Mary:

This series of videos, filmed on location at the Melbourne Museum, encourages you as an educator to think about how to make the most of an excursion to the museum and how you might respond to children's learning both before and after that excursion. Museums are exciting places to visit with young children, providing a window of opportunity for them to view and learn about the cultures of their world. The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, the VEYLDF, recognises that children are influenced and affected by the environments around them, and that a connection to community and culture reinforces a sense of well-being for children. When young children visit and explore museum spaces with a supportive and responsive adult, it enriches their learning. It'll create opportunities that might spark curiosity, allow for creativity and experimentation, encourage critical thinking skills, inspire a love of history, and importantly, extend children's language development and vocabulary skills. These video resources will support you as an early childhood educator to understand the value of introducing scientific literacy to children, and importantly, how you can increase your confidence in engaging with children.

Barbara:

The 600 Million Years exhibition at the Melbourne Museum brings to life the story of Victoria's evolution that starts with an explosion of life in the sea and moves to land. This exhibition requires children to think about massive spans of time, big numbers, and how previous evolution over time has resulted in the Victoria that we live in today. Priscilla, what are some of the ways that we can warm up young children's thinking about time ahead of their visit to the exhibition?

Priscilla:

That's a great question, Barb. First of all, I would like to reassure early childhood educators that they do not need to teach the geological timescale, or in fact, have their children understand 600 million years, that it's really just coming back to what they understand and warm them up by starting with what do they understand about time? And you can start with themselves because we know they're quite egocentric. So how old are they? Are they three? Are they four? How old are their brothers and sisters? Are they older? Are they younger? Just to warm them up about this concept of different ages. And so really when they come into the exhibition, the way that the exhibition's set up is from oldest to youngest, and you can walk it in any way. You can walk it in the life that was only recently became extinct or some of the oldest multicellular life that we know about. So you can take that journey in many ways, but they do not need to know in depth about 600 million years. But just starting to introduce those concepts.

Barbara:

I'm thinking that as you are starting with where the children are at, that that is also in terms of young children's learning, helping them to understand their own learning and to assist with their starting points. So it's a really beautiful way to start the journey with them understanding their own assessment of their own learning.

Priscilla:

And that it can start with their sort of early understandings of numeracy and starting with small numbers before you even begin to conceptualise what 600 million years looks like.

Barbara:

Terrific. Thank you. Assessment for learning and development is one of the eight practise principles of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. This reminds us that early childhood professionals must be clear about what they want children to learn and why that learning is important. What do you want children to understand about fossils and how might we make these ideas relevant to young children?

Priscilla:

I think one of the great things about fossils is that they are evidence of life that was once living. That doesn't always have to be dinosaurs. Children often think, "It's dinosaurs, it's dinosaurs, it's dinosaurs," because it's so exciting. But actually it was everything that was once alive. And it doesn't have to be a skeleton, it can be a footprint, it can be a feather print, it can even be a fossilised poo. And what's so fascinating is we're not just sort of making this up. It's based on the evidence. I think this notion of understanding that scientists are making claims based on evidence is something that is great for children to understand and that they can find evidence and they can find clues.

So in their own early childhood setting, in their own local parks, they can go out with their early childhood educators and look for clues and evidence of life. So that could be a dog print in a concrete footpath is telling them about life. That could be that they find a baby's dummy left behind. It could be a nest in a tree. It's thinking about how you go about looking for evidence and also fostering that curiosity and that skill of looking, observing, noticing, communicating that with your friends, with adults around you, and starting to develop that language further as well.

Barbara:

I'd love that idea of them going outside to explore as a junior scientist, if you like, to start the idea that those very grown up things that produce these amazing exhibitions are actually the kind of things that they can do in their local neighbourhoods.

Priscilla:

Absolutely.

Barbara:

What is some of the language that an educator could model to support children's knowledge around these big ideas?

Priscilla:

The first thing I would recommend is always going to what the children already know. They will have been absorbing language around these areas through all kinds of programmes on children's TV. There will be many of these words already there so drawing out that language, acknowledging it by creating a word wall, getting other children to say those words back. Some of them might be really extraordinarily long words like Cretaceous Period or Ambulocetus or Diplodocus, these words that sound great to say, it's almost like a sort of a wonderful poem, and they love repeating it, so getting them to use these words. The other thing I do is perhaps put up a toys corner. And so whatever toys you might already have or toys that you might be able to have access to from a toy library or you might be able to find in some shops, is playing with some other toys of ancient animals.

And these can encourage all kinds of language use that they might not already have. For example, if they were playing with this plesiosaur, you might have a water table set up with this plesiosaur and this ichthyosaur and this ammonite. And you might encourage all kinds of words like swimming, flippers, diving, neck, long, head, teeth, tentacles, shell, all kinds of language could be used by the children. The other thing I would recommend is having a book corner. There are so many wonderful books out there for children to use to read and not to be afraid if the children themselves can't read them, of course, but that the educator could read them during story time or having books that you know children will be able to flip through the pages and look at themselves.

There are some that are just so beautifully illustrated that you could just imagine a couple of children lying on the carpet and having a conversation with their friend about what they see. Talking about, here's this dinosaur, there's a bird. Is it a bird? It's standing on the horn. In this image, you can see a series of volcanoes in the background and dinosaurs in the foreground, and all the wonderful kinds of language that this could spark amongst the children in the centre.

Barbara:

Questioning and analysis informs early childhood educators planning and practise decisions so that what educators plan for children has meaning and is worth children knowing and doing. What would you like young children to understand and appreciate after visiting this exhibition?

Priscilla:

The diversity of life is absolutely incredible, and that is what this exhibition showcases is that how life has changed over time and what extraordinary different things have been living on our planet. And it's a wonderful thing to foster that curiosity and that love of the natural world. So for me, it's about getting the children to look deeply at different parts of the exhibition and really getting their eye in to see beautiful, tiny little sea stars that have fossilised over 400 million years old. There's beautiful fossil trilobites. They're like, it's not quite a crab, but kind of like a crab that lived before the time of the dinosaurs. What I think is the takeaway in terms of what they could intentionally learn is just to open their mind to just the absolute incredible diversity of life on earth.

Barbara:

I think that sounds amazing, and I'm wondering as you say that that also this is the hope for the children. I'm wondering about the families that come along with children as well, and what you would say to perhaps encourage the family to join in children's learning.

Priscilla:

Absolutely. I would say that firstly, the museum belongs to you and belongs to all Victorians. This is your museum and you belong here. So we would encourage families to come in when they like, to come and revisit as many times as they like. And children are free to the museum as well, so they're able to come back and explore it again. And we'd love to see them here again.

Barbara:

I think that sounds terrific, and I can imagine that educators would be very happy to really encourage that sense of ownership of public space.

Priscilla:

Absolutely.

Barbara:

Terrific. Thank you very much.

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