

Be You In Focus Webinar Transcript

Professional Boundaries and Difficult Conversations

Presented by Debbie Yates, Cris Zollo, Trish Osgood and Maria Curtis on 4 March 2020

Debbie Yates: Hello everyone and welcome to our InFocus Be You webinar: Professional Boundaries and Difficult Conversations. Thanks for joining us today. My name is Debbie and I'm a State Manager with Be You. Joining us today are three panellists. We have Cris Zollo and Trish Osgood, both Be You Consultants, and Maria Curtis is also with us, our Be You Content Advisor.

Be You is a national initiative led by Beyond Blue in partnership with Early Childhood Australia and headspace funded by the Australian Government. Be You aims to transform Australia's approach to supporting children and young people's mental health in early learning services and schools. Our vision is that every learning community is positive, inclusive, and resilient, a place where every child, young person, educator, and family can achieve their best possible mental health. Be You is a collaborative learning community for educators who are supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Being part of this community means your early learning service or school has access to Be You Consultants, like Cris and Trish, to assist you in undertaking your learning and action.

Is your school or service registered and participating with Be You yet? If you aren't, you can register yourself and your early learning service today. There will be links on the side of the screen for you throughout the session today. By participating today in our online learning community we also hope you will learn and be inspired by the ongoing process of embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogy - ways of being, knowing and doing to focus on mental health. So I'm now going to pass to Cris to start us off today with an Acknowledgement of Country.

Cris Zollo: Thanks Deb. Good afternoon everyone. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians from all the lands on which we are meeting today and also acknowledge and pay my respects to Elders past, present and future and all those who continue to hold the memories, traditions and ways of being for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We also recognize the importance of the continued connection to culture, country and community to the health, social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Throughout today's webinar, I invite you to consider how the ways that we support educator and family wellbeing are informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Trish is now going to share a self-care message with us. Thanks, Trish.

Trish Osgood: Thanks so much, Cris. You'll see we've got a slide here that's about being safe and inclusive. We're all here today to consider, learn and reflect about early childhood wellbeing and education. On our screen are the Be You ways for today. Remember to look after yourself. It's very important. A sense of safety is the most foundational requirement for positive mental health, a sense of security and for forming relationships.

Helplines will be posted in the Chat throughout this webinar so please use them to talk to someone if you or somebody that you are with is experiencing difficult feelings. This means that people are safe to be who

they are, are able to work to their strengths, express their opinions and beliefs, and feel heard and respected, even when they have opposing views.

We know that children learn from what adults around them do. Being aware of how to look after ourselves and support each other can make a huge difference to each of us, to the wellbeing of our team, and to the children in our care. Children build a picture of who they are by observing adults and modelling what they do. During the webinar today, there will be an opportunity for you to reflect on your own practices through polls and some reflective questions. Please remember to take care of yourself when we talk about mental health today and just be aware that sometimes unexpected feelings can emerge, even difficult ones.

Please be aware of feelings that come up and make sure that you talk to somebody if you have them and they occur. Maria is just going to talk about the online space now.

Maria Curtis: Welcome everybody. I just want to go through some technical tips to maximise your learning today. For any of you who are unfamiliar with this webinar platform, what you see is what the screen will typically look like with the webinar viewer on the left and the control panel on the right.

Throughout the webinar you can ask questions about using the webinar function and we will have some technical support available. The control panel with the question box is highlighted in blue. The responses in green are public responses and the ones in red are private responses. You can also use your control panel to manage your phone or computer audio. Today everybody is being placed in 'Listen Only' mode and your microphones have been muted as we have a large number of attendees.

If at any time you're experiencing difficulties, please note the customer care details that are on the screen and contact the team directly. Throughout the webinar we encourage you to get involved as much as you feel comfortable. It's important that everyone feels this is a safe place to learn and everyone's contributions matter.

You can ask any questions via the questions box and we hope to respond to as many of your queries as possible during today's session. For any that we don't get to, we will follow up after the event concludes. I would just like to acknowledge our wonderful support team in the background. We have Dino, Steph, Di, Rita and Juanita. There will be links to resources and references posted in the chat that you can copy, there's also a downloadable handout with the reflective questions on it that you might like to use.

These will be available post webinar, but feel free to download that at any time. We'll be inviting you to participate in the polls that will be launching throughout the session and all event participants will be able to access a certificate of participation and a recording of this webinar. We are also making the attendee list public for you now so please make use of these functions. Deb, you might like to go over what we are going to focus on today as we move to more interesting material.

Debbie Yates: Thanks, Maria, Cris and Trish for setting us up today. Today the webinar will focus on our professional roles and our boundaries as educators. We will consider ways we can prepare and conduct difficult conversations and how we can also include self-care to support ourselves when we are involved in challenging situations like that.

Within our workplaces it's important to take time to sit back and reflect around why professional boundaries are important with our families and with our colleagues. They can be especially relevant within the context of having a difficult conversation and often we reflect on that with regards to families, but difficult conversations can happen with colleagues or a manager or supervisor as well. We hope you'll end this session with some strategies and perhaps also some reflections you can take back to your own workplace to further discuss and trial ways that fit within the context of your own learning community. Let's begin with considering professional boundaries and our role as educators.

When discussing this area we can sometimes define our boundaries by what we do as well as what we don't do. We are not specialists such as a counsellor or a diagnostician and it's important to define that for

ourselves and for those we work with within our learning services. As we are discussing our boundaries and roles first up today, a poll will come up on the screen so you can reflect on your own experiences as well. This is your first chance to be a bit interactive within our webinar today.

Our first poll question is: How do you find maintaining professional boundaries? Is it something that you find really easy all the time? Can it be difficult sometimes or always? Is it something that is challenging for you? Perhaps this might be different to when you first started your career to where you might be now within your professional roll. Cris, if you want to start us off today while people are responding to the poll by discussing and reflecting on how the Code of Ethics can assist educators when they're considering professional boundaries.

Cris Zollo: Thanks, Deb. The Code of Ethics is based on fundamental shared values of the profession and it's intended to guide ethical decision making that supports a commitment to maintaining the rights and dignity of children, families and colleagues. The code makes reference to several core principles to guide us in making and considering ethical issues, particularly in relation to competing priorities around maintaining professional boundaries.

The core principles are organised around children, families, colleagues, the profession and communities. It's worth considering some of these core principles – and we will reflect on a couple now, but as I do that, it's worth considering how they're pertinent to maintaining professional boundaries and informing service policies on maintaining professional boundaries as well. The first core principle I'd like to point out is the one in relation to children, which is to act in the best interests of children.

That's particularly pertinent to think about when you are considering competing priorities around professional boundaries, in fact that might be a really lovely guiding principle always when trying to determine professional boundaries: is this in the best interests of children? I'm just going to pick up on another one that relates to families – respecting families right to privacy and maintaining confidentiality. That's particularly pertinent to having difficult conversations with families as well.

If we think about the right to privacy and maintaining confidentiality for families, we can also see that that's linked to acting in the best interests of children as well. The last one I want to refer to relates to the profession itself.

Within the scope of professional roles, the particular core principle suggests that we need to avoid misrepresentation of our professional competence and qualifications. This has direct links to maintaining professional boundaries around something that Deb has already raised around what our role is, Are we counsellors and are we diagnosticians? Are we acting in that way and should we be acting in that way? You can see that the code could support services to review some policies and procedures that they have in place in reference to professional boundaries and support that commitment that we have to maintaining the rights and dignity of children, families, colleagues and communities.

Debbie Yates: I think that's a really good reminder about how the Code of Ethics can be used in a really practical way to support us to reflect on our boundaries and our role. Within the Be You content, there are also some areas where it can help us reflect on our professional boundaries. Within the Assist module, it talks about how our role is to observe and support children and young people. We're not expected to be a mental health expert or counsellor.

We shouldn't seek to diagnose or to solve mental health issues and conditions, but rather approach the work in a way that supports positive mental health in all children and young people and trying to understand your role within the bigger picture, which also includes the families, the learning community and health professionals who can provide support when needed while keeping in mind that there are boundaries around our role as educator and our interactions with families when providing support.

If a family comes to us with concerns about their child or young person, we need to think about whether we are the best person to discuss the issue or do they need more specialised support – perhaps a specialised

colleague within our team, a member of the leadership team or someone external to our service to provide that support and how can we assist them with making decisions about possible referral options? Now we'll just see how we went with our poll today.

Hopefully everyone's had a chance to respond. We can see that 'Sometimes difficult' is definitely the most popular one there at 72 percent, but maintaining those professional boundaries is something that we have to work on and it's something that can come up in a way through our work that we need to consider on a regular basis. Thanks for sharing your thoughts there. We're just going to now consider some examples around professional boundaries and why they're important. Maria you have a really great example from your own personal experience around professional boundaries within the community that you were living in. Are you happy to share that with us?

Maria Curtis: Yes, it was in a small town, but it could also have occurred within a small community within a larger setting. I was working in an early learning service and went to my GP. Now in these towns, the boundaries are blurred. You see the people socially, you see them in the workplace, but I went to my GP for a personal matter and found that I was being asked about a concern that the doctor had about their child. I was a bit taken aback initially by the professional boundary being crossed by the doctor as well as not knowing how to respond.

I actually said that it was better to have a time and a place and make a time to come and talk about it, but I was quite confronted by the crossover of boundaries. I know that the boundaries are very blurred in small communities because you see people socially, in the workplace and professionally. It was early on in my profession and it was quite a confronting a situation.

Debbie Yates: I can imagine so and especially as you would not have been in work mode at that time, so it's a tricky space to be in. Cris, you have another example that you want to share with us, which takes us into that space of social media.

Cris Zollo: It is not so much of an example, but more of a reflection about the current societal context and the importance of considering professional boundaries in relation to social media given its prevalence.

It's probably a good time to think about what your service policies and procedures have to say about social media use and maintaining professional boundaries and actually why we have those policies in place and why it's important to maintain those professional boundaries in the social media context. There are some really interesting ethical dilemmas that are arising relating to social media use for educators and early learning services. Questions like, what would you do if a parent sent a friend request to you on social media? What is the response there?

How would you act? How would maintain a professional boundary? Other considerations include the potential issues that can arise if you do cross a boundary of this kind or a professional boundary. How would this fit with the Code of Ethics core principles such as acting in the best interests of children or respecting the privacy and maintaining confidentiality for families?

These are really important ethical dilemmas to consider and I suspect it depends on the context and the relationships that we have with different groups of people. I think the Code of Ethics provides a very clear guidance in relation to online interactions with colleagues, at least. It states that in relation to colleagues, I'll maintain an ethical relationship in online interactions and possibly the ethical relationship in online interactions needs to be unpacked as well.

Debbie Yates: Thanks for sharing that Cris. From my own experience, I've previously worked as a director at an early learning service and I've had situations where staff members have chosen to leave a workplace but also situations where a staff member has been asked to leave. So in these situations there are bound to be questions from families and amongst staff as well.

It was really important as a manager to consider professional boundaries in those cases where I had both personal and professional information about staff members. In the particular experience that I had, it was important to ensure confidentiality was kept and also to ensure support was provided to those involved.

It was also a good opportunity to model professional boundaries to the broader team, highlighting the importance to not speculate about the situation, and I was also able to give guidance on the kind of language which could be used to discuss the matter professionally with families, if and when questions arise. We also really kept the children's needs in focus, which reflects back on what Cris has said about using the Code of Ethics. We had to consider the children's needs during the transition periods with new staff coming in. As a manager, it was also important to consider my own self-care and consider who I had around me who could be a support to debrief with, which was really valuable and necessary, but also to do this in a way where I was considering the confidentiality of the matter.

Building on from this discussion around professional boundaries, we are now going to step into a space where we're going to explore a bit more around difficult conversations. Our second poll is going to come up now where we're going to really consider what your experience as an educator has been having difficult conversations with colleagues or families.

Sometimes we automatically go to a negative space when we think about difficult conversations, but sometimes we can have an experience that is really positive and rewarding. They can also be quite challenging so have a think about your own experience and then respond to the poll. While you are thinking about that, Trish perhaps you can start us off by having a bit of a conversation and reflection around why we find some conversation difficult.

Trish Osgood: Thanks, Deb. It's a great question and an extremely valid one. We do sometimes deem conversations difficult when we're not able to predict the emotional responses from families or colleagues.

Sometimes it's a case of not feeling prepared emotionally and or even mentally ourselves for the potential pathways that this conversation may take, and not necessarily being in control of those responses. It is helpful to be prepared as much as we can and make sure that we are considering aspects that may impact the response such as timing, environment, our own feelings, the other person's background, distractions and ensuring we give the other person space to share and be validated, instead of dismissing their point of view. As Maria mentioned earlier, even just booking in that time and giving yourself that mental and emotional space to be prepared as well is important.

Debbie Yates: Thanks, Trish, I think that's a really good point around considering about how sometimes what makes us feel uncomfortable is that we're not quite sure what the response is going to be. I think it's really good to acknowledge that. Cris, did you have any other thoughts around why we deem some conversations difficult?

Cris Zollo: Clearly the unpredictability of the situation, as Trish said, brings us a lot of discomfort. I think we all like to be prepared and I think not knowing what their reaction might be is difficult as well. Although I think we could probably imagine what the reaction is going to be through empathising and we need to have some confidence in our professional capacity to remain calm and to validate the emotions being experienced by the other person we are talking to. That's often really important and is really quite supportive of the person who's experiencing those emotions as well.

We also should be able to just sit with that emotion for a while as it is being expressed, perhaps just the way we do that with children. I think if we do that, we can probably manage the discomfort a little bit better than we seem to be thinking we would manage it right now.

Debbie Yates: Let's have a look at our poll responses and see how other people felt about that. Just under half have found that having difficult conversations can be challenging, but it's really positive to see that there's also 17 percent that found it can be rewarding and that can be a really great thing to reflect on when you have had those rewarding, positive conversations. It can help put you in a positive mind space for the

next one that might come. We know that these are things that pop up regularly within our workplace and in our role as educators.

So how can we best prepare ourselves for difficult conversations? It might be with a family member that we're working with, it might be with colleague or perhaps even with a manager or supervisor. What sort of strategies can we put in place to really provide us with some confidence in these spaces? Trish, would you like to share an anecdote that you have from your own experience around preparing for a difficult conversation?

Trish Osgood: Thanks, Deb. I recently had a service contact me with a particular concern about how best to support a particular child. They were really concerned about this child because they had experienced trauma through the death of a parent. They were displaying signs of needing extra support both in their setting and externally. The educators were finding it difficult to have conversations with the other parent as it was still a really sensitive area and a trigger for that parent.

We discussed reading the information in the Inquire module from the Early Support domain as a way of preparing and equipping the educators to frame the conversations in a sensitive way and just having that information and those strategies ready helped them.

The reason I recommended that module was for the very reason that when I completed that module myself and did that online learning, I was able to reflect on my own history working with children and families and found that the strategies were extremely practical and applicable, and definitely include valid communication strategies that really enhanced my communication processes. Communication in this situation was definitely the key to getting support both for the parent and the child that they needed desperately.

Debbie Yates: Thanks, Trish. It sounds like you were really able to support that service to really consider what their role was and their professional boundaries and roles in supporting that family in helping them to communicate in a way that met their needs, but also was ensuring it stayed within their boundaries and role. Maria, you have another strategy that you found really useful, too.

Maria Curtis: Yes, and I am glad we have the time to talk about it. It's the Stop, Reflect, Act framework. The link to that will be put in the chat.

It's a really useful framework to use when you get those unexpected questions, in a morning when parents are dropping off their children and you're in the passageway around other people, and all of a sudden a parent comes up to you and discusses a concern or asks a question. You have to stop – that's not the appropriate place or time to respond. It's about not reacting to the situation, about pausing and listening.

It's about making a time, stopping and listening and then reflecting on it later as to what is the best way to respond to this parent. You might need to confer with colleagues or other team members to get a broader picture and then after consultation or giving it some considerable thought, acting and making an appropriate time and place to have that conversation. This also relates to colleagues in your team. If one of them comes to you and says, I'm really upset about something, again instead of reacting, it's about listening, reflecting and saying we'll get back to you and have a chat about it later. It's that Stop, Reflect, Act framework that I think is an incredibly useful framework in a variety of situations. I know I've used it many times, in many different situations.

Debbie Yates: Thanks for sharing that, Maria. thinking about that myself, it's often the 'Stop' part that is the most challenging because when someone comes to you with something, often we have an emotional reaction or our first response is that we really want to help so even though we might not have all the information or maybe it's not even the appropriate space to have that conversation We want to help and provide support. Have you found that before in your experience?

Maria Curtis: Yes, because you often have an emotional reaction. Why are they asking me this? Why am I getting this question now? It's an initial emotional reaction that you get, so it's just stopping and pausing and actually listening.

Sometimes your emotional reaction stops you from listening and you have to reflect on what they actually said and maybe unpack that a little bit.

Debbie Yates: Trish, you talked earlier about the Make Safe symbol we started off with today. Have you got some more information around that and how that can support it in preparing for difficult conversations?

Trish Osgood: Essentially it's not only making the other people safe that we're speaking with, but also ourselves, so acknowledging that difficult conversations can be quite emotional. It's really important to start with the concept of make safe and it could include ensuring that the space is private and confidential and that confidentiality is maintained while establishing how we want to support that family or child and that we are there to help by starting the conversation with a question and gaining the family's perspective.

There is a lovely quote that's mentioned in the Early Support domain and in the Inquire module. It says: "Start the conversation by asking the family to tell you what their child is like at home." It's a really good way to start with their perspective and to make them feel safe, like they're being heard and that their opinion matters. The other aspect too is giving yourself time to be prepared as well. Sometimes it is about not delaying that conversation necessarily for the sake of it, but being able to be better prepared for those conversations. So booking in a time and space that is safe, but also coming prepared for those conversations that may include considering aspects of their culture, family dynamics and language.

However, it's also about having collected information. We do have some really good tools on the website like the Mental Health Continuum and the BETLS Observation Tool. They are both great ways of collecting data and observations and just have that ready.

Debbie Yates: That can help with confidence, knowing that you've got some information there to share and support and that also maybe the family might want to take away with them at the end, so that's a great suggestion. Maria, one of the other techniques that we often can hear about is what's known as the sandwich technique to help us have a difficult conversation. Can you expand on that one a little bit?

Maria Curtis: The sandwich technique can be used in a variety of situations and it's framed just as a sandwich. You make a strength based or positive comment, whether you're talking to a family member, colleagues or in any other situation. Then you might have a concern or a question and then by sandwiching the concern or question in the middle, you make another strength based or positive comment.

If it is just a question, it doesn't appear as though you're imposing or alarming the parents, it's just nicely put together with a strength based comment, a concern or question and another strength based comment. It is excellent to use with families, co-workers and management in lots of situations. It's a great technique I have seen used very well.

Debbie Yates: We've talked about the importance of active listening as part of these difficult conversations. Trish, what are your thoughts around the role that active listening plays in preparing and being involved in a difficult conversation.

Trish Osgood: As mentioned, listening is really important to make the other party feel heard and have their voice, and not only that but to just fully understand what it is that we're actually having a conversation about and to get the full picture. Active listening is so much more than listening with our ears. It's also about body language and there are quite a number of different strategies.

When we do consider a solutions based approach to having these conversations, active listening is a part of that. We need to listen to the needs of the family and the child, maybe even a colleague, and ask about their strategies that they might employ at home, if it's a family for example. Active listening includes things

such as attending, following the conversation, asking appropriate questions, the use of pauses, silences, reflecting back to clarify and prioritising the main purpose of the conversation as well as bringing the conversation back if there is a distraction and showing through our body language that we are actually giving them attention.

You can actually find active listening skills in something called the Communication Skills for Educators Fact Sheet. It's in the Relationships topic on the Be You website. It is a great resource that I often refer to and often recommend people to have a look at because it really does outline those skills and makes them really clear as well.

Debbie Yates: As you said, they are really good skills to support our work with families, but just as importantly, we can use them when we're talking with colleagues and with children. All of those communication skills are transferable across multiple settings so they are really useful for us in our day-to-day work as educators in early learning services.

One of the things we have been talking about is preparing for difficult conversations. We don't always have an opportunity to prepare for difficult conversations. Sometimes they come in ways and means that we are not expecting. Cris, what are your suggestions about how we can best support and look after ourselves and to manage those difficult conversations if they come a bit out of the blue.

Cris Zollo: As much as we can say that we were unprepared for conversations, as Maria said, somebody might approach you in the morning if you're in the service and you're not prepared to have that conversation at the time, the thing that makes us think that we're actually unprepared for the conversation is that we don't know what's coming. We don't know what the topic is going to be so we don't feel prepared in that sense. Everything we have just talked about helps us with this. The Stop, Reflect, Act framework, is a way to buy yourself some time by active listening and validating the importance of the conversation but postponing it to another time where we can maintain confidentiality and where we can create a safe space for everybody where we can actually gather the information we need to respond.

I think that you'll find that even a colleague or even a family member would respond positively to you validating their feelings, the importance of having the conversation and also making a time which is more suitable for everybody where we can actually have a conversation confidentially, safely and respectfully together.

As unprepared as we feel, the strategies we've talked about today are actually about being prepared for that conversation. We don't know what the topic of the conversation is, but there are lots of strategies that support us to be prepared.

Debbie Yates: I think that validation is one of the really important keys in those moments, so really validating the information or the emotions that have been shared with us around what's happening for the family or for the colleague and then providing them that reflection back saying, 'we understand, we are hearing you, but can we talk about it at a different time?' and making sure that there is follow up that builds trust and a relationship.

That helps to support other conversations that might need to happen later on as well. It's that ongoing relationship that's really valuable and important and all of those small steps really help to build that over time. That is part of what helps us to build mentally healthy communities overall, that feel of feeling of safety and that feeling of sense of belonging and relationships that people can grow and develop over time.

We now have time for poll thinking about the educator's role in difficult conversations. When we look at those conversations and reflect on some that we've had, or maybe you're already preparing or planning for one that you've got coming up in the future, let's think about what our role is in that conversation.

You've got four different options there, but we probably could have thought of ten different options. Sometimes what that might look like for you is different depending on the type of conversation. Have a think

about what you consider your role might be and mark which one you think while we're talking about this topic a bit further.

Cris, when we are actually thinking about having a difficult conversation and considering the professional boundaries in our role, sometimes the question we forget to ask ourselves is: am I the most appropriate person to have this conversation?

Cris Zollo: That's a really important question to ask and there are lots of considerations that need to be made around who's the most appropriate person to have the conversation. That includes the nature of the issue that needs to be raised, existing relationships between the people who are going to be involved in the conversation, and cultural and language considerations as well.

I do know a director of a service with a high number of Aboriginal children enrolled who always seeks the support of an educator who identifies as Aboriginal. The educator is always available to families at drop off and pick up time so they can approach her if necessary. If it's a difficult conversation, they can find a way to take them elsewhere and then engage the director as well. When those sensitive issues are raised or when the director needs to raise a sensitive issue for discussion with families, what happens is that the educator approaches the family quietly first and gives them a bit of background about the discussion and the need for a discussion and meeting and then organises a meeting with a director.

Generally, the families are quite comfortable having the educator sit in on the meeting with the director and in that capacity, the educator provides support for both the family and the director. The outcome of this approach has always been quite positive for this particular service. I do need to note that this is a strategy that works for that unique community.

It is important to think about things like culture, language, existing relationships and the nature of the issue that's being raised and who should be raising it as well before making a decision about who's actually going to lead that conversation.

Debbie Yates: Thanks for sharing that example, Cris. That's a really good one where the team is also working collaboratively together so not one person feels like they have that sense of ownership or responsibility. That's actually a really good protective factor for the team and for the educators as well to feel that support around each other, and for the families to see that in action on a day-to-day basis as well would be really valuable. In that situation, considering the poll we just had up, what role do you think the educator is playing in that particular situation?

Cris Zollo: I think the primary role is as a facilitator, making families feel safe and respected, creating that safe space and bridging that relationship between the director and the families as that relationship continues to build. She is also providing support for the director and for the families and again, I think that probably contributes to creating a safe space for everyone.

Debbie Yates: Maria, sometimes when we're having difficult conversations they can sometimes take an unexpected turn. Not everyone will follow a similar pattern. What do you think are some ways we can support ourselves if a conversation takes him as an unexpected outcome?

Maria Curtis: No matter how prepared you are, you don't know what's going to occur. You may think you have a great relationship and be working in partnership with the family. I have had the experience where I thought all of those things and had carefully prepared for the conversation but I found myself in a situation where one of the parents involved in the discussion just got up and stormed off out of the meeting. It was totally unexpected and the other parent was left looking shocked. It was a difficult situation.

It was a matter of just having to do what you can in that situation. I always plan when I'm managing these conversations to make sure that there's a proper finalisation to the conversation because I think that's really important and even more so in this situation because finalising the conversation also is about making sure that everyone is on the same page and summarising and clarifying any actions. When the unexpected

event happened in this situation, I tried to continue the conversation with the remaining parent, but she was too distressed so it was a matter of making another time the following day to actually be able to draw on the points that we had already established and look at where we could go from there.

I believe in an ideal world this situation wouldn't happen because you carefully prepare your conversations and what's going to be the outcome so finalising the conversation is very important.

Debbie Yates: Thinking about those next steps is a really important part of the process so when you can't get to that step, it can be quite challenging. It sounds like you're using some of those Stop, Reflect, Act strategies in the moment, so it was about stopping and pausing and giving some time for the remaining parent and listening, then reflecting on what was necessary at the moment – which wasn't necessarily to finish the conversation. It wasn't the right time. The action was to set another time so it could happen when everyone was in a space where they were more comfortable and able to work through the matter and come to a conclusion.

Maria Curtis: I think it is very important that there is a finalisation to all these conversations because I've been in a situation where my idea of what we discussed and the other person's idea of what we discussed were miles apart because sometimes you hear what you want to hear.

Debbie Yates: It's about clarifying and summarising as well. That might look different for different people. For some people that is just the conversation itself, some might find a follow up email really beneficial, others like to go away with some written information so they can consider it further at a later point in time. I think they're all really important things to consider.

We'll just have a quick look at the poll to see what people felt. A good lot of people feel that it's all of those things at various points, but obviously a support and a facilitator are two of the really key elements of our role in those conversations. I think it's really good that when we're reflecting back on our professional boundaries to ensure that when we move into those difficult conversations, we clarify our roles initially with families as well, or with our colleagues, and highlight what our role is in that space – that we are not coming in to try and diagnose or to provide special expert support. We're not clinicians. Sometimes clarifying that can be really important at the beginning of the conversation and framing it as we are here to support and assist in whatever ways we can.

We now hopefully have some strategies and some ideas around difficult conversations, but I think the other part of this is the elements around self-care because it can be a really professionally challenging situation to move through. Trish, are you happy to unpack and share some ideas around educator wellbeing and self-care when people are in professionally challenging situations?

Trish Osgood: Thanks, Deb. Self-care is extremely important, not only for our own mental health, but for sustainability in our roles as well. Looking after yourself in general and in particular after a difficult conversation is about finding something that works for you. That could be a range of strategies.

These can include something that suits your personality type and it suits your learning style as well, so things like booking in some time to exercise works for a lot of people, unpacking what the conversation was about or talking to a colleague about how you're feeling. Booking in some social time with a friend – particularly if you're an extrovert, and meditation is always good, or following up in terms of looking at the practical next steps.

I know that for some people that's about putting it down on paper, making it visual and very practical. We've mentioned summarising conversations and maybe even having that take away information. That could be agreed next steps that really give everybody involved that feeling of solving something and they are moving forward to the next step. Everyone is getting that support that they need and it's not just the people they're talking to. It's just giving you that sense of achievement and for some people that's really important. It might be something like reading a book or just having some alone to reflect.

I know in my past experience, sometimes I just even notify a colleague or somebody in leadership of an upcoming conversation that I think may be quite emotional or quite sensitive and having them checking afterwards or going and checking in with them afterwards about how I was feeling, was in itself really great self-care.

That was a really handy thing to do. I know that professional boundaries are extremely important to consider and it's not only just within the context of those conversations, but in general when we are considering the balance between work and home life. Burnout can be a very real thing and it can be the result of not finding that balance as well.

When you consider that balance it is important to keep in mind how you economise your time and your priorities at work when you're at work. That might be, if you are a list writer, dividing your to-do list into sections of time – short things that you can do if you only have ten minutes, you can do this one little task and cross it off your list, or if it's something longer, doing it at the end of your work day before you go home. It's just making sure that you're economising that time and the resources that are available at your workplace and keeping work at work.

It's also having that clear cut off from work and your personal life, not taking work home, both physically and mentally, and finding a way to change your own headspace when you leave work. I know that a lot of people do that in different ways, and again, it's finding something that really works for you.

It could be done through establishing a routine such as listening to music when you leave work, reflecting on the day through writing a list for the following day, it could be something like listening to a podcast, just anything that works for you that helps you to mentally separate from your time at work and your time at home. It's about putting up those routines and transitions that work for you when you're also arriving at work, not only leaving work.

That can really flow through to a lot of different aspects for how you are mentally prepared for your day as well and how you manage your stress levels for that day, too. I know one service that sets up in the mornings together. They get there a little bit earlier, set up together in their teams and then after they finish setting up for the day, they set aside time to have a cup of tea or coffee together as team building, self-care and just to establish their mindset for the day. The other thing that we need to mention here is that we have a number of wellbeing tools for you.

You might have staff members who don't have those routines set up yet. It's maybe something you want to work on in your setting. Our Wellbeing Tools for You, which is under the resources section in our Tools and Guides, has some really great websites and tools. The one thing I really want to highlight is the number of different website links that have links to some self-care planning templates.

It might be a need that you've identified in your setting that you'd like to undertake in a staff meeting or send out as a helpful tool to help your educators. It's about every educator identifying their own triggers that might be setting them off for the day or something that might not be working for them. It's about identifying their own supports that they do have in place or that they might put into place.

It's also about strategies that they can actually plan to put in place. That might be arriving those ten minutes earlier to work and having that time to mentally prepare for the day. It could be a number of things that actually work for them. A really vital thing to do is to take that time out to consider where we're at in that journey of self-care and to really plan ahead and think about reflecting on what we have in place that may be working or not working and what we can do about that too.

Debbie Yates: Thanks, Trish. I really like the way you've approached that in regards to those elements of personal responsibility when it comes to educate yourself in self-care, but there is also that broader team responsibility.

Today we've covered quite a lot of content and we've shared quite a lot of information around our professional boundaries and roles as educators. We looked at how we can prepare and support ourselves and each other when we are participating in difficult conversations and the role self-care plays in supporting us when we're in a professionally challenging situation.

I would just like each of our panellists to share a takeaway message that they will take away today and I invite everybody who's listening today to do the same thing, whether you want to jot down a note with what you will take back to your workplace for you individually or perhaps a reflective question or action for your team to take on board. But Maria, Trish and Cris, do any of you have any takeaways that you'd like to share with us today?

Trish Osgood: I want to reflect on things that both Maria and Cris mentioned about the difficult conversations that come upon us unexpectedly and the importance of creating a dedicated time that gives both the safe space and also the time for you to reflect and also the importance of validating. I think all three of you have actually mentioned that and I found that a really valid point to take away. Sometimes those conversations do come on us unexpectedly and they are often quite emotional as well. It's really important to find those strategies that work to be able to create the right environment to have those conversations.

Maria Curtis: I wanted to reiterate that my takeaway is using the Stop, Reflect, Act framework. I've used it so frequently and it's that moment of stopping and not emotionally reacting. To me that's a more professional approach

Debbie Yates: It's one of those things that the more you use it, the more familiar and second nature it will become. Cris, what are you going to take away that you would like to share with us?

Cris Zollo: There are a couple of things. I think it's really important to think about existing policies and procedures and how they support us to maintain professional boundaries and to have discussions about professional boundaries at the service. What do your policies and procedures mean in relation to professional boundaries? Raising ethical dilemmas that might arise and supporting the discussion with use of the code and your own policies and procedures is really helpful. I think that's going to help people feel much more prepared to actually respond to any ethical dilemmas that arise in this area as well. I think an ongoing conversation and reflection needs to happen and that's one way to support everybody to be prepared to maintain professional boundaries and also to have difficult conversations, whether they are planned or unplanned.

Debbie Yates: Thanks a lot, Cris. I hope everyone today is also considering what takeaways they have. Please take the time to note them down in a way you can utilise them later on. I'd really like to thank everyone for participating today. When you exit you will be prompted to complete an exit survey. We really encourage you to do so, so we can get feedback and better understand how our Be You InFocus webinars are meeting the needs of people who are watching and listening today.

When you complete it, please include the names of anyone who is watching with you as well. As many of you know, these webinars are really great way to not only learn, but to also reflect and put learning into action. We know that that's such an important part of our continuous improvement and professional development in your space, and also a way of showing our continued professional development within the Be You framework as well.

You can also utilise the remaining elements of our Be You framework, which is obviously the professional learning as well as a way to really reflect and act on your mental health goals within your service. You can contact our team at any point for assistance with that. The Be You consultant is there to provide support at any time for you, either one-on-one, during National Check In's, through webinars like this – there are a whole range of ways we can really support early learning services and schools when you are implementing Be You.

Remember if you're not yet registered, visit www.beyou.edu.au/register. It's a really easy step to do.

Thank you so much everybody. We really appreciate your time today, and we hope you have some really good takeaways from our session. Thanks very much.

End.