Department of Education and Training

Empowering early learners: unlocking oral language, literacy and executive function for success

SEMANN SLATTERY

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Using this resource

Hear more

Watch here

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Think and discuss

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Beliefs about children's learning and development

Individual and collective belief about children and their learning have an impact on our practice

- All children learn
- Inclusive practices enhance outcomes for children
- Early childhood programs with highly qualified and skilled teachers and educators make a difference
- High expectations by professionals for every child should be central
- An assessment culture within an early childhood program is a critical factor in achievement
- Every child, early childhood professional and early childhood program can succeed

To hear more, click here

What do the early childhood professionals in your service believe about how children learn?

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Assessment

Phases of learning and Learning Trajectories

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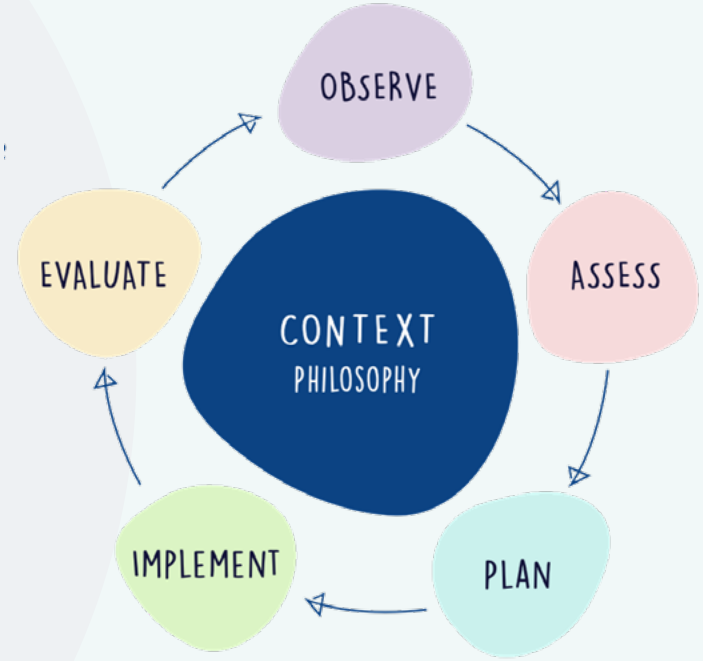
Assessment Practices

"Educators use a variety of strategies to collect, document, organise, synthesise and interpret the information that they gather to assess children's learning. They search for appropriate ways to collect rich and meaningful information that depicts children's learning in context, describes their progress and identified their strengths, skills and understandings." NT Early Years Curriculum Guide: preschool



Listen to an ECA Podcast — #25 Sixth Landing - teaching and assessment for learning here

You can read more and unpack the planning cycle on pages 17-18 here

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Beliefs about children's learning and development

A learning trajectory describes how each stage of learning builds on what has gone before and also provides the foundation for later stages of learning.

Phases of learning are a tool for educators to use throughout the year to make informed judgements about a child's learning, development and wellbeing. There are no minimum standards, skills or checklists and no end point that children must reach by the end of preschool before they commence their Foundation Year.
(NT Early Years Curriculum Guide: Preschool)

Watch to learn more about learning trajectories, click here

Learn more about learning trajectories, click here

Read more about learning phases in the NT Early Years Curriculum Guide: preschool on page 19 click here

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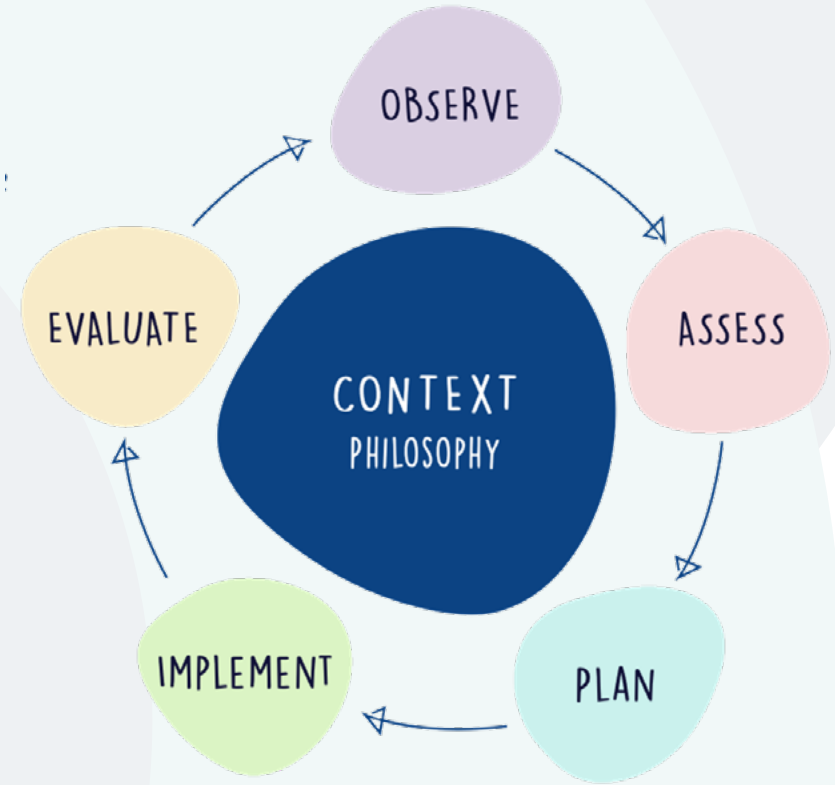
Learning Trajectories and the Planning Cycle



Observe listen/collect information	The learning trajectories provide an opportunity for you to know what to look for in relation to different aspects of children's learning, development and wellbeing.
Assess analyse/ interpret	The learning trajectories help you to understand children's individual strengths and capabilities, and to understand what happens next along the continuum.
Plan design	The learning trajectories assist you to thoughtfully analyse the information you have gathered. They help you plan for, and extend, children's learning, development and wellbeing.
Implement enact	The learning trajectories offer suggestions for intentional teaching strategies in each domain.
Evaluate critically reflect	The learning trajectories assist you in identifying unanticipated outcomes, and whether the implementation supported or extended children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Click here to listen about learning trajectories and the planning cycle

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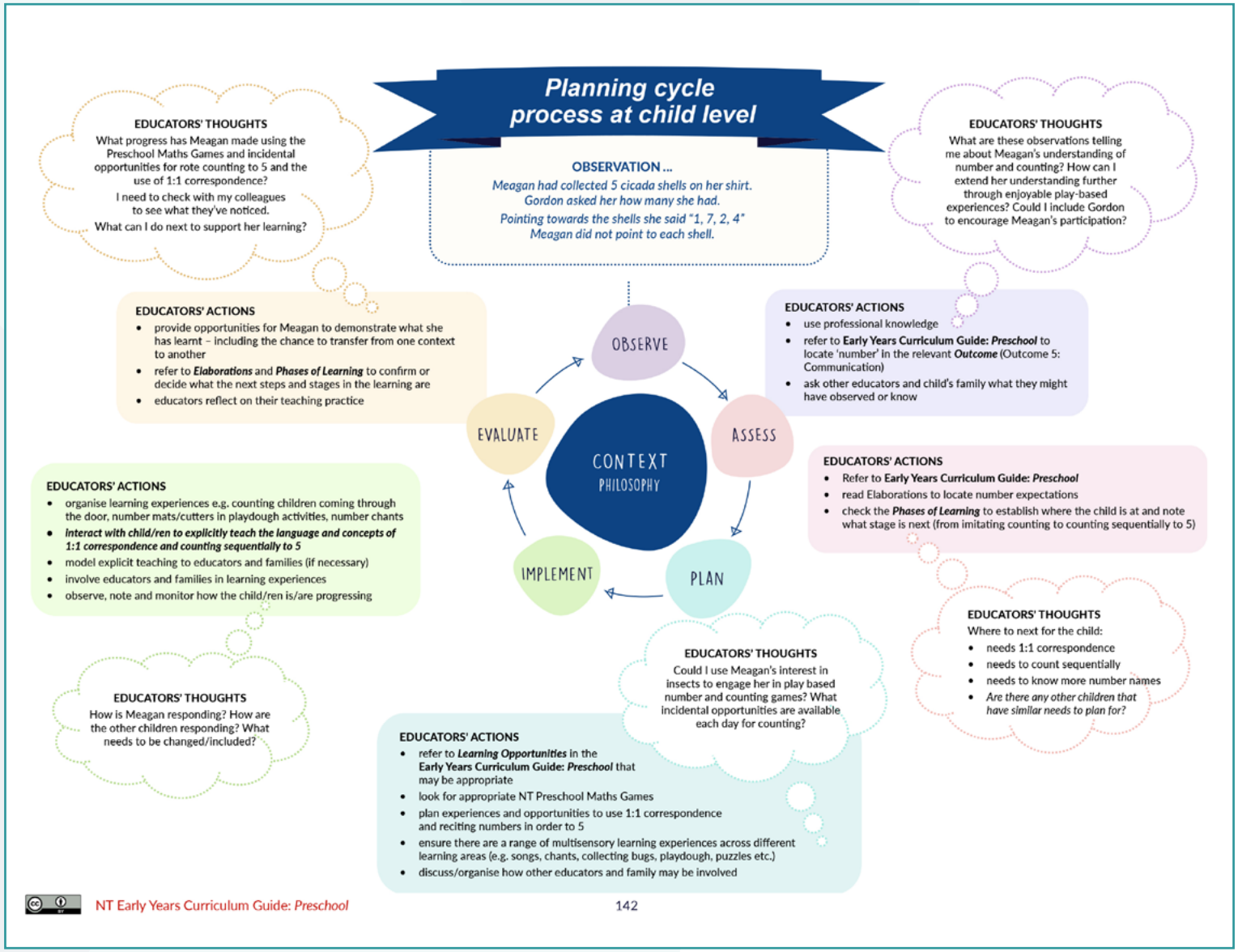
The Planning Cycle in Action



Click here to download a copy of the Early Years Planning Cycle Resource

In what ways is the planning cycle visible for each child in your practice?

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Case Study

Daisy is a confident and energetic 4-year-old who thrives in group settings. She often initiates play, negotiates roles, and leads collaborative projects, particularly in construction and dramatic play. While Daisy's engagement is evident, her educators begin to wonder: *How can we strengthen our assessment practices to better understand where Daisy is in her learning trajectory?*

The team reflects that many of their current observations capture what Daisy is doing, but not how her learning is evolving over time. To address this, they start using a more intentional approach to documentation, focusing on the 'how' and 'why' behind Daisy's actions.

For example, rather than noting that Daisy "built a bridge with blocks," an educator observes that Daisy planned the sequence of construction, tested weight-bearing strategies, and adapted her design based on peer feedback. These insights are linked to learning trajectories in problem-solving, collaboration, and spatial reasoning.

Educators revisit earlier documentation to identify patterns in Daisy's play, recognising that her thinking has shifted from experimenting with materials to anticipating outcomes and leading group decision-making.

To capture more nuanced evidence, educators trial different modes of assessment. Voice recordings of Daisy narrating her actions, annotated photographs of her constructions, and peer dialogue transcriptions offer layered insights into her cognitive processes.

These tools helped educators assess not just the outcome of a task, but the depth of Daisy's thinking and the sophistication of her strategies.

The team also revisit planning practices, asking

- *How do our assessments inform the next steps in Daisy's learning?* They begin to pose planning questions such as,
- "What type of challenge might extend Daisy's spatial reasoning?" or
- "How can we support her to build persistence when plans don't work out?"

Prompts for reflection

How did the educators shift from describing what Daisy was doing to analysing how her learning was progressing?

What evidence helped them map Daisy's development across phases of learning?

In what ways can assessment guide intentional planning that honours each child's learning phase and supports progression?

What are the strengths of your current assessment practices?

How might your practice be informed by the phases of learning and learning trajectories? Where would this be visible in your practice?

How might you strengthen what you have learnt about children through observation to inform the 'plan' and 'implementation' phase of the planning cycle?

Pause and Do

1. Locate your current plan or program
2. Consider your reflection from the previous slide
3. How might this inform your next plan or program?
4. What support might you need to implement any changes?
5. Design your plan for the next cycle, including these adjustments
6. While in the implementation stage, be sure to pay attention to the impact of the adjustments on your practice. Document them in a way that informs your future planning
7. At the end of the programming cycle, consider the over all effectiveness of changes made and repeat the cycle

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Oral language and literacy

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Oral Language in action

Oral language encompasses speaking and listening and is a critical foundation for the early development of literacy across modes of communication, from speaking and listening to reading and writing.

Interactive storytelling	Read-aloud sessions
Conversations and dialogues	Engage in daily conversations
Music and songs	Singing and rhyming
Scaffolded questioning	Open-ended questions
Outdoor exploration	Nature walks with conversations
Story creation	Group story creation

Click here to listen to the power of oral language in action

Literacy in action

Literacy in action is:

- The comprehension of simple texts that are read aloud, recounted, or signed
- The emerging understanding of how texts are created and produced

In addition, this includes:

- Learning to understand more complex language used in high-quality texts.
- Learning to hear and produce the sounds in spoken words.
- Beginning to understand the relationship between spoken and written words.

Interactive read-alouds	High-quality texts Repeated reading Shared reading
Writing and drawing	Emergent writing
Scaffolded questioning	Open-ended questions

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Practice Videos – bringing it all together

Being able to observe literacy rich strategies in action can support and guide critical reflection both individually and as a team. Click on the images below and consider videos of practice that may support you and your team to strengthen practice.

The Literacy Toolkit, Government of Victoria
Includes a range of videos demonstrating literacy specific practices. Choose an area that you'd like to strengthen and watch to learn.

Connecting with practice videos, ACECQA
Vignettes can promote discussion and provide opportunity to experiment with new ideas. For example, you might consider the Communication Milestones from Speech Pathology Australia as you observe children in these videos.

The Learning Hub, Early Childhood Australia
Look for the video tours of early childhood services. What evidence can you see of literacy rich practice?

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Case Study – Play based literacy development

Amira, a 4 year old, has become captivated by making signs for her play. During outdoor play she often creates menus for the sandpit cafe or labels for her block constructions. Noticing her interest, her educator decides to nurture her emerging literacy skills through playful, meaningful experiences connected to her own ideas.

The educator introduces a basket of paper offcuts, clipboards, markers, and alphabet cards to the outdoor environment. Amira and her friends immediately begin creating signs for their games. The educator gently supports by asking open questions such as “What do you want people to know?” which encourages Amira to think about the purpose of her writing. The educator models sounding out simple words and helps Amira notice the letters that match these sounds, always keeping the focus on playful exploration rather than correctness.

Soon, Amira begins experimenting with writing her name on her signs and proudly shows her peers. The educator then invites the group to create a shared storybook based on their outdoor café play. Children contribute drawings while Amira dictates parts of the story. The educator records the children’s words and reads the story back during group time, helping Amira link spoken language with print while strengthening her confidence as a storyteller.

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Prompts for reflection

1. How did the educator embed literacy learning within Amira's play and interests in a way that felt meaningful rather than instructional?
2. How did the use of real purpose writing help Amira understand the connection between spoken words, symbols, and early print concepts?
3. What other play based strategies could extend Amira's literacy learning, particularly those connected to her interest in signs, menus, and storytelling?
4. What practices from this case study could be adapted in your own setting to support literacy development through playful, child centred experiences?

Watch an Introduction to Early Childhood Learning Trajectories

Environments that support learning, click here to listen

Pause and Do

1. Locate your current plan or program
2. Consider your reflection from the previous slide
3. How might you design indoor and outdoor spaces that foster oral language and literacy?
4. What support might you need to implement any changes?
5. Design your plan for the next cycle, including these adjustments
6. While in the implementation stage, be sure to pay attention to the impact of the adjustments on your practice. Document them in a way that informs your future planning.
7. At the end of the programming cycle, consider the overall effectiveness of changes made and repeat the cycle.

Executive Functioning

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Executive Functioning

Executive functioning skills enable children to sustain and direct their attention, remember instructions, think about problems or situations in flexible ways, sequence tasks into manageable chunks, set goals, monitor their own progress, and regulate their responses. Executive function provides an important foundation for children's learning and prosocial behaviour and increases the likelihood of future academic success. It includes components of working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control.

For more information, watch this video from the Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Watch this video from AERO for more information, about executive function, learning trajectories and the planning cycle

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Working Memory

Working memory is the capacity to hold, recall, and work with information for short periods of time, allowing children to stay focused, engage with tasks, and act on instructions. In early childhood, this skill is developing rapidly as children begin to manage more complex expectations in both play and routines. Working memory supports a child to follow instructions, remember what comes next in a sequence, and stay connected to an idea even when distractions occur. For example, a child may be asked to collect their hat, wash their hands, and join the group for lunch. Depending on age and developmental context, we may expect children to follow two or three step instructions like this with decreasing levels of support. Working memory also helps children persevere when play is interrupted, enabling them to return to their task and continue with their original idea. As children strengthen this skill, they become more capable of organising their thinking, completing tasks more independently, and engaging with learning in deeper ways.

Ideas for Practice

- Encourage children to recap things they did "Tell me more about what you did on the weekend … what was your favourite part?"
- Games that challenge children to remember information and then act based on that recall — e.g., *Simon Says* or *I Spy* — and songs with sequenced, cumulative actions, such as *Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*, *The Wheels on the Bus*, or *There's a Hole in My Bucket*.
- In a group (where all the children can see each other), everyone has a turn at making an animal noise. Each child must repeat the noises of the others who came before them first before making their own noise.
- Place 3-5 familiar objects on a tray, let children look, cover them secretly and remove 1 object. Ask – what's missing?

Flexible Thinking (Cognitive Flexibility)

Flexible thinking, often called cognitive flexibility, is the ability to shift attention, adapt to new information, and consider alternative perspectives. This skill helps children manage changes in routine, move between tasks with ease, and respond constructively when plans need to be adjusted. In early childhood settings, cognitive flexibility can be seen when children cope with a change in the daily schedule, accept a new way of doing something, or modify their play ideas to include others. It also supports creative thinking, allowing children to imagine multiple uses for materials such as loose parts or art resources and to generate different solutions when problems arise. As flexible thinking develops, children become more capable collaborators, more resilient in the face of small setbacks, and more willing to experiment with new ideas. This openness enriches their learning, play, and relationships.

Ideas for Practice

- Opportunities for physical activities that include movement and problem-solving skills — e.g., obstacle courses, scaling and climbing activities such as trees, climbing structures, balance beams, or ropes
- Model responses to challenges to help generate ideas — e.g., “It’s hard to join two different materials, and I can see it’s not working how you first thought. What else might work? What can we do next?”
- Games that become progressively more difficult — e.g., adapt as they progress, with new instructions provided to help children with their thinking

Inhibitory Control (Self-Control)

Self control, sometimes referred to as inhibitory control, is the ability to pause, think, and choose an action rather than responding automatically to an impulse. It involves filtering out distractions, managing strong urges, and staying focused on a goal even when something more immediately tempting is nearby. For young children, this can be especially challenging as they are still learning to regulate their emotions and behaviour. In early childhood settings we see this skill emerging when children wait for their turn, stop themselves from interrupting, or hold back from grabbing a toy they want. Although these moments can be difficult, each attempt strengthens their developing self regulation. As children build self control, they become more able to participate in group activities, engage safely and respectfully with peers, and navigate daily routines with growing independence.

Ideas for Practice

- Model the use of words to express feelings and negotiate differences of opinion. This helps children develop emotional language — learning to identify, name, and communicate their emotions
- Play music and invite children to move to the rhythm (fast or slow). When the music stops, have them freeze. Increase the challenge by asking them to freeze in a specific position — e.g., bobbing down. This encourages children to inhibit movement, shift their attention, and follow directions
- Play games such as Red Light, Green Light to build focus, self-regulation, and listening skills

Executive function in action

Executive function supports children to manage their attention, regulate their behaviour, solve problems, and adapt to changing situations. It encompasses working memory, flexible thinking, and self control, providing an essential foundation for learning, wellbeing, and social connection. Children draw on executive function skills as they plan, stay focused, shift between ideas, and persist through challenges.

Executive functioning in action includes:

- Developing the ability to pause, think, and choose actions with increasing control
- Learning to manage emotions and behaviour during play and group routines
- Using working memory to follow instructions and complete simple sequences
- Adjusting ideas, plans, or actions in response to new information

Activities for self control and inhibitory control; Games that involve waiting, stopping, and turn taking
Fostering emotional and behavioural regulation; Calming strategies, co regulation, predictable routines
Encouraging persistence and focus; Goal setting, completing tasks, motivating challenges
Group activities that foster collaboration and self regulation; Shared problem solving, cooperative games, team tasks

Click here to hear more

Watch Dr Adele Diamond – How to help children develop executive function

Read more about how an early childhood teacher considers executive function in practice

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Case Study

Supporting Executive Functioning in a 3-Year-Old

Mateo is a lively 3-year-old who loves playing outdoors and exploring his environment. However, his educators notice that he finds it difficult to transition between activities and often becomes upset when plans change. For example, when it's time to come inside after outdoor play, Mateo resists, cries, or lies on the ground. He also finds it hard to follow simple instructions if they are given all at once, often forgetting parts of what was said.

To support Mateo's **working memory,** his educators start by giving him one instruction at a time, such as, "Please put your hat in your locker." Once he's mastered that, they gradually build up to two-step instructions. They also use visual cues and gestures alongside spoken instructions to help reinforce the message.

To help him with **self-control**, the educators introduce short, structured activities with clear beginnings and endings, such as tidying up using a song. They also use picture schedules and countdown timers to support smoother transitions, giving Mateo time to prepare himself for change. For example, they tell him, "In five minutes, we will go inside," and follow up with reminders.

To develop **flexible thinking,** the educators introduce Mateo to storybooks with plot twists or characters who solve problems in unexpected ways. After reading, they ask questions like, "What else could the character have done?" or "Can you think of a different ending?" These questions help Mateo begin to consider alternative ways of thinking.

Over time, Mateo shows greater adaptability, fewer outbursts during transitions, and improved focus when following multi-step instructions. The support from educators helps him to build resilience and confidence in daily routines.

Prompts for reflection

1. What supports were put in place to help Mateo manage transitions?
2. How did the educator scaffold Mateo's ability to follow instructions?
3. How might visual supports benefit other children in your setting?
4. What strategies do you already use (or could use) to support flexible thinking in young children?

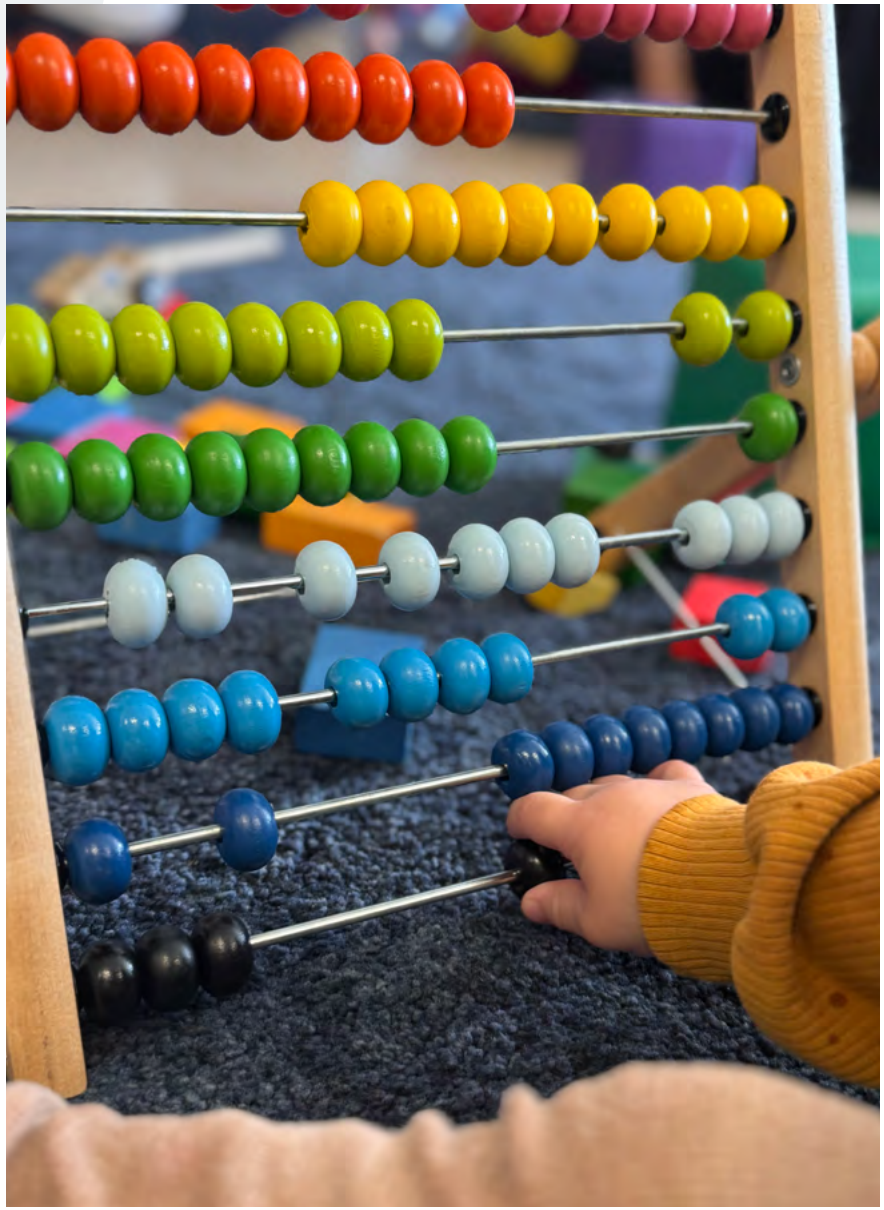
Pause and Do

1. Locate your current plan or program
2. Consider your reflection from the previous slide
3. How might you design spaces that enable executive functioning practices while inside play with children?
4. What support might you need to implement any changes?
5. Design your plan for the next cycle, including these adjustments
6. While in the implementation stage, be sure to pay attention to the impact of the adjustments on your practice. Document them in a way that informs your future planning.
7. At the end of the programming cycle, consider the overall effectiveness of changes made and repeat the cycle

Further Support

Need more support?

Contact the Office of Early Childhood:
oec.eyss@education.nt.gov.au



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