# Facilitating children’s agency

This fact sheet is for educators who wish to deepen their understanding of the term ‘agency’ within their early childhood care and education setting, and how these concepts and ideas might be applied to pedagogical practices

Children’s agency needs to be understood as a complex and contextual concept. The educator’s role in children’s agency is integral and when educators understand agency deeply, their practice can enable children to flourish. Scott’s (2019) research into educator understanding of children’s agency found that for children to enact agency in early childhood education and care settings, there were some essential aspects and conditions that need to be facilitated by educators through their practice.

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| Top tips for facilitating children’s agency in early childhood education and care settings |

The first important point to highlight is that **agency is contextual**; the right conditions are required for children to enact agency and the educator plays a vital role in this.

**Know** your children, families and communities through developing strong relationships; every child’s agency will look different. Be aware of how much freedom and power you can share with children based on their disposition, their abilities, their interests.

Engage in **intentional interactions** that are underpinned by a commitment to facilitating children’s agency. Having the courage to say ‘yes’ to children’s ideas, even if they sit outside your comfort zone, can be an integral aspect for children’s agency enactment.

**Allow mess**, and challenge yourself to sit with **uncertainty**. Work on accepting how if you truly foreground children’s agency, you will be taken in directions you may not have thought of and will not have planned for!

Ensure children have opportunities to **show initiative** and are able to **pursue outcomes that are valuable and meaningful to *them***. Asking a child to choose from a pre-determined set of options results in the child engaging in a ‘responsive action’ not an enactment of agency.

Be aware of what is **meaningful for the child**. It may not be immediately obvious but there is always a motivation behind children’s actions. Can you engage with that motivation and help the child explore and own it?

**Share power with children**, seek their input, listen deeply and always follow through.

**Agency does not happen ‘in a vacuum’**, children’s agency is not about letting each child do whatever they want, when they want! When educators prioritise children’s agency and facilitate it through their practice, valuable opportunities open up for educators and children to discuss how children’s actions and behaviours might impact others. Educators need to facilitate agency alongside **affiliation**, that is, the idea of living alongside others with respect and empathy.

When agency is enacted well, children can develop into young learners who are confident in expressing their ideas and practised in demonstrating initiative. These children may also become very respectful of their peers and of educators – they have a greater understanding of the reasoning and thinking that sits behind their decisions

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| Examples of educator understanding of agency facilitation |

Sue, an early childhood teacher from Melbourne, spoke of how her understanding of children’s agency had changed over her decades’ long career. She had moved away from understanding her role as an educator in terms of rules and restrictions, where the ‘power of the teacher’ was paramount, to one that prioritised and promoted children’s agency, where she ‘shares power with children’. Sue moved from practice where ‘the teacher drove everything’ with a ‘rigid, boxed program up on the wall, changed every fortnight’ to allowing children to make choices about their day and incorporating their ideas and interests into the program, where it’s all about ‘their learning, their agency and them being empowered’. Sue challenges teachers to reflect on the question; ‘is your program more about what you want to take to the children or is it really meaningful for them?’

Nina, a Diploma-qualified educator working in Melbourne, reflected on how agency underpins everything you do as an early childhood teacher … ‘well how it should underpin everything,’ she said. Nina places the utmost importance on children being able to enact and strengthen their agency and states ‘all children are *able* to make choices and decisions, it’s whether or not they’re allowed to.’ The importance of the educator’s role in facilitating or restricting children’s agency in the early childhood setting is clear to Nina. An example of children enacting agency in Nina’s room was when she stated that by the end of the kindergarten year Nina is able to ‘step back and let the children run the room … they looked after everything’ and this included making toast. The children were taught to use the toaster safely and were able to make themselves a snack when they were hungry – a great example of allowing children to enact their agency and make choices and decisions around their own wellbeing, trusting them to do so safely and responsibly.

The ideas contained in this fact sheet are reflected in the practice principles for children’s learning and development in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) that supports all children’s learning and development from birth to eight years. The VEYLDF emphasises the importance of sensitive, responsive and engaging practice and sets the highest expectations for all children.

#### This fact sheet was developed by Dr Caroline Scott

Caroline has worked in early childhood education for over 15 years and is currently working as a Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Victoria University. Caroline has extensive experience teaching and researching in the area of early childhood in higher education and recently completed her PhD on educator understanding and facilitation of children’s agency. Caroline has been involved in many research projects across her career, predominantly in the area of outdoor play spaces, the topic on which her Masters research was based. Caroline has presented her PhD research into educator understanding of children’s agency at national and international conferences and symposiums.

This fact sheet supports information contained in the November 2020 VCAA Twilight Webinar ‘Children’s agency: what does it really mean and why is it regarded as important?’ [Edited vignettes of this webinar are published on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority website for you to watch](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/professional-learning/earlyyears-professional-learning/Pages/PastProfessionalLearningMaterials.aspx).

Additional resources that might be useful**.**

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