reflections
GOWRIE AUSTRALIA PUBLICATION **ISSUE 2 2019**

## LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL – A REFLECTION ON LABELLING

**Natalie Gentle, Inclusion Agency Team Leader, BECE; Lynne Rutherford, Acting CEO, Gowrie SA, M.ED; and Kerra-Lee Shearer, Inclusion Agency Inclusion Professional – Behaviour Specialist, B.Psy.**

The Inclusion Support Programme is a key component of the Government's Child Care Safety Net to provide support to early childhood and child care (ECCC) services to build their capacity and capability to include children with additional needs in mainstream services; providing them with an opportunity to learn and develop alongside their typically developing peers (ISP Guidelines). As an Inclusion Agency we have struggled throughout the duration of the program with determining appropriate language to use. The ISP Programme Guidelines outline:

## LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL – A REFLECTION ON LABELLING (CONTINUED)

*"While there is no national definition of 'additional needs', a range of risk factors may (but not always) lead children with particular characteristics to be vulnerable to suboptimal learning and life outcomes. These include (but are not limited to):*

- *children with disability including those undergoing assessment for disability*
- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*
- *children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds*
- *children from a refugee or humanitarian background*
- *children with serious medical condition/s*
- *children presenting with language and speech delays*
- *children presenting with disruptive behaviour."*

How do we respectfully talk about children when society has categorised children into distinct groups with a label? We often have reflected on 'how would we like people to refer to us when they talk to or about us? In all likelihood, we would feel uncomfortable if people were talking about us at all, but if it had to happen, we would want to be involved, and our rights and dignity considered and respected.

Throughout our work, an important role is talking with others about respectful ways to talk to and about children. Thinking deeply about the way we speak to and about children can be a powerful way to change perspective and build learning and capacity. The language we use influences the image we portray and therefore the attitudes that are formed by and about children, adults and educators in our services.

Working with children who have additional needs/rights means that at times educators use language to distinguish them from others, and as such we hear children described in different ways, sometimes by their diagnosis, as "special" or "special needs", or as having additional needs, or "disabled". These terms put the child's diagnosis ahead of who they are as a person, including their individuality, and don't acknowledge the strengths that they bring to a setting each day (Cologon, 2013). Instead we could refer to all children by their given name.

While we need to consider using language that respects the rights of children, there are other terms that often get used when educators are struggling, when they are not sure what to do next, or have run out of ideas. It can be challenging when we hear children that are at the centre of our work labelled in ways that diminish them. Terms like "naughty", "trouble" or "difficult" get used, or they are referred to as just one of "those" children.

## LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL – A REFLECTION ON LABELLING (CONTINUED)

Language that labels a child in this way does three things.

1. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you decide that a child is one of "those" children, then they will be. Children often adopt labels and they take on this 'role' within the setting. When you discuss children in a way that does not respect them, does not include them, does not make them feel like they belong, then chances are they will find their time in an education setting difficult, and behave accordingly. Repeatedly describing a child as "disruptive" or "difficult" impacts their self-identity, and becomes closely linked with their sense of self. These labels often follow children throughout their lives. Other children and adults within the environment quickly pick up on these terms and language and will also see children in this way. A big part of our sense of who we are is developed by how we think other people see us. Children develop their sense of self by processing what others tell them about who they are in the world (Mitchel, 2014).
2. It puts children on the outside, and forms an environment of exclusion. Inclusion is not just providing children with access to the education setting. Mackenzie, Cologon & Fenech (2016) argue that sometimes we see problems as existing within children and therefore seek 'treatment', ways or strategies to 'change' the child, however this is not a helpful way of understanding their behaviour as a form of communicating their needs. When we think of a child as one of "those" children, we remove our responsibility to create change, because we assume they will always be that way. Inclusion means that children are able to engage in experiences, have peer relationships, and feel respected by adults. Inclusion involves all leaders, teachers and educators reflecting on practices, environments, curriculum and pedagogy, and the language we use to talk to and about the children in our settings.
3. It creates an 'us vs them' mentality, where "they" are difficult, "they" are different. When we create sides, we look at children with a cost/benefit lens. What value is this child bringing to relationships with the other children and educators? How do other children benefit from having a child experiencing disability in the space? How does this benefit outweigh the challenges, the changes that have to be made to practices? When we view a child as one of "those" children, we are impacting on their basic human right

to an education and relationships at the same standard as other children. We need to stop thinking about children as providing benefit to others, and reframe. Children with a disability have the same rights as all children and all children have a right to access education settings and be supported in relationships and learning opportunities. As educators one way we can enact those rights is by choosing to use respectful and inclusive language.

So how can leaders, teachers, educators and parents support each other in their settings to rethink how they talk about children? The answer to this question is surprisingly simple.

- Document the language that you don't want to use, and provide an alternative that is respectful of all children and families in your setting. Share this with your team, families and other stakeholders to get them on board, and ask for suggestions.
- Challenge your colleagues when they use language that makes you uncomfortable. Don't be afraid of the hard conversations. Be prepared to explain your point, but also be prepared to listen.
- Always ask the question, "would I say this directly to the child, or to their family?" Would you tell a child's parent that he is one of "those" children? If the answer is no, then we know that we need to rethink our language.
- Have high expectations. The Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) requires that we are committed to equity and believe in all children's capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities. Children do better when educators believe in them, 'the greater the expectation, the better they will perform' (Watts et al., 2012). However, this works in reverse so if you already expect a child to be one of "those" children then they will be – help educators to change their expectations.
- Always remember above everything else that every child has rights. Every child has the right to an education. It is the responsibility of educators to support all children in the enactment of those rights (Rinaldi, 2013).

Some time ago, it was common language to describe an educator as a child care worker, a term that undervalued the work that is done to educate children each and every day. Educator's changed that language by refusing to be labelled in this way, by challenging those that used this label, by justifying and talking about why the language needed to be different. Now it is rare to hear that term used to describe a role that is so integral to children's education, development and well-being.

We challenge you to do the same for children. Don't allow people to reduce them to their diagnosis, their behaviour or their status; instead support those around them to see them for the individual they are.

## References


- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009), Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia. Retrieved from https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf
- Mitchel, SA 2014 Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity, Routledge, New York.
- Watts, TW et al. 2012, 'The Role of Teachers' Expectations in the Association between Children's SES and Performance in Kindergarten: A Moderated Mediation Analysis'.
- Cologon, K 2013,Inclusion in education towards equality for students with disability, Children and Families Research Centre Institute of Early Childhood Macquarie University, Australian Government Department of Education.
- Rinaldi, C 2013, Re-imagining childhood – the inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia, Adelaide Thinker in Residence.
- MacKenzie, M et al 2016 'Embracing everybody': Approaching the inclusive early childhood education of a child labelled with autism from a social relational understanding of disability', Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, Volume 41, Number 2.