

# NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING SAFETY

By Caroline Milburn

*In a sector awash with policy guidelines and recent reforms, how do you inspire educators to embrace a new way of teaching children under six and their families about road safety education?*

The *National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education* were developed by early childhood education and road safety experts throughout Australia and New Zealand, to support evidence-based road safety education in early childhood settings.

A new resource – *The Starting Out Safely Road Safety Educator Resource* – provides practical advice to enable educators to bring to life the eight national practices.

“We were very conscious of giving people a sense of what road safety education looks like in practice and to stretch people’s thinking about what it might mean,” said Ms Catharine Hydon, an early childhood education consultant and lead writer of the *Starting Out Safely Road Safety Educator Resource*.

“People might not think that activities such as children sourcing old Melways maps, looking at the maps and talking about the roads are about road safety education. But we wanted to make it clear to educators that they can use material like that in road safety education.

“Sometimes in early childhood education we talk about broad concepts and we don’t talk about what it means in practice. Educators are such busy people and they really value things when they’re made as accessible as possible.”

The eight national practices were released in 2011, to support educators to embed evidence-based road safety education in their curriculum to lay the foundations for safe road use throughout life. More children are killed using Australia’s roads each year, than the number of children who die each year from accidental drowning.



Nationwide, 61 children aged 0–14 died in 2011 from road traffic accidents on a public highway or street involving a moving vehicle such as a motor vehicle, bicycle or tram.

Seventy-five per cent of those killed were passengers and a further 20 per cent were pedestrians. Younger children aged 0–4 were more than twice as likely to be killed in a road transport accident than those aged 10–14.

Many thousands more children are seriously injured in road accidents each year. For example, in Victoria on average each year 622 children aged between 0–18 are seriously injured and 30 are killed on the state’s roads, according to the latest figures from VicRoads, the state’s road traffic authority.

VicRoads was one of the road safety authorities involved in the Australian and New Zealand expert reference group that developed the eight national practices for early childhood road safety education.

After the reference group developed the national practices VicRoads turned its attention to creating the educator resource. It set up a working group to

produce the resource by gathering ideas and practical examples of innovative road safety activities in early learning services.

The working group members included Ms Hydon and representatives from Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA), Gowrie Victoria and VicRoads. VicRoads and the Transport Accident Commission funded the development of the resource.

The group was mindful of the need to overcome assumptions about road safety education – that it is traditionally viewed as an information session or special event and it involves a limited number of activities, applied to early learning services regardless of their location or individual needs.

To break through these traditional beliefs about teaching road safety messages to children under six, the working group packed the educator resource with practical tips, curriculum suggestions and case studies.

The material is aimed at encouraging and inspiring educators to use the ideas in their early learning services, as well as coming up with their own experiences for children. “We wanted to encourage people

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to think of road safety education as not just being about introducing children to crossing a road safely,” Ms Hydon said.

“We wanted to broaden our curriculum responses to get children thinking about things like how they might get to school safely.

“And we wanted to avoid a one-size fits all approach by being explicit about different examples, so that an educator in a service located next to a busy road might approach road safety education differently to a service in a country town with no footpaths.”

The eight national practices and the educator resource have also been designed to mesh with Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

The resource’s practical tips include teaching strategies and activities that enable road safety education to be embedded into, rather than added on to, the early years curriculum.

“It’s a smarter not harder approach,” Ms Hydon said. “The last thing that ELAA or VicRoads want to do is make the attention to road safety education a burdensome, extra task for educators.”

The working group sought feedback on the usefulness of the resource from early learning services in rural and urban locations. It also sought responses from

other early childhood education experts before finalising the resource for publication.

VicRoad’s Emma Clarkson, who led the development of the resource, said educators who trialled the resource were overwhelmingly positive about its effectiveness in helping them understand how to embed the national practices into their teaching strategies and engagement with children and their families.

The educator resource is divided into eight sections outlining each of the eight national practices, with relevant case studies and practical suggestions included in each section.

Ms Clarkson said the working group was determined to ensure the resource included some of the more difficult challenges that educators are expected to deal with, such as communicating with families, especially those from culturally diverse backgrounds, about safe road use attitudes and behaviour.

“Giving parents guidance can be a tricky thing to do, especially when there are strong cultural differences,” said Ms Clarkson, a VicRoads senior policy officer. “When families come from places with few road rules, it can be hard for those families to adjust to a new society and new road laws in Australia.

“So the conversations that early childhood educators have with these families about road safety are very important.”

Cultural Competence – implementing road safety education that is culturally relevant for the diversity of children, their families and the community – is one of the eight national practices.

Under the Cultural Competence section of the educator resource, the national practice is illustrated with suggestions about how educators can reach out to families. The section also advises educators “for the most part, this practice is more about being patient and inclusive rather than only utilising a set of activities and resources”.

A case study describes a rural family day care service with families from Sudan who drove their children to the service in cars without proper child restraints or seatbelts. The service worked with a local community leader and social worker and held a local information night to talk with families about seatbelt and other road safety issues.

After the information night educators at the family day care service noticed an improvement in the number of families using seatbelts. The service plans to hold a similar neighbourhood meeting for families each year.

Ms Hydon said such examples showed the extraordinary, society-wide benefits of early childhood road safety education.

“Road safety education is not just for children and young drivers. It’s for the whole community and the whole community benefits when everyone knows about it and takes it seriously.”

She said the case studies and other materials in the resource also revealed how educators played a crucial role in helping to create healthier, safer and stronger communities.

“Part of our work in early childhood education is to be responsive to the place and community you work in,” Ms Hydon said. “Early learning services are important community institutions and educators in these services are often the first point of contact that families make when settling into a community.”

The free on-line resource has also been designed to ensure it can be used anywhere in Australia by early childhood educators. It is available on the websites of ELAA and VicRoads and will form part of ELAA’s *Starting Out Safely* road safety professional development sessions for early childhood educators.

