

# Be You Virtual Conference Transcript

## Relationships and play: Assisting recovery after change

Presented by Rita Johnston (ECA) and Paola Mercado (ECA)

### Rita Johnston

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the second day of the 2020 Be You virtual conference titled Responding Together, Managing Wellbeing In Times Of Uncertainty. My name is Rita Johnston, and I'm very happy to be here with you this afternoon. And with me is my colleague Paola Mercado, and we are both part of the Be You team for early childhood Australia. So yesterday morning, we heard about the foundations for creating a mentally healthy community. We heard about risk and protective factors for wellbeing. And then finally, the last talk was about critical incidents, response and recovery. In this session, we'll look more deeply at critical incidents and the role of relationships and play in assisting recovery after change.

I want to start by saying warami, which is hello in the Darug language, one of the languages of the first people of the Sydney basin, where I live and work. I'd like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the land where we are sitting today, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I acknowledge and pay respect to Elders past, present, and emerging, and all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living and working on this land and throughout Australia today. I recognise that Aboriginal people have been nurturing and teaching children on this land for thousands of years. And I honour and respect that role. Today we've got people joining us from all over the country. So I invite you to share your own acknowledgement by putting the name of the country that you are on into the chat. And if you're unsure of which land or country that you're sitting on, there is a link in the chat to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies that will help you.

For those of you who don't know about Be You and perhaps weren't at the first day of this conference, or haven't been at one of our virtual conference conferences before Be You is a national mental health initiative for educators and is the organiser of this conference. Be you is led by Beyond Blue in partnership with Early Childhood Australia and Headspace. It's completely free and available to every educator, early learning service, and school in Australia. Be You empowers educators to support children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing and their own mental health. Be You offers educators online, professional learning, fact sheets, online events, and other resources. It offers whole learning communities, tools and processes to implement a whole learning community approach to mental health and wellbeing.

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The discussions throughout the conference also highlight the Be You resources tools and professional learning to show you how Be You can support a whole school and a whole early learning approach to mental wellbeing.

Recent events have reinforced the need for mental wellbeing strategies in early learning schools and early learning services in schools. And this conference covers three key themes in 10 sessions over two days. So the first theme is mental health and wellbeing, a whole community approach. The second theme is prepare and take care of critical incidents in uncertain times. And finally, the third theme is the benefits of building strong family and community partnerships. Most of the sessions in this two day conference are aimed at a particular learning stage, early learning, primary, or secondary school. And this session is most relevant to early learning educators.

We're going to be talking about mental health. We're going to be talking about critical incidents. And so I just want to remind people to make sure they keep themselves safe. If difficult thoughts or memories arise through this conference, make sure you talk to a trusted colleague, family member or mental health professional, and please only share what you feel comfortable in sharing in chat. And I ask everyone to also be aware of confidentiality.

So today we're going to look at four areas around critical incidents in early learning settings. So firstly, we want to look at what do critical incidents actually look like in early learning settings. Do we, in early learning, have some unique perspectives and experiences? We're going to look at why relationships are at the heart of recovery for adults and children and how we can strengthen relationships at these times. And then finally, we're going to look at the role of play in children's recovery. So I hope you enjoy the next 45 minutes with us as we look at these areas.

### **Paola Mercado**

And before we move on, we're going to open the poll and we're going to have a little bit of a reflection and discuss, so hopefully the poll is popping up for you on the screen.

### **Rita Johnston**

So the poll question is how confident are you in identifying and responding to critical incidents? And this will give us a sense of where you are at, at the moment, with your understanding of critical incidents in the early learning settings. Are you very confident, somewhat, a little, or not at all confident? And certainly when I was in the classroom, Paola, and teaching in preschool, I didn't even know the term critical incident or what it might mean or look like. So it'll be interesting to see what our participants know.

### **Paola Mercado**

It will be. And actually we've already got some results coming up here. So we have a good amount of people, so round about 57%, who were somewhat confident at already being able to identify and respond to critical incidents. So that's a really good chunk of people. And then we have, 27% who are little bit confident. So they're thinking that they've got this and they might be able to respond and identify critical incidents. And there's a smaller amount that are very confident. And perhaps that's in relation to what's currently been happening for many communities in our most recent few months, thinking about those things.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah. So thanks everyone for participating in the poll. And hopefully as we progress through this presentation, you'll start to understand more about critical incidents in your particular setting. So let's unpack critical incidents in the context of change, in this broader context of change. So basically we all like what we're familiar with, what we're comfortable with and change at an individual level is a process whereby individuals alter their ways of thinking and doing. So change can be uncomfortable. We have to change our ways of thinking and doing. There's a well-known expression called - that says everything

changes, nothing stays the same. And for me, when I first heard that expression, I really didn't like it. I was like Goldilocks. I was looking for the, the situation in my life that was just right. And every now and then it would come along, but everything changes and eventually life would go on with all its ups and downs. However, what I've learned is that as I have... when I have a better understanding of framework about what change is, I'm better able to appreciate those just right times, and at the same time, develop the skills and capacity to negotiate the next foreseeable or unforeseeable change in my life. And this is what developing a critical incident management plan is about. It's about having, developing the skills and the strategies and the systems so that when those ups and downs do arrive in your service, you've got a sense and you know what to do and how to manage them.

### **Paola Mercado**

And I think your point about understanding that nothing will ever stay the same. Things will change. I think even that initial step is a really good foundation to move forward with. Yeah. Good, good point.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah. And nevertheless, we do get times when everything's just right and we need to really enjoy those.

### **Paola Mercado**

That's true.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah. So the other thing I used to do was thinking in very black and white ways, so there was other change or there was stability and what I've discovered that change, like everything, actually lives on a continuum and is actually happening all the time. So changes can be large or small. They can be initiated by ourselves or be hoisted upon us by others or by external events. Some changes allow for us to have some agency in them, whereas other changes are in the hands of other people. Some changes are welcome, like getting married, some changes are unwelcome, getting a divorce, or maybe that's welcome too, in some cases. So some changes are welcome or unwelcome, and some changes are supportive and some changes are dangerous. So change sort of slides along that continuum in all those areas.

### **Paola Mercado**

And I think another example would be moving house. When you're moving house, it's a welcome change, it's a planned change. However, that brings with it all these other, I guess, feelings that you hadn't planned for originally, it's the sense of grief and loss of leaving your old home, whether it's for positive or negative reasons that you're leaving your old home and creating that new space as well. So those changes, as you say, being on the continuum, are constantly moving.

### **Rita Johnston**

And they're always stressful, stressful. So we do know that every change is stressful because it involves our need to adapt to these new circumstances. And remember earlier I said that we like things to stay the same. And so when these either positive or negative changes arise, we have to change our ways of thinking and doing. But also remember that we do need some level of stress to be healthy, and we call this positive stress. However, the greater the degree of change, the more difficult it can be. And when these changes fall into the dangerous category, we can call them critical incidents.

So, according to the World Health Organisation, we're going to have a look at a definition of a critical incident now. And according to the World Health Organisation, a critical incident is an event outside of the range of normal experience. So, that's a really important first step definition. It's something outside our normal range of experience. It's sudden and unexpected. It makes us lose control. It involves a perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical or emotional loss. So, there's some big things. Outside our normal experience, sudden and unexpected, we feel like we've lost control, we feel threatened and there's some either physical or emotional loss. So, we can see that critical incidents fit into that extreme end of the change continuum. A critical incident is often big. It's initiated by people or events out of our control. It's unwelcome and it feels, or actually is dangerous or threatening.

Often these events are sufficiently disturbing to overwhelm, or threaten to overwhelm, an individual's coping capacity. And in the context of your whole early learning community, incidents can become critical when they overwhelm the usual coping capacity of your learning community. A critical incident can occur either within your service or outside of it. And COVID-19 is a critical incident that started outside and has infiltrated inside, the effects of it have been infiltrated inside early learning services. A critical incident may involve children as well as educators, families, and other people who are close to them. So, while the network of people affected by a critical incident can be very wide, if the incident directly involves people within your learning community, so imagine if something actually happens right within your early learning community, the impact can be very, very intense. Do you want to add anything to that, Paola?

### **Paola Mercado**

Well, just thinking about all of the things that we've been saying, and I really like how you've defined critical incident and especially how it relates back to an early learning service. We have some wonderful participants adding to the chat box and (INAUDIBLE) is one of them who's feeling like she needs more resources to deal with critical incidents. So, that in itself is showing that this is what's happening in our early learning services, in our early learning communities. And it's really important to be able to access the resources that you need during these times. And perhaps there are things that we can already be doing to help us prepare for hopefully not the next time that happens, but as you say, change always happens. And sometime it will be at an unexpected moment that you will need these resources and be able to access them at any moment.

### **Rita Johnston**

And the Be You range of resources and you'll see links to various things in the chat, have some really good resources. And I'll mention those again a little bit later once we unpack the critical incidents a little bit more. So, we're going to have another poll in just a moment, but before we do that, I want to just describe what critical incidents might actually look like. So, I've put them into three categories and the first is natural disasters. So, we're well aware of those in Australia. We've had last summer's bushfires and now we've got COVID-19, we've had drought and flood as well, and cyclones. And in other countries they have hurricanes or extreme cold weather events like snow and avalanche. So, these natural disasters fall into that category of critical incident. Then there's personal disaster. So, this is about a serious injury to a child or an adult, death by illness or accident of a child or an adult, or suicide. So, these are personal, we could call these personal disasters. And then there's all sorts of other things which I've sort of popped into another category. But one example is for example, physical damage to property or animals or pets by fire, flood or vandalism. So, remembering that a critical incident is an event outside the range of normal experiences, as the poll pops up, can you please tick, unless they've already started?

### **Paola Mercado**

I was waiting for you to finish because it was an instant reply to COVID-19.

### **Rita Johnston**

Of course, everyone will tick that.

### **Paola Mercado**

Absolutely, there was 100%. It started off with 100% on COVID-19, which is very relevant to what's happening, but slowly we've been able to obviously pick a couple of other options. So, there's quite a percentage who have been either affected by bushfire, flood or drought as well. Then there's suicide, so 5.6%, 9.6% affected by death or accidents, and major illness, there's again 8%, and physical damages 6.3, and then a small amount, 4.2% in the other. So, these are all really good, I guess, statistics of our current participants and knowing where everybody is. And obviously it highlights that everyone is being impacted or affected in some way by a critical incident. And one of the examples that we have in our professional learning modules that sit on the Be You website, which I think would fit into that other category, Rita, that you were saying, is how an early learning service turned up for their day, and they had children turning up at the same time when they realised that in their backyard, their chooks, their chickens had all been killed

during the evening, during the night and they had only been made aware as the educators arrived for work that morning and children were arriving for the day of care. And some property, some outdoor equipment had been damaged, so that obviously is a critical incident that really, really affected that particular learning community and had an impact on the children, the educators, and the families who were walking into that space and environment at that particular moment.

### **Rita Johnston**

What a shock that would have been, particularly for those children. And you well know, there are children who are very connected with the animals in the environment who go to the fish or the chickens or the rabbits or whatever you might have as their first connecting point. And to then have that experience is pretty traumatic and difficult. I'm interested in the other category and what I wanted to suggest too, that if you've had something... remembering that a critical incident is something that's outside your normal range of experience. If you've had something that's happened at your setting that you think might be a critical incident, but not sure, please pop it into chat and we will have a look. Because really, a critical incident is a critical incident if you define it as a critical incident.

### **Paola Mercado**

And we've just had another addition to the chat where Ralph is saying that it was highlighted at one particular point for a child who lost their mum, suddenly lost their mum, and Ralph was feeling that they had some knowledge in the area, but a lot of the other educators perhaps didn't feel quite confident and didn't have the knowledge on how to deal with that as well. So, this highlights the importance of having the conversation with your wider team of educators as to the planning and the understanding of what a critical incident may look like. And another addition to the chat is, Mim is saying that there's sometimes little changes build up and then they can actually become the critical incident and become overwhelming. So yeah, all really good points that we're having come through the chat.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah, that's a really interesting point, because earlier I said it was sudden, but, you know, we've got an example here from one of the participants, is that for them, that there was a critical incident that was a lot of little steps happening one after the other, till finally it became escalated to critical.

### **Paola Mercado**

And I think COVID-19 is a good example as well.

### **Rita Johnston**

Well that is, yeah.

### **Paola Mercado**

Because we could see it happening around us and then it, obviously, as you were saying, infiltrating from the outer perspective in towards how it has a direct impact to us as individuals, to us in our community, in our local spaces, our own homes. So yeah, really good.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah. And I was thinking that, back to the educator who was needing resources, in Be You, we've got a domain called responding together, which is specifically about identifying critical incidents and also about how to respond, how to develop a plan around that. And we've got some fact sheets around that too, so you'll see links to that in chat, but you'll also just be able to find those on the Be You website. So, now that we've identified critical incident, and what I'm seeing is that in early learning services, there's a wide range of critical incidents have happened over the last 12 to 18 months. What we want to do now is talk more about, what do we do? Something's happened, what do we do? So, yesterday in one of the keynotes, Ami was speaking about the principles of recovery from a critical incident. And she spoke about the emotional impact of a critical incident and the practical steps to recovery. So, the rest of this afternoon, we're going to talk more about the wellbeing side of recovery. So you might notice that the principles of recovery on this slide are founded in relationships, staying connected, getting back to life as usual, providing support and

checking in are all relationships in action. Building and encouraging strong positive relationships is one of the key protective factors for mental health and wellbeing in general, so it follows that having someone to turn to is really, really important, following a critical incident and promoting positive relationships is key to recovery. We know that positive relationships create a sense of safety, stability, security, and support. And this enables the fight-flight-freeze response in the body and brain to calm and regulate. And it's only after the stress hormones have settled and the calming hormones are activated that the front brain can begin to think clearly and start to make sense of what is happening and move forward in recovery. And Paola, I know you talked about protective factors yesterday. Have you got anything to add?

### **Paola Mercado**

Well, if people, attendees, that are here today didn't actually catch the session yesterday, those recordings and the one that Rita was talking about that Ami presented, they will be recorded. They have been recorded and they will be there for you to access those recordings at a later stage, but concentrating on the risk and protective factors model, again, this information you can find on the Be You website. But I think the protective factors actually allow us to build on increasing those protective factors in a daily... in our daily practices, on a daily basis in our routines, in our, as you say, our relationships, maintaining those, really strengthening those, increases our ability to be able to then not feel so overwhelmed when a critical incident were to happen. I think the impact of a critical incident is always going to be that initial, overwhelming response, but the immediate responding to a critical incident will be able to be better planned out and better thought when you've already got a really solid foundation of those protective factors that are enabling you to move forward.

### **Rita Johnston**

So yeah, going back to that definition, that broad definition of a critical incident, overwhelming our coping capacity, if you're in a service that's got a strong relationship based practice and children and educators and families feel included, they feel like they belong, they've got people to talk to, they feel safe, then when the critical incident comes along, they're already going to have... going to be prepared. Preparing for a critical incident isn't about having a folder in the cupboard that you pull out when it happens, preparing for a critical incident is like, is about preparing for life and all the practice that we already do in early learning services is key to that. As I'm saying that I'm thinking about, we're going to talk a little bit more about families in a minute. And I'll unpack that a bit further. What I want to say just now, is that - what do I want to say now?

### **Paola Mercado**

Well, as you're getting your slides ready, just going back to the chat here, we've had some people saying about critical incidents that when lots of hard things have happened, by necessity, as early learning services, we have to keep going and there's not that time to stop and reflect. And so then it becomes a period of overwhelm for everybody, for all staff. So I guess that's sort of really for me, brings back the point of what can we do in our daily practices that can support us when those times happen. Not that we should be expecting a critical incident to happen, but that sense of overwhelm, and that sense of stress in that moment can actually be not less than, because you're still going to feel it, but you'll be able to have those thinking processes to help you have that response.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah, you'll be able to manage it better. And as you're speaking Paola, I'm thinking that when we've... when we've built those relationships through our normal practice, then when the critical incident comes along, we're already strengthened. We've got a lot better in a... lot stronger responses to respond to it. But also when we name something, when we've got language around something, when we name something, when we understand what a critical incident is, and it may or may not happen in our centre, then when it does happen, it's not a nameless, terrible thing that's happened. One of the things that happened to me when COVID-19 arrived was I was able to say to myself in my own adjusting was, oh I think this is a global critical incident, right? I know what category to put it in. I know what's likely... how I'm likely to respond. I've got a sense of how other people are likely to respond. I know this will actually be very stressful. So just in naming

that a critical incident started to activate some coping mechanisms for me. So this is really good work. What I did want to say is that when we're talking about children is that family and educators' immediate reactions to a critical incident, as well as their attitudes and responses to a critical incident will affect the recovery of children. So the more confident you are around children, when there is a critical incident, the less probable impact on the child. And the quality of our relationships is particularly important for children and young people already exposed to multiple risk factors and challenges within their home or learning community, or broader community environment. So those educators today with us who are working with families who've got high risk factors, know that your grounded, calm, and centred approach and your knowledge about these things is going to be what's going to support children in their recovery.

### **Paola Mercado**

I really like that point that you made, because we have had some participants note that there are stressful times where perhaps those stable home environments aren't happening for all children within their learning community. And another flip side example would be Katrina's added that their school principal died earlier this year, which... but in turn that brought the community together to manage the grief of the staff, students and families. So that to me shows they have those solid protective factors happening, and they have those warm, secure relationships that are already happening within their learning community to allow everybody to process this critical incident together. So that's quite a protective factor in itself.

### **Rita Johnston**

Yeah, so when we're talking about relationships, we've talked about the need for relationships, and we're now talking about relationships in action. And we do have that reflective question, given recent events, what are some of the ways you have been building strong, supportive relationships with educators at your service, with children, with families and with fellow educators? And I think people in chat have already been popping that in.

### **Paola Mercado**

Yeah, some really good examples that are coming through.

### **Rita Johnston**

So I encourage you if you can, to also just to read what's in chat too, because you'll get some really good ideas there. I wanted to share one example I heard from a school, a preschool in the Blue Mountains, a small preschool with 20 families. And what they did for Mother's Day was they went around, a couple of the educators went around, with some care packs for each mum and dropped, you know, delivered them to their door and had a doorstep socially distanced chat for 5 or 10 minutes. They checked in with the mums and the families. They could find out if anyone needed support. They could find out how people were going and just for those mums to receive that care pack and know that they're being thought of and cared about by the early learning service, is a great protective factor. It makes you feel included, it makes those mums feel thought about cared for and valued. And these are all our protective factors when critical incidents happen.

### **Paola Mercado**

And I think that's a really good way of thinking that for when families are feeling that way, that is a ripple effect on the children. And what comes to mind for me is babies and toddlers who are nonverbal, who are unable to articulate and express how they're currently feeling and what they're understanding, but they're getting their nonverbal cues from the adults around them. So it's really important to be able to have those adults who are caring for our babies and toddlers to be understanding these things as well.

### **Rita Johnston**

So, we'll finish off this section around relationships and relationships in action, but please keep popping into chat some of the things that you have done during the COVID-19, I mean, everyone's had at least one critical incident through the COVID-19 epidemic. I've heard so many fabulous stories of the way early learning services have supported families. I'm actually in awe and astounded at the things that have happened using Zoom meetings, you know, delivering the care packs, doing different ways of drop off and

pick up the children.

### **Paola Mercado**

The daily routine of pick up and drop off is... that's had to change dramatically. But as you say, credit to all the early learning services who have been able to creatively think of ways that they can still maintain that solid connection that they have with their families and their children, and maintain those really warm and secure relationships.

### **Rita Johnston**

And I think to support families who are in the early stages of their parenting, which is always challenging anyway that early learning services have been able to support families in their parenting so well during this time. so, yeah, I do take my hat off to all of you. So just to summarise, during and after a critical incident, it's important to work together in partnership with families and other educators, to create an environment and culture where all members of the learning environment can feel supported and can flourish. And I think, you know, definitely the early learning services have been doing that. We also need to be responding to the child. And this means connecting to them and exploring how they're feeling, responding in a way that's compassionate and supportive, and helping the child feel safe as they recover. And these are skills that you already use in your work and we've talked about that. However, after a critical incident, it's about being much more intentional, about building these positive relationships with children and adults, and then using these relationships to influence everyone's overall health and recovery.

So far, we've looked at what a critical incident might look like in your setting and we've talked about the role of relationships and shared some practical examples of relationships in action. So now let's look at play. I was really interested to spend a little bit of time exploring play in this presentation, because play is also about relationship. So, play builds relationship with oneself and with others. So when you look at that, Paola, what do you think?

### **Paola Mercado**

Well, I think when we look at children who are in care, that's what they're doing most of the time, they're engaging in play, they're engaging with their physical environments, they're engaging with their peers, they're engaging with educators all through play. So, how intentional is that play for learning, and how much of that play is the creative output that the child is having for expressing? And we all know that we have traumatic areas for children to role play. So, we know that play provides a really important medium for expression. Play and recovery, I think is a little bit different and we're starting to see it a lot more around what's happening because our eyes have been opened a little bit as to what a critical incident is. And so seeing it from a different perspective is really what's going to make a change for how intentional we are when we're using play as a recovery resource.

### **Rita Johnston**

So, yeah, play doesn't only develop cognitive skills and keep children busy, play helps children develop emotional skills. Through play, children can express their feelings even before they have the words to say how they feel. And when I say that, I'm not just talking about pre-verbal children, I'm talking also about verbal children, about pre-schoolers, who have language around what they know, but then maybe this event happens that is brand new and they won't have the language, or they might not be able to access the language to explain their thinking and feeling about this new critical incident. And we will often see that come out in their play as a way of communicating what's going on in their thoughts and their emotions. The other thing about play is it also fosters the imagination and becomes the basis for creativity in art or music or other ways of self-expression. And so these ways of personal expression can help people cope with feelings all their lives. So, the play experiences we're allowing our children to participate in are actually supporting that child's emotional development for the rest of their life.

Imaginative play also allows children to explore their own minds and the minds of others. And we know that this leads to the development of empathy and a better understanding of themselves and others. Play is a way that children can work through and resolve problems that impact their whole lives. However, after a

critical incident, the things children express through play can sometimes be worrying or challenging for adults. And this is the part I want to unpack a little bit in the next few minutes. We might become uncomfortable or think there is a problem that we need to fix when we see some of this play, and then we might want to ask the child to stop. We might tell them not to play a particular game or create a particular drawing or an activity. But when we understand that this play is the way the child is communicating their understanding of a critical incident or a trauma, that they're sharing their story, it's easier for us to become a calm, regulated adult witness to what the child is expressing. Our safe and secure presence, our watching and listening, will help the child work through their own thoughts and feelings and help them move to recovery and resolution. And being a strong, secure, steady base, actually steadies the child and enables them to begin to feel confident that everything will be OK.

### **Paola Mercado**

We've just had two participants actually give examples of how it's been happening in their services. So, Julia has added that play helps create that stability and mindfulness for both the educators and children. And that's a really good point that we will touch on a little bit later as well. The educators there is quite important. And then Janine has seen an increase in cubby house making.

(LAUGHTER) Children seem to have expressed the recent limits of staying inside at home with their peers and creating those cubby houses within their spaces. So, that's a really lovely example of how play is happening for children to unpack and understand what's happening and what impact the COVID-19 is having on them.

### **Rita Johnston**

And their families.

### **Paola Mercado**

On them, on their families, on their peers, on their new environments.

### **Rita Johnston**

So, the children don't have to go to Bunnings to make a cubby house. They can just go to preschool. That's amazing. That is so good to hear. So, we're going to have a poll.

I'm just checking my notes. Let's look at the poll now, and then we'll unpack some examples in a minute. So, the poll is about how confident you are, we are, when you see children expressing critical incidents or trauma in their play. So, when you see or hear children expressing critical incidents or trauma in their play, are you confident and happy to support them? And please, you can pick more than one answer, but maybe stick to two or three at the most. You're happy to just observe for the time being, you're able to identify if they need additional support, you're uncomfortable, but still able to respond or you're uncomfortable and need help, or you have some other response. And while people are doing the poll, I'll just share a couple of examples that one example, I personally had and another example that I heard about. And the first one was during the Twin Towers disaster way back in 2001, the next day I was sitting, a little boy was playing with blocks near me, and he was stacking up two blocks and then another block was coming in (MIMICS PLANE SOUND) put the two blocks (MIMICS PLANE SOUND). So, he was obviously playing what he had seen on television. And when he first started playing, I was quite shocked. But then I went back to my educator toolbox and I thought, no, let's just observe for a start and see what happens. And he played this particular, I'll call it the Twin Towers play, for 10 or 15 minutes and then went off and did something else. And what I noticed through the week was that a variety of mainly the boys did that sort of play during the week, but then it sort of extinguished over time. And I certainly shared it with the mum and suggested that she don't let the child see the ongoing replaying of that event on television, but there didn't seem to be any, you know, serious impacts on that child.

The second example I wanted to share is that recently a grandmother was visiting with her grandchild in a town that had been affected by a bush fire, but not impacted. So, the fires were nearby, but they didn't have to evacuate. And there was smoke around and there was news, but nothing really terrible happened to that town. So, as grandma was visiting, the grandchild came up and showed grandma a drawing with a number

of black shapes and said, Grandma, these are the dead people from the fires." And now this was three months after the bush fires. So, what do these examples say to us?

One of the things that I said earlier is sometimes we want to shut play down or we want to make it better, or we want to somehow think, well that child, you know... why is that child thinking of dead people? But if we see that play as communication, then we can just acknowledge and accept that communication. So, with the drawing, the child who was doing the drawings, obviously this had been going on in this child's mind and this was a way for her to get it out and onto paper. One of the things that happens with this sort of play and with also, now I'll just qualify by saying I'm not an expert in this, but one of the things that happens is when we put things in writing, put things in drawing, or put things in play, it actually takes it out of inside and puts it outside and gives us a little bit of distance. So that's a really fantastic way of resolving issues around that, that children can do in a very natural way. When is this sort of play a problem? And as I said, I'm not an expert but in both of these situations well, this play extinguished. But if that play would continue, then you might say maybe it's time to get extra support.

**Paola Mercado**

Absolutely.

**Rita Johnston**

Paola you've got something to share.

**Paola Mercado**

Well I just wanted to go back to the polling results because that's... what you've just said is really great cause it reflects on the amount of people who are happy to just observe for the time being. And I think that's quite important because there is a small percentage who are still uncomfortable and not able to respond in those moments. And that could be various factors. It could be educators' own risk factors that are coming up for them and thinking about, "OK, I'm not comfortable with this because I'm not sure how to respond." But for educators to really identify that they're uncomfortable in that moment, are they then able to seek support from other educators within the room or their leadership team? And perhaps thinking about how they're responding through play. With today's session, you would be able to have those conversations as you leave from today and think about, OK, what can we do if that situation were to arise?" Because we may likely be seeing what's happening for the children, being expressed in their play. And then, we have a really good chunk of people. so 33% who are very confident to support them in play, which is really nice to see, and also another 36% who are able to identify and as well provide that additional support as needed. So, these are really good results in the poll. And we've also had some participants add through chat that through emotion in play, children are able to manage and regulate their emotions. And I think that goes really well.

**Rita Johnston**

That's key.

**Paola Mercado**

That's right, and that's key, and that reflects back to educators being perhaps sometimes having to sit in that uncomfortable space as you were giving your example about those Twin Towers. That is quite uncomfortable and can be quite confronting. I also have another example because we've had some participants talk about domestic and family violence. So sometimes, those things that are happening - whatever we've experienced through our lives, we have to be aware of what we're feeling in that moment to make us feel uncomfortable. That's why I go back to perhaps thinking those wider conversations that you can have with your team, with the people who are around you. And I know that sometimes, especially for family day carers, they are the only educator in that space. But perhaps reflecting on how you can increase play or support play for children during these times is gonna be quite a good time for reflection and thinking about strategies that you can implement to promote recovery through play.

### **Rita Johnston**

And I'm thinking now, Paola, if we see play as a recovery tool - well, it's an emotional - it builds emotional capacity in children anyway, and if we see it as recovery tool and a building of protective factors, I'm also thinking that play outside with loose parts, with nature, with a range of resources is really important to children, particularly during times of critical incidents, so they are free to construct their own play experiences. And in some early venue services they even have, you know, have the sand tray with all various objects that children can use to, you know, map out their understanding of the world. And all these play experiences can be incredibly healing and therapeutic. And as I said, if the Twin Towers play had have gone on for weeks, or even, you know, a week or more, and had have intensified, I definitely would have been seeking help around that, but because it did extinguish, then I knew - it's like when we name an emotion, when we name feelings, happy, sad, angry, our emotions regulate. And so also when children express what they're thinking and feeling through play, they can come and regulate and come back into you know, a more calm and more recovered stage.

### **Paola Mercado**

Absolutely.

### **Rita Johnston**

So I think we have segwayed on pretty well just to our last little section, thank you Paola, about support for educators. So educators need relationships too. And you, as an educator, can benefit from good relationships with the wider community. For example, research has linked partnerships between educators and mental health professionals to be significant in improving educator ability and confidence in supporting children. So one of the things you can do is access some more professional learning. I know one service invited a psychologist in to talk to their educators about anxiety and about a range of topics. And particularly, doing critical incidents, this is even more true. So, you know, you can invite people in to support your educators either as a group in a presentation, or I know some services who have a psychologist comes in once a month and sits in the office for a couple of hours, and individual educators can have 20-minute chats. In addition, the evidence suggests that effective relationships between educators and mental health professionals are related to lower levels of educator stress and turnover and increased sense of competency. So I recommend to you all to access that support of those mental health professionals.

### **Paola Mercado**

I think, in addition, I think that's gotta be contextualised because some services are able to connect to a psychologist, and they perhaps have one in their local community that they can access. But I'm thinking of the more remote communities that don't have those local professionals within their reach. However, knowing what support you can access within your local context, your local learning community is gonna be really important. So thinking a little bit outside the box, and I think COVID-19 has pushed us to think of perhaps online. And there are people, there are services that you can access by the online method whether it's an online chat or an online hotline phone call. But there are support services out there. So I think we have to contextualise to suit your service whether you're a family day care, whether you're a long day care, whether you're part of a bigger organisation who perhaps offers you the luxury of having an EAP service as opposed to a small community-based preschool who doesn't necessarily have access to those services. Everybody still will have access to some form of support services. It's just knowing what is out there that will benefit you.

### **Rita Johnston**

And the Be You website and Beyond Blue have great resources as well. So we've got a couple of minutes to go, so there's two questions I'd like to ask you. The first one is, how do you play? We know play is great for children, but how do you play? I personally, I go out in the garden. I exercise in nature. I like to sing a lot. I meditate and do some yoga. So pop into chat. How do you play? What are the things you do whether it's cooking, or gardening, or journaling, that brings you back to sort of regulation? The second reflective question is - we've already shared, you've already shared so much of what you already do, so I won't ask

you to share that again. But perhaps think about what's one additional thing that you can take back to your service or that you can do as an individual? One of the things that I always try and encourage people to do when they've been to any professional learning is to come back with at least one action that they're going to do. So what else can you do as an individual or as a whole service in relation to better understanding critical incidents in the area of relationships, or in the role of play, or in your own or your service educators' self-care.

### **Paola Mercado**

And please, don't forget to have a look at chat because I can see so many wonderful suggestions that are happening there. And I guess with everything we've had to readjust as to what our play currently looks like, so one example that jumped out at me was to go out exploring, but that will look slightly differently at the moment, but you are still be able to explore perhaps your local community, which you weren't able to do so previously. So again, please have a look at chat and think about how you play.

### **Rita Johnston**

So in conclusion, thank you so much for joining us. We encourage you to continue to engage with Be You, learn more, and keep up-to-date. If your learning community isn't yet implementing Be You whole learning community approach, we encourage you to register online and get started with the support of a Be You consultant. If you're looking for resources to support you in a specific need or concern, such as adapting to change, visit the Be You website, and that's [beyou.edu.au](http://beyou.edu.au) And finally, keep up-to-date with Be You resources, events, tools, and tips on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter. Also, subscribe to the Be You YouTube channel and receive updates on new videos from Be You. Thank you for joining us today, and we hope you enjoy the rest of the virtual conference. And remember, if you've missed any sessions, you will get a link to the recordings. Thank you again for joining us.

### **Paola Mercado**

Thanks everybody.

### **End of webinar.**