**[Mary Holwell]:** Hi. We've had a really interesting morning this morning, talking with Dr. Caroline Scott. Caroline is an experienced early childhood educator, having worked for over 15 years in the early childhood field, and recently completed her PhD looking at children's agency and educator understanding of that agency. Caroline, along with producing this series of video vignettes, has also delivered a webinar for us in 2020 looking at children's agency, and a fact sheet which includes some tips for you and your service about how to think about children's agency, and the impact your practice can have on allowing children to enact their agency. I would encourage you to look at these resources and other resources that the VCAA Early Years Unit has produced by logging on to our website.

**[Dr Caroline Scott]:** Start with the child. In terms of understanding agency, it is quite contextual. Children bring their own abilities and interests and motivations, and so tapping into those is where the source of a child's agency is. If we can step back as educators, we can allow space for children to act with initiative, we can allow space for children to pursue those things that they find meaningful, so that's a really good place to start, with the child. This idea of stepping back is allowing space for children to act with initiative, but knowing the child and their capabilities is really important in that as well. So the educator needs to know children well, which of course is the basis of all our work with children and families in early childhood education and care, establishing strong relationships and knowing our children really well, so knowing what they're able to do and knowing what their interests are. Allowing children to act with initiative means that they have the space to do so. So if we're directing children all the time, if we're giving children choices from a limited range of options, then actually that's not allowing them to really act with agency.

In the sector, there's a lot of understanding around agency which centres on choices and decisions, which is a really important part of agency, but it's not the only part of agency. So if we're giving children a choice from three different options, that's actually... What we're eliciting out of a child is a responsive action to those choices, it's not an act of agency. So there's a real difference there between giving some choices and allowing some decisions within quite tight restrictions, and actually stepping back and allowing some freedom for children to come up with their own ideas and act, like you said, with initiative.

So if we think about routines, some participants in my research were very clear in the way that they engaged in conversations with children around rest time and nap time, around snack times, and that can be challenging for educators, I know, because it's busy and there's lots of children to cater for, and of course, there's educators coming and going in terms of their breaks and different shifts and things like that, so it can be hard to give over some of that power to children, and when they're hungry and when they're tired, but actually that's a really strong way of allowing children to act with agency. It's not just taking their word that "I don't want a nap today," it's about having a conversation with them and talking through, "Well, what will happen if you don't have a nap? How do you think you might feel?".

I know that for educators, sometimes there are some challenges with what parents would like to happen in the day and what actually the child is telling them, so trying to balance that up. "Mum and dad have told us that when you don't nap, you get really grumpy, and sometimes you're so grumpy that you don't eat dinner," and talking through the sorts of things that means for the child and their family, and maybe that child armed with that knowledge will say, "I think just a little lie down for a rest is a good idea." Maybe they won't, and it's really important that we listen to the child if they're adamant that's not what they want to do.

In terms of snacks, trusting that children know when they're hungry. We obviously have a responsibility as educators to make sure that children are nourished and that children have a drink of water when they need one, but also allowing it to be flexible, so it's not, "You need to sit down at 11:30 and we all have lunch." That said, the communication and the social interaction that happens at mealtimes, I know is really important, so even one of my participants in my study had a really open, flexible idea about snack time, but actually the children would tend to sit and eat together anyway, which was a really lovely natural development. That was, "I'm going to trust that the children are going to say when they're hungry, that they're going to get their snack or their lunch, and they're going to sit down," but because naturally the children knew that that was a time that they could sit down and chat and have a lovely time together, it ended up that they all would sit together anyway, so they're a couple of routine things.

In terms of planning activities and experiences, really listening to children, really listening and taking on board their input. If it's something that you can't implement, then giving them a reason why that's something that's not going to happen, but taking a risk sometimes and saying, "Okay, maybe we can take the animals and take them out to the mud pit," if that's what the children are asking to do, and we'll think really carefully about the safety features and the safety aspects and elements of that. But let's combine some materials, let's mix up some resources and see what happens, because that's often what children want to do. So trying to blur the lines between the building blocks and the animal area and the construction table can be a really powerful way of children showing agency and enacting their agency, and pursuing what it is that they value.

It means stepping back. It means giving over some power. Power is a powerful word, but sharing power with children, so being able to let go a little bit of the control of needing... Feeling the need to plan lots of things, and contain and limit and put boundaries around things, trying to step back from that, saying, "What do we want to do today?". Listening to those suggestions from the children, but also tapping into things that you've observed, because I know educators are really good at close observations, of course, of children's interests and motivations.

Children of any age, whether they're pre-verbal or they can quite clearly tell us what they want with their words, are pursuing what it is that they value. So if we think about agency for adults and we think about, "Well, I have strong agency, I'm able to make decisions that are right for me and pursue those choices that I've made," for children, they don't stand in front of you and say, "I'd really like to just play with the texture of the sand today." They don't say that, but they'll go and do it. The child who's throwing the toy cars over the fence is doing what it is that they find meaningful and valuable in that moment. Now, that's not what we want, we don't want the cars all outside in the car park, so if you can listen to what the motivation is behind what that child's doing, then you can say, "Okay, I can see that either throwing, or the noise that the cars are making on the other side, or maybe you're just really frustrated and angry, so let's get to the motivation behind what it is... Why you're doing what you're doing, and let's try and provide the materials and the space for you to do that in a more safe manner." So it could be that it's the frustration, it could be an emotional thing, it could be the action that's bringing them some joy, and so you can then implement something that responds to that, to what they've told you they want to do, but in a manner that's not losing all the cars over the fence or whatever it might be, so yeah, really careful. It really is interpretation, and that's what early childhood teachers are so good at, tapping into children's interests and wants and needs, but maybe it takes it a little step further, and not just looking at the observable behaviour, which for the example I just gave is throwing cars over the fence, which would be "Stop doing that, that's not what we do with the cars, bring them back here," but instead say, "Okay, why? Why was the child doing that? What's the motivation behind this and how can we pursue that in a better, more constructive manner?".

What can be seemingly small tokenistic choices within a child or an infant's day that can be overlooked, but actually those small seemingly tokenistic choices of running over there, or playing with that particular child, or sitting by themself, or tearing up a book, I'm using some destructive examples here, but sometimes that can be quite a powerful example of what it is that a child's trying to achieve. The interpretation of that, so it's not just an observation of the observed behaviour, of the evident on the surface behaviour, but it's actually looking behind that and thinking, "Okay, is it an emotion that's motivating this behaviour that I need to try and tap into and support, or is it just a want for physical action of some description, or some alone time, or social time?" And trying to facilitate it in that manner. And it helps the child understand, because they might not actually understand why they're doing what they're doing, so having that conversation with them to get to the bottom of it, of course, is really tapping into, "Oh, so what's..." Children aren't using the words, "What's motivating me to," but it does help them understand maybe where those emotions are coming from, or the fact that they're doing a particular thing.

So, my research was with ages three to five, or educators working with ages three to five, but certainly from the research around agency, not only when children actually verbalise what it is that they want and tell you what their valued outcomes are, we know as early childhood educators that children are communicating from birth, and our revised VEYLDF talks about agency being there from birth. So as educators, we need to tap into what it is that that child's communicating, or that infant is communicating to us, just by what they're doing. There might be some words involved, but we know that through behaviours and actions, gestures, through nonverbal communication, children are always telling us what it is that they want and what they want to do, so it's about really close listening and watching and observing of children in that space.

**[Mary Holwell]:** In thinking about initiative and children's agency, I would encourage you to go on and look at some other VCAA early years resources, and that is the Early Years Planning Cycle Resource for the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, and the Learning Practice Guide.

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