

Infants and Toddlers: Practice, Pedagogy and Research Conference



Centre for Research in
Early Childhood Education



MACQUARIE
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SYDNEY · AUSTRALIA

Presentation Overviews

Friday Breakout Session 1

11am

Educators' understandings about infants' interactions in peer groups

Belinda Friezer, Linda Harrison and Sheena Elwick
Charles Sturt University and Macquarie University

Little is understood about why infants behave the way they do when interacting with peers in similar-aged groups. In this conversational study, four educators from two long day care centres were asked to explore the meanings of infant-peer interactions and reflect on their own feelings while watching video-recordings of triads (a third infant with two interacting peers) collected across a 12-month period. This presentation is designed to support educators to recognise and consider the motivations that underlie infant's behaviour in peer groups and to promote infants' social interactions in groups.

How placement visits and programs support pre-service teachers understanding of working with CALD infant & toddlers and their families.

Joanne Kaemmer Tanean and Theresa Evans
Victoria University

Given the significant increase (73% from 2022 to 2023) in the number of migrants arriving in Australia, support for CALD and non-CALD families is crucial to ensure the best outcomes for young children. This project seeks to address pre-service teachers' preparedness for the ECE workplace by: enhancing domestic students' and educators' understanding of cultural similarities and differences; fostering sensitivity towards students' specific cultural and language needs; and confronting biases about CALD students' capabilities. This study will identify the type of supports that students need on their professional practice and, in turn, benefit CALD young children and their families.

Toddlers moving through their day: An Action Research Project exploring the transition to mealtime

Michelle Richardson and Alisa Elacion
Teacher Gowrie NSW

Routines such as nappy changes may be overlooked as merely tasks to be completed efficiently rather than opportunities for learning and skill development. This action research project explores recognising and making visible the learning opportunities during caregiving moments in a 1-2-year-old room with an emphasis on primary educator relationships with children. The research first

assesses primary educators' practices and understanding of caregiving moments by analysing the documentation of caregiving interactions and interviews with these educators, followed by a one-month intervention in which educators observe and document children's learning during nappy changes. It aims to highlight how routine caregiving can foster language, social skills, agency, and self-help skills in infants and encourage educators and parents to view these caregiving moments as valuable learning opportunities for children.

Nurturing STEM Dispositions: Educators of Infants & Toddlers

Ana-Luisa Franco
Little Scientists

STEM learning from infancy supports children's long-term wellbeing and educational outcomes, yet educators often lack confidence and knowledge to implement STEM learning in early childhood programs. This presentation draws on educator submissions to Little Scientists' Early STEM Education Awards and House Certification program to highlight the diverse ways infant and toddler educators embed early STEM learning in their contexts. Recommendations of slow pedagogy, relational pedagogies, and inquiry-based practices are also presented to support educators in successfully embedding rich STEM learning into their infant and toddler curriculum.

11.50am

The Impact of Presuming Competence on Families of Infants and Young Children Who Experience Disability

Kathy Cologon
Honorary Macquarie University

How does the presumption of competence by educators, medical professionals, and society at large impact the experiences of families with infants and young children who experience disability? Twelve parents with children who experience disability participated in in-depth interviews over six months. Presuming competence emerged as an important theme. The analysis revealed that when competence is presumed, children who experience disability receive more enriching life and learning opportunities, leading to better outcomes and supporting family well-being. By shifting societal and institutional attitudes towards presuming competence, we can create more inclusive, supportive environments that enable infants and young children who experience disability, and their families, to thrive.

Embracing pedagogical documentation as an advocacy tool for infants and toddlers

Lisa Davies and Stephanie Chiha
Abbotsleigh Early Learning

This presentation explores the development of a school-wide learning framework in a pre-K-12 independent school, and how it created opportunities to initiate a shift in perspective, among our colleagues and families, around the inclusion and participation of infants and toddlers in our school community. This project highlights the value of intentionally drawing others' attention to very young children's capacity as strong, socially connected citizens worthy of holistic, meaningful participation in their communities. Our findings underscore the need for highly qualified practitioners to work alongside infants and toddlers to acknowledge the nuance and specificity of this work.

Creating and providing high-quality interactions and communication rich environments

Tiffany Noble and Lisa Palethorpe
Goodstart Early Learning

All babies and young children deserve to become effective communicators to promote positive lifelong outcomes. This is achieved when adults in their world focus on creating and providing high-quality interactions and communication rich environments. Educators therefore have an obligation to observe, assess and plan for children's learning and development. This presentation overviews the All Children Communicate! Program, implemented with Goodstart Early Learning centres. The presentation demonstrates the benefits of understanding four core components of early communication and language development, and highlights the important role educators have in assessing infants' and toddlers' early communication and language skills as well as monitoring and supporting progress.

Educator-infant book reading interactions in Australian and Chinese early childhood centres: A cross-cultural, multimodal study

Ling Sheng
Macquarie University

This study compared reading with infants in early childhood centres in Australia and China with a focus on the potential of educators' use of language and other communication modes to promote infants' language development and learning. In video-recorded observations of spontaneous educator-infant interactions in ECEC centres in Sydney and Hangzhou, we identified four educators from each country who engaged infants in book reading sessions. We analysed the situational context of these sessions and the educators' use of language and gestures. This cross-cultural study's findings can inform efforts to support the learning of infants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Friday Breakout Session 2

2.50pm

Play N Yarn Gummyaney: A community connection for Aboriginal families, children and the wider community

Kara Hickson
Wiradjuri & Ngiyampaa from Play N Yarn, Gummyaney

This presentation will share a yarn about the history and impact of Play N Yarn Gummyaney, an informal playgroup of Gummyaney Aboriginal Preschool, a trusted Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) in Clarence Valley that supports Aboriginal children and families in accessing early childhood education. Play N Yarn serves as a community pillar, fostering connections among families, children, and the wider community. Through shared experiences, families find support and relatability, creating calm amidst the challenges of parenting infants and toddlers and these young children form early connections to people and place.

The language environment of infant-toddler room. Emerging findings about language interactions and noise levels

Sheila Degotardi
Macquarie University

MQTaLK is a longitudinal research project which used multiple measures of the quantity and quality of features of the language environment at 18 months, and measures of language development at 2 ½, 3 ½ and 4 years of age. Analysis is still in progress, but this presentation will overview emerging findings, including the nature and quality of educator-infant interactions and noise levels in infant-toddler rooms. In this presentation, I will focus on noise levels, and explore how these relate to the language environment and children's language development. Findings will prompt practitioners to pay close attention to how educators, infants and environmental features all contribute to a facilitative language environment.

When infants and toddlers spend their days where and with whom they choose – the wonderful benefits of natural grouping

Ella de la Motte and Jennifer Newcombe
EDEC Early Childhood Consultant

Often, usually to reassure families or to support educators, we create spaces for 'safety' for our youngest learners. This is in direct contrast to the EYLF V2.0 principle of 'Equity, inclusion, and high expectations' alongside what we know through viewing children through a 'competent and capable' lens. In this presentation, we explain how we adopted a natural grouping approach to explore how children adapted to peers of different ages. We explored the capabilities of infants and toddlers, observing their differing levels of support required, through temperament & culture. We show how infants and toddlers became more resilient, and would try new things, whilst still clearly communicating their needs for support.

Creating change based on individual identities in our infant and toddler groups

Julia McKean, Jasmine Park and Maggie Luck
Handprints Early Learning Centre Turramurra

This presentation discusses learnings from a setting's practice of creating in-depth individual child profiles that were gathered over 4 weeks from observations from a minimum of 3 educators, a parent and the child in the infant and toddler rooms. Findings discuss how these were used by the educator team to create 3 key classroom changes based on individual identities and needs. The presentation concludes with suggestions and takeaways for slowing down to create positive and meaningful change.

3.40pm

Bubs Yarnin: How an infant social development resource is connecting Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, to evidence-based practices.

Monique McAuley and Kara Hickson
Macquarie University and Play N Yarn, Gummyaney

This presentation will share a conceptual model of infant and toddler Infant-peer social development created following Play N Yarn's playgroup sessions, walks and yarns on Country in Clarence Valley, using an innovative blend of traditional and modern knowledge-sharing methods.

By condensing and transforming the Bubs Yarnin resource into a visual representation of the social development of infants and toddlers, this knowledge becomes more accessible to the local community. This approach highlights the interconnection between Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing and evidence-based practices in early childhood education and care in informal playgroup settings.

Educator–Infant Joint Attention - Comparing Dyadic and Group Interactions in an Infant-Toddler Early Childhood Setting.

Sarah Jacobson
Macquarie University

Educator–infant joint attention is a crucial component of quality practice in early childhood education and care. Mutual responsiveness within coordinated attention and action supports language and cognitive development in mother–infant dyads. However, limited ECEC studies suggest mutually responsive interactions are difficult to sustain in a multi–child context. Our dynamic systems analysis illustrates moment-to-moment qualitative shifts in educator–infant synchrony in relation to the number of infant peers present during free-play activities. Enhanced understanding of the micro-dynamics of joint attention allows for a more skilful approach in realising the potential of interactive learning opportunities in the ECEC context.

How learning-oriented talk develops in children aged from 2½ to 3½ years

Natalie Brand, Sheila Degotardi and Emilia Djonov
Macquarie University

The study MQ Toddler TaLK (Talk-Learn-Know) examined how children develop and use language to demonstrate and create knowledge when they engage in learning-oriented talk in ECEC centres between 2½ and 3½ years. Using video-recorded observations of 27 children at five time points (when each child was 30, 33, 36, 39 and 40 months old) during play and mealtime, we analysed their use of learning-oriented language features such as questions, cognitive state language, reasoning, and past and future talk. Our findings reveal when these features emerge and how they develop, the contexts in which the children used them, their importance for learning prior to and once children commence school, and how educators can promote toddlers’ development and use of learning-oriented talk in ECEC centres.

Out the Gate with our Littlest Learners

Rushda Sami, Jasmin Oxford and Julia McKean
Handprints Early Learning Centre

We have all heard the age-old advice to take an unsettled child outside. This presentation explores the integration of regular outings into an infant and toddler classroom to enhance children’s learning, development and well-being in collaboration with families, through learning as a community. Findings show that children are mentally and physically stimulated by the ever-changing environment and abundant play opportunities outdoors and return from outings relaxed and ready for rest. With such a calming effect, these outings now play a vital role in the classroom to enhance physical development, confidence, and curiosity in infants and toddlers.

10.30am

Transformative and Reflective Leadership in Birth to Three Spaces: A journey of leaders in Victoria

Katherine Bussey, Saba Fatima, Nadia Vallelonga and Gracie Pupillo
Deakin University and Early Childhood Management Services Oakhill

This presentation shares a 12-month project to enhance practices for children birth to three in a Melbourne early childhood (EC) education and care service, featuring the collaboration between service leaders, a B-3 Academic in-residence and an ECMS Practice Coach through observation, critical reflection and mentoring. Key findings include the qualities of leaders who drive evidence-informed, child-focused practices, the value of collaborative reflection to empower teams, and the benefits of tailored professional learning. In light of the limited support from policy and funding for professionals working with B-3 children, this project advocates for improved B-3 pedagogy and specialised role of teachers with B-3 expertise.

Everyone's a winner!! The practice of family grouping as a positive context for learning.

Dimitra Vassios, Vivian Ge and Kellie Gleeson
Inner West Council

Family grouped settings allow all children to feel a sense of belonging and can make transitions to the service smoother as they develop intimate relationships with primary educators and caregivers and have the opportunity to choose the peers they want to spend the day with (for example, they can stay with their siblings, cousins, and even neighbours in the same "base room"). This presentation draws on collective and ongoing practices in family grouping to demonstrate how enriched, ongoing learning is well within the capacities of babies and young children as they share authentic relationships and transfer their knowledge, learning and self from one setting to another in an almost seamless fashion throughout the day.

Five little ducks: Highlighting adult behaviours that facilitate infant participation and attention

Caroline Cohrsen and Parian Madanipour
University of New England, Armidale
Griffith University, Queensland

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0 draws attention to children's executive functions (EFs) but does not suggest how educators can recognise and respond to evidence of emerging EFs. In this presentation, a short video of a mother-infant singing-talking interaction will be shown. The ways in which the mother's conversational turns facilitate the three-month-old infant's autonomous participation and sustained attention throughout the collaborative, co-constructed interaction will be highlighted. The sequential organisation of turns, carefully orchestrated by the mother, creates opportunities for the infant to contribute to the back-and-forth interaction. This is important as it highlights opportunities for educators of very young children to be intentional in their interactions to support learning and development.

Making Learning Visible During Caregiving Moments: Action learning project

Anneli Elliot, Aya Abdelrahman and Elena Marouchos
Gowrie NSW

Learning is not always recognised as a key component of children’s caregiving moments, particularly during nappy changes. This action research project analysed caregiving moments between primary educators and children. In addition, interviews with primary educators were conducted to explore how to value learning and make learning visible in a 1- to 2-year-old room. Findings will highlight the benefit of caregiving moments for deeper learning and understanding of children, and encourage educators and parents to think of nappy changes as a learning journey that inspires children to expand their sense of agency, and become active participants in their own care.

11.20am

An Excavation Site: Rituals and memories in the making

Karen Fong
Mia Mia Child and Family Study Centre, Macquarie University

Rituals are an important way young children form relationships with others and develop a sense of place and identity within a new setting. This presentation highlights learning from a co-created daily meeting and digging in the sandpit ritual that took place for 6 months in the Birth to 2’s room. The importance of practitioner’s emotional attunement with young children within the ritual to heighten their relationships with educators and peers in the community is discussed along with suggestions for practitioners to reconceptualise, rethink, advocate and reconsider current perspectives and approaches towards rituals for children under 2’s.

Developing Infant Toddler Centre Philosophy: The role of leadership and critical reflection

Lindsey Desmons, Karen Bonson and Gemma Boccabella
Uniting, Specialist Early Education and Development (SEED) Program

Meaningful and authentic service philosophy and critical reflection practices are important processes to guide pedagogical and service decision-making in infant-toddler contexts. This presentation draws on learnings from the development, implementation, and review of the SEED Program’s philosophy in the infant-toddler program. Key approaches discussed include: educator capacity building through collaborative workshops, critical reflection and continuous review with teams and small groups, integration of infant-toddler perspectives and relational strategies, and use of innovative pedagogical approaches (“snapshots of daily practice” and “philosophy river” with families and children).

Talking the talk: Enriching language interactions with infants and toddlers.

Tracy Redman
Macquarie University

This study sought to enhance educators’ language interactions with infants and toddlers through a professional development (PD) program provided in three ECE centres. Audio-recordings of educators’ interactions with infants and toddlers, interviews and questionnaires were collected at three time points to track educators’ journeys of change. Results showed that educators’ conceptual language improved considerably from baseline to the 3-month follow-up and sustained

with further improvements at 10-months post PD. Findings have important implications for the design and delivery of systematic evidence-based PD.

Baby-Play: Intentionality and play-based learning with our youngest citizens.

Andi Salamon
University of Canberra

Infants are sophisticated social and emotional agents who act in playful and intentional ways with what they know about their relational world, yet this is often underestimated or challenging for educators to enact with infants. This presentation introduces 'Baby-Play' an upcoming participatory approach project that will draw on innovative methods to document and generate new knowledge about infant play-based experiences and engagement, and the conditions that enable it. Implications for research, practice, and policy from 'Baby-Play' will be discussed.

Saturday Breakout Session 4

2.10pm

Understanding and facilitating agency: Development of a practice guide for infant-toddler educators and ECEC service leaders

Tanya Burr
Macquarie University

Within Australia, policy documents, curriculum frameworks and sector publications promote the educators' role in responding to children's agency. This presentation will detail a recent year-long inquiry project between a researcher and infant-toddler educators and service leaders, aimed at developing a set of practice principles to better recognise and facilitate infants' and toddlers' agency within ECEC programs. The practice guide prototype will be revealed and discussed, along with feedback and considerations provided by infant-toddler educators and service leaders following the piloting of this practice guide in their ECEC settings.

Using infant mental health principles to deepen our understandings of children's experiences

Nadine McAllister and Nicole Johnstone

C&K Dixon Street Early Years Centre

C&K Dixon Street Early Years Centre offers an intensive, referral-only early learning program for children and families living with significant adversity. Our program is guided by attachment theory, trauma informed practice and infant mental health principles. We are thinking about all aspects of a child's development including the 'emotional child'. Examples from our work in supporting children during experiences such as meeting the competing demands at a mealtime and transition from one room highlight the value of multidisciplinary thinking and relationships built on trust.

Observe, Reflect, Improve Children’s Learning: Introduction to using the ORICL Tool

Linda Harrison, Tracy Redman and Anne-Lii Hardy
Macquarie University

ORICL is an online tool co-designed by infant-toddler researchers in partnership with ECE providers and practitioners. A live demonstration of the ORICL tool will showcase how it can support and strengthen educator observations, planning, and practice to enhance children’s learning and well-being. This session is designed for educators working in LDC or FDC services who would like to know more about participating in the ORICL research project.

Sustainable practices to support invitational play spaces

Sharlynn Irvin
Handprints Early Learning Centre Killara

This presentation examines efforts to inspire all educators to promote and engage in sustainable practices. I report on my experiences in involving everyone in implementing the principles of ‘reduce, reuse and recycle’, and improving sustainability at our early childhood centre. This work involves asking questions such as ‘Is this resource needed?’, ‘Does it come from a sustainable source?’, and ‘How can it be reused and recycled?’ alongside harnessing each educator’s strengths. The presentation highlights the value of recognising that all educators have sustainability talents and includes practical play-embedded reuse ideas to inspire the audience to recognise their own strengths as well as the strengths of their own teams.

2.50pm

Rethinking Infant Education and Care: Emphasising Collective Agency in Early Childhood Education

Matthew Stapleton
Centre Support

This presentation examines the introduction of group-based practices in early childhood education settings. By reimagining the structure of mealtimes and daily activities, new practices enabled infants to engage in group cohesion, mutual learning, and independent exploration. These changes have led to more contented and socially interactive children, as well as more efficient and satisfied educators who can better manage their time and responsibilities. This presentation will delve into the practical steps taken to implement these changes, the observed outcomes, and the broader implications for early childhood education policy and practice.

Birth to 3: Practice in Reality

Michele Peden and Amanda Norman
Goodstart

Goodstart’s Birth-3 Years Framework equips educators with resources that uplifts professional practice, aligning with the national learning framework and contemporary research. Over three years, the Birth-3 Years Framework was co-developed through a pilot with 11 centres in regional QLD and 50 centres in WA. Teams employed a blended learning approach, integrating online and face-to-face sessions to implement tailored, evidence-based strategies. The presentation will provide an overview of the Framework and how educators use it to promote practices that support nurturing

relationships, enabling environments, attentiveness, dialogue, and young children's development as young citizens.

Infants and toddlers in the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

Belinda Davis, Clare Britt, Amanda Palmer, Wendy Shepherd, Janet Robertson and Meredith Chan
Macquarie University, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

This presentation overviews The Art & Wonder®: Young Children and Contemporary Art Research Project and how it developed understandings of the impact of contemporary art and museum experiences on young children, educators and families. The projects provide a rich experience of multiple forms of communication through connecting with images, videos and told stories about artists and their practice, sensorial engagement with tactile materials, and embodied responses to artworks and materials. Project findings prompt practitioners to consider the benefits of visiting local museums and galleries with infants and toddlers and to consider opportunities for embedding arts-rich experiences in their settings.