

Infants and toddlers: competent and confident communicators and explorers ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

National report summary ^[2]

PDF available for download ^[3]

National report summary

Good quality early childhood education and care for infants and toddlers has lasting benefits for children and their parents and whānau. This time is a critical and fundamental period of development for children as it lays the foundations for lifelong learning.

The communication and exploration strands of Te Whāriki, the Ministry of Education's curriculum for early childhood, are crucial to these foundations.

This report presents the Education Review Office (ERO)'s findings about how well 235 early childhood services reviewed during Terms 1 and 2, 2014 supported infants and toddlers to become competent and confident communicators and explorers.

Emphasis on relationships

Early childhood services in this review generally focused on establishing warm and nurturing relationships with infants and toddlers and had less emphasis on communication and exploration.

A responsive curriculum

Just over half of services had a responsive curriculum that supported infants and toddlers to become competent and confident communicators and explorers.

In the most responsive services, children experienced a high quality curriculum and responsive interactions and relationships. Children's interests and their parents' aspirations informed the curriculum and daily routines.

How well each service promoted positive learning outcomes for infants and toddlers was most influenced by:

- high quality leadership
- a highly reflective culture where teachers inquired into and regularly reflected on their teaching practice
- whole-staff professional learning and development in relation to infants and toddlers.

Conclusion: Improving outcomes for infants and toddlers

Generally, infants and toddlers were supported in well-designed learning environments and by warm and nurturing relationships with adults in the service. This support reflected a strong focus on wellbeing and belonging for these very young children.

Just over half of services supported infants and toddlers well and promoted positive outcomes for these children. These services not only focused on wellbeing and belonging, but also on supporting children to be communicators and explorers. Services' curricula were based on children's interests and their parents' aspirations, and children's learning was shared with parents. Assessment information also informed deliberate teaching practices that meant infants and toddlers continued to learn and develop as communicators and explorers. Teachers reviewed and reflected on their practice and considered the impacts on infants and toddlers and how they could improve teaching and learning.

However, these good practices were less evident in almost half the services in this evaluation. In less responsive services, although teachers maintained an appropriate focus on children's wellbeing and belonging, they struggled to encompass the communication and exploration strands of Te Whāriki in their curriculum. Teachers in these services had a more limited understanding of Te Whāriki and teaching practices specific to infants and toddlers. Teachers needed to extend their knowledge and understanding of current research, approaches and philosophies to provide a relevant and responsive curriculum for toddlers, particularly two-year-olds.

For infants and toddlers, high quality education and care is critical during this fundamental period in a child's development. While teachers

often knew children well, the curriculum was not always responsive to infants' and toddlers' strengths and interests. In addition to this, much assessment information did not identify children's progress or the increasing complexity of their learning and development.

The quality of the transitions for toddlers from spaces for up to two-year-olds to spaces for those over two was of particular concern. Infants often had key teachers who knew them and their families well. This meant the curriculum and interactions were responsive, and relationships were warm and nurturing. However, in many services transitions were not as well supported by nurturing key relationships or a responsive curriculum.

For infants and toddlers to be competent and confident communicators and explorers, leaders and teachers need to give them opportunities to improvise, randomly explore, compromise, negotiate and be playful. When children choose their own activities, they are more likely to be closely involved and to ask and follow up on their own questions or the questions of others. Children need to develop the expectation that communication can be a source of delight, that there are multiple ways of expressing ideas and feelings, and to learn to interpret others' ideas, feelings and actions.

****Notice the similarities between the conclusions drawn from this study in New Zealand to Canada's You Bet I Care! published in 2000.**

Note: This report is one of the many national evaluation reports on specific topics produced by New Zealand's Education Review Office (ERO) under the country's Education Act. The ERO's website describes it as "the New Zealand government department that evaluates and reports on the education and care of students in schools and early childhood services". The website is of interest to those who believe that evaluation, data, research and public reporting are integral parts of good public policy. See: <https://www.ero.govt.nz/> [4]

Related links:

You bet I care! [5]

Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, University of Guelph, 1 May 2000

ECE report won't impact govt target [6]

The New Zealand Herald, 7 Aug 2015

Region: Australia and New Zealand [7]

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