There's a lot going on! Pedagogy with very young children

Anne Stonehouse: Hello, I'm Anne Stonehouse. This video explores what it means to teach very young children well. In other words, some of the important features of effective pedagogy. We do this by observing one educator with children from around one-and-a-half to almost three years, and hearing her thoughts about some aspects of her professional practice. We're using the term pedagogy broadly, in the way that the Early Years Learning Framework and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Frameworks define it.

Pedagogy is early childhood educators' professional practice, especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships, curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning.

We also use the terms teaching and practice to mean the same thing. The importance of the first three years for learning and development is widely acknowledged. What then is excellent pedagogy for this age group? This is not an easy question to answer in part because some of [the] evidence of learning in the first three years is subtle. It's hard to recognise unless you know what you're looking for. Figuring out what very young children are trying to do and communicate what their intentions are is at some times like solving a mystery. The mystery can make it challenging to decide how best promote their learning, development, and well-being. Traditional stereotypes of very young children can also lead to low expectations, underestimating their learning, because we either don't notice it or we misinterpret their actions and communications. It's also true that the difference between very good and mediocre pedagogy is often subtle and has a lot to do with why you do what you do and how you do it.

In this video, we aim to highlight the complexity of providing excellent education and care for very young children. We hope to prompt critical reflection that leads to improvements and practices and to validate existing excellent practices. Mel is an educator and the educational leader at Elwood Children's Centre in Melbourne. We filmed her on two days, three months apart. Several of the children were present on both days. Although the filming took place in an education and care service, the messages about practice are relevant to professionals who work with this age group in other settings. For example, maternal and child health nurses and facilitators of supported playgroups.

Teaching and learning happen all the time, not at special times, and take many forms. Sometimes educators' give instructors or initiate a learning opportunity. Often, teaching is responding, being guided by the child. Usually, it involves the adult doing and/or saying something, having a conversation that is an interaction. Teaching also includes educator's decisions not to intervene, but rather to observe, be close by, and accessible, an interested bystander. Setting up learning environments and making decisions about the structure of the program are also crucial. Whatever form it takes, pedagogy that is high quality is always thoughtful and purposeful.

Melanie Turkopp: I think teaching happens with everything, at any situation that arises, anything that goes on. It could be just a fleeting moment.

Anne Stonehouse: Specific practices in an education and care service are always the result of critical reflection and depend very much on the children and the context. However, all good pedagogy enacts similar key principles and aims for similar outcomes for children. Three outstanding principles, whatever the context, are: Number one, profound respect for young children, viewing them as both capable and vulnerable, and acknowledging their right to contribute to decisions about their experience. Secondly, deep and thorough knowledge of each child combined with unrelenting determination to try to understand their intentions, what they're telling you through their behaviour and communication that they've learned and are learning, their personal style of being and what they're interested in. Third, clarity about your intentions or purposes, what you want children to learn, the reasons why, and how best to enable that learning.

Pedagogy that enacts respect, knowledge, and clarity of purpose arises from sustained critical reflection, being creative, experimenting, taking reasonable risks and learning along with children. The rest of the video is Mel's thoughts about these three features and some illustrations of how she translates them into practice.

Mel: I view children, and especially this age group, as capable. I can appreciate what they're trying to do, what they feel is their way of doing things, their voices are heard so I can understand, you know, Van tends to get up off the table during a meal time. If I would have brought him down, said to him 'Oh, we sit down for lunch,' I wouldn't have noticed that he gets up off the table and makes sure that door's closed because no one closes that door properly. So he will get up, he'll close that door and he'll come back, and for me, that's allowed him to observe his environment, realise it's too noisy from the other room. We like our door closed, and come back.

So I'm allowing him that sort of ability to see his environment, look after his environment, and so I think if I can see the children in that respect, I won't, I won't, what do you call it, not stifle them, and I think that happens a lot where we think it should be done a certain way and we're sitting at the table and this is what we do, and this is how we eat, but if you can actually see that there's a reason behind what they're doing, I think that there's so much learning for us about them and for them to feel so good about themselves.

Mel: Van, would you like to take to this to Lula? Because I think we're finished. Do you want to take the fruit platter or the scrap bowl?

Van: Take the fruit platter.

Mel: Fruit platter?

Mel: He thought of a game that might stop Walja, and told 'who's [inaudible]?' A brave eagle hawk. Where's the eagle hawk? Which one's the eagle hawk? That's the eagle hawk, that's right and I can fly higher than you. [child makes noise] How are you going to see the pages if you put my arms up high? Aha, I get it.

I think what's important when talking and communicating with children of this age is that you're talking how you normally would talk to anybody, and you speak to them respectfully and high expectation too. We've got an expectation of these children that do understand what we're saying, and they've understood from a very early age, but are just learning more and more about language. The way I talk would be how I would want someone to talk to me as well, and I think if someone came in to me and was so high pitched and so cartoon like, I would get offended.

Anne Stonehouse: Educators who aim to know children deeply value communication with families and what they can learn from them.

Parent: Oh Mel, I just want to tell you that we had a little bit of a rocky start this morning.

Mel: Oh, did you?

Parent: Because we had another night with Gilbert coming into our room and we're trying not to let him sleep in our room ...

Mel: Okay.

Parent: Because we don't get a full night's sleep. So we keep walking him back into his room and not talking but just leading him back.

Mel: I might give him a few more cuddles, a little bit more time with his Sessy on the couch.

Parent: Yeah, and maybe early sleep?

Mel: Because he definitely starts knowing when he's tired and he grabs his Sessy and hops on the couch where I might hang with him a bit too. And pop him to bed earlier?

Parent: Yeah, yeah.

Mel: Yeah? I find that the parents are actually quite open with information and, you know, a few questions just brings it all out as well, and I didn't want to reflect what was going on at home, I just wanted to make his time with us maybe catch up on rest, feel less anxious about his mum feeling tired as well, and that component's probably the most important, and without that information from Romy, I would have been wondering why he was so, 'Ooh', or he couldn't cope with his peers, or, you know, things were happening for him.

Anne Stonehouse: Educators who are serious about their pedagogy think carefully about what kinds of learning opportunities are likely to have meaning for children, and also about the effect of their involvement in children's play and learning.

Mel: In the home corner, when they're pouring cups of teas and coffees, and sometimes I can actually stand back, and I can see them doing it for each other. But I think the children are quite happy and interested to come and join me with the cup of coffee, and that area's actually been set up because there's been such this thing about cafe's and coffee and lots of parents are taking their children to cafe's and having little babyccino's and those things now, so it's very relative to their families and what they do, having another, and I think doing it for each other is really good too 'cause it's bringing young children into social play that I think, you know, a few years ago people saying, 'oh, they're very solitary, they're very egocentric.' They don't even realise sometimes that this is what they're doing, they're actually cooperating and reading each other as well.

Child: Delicious!

Mel: Cheers! Very yum, thank you I'm getting more. Cameron, do you want another one? Thank you.

Child: Me?

Mel: Aw, Rad wants some, cheers. Oh my goodness.

Child: More?

Mel: I'm going to need to have a bit more stomach room here for this, there's a lot going on.

I don't think there's a lot of pressure to be involved all the time. In fact, I think like even in, I mean, the children wanted that interaction in the home corner, but I think actually sometimes it can be more of a hindrance too because it takes them away from learning so many other aspects, but it is a judgement call at the time. There were so many people at that tunnel that I brought over, and with the thing underneath, 'cause they were so excited that it was sort of exactly how they wanted it finally, that I did need to come in at some point and sort of try and disperse a little bit of the cramped up commotion that was going to take place, 'cause I think they were going to start getting a bit frantic and upset with each other. So distractions I thought at that time would be a good idea.

There's moving cars here, there's a tunnel, there's an ape and a koala. It can get very busy, and there's at least four or five people, so this is a very busy place, hey?

I find it quite easy to see when I would like to hop into something. Sometimes I'll just watch a child or two children that have just been so busy doing their thing, and it's just a matter of putting something extra on the table, either standing back or just sitting there myself and sometimes they don't even realise I'm there.

Mel: Do you want to have a kangaroo? [squealing] Here's one kangaroo, hold on Quinn, hold on Quinn, I'm giving one to Van. There you go, now you can all have some animals together.

Anne Stonehouse: Helping children learn to be together, understand their rights, and respect others' rights is a vital area of learning, and therefore a major part of an educator's work. This perspective contrasts dramatically with the aim of managing behaviour.

Mel: Come take this Cameron. Take that, Cameron, take that to Lula. And there's a tray here Lula .Dot was wearing that. Sorry, Eva was wearing that, Dot. You can have a turn after, she was wearing it, thank you.

Educator: May I take this?

Mel: Yes please.

Educator: Thank you.

Mel: She's just going to do a little bit of cooking, I think. And when she's finished, she's going to give you a go, okay? How did you go with your face? Did you … [trails off]

Mel: Do you remember when you said you were finished with it? Dot's going to have a turn. She really wants to have a turn too. If you want this off, you give this to Dot. Thanks. Would you like some help, Dot?

Situations where children are being a bit more pushy to others than some would like, I find there's a few ways in which you can do it, and I think a bit of observation's really important in the actual time that it's happening. If there is a bit of a shove and another child sort of looks, looks back at the one who's done it, I mean, you can actually observe it first before jumping in because it would be nice to see if that other child can actually hold himself up or respond in a certain way that will maybe help that learning without our interception or without our assistance.

If it's continuing and I'm seeing that the other child's not able to assert themselves in the situation, then I would prefer to go and support that child that it's happening to. And if I feel, after observation, that the child who's doing all the pushing is enjoying something out of it or actually feeling they're getting a bit of attention out of it, then I even specifically more turn to the other child, but within ear shot of the one who's there, explaining how I feel about the situation and that , you know, we're very much there to look after them and we're going to support them and help them to, you know, maybe, say 'stop' to the other person or understand that you can walk further away if you like.

Because sometimes it's very interesting to the person who is pushing, actually why they've done it and what was in their head, and it could be something very simple that could change their actions.

Anne Stonehouse: Well set up physical environments are essential for positive learning and teaching. They happen when educators have clear goals and are thoughtful about how environments contribute to children's learning.

Mel: There's been some extra mirrors placed in the learning environment. The area where's there's a light table, which is actually a light plate, that reflection of light and them in a small space allows them to sort of see themselves within that environment doing what they're doing, not just looking at the actual things they're touching. The other areas where I've actually added more mirrors is specifically for one child, and that was about feelings and starting to understand where maybe some of his frustrations are coming from, maybe starting to understand some other children's facial expressions, because they're not able to say how they feel at the time, that he's maybe invading their space, or their comfort zone. So that was actually set up for him in mind.

The sort of mirror area with the dolls, and we took some photos of children with different expressions from the centre. It's kind of to reflect who they are and what their faces can end up looking like, and sometimes I've noticed them looking at those pictures and actually making the faces that they see too, and with us available, then I can express what that feeling or what that expression looks like to others.

Mel: That's me! Who's that? That's right. Were you smiling or were you sad? I think you were smiling. That's Jake, he's having a big smile. You can see his teeth. There's Dot, I think she looks a bit sad.

Child: Dot.

Mel: Bit sad. He looks a bit angry.

Having an open space and just having a few things here is probably not well thought out and structured for what children want. My thought when setting something up like that is the tables at a certain point, they might hop onto it. This is a glass or a light table, so you have to be careful, so my thought was to put it under a high cot, so then they're restricted from being able to one, get on top of it, and two, there's really only space for maybe two or three children, and because there are other areas they can go to, they don't think that they have to be there.

There's so many lessons to be learned in an environment that's, that is structured and purposeful, but it's being able to be utilised by the children and read by the children. So dividing, but at the same time, still being able to observe from other areas of the room is important. So, if I'm using materials which I feel will divide up an area and make there be some quiet sort of spots for people or some other experiences on the other side, they're always sort of sheer, so you can see what's going on but still give them that opportunity to be in different spaces where their worlds don't collide.

I've questioned myself may a time about 'Am I resetting too much? Are we reorganising too much?' I've even done a few sort of tests on it as well, and sort of just thought, 'Let's just see how it all goes.' And the one main thing that comes to play is that things are everywhere, and it all comes into the middle, and wherever an educator is, mostly everything will come. With experiences that have a lot of bits and pieces in it for posting and so forth, sometimes they get carried in baskets and children this age love baskets and they love carrying, and so be it that that should happen. But when they're finished and all is done, it can definitely come back to that space and be ready of another opportunity.

Sameness and change in your environment, I don't change too much in our environment. There's no furniture changing around, 'cause once you change one thing, you end up ending up having to change other things 'cause they don't either work with where it is, and it can cause quite, I think, a disruption to children. They'll walk in expecting to have this there and this here, and it could cause a little bit of anxiety, a bit of concern, and maybe not even wanting to come back in. So, I'm not saying keep everything as is, but, you know, if you're providing an experience for a specific reason, and you're adding to an experience which happens a lot, as you see children play, we can add and extend. The home corner wasn't such a café before, and now it has kind of moved into a bit more of a café feel for the children. I think things need to be, what do you call it? Not dependable, they need to be predictable. I think children like that within the place they've gotten to know so well, and when I do change things in the room, if I do have a thing that I would like to do, I do it while they're there. I don't do it when they're not there.

Anne Stonehouse: Why's that?

Mel: Because they can see what's happening. They can actually have an understanding of what I'm doing, and they can actually help me. Even just applying the … and this isn't even moving furniture, even just bringing in the painted rocks that we've put in, they all sort of came to it, but we painted it first, they saw me putting some symbols on. We then took those and put them in a container together, so it wasn't just me coming out and presenting it to them and, 'Look what are you going to do with it?' It was a progressive change for them as well, so I actually find that really important that it's not just walking in the next morning and looking at something completely different, yeah.

Mel: Can you find the lizard? Here's a lizard. Exactly.

Anne Stonehouse: Powerful, positive teaching and learning opportunities occur when educators view daily living experiences or routines as important parts of the curriculum. Meals and morning and afternoon tea, in particular, offer excellent opportunities for educators to enact respect and explore children's intentions.

Mel: I think the more the children know and the more the children do as far, as routine, and knowing how to be progressive with what they want to go on with, as well as using routines carefully with children, too. That combination is allowing children freedom, but letting them know where things are, and they'll always be there, so their milk will always be in the fridge, but if we leave it on the table, it won't be in the fridge for them for the next time,  and it will probably go off. So, it's learning that these things go in a place, so that you can return to it, and so those routines are flexible for them, but then they're also known to them as well. The table cloth on the table, as soon as that comes out, or even if we mention lunch or morning tea or afternoon tea, they'll go and grab the tablecloth themselves.

Sandwich Day that we had today is often a hit and miss, and we're trying to work that out a bit carefully as well, so they are having the things they want to eat, having the choice, and that's why I thought while we were sitting there, I was like, this big platter it's sort of, and I'm not too sure about this, maybe there should be two at the table. So we're still nutting out the best way that the children can choose their food, have their own choice and flavour they like, understand what's in there too because I did see Dot at the end of the table was very interested in the salad sandwich. I've not seen many children enjoying the salad sandwich, but I don't know whether it was the colours or the feel of it, and she really was actually going to partake, so she ended up taking that for herself, trying out leaves in her mouth, and a few other things that were inside the sandwich. So it was actually a really good learning experience for her in the end that she tried that one out as well. There could be five ham sandwiches, but the middle one is the one that they want, so who am I to say to them, 'This is the one you're having of the ham sandwiches.'

So that's where I feel like their choice is the most important, but the reason why I think he'd taken so many is 'cause he got the wrong filling. So I think it was just a trial and error really for him, and he was sitting there knowing he'd actually taken the wrong one, but I don't think he knew what to do from then on. He did know that he wanted something else, so from my perspective, it was instead of putting it back on the tray and having other food on those things and giving it to other children, allow him to actually have the one he was wanting the whole time. Even Rad next to him knew the one he wanted and gave him the cheese one for the second time round, so I think it was just a mishap of things had taken place and busyness at the table, that he was able to sort of be continually taking, but then realising it's still not the one I would like [laughs].

And our eyes probably weren't there to then assist him straight away and had we assisted him and said, 'You know what, is that not the one you want?' He probably would have probably gone, 'No.' I think it's looking through the action they're taking. It's not to go against what we're doing and what's perceived to be the way we need to behave at a table or how we're supposed to know what to do at a table. I think you've got to look past that and realise that we need to understand their wants rather than, you know, and if they were older and getting into the other rooms, they might be able to say it a lot easier to us, yeah.

Anne Stonehouse: Thoughtful experiments and innovations characterise good pedagogy, as educators continually look for ways to improve practice.

Mel: And just one photo, particularly, from our educational leader came through, and I kind of just was puzzled over it, thinking, you know, 'How beautiful would it be just to have fresh air, to relax, to sleep?' and I kept thinking of myself even lying on the beach, thinking, 'Oh.' I do, I drift off on the beach. And you do actually relax when you're in a park, and so I thought, really it could prove something more. Really relaxing, really fulfilling and a nice learning space to relax in.

We definitely saw that they slept, fell asleep much quicker than they would if they were inside. We had a student with us who straight away said, 'It's too light, it's too noisy, there's no way they're going to fall asleep.' And they did still fall asleep, and most of the them slept as much if not more than they would sleep inside.

Anne Stonehouse: Highly skilled educators are both intentional and thoughtfully spontaneous. They plan, work purposefully and at the same time trust the intuition and hunches. Their trust in themselves and the children allows then to initiate, respond, and be in the moment with children. They notice opportunities and take advantage of them. They make the most of opportunities for one-to-one, or one-to-two interactions with children.

Mel: All the fish are swimming in the water, all the … Agree with you. [Mel] Who's that? [Child] Van. [Mel] Van! So now Van's there, that means you can use this hand towel today to dry your hands. Eva? No, she looks like Quinn, but it's not it's, Eva. Quinny's in the wombat room. That's Van. Who's that? [Child] Richard.

Mel: Do you want to use this one, Cam? That's you too, your cloth. It started raining, and I've become a little bit more efficient when the rain comes. We don't take the beds inside. I've just got some tarps, so the tarps go up, and it's been raining, and one of the best things that happened was when the children they had no idea, they were asleep. They woke up and the ground was wet, and all of a sudden, these snails had almost invaded the garden, so when they had fallen asleep, it was dry, and it was quite warm. When they woke up, it was wet and there were just snails everywhere. So this thought to them that the whole environment had changed. I thought, 'This is a big concept, so we're going to have to start thinking about this, we're going to have to start, I think, talking about it.' And so first we spoke about the snails and where they were going and why they had come out. I said, 'It must be wet and they're coming out.' And they were looking and pointing, and I said, 'Let's just watch where they go, and …'

So it encouraged them to want to know more about these snails. 'Are they going to their family? Are they going somewhere dry? Do they like the wet?' And so then that's something I wound have then continued upon after speaking with them with a little book that we can see in our room that had snails. And it brings this learning out further by us suggesting things to them, by me coming up here afterwards and Googling a few things on snails that I may not have known that I can then apply when they remind me of what happened outside or, you know, 'cause they return to that area either the next day or whenever and say 'Oh, snails!' You know, we'll probably have to go looking for them.

Anne Stonehouse: Planning includes finding answers to questions about children. Mel seeks always to understand children better in order to expand and extend their learning.

Mel: The things that are uppermost in my mind about planning, and this is one of the things I really enjoy, is the small components about it, the, picking up on the little things on planning. Leon and few others are at the table, and we were doing high fives when people were pouring their milk, 'cause they were so excited that they were pouring. It was the beginning of the year, and they hadn't had able to do it yet, or the time, so they were high fiving, and I saw Leon sort of going a little bit like this, and when he did his, I went to high five and he just, 'No, no.' I thought 'Well, that's interesting, I wonder…' And so it creates questions in your mind. 'Does he not like the slap? Does he not like the sound? Does he not like the touch?' And when you start thinking, having questions, you're already planning for this child.

So I thought 'Oh, that's interesting.' So each time we sat down, and we were doing a few other things, I thought 'I'm going to … I'm going to bring this up.' So for me his planning was 'I want to find out what this is.' So there was a few more times that it happened, 'No, no', no high fives and his head was down, and he looked a bit, by the third or fourth time we did it, we sort of ranged it about two weeks' worth that I was trying this out with him, and then finally he kind of looked like this, as if 'Is she ever going to get this?' And it was amazing because we kept doing it and I kept asking him occasionally and he just looked at me, he shook his head, he grabbed my hand, put it into a fist, got his hand and did that. So then I asked the parents, I said 'Do you high five?' They went, 'Oh no, we bro fist.' And I was like, 'Oh, gosh.'

Anne Stonehouse: Promoting and encouraging very young children's learning development and wellbeing in the best possible ways is complex. Volatility describes the curriculum for this age group. Things can change for better or for worse in the blink of an eye. One minute, you have a crowd around you while you read a book, and then suddenly, you're reading it to yourself. Two children playing happily can turn quickly into a vigorous dispute. Children may be entranced by something one second and totally disinterested the next – no transitions or warnings. A misconception related to this volatility is that these very young children have short attention spans. This misconception arises from the fact that we don't always predict accurately what will and won't interest them. Yes, children do tend to come and go, but that's not the same as saying they have a short attention span. It is often said that encouraging very young children's learning requires slowing down to their time. They can take a long time to get from here to there because there is so much that interests them. However, there's an equal argument for adults to, at times, speed up and move with the children's fluctuating interests and engagement.

Excellent pedagogy with very young children requires being attracted by the subtlety of their learning, the frequent sense of mystery about their intentions, and the challenge of interpreting their behaviour. You need to relish the constructive randomness, unpredictability, and the lack of orderliness, as very young children go about their relentless quest to learn about this magnificent and complicated world. You have to respect and trust them as competent guides for much of their learning.

Mel: [Mel] You tell me when it's ready for me to put the tablecloth on, okay? You tell me if it's clean enough.

Anne Stonehouse: You need courage and a lot of physical and intellectual energy to ask questions, investigate hunches, be observant, see possibilities and experiment with children as collaborators. You have to think in advance, plan, and be prepared, and importantly, think while you're with children. Excellent pedagogy with young children results when educators have some the same qualities and dispositions that the children have: Lively minds, energy, curiosity, creativity, a drive to find out and understand, trust, openness, and a sense of wonder.

Mel: And I think educators can get quite set in a way in which they work, and it's not a terrible thing, but it's, once they're open to other ideas, and they can see how much more valuable it is to children, to offer in a different way, I think that can change that ideal.

Mel: I have a bit more stomach room here for this. There's a lot going on.