



# Fostering children's wellbeing

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You have just finished setting up the room for the day, the craft resources are plentiful, the book corner is cosy, and you have even managed to grab a sip of your coffee before the day truly kicks off. Suddenly within what seems like minutes, a child is in tears because their friend won't let them play, another is refusing to put their shoes on, and someone else is suddenly ravenous with a huge case of the hangries the second the food is put away. Welcome to a morning in early childhood education.

It is important for us to remember; children's behaviour is simply a window into their unmet needs. Understanding and responding to these needs is the key to fostering their wellbeing. [The Phoenix Cups®](#)

[framework](#) offers a simple way to think about this (*Phoenix & Phoenix, 2022*). Imagine every child (and adult) has five invisible cups that represent each of our five basic human life needs: the need for Safety, Connection, Freedom, Mastery, and Fun. When our needs (or cups) are full or filling, children feel secure, engaged, and a positive feeling of wellbeing. When they are running on empty? That's when we see frustration, disengagement, and emotional distress.

Children will find the most efficient and effective way that they know to meet their needs, but this means it is not always in ways that are cooperative or considerate of others. This requires skills, and the Skill to Fill® our cups is something that



we as educators can support children with each day. For example, a child desperate for connection might interrupt constantly, while one craving autonomy might resist guidance. Our role as educators is to recognise these behaviours as signals rather than problems and create environments that help children meet their needs in ways that don't impinge on the needs and rights of others. So, when considering fostering children's wellbeing, how can we create an environment where children thrive?



### THE SAFETY CUP® BUILDING A SENSE OF SECURITY

When a child's Safety Cup® is full, they feel secure, calm, and ready to explore. A child with an empty Safety Cup®, however, may be anxious, withdrawn, or overly rigid about routines. As adults, we can support children's Skill to Fill™ their Safety Cup® through:

- planning for individualised rhythms and rituals rather than rigid routines.
- being consistently supportive, present and provide comfort and reassurance through trusting, predictable relationships.
- creating environments with opportunities for rest and relaxation that children can drive – not set rest times that don't support the majority of the group.
- providing opportunities for children to experience risk, build skills around risk and enhance their comfort and abilities.

And remember, feed our Safety Cup®! There is not much more terrifying than a hangry Safety Cup®. Allowing children to eat when they are hungry, rather than on our predetermined schedule will massively support Safety Cup® Filling.

*Self Reflection:* Consider your meal schedule each day. Do you eat dinner at 5pm and in bed by 7pm every night? Or are you someone who eats dinner at 8pm and in bed by midnight (or 1am, we won't tell!)? How would you feel if I said that you had to get up at 6am, eat breakfast at 6.30am, eat lunch at midday, eat dinner at 6pm and in bed by 8pm everyday?

For most of you as adults, that would be frustrating and not necessarily meet your needs. Children are the same.

*Reflect:* So how do we plan for this? How do we balance children's own bodies needs for early/late or no sleep? How do we balance those that are hungry early/late or snackers?

### THE CONNECTION CUP® IT TAKES A VILLAGE



Children are wired for connection. When their Connection Cup® is full, it is easier for them to engage positively with peers and educators. When it is running low, you might see clinginess, withdrawal, or difficulty with social interactions. Adults can support children need for connection through:

- warm greetings where we say the child and parent's names. Be genuinely excited to see them!
- Seeing each child as a complete individual holistically and show care, connectedness and affection to them in a way that is personal to them.
- engage with children, joining them at their level physically, emotionally and as equal participants in play. This builds trust, genuine connection and care. Where it is appropriate, little reassuring touches, pats, a high five or a hug can build beautiful connections.
- consider the environment to support children's belonging. For example, photos, images of the local community, embedded inclusion of children's culture and backgrounds or thoughtful and respectful display of their artwork or creations.



## THE FREEDOM CUP® ENCOURAGING AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE



Children need opportunities to make choices and exert independence. An empty Freedom Cup® can lead to [resistance, rebellion and retaliation](#) (Gordon, 2000). How do we plan for children to have genuine choices on elements of their day that directly impact them and their world? Consider what opportunities we provide for self-directed play and exploration. Children need opportunities to problem-solve, express their thoughts, independence and build resilience. Our Freedom Cups, particularly in children, will often drive us to have a need for movement, big activity and risky play. Rather than enforcing unnecessary rigidity (that typically leads to resistance anyway), consider how to plan for flexibility, choice and agency for children.

**Self Reflection:** Consider how many choices you make each morning. Your alarm goes off and you choose if you turn it off or get out of bed. If you shower or brush your teeth. What to wear? Do you don your uniform or break a 'rule'? You choose what you eat for breakfast or if you skip it and survive on a coffee? Are you going to drive to work today, walk or are you going to go to work at all? This is only a tiny example of choices we make, and this is all before we even leave the house in a morning.

**Reflect:** How many of these choices do children get? Consider some of the children you teach. Could they be arriving with an already empty Freedom Cup® before they even step foot in your service? If this is the case, how are we planning for Freedom? How are we proactively supporting children's agency, autonomy, choice and exploration?



## THE MASTERY CUP® "I CAN DO IT!"



Children thrive when they feel capable and successful. When their need for Mastery is met, they are eager to try new things, apply themselves and are often real leaders! When it is empty, they may avoid challenges or become easily frustrated. What can we do to support children's need for Mastery? We can:

- encourage children's effort rather than outcomes: "You worked so hard on that block tower!" Rather than "I love that block tower!" Check out [Dr Louise Porter's work on Acknowledgement vs Praise](#) here for ideas and examples of this.
- provide opportunities to develop self-help skills like dressing themselves or serving their own food.
- create achievable challenges with patience and encouragement.
- provide opportunities for children to be a leader, a more experienced peer or hold some of the power.

**THE FUN CUP®**  
**BECAUSE PLAY IS**  
**ESSENTIAL**



Fun is a basic human life need for us all. In fact, people that laugh more live longer (*Rashida et al., 2022*). When a child is meeting their need for fun, it promotes laughter, humour, play, excitement, spontaneity, enjoyment and learning. When our need for fun is not met children may seem restless, disengaged, defiant or “cheeky.” As educators and teachers, we need to remember the lessons we learnt as children.

Play is life!

- Play with children, share in moments of laughter, silliness and joy.
- Plan for play in ways both structured and unstructured.
- Incorporate humour, music and movement into your day.
- Allow for creativity, divergent thinking and spontaneity.

An impromptu dance party, pillow fight or game of ‘floor is lava’ never hurt anyone!



**You can't pour from an empty Cup.**

Remember, as educators, we can't pour from an empty cup. Supporting children's wellbeing requires us to also nurture our own. Taking small moments to rest, reflect, and connect with colleagues can make a big difference in our ability to be present and engaged. Prioritising self-care, from a quiet cup of tea, a walk in nature, a shared laugh with a child, or five minutes outside the room can help us to sustain the energy and compassion we need to work with these wonderful small humans.

A well-supported educator fosters a well-supported child.

Despite our best efforts, some days will be tough. When cups are empty and tensions are high, remember:

- Connection before correction... always. Thanks [Trent Savill](#) for this gem (*Savill, 2015*).
- A calm and regulated educator helps create a calm and regulated child.
- Laughter, movement, and a well-timed snack can work wonders.
- You are making a difference, even when it doesn't feel like it.
- You've got this!

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