

Interactions matter: Increasing the frequency of quality educator-child interactions

Background

How often educators engage with individual children matters. In REEaCh Research Brief 1 we spoke of the importance of educators engaging in *high-quality* interactions with young children every day. In this brief we highlight the positive impact that *frequent* interactions between educators and children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) programs have on young children's learning and development.

Research shows that educators working in ECEC settings can have a major impact on young children's development. However, the degree of impact that ECEC educators have on young children's development depends on the *quality* and *frequency* of their interactions with every child, every day. This is especially significant for young children who are experiencing disadvantage.

International and Australian research highlights that there is a low presence of adult-child interactions in ECEC services. Understanding what strategies and mechanisms support ECEC educators to engage in frequent interactions with every child is essential to ensuring optimal outcomes for young children in the years prior to preschool and school.

Dosage is a term that is often used in research studies. It refers to how often (frequency) young children are exposed to quality interactions with adults. The *Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a)* teaching strategies referred to in this article have had large and long-lasting impacts on young children's developmental outcomes. If educators implement these teaching strategies often with young children in daily educational programs they can offer children repeated opportunities to consolidate, enrich and extend children's learning.

Aims

There is an assumption that by improving overall quality in early childhood settings, children's outcomes will improve. However, a certain 'dosage' may be needed before the increase in quality can be linked to children's outcomes.

In addition to testing whether the VAEL professional learning program increased the quality of educator-child interactions (see Research Brief 1), we were interested in tracking the frequency (i.e., dosage) of educators' daily interactions with young children over time. Therefore, we aimed to describe the use of educator time by comparing how educators distributed their time at baseline (study commencement), through progressive samples of practice during the implementation of the pilot study (first year) and during the sustainability year (second year).

Key findings

Time sample data were collected by two trained researchers and were used to provide feedback to educators on how they distributed their time so they could consider their practices during efforts to increase their quality interactions with children. There was a focus during the intervention to increase 1:1 and small group engagements with children in the program. Our study tracked how often educators were working with one child, a small group (2-3 children), passively supervising children, working with educators, or cleaning/organising. The time sample data also included the context for each time point (indoor, outdoor, meal time, nappy change etc.).

Our time sample data (Figure 1) showed educators can adjust their use of time with children in any ECEC program. Over the duration of implementation and sustainability, there was evidence of an increase in time spent working with children, particularly in time spent working with individual children and small groups, and reductions in time spent cleaning and organising.

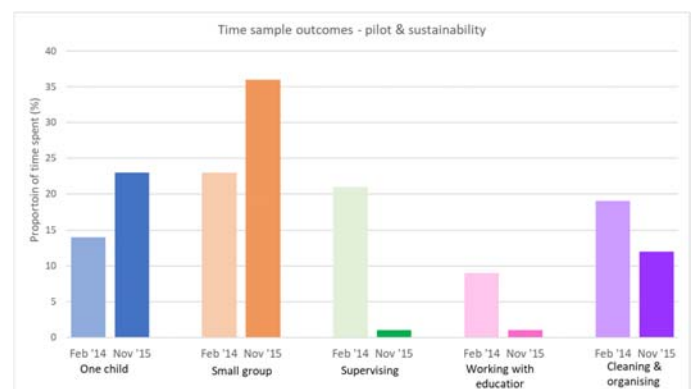


Figure 1: Time sampling

Implications

For policy and practice

The number of quality adult-child interactions (dosage) matters to ensure every child is not only attending, but engaging in high quality ECEC programs.

In the VAEL study collecting dosage data alongside attendance, practice change, and child outcome data provided a multifaceted and nuanced picture of how ECEC educators are maximising young children’s developmental outcomes.

Activity: Conversational reading					
Child	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri
Sarah	✓	✓✓✓		✓	
Alan			✓✓		✓✓✓
Eleanor	✓✓	✓		✓	

Example of educator self-recording daily interactions

Careful planning and co-ordinated effort as a team increases the number of quality interactions educators have with every child in daily ECEC educational programs.

Recording dosage and tracking educators’ interactions with individual children every day ensured all children attending were engaged in individual, intentional and frequent learning interactions with their educators.

For research

There is value in investigating the difference between attendance and dosage in terms of quality educator-child interactions on child outcomes in the years prior to preschool and school.

There is potential to build on findings from this study by investigating further how different levels of dosage of teaching strategies (such as 3a) might influence children’s developmental outcomes. In addition, future research could examine the timing, frequency, intensity and duration of different teaching on young children’s developmental outcomes.

Study details

The VAEL study included a pilot and main study (see brief 1). This brief focuses on the pilot study which began in January 2014 and was extended into 2015 as a sustainability year. The professional learning program was developed to support educators to

implement a sustained approach to embedding 3a strategies in their educational programs and with children. The pilot professional learning program consisted of training, external expert coaching and Educational Leader coaching. This was followed by a sustainability year in which the Educational Leader led the implementation of the strategies with educators, with reduced support from the external expert coach.

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About us

The Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Hub was established in 2018 with funding from the Leaper Foundation. Our purpose is to make a sustained impact upon the lives of young Australians through advancing the quality of early learning experiences for all children. The REEaCh Hub works to translate research findings into real-life solutions so that all young children can realize their potential. For further information refer to:

<https://education.unimelb.edu.au/REEaCh>