



EARLY YEARS (AGES 3–5)

Play

EDUCATOR RESOURCE

Created in collaboration with First Nations cultural advisers

Aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework v2.0

Written by teachers for teachers



Warning: This resource may contain images, voices and names of deceased persons, and references to language or events that may be considered culturally sensitive, offensive or outdated.

Language note: It's important to consider the historical context and evolving nature of language when viewing the information in this resource. While it may not be our preferred language, Australians Together at times uses or includes terms necessary for context, due to the educational nature of our content.



Essential question

How can play help us connect with Country and each other?



Before teaching

Connecting through play

Learning through play (or play-based learning) is central to the Early Years Learning Framework, and its importance to children's development has been enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), recognising the right of all children "to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

The benefits of play are universal, allowing all children to:

- express their personalities and uniqueness
- enhance thinking skills and strengthen brain function
- make meaningful connections with others as they form friendships and relationships
- learn to transfer learning from one experience to another
- build a stronger sense of identity.

The vision of a world-class education system outlined in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* emphasises that:

[t]his begins with making sure that every young child has the opportunity to benefit from structured play-based learning before they start school, because this helps build the social, emotional and cognitive skills they need to succeed in the years to come.

(Education Council 2019, p. 2).

In these activities, children will learn about the ways play connects all of us. They'll discover more about the types of toys many First Nations children play with, have opportunities to play First Nations games, and make their own toys using natural materials. Children will begin to understand the importance of Country, and the ways that we can all connect with Country through play.

Country

To prepare for discussing and learning about **Country** with your students, read the article, '[The importance of land](#)' (635 words, 2-minute read) from *Australians Together*, and watch the video of First Nations people sharing the ways they understand and relate to land (02:18).

In their book, *Nganga: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Words and Phrases*, Aunty Fay Muir and Sue Lawson describe First Nations people's understanding of Country:

A simple explanation is that for Aboriginal people, Country is their mother. If you don't look after your mother, she won't look after you. If Aboriginal people don't care for Country, Country won't be able to supply food and shelter.

In Aboriginal culture, Country is more than the land. It is the sea, sky, the rivers, seasons, plants and animals. Country is a place of belonging, heritage and culture. Country is not only the land where a person belongs, but their clan's Dreaming. Country encompasses how Aboriginal people, the land, their spirituality and law are interwoven.

(2018 p. 37)

For your own learning, you may wish to read the article, '[Who is Country?](#)' (963 words, 4-minute read), by [Walbunja-Yuin](#) woman Sara Kianga Judge, for the Australian Museum, to gain a deeper understanding of who, not *what*, is Country.

Connecting with communities/Elders

If you or your school already has a relationship with a local First Nations community member, cultural expert or Elder, reach out to invite the person to share and learn about the toys and games of the local area, ensuring you follow any cultural protocols around the playing of games or making specific toys.

Be aware that not all First Nations Peoples hold knowledge in all areas, and because of colonisation, some stories weren't able to be passed down. Instead, you may like to ask local community members to share about their own personal experiences of play like the toys and games they liked to play when younger.

If you don't have existing relationships with First Nations people, consider establishing one by contacting a local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander land council; or searching for First Nations groups through local or state botanical gardens, national parks and ranger groups, peak educational bodies or museums.

Relationships take time to build and it's important to maintain realistic expectations. It can take significant time to establish trust and respect within a First Nations community. What's important to you may not be as important to the people you're working alongside. Short-term approaches to engagement often result in pain. First Nations people should dictate the pace of any engagement. Keep in mind the huge pressure on First Nations people and communities to share experiences and expertise with non-Indigenous Australians.

Be sure to remunerate cultural specialists for their time and expertise.

For more information, see '[Connecting locally with First Nations communities](#)' (775 words, 4-minute read) from Australians Together.

First Nations toys

Before colonisation First Nations children played exclusively with a variety of natural toys, made using everything from emu feathers to forked branches (Haagen 1994). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people "made rattles, dolls, spinning tops and balls for their children to play with, as well as small-scale, harmless models of tools and weapons" (Delacey 2015, para 16). Children made toy propellers out of strips of long leaves, which they launched into the air in throwing competitions. Toys were mostly communal property and weren't kept or guarded in the way that modern toys are (Haagen 1994). Toys were designed to amuse and educate children, and to prepare them for adulthood (Australian Museum 2022).

What are First Nations toys made of?

All First Nations toys prior to European colonisation of this continent were made from biodegradable materials, as there were no man-made metals or plastics in circulation until after colonisation.

Some materials sourced from the environment to make toys for First Nations children include:

- shells: for making rattles and baby dolls
- grass: used to bind clay or make rope
- pandanus strips: to make balls and a small boomerang-like projectile called a piar-piar (Australian Museum 2018)
- feathers: for adorning toys that represented birds, or for making masks and necklaces
- cabbage palm fibre: for making ring quoits and baskets
- eucalyptus leaves: which were grouped together, with each leaf representing a member of the family
- sticks: for drawing in the sand or as dolls
- wood: to make toy canoes, spears and boomerangs
- clay: for spinning tops and making dolls
- ochre: for painting and decorating (Haagen 1994).

Play in First Nations cultures

Apart from having fun and having the chance to explore adult-like activities, according to *A Typology of the Traditional Games of Australian and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, First Nations people see child's play as:

- “incorporated in ceremonial practices or rituals, such as religious observances
- a means to express or eliminate conflict
- a mechanism to develop individual and group identity, a sense of belonging and community
- a part of daily life and a way to learn about the way the culture works
- a component of significant life events such as inter-group feasting
- a way of social interaction – both regulated and improvised
- a part of collective memory of a cultural group and part of the knowledge to be passed on to others.”

(Edwards 2012, p. 6).

Recommended resources

The following resources may be helpful in your own professional development or to help further guide your students in this learning:

- The Australian Sports Commission has compiled a comprehensive collection of ‘Traditional Indigenous Games’ to be used in classrooms. Some are used in the activities in this resource, and you can find the full collection [here](#).
- [Traditional Aboriginal Games – Celebrating Aboriginal Intangible Heritage](#) (04:21) from the Department of Premier and Cabinet Victoria is a short but informative video.
- Nadia Wheatly’s book [Playground](#) contains vivid recollections and accounts by First Nations people of growing up on Country. Read the chapter, ‘Cubbies and toys’ to help create a picture of what childhood is like growing up on Country.

Which words?

You can access the Australians Together [Language and Terminology Toolkit](#) for any terms you feel unsure about.

Glossary

Country/Place: the lands where First Nations communities have always lived and belonged to. It’s also a belief system, a relationship with all living and non-living things which includes everything within that landscape: rocks, trees, waterways, sky, animals, plants, medicines, sacred sites, all people, ancestral spirits and past, present and future community connections. Country sustains First Nations Peoples and must be respected and cared for by every generation that is and will be.

Activity materials

You’ll need:

- drawing materials such as paper, lead pencils, markers/textas, coloured pencils
- copies of the parent/carer letter to send home
- a copy of the books *Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo* by Alison Lester, and *Country* by Aunty Fay Muir and Sue Lawson
- wooden craft sticks, paper and pieces of thick cardboard
- access to a device to share images and videos with children
- used/old wooden pencils and modelling clay.

Activities

What do you love about playing?

Discuss as a group

To begin their learning, first talk with the children about what they love about playing. You may like to answer the question yourself and encourage other educators and co-educators to do the same.

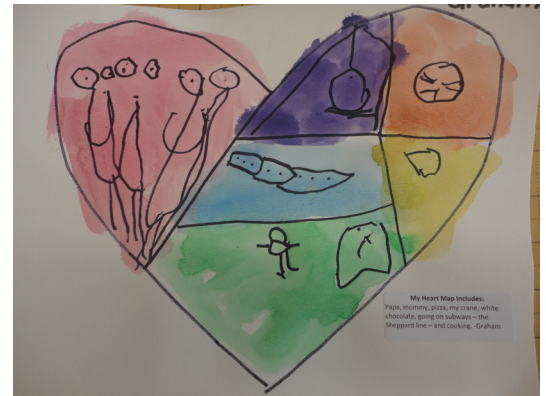
Use these responses and those of the children to begin to create a documentation board or book to record children's learning throughout. The documentation could be photos, drawings done by the children, quotes or ideas that have been written down during group discussions.

Draw what you love

Ask children draw their own pictures showing something they love about playing. The drawings could be created in a love heart shape for some visual impact and then added to the documentation book or board being used to visually share children's learning.

All the children, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children especially, may like to include some of the symbols from the 'First Nations symbols' teacher resource in their drawings. Permission to share and use these symbols was generously provided by The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministry Team for The Salvation Army.

You may wish to take the opportunity to explain to the children that permission's been given for the use of the symbols, and talk about why we don't copy other people's symbols or drawings.



Ask: do parents play too?

Use the provided parent/carer letter template to get parents involved in the children's learning about play.

The letter asks parents to share their responses to the following questions:

- What do you love about playing now?
- What games do you play now?
- What games did you play when you were a kid?
- What was your favourite game?
- How's it played?

Then encourages families to send in their responses to be added to the documentation board/book. These responses could also be used as part of the final 'Creative response' activity.

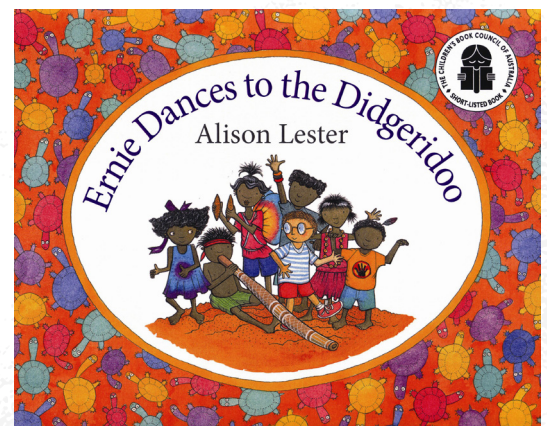
How do we play?

Read *Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo*

Read the picture book [Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo](#) by Alison Lester or, if you can't access the book, listen to the author read it aloud [here](#) (08:16).

As children listen to the story, ask them to put their hands on their heads every time they hear about someone in the story 'playing'. Reinforce with children here that they may all have different ideas of when people are playing or what playing looks like – and that's okay!

After reading the story, use the online AIATSIS [Map of Indigenous Australia](#), or a printed version, to show children where Arnhem Land is located, as well as the location of the Country they live and play on.





Make an animal puppet

Use the provided parent/carer letter template to get parents involved in the children's learning about play. In the story there are lots of different animals mentioned – ask the children if they can remember any of them, or go through the book/video again on an 'animal hunt', just looking for animals that are part of the story.

These animals include:

- fruit bat
- goanna
- pig
- long neck turtle
- frog
- buffalo
- snake
- horse
- fish/barramundi
- crocodile
- crab
- magpie goose.

Ask children to choose one of the animals from the story to draw and colour in.

To turn these animal drawings into puppets, glue them onto pieces of thick cardboard and cut each animal out. Attach a wooden craft stick to the back, and these puppets can be used as part of a story table for the book, or for students to create their own games/imaginative play.

Where can we play?



Watch *Little J and Big Cuz*

Watch the '[Big Plans](#)' episode of *Little J & Big Cuz* that shares many examples of the characters participating in play. Instead of focusing on the types of play, the aim of this activity is for children to start to consider the places where people play, and that playing is a way of connecting with Country.

After watching the episode, talk together about where the characters were playing (in the school yard, backyard, bedroom and kitchen).

Then brainstorm places the children love to play. Possible responses include:

- at the beach
- at the playground
- in the creek
- at someone else's house.

You may like to talk about the differences between playing inside and outside, asking children which they prefer and why.



Design an obstacle course

Students take inspiration from the obstacle course created by Little J in the episode and draw a picture of an obstacle course somewhere they like to play.

This could be done in parts with children painting the background first showing the location they've chosen for their obstacle course. Children could draw the obstacle course separately to be cut out, and stuck onto the painted background, or could draw directly on the background when it's dry.

The 'First Nations symbols' teacher resource can be used to map out the obstacle course; for example, you can use one of the animal tracks to lead to the next obstacle or the river symbol for a water source. The children could also create their own symbols to identify places within their course or paths through it.

Activity notes

Episodes of *Little J and Big Cuz* can be accessed on both ABC iView and SBS On Demand with a free account.

For this activity you could also watch '[The Creek](#)' episode of *Bluey* as an example of another place in nature to play. It shows the characters bored at the playground and having far more fun when playing out in nature, which may reinforce the children's own ideas about their favourite places to play.

What can we play with?

Play outside: a world without plastic

Take the children outside and ask them what they can find to play with that isn't made of plastic or has batteries. You may like to remove any of these types of toys from the outside area first to avoid temptation!

Ask children to share their ideas and then explain to them that plastic is a relatively new invention which wasn't around for almost all of the many thousands of years that First Nations children have been playing on this continent.

Ask children:

- What do you think First Nations children play with from Country?
- What are we learning while playing like this? How? Why?



Learn about spinning tops

Show children the images of spinning tops from the Australian Museum '[Aboriginal Toys](#)' page and share some information about the ways tops are made and played with.

Make a spinning top

To make spinning tops with children you'll need:

- a box of used wooden pencils of varying thicknesses and lengths
- a 1 kg tub of modelling clay.

Instructions:

- Take a golf-ball-sized piece of modelling clay and roll it into a ball.
- Push the sharp end of a pencil down through the middle of the ball until the pencil point comes through. You've made a spinning top!
- Spin it on the table.

After making the tops, discuss the following questions with the children:

- Do you think this is how First Nations children have always made spinning tops? Why/Why not?
- What materials do you think they may have used? Why?
- What are we learning while playing this game? How? Why?
- If you had those same materials what other games might you play?

Activity resources

Take a look at some of the ways you can make [Spinning tops](#) on the Exploratorium website in the Tinkering Studio Projects tab. There are two very short illustrative videos to demonstrate.

How can we say 'play'?

Listen to the *Little Yarns* podcast

Listen to the '[Play in palawa kan'i](#)' episode of the *Little Yarns* podcast (07:00).

After listening, ask the children the two questions that are asked in the episode:

- Have you ever told stories around the campfire?
- What games do you love to play?

Then use the online AIATSIS '[Map of Indigenous Australia](#)', or a printed version, to locate both the lands of Kamilaroi and Palawa Peoples (as both languages of these People groups are mentioned in the podcast episode).

Also take a moment to ask the children if they know which Country they live and play on. If they don't know or can't remember, use the AIATSIS Map to show them.

Invite a local language speaker in to share the word for 'play' with students or use resources like the '[Gambay First Languages Map](#)' and [50 Words Project](#). Keep in mind that teaching a First Nations language requires permission.

Animal find

Read *Country*

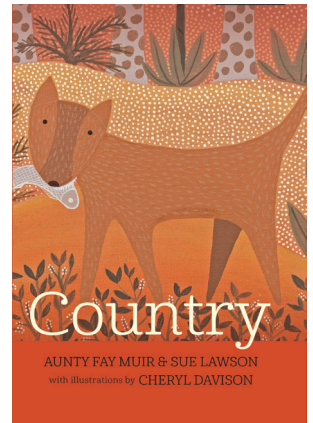
Read the picture book [Country](#) by Aunty Fay Muir and Sue Lawson with illustrations by Cheryl Davison.

After reading, ask the children what animals they saw in the illustrations; for example, black cockatoos, eagles, water birds, crabs, sulphur-crested cockatoos, fish, bats, a dingo/dog.

Talk with children about the importance of Country for First Nations People and how animals are an integral part of Country. Connecting with and caring for animals is a way of connecting with and caring for Country too.

Ask the children:

What animals have you noticed where you live, or at preschool?



Animal games

Copy animal actions: 'Wombat wobble'

Share the video of the '[Wombat Wobble](#)' song, written by [Wiradjuri](#) musician Johnny Huckle, on a screen where children can see the actions.

Encourage the children to copy the animal actions from Johnny's song.

You may like to play the video more than once if the students are really enjoying following along with Johnny!

Listen and move to 'Sand Crab Song'

Share with children the song '[Kerkeri Wed](#)' from ABC's *Yarrabil: First Nations Songs* collection.

'Kerkeri Wed' ('Sand Crab Song') is written and performed by Ruth Ghee. The song is sung in both English and Meriam Mir, a language spoken in the eastern Torres Strait Islands.

Ask children to copy along with the actions as Ruth sings.

Play together on Country

Kangaroo relay race

In this game children copy the actions of a kangaroo while participating in a jumping relay race.

Follow the instructions for the 'Kangaroo' game from the [Yulunga Traditional Indigenous Games](#) resource on p.114, (or p.121 of the PDF page selector) or use the video, [Yulunga Traditional Indigenous Games – Kangaroo](#) (00:46) from The Australian Institute of Sport, which talks you through the game.

After playing the animal-based games, ask children to share any other animal games they like to play at preschool or home.

Resources for further learning

Kangaroo is just one of many First Nations games you can share with children from the [Yulunga Traditional Indigenous Games](#) resource. The instructions for the games are easy to understand, give visual examples and each game has age ranges identified.

Leaf games

Look at the images of the '[Leaf games from Yuendumu](#)' on The Australian Museum website, then take children outside to collect leaves that represent their families.

Remind students to only take leaves from the ground, rather than collecting them from the trees, as a way of taking care of Country and ensuring there are always resources for local wildlife.

Give students time to play with their leaf families, allowing them to interact with each other's leaf families and represent any events/changes/activities etc, just as the article from the Australian Museum describes.

Take photos of these to be added to the documentation board or book. Or record short videos to show the leaf play in action.

Walbiri memory game

For this activity children play a version of the memory-testing game 'Walbiri' that's played by [Walbiri](#) children of central Australia.

Share some of the information about the origins of the game from the [Yulunga Traditional Indigenous Games](#) resource, from the Australian Sports Commission, with children before playing, and allow some time for the students to share their thoughts or ask any questions about the game.

Then draw a large circle on the ground or in sand and place a small collection of objects in it. Children spend a few minutes looking carefully at the objects before turning their backs. Remove one or two of the objects and then ask students to turn back around and share which object/s have been removed.

You can play a few rounds like this or also rounds where objects are added or rearranged for different memory-based challenges.



Reflection

Discuss with the children the following questions:

- How do these games help us connect with Country?
- How do these games help us connect with each other?

To document their thinking and reflections you may like to record videos of the children asking and answering each other, or turn their responses into a book to be shared with the wider school community.

The games we love to play



Respond creatively

Work together with children to create an illustrated deck of large cards, each with a game on it that the children love to play.

These could include:

- games the children came up with when they were playing without plastic
- games shared from home
- First Nations games played during the learning
- games the characters were playing in *Ernie Dances to the Didgeridoo*.

When finished, these cards can be laminated and held on a hinged metal ring for children to access – especially on days when they don't know what to play or how to ask someone else to play with them. This can help foster connection between children, their peers and educators.

Parent/carer letter

Dear parents/carers,

We've just started learning about the ways that play can connects us all.

In the coming weeks children will discover more about the types of toys played with by First Nations children, have opportunities to play First Nations games and make their own toys using natural materials. Children will also begin to understand the importance of Country and the ways that we can all connect with Country through play.

As part of their learning, we're asking children to find out more about how different people play and played in the past, which is where your involvement comes in!

We'd love if you could talk to your child/ren about your answers to the following questions:

- What do you love about playing now?
- What games do you play now?
- What games did you play when you were a kid?
- What was your favourite game?
- How's it played?

If possible, send in some photos or written responses for us to add to our learning documentation about play that we'll be adding to throughout the children's learning.

Thanks so much for your help,

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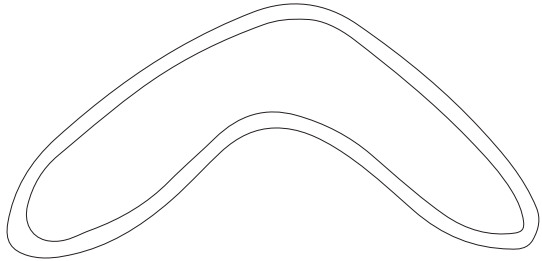
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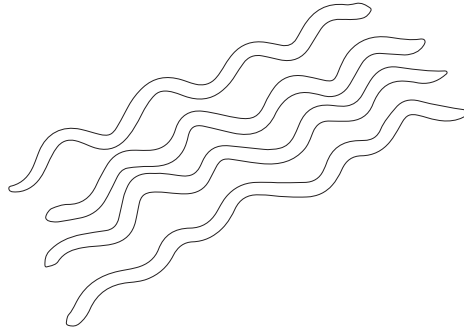
Thanks so much for your help,

First Nations symbols

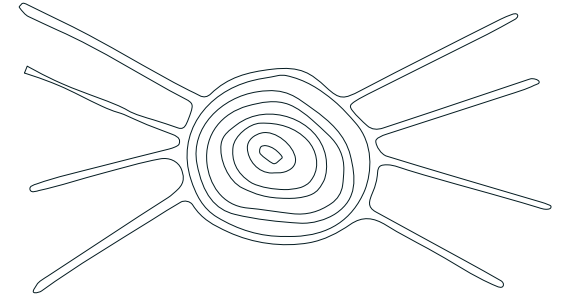
BOOMERANG



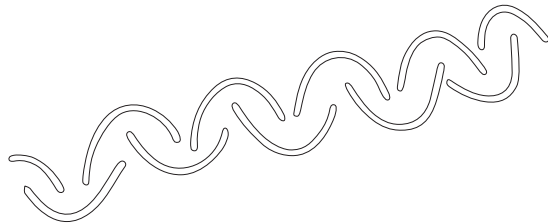
RIVER



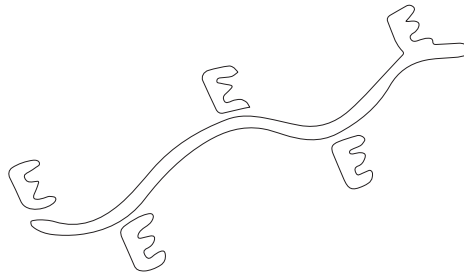
MEETING PLACE



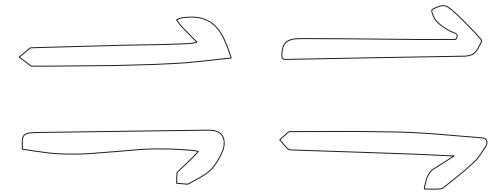
TURTLE



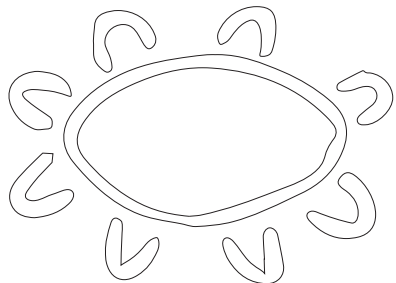
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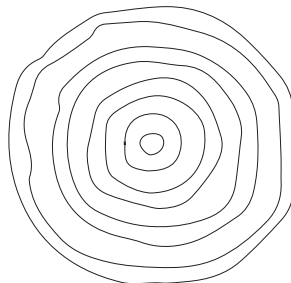
KANGAROO



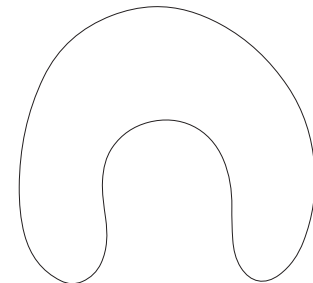
YARNING CIRCLE



CAMPSITE



PERSON



Play

EARLY YEARS (AGES 3–5)

Australians Together Learning Framework™

Our resources follow a framework of 5 Key Ideas that are designed to shape a new narrative for all Australians. Each Key Idea underpins the content and activities in its section to take students on a transformational learning journey. You can download the framework from our [Curriculum Resources page](#).



The Wound

Injustice from the impact of colonisation



Our History

A past that shapes our story as a nation



Why Me?

What's it got to do with me?



Our Cultures

Everyone has culture. Know about your culture and value the cultures of others



My Response

Steps we can take to build a brighter future

Alignment to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF v2.0)

Learning Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- 1.1 Children feel safe, secure and supported
- 1.2 Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and agency
- 1.3 Children develop knowledgeable confident self-identities, and a positive sense of self-worth
- 1.4 Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect

Learning Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- 2.1 Children develop a sense of connectedness to groups and communities and an understanding of their reciprocal rights and responsibilities as active and informed citizens
- 2.3 Children become aware of fairness

Learning Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- 3.1 Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing
- 3.2 Children become strong in their physical learning and mental wellbeing

Learning Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- 4.1 Children develop a growth mindset and learning dispositions such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity
- 4.2 Children develop a range of learning and thinking skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating
- 4.3 Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another
- 4.4 Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies, and natural and processed materials

Learning Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- 5.1 Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes
 - 5.2 Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts
 - 5.3 Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media
 - 5.5 Children use digital technologies and media to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking
-

References

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- Haagen C (1994) [Bush toys: Aboriginal children at play](#), Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
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- United Nations (1989) [Convention on the rights of the child](#), UNICEF Australia website, accessed 15 October 2025.

Image acknowledgments

- Cover image: [Two young girls playing in the bush](#), Astrid Volzke/Austockphoto.com
- [Toddler's hands building tower with natural wooden blocks at preschool](#), Casey Kent/Austockphoto.com
- Alexis McDonell (2014) [A map of my heart](#) [photograph], The Curious Kindergarten website, accessed 15 October 2025. Reproduced with permission.
- Alison Lester (2006) [Ernie dances to the didgeridoo](#) [book cover], Lothian Children's Books, Hachette Australia. Reproduced with permission.
- [Preschooler playing in nature with leaves in a bowl](#), Jelka Matlung/Shutterstock.com
- Fay Muir, Sue Lawson and Cheryl Davison C (2024) [Country](#) [book cover], © Wild Dog Books, accessed 15 October 2024. Reproduced with permission.
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