We have
caring
hearts



*Mistakes help us
learn and grow* >>>>>





Teaching children to reach for the silver lining

DANIELA KAVOUKAS
Services Manager
Community Child Care Association

One in seven primary school children suffers from mental illness.⁴ Alarming isn't it? As an educator, you can play an important role, helping children to develop resilience and reach for that silver lining.

⁴ The Resilience Project: theresilienceproject.com.au > Media > Resilience and happiness depend on gratitude, empathy and mindfulness



As educators, we can give children the chance to solve problems whilst building their confidence in their abilities.

You can be the magic ingredient

A positive, supportive connection with an adult is the single most common factor for children who build resilience.⁵ Any adult in a child's life can be this positive, supportive person – it could be you...

Think about the children in your service – what are your connections like with them? Do they come to you when their worlds are falling apart? Do they know you're in their corner? Think about a child that you don't have that connection with. Do they have someone at your service who has their back? What could you do to strengthen your connection with them?

Empower children to be brave

Children need to understand that it is more than OK to ask for help. As educators, we can give children the chance to solve problems and cope with ups and downs whilst building their confidence in their abilities.

Use questions like 'What could you try next?' or 'What do you think would happen if...' to encourage children to manage new tasks and tricky situations.

Support children to self-regulate

The prefrontal cortex is the control tower of the brain. It is involved in attention, problem-solving, impulse control and regulating emotion. These are known as 'executive functions'.

As educators, we can boost children's executive functions by establishing routines, encouraging creative play, including games that involve turn-taking and memory, and giving children opportunities to think independently and make decisions.

Get moving

Exercise reorganises the brain to be more resilient to stress. Read that again – it reorganises the brain to be more resilient to stress. To top that off, physical activity also boosts memory, cognitive performance and focus.

To get children moving, plan regular times for unstructured active play, set up active play areas indoors and include active games, like 'duck, duck, goose' or 'follow the leader'. And don't forget to participate and be a role model!

Teach mindfulness

We've all heard about mindfulness, right? But how often do you incorporate it into your program? Mindfulness benefits children of all ages and is a useful tool for decreasing anxiety and promoting happiness.

There are so many ways to incorporate mindfulness into your program – both as planned experiences and incidentally – think deep breathing, calm jars, guided meditations, noticing sounds in the yard...

Role model resilience

Children are always looking to us for guidance – but do you role model resilience? By bringing children into your emotional world (in an age-appropriate way), you will help them to see that sadness, disappointment and other feelings are very normal human experiences.

You can role model resilience by sharing how you are feeling and why it's OK to feel that way. For example, 'I'm feeling sad today because I had to take my sick dog to the vet' or 'Sometimes I feel embarrassed when I make a mistake. Taking a few deep breaths helps me feel better again'.

Continued on next page

⁵ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: developingchild.harvard.edu > Science > Resilience



One For All



5-finger breathing

1. Spread out your fingers
2. Use one finger on your other hand to trace your thumb – breathe in as your finger rises, breathe out as your finger falls
3. Keep tracing your fingers until you get to your little finger, remembering to breathe in and out
4. How are you feeling? Calmer?
5. If you need to, start again

Encourage healthy risk-taking

Children need the chance to take positive risks. As educators, we can create opportunities for children to try new things and challenge themselves.

When a child struggles with a new task or tricky situation, this is your moment to teach them about failing forward. Talk them through what's happening and how they feel. How brave and courageous they are. What they can do next time to get a little closer to their goals. What they would like to try or do differently.

Use gratitude to foster growth

Practising gratitude with children is a game-changer when it comes to creating healthy thinking habits. Growing children's gratitude can be as simple as checking in with them before pick-up time about the best part of their day.

Do you practice gratitude with the children at your service? Use questions like 'What was good about your day?', 'What made you smile today?' or 'Who was kind to you today?'

Don't forget the good old emotion faces chart...

Helping children to identify their feelings is the first step in helping them manage them. As educators, we can support children to make sense of what they are experiencing and learn that these emotions – however difficult and challenging for them – will pass in time.

What resources do you have to support your teaching and children's learning? Do you use emotional literacy in your group discussions? Try questions like 'Remember a time when you were excited – how did your body feel?' or 'How can you tell that I'm feeling happy today?'

Resources

Emotion faces chart

A handy graphic to help children to match a face (and an emotion) with what they're feeling
www.therapistaid.com > Worksheets > 9> Printable emotion faces

Grow Your Mind podcast

A podcast where children teach children about their mental health and ways to be resilient
growyourmind.life > Podcast

Kinderling

Family-friendly radio for children and their grown-ups
www.kinderling.com.au

Resilience Project app

A daily wellbeing journal designed to help children and adults develop emotional literacy, engage with gratitude and practise mindfulness
theresilienceproject.com.au > App

Smiling Mind

A meditation program developed by psychologists and educators to help bring mindfulness into your life
www.smilingmind.com.au

'Top 30 children's books about resilience' article

Children's stories that promote resilience and whose characters have grit
biglifejournal.com > Blog > 5 > Top 30 children's books about resilience



Be a strength-based educator

We sat down with Tracey Altoft to chat about how she supports each child to shine at her Exceeding-rated service, Holistic Approach Family Day Care

Tell us a little bit about your service and the children and families you support...

My service is located in a small country town in Northern Victoria. I provide a service that is rich in natural experiences and tailored to each child's abilities and strengths. The children in my care are all unique and vary in their culture, physical ability and interests. I aim to provide a service that nurtures and supports each child's uniqueness, enabling them to reach their fullest potential.

How did you end up in family day care? And what's been special about your journey?

I began family day care after my second child was born. While I wanted to be a stay-at-home mum, I still needed to earn an income, so family day care was the perfect option for me and my family. I quickly fell in love with the calm, supportive and loving environment that family day care enables. My passion for early childhood education blossomed and I am now completing a Bachelor of Education.

You have children from different cultural backgrounds and with different learning needs and interests. How do you plan for diversity and ensure all children feel seen and heard?

The children that have come into my care during the last seven years have all had unique qualities and personalities, which I have had the honour of supporting and nurturing. I believe that developing collaborative relationships with families – ensuring strong communication – is the key to providing education and care that is just right for each child. I liaise with families and co-program with the children to plan a program that is guided by the children's interests and is inclusive of their strengths and abilities.

One of the children has specific motor needs, and you're currently borrowing equipment from the Specialist Equipment Library, including a standing frame, floor sitter, and height-adjustable tables and chairs. How do

you facilitate these types of transitions so the little person with high support needs has their right for dignity and respect met?

I discuss with the children and the child with additional needs why he needs more support or completes things a different way with certain tasks. I am honest and explain things in a way the children can understand. I ensure that each child's questions are answered with dignity and respect. I also emphasise that we are all different and we are all important.

I always aim to provide a service that is inclusive, equitable and accessible to all. For example, the child with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) brought a book from home to share with his family day care friends. The book explains what SMA is via a fictional story about a zebra named Zac. The child with SMA showed all the children the book and we read it together. He proudly told everyone 'I have SMA'. The children and I discussed the book and spoke about similarities for the child. He told us all about his 'SMA Squad' – his team of doctors that keep him healthy.

Continued on next page



What strategies do you use during sensitive routines, such as toileting routines? How do you meet the child's mobility needs whilst supporting his agency and privacy?

I always talk to the child first about what we are going to do. I ask for his permission and explain the steps involved. I listen to the child and look for his cues when he needs assistance or would like to complete a task independently. I modify/adapt the task where possible to enable the child to take as much responsibility and control of the task as he can.

Communication with the child's parents is paramount. They know their child the best and can offer invaluable insights into how to best care for their child.

How has inclusion support helped?

Accessing inclusion support has enabled me to lower the number of children I care for on the days that the child with additional needs attends (three children to one educator). This ensures I can meet the education and care needs of all children, providing them with an individualised program based upon their unique strengths, abilities and interests. I also plan for and implement small group learning opportunities, which support each child to develop their social and emotional development.

I feel that without the inclusion support, I could not provide the quality of education and care that I do now.

What are your three tips for supporting children to view differences as strengths?

- ✓ Celebrate each child's uniqueness
- ✓ Focus on and plan for their strengths and what they can do, not what they can't
- ✓ Collaborate with family and other professionals who work with the child to provide a setting that enables all children to participate to their fullest ability



Did you know your service can borrow a diverse range of equipment from the Victorian Inclusion Agency to support quality inclusion? It's free! Visit www.viac.com.au > VIA > Specialist Equipment Library to learn more



Talking to children about natural disasters



The recent bushfires in Australia have had a significant impact on the country. Natural disasters, including bushfires, drought, cyclones and floods, are traumatic and can shape childhood experiences, as children may be directly impacted or indirectly by being exposed to media coverage.



Trauma can change how a child makes sense of the world and how they fit in.

How each child processes traumatic events can be very different and may become noticeable in behaviours that seem unrelated to the event.

As an educator, you're in a unique position to play a critical role in supporting children after a natural disaster by creating a safe environment and by being responsive to their needs during recovery, both in the short and long term. This includes talking to children about the event.

Educator wellbeing

It's important to understand what impact natural disasters can have on children's mental health and wellbeing, as well as on your own. Feeling overwhelmed and a sense of loss of control can be natural reactions. To be able to give support to children and their families, you need to ensure you look after yourself. The Be You website provides more information on educator wellbeing following a natural disaster.

What to look for

Being dependent on adults for their safety adds another potential layer to the trauma a child may experience following a natural disaster. Trauma and coping strategies will also depend on the child's age, developmental stage, experiences and family context. Children express themselves through the way they behave so observing them, looking out for behavioural changes and signs of distress can guide you in your response and support. The Be You website provides more information on the signs to look for that indicate a natural disaster could have impacted on a child's mental health.

Observing behaviour

For children, it can be challenging for them to explain their feelings. They may not entirely understand what they're experiencing. Observing children's behaviour could tell you what they might be feeling. To document and gather observations about a child's behaviour over time, use the Be You BETLS observation tool. BETLS is an acronym for behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships. The tool provides you with a structure to reflect on a child's wellbeing, behaviour and social interactions. For children who don't express themselves verbally, it's important to check their behaviour closely when:

- Responding to trauma
- Identifying if a child is at risk of mental health issues
- Providing appropriate support

Talking

Talking can assist children to make sense of the event. Provide opportunities for conversations so they know they can talk to you. Ignoring or pretending the event didn't happen can do more harm. To support children in understanding and processing natural disasters, encourage them to express their emotional experiences, verbally or through other means. They may need help in naming and identifying their feelings. Assist with visual cues such as cards that show emotions.

Some children may decide not to talk about the event, and this needs to be respected. Don't push it. Other children may ask lots of questions. So tune in, follow their lead, listen, and be calm, sensitive and compassionate in your responses. Be honest and clear when answering their questions – it's important not to overwhelm them with details. Use developmentally appropriate language that children understand and only give the information the child has requested – when they are ready they will ask for more information.



Art and craft provides children with an opportunity to express their emotions.



Play

Through play, children can revisit events in a safe environment and under their control. As children play, you might notice them repeatedly retelling their story. It's important to listen to them calmly. They might also recreate their understanding of the experience, expressing their feelings as they re-enact what happened. Observe their play and let them lead how you are involved and to what extent you explore and imagine with them.

Other creative activities

You can also provide an opportunity for children to express their feelings through creative means such as drawing, painting, clay or playdough. Have books about feelings available to them. Create a quiet space for children to use when they need it and provide comforting toys.

Be mindful of changes

Children who have suffered trauma are sensitive to changes. Maintaining familiar routines with familiar people can reduce stress and help children feel safe, although this may be challenging given current circumstances. Warning children about change in advance can lessen their anxieties and fear.



If you would like support from a Be You Consultant, register your learning community with Be You, which is a free, government-funded initiative. Go to beyou.edu.au > Register



Resources

BETLS Observation Tool

beyou.edu.au/ > Resources > Tools and guides > Be You Mental Health Continuum & BETLS observation tool

Bushfire Response resource pack

beyou.edu.au > Bushfires and mental health > Resource pack

Educator Wellbeing after a Natural Disaster fact sheet

beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Grief, trauma and critical incidents > Educator wellbeing after a natural disaster

How to Provide Support after a Natural Disaster fact sheet

beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Grief, trauma and critical incidents > How to provide support after a natural disaster

Impact of Natural Disasters on Mental Health fact sheet

beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Grief, trauma and critical incidents > Impact of natural disasters on mental health

Responding Together online learning modules

beyou.edu.au > Learn > Responding together



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