



# Strategy in early childhood education



ECE resources

Strategy is about identifying the mission, vision, and desired outcomes of an organisation, and determining how to reach them. In early childhood settings, it is used to define the direction of growth and development<sup>1</sup>. Strategy is something that plays out in daily decisions while looking to the future<sup>2</sup>. It is ultimately philosophical, focused on the pattern of purposes, philosophies, programmes, actions, and choices that define what the early childhood setting is, what it does, and why<sup>3</sup>. With a clear strategy for what they want to achieve, early childhood teams can continually make minor adjustments to practice to move towards their vision, coordinating choices about practices and philosophies, and building professional learning to increase capacity over the long-term<sup>4</sup>.

Every early childhood service already has a strategy or set of strategies that are its logic for action, related to policies, decisions, financial choices, and so on. However, this logic for action may not be particularly deliberate, and may need to be improved or changed to help the early childhood service be more effective in its context<sup>5</sup>. Being strategic is a deliberate and disciplined act<sup>6</sup> involving leaders in recognising and exploiting opportunities in the surrounding environment, as well as connecting and synthesising ideas to influence and align the actions of others<sup>7</sup>. Strategies may relate to creating a stronger mission and vision, designing processes for internal evaluation, assessment or planning, developing particular pedagogical practices, or building relationships across the setting and community. There can be broad overarching strategies for the entire early childhood setting or wider organisation, as well as strategies for particular groups, rooms, or programmes within the setting. There can also be management and administrative strategies<sup>8</sup>. Strategies can be predominantly preplanned, or evolve in response to unanticipated events and potentials<sup>9</sup>.

Strategy is often summed up in strategic plans, but strategy itself should not be confused with planning<sup>10</sup>. Strategy is better thought of as a theory rather than a plan. It might be related to a theory on how children learn best, or on what kind of early childhood support might best serve a community, or what enables children to develop stronger cultural identities, while planning does not necessitate a clear articulation of theory and beliefs about practice. In fact, it is possible to draw up lists of activities and actions without any form of strategy being applied<sup>11</sup>!

## Why is strategy important in early childhood settings?

Early childhood settings operate within complex environments which introduce a measure of contingency or uncertainty, and require responsive and flexible decision-making and action. Early childhood staff may pursue a range of diverse pedagogical values and interests, hold individual ideas and intentions, and bring different personal strengths to their work<sup>12</sup>. This makes strategy important as a means of coordinating action.

Early childhood services are also open systems with interdependent relations with different communities and organisations (including the community of learners within the setting, the wider community in which families are situated, the community of early childhood practice, and national and governmental organisations for policy and regulation). They also receive all of their resources from their external environment, including funding and fees, staff members, family enrolments, community support, regulations and curricula<sup>13</sup>. This means early childhood services are going to be most successful when

they use processes for adapting appropriately to their environment and aligning themselves with its resources, demands, and affordances, which is key to strategic thinking<sup>14</sup>.

The use of strategy has many positive benefits for early childhood services. Strategy and the processes used to develop strategy support leaders and teams in early childhood services to:

- **Think, act, and learn strategically**<sup>15</sup>. Having a coherent set of values and theories of practice<sup>16</sup>, and being mindful of the early childhood service and its relationship to its context<sup>17</sup>, can help early childhood settings respond to the change and uncertainty that is likely in complex contexts<sup>18</sup>.
- **Collaborate and connect with community**<sup>19</sup>, inviting the ideas of team members, families, and communities<sup>20</sup>, and building trust, shared commitment, and alignment between teams and communities<sup>21</sup>.
- **Take advantage of opportunities and collaborations** within the service's context and community<sup>22</sup>.
- **Raise levels of engagement, interest, and motivation**<sup>23</sup> in early childhood teams.
- **Make effective decisions** through the use of a clearly articulated and coherent theory of practice<sup>24</sup>.
- **Build capacity, knowledge, experience, tools, and skills** to achieve goals and respond to future changes more effectively<sup>25</sup>.
- **Increase the self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence**<sup>26</sup> of early childhood teams through creating effective change.

To learn more about developing strategic practices in early childhood settings, see [The Strategy Design Cycle](#).

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## Endnotes

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- 24 Bryson (2018); Goltz (2020).
- 25 Bryson (2018); Wilbon (2012).
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