

# Innovative Strategies to Support Family Engagement and Educator Wellbeing: A Toolkit for Educators

## *Learnings from Goodstart Centres of Innovation*

**Goodstart Early Learning**

**Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute  
Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood, The University of Melbourne**

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REEaCh | Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood

## About the project

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services developed innovative strategies to maintain engagement with families and support educator wellbeing.

This project aimed to capture and learn from these innovations by:

- **RESEARCH** - into the experiences of educators, children and families attending Goodstart ECEC services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **ENABLING** - supporting Goodstart Centres (Centres of Innovation) to co-design, test, and refine innovative family engagement and educator wellbeing practices.

## Our Centres of Innovation

Goodstart Centres applied through an Expression of Interest to become a Centre of Innovation. The following Centres of Innovation participated:

- Goodstart East Sydney Early Learning (NSW)
- Goodstart Wynnum West, Wondall Rd (QLD)
- Goodstart Boronia, Albert Ave (VIC)
- Goodstart Flemington (VIC)

The Centres of Innovation were supported through bi-monthly coaching and quarterly professional learning sessions to co-design, test and refine family engagement and educator wellbeing strategies from May 2021 – August 2022.

## Using co-design processes to innovate

The process of co-designing, testing, and refining innovative strategies can be fun and empowering for Centres. The innovation process used by Centres of Innovation consisted of three key steps. Each step is outlined on the following pages.



## 1 IDENTIFY a challenge, opportunity or area of interest



Through co-design, educators and families can come up with innovative strategies that respond to specific challenges or opportunities at their Centre. Creating opportunities to share ideas about what is important to participants is key to enabling engagement, collaboration, and creativity.

### Ideas to get you started

Brainstorm challenges you want to address at a team meeting. Document your ideas using post-it notes and mind maps.

Have an ideas box for educators and parents.

Talk with educators individually to get to know their interests and ideas for improvement.

Talk to parents about what they would like to see at the Centre. Put a question in the newsletter or have an ideas board that parents can contribute to.

Think about what data you have that might help you think about your challenges and opportunities for example, enrolment or attendance data.

Connect with other Goodstart Centres to get ideas of things to try.

### Reflections from Centres of Innovation

*There is no need to reinvent the wheel. A little thing that you or your team can do can make all the difference to one child, to your entire center, or to your community, sometimes.*

*Just give it a go. Even though we are all time poor, especially in early learning, we can implement little things that make a real difference to families and staff.*

*Make the process easy, simple and enjoyable for your team: find ways to build on current routines and practices.*

*Find your allies and get them involved from the start of the journey.*

COVID-19 lockdowns were very, very frequent in Victoria. And that was resulting in a lot of stress and mental non-wellbeing for educators.

**Goodstart Flemington**

*Most of our families are low socioeconomic families and we have quite a lot of children on NDIS plans. Some of our families are hard to connect with and during Covid-19 that was probably even more so.*

**Goodstart Boronia, Albert Avenue**



## DEVELOP strategies that harness the talents & interests of your team



The co-design process allows educators to be creative and develop innovative strategies that build on their talents and interests. Educators have reported that it can make their work more enjoyable by sharing things that matter to them, adding variety to their roles, and strengthening their relationships with team members, children, and families.

### Ways to identify talents and interests

Ask educators for suggestions and ideas for upcoming events and celebrations.

Team meetings provide a great opportunity to identify everyone's strengths and interests. Ask staff to share what makes them happy or write down three things that make them smile.

Get to know staff members and their interests by having individual or small group catch-ups.

Make sure educators understand that all talents and interests are valued and that leading and supporting roles are equally important.

Create a short profile paragraph for each educator including their interests and hobbies to share with families.

### Reflections from Centres of Innovation

*Start small and take it at a pace that suits you and your team.*

*Promote a culture of sharing. Find ways to let educators share things they enjoy and/or special skills, knowledge, or cultural celebrations.*

*Get others involved and share responsibility for activities.*

*Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and to push yourself and your team out of your comfort zone.*

*Have fun! Make the workplace as fun and as playful as possible and you will be more likely to retain a happy and healthy team.*

With the help of our amazing cook we conducted Zoom cooking lessons with educators and families. Our educator with a Spanish background ran a Spanish language program. We developed a yoga program for children and educators because one of our educators is a certified yoga teacher.

**Goodstart Flemington**

All of our team have different hobbies and different skill sets. They come from different cultures and speak different languages. We wanted to have that opportunity for all of that be showcased through our incursion program *Wondall Skill*

**Goodstart Wynnum West Wondall Rd**



## TEST and REFINE your strategies



An important part of co-design is seeking feedback from children, families, and educators to understand how they responded to your innovative strategies and how they can be improved. Educators are experienced at documenting children's learning (Quality Area 1) and many of these skills will be useful for testing and refining your strategies.

### Ideas to collect feedback

Use familiar channels such as Storypark, Facebook, and informal conversations to get feedback from families.

Think about a one-question survey that families can complete at pick-up or drop-off. They could write their response on a post-it or put a token in a jar to 'vote' on their choice. Make it an activity children and parents can do together.

Ask children what they liked the most about the activity or get them to draw a picture and explain it to you.

Give educators opportunities to reflect on their activities, including what worked, what didn't work, what they enjoyed, what they learned, and what they would do differently next time.

You can learn a lot from activities that don't go well so don't forget to reflect on them and document your learnings

### Reflections from Centres of Innovation

*Document learnings to help you refine and make improvements as you go.*

*Persevere in finding approaches that work for your team and Centre. You might have to try a range of different ideas before you find the best strategies.*

*Try to simplify your strategy so that it works within the normal day and routines.*

*Don't be afraid to try. Learning about what doesn't work can be just as valuable as learning what does work.*

*Some strategies work well for a short period of time but might not be long-term solutions.*

*We have collected lots of informal feedback on Wondall Skill including the smiles and happiness of educators, asking children the best part/activity, Facebook 'likes.*

**Goodstart Wynnum West Wondall Rd**

*As part of our team meetings, we conduct anonymous MENTI polls to check in on our team's wellness. Using the data, we were able to track as a team how we feel.*

**Goodstart East Sydney Early Learning**

## Innovative strategies developed by Centres of Innovation

Several innovative family engagement and educator wellbeing strategies were developed by Centres of Innovation, which are summarised below and described in more detail in Appendix A and B.

### Family engagement strategies:

- Sharing cultural traditions and celebrations with children and families
- Offering incursions where educators share their talents and interests
- Supporting home learning
- Connecting families to community supports
- Developing new ways to stay connected with families during COVID-19 restrictions

### Educator wellbeing strategies:

- Creating informal opportunities to connect and de-stress
- Promoting wellbeing and sharing wellness and self-care strategies
- Measuring staff wellbeing
- Developing new staff processes for communication and planning
- Recording educator achievements and goals

## Key learnings

The experiences of participants in the Centres of Innovation provide valuable insights into new ways ECEC services can support families and educators in times of crisis. Key learnings from Centres of Innovation include:

- **During times of upheaval and transition, ECEC services can play an important role in supporting families.** This project highlighted that ECEC services are well placed to support families given their strong relationships with children and families, strength-based approaches, and effective communication channels.
- **Innovative strategies to increase family engagement and educator wellbeing can be used to address challenges during all types of crises.** In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, Centres of Innovation also had to deal with bushfires, floods, and transport strikes. One Centre had to relocate for three months due to urgent repairs.
- **Educators can benefit from Centre-wide innovation in several ways.** Innovation can influence the direction of the Centre and foster new ways to connect with families and children. It can provide opportunities to build on educators' existing interests and skills. It can add variety to roles and strengthen relationships between team members, increasing educators' overall job satisfaction.
- **Small changes can have a positive impact on educator wellbeing and family engagement.** Centres developed innovative strategies in response to specific challenges or opportunities at their Centre. These innovations were often small, targeted, and timely, increasing their impact and allowing them to be implemented within the time constraints of staff.



## STORIES FROM OUR CENTRES OF INNOVATION

### Showcasing educators' interests and talents

*Wondall Skill* was inspired by another Goodstart Centre who had an internal incursion program to attract families on certain days. We saw it as an opportunity to showcase our teams' talents at a time when COVID-19 restrictions prohibited excursions and external visitors.

The first thing we did was talk to everyone about their talents and skills and what they really cared about. We put together a five-week program showcasing some of these talents. The success came from seeing how enthusiastic and happy all the team were when they were showcasing their skills, their culture, or their hobbies.

One of the highlights of *Wondall Skill* was how open the team became with each other, especially about celebrating their culture. Those celebrations, learning about language, food and just getting to know each other. It really helped the children, and the families understand their educators better.



Goodstart Wynnum West, Wondall Rd

### Supporting educator wellbeing by walking

During COVID in 2020, our centre was closed on four hours notice for major maintenance. We combined with another local service for 16 weeks.

We implemented walking meetings because staff were really unsettled during that time. Staff could open up and express how they felt. There's not a lot of privacy in early learning services. Walking meetings let you have an honest, open conversation without worrying about who heard you.

When I saw one of the staff struggling, I'd just say, "I've got someone covering you for 10 minutes. Let's go for a walk". It was just a general conversation. It relieved a lot of pressure and supported the staff at a tough time.



Goodstart Boronia, Albert Ave

## Integrated approach to mental and physical wellbeing

Our vision was to support educators and children to gain the health and wellbeing tools to help them thrive.

As one of our educators is a certified yoga teacher, we developed a yoga program for children and educators.

We have created a wellbeing space in one of our rooms where we do our yoga poses together.

There is a lot of enthusiasm among the children, and they enjoy learning new poses. A boomerang, kangaroo, and emu were among the NAIDOC poses they learned recently.

Educators are highly motivated to continue practicing yoga on an everyday basis with the children.

We can see a positive impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of educators and children.

The positive feedback from parents has encouraged us to run this program on a continuous basis.



Goodstart Flemington

## Building a mentally healthy community

Educator burnout has been a concern in the sector, but COVID exacerbated it. We wanted to implement strategies that increased the wellbeing of our team.

Our first step was to set boundaries around work hours and cease email and Teams communications between 6:30pm and 6:30am and over the weekend to support switching off.

After that, educators were encouraged to share their wellness and self-care strategies, so teachers had more tools in their toolbox across the board.

As part of our team meetings, we have also instituted wellness check-ins. We do that at the beginning of every staff meeting, which has given us a great way to track how the team feels.

We have also added more avenues for educators to provide feedback and ways to celebrate success and achievement.



Goodstart Early Learning East Sydney



## Resources

A summary of the resources generated by Centres of Innovation during their participation in this project is presented below. These resources can be accessed on the [REEaCh website](#), the Goodstart website and the CCCH website.

- [Video resource for Educators](#) (a short video comprising interviews with educators, who discuss the co-design process, innovation strategies implemented, the impact of innovation strategies, and important learnings).



- [Research and Practice Brief for Educators](#) (a summary of the research underpinning the project and the innovation strategies implemented)
- [Family Engagement Resource for Parents](#) (summarizing the importance of family engagement and providing tips for engaging with Centres)
- [Practice Resource from each Centre of Innovation](#) (each Centre of Innovation has outlined the innovation strategies implemented, the impact, key learnings and tips for implementation)
- [Parent Connections with Early Learning](#) (online article posted on the First Five Years website)
- [RCN Resource for parents starting their engagement with early learning](#) (a list of helpful resources curated by the Raising Children Network)
- **Summary of Family Engagement strategies** (Appendix A)
- **Summary of Educator Wellbeing strategies** (Appendix B)

If you want to find out more about co-design and human-centred design, here are some useful resources:

- <https://www.vic.gov.au/co-design>
- <https://www.vic.gov.au/human-centred-design-playbook>

## Appendix A: Family Engagement Strategies

The Centres of Innovation developed and tested strategies to engage families during COVID restrictions, to support home learning, and to connect families with community resources. The activities also included celebrating and sharing cultural traditions with children and families, as well as offering incursions in which educators could share their talents and interests. Please refer to Table 1 below for a complete list.

Table 1: Family Engagement strategies developed and tested by Centres of Innovation

Family engagement Strategy	Benefits	Centre
<b>Home Learning kits</b>  Kindy packs made of fun activities and resources during lockdown while not attending. Kits were tailored to individual child interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children loved having new and interesting things to learn and play with at home</li> <li>- Parents were grateful as they had been home for so long</li> <li>- Kept families connected to the centre</li> <li>- Some home learning activities were then brought in for show and tell once children returned to the centre.</li> </ul>	Boronia, Albert Avenue (VIC)
<b>Connecting families with community supports</b>  A poster was developed with names and numbers of local support agencies and was posted on Storypark for all families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All families had access to the poster on Storypark without feeling they were targeted specifically as needing help.</li> <li>- Useful resource that can be updated</li> </ul>	Boronia, Albert Avenue (VIC)
<b>Regular phone calls and check-ins</b> to update families on their child's progress, which also acted as a source of adult interaction for isolated parents and carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Update families on their child's progress</li> <li>- Isolated parents and carers felt connected to the centre</li> </ul>	Boronia, Albert Avenue (VIC)
<b>Front door greetings</b> during restrictions Kinder staff now walk children out at the end of the day so they can chat to families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Families found it welcoming and reassuring</li> <li>- Kept families connected to educators and updated on their child's learning and development</li> </ul>	Boronia, Albert Avenue (VIC)
<b>Wondall Skill</b> - incursions run by educators showcasing their interests and talents including singing, music, story-time, cultural celebrations and jewelry making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children have enjoyed participating in new activities with their educators and learning about different cultures</li> <li>- Great feedback from families</li> <li>- Educators have enjoyed sharing their culture, talents and interests with children</li> </ul>	Wynnum West, Wondall Rd (QLD)

## Appendix B: Educator Wellbeing Strategies

Educator wellbeing strategies were developed by Centres of Innovation that promoted wellbeing, shared self-care strategies, facilitated informal connections, measured staff wellbeing, and recording educator goals and achievements. Please refer to Table 2 below for a complete list.

Table 2: Educator wellbeing strategies developed and tested by Centres of Innovation

Educator wellbeing strategy	Benefits	Centre
Informal opportunities to connect		
<b>Educator/ Director walking meetings</b> Educators were invited to go for a short walk with the Center Director one-on-one to talk and refresh.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provided educators with a private and non-confrontational setting in which to speak freely and have a break from the Centre during periods of high stress.</li> </ul>	Boronia, Albert Avenue
<b>Lunch dates with Centre Director</b> Two educators nominate to have an informal lunch catch up with the Centre Director in a quiet outdoor area at the Centre.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunity for educators to talk informally with the Centre Director.</li> <li>- Opportunity for team members to learn about each other's history/background/ aspirations and dreams.</li> </ul>	Flemington
<b>Educators cook for children</b> Educators took turns (in groups of two) to cook for children when the Centre was quiet and in-between chefs. Educators were able to nominate what they want to cook and who they want to cook with.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators get to share a fun activity and have some variety in their day.</li> <li>- Children get to try food from different cultures.</li> </ul>	Flemington
Promotion of wellbeing and peer support		
<b>Weekend Wellness Challenges and reminders</b> asked staff to share on Teams: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 things they do for their wellbeing</li> <li>- what they were looking forward to when restrictions ended.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are reminded to care for their own wellbeing.</li> <li>- Educators are encouraged to share positive strategies to support wellbeing.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
<b>Feel good Fridays</b> Friday night 30-minute self-care sessions for educator wellbeing and resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators make time for their own wellbeing by participating in self-care activities.</li> <li>- Educators contribute ideas and/or run a session.</li> </ul>	Flemington
<b>Yoga program</b> 30-minute yoga sessions for children and other educators throughout the week within work hours. These are run by a trained educator and laminated yoga cards have been made to support the program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved educator motivation, fewer staff sick days.</li> <li>- Improved educator and child wellbeing.</li> </ul>	Flemington

Educator wellbeing strategy	Benefits	Centre
<b>Buddy up COVID Testing</b> for affected staff who needed to test every 72 hours. Lunch breaks are coordinated and extended to allow time to get tested and still have time for lunch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators feel supported and less isolated.</li> <li>- Educators' working conditions are not impacted by testing.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
<b>Measuring staff wellbeing</b> at staff meetings through anonymous online Menti polls. Staff are prompted to share what they have done in the last week for their self-care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are reminded to care for their own wellbeing.</li> <li>- Leaders can monitor the wellbeing of educators at the service.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
<b>R U Okay day</b> promotion and tips on how to have conversations with others about mental health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are encouraged to have open conversations about mental health and wellbeing, and to seek help if needed.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
Staff development		
<b>Professional journal project</b> Educators have their own profile on Storypark where they can record their professional development goals and document their achievements over the year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are provided with space to think about their professional goals and development.</li> <li>- Documenting achievements supports educators' professional efficacy and fulfilment.</li> </ul>	Flemington
<b>Mental Health First Aid training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are knowledgeable about mental health and better able to identify those needing support and recommend helpful strategies.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
<b>Wondall Skill</b> - educators provide incursions that showcase their interests and talents including singing, music, story-time, cultural celebrations and jewellery making.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators have enjoyed sharing their culture, talents and interests with children.</li> <li>- Children have enjoyed participating in new activities with their educators. and learning about different cultures</li> <li>- Great feedback from families.</li> </ul>	Wynnum West, Wondall Rd
Centre communication and planning		
<b>Quieting of email/Teams</b> from 6:30pm to 6:30am and over the weekend to support switching off from work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are given permission to switch off from work outside work hours.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
<b>Teams COVID update channel</b> to communicate information quickly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators feel informed about changing working conditions due to the pandemic.</li> </ul>	East Sydney
<b>Future Friday</b> getting educator input into future Centre activities to create excitement and buy-in.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educators are motivated and feel professional fulfilment at work.</li> </ul>	East Sydney