

Playing with Intentionality: Strengthening Executive Function in Early Learners



OVERVIEW

Playing with Intentionality invites educators to explore the evolving role of intentionality in play-based learning from the EYLF v2.0 vs 'intentional teaching' from the original EYLF. The workshop reframes intentional teaching not as adult-led instruction, but as a relational and responsive practice that unfolds within the flow of children's play.

Grounded in current neuroscience and the latest in scientific research, this workshop highlights how educator interactions can strengthen the core elements of executive function: working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition control, and examines how play supports these cognitive capacities.

This workshop provides a strong foundation in understanding the importance and power of play as the central driver of children's wellbeing, learning, and development. The workshop engaged in high-level professional dialogue, critical reflection, and evidence-based content that challenges and refines existing practice. Drawing from the latest in neuroscience and contemporary research on brain development and executive functioning, participants explore the deep cognitive and emotional mechanisms that underpin learning through play.

WE WILL...

- Unpack how intentionality has shifted within the updated framework and explore what it looks like in real, everyday practice.
- Consider the difference between teaching intentionally and engaging in play with intentionality, while reflecting on how environments, relationships, and educator decisions shape children's learning.
- Explore executive functioning - what is it, how does it develop through play, how do responsive interactions support children's cognition, and how thoughtful design of experiences nurtures cognitive growth.

DELIVERY MODE OFFERINGS:

- Self-paced online course
- Full-day face-to-face session (up to 5 hours)
- Live online webinar
- After-hours in-service workshops with teams (up to 2.5 hours)

Contact us to book your workshop [HERE](#).

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PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will possess:

1. A renewed sense of clarity and confidence in their professional practice, with an understanding of how to transform intention into meaningful, brain-aligned and heart-centred teaching that strengthens children's capacity to learn, connect and thrive.
2. A clear understanding of how intentionality in practice has shifted within the EYLF v2.0, including the distinction between teaching intentionally and playing with intentionality.
3. The capability to create stimulating learning environments that support critical thinking, problem-solving and social development through play.
4. Practical strategies for scaffolding children's learning through reflection, modelling and guided discovery, while preserving the integrity of play-based learning.
5. An informed understanding of the neuroscience of executive function, including how play strengthens working memory, self-regulation and cognitive flexibility.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Phoenix Cups Framework Sandi & Chris Phoenix

Behaviour is a child's best attempt at meeting their needs. Children's basic human life needs consistently influence their emotional state, wellbeing and behaviour. Educators responses can support regulation, wellbeing and readiness to learn.

Self-Determination Theory Ryan & Deci

Children thrive when their core psychological needs are met. Children's wellbeing grows when environments actively support autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the foundations of children's capacity to learn, relate, and regulate.

Theory of Constructed Emotion Dr Lisa Feldman-Barret

Educators explore how the brain continuously constructs meaning and emotion based on experience and context, and how play serves as the ideal platform for this development.

KEY LINKS – NATIONAL

Alignment with National Quality Standard

- **QA1:** Educational Program and Practice, as you strengthen intentional decision-making and thoughtful curriculum design.
- **QA5:** Relationships with Children, as you learn how to support responsive interactions that honour children's agency and wellbeing.
- **QA7:** Governance and Leadership, as you build reflective practice and professional capability across the team.

Alignment with Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

- **Standard 1.2 Know learners and how they learn:** strengthening teacher understanding of children's developmental needs, agency, and the role of intentionality in supporting wellbeing and engagement.
- **Standard 3.2 Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning:** building capability in purposeful planning, responsive interactions, and designing rich, language-filled play environments.
- **Standard 6.2 Engage in professional learning:** supporting reflective practice and ongoing growth, helping educators apply contemporary pedagogy with confidence.

Alignment with EYLF v2.0

Principles

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships: Intentional, attuned interactions build the emotional safety children need to develop executive function and self-regulation.
- High expectations and equity: Ensures all children can access rich, play-based experiences that build attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility.

Practices

- Learning through play: Demonstrates how play is the primary context where executive function-memory, inhibition control, and flexible thinking-naturally strengthens.
- Intentionality: Supports educators to use modelling, scaffolding, questions, and co-regulation to extend children's thinking and problem-solving during play.

Learning Outcomes

- Outcome 4 – Children are confident and involved learners: Strengthens attention, persistence, planning, and flexible thinking through play-rich executive function experiences.

Alignment with National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

- **Principle 1** – Child safety and wellbeing are embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture. The course promotes a culture where children's emotional safety, cognitive needs, and wellbeing guide every intentional teaching decision.
- **Principle 3** – Children are involved in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously. The course supports child-led play and agency, ensuring children's ideas, choices, and perspectives shape learning experiences.
- **Principle 4** – Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing. The course equips educators to communicate the benefits of intentional, play-based learning with families, strengthening shared responsibility.
- **Principle 5** – Equity is upheld and diverse needs are taken into account. The course positions intentional play as an inclusive, strengths-based approach where every child can access and succeed in developing executive function skills.

KEY LINKS – QLD

Alignment with the Kindy Uplift Key Priority Areas

Social & Emotional Skills

- Equipping educators to create environments that bolster confidence, self-regulation, and wellbeing.
- Supporting educators to embed co-regulation, empathy, and emotional literacy within daily interactions. Barrett's research demonstrates that emotional competence develops through experience and attuned social contexts rather than direct teaching.
- Educators learn to create emotionally safe spaces where children can label and manage their feelings through language, modelling, and connection.

Oral Language & Communication

- Children use language to negotiate, imagine, and problem-solve to naturally build vocabulary, narrative thinking, and comprehension.
- Educators learn how intentional dialogue, open-ended questioning, and the use of emotional language strengthen both linguistic skill and cognitive flexibility.

Executive function

- Supporting children to develop working memory, cognitive flexibility, and the foundations of self-control through thoughtfully designed play experiences.
- Understand how purposeful, play-based experiences strengthen brain systems responsible for working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation.

Alignment with QKLG

Principles

- Holistic Perspectives: Recognises the interconnected development of executive function, emotional regulation, language, cognition, and social skills through play.
- Responsiveness to Children: Encourages educators to observe children's cues and respond with attuned, intentional interactions that extend thinking.
- Reflective Practice: Builds educator capacity to analyse and refine their own decisions, scaffolding, and interactions to better support cognitive and emotional growth.

Learning and Development Areas

- Identity: Enhances children's agency, confidence, and sense of capability as they plan, problem-solve, and direct their own play experiences.
- Wellbeing: Strengthens executive function skills, such as working memory, inhibitory control, and flexible thinking, through play-rich routines and interactions.
- Communicating: Embeds rich oral language development through sustained shared thinking, narration, questioning, and reflective dialogue within play.

KEY LINKS – VIC

School Readiness Funding Menu

Please note this workshop is not on the SRF menu. It can however be utilised under flexible funding provisions. For more information on flexible funding go to the Victorian Department of Education website here:



For more information on the Phoenix Support SRF offerings, including those on the menu as well as flexible funding options, head to our website here:



Alignment with the SRF Priority Areas for use under Flexible Funding Options

Communication (language, literacy and numeracy)

- Enhances children's communication, language, and early literacy outcomes through intentional strategies for rich, language-filled interactions during play.
- Discussion, storytelling, and guided reflection, supports verbal exchanges in play such as negotiating rules, imagining roles, or narrating experiences build vocabulary, phonological awareness, and expressive language.

Wellbeing (social, emotional and executive function)

- Design playful, intentional experiences that scaffold children's executive functioning, emotional regulation, and resilience.
- Explores how play builds neural pathways for executive function; such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, attention, and impulse control which are essential to children's emotional stability and mental flexibility.

Access, Inclusion and Participation.

- Fosters equitable, inclusive teaching practices that engage all learners through play.
- Strategies are intentionally adaptable across diverse service contexts and inclusive of all children, recognising and responding to developmental, cultural, and linguistic diversity.

Alignment with the VEYLDF

Practice Principles

- Reflective Practice: examine and refine their professional decisions.
- High Expectations for Every Child: recognising each child's capability and uniqueness.
- Respectful Relationships and Responsive Engagement: through attuned, intentional interactions.
- Integrated Teaching and Learning Approaches: blending intentional teaching with child-led play to promote curiosity, independence, and resilience.

Pedagogical Practices

- Designing learning environments that encourage exploration and problem-solving.
- Using assessment for learning to observe, interpret, and extend children's play.
- Strengthening partnerships with families by communicating the learning that occurs through play and intentional teaching.

Learning and Development Outcomes

- Outcome 1 – Children have a strong sense of identity.
- Outcome 3 – Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.
- Outcome 5 – Children are effective communicators.