CHAPTER 1

WHY EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION MATTERS

Communication works for those who work at it.

John Powell

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter highlights the critical role effective communication plays in the provision of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and in the practice of early childhood educators, teachers and leaders. It explains why effective professional communication matters and introduces ideas about what "communication" is.

KEY CONCEPTS

- communication
- hierarchy of competence
- professional communication

"I KNOW HOW TO COMMUNICATE!"

While **communication** might seem something that is easy to do—after all, we do it all the time—in the context of quality ECEC it is something that takes skill and practice. This book will show that *communicating effectively as professionals*, interpersonally and in the workplace, requires a repertoire of many interconnected skills. It also involves adhering to principles of effective communication, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. Communicating effectively and professionally, interpersonally and in the workplace, is something that is learned and requires practice for all educators, regardless of the qualification you have and whether or not you have a formal leadership position in your service.

REFLECTION 1.1

Imagine that you were to apply for an early childhood educator position.

- How would you respond to the "excellent communication skills" requirement?
- How effective a communicator do you think you are?
- On what basis have you made this assessment?

As we will see in Chapter 2, communicating professionally is neither natural nor simple, and putting these skills into practice can be particularly challenging in an ECEC service, where educators work with diverse people in what can be busy and noisy environments. Being an effective communicator is, however, an expectation of all educators, from those working with children to those in leadership positions. This expectation is evident in advertisements for early childhood educator positions, with many employers listing excellent communication skills as a requirement for educators' roles. Below is a sample of essential criteria taken from real job advertisements that reflect how integral **professional communication** skills are to quality ECEC:

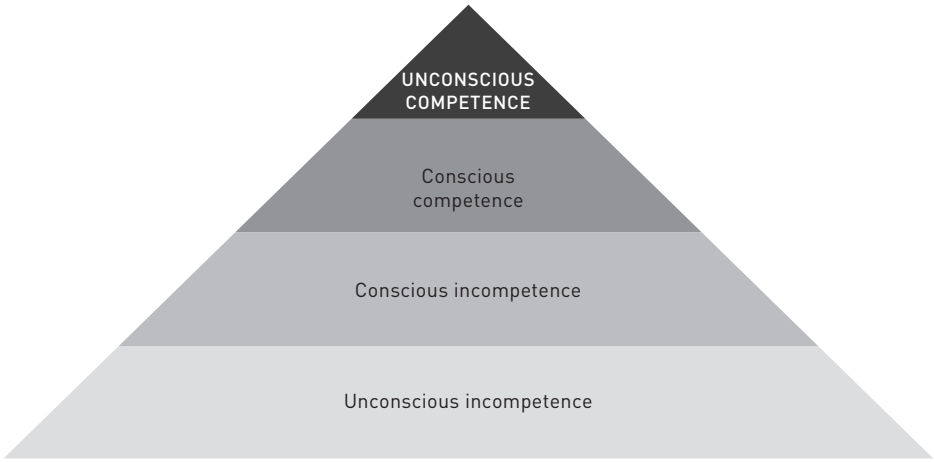
- Excellent written and verbal communication skills and the ability to form meaningful relationships with parents, families and other educators
- Professional standard of written and verbal communication and interpersonal skills
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills ... Maintain effective communication with the parents throughout the service
- Ensure that all families are communicated with in a warm and professional manner
- Be able to collaborate with the wider team to design and implement engaging, age-appropriate experiences and spaces for the children
- Strong good written and verbal communication skills (in English) and the ability to build strong relationships with families and fellow educators.

Professional communication is different from everyday communication. This is because when communicating as professionals we need to be intentional about our communication, purposefully adhering to principles of effective communication and drawing on a repertoire of interpersonal and workplace communication skills, and applying these with a diversity of people in diverse contexts to achieve the desired purpose. Professional communication is a learned practice, and one that takes time to master. The **hierarchy of competence** (Figure 1.1) provides a useful point of reflection when considering our ability to communicate professionally. The hierarchy of competence reflects the progressive stages involved when developing from skill incompetence to skill competence (Adams, 2016).

Reflected below is the competence hierarchy applied to an educator's communication skills:

1. At the unconscious incompetence stage an educator is poorly skilled but does not realise this. She may not even appreciate or accept the value of effective communication or the skills it comprises. Until she recognises this she will remain in this stage.
2. At the conscious incompetence stage an educator acknowledges that she needs to develop her communication skills and makes deliberate efforts to improve. Learning about and practising communication skills takes time and effort. Mistakes are part of the learning process.

FIGURE 1.1 HIERARCHY OF COMPETENCE



3. At the conscious competence stage an educator is a skilled communicator. She knows this because she understands how communication works, and knows and applies communication principles and skills. Applying communication skills at this level, however, still requires conscious effort and involves hard work.
4. At the unconscious competence stage an educator will effectively apply communication theory, principles and skills as though they are "second nature".

REFLECTION 1.2

Over a two-week period keep a journal of some of the communication exchanges you have with your colleagues, your parents, your service director/manager/owner, and someone from your local community. Aim to record two reflections for each stakeholder, noting in each reflection:

- the context in which the communication took place
- the key messages expressed by each person and how these messages were expressed
- the communication skills you think you used
- what you think you did well
- how you think you might have communicated more effectively with the other person.

Considering these reflections, where do you think your professional skills lie on the hierarchy of competence?

As you read through this book, we encourage you to revisit this reflection exercise. Each chapter presents concepts and skills for you to consider when evaluating what your communication strengths are, and in what areas your professional communication might need further development.

COMMUNICATION AND QUALITY IN ECEC SETTINGS

Early childhood education is a people-focused profession. Over the course of a week, a day or even just a morning in an ECEC setting, early childhood educators communicate with many diverse stakeholders: children, children's families, other staff, the centre's owner or management committee, managers, other professionals (such as speech therapists, school teachers or social workers) and members of the local community. Communication is at the very core of what educators do.

Australia's system of regulation, quality assurance and quality improvement—the National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2018)—includes the National Quality Standard (NQS) that comprises seven quality areas:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's health and safety
3. Physical environment
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships with children
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Governance and leadership.

Interestingly, the NQS requires educators to build *children's* skills as effective communicators (Element 1.1.1), capable of resolving conflict (Element 5.2.2). These elements support Outcome Five of the NQF's Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009a), that "children are effective communicators" (p. 41). Yet surprisingly, there are no requirements in the NQS for *educators* to develop their own professional communication skills, individually or as a team. Rather, it seems assumed in the Standard that educators have the requisite communication skills to meet all 40 elements. As will be made clear in this book, being an effective communicator interpersonally and in the workplace is not something that comes naturally. Rather, it requires an understanding of how communication works, adhering to a set of key principles, and using a range of interconnected interpersonal and workplace communication skills in practice. These three domains of effective professional communication will be explored in this book.

REFLECTION 1.3

Read through the list of elements in the NQS
(see https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-07/RevisedNQSHandoutA4.pdf).

- What communication skills do you think you need to implement the elements of the NQS?

Research has identified the need for effective interpersonal and workplace communication skills for all educators working in ECEC settings. In an Australian study investigating what exemplary educators do, participants identified communication as a key contributor to their high-quality practice (Long, 2019). Educational leaders are also expected to exercise effective communication skills as pedagogical leaders (ACECQA, 2019b; Rouse & Spradbury, 2016). The renowned Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector study from the UK (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006) identified effective communication as a crucial attribute of effective leadership. Jillian Rodd, an eminent scholar on early childhood leadership, has even maintained that communication skills are "the early childhood educator's tools of trade" (Rodd, 2013, p. 64), and that "successful leadership in early childhood is a matter of communication more than anything else" (p. 63). Clearly, communicating effectively with others is fundamental to what educators do and for quality ECEC.

Effective professional communication is the foundation of relationships that support quality ECEC. This is because effective communication (KidsMatter, n.d.; Stonehouse, 2013):

- helps us to feel comfortable with each other
- builds open, honest, trusting and respectful relationships
- enables deep and shared understandings
- leads to collaborations
- provides a model for young children.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

The term "communication" is derived from the two Latin words "communis" and "communicare" (Communication, n.d.). The noun "communis" means that which is common, or public, or general. The verb "communicare" means to share, to impart, or to make common. These terms have relevance for early childhood educators because, as we will see in our examination of how communication works (Chapter 2), a communication exchange will be most effective when it is conducted within participants' shared fields of experience; that is, when the intended meaning is clear and understood by all parties.

Today, communication can be thought about from many different perspectives. For example:

- A transmission of a message from a source to a receiver (Miller, 2015).
- "The means by which we represent our thoughts and feelings to others, transmit knowledge, solve problems and build relationships" (Rodd, 2013, p. 68).
- "Any behaviour—verbal, nonverbal or graphic—that is perceived by another" (Dwyer, 2016, p. 3).
- The constitution of meaning (Miller, 2015).
- A form of power (Harms, 2007).

You may have noticed a progression in the complexity of ideas as you read this sample of perspectives. The progression moves from the idea that (a) communication is a simple linear transfer of information, to (b) a perspective that focuses on shared meanings, to (c) a conceptualisation that communication can be a tool of influence. Embracing these three ideas, in this book communication is conceptualised to be the transfer, sharing and/or influencing of meaning. In Part 2 of the book we explore this conceptualisation further in the context of *interpersonal communication*; that is, communication that takes place with at least two people. We then build on this understanding in Part 3, where we consider interpersonal communication in a workplace context; that is, in ECEC services.

REFLECTION 1.4

In the Spotlight on Communication that follows, Kristie Wilson recounts a series of communication exchanges she had with management in response to a directive about Christmas gifts that were to be purchased for children at her centre.

- As you read Kristie's story, identify how the communication she discusses reflects communication as the transfer, sharing and/or influencing of meaning.

SPOTLIGHT ON COMMUNICATION

KRISTIE WILSON—EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS, GOWRIE, NSW

I am a passionate advocate for children and their rights. I am highly committed to providing children and educators with opportunities to reach their full potential in a creative and caring environment. I hold a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and have been fortunate in my career to work in several roles, from working directly with children to executive management positions. My aspiration is that children's voices are heard, that they are recognised as active participants and are empowered to contribute and make a difference in the world. I am currently working at Gowrie, NSW as the Executive Director of Programs, providing leadership and oversight to a suite of programs across Early and Middle Childhood.

This is a story from a much earlier time in my professional career. I was quite new to a management role in a centre, but I do recall an issue I had, and some of my colleagues also had, with senior management instructing us to purchase books for children for Christmas presents. The instruction was very clear—pink books for girls, and blue books for boys. I remember thinking to myself, how is this possible? A number of colleagues and I approached management at the time to have a discussion and raise some concerns we had with this instruction. We were told to provide a list of the number of girls and boys enrolled and the presents would be delivered to the centre. We would know which ones were for the boys as they would be wrapped in blue, and the girls' books would be—you guessed it—wrapped in pink. I recall being quite frustrated and thinking we operate in an environment where we are the source of information about gender roles and expectations, and what is truly valued in boys and girls. Early childhood environments are spaces where children pick up cues and understanding of how they are supposed to behave and talk, what they should like and what they shouldn't—what unconscious messages would blue and pink books send to the children, educators and families? How would we ever have a chance of breaking down harmful stereotypes and promote gender equality? A back-and-forth conversation was had around how this decision would perpetuate inequality and reinforce the difference between genders, rather than viewing individuals as people first and equal. Needless to say, the following year it was left to the individual centre to arrange their Christmas gifts for children.

Given how complex communicating with another person can be, Hughes and MacNaughton (1999, p. 27) highlight that being clear about the goal or purpose of your communication can help to minimise the chances of miscommunication occurring. Being a "goal-oriented" communicator involves three considerations. The first is to be clear about the purpose of your communication: is it to inform (e.g., an educator telling her colleague that she is going on her break), to seek understanding (e.g., an educator checking with her colleague that it was okay to go on a break) and/or to influence (e.g., an educator asking her colleague to take over what she is doing so that she can go on her break)? Having established your purpose, the second aspect of being "goal-oriented" is to consider how realistic your goal is. For example, how will you inform your colleague that you are going on a break if she is in the middle of a conversation with a parent? The third consideration is taking responsibility for the outcome of your communication goals. When communication breaks down it is easy to think that the problem lies with the other person. Being "goal-oriented", however, puts the onus of responsibility to be an effective communicator on ourselves.

The importance of thoughtfully and purposefully considering the way in which we communicate as early childhood professionals influences all aspects of ECEC. This book explores a range of ideas that will invite you to think deeply and critically about your communication and the communication that takes place in your ECEC setting. These ideas centre on the communication process, principles of effective communication and, of course, the skills and techniques that support effective communication. We begin by exploring the communication process in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Professional communication is fundamental to what educators do and to the quality of an ECEC service. Exercising effective interpersonal and workplace communication takes skill, an understanding of the communication process, and an application of communication principles. It involves an awareness that communication is more than just a transmission of messages; it also includes the sharing and influencing of meaning. Educators are expected to be proficient communicators. Reflection on one's own competence—based on the ideas, theories and approaches covered in this book—can foster communication with families, colleagues and other professionals that is intentional and effective.