



# Supporting Children’s Relaxation in Early Childhood Education and Care

Authors: Emma Cooke, Sandy Houen, Gina Nuttall, Karen Thorpe and Sally Staton

Children understand and experience relaxation in their own way. This can be different from what adults understand.

Researchers at the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland investigated how young children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) experience relaxation.

Our study aimed to understand children’s lived experiences of relaxation and provide new insights to assist educators to support children’s relaxation.

Our study found that young children:

- Understand and can explain their own experiences of relaxation.
- Use sensory-rich descriptions of their relaxation experiences.
- Prefer to relax in different ways and varied settings.

## Stress in early years

In the first five years of life stress can disrupt the structural architecture of the brain and can have on-going impacts on children’s learning and functioning<sup>1</sup>. Relaxation is a known counterpart to stress<sup>2</sup>. In Australia the National Quality Framework legislation for ECEC requires that children’s well-being and comfort is provided for and children’s need for rest and relaxation is met. Despite this requirement, to date there has been little research of young children’s experiences of relaxation<sup>3</sup>.

Many ECEC settings focus on scheduled rest times as a strategy to support children’s relaxation and decrease stress.



Stress can have ongoing impacts on children’s learning and functioning.

WE INTERVIEWED	FROM	AGED
46 Children	6 ECEC centres	3-5 years old

## WE ASKED

What do you think it means to relax?



However, evidence suggests that these periods may not meet the relaxation needs of all children and indeed may induce stress<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, understanding children’s preferences and perspectives is critical to support their relaxation needs.

## What we did

In our study we consulted young children, aged 3 to 5 years, to learn about their understanding and experiences of relaxation. We recruited six child care centres and interviewed 46 children in small groups of two or three. Children were asked to draw throughout the interview to help them feel comfortable and their drawings were used to prompt ideas and discussion. However, some children preferred to talk or act out their experiences. Our method positioned children as competent and active builders of their own social world. The interviews were recorded and analysed.

## What we found

We found that children were capable of clearly articulating their varied relaxation preferences. No one particular type of play, activity, place, object or social setting was inherently relaxing for all children. Instead children described a range of



Children described a range of relaxing sensations, places and activities.

sensations, places and activities that varied from child to child. Children's descriptions of relaxation included:

- **Sensory rich relaxation concepts** such as cosy and comfortable sensations and objects (e.g. "Lie in the grass, the soft grass") and temperature related sensations (e.g. "We do that [relax] outside because that makes us feel cosy and warm").
- **Relaxation places** including bed, couch, pillows, chairs, hammock, home, nature and indoor/outdoor settings.
- **Relaxation activities** including being alone, being with friends/family, food, music, media and play.

While children's sensory rich descriptions of relaxation are in line with mindfulness practices, children did not deliberately seek relaxation experiences as an intentional response to reduce stress. Instead children described relaxation as an enjoyable part of everyday life.

### How can children's relaxation be supported?

Children's accounts indicate that environments and social settings that allow them to choose where, how and when they relax are most effective. Results indicate that children's relaxation can be supported by:

- Talking with children about their own preferences for relaxation.
- Providing a range of sensory focused relaxation opportunities throughout the day.

#### References:

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**Acknowledgement:** The UQ: *Choosing Rest* study was funded by a Queensland Government Education Horizon Grant (Project ID: 1401000027) and conducted in collaboration with the Institute for Social Science Research, Queensland University of Technology, Childcare and Kindergarten Association and Family Day Care Queensland. We thank the educators, service directors, parents, and children who participated in this study. We also acknowledge the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course for their support in translating this work.

- Making cosy spaces and activities available to children to respond to their own physical and emotional needs for relaxation during the day.
- Affording children agency to respond to their own body cues at all times of the day.

#### Other practical suggestions:

- Revisit your current rest policy and procedures.
- Critically reflect on current provisions for children's relaxation. Possible questions for reflection are:
  - Does your service currently distinguish relaxation from sleep and rest?
  - How does your current approach to relaxation align with your service philosophy?
  - How do you provide for each child's relaxation preferences?
  - How does your service include the voices of children in the provisions of relaxation?
- Provide language focused on the physical indicators of relaxation. For example, "when I take a deep, slow breath I can feel my heart slow down and my body feels calm."
- Provide language focused on the physical indicators of stress. For example, "when I feel stressed, my muscles feel tight."

#### Further research

This study was the first to ask young children what relaxation means to them and what they do to relax, providing insight into children's perspectives on everyday relaxation experiences. We suggest further research to explore:

- How children's physical surroundings and care settings effect their relaxation experience.
- Educators' time constraints and ability to respond to children's individual preferences.
- How class backgrounds, cultures, gender and dispositions shape their relaxation experiences and preferences.

For further information contact:

#### Dr Sally Staton

Group Leader (Early Childhood – Development, Policy and Practice), Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.  
Email: [s.staton@uq.edu.au](mailto:s.staton@uq.edu.au)