

Responsive Relationships

Background:

The importance of responsive caregiving for young children is now well understood along with its critical role in child development. In considering the most important competencies for people working in early childhood education and care, responsive caregiving should be carefully considered. The following example provides a case study of how a children's centre in the northern suburbs of Adelaide has ensured that staff are supported to be highly competent in their skills as responsive caregivers, through the implementation and integration of the Responsive Relationships program. This case study demonstrates not only an example of a critical competency for staff but also that strategically supporting staff in their skills as responsive caregivers is a marker of optimal program delivery.

Responsive Relationships was developed within the children's centre's Occupational Therapy and Speech Pathology program and piloted through a University of South Australia honours program during 2016/17. The major aim of the Responsive Relationships program is to support children's centre staff to embed responsive, relational skills into everyday work practices in order to increase protective factors such as children's self-esteem, sense of belonging and safety, and to positively influence children's developmental trajectories. To achieve this aim teams are supported to incorporate reflections on specific techniques that promote Responsive Relationships within regular reflective practice sessions in centres.

Case Study:

Context

The Mark Oliphant College Children's Centre (MOCCC) is located within a fast-growing urban area in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. The centre is for families and their children prior to birth until school commencement. The multidisciplinary staff team was comprised of 20 team members (of varied full and part-time fractions) inclusive of a Community Development Coordinator, Occupational Therapist (OT), Speech Pathologist (SP), Family Practitioner, Aboriginal Community Education Officer, early childhood teachers and School Support Officers with diploma and certificate 3 qualifications. The centre is classified as a category 1 level of disadvantage, which is the highest level of disadvantage obtainable. A variety of programs and services including preschool, occasional care, playgroups, health services and parenting groups are regularly available. Approximately half of the children enrolled in the preschool program present with a disability or requiring adjustments to the curriculum in at least one area of functional need. A significant proportion of children are from families who are facing traumatic circumstances including, but not limited to; terminal illness, domestic violence, homelessness, separation, drug/alcohol abuse, poverty, and unemployment.

In 2016 the children's centre was staffed by a passionate, experienced, skilled, and committed team. Despite their best efforts in providing a high-quality inclusive learning and care environment, the children were not making the anticipated developmental progress. Educators and teachers were spending long periods co-regulating a significant number of children for whom co-regulation was a foreign experience. This was impeding on their abilities to respond to children who were regulated, engage in quality interactions, and stimulate children's critical and creative thinking for example. An even bigger concern was that the team was showing symptoms of 'burn-out', identified as compassion fatigue by the educators and teachers themselves.

The multidisciplinary team was acutely aware of current research relating to neuroscience and the importance of consistent, warm, responsive relationships on brain development, in addition to the need for strong social and emotional development to support cognitive development. This led the team to question whether the relationships they felt were of high quality, were actually 'enough' to respond the complex needs of the cohorts they were presented with. How could they build their skills even further, to suit the children within the education and care environment? While the relationships would be rated as high quality in a different setting, what would high quality look like for this cohort of children? This led the centre to opt into a project offered to children's centres at the time, known as the Responsive Relationships Project, at the end of 2016.

Implementation

The Responsive Relationships program is structured around 10 basic skills that are identified as critical to responsive care giving:

10 Responsive Relationships skills
We are present
We have warm faces
We welcome your return
We wait and wonder
We notice and name
We serve and return
We connect and guide
We mirror feelings
We co-regulate & soothe
We delight

The program then has the following aspects that support reflective practice and skill development:

- Professional development sessions covering each of the 10 skills in 30-to-60-minute workshops once per week or fortnight
- Daily skill practice
 - educators commit to focusing on noticing when they use/practising using each skill for a few weeks
 - OT and SP commit to time on the floor in long day care, occasional care and preschool working alongside educators using the focus skill (this may involve OT and SP taking photos and videos (with appropriate permissions) of skills being used to facilitate in the moment and reflective practice sessions)
- Weekly or fortnightly reflection sessions
- Skill prompts – via written information in staff spaces (eg, staff room, newsletters, emails), posters and wristbands

At MOCCC the staff team was involved in the original pilot program that was evaluated in collaboration with UniSA in 2016/2017. Since then, the centre has continued to run the program annually for the whole staff team (educators, administrator, community development coordinator, playgroup facilitators). Despite numerous staffing changes across the team, the program has

remained embedded, and the site continues to demonstrate an outstanding level of relational pedagogy.

Outcomes

AEDC Data for the site (Mark Oliphant College) after the implementation of Responsive Relationships shows growth in social competence and emotional maturity, along with a decrease in the number of children who were at risk or vulnerable.

Social Competence:

Year	% of children on track	% of children 'at risk'	% of children vulnerable
2015	66	21.6	12.4
2021	78.8	17.4	7.5

Emotional Maturity:

Year	% of children on track	% of children 'at risk'	% of children vulnerable
2015	79.4	10.3	10.3
2021	86.3	7.5	6.3

In addition to seeing a significant improvement in children's social competence and emotional maturity with the implementation of Responsive Relationship the following changes have also been observed:

- Children are better able to pose and answer questions, solve problems, focus on sustained inquiries and engage in conversation. They display positive learning dispositions such as resilience and have time to develop their intellectual thinking.
- A highlighted focus on educators developing responsive relationships, improves the way in which children's voice is heard, learning is co-constructed, and collaboration is promoted.
- Educators have become more present and responsive, noticing, documenting and reflecting on learning, while engaging in quality conversations that extend thinking.
- The site has developed and maintained a whole of site culture that ensures that every child or family walking through the door is responded to by a skilled staff member. This leads to family units feeling connected to and supported by the centre as a whole.
- Responsive Relationships has given the team a shared language and framework from which they can specifically reflect on interactions from a relational perspective outside of the program
- The team's ability to co-regulate with children has been strengthened. Staff are able to support one another at these times through a shared understanding of children's emotional needs.
- The team displays a high level of confidence in responding to all children and one another which has positively impacted on staff wellbeing.
- An unintended outcome was that staff have reported that they are more competent and confident in responding to adults, strengthening relationships with families and colleagues

See attachment 'Magic Happens in the Bush' for further examples of outcomes and integration within the education and care program.

Recommendations:

In considering the most important competencies for people working in early childhood education and care and the markers of optimal program delivery the above case study highlights the following key points:

- There is need for a structured program that supports staff to reflect on and continuously improve their skills as responsive caregivers. Responsive Relationships has been effective within children's centres but is currently limited by it only being offered at integrated sites with access to the OT and SP program.
- The implementation of Responsive Relationships provides an example of successful layering of supports with a universal provision of OT and SP through the capacity building approach of the program.
- With the consideration of 3-year-old preschool it will be critical to factor in how staff will be supported to offer high quality responsive caregiving that is foundational for children at this early developmental stage.
- There is not currently broad access to programs that ensure that staff are reflecting on and refining their skills as responsive caregivers. There can be the assumption that this is a simple or given part of staff's role however this program has shown that there is a gap in professional learning in this most critical skill. Staff need to be led in intentional reflective program that shifts the focus to staff reflecting on their personal skills, values and beliefs that underpin relationships with children.

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Magic happens in the bush

MARK OLIPHANT COLLEGE
B-12 CHILDREN'S CENTRE

INTENTIONAL developments in pedagogy | Developing responsive relationships

FROM...

Inconsistent responses
Fear of 'negative emotions'
Feeling distracted
Majority of time co-regulating

TO...

Highly responsive relationships consistent among all staff
Open and acknowledging all emotions
Being present
Majority of time engaging in shared sustained thinking

INTENTIONAL change in environment | Engaging with natural environments

FROM...

Being and learning in man-made structures

TO...

Being, belonging and learning in the natural environment

EMERGENT impact | Patterns of change we observed in children

FROM...

Repetitive play cycles
Watching clock and missing family
Selective mutism
Reluctance to share information
High dependence on adults
'Big emotions' when faced with challenge and change

TO...

Imaginative, creative play, featuring strong learning dispositions
Deep involvement, perceiving time passes quickly
Initiating communication with peers
Readily retelling stories about experiences
Leading own learning, eagerly posing questions and researching
Resilient, independent and flexible responses when faced with challenge and change

EMERGENT impact | Patterns of change we observed in educators

FROM...

Educators asking all of the questions
Educators answering questions
Educators doing most of talking
Inviting families to help
Struggling to provide challenge outdoors
A focus on wellbeing

TO...

Educators listening for children's questions
Co-constructing meaning with children
Making space for children to take the lead
Collaborating with families
Promoting critical and creative thinking in natural environments
A strong focus on involvement in learning leading to an increase in wellbeing

EMERGENT impact | Patterns of change we observed in families

FROM...

Unsure how to be involved in kindy
Unpredictable attendance
Valuing only academic skills
Risk averse

TO...

Active involvement – clearer pathways for engagement
Always attending on Bush Kindy days
Acknowledging children's learning dispositions
Open to the intellectual learning and emotional benefits of risk in play

EMERGENT impact | Patterns of change we observed in STEM Learning

FROM...

Educator initiated STEM contexts
Educator initiated STEM contexts
Educator pre-planned STEM contexts

TO...

this, plus STEM inquiry initiated by children's curiosity
this, plus STEM engagement initiated by families noticing and sharing
this, plus STEM teaching which is responsive, in the moment at 'bush kindy'

COMMUNITY | Our people WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Scan the QR codes to view the following clips to learn more about our STEM Learning journey.



Engaging families in STEM inquiry



Responsive Relationships



Talking about children's inquiry



What bush kindy has meant to our families



OUR COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Community challenges

Dependence on the 'system'
Violence
Illiteracy
Racism
Abuse
Disempowerment
Crime
Neglect
Mental health
Unemployment
Poverty
Isolation
Stigmatisation
Misuse of technology

Community aspirations

Recognition
Balance
Caring
RESPECT
Beautiful Motherhood
Reading
Career
Fun
Learning
LOVE
Equality
Family Trust
Ready for school
Helpful
Write
Honesty
HAPPINESS
Achievement
Individuality
School
Independence
Always listen
Patience
Gentleness
Friendship
Forgiveness
Memories
Confidence
Fairness
Compassion
Success
Feeling safe



Government of South Australia
Department for Education