# Planning for under 3s using the VCAA Early Years Planning Cycle Resource

This fact sheet was developed by the Early Years Unit at the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and supports the information presented in the April 2021 VCAA Twilight Webinar, ‘Planning for under 3s using the VCAA Early Years Planning Cycle Resource’.

This fact sheet also references content from the following previous 2021 Twilight Webinars:

* ‘But do they do anything?’ Documentation and infant pedagogy
* The challenges and opportunities of digital technologies for very young children
* Infant thinking and theory-making: connections to frameworks and documentation.

Edited vignettes from all 2021 Twilight Webinars are available to watch on the [Early Years Professional Learning webpage](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/professional-learning/earlyyears-professional-learning/Pages/PastProfessionalLearningMaterials.aspx) of the VCAA website.

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| Recording observations to create rich documentation |

When we write down our observations of children, it forces us to think more carefully about the words, images and visual representations we use to describe children’s learning. It also makes us consider the value of our documentation decisions: that is, whether these observations contribute to our understanding of children. Documentation should enrich our understanding of children, their attitudes and dispositions, and how they are learning. This is what we can reflect on and analyse. When documenting, we need enough evidence to be able to reflect and analyse because it is in these processes that any documentation starts to have meaning. This is when we need to ask, ‘How does this information contribute to our overall understanding of the child or group of children?’

Sometimes we might wait to document the ‘big moments’. The limitation of such an approach is that we may begin the documentation process with the end result already determined. Educators should be wary of engaging in the planning cycle and documenting from this perspective. It is important to recognise the ‘everyday’ moments where children show us elements of learning. For the young child this may be as simple as demonstrating an awareness of body parts related to a visual or a song they are learning. For the older child it may be an emerging understanding that water can exist in different forms such as solid, liquid or gas. These observations may seem small or fleeting, but during these moments children are showing us who they are as learners.

Documentation should show us evidence of children’s progression over time. Educators need enough rich information so that they can contextualise their thinking for each child. This type of rich documentation can help us to engage in conversation with others about what we have observed and documented, opening opportunities for us to view children’s learning and development through multiple lenses.

There is no recipe for what and how we should document; every context is different. Educators need to use their knowledge and critical thinking skills and develop a deep sense of curiosity about what is going on. This requires educators to be open to ‘noticing’ children. It is this idea of noticing that will guide what you document, which will in turn become rich and meaningful illustrations of children’s learning over time.

There are two aspects to documentation: the initial observation, which informs the planning cycle; and ongoing monitoring for change, which helps to determine future learning opportunities.

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| Building a picture of a child’s learning and development: ‘Hats’ sample learning plan |

Consider the sample learning plan ‘Hats’ on page 41 of the [Early Years Planning Cycle Resource](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EarlyYearsPlanningCycle.pdf#page=5). The first step in the learning plan is to ‘collect information’, which we often refer to as ‘the observation’. This is a record of what the educator observed about the child. But what makes this collected information meaningful is that the educator has gone on to question and analyse the observation, and has then linked this to the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) learning and development outcome.

The educator collecting this information already knows a lot about this child. This helps them to assess the importance of what they have noticed, develop appropriate learning aims, and identify markers of progression. The educator can then start to think about what they might offer next and purposefully record what they will do. This process is important as it starts to prompt educator thinking about how to extend learning.

Not everyone will include the same level of detail when using the planning cycle; more experienced educators may not need to write down as much detail. For educators just starting out, however, it is recommended to take the time to think about each step in the planning cycle: collect information; question and analyse; plan; act and do; and reflect and review. This will help to ensure that your documentation is rich and meaningful, and may open up pathways for conversations with others, both colleagues and families. (There is also significant value in sharing documentation with children – even very young children.)

The final step of the planning cycle (reflect and review) asks you to move to the next stage of observation. You have collected the initial observation and provided a learning opportunity based on this observation. You have then collected additional information as the child or group of children engaged with the opportunity you created. Now you are able to reflect on or consider this additional information, which could result in a change of resources, environment, experiences or pedagogical strategies. There are a lot of options for thinking, reflecting on and changing what it is you are offering and doing. This process also creates greater opportunities for discussion with families.

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| The purpose of documentation |

The purpose of documentation is to help us better understand children. It creates a base or foundation so that we can be responsive to the children in our care, and it supports us to build further relationships, particularly with very young children. Documentation also helps children and their families understand the *value* we place on children’s learning and thinking.

What we write down about children becomes the basis of our planning; it helps determine what we offer next – either in learning experiences or in adaptations to the environment or routines. It is about ensuring we have evidence that will support us to match our interactions to children and become attuned to them.

Documentation allows us not only to track the child’s progress but also our own professional progression as we reconsider what we offer to children and what strategies we use. We should be growing as educators through this process and expanding the pedagogical strategies that we could implement.

Educators need to shift their thinking away from concerns about the ‘required’ volume of documentation to consider how their choices about what to document help to create a picture of a child’s learning and development. It can be useful for educators to view documentation as a process that:

* helps them to keep track of their thoughts, ideas, questions and concerns
* gives value to these observations for the reader
* demonstrates evidence of children’s progression over time
* provides an opportunity to interpret wonderings and happenings in the learning process.

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| Where to start when planning for very young children |

We can often underestimate or undervalue young children’s thinking processes and how they construct new meanings. It is important that we do not assess children against predetermined outcomes or a particular theory. While a sound understanding of child development theory is important, educators must be open to multiple ways of viewing children and their learning. The place to start when thinking about planning for young children is with the child themselves and what you know about their interests and their current level of learning and development. This might mean that sometimes educators need to spend a little less time involved in ‘paperwork’ and a little more time engaged with children. This is especially true when you are getting to know children and their families. Documentation is important, but if you do not know the children, it is hard to document meaningfully. The decision to work this way is a pedagogical strategy.

Once you get to know children, you are then able to follow their direction and see where they take you. You join your attention to their attention. This is like finding a thread in their play or their thinking and following that thread as far as you can go. It might be helpful to think about this in terms of the following:

* I see
* I think
* I wonder.

This can be a way of not only thinking about children but also about yourself as an educator. What are you seeing, thinking or wondering about? This way of working supports your skills in analysis and interpretation.

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| Building a picture of a child’s learning and development: ‘Making faces’ sample learning plan |

Consider the sample learning plan ‘Making faces’ on page 56 of the [Early Years Planning Cycle Resource](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EarlyYearsPlanningCycle.pdf). Note that this sample learning plan has a title – as do all the sample learning plans in the Early Years Planning Cycle Resource. A title can help shape your ideas and narrow your focus, and can also help communicate to families about their child’s learning and development.

In this learning plan there is a lot going on. This child demonstrates visual acuity, hand-eye coordination, a sense of achievement and persistence, and a sense of agency. In reading this plan, we see that the educator has been able to support Diego to work in his Zone of Proximal Development; it is evident that with the adult’s support, he is able to achieve something he could not achieve independently. Diego’s learning could be further extended through the provision of art experiences and experiences that will support him to identify and name different emotions and what they indicate.

This learning plan presents to the educator an opportunity to ‘be in the moment’ with this child and to better understand his emotional responses and provide him with modelling and language that enables him to acknowledge these.

We can see that the educators in both the sample plans referenced in this fact sheet have chosen to focus on a particular evidence marker, but the educator could use this same observation to reflect learning that could perhaps be linked to another evidence marker. One observation and the subsequent opportunities presented to the child can lead to learning in a whole range of areas.

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| Becoming a better educator through pedagogical documentation |

Generating quality pedagogical documentation is a better way to work. It provides us a record of children’s experiences, learning and development as well as a record of our own learning and development. Quality pedagogical documentation is a multipurpose tool; it is not only about children and making their learning visible but also about making their learning *processes* visible. It is a way to connect theory to practice as well as being a tool for assessment and evaluation.

Creating quality pedagogical documentation is not a solitary process. It requires others to also view, consider and add commentary on the work. In the *Reggio Emilia* approach, they describe this process as the ‘gaze of solidarity’ – it is better to invite the views of others than to make pedagogical decisions on your own. Historically we have been encouraged to be very objective about observation-taking. You recorded only what you actually saw, with little (if any) evidence of wondering. But observations are subjective; they are influenced by our own judgments about what is worth recording as well as how we analyse what we have recorded. This subjectivity was once regarded as a limitation, but it can be a real strength. The more interpreters of the record, the higher the chances are that you reflect the child’s thinking and learning with rigour. To effectively make decisions about what children might be learning, educators need to consider the possibilities that come from others collaborating and sharing their perspectives on the documentation created.

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| Final reflection |

Documentation is the search for meaning, and meaningful and accurate observations are what leads to quality pedagogical documentation. When done well, documentation can provide you with the opportunity to tune into each other and children, and this makes work more joyful.

#### Additional resources that might be useful.

Download copies of [VCAA early years resources](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/earlyyears/ey-curriculum-resources/Pages/Index.aspx).

Order [free hard copies](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/earlyyears/ey-curriculum-resources/Pages/Birth-to-8years.aspx) of VCAA early years resources.

Sign up to the VCAA Early Years Alert.

Keep up to date with new resources and professional learning opportunities by [subscribing to our newsletter](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/earlyyears/veyldf/Pages/Index.aspx).

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