

reflections

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“GET ALL COSY ... IT’S LIKE CHILL OUT”: CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVES ON RELAXATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Emma Cooke, Dr. Sandy Houen, Dr. Sally Staton, Prof. Karen Thorpe and the Choosing Rest Research Team

Learning to relax is an important life skill. In an increasingly busy world, finding moments for relaxation supports mental and physical wellbeing. However, what we do to relax and when we do this varies enormously. Children need the opportunity to relax too, especially in the busy social world of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. It is important that they are offered opportunities to discover what relaxes them and have opportunities to experience relaxation during their ECEC day.

The significance of children’s relaxation and wellbeing is recognised in the National Quality Framework which distinguishes relaxation from sleep and rest and

emphasises the requirement to meet each child’s individual relaxation needs (ACECQA, 2018). Despite this inclusion, little is currently known about how children relax and their relaxation preferences. Our research consulted children to seek their perspectives on relaxation. We conducted group interviews with 46 children aged 3–5 years-old across six ECEC services (4 long day care and 2 Family day care), as part of the Choosing Rest study (Ethics Approval:2017001866).

Our interviews showed children to have a sophisticated understanding of relaxation and a diversity of place, space and activity preferences for relaxation.

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While some children understood relaxation to mean ‘sleep’, consistent with the National Quality Standard most children conceptualised relaxation and sleep as distinct:

Researcher: So what do you think it means to relax, Eden?

Eden: Not going to sleep but like going to sleep.

Researcher: ... what do you mean by that?

Eden: Because you get to get all cosy ... it’s like chill out.

Children reported a large range of relaxation activities and locations, including outside, inside, hammocks, swings, trampolines, listening to music and songs, and reading “all the books”. Whilst diverse, a common theme amongst children in describing relaxation was the use of sensory-focused descriptions, often recounting ‘good’ feelings of being ‘cosy’ and ‘comfortable’:

Tate: I like relaxing on the trees when the leaves are falling.

Researcher: ... Oh, what’s good about when the leaves are falling?

Tate: Good ... when I lean on leaves they make my back feel good.

A significant finding was that children often described being “alone” as both a preference and key to relaxation:

Researcher: So when do you need to relax Elle?

Elle: When peoples different places.

Researcher: When people are different places, why is that?

Elle: Because I like being alone.

References to being ‘alone’ was contextualised by frequent references in interviews to children’s negative experiences of peer conflict (e.g. ‘not sharing’ and physical fighting) in ECEC.

Our findings show that children are highly capable of understanding relaxation, describing their relaxation preferences, and distinguishing relaxation from other activities, such as sleep and rest. The findings of this study suggest that group-based, standard rest-times may not be sufficient to address children’s relaxation needs in ECEC settings. Provision of places and spaces

for children to be “alone” and experience “sensory-focused” relaxation opportunities, in busy, group-based ECEC environments should be considered.

Suggestions for practice:

- Discuss with children ways they like to relax and ensure those opportunities are available to children throughout the day.
- Provide for children’s sensory focused relaxation preferences – set up cosy spaces indoors and outdoors – provide access to blankets, hammocks, and cushions.
- Provide language focussed on the physical indicators of relaxation. For example, “when I take a deep, slow breath I can feel my heart slow down and my body feels calm.”
- Provide language focussed on the physical cues of stress, such as “when I feel stressed, my muscles feel really tight.”
- Critically reflect on current provisions for children’s relaxation. Questions for reflection:
 - Does your service currently distinguish relaxation from sleep and rest?
 - How does your current approach to relaxation align with your service philosophy?
 - How do you provide for each child’s relaxation preferences?
 - How does your service include the voices of children in the provisions of relaxation?

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* Please note: Children have been assigned pseudonyms.

Framework: Quality Area 2 – Children’s Health and Safety. Retrieved December 6, 2018, from <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-quality-standard/quality-area-2-childrens-health-and-safety>

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