



Sense of Agency

When a child has a sense of agency, they are able to make choices and decisions to influence events, and to have an impact on their world (EYLF, p. 45) Having a sense of agency is closely linked to the key concepts of being, belonging, and becoming, and to developing a strong sense of identity.

As children make meaningful decisions and choices about things which affect them, they begin to see themselves as rich, competent, capable learners, as valuable and valued citizens within their services and within the community. In essence, developing a sense of agency in children means providing opportunities for children to make choices in their day to day environment, recognising and cultivating learning dispositions (such as curiosity and imagination) that support children to make autonomous choices, and supporting opportunities in the curriculum for inquiry, experimentation and investigation.

This summary exists to share with nominated supervisors, educators, coordinators and other interested people, some perspectives around a sense of agency in children, and to encourage further thinking about how the concept of a sense of agency in children can be further explored.

Some key ideas about developing and maintaining a sense of agency include:

- Making choices – materials and resources that are easily accessible, opportunities to choose independent or group play, flexibility in routines.
- Real tasks and responsibilities – when children are provided with real challenges and tasks, they are meaningfully engaged in something which adds value to the space they are in, that gives back to the broader group, and that affords them a sense of being a part of something bigger than themselves. By being involved in experiences where perseverance is needed, children develop resilience and have a sense of achievement
- Children's Voices – when children are able to not only express an opinion or choice, but have that opinion or choice honoured and have an impact, they see themselves as someone who's views and opinions matter
- The promotion of young children's agency has been identified as foundational to learning, development and wellbeing outcomes. It is widely acknowledged that children learn and develop through active interaction with others and participation in their environments (e.g. Bandura, 2001; Carpendale & Lewis, 2006; Corsaro, 2005; DeVries & Zan, 1994).
- The role of the individual in constructing his or her experience of the world is active, in that people are 'agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences' (Bandura, 2001, p. 4). When children have a sense of agency, they are in the "driver's seat" of what happens for them at a given moment in time.

So what do these discussions about agency mean for nominated supervisors, educators, and coordinators?

How can providing opportunities for children to develop and demonstrate a sense of agency dovetail with the smooth running of an early childhood education and care service?

Providing opportunities for children to develop and demonstrate a sense of agency is sometimes confronting, and often misunderstood. Whilst children are, indeed, rich, competent and capable learners, they are also on a learning journey, and their ability to make choices grows and develops over time and with guidance. Part of the role of the educator is to support children to develop decision making skills which will support them to recognise the range of options available to them, to develop the decision making skills needed to make sound choices, and to realise that the choices they make will impact on others within the group, and more widely.

It is important to recognise that choice and change can be complicated for children and educators at first. Much of the research and reading points to the idea of services starting small, with a limited number of choices, and scaffolding children and staff teams into the idea of a more open ended learning environment. It is important to provide a level of choice which is not overwhelming. In practice, this may mean one or two opportunities within a day for children to make choices about the structure of the environment, the range of resources available, or some aspect of the routine.

The link between a child's sense of agency in early childhood and their future selves is strong, and well supported by contemporary research. Children are far from passive observers in the years they spend in early childhood education and care services – they are creative and inventive users of the world around them (Barnes et al, 2006) – they are "human beings" as well as "human becoming". It is for this reason that educators and educational leaders need to not only understand, but actively cultivate a child's sense of agency within their service. ■

Further Resources

To access more resources around leadership in the IPSP online library (www.ipsplibrary.net.au), search for terms such as “agency”, “being, belonging, becoming” or “routine”.

Read more about a child’s sense of agency from:

Early Childhood Australia – forum discussion on children’s sense of agency: <http://forums.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/forum/nqs-plp-forums/nqs-quality-area-5-relationships-with-children/882-children-s-sense-of-agency/page2>

ARACY – Children’s Agency in Communities – a literature review: <http://server05.calyx.net.au:8080/pzca-ds/bitstream/handle/123456789/244/children’s%20agency%20in%20communities.pdf?sequence=1>

If you would like further support, please email the project officer, at enquiries@gowriesa.org.au

References

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