# Collecting information about children 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 August 2021 VCAA Twilight Webinar, ‘Planning for under 3s using the VCAA Early Years Planning Cycle Resource’.

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.

|  |
| --- |
| Why do we collect information about children? |

Collecting information is a bit like the spark that lights the fire. In many ways, the success of everything else you do as an educator is dependent on what you notice and record. All of us think we will remember everything, but education and care settings are busy places and it is difficult to keep track of our insights into what children know and are learning and doing without a recording process.

If you think about the planning cycle, collecting information is prominently positioned. It is, however, not the beginning because there is an element of reflection needed at the start as you consider what it is that you will pay attention to. Writing or recording is part of the collecting information stage.

Collecting information that is a reliable and accurate representation of where the child is on their learning and development journey will allow you to make the best decisions about what learning opportunities you offer next. The physical act of writing something down or recording it in some other way, such as collecting artefacts or oral accounts, gives you the opportunity to think more deeply about it. It reminds you that this was something worth noticing – a piece of new information that gives you an insight into the child that you didn’t have before. You can use this to begin to consider if it is a holistic representation of the child – can you see evidence of this learning in other areas? Is it dependent on who the child is working or playing with? Perhaps they still require some scaffolding from more able peers until they consolidate the required skills.

Consider the sample learning plan ‘Catching insects’ on page 5 of the [Early Years Planning Cycle Resource](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EarlyYearsPlanningCycle.pdf#page=5). The observation is brief, noting an instance where the child watches an insect climb up a nearby fence and points out the insect to a passing educator. This is something an educator could miss and not use to develop further learning opportunities, but this educator has made a note of it and then analysed it to make a connection to the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) Identity Evidence markers:

* are open to new challenges and make new discoveries
* initiate interactions and conversations with trusted educators.

The approach the educators will take is then consolidated in the ‘Act and Do’ part of the planning cycle. Writing this information down makes it available to all the adults in the room and reminds them of vocabulary they will introduce to expand learning.

Writing something down also provides you with detail that you can discuss with other professionals and families. This supports collaboration and provides a deeper knowledge of the child, giving you and others a rich and more complete picture of the child and their dispositions, and what they know and can do – their strengths, interests, abilities and needs – so that the ‘what next’ is relevant and responsive. The discussions you have with colleagues and families bring other perspectives to your notes and may open new opportunities for learning.

|  |
| --- |
| What should we consider when collecting information about children? |

When collecting information about children, it is important that we consider the idea of holistic or authentic assessment; this is assessment that involves exploring and assessing different aspects of children’s learning and development in different contexts, environments and relationships. The purpose of holistic assessment is to gain a clear and comprehensive picture of children’s learning and development so that you can plan appropriately across all the Learning and Development Outcomes.

Educators need to know and understand a lot about children, and they can use this knowledge to make sense of their observations. Sometimes to make sense of a new observation, educators need to connect it to previous ones. This idea is easily demonstrated if we think about children’s interactions and how knowledge of their usual interactions can be useful in helping educators to note changes that might indicate progress in learning. For example:

* Who does the child usually play with? Observe for this – how does the child respond with different peers or adults?
* Who is the child watching? Who do you think they are they interested in and why? Are there differing levels of skill development among these children, providing a challenge for the child?
* How do you find out who children are interested in within their group? You can create laminated photos of the children positioned on pop sticks or wooden blocks or provide face photographs at the painting/pasting easel, which the children can use to create their friendship groups, adding detail by illustrating their bodies. If you set up experiences like this, you can note who the child chooses/talks about and talk with them about their choices.
* Through discussion with families, are you gathering evidence that supports your assessment? Is the child demonstrating evidence of learning in different contexts, such as the home environment? Remember, holistic assessment involves exploring and assessing different aspects of children’s learning and development in different contexts, environments and relationships.
* Where does the child choose to spend a lot of time? Talk with the family about this: is it that the child is generally choosing the place or experience where they feel competent, rather than being curious and choosing a ‘new’ place or experience that will challenge their thinking, perseverance and resilience? We need to connect this with experiences the child might have had outside of the setting – in their family or broader community. For example, what the family’s occupations or interests are might significantly influence the child’s knowledge and could serve as a ‘lever’ to make learning opportunities you plan more meaningful for the child.
* You can look beyond the immediacy of these everyday interactions and consider what the Australian Early Development Census data tells you about the children in your community. This will provide a broader context and may help you consider some collaboration with other providers or services in your community for projects that improve outcomes for young children.

|  |
| --- |
| How might we develop better noticing skills? |

Better noticing skills require a knowledge of trajectories of children’s learning and development – you need to be familiar enough to notice when a child has ‘moved’ to a new stage of development. Be attuned to the children and their interests and make time for interactions with small groups of children. Regularly review what you have recorded about children so that you don’t continue to notice the same thing – it is important to broaden your view.

Go back to the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes and Key Components of Learning, and work with your colleagues to brainstorm other ways a child might be displaying evidence of progress in relation to the outcomes. The examples provided as evidence statements are just that – they are not an exhaustive list. Unpacking and thinking about the Learning and Development Outcomes will broaden what you might notice.

|  |
| --- |
| What type of ‘pre-thinking’ needs to happen when you start to think about a new cycle of planning? |

‘Pre-thinking’ refers to all the processes that you might go through before you put pen to paper. What questions do you have? What ideas are you considering? What ‘clues’ are the children giving you about their interests, understandings, questions or ideas? This process of pre-thinking starts with your image of the child. Each new cycle requires a belief from educators that children possess their own theories, interpretations, knowledge and questions, and that children are co-constructors of knowledge alongside their educators. Within this context of shared understandings, the educator can recognise that children’s ideas about their own learning and capabilities are important and should have visibility in the documentation you collect.

Educators need to follow children’s footprints – that is, the directions of their learning. This is only possible through a process of reviewing and reflecting on your documentation materials. It can be useful to consider what you know, what you don’t yet know and what you would like to find out more about – the pre-thinking is a bit like looking back to look forward. Gathering clues about children and then asking rich, deep questions adds great value to the development of the planning cycle.

There is great value in the questions you ask of yourself and children. What direction are you taking children and yourself with your questions? While there might be many directions you can take children’s learning, finding a thread and following it as far as you can go will feed into the complexity of the work and can produce more meaningful results.

Another important component of pre-thinking also involves the perspective of others. Planning can often be a subjective process. This is not necessarily a limitation but a strength, which enables us to take ownership of our ideas and our thinking. We do, however, still require the input of others – of children, of families and our colleagues – to create more authentic and holistic documentation that can enrich our understandings of children

|  |
| --- |
| How important is it to consider each child’s context when using the planning cycle? |

It is very important to consider what is meant by context. In relation to the planning cycle, we are talking about all the influences that might affect a child’s learning and development. The ecological model is a way of thinking about these influences, and positions the life of each child within a social, environmental, political and economic context. Thinking about context in this way can help illustrate the strong networks of community, services and programs that support children’s learning and development. When you consider these influences, you can start to really appreciate that each child has their own context. Thinking about the context that children currently live in and have previously experienced helps shape and inform your planning cycle, both in the initiation of each learning plan and in its continuation. There needs to be a recognition from early childhood professionals that the families and, indeed, the broader communities that children belong to are diverse.

It can be helpful if you think of each child walking through the door of an early learning environment as having ‘funds’ of knowledge. These funds are the skills, knowledge, family and community networks that they have built up – even in a short amount of time for very young children. To do this requires early childhood professionals to establish and maintain relationships that allow them to discover more about children and their families. This can be supported by educators having an open and transparent communication style. It is important to remember that your knowledge of and relationships with children and families are not static things, as relationships are constantly changing. Teachers and educators need to have a good grasp of the everyday experiences and practices of children and how these can be incorporated into the early learning environment. It is helpful to ask yourself what you can do to support children’s learning and development and expand their funds of knowledge within your planning processes.

The first thing that needs to happen when connecting context to the planning cycle is to ask yourself what strategies you employ to gather information about each child and their family/environment and then consider how this information is reflected in the planning cycle. This can be done for individual children as well as the group.

|  |
| --- |
| What are some of the ways of ensuring that your observations are ‘accurate and meaningful’ representations of what children are thinking or learning? |

The planning cycle includes the phase of collecting information as a key element and this is where we really draw on our observational materials.

One way of ensuring that you are collecting rich observational data is to ask yourself a few key questions:

* How do my observations and understanding connect to previous learning experiences?
* What is happening in this observation? (Try to consider your work around observation as being highly focused work that will offer you a glimpse into the processes children might use in their thinking.)
* What does the child know how to do?
* What was the context of what you observed?
* What was the role of adults in the observation you recorded?
* What predictions or ideas are the children making or sharing with you?
* Is the learning visible? Are you able to communicate children’s learning and progress to families and other educators and professionals?
* What might be the child’s point of view about this experience?
* Practise trying to see ‘a child’s mind at work’ each day. What processes are they using to ‘figure things out’?

Once you have gathered your documentation, it can be helpful to review the materials using the following prompts:

* What do I want to understand?
* What theories am I using to interpret my observations?
* What can my documentation materials help me to learn or discover?

Consider the sample learning plan ‘Sensory garden: Watching plants grow’ on page 18 of the [Early Years Planning Cycle Resource](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EarlyYearsPlanningCycle.pdf#page=5). In this observation, two children are demonstrating their capacity to infer, predict and hypothesise; the educator has recorded evidence that the children can observe and notice change, and engage in explorations of living and non-living things.

When thinking about your documentation, it can be useful to consider whether you have captured the following four perspectives:

* the child’s story
* the learning and development story or theory story
* the educator/teacher perspective
* the family story.

All early childhood professionals see things differently, and it is through being open to these differences and taking the time to consider them that accurate and meaningful observations are generated.

Good observations will transform your practice.

#### 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](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/earlyyears/veyldf/Pages/Index.aspx#:~:text=For%20news%20about%20VEYLDF%20resources%20and%20professional%20learning%2C%20subscribe%20to%20the%20Early%20Years%20Alert) to be informed about new resources and professional learning opportunities.

Contact the Early Years Unit, VCAA:

Email: [veyldf@education.vic.gov.au](mailto:veyldf@education.vic.gov.au)

Phone: (03) 9059 5158