



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Talking about practice: 'I can do it!' Supporting babies' sense of agency

This video is part of the *Talking about practice* series designed to support discussion and reflection about the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) and their links to what educators in a variety of settings currently think, plan and do. The series is intended to be used in conversations between early childhood educators as they reflect critically on their practice.

The video is in three parts. Each part contains a conversation and some vignettes showing the ideas in practice.

Introduction

Although both the NQS and the EYLF apply equally to children from birth to school age, some educators have difficulty seeing the application of the ideas in them to very young children. Belinda George is an educator in an early learning service in Melbourne who also has responsibility for ongoing professional learning for her colleagues and is a part-time lecturer at TAFE. In this *Talking about practice*, she has a conversation with Anne Stonehouse about the concept of babies' agency, what it looks like and what educators can do to promote it in everyday learning experiences.

A second theme running through the three segments is the status and perception of working as an educator with babies—the idea that some people within our profession believe that it is simpler, less intellectually demanding, and that it is, in fact, boring.

To guide discussion, each segment offers questions and opportunities for you to identify examples in your own practice. Reflecting on this conversation and applying the messages to your context will help you to consider this important topic. You will no doubt think of other questions and points to discuss.

Because the focus of this TAPs is babies' agency, there is a lot of emphasis on supporting autonomy and independence, an 'I-can-do-it' attitude. It is important that the discussion of the TAPs emphasises the important role that educators play in babies' learning, that it is only sometimes best to stand back and not engage. Some educators need encouragement, skills and knowledge to appreciate the important role that they play as

they engage with babies to support learning. Other educators need to appreciate more the value of giving babies opportunities to do things themselves.

Whatever the topic, it is important to keep in mind the value of critical reflection. Inviting a range of perspectives, examining 'taken for granted' ways of doing things, validating some of your practices and most importantly looking for ways to improve, are all crucial in efforts to support children's learning. The questions for consideration are always 'What actions can we take? What more can we do and what can we do better?'



Questions for Segment 1: What does babies' agency mean? What does it look like?

- This first segment introduces the concept of agency as it applies to children under 16–18 months.
- Before looking at the segment ask: What does the concept of agency mean to you? How does it apply to babies?
- At the beginning, Anne mentions several specific links between the concept of agency and the EYLF: Belonging, being and becoming, and the five Learning Outcomes. She also mentions links to the NQS, including the specific mention of agency in Element 1.1.6: 'Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and influence events in their world'. Take one of these ideas in either the EYLF or the NQS and discuss how it applies to babies.
- Do you agree or disagree that working with babies is often viewed, even within our profession, as less exciting and requiring less intellectual engagement on the part of educators than working with older children? If so, why do you think this is?

- Discuss the idea that babies' learning is subtler than that of older children. What learning milestones stand out in the first year and a half of life? What are some examples of more subtle milestones that are important but that many people might miss if they don't know what to look for?
- 'Knowledgeable responsiveness' is mentioned as essential to promoting babies' sense of agency. What do you think that means? What do you do to get to know the children you work with deeply?
- What can we do to promote the idea of babies as capable and confident learners?
- What do you think is meant by the statement that, in some services, it looks as though the babies get in the way of the routines? Is there any evidence of that in your service?
- When looking at the brief vignettes, think about the roles that the educators play. What do they do to promote the children's sense of agency?

Note: The baby with the red cloth was just on the verge of taking her first steps on the day of the filming. You can see her let go and stand alone briefly.



Questions for Segment 2: Why does agency matter? How can I nurture a sense of agency in routines?

- How does having a sense of agency link to learning dispositions? How does it contribute to being a confident and involved learner?
- Do you agree or disagree with the notion that babies are like sponges, soaking up and learning from everything around them? Is it appropriate to think this way? Why or why not? What other images can be used to describe babies as learners?
- Can you think of some examples of babies having 'fads' or having an intense interest in a particular type of play? What do you think this is about?



- Belinda mentions that sometimes educators do things for babies that they can do for themselves. Do you agree? If so, why does this happen? What can be done about it?
- Belinda mentions that it's more important to know babies than to know milestones. Do you agree? Why or why not? How can knowledge of child development and developmental milestones help educators to promote a sense of agency? How can it interfere with promoting agency?
- How do you decide when babies need your help and when they don't?
- What examples are you aware of where babies teach and support other babies?
- What gets in the way of slowing down and being 'in the moment' with babies?
- Can you think of ways to more actively engage babies in routines?





Questions for Segment 3: The physical environment. keep in mind the question ‘Who am I doing this for? Who is it benefitting?’

- In what ways does your physical environment contribute to babies’ sense of agency?
- Belinda mentions ‘adult pleasers’ in relation to the physical environment. What do you think she means? Can you think of some examples of ‘adult pleasers’ in your environment or in the way you implement the curriculum?
- How do you monitor the need for change balanced with sameness in your physical environment? How do you decide when to make changes?
- What is the balance in your environment between open-ended materials and closed materials? Might it be useful to do an audit to see if you might need to increase the availability of open-ended materials?
- Belinda mentions the value of a pinecone in the babies’ room. That’s not a conventional item in most babies’ environments! What unconventional materials do you have in the babies’ room that encourage babies’ engagement, enjoyment and learning?
- Look through the NQS Elements. Which ones relate most directly to improvements you need to make to the curriculum for babies, to promote a sense of agency?
- How do you achieve a balance between messiness and organisation to create a high-quality learning environment?
- How do you use bins and baskets in your program? Would it be useful to critically reflect on their use, and in general on how you display learning materials to encourage engagement?
- If you put all the toys away in the setting you work in, what would be left for babies to learn from?

- Discuss the link between a rich physical environment that invites engagement and promoting good-quality interactions between educators and babies.
- What is meant by the idea of educators as ‘entertainers’? What contributes to that happening?
- How do you ensure that there are moments of calm and peace during the day?
- What can you do to strengthen a culture of valuing babies’ learning and the work that educators do to support that learning?

Finally:

- What have I learnt?
- What action will I take as a result of what I have learnt?
- What is the first step?

