

# GETTING PRACTICAL ABOUT REFLECTION

1.2.3 Critical reflection on children's learning and development, both as individuals and in groups, is regularly used to implement the program.

4.3.3 Interactions convey mutual respect, equity and recognition of each other's strengths and skills.

National Quality Standard Elements (ACECQA 2011)

'To enter into a style of teaching which is based on questioning what we're doing and why, on listening to children, on thinking about how theory is translated into practice and how practice informs theory, is to enter into a way of working where professional development takes place day after day.' (Shoptaugh 2004, p. 9)

Reflecting on our work with children, their families and each other is one of the most important aspects of our commitment to improving the quality of our services. When we enter into a space where we ask questions about what we do and why we do it, we open ourselves to new possibilities – other ways of knowing and being – and ultimately better outcomes for children.

Many educators see the value of considering these important questions but when it comes to practical ways to put this commitment into action it proves to be easier said than done. Ideas have begun to be implemented by educators in a range of settings that make reflection more than just a good idea. This article offers some practical approaches, some of which might be the springboard for your service to consider as we turn our commitment to reflection into action.

But before we consider how to reflect it's important that we are clear about what we mean by the process of reflection. *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) defines reflection as:

.....  
'Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice. Its intention is to gather information and gain insights that support, inform and enrich decision-making about children's learning. As professionals, early childhood educators examine what happens in their settings and reflect on what they might change.'  
(DEEWR 2009, p. 13)  
.....

It is now well understood that thinking critically about our practice is one of the best ways to improve the experience of education and care for children and families. Our colleagues in other professions such as nursing and social work have been using reflection techniques for many years. It is most likely true that many of us have been practising reflection – asking questions of ourselves – without even knowing it. When we stop asking why we do things and in whose best interest we work, we make it possible for our practices to become stagnant and soon we find ourselves justifying what we do because we have always done it that way. It happens to the best of us; the only antidote is reflection – thinking critically about how we reached the conclusions we did and what else might be possible.

Of course reflection can take many forms. It can be done with your colleagues in a formal staff meeting or with a couple of trusted friends over a cup of tea. Donald Schon, an important writer and thinker about reflective practice, referred to this as reflection on action – after the event when we have a moment or two to look back and consider what happened and why. Or it can happen in the middle of a conversation with parent or child – it should feel like you are listening to yourself and the way you relate to people and changing the way you act and what you say accordingly. Schon called this reflection ‘in action’ or thinking on your feet.

But for most of us learning the art of thinking about our actions takes practice and some tools. Many educators are concerned about ‘doing it properly’ or ‘having proof’ that it’s being done. Perhaps as we understand the process more, learn effective techniques and recognise it when it is occurring, we will feel more confident that we are becoming reflective educators. Reflection serves us no purpose and does not deliver improved quality to children and their families unless we develop ways to actually do it. The following examples offer some effective ways to undertake this important work. They are not the only ways and you are invited to use them, change them or tweak them. As with most things, we develop our reflective muscle the more we use it.

#### EDUCATOR MEETING AGENDA 6.30 PM – 8.00 PM

Welcome

##### Practicalities 30 min

- Rosters
- Cleaning up the outside play space
- Locking up

##### Reflection 60 min

- What should we do about Easter? Or
- High expectations

#### Staff meetings as reflection

Unfortunately we have all attended staff meetings that would be better described as ‘whinge’ sessions rather than a meeting of professionals. Many services have made the decision to turn these times into active opportunities to meet and talk about practice, quality and outcomes for children. Making the time we have to meet into an effective opportunity for reflection takes organisation and strong leadership. The agenda (make sure there is one) could be divided into time for practicalities and reflections (see the example). Because the practicalities can take over, give that part a strict time limit – about a quarter of the time and dedicate the rest to talking and thinking together about things that matter to your practice and to the children and families you work with – the principles in the EYLF are a great place to start. Don’t worry too much if it takes a couple of goes to get the balance right – it’s the effort that counts.

#### Notes from staff meetings

Making time for reflection in a staff meeting is an important step but it’s also helpful to record or make notes about the discussion process because it prompts us to remember to act on what we have talked about as well as look back and see how far we have progressed. There are many ways to do this: a diary or notebook with ideas and actions recorded, or a template like the following illustration. Try some different ideas and see which ones work. Remember that reflection is more about changing practice for the better than completing paper work. ➔

#### REFLECTIVE PRACTICE NOTES

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Who was there? \_\_\_\_\_

What are we talking about? \_\_\_\_\_

Ideas we discussed (what were our concerns, what is the issue, why is this the case, the why, when, who, what, how questions) \_\_\_\_\_

Actions (What are you going to do now?) \_\_\_\_\_



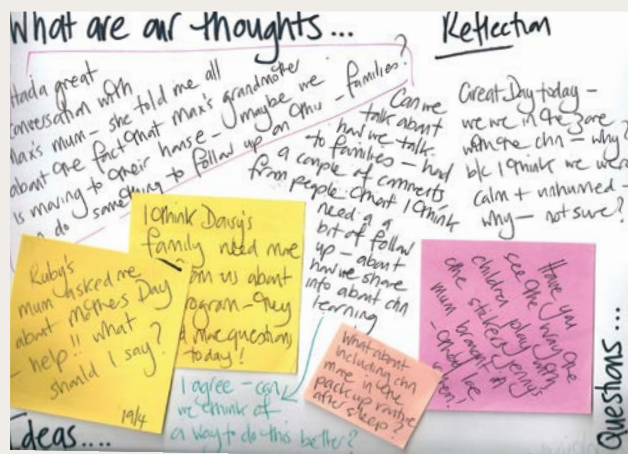
## Asking questions?

There is nothing better than a good question to get reflection underway. Asking the question and getting people to think and talk about it is the key to a great discussion and the way to deliver insights into our practice and outcomes for children.

A few services have begun to send out a single question to a team or the families as a way to engage everyone in reflection. Make it a good one, something that will get people talking – what do you think about group times for children aged under three years? Or should we celebrate Mother's Day? Using email or a survey tool such as SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) is a good way to pose a question. Try and send it out in advance of a meeting so people come prepared, having talked it over with their teams or perhaps even with children or families.

### Room diaries

Diaries are another helpful tool. They don't have to be flash – just a simple notebook or exercise book. Place them somewhere that's accessible to all staff and encourage everyone to write their ideas, thoughts and questions into the book. This collection of ideas (don't worry about saying the right thing or spelling and grammar) can then be taken to staff or team meetings or used to generate one of the reflection questions. They act as a way to capture your thoughts instead of trying to remember them. They are, if you like, a place to put 'in action' thoughts for 'on action' reflection.



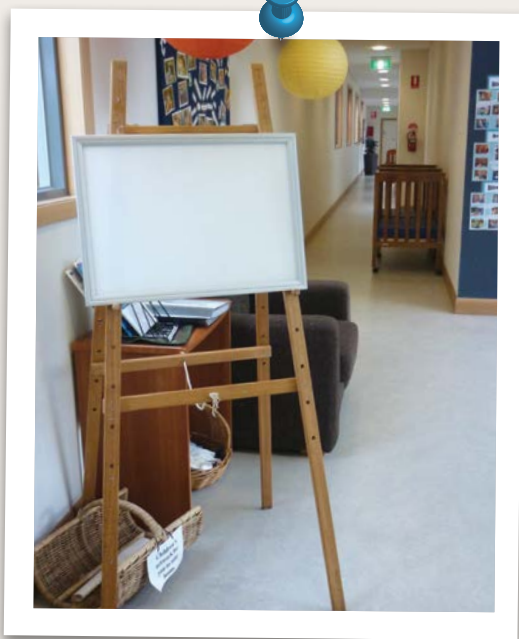
### Reflective conversation with families

Inviting families into reflective conversation is an exciting and largely unexplored dimension of reflective practice. Services that have offered families the opportunity to think with educators can open up space for new perspective and different approaches. But finding ways to do this can be challenging when parents have limited time. The electronic question process discussed above is one effective way. Another idea is to use a 'graffiti' page where parents are invited to write their thoughts and ideas onto a large piece of paper in response to a question posed at the top of the sheet.

The photo illustrates the way a service might present the graffiti page – in the foyer and visible as parents as they arrive or depart. It becomes a conversation point and a way to get ideas from parents, who otherwise might not have the capacity to contribute to processes like these.

This page could then be taken to a staff meeting for further consideration and decision about action.

By using practical techniques to bring reflection from thoughts to shared processes we release its capacity to help us change our practices for the better. Reflective actions will then become such an important feature of our everyday practice that we won't be able to imagine a time without it.



## REFERENCES



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