



Supporting Educator Relaxation in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Early childhood educators play a critical role in the lives of young children. Supporting their well-being is an individual, community and organisational responsibility.

Researchers at the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland investigated Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) educators' experiences of relaxation. Our study aimed to examine the social and environmental factors that influence early childhood educators' relaxation and provide new insights to better support well-being.

Educator stress and relaxation

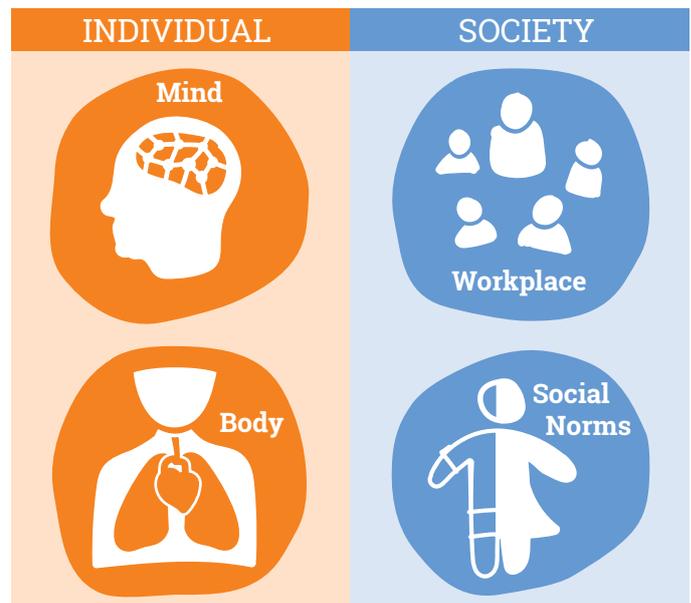
Early childhood educators juggle multiple daily tasks including planning, implementing and evaluating programs, ensuring safe and stimulating environments, working with families and engaging with communities. Outside work pressures, such as personal and family commitments, financial hardships and undertaking additional studies, can compete with unpaid overtime facilitating parent information sessions and documenting programs. These factors can lead to high levels of stress and burnout¹.

Stress impacts educator well-being and quality of life. This in turn can effect ECEC workforce retention, engagement and stability; and ultimately the quality of ECEC programs for children and families². Relaxation is an important component of educator well-being³. Yet, to date, there has been little research that focuses specifically on ECEC educator relaxation.

Promoting relaxation

Research of strategies to promote relaxation are typically focused on individual factors, however there are also social factors that can promote or hinder relaxation.

Individual factors of relaxation focus on one's body and mind and are seen in our heart rate, breathing, muscle tension, stress hormone production and blood pressure as well as cognitive behavior and emotions. Strategies to promote relaxation include techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, yoga, breathing exercise, spending time in nature, cognitive behaviour therapy and mindfulness.



Relaxation can be considered as an individual or social responsibility.

Social factors such as workplace initiatives and social norms can also influence relaxation. Social strategies to promote relaxation include workplaces using break times and mandated relaxation exercises to promote recovery from work related stress. Additionally, social norms such as gender, cultural factors and personal triggers influence our roles in society, and therefore our ability to relax. For example, educators in ECEC often have a double-burden of care, caring for others in both their professional and personal lives.

What we did

We interviewed 8 early childhood educators who worked with children aged 3-5 years old in ECEC. We asked them 'What does relaxation mean to you?' and 'What do you do to relax?'. The interviews were recorded and analysed.

WE INTERVIEWED	WE ASKED
<p>8 ECEC educators</p>	<p>What does relaxation mean to you? What do you do to relax?</p>

What we found

We found that educators conceptualise their own relaxation in four main ways:

1. Switching off



Just kind of go away from the busyness of what's happening. (Laura)

Just being alone with your thoughts, having some calm, not thinking about everything you have to do. (Kelsey)

Yeah. Reading. That's my big thing, as long as I'm reading it's fine. It's - I can't do screen time. I can't do TV. (Nadia)

- Educators described detaching from demands of work and family.
- Educators' ways of switching off were diverse including napping, watching TV, checking Facebook, reading, cooking or running.
- Some educators (like Nadia) had very definite preferences about what does and does not allow them to relax.

2. An individual's problem



Researcher: What do you do to relax?

Kim: Me - not all that.

Researcher: Nothing?

Kim: No. No, I'm bad with myself. No...

Researcher: Really? How do you think that is?

Kim: No, I don't know, just too busy. I put myself last I suppose.

I try to meditate but the problem is I'm not a meditator. (Debra)

- Educators described a lack of relaxation as a personal problem or weakness and when they 'failed' to relax this was their own fault. In this example Kim appears to victim blame herself for her lack of relaxation.
- Meditation and mindfulness are currently popular solutions to counteract stress so Debra frames her inability to meditate as her own problem.

How can workplaces support educator relaxation?

Our findings reveal that educators' accounts and experiences are heavily weighted towards the individual being responsible for their own relaxation. While self-care is important, there are also opportunities to reflect on what can be done within ECEC workplaces to support relaxation. Steps towards promotion of relaxation include:

Consulting: Consult educators about the preferred places to relax (for example, in or outdoors) and relaxation activities.

Considering: Consider how individual needs and preferences can be catered for at work (for example, in Sarah's case – relaxation was about feeling organised and ready to start the day unhurried. Is there a way that her relaxation needs could be met during work time rather than her personal time).

Creating: Create work environments that are encouraging of relaxation during lunch breaks and align with individual preferences. Discuss and advocate the practice of micro-breaks as long as they fit with ECEC educators' job demands (for example, if an individual relaxes through deep breathing exercises, they can be encouraged to do so throughout the day).

References:

1. Thorpe, K., Jansen, E., Sullivan, V., Irvine, S., McDonald, and The Early Years Workforce Study team. (2020). Identifying predictors of retention and professional wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce in a time of change. *Journal of Education Change*, 21 (4), 623-647. doi:10.1007/s10833-020-09382-3.

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3. An outside of work activity and a last priority



I don't think you relax because you're on your own [working as a FDC educator]. You just can't switch off at any time. (Lillian)

Researcher: Yeah. When might you want to relax?

Stephanie: Well if it's the weekend - because I work full time - I probably would have a little catnap on the weekend, like half an hour.

Researcher: It's nice sometimes, isn't it?

Stephanie: Yeah. Then at night probably, like after dinner, put my feet up.

- Generally educators spoke about relaxing experiences outside of the work context and indicated these experiences were a last priority.

4. Relaxing at work



Yeah, there's not much time through the day to actually sit and relax unless in the afternoon I can sit in the sandpit or—that's still relaxing being with the kids in a calm environment. Playing in the sandpit can still be relaxing. (Kim)

I think part of relaxation is coming a little bit earlier than when I'm due to start. Just having enough time to obviously find out where I need to be to cover the staff but also just maybe have something to eat, have a drink of water. So then when I start work, I'm not so rushed. (Sarah)

- Kim seems to have found a micro-moment to relax at work. Micro-moments are a new concept in research. We recommend that this idea and its potential benefit could be investigated further.
- Sarah arrives at work earlier than rostered or paid to feel organised. We wonder how work contexts could accommodate Sarah's needs within paid work hours instead.

Further research

We suggest further research to explore:

- How is relaxation framed in policy documents relevant to early childhood educators?
- What structural/organisational supports or changes could support educators' relaxation within work contexts?
- How can we disrupt the dominant discourses relating to educators' work and family lives?
- Do educators use micro-moments to relax and recuperate and, if so, how can ECEC work contexts support this idea?

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