

## Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods

Episode 1 with Dr Emma DeCicco

Dr Emma DeCicco

BPsych, Psy.D, MAPS

**Susie Perkins:** Welcome to the Meerilinga Podcast series. We're calling this "Positive Childhoods"

This podcast is the first in the series and is to celebrate Children's Week 2021. The production of this podcast is kindly sponsored by Department of Education and Lotterywest.

**Belynda Smith:** We'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet, and for us here recording today that's the Wadjuk Noongar people. We respectfully acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, and community, and honour first nations people, past and present, in the spirit of reconciliation.

Secondly, we'd like to welcome listeners and say thank you so much to those educators, parents, and others listening in today, we really appreciate everything it takes for you to be here listening in, and we know how much you do for the children that you care for. So, thank you for being here.

My name is Belynda Smith I'm a parenting facilitator with Meerilinga's Parenting Service. I'm passionate about meeting the needs of parents for that we can help families to thrive.

**Susie Perkins:** Kaya. I'm Susie Perkins. I am an advisor with Meerilinga Young Children's service – metropolitan region – supporting parents and their parenting journeys.

**Belynda Smith:** So, Susie and I [will] co-host today, and we're here on behalf of Meerilinga. We're a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity that promotes the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child: working with children, their families, early childhood professionals, planners, and the community to raise the status of children in Western Australia.

Now today we have with us a beautiful, wonderful guest, who I have had the great good fortune to speak with a couple of times before. I'm going to ask Susie to introduce our beautiful guest, Emma. So, thank you Emma, DeCicco?-

**Emma DeCicco:** (Laughs) Yep, you go it!

**Belynda Smith:** -for being here.

**Susie Perkins:** As a passionate advocate for proactive mental health measures, Emma's focus is on providing the highest standard of evidence-based practice which is always founded on building a strong relationship. I love the quote she uses: "I have training in lots of acronyms, be it CBT, ACT, EFT, DBT, or EMDR and they certainly come in very handy. Underneath it all, however, is one human holding a safe space for another human, walking alongside them for that time in their journey, helping them along the way."

**Belynda Smith:** Beautiful. Thanks for being here, Emma.

**Emma DeCicco:** Thank you so much for having me here. It's such a privilege and honour to be able to be here – especially for such an important occasion: celebrating Children's Week.

**Belynda Smith:** Yes, we are here today to talk about children, and their importance, but first it would be lovely to hear a little bit about you and what brings you here: the winding pathway you've taken to this point. Tell us a little bit about your story!

**Emma DeCicco:** It's been quite a winding path, I think. For me, I grew up in Perth and I was very privileged to have a really wonderful childhood. But I also had friends and family – we moved around the state a little bit – and so I came into contact with children who didn't have as fortunate upbringings as I did. And kind of from a very young age I got really interested in helping other people and really wanting to be there for kids. So, from the beginning, I decided I wanted to be a psychologist and they [my family] were all like 'why?'

So, I pursued that along the way I ended up doing a Bachelor and then a Doctorate Masters and kind of got turfed out the other end as a clinical psychologist.

And I also have three children of my own. Beautiful little cherubs that they are – when I left them this morning they were fighting over paint, so it's going to be interesting what I'm coming home to!

**Belynda Smith:** (Laughs) Wonderful, I think we can *all* relate to that. The people listening in, with children of our own or children to care for. Yes, very familiar.

So, you are a great advocate for children and families, which is a perfect link in with Children's Week and the Children's Week focus this year is "Children's right to make their own friends and form meaningful connections with those around them". So, we'd love to do a bit of a deep dive around some of these points.

First of all, I know you've got those three beautiful children and you've been parenting for just over a decade?

**Emma DeCicco:** Yeah, 12 almost 13 years at this point.

**Belynda Smith:** Time for long-service leave at that point I always think!

**Emma DeCicco:** Oooh, time for high school!!

**Belynda Smith:** What's the thing you wish you'd known years and years ago, and what's the advice you would give to your previous self when you were just setting out as a parent?

**Emma DeCicco:** Honestly I would go back – I've thought about this a lot – I would go back, and I'd probably sit next to me and say "You know what? It's ok."

You know, I went into this having all these lofty expectations of how I wanted it to be and what I wanted for my children – all of these things. And it made it really, really hard. Really hard. So, I think the first thing I would say to me, 12 odd years ago, is to lower the expectations. Just bring it down a notch. I think it's really important that we go into this realising that we can't do it on our own. We actually need a crew around us or a tribe around us. And building that out is really important not just for us but also for our children

I think, you know I talk to mums and dads and carers now, and I talk about building out a team of pros and amateurs. Getting the professionals on your side and getting some of the amateurs – that might be your own parents, or friends, or people in your world you really trust, who love you and love your children as well. Really focusing on building out that community is just so important when you're entering the big scary world of parenting.

And I think another thing that I would definitely say to myself is "You're going to make mistakes."

**Belynda Smith:** Welcome to the club!

**Emma DeCicco:** And lots of them!!

And its ok. And if you can bring a lens of compassion to yourself as opposed to this really punitive critic, then you'll learn a lot more and you'll be in a better place to be able to be there for not only yourself but for your kids as well.

**Belynda Smith:** Lovely.

So, you are a clinical psychologist and a Board approved supervisor practicing for 13 years with a focus on trauma-attachment and perinatal. I'm really interested to know about all those years of study and practice and reading all those peer-reviewed articles and really getting to grips with the meat of it all – what have you gleaned about what children need most from the people who care for them?

**Emma DeCicco:** Its actually really simple – they need attunement.

**Belynda Smith:** What does that mean? Attunement – that's a fancy word!

**Emma DeCicco:** I know, it is a fancy word! It sounds simple, children need parents or carers or people (it doesn't have to be parent or a carer) in their world who will be attuned to their needs. And that means, basically, they're going to be in sync or understand what that young person needs and be able to respond to that in an effective way.

It's really simple in theory but it can be really difficult in practice. While all children need the same thing – they all need attunement, they've all got very basic core emotional needs – they also have completely different predispositions, they've got completely different characters, they've got completely different temperaments, so meeting those needs isn't going to be the same for every child. It's going to happen in different ways.

So, I talk about how we've got six core emotional needs. It's really useful when you're thinking about parenting and you're thinking about caring for a child to look at those core emotional needs. I get my little whiteboard out and I draw six cups and I'll get my little people to draw a line on how full their cup is and then get their caregiver to come in and see how full that cup might be and what they might be able to do to fill it a bit more.

We look at, first of all, the first cup always is safety. That's physical and psychological safety – that's obviously really imperative.

And then we go to attachment. We know from the research that a child needs at least one secure attachment. Hopefully more, but one will do wonders in their world. It's about building out that really solid relationship.

Then we look to [how] they need the freedom to express their emotions, the freedom to express valid wants and needs and emotions and have that heard! Little people have big feelings, and they need to be able to express that in safe ways and have that heard.

**Belynda Smith:** Which can be very challenging...

**Emma DeCicco:** It's very challenging!! Absolutely!

**Belynda Smith:** For us as parents and carers.

**Emma DeCicco:** Yes, definitely. So that was cup number three, and then we've got the fun stuff! We've got spontaneity and play. They all need to be able to play and be silly – as silly as possible. As I left my children this morning with paint everywhere, I was like "Right! This is the spontaneity and play cup!" Just going to leave that one there.

And then we move onto autonomy and competence. They need to be able to learn how to do things on their own. They need to be able to make mistakes and take risks – calculated risks – in a way where they are going to fall over and hurt themselves sometimes. They're going to fail at things, and by that they learn not only that they can overcome failure and they can cope with things, but they're also learning about the unique little person that they are. And that's really, really important.

A lot of people criticise these parenting models around [the idea] that it's just about giving kids everything they want, and that's actually not true at all. It's about giving them what they need, but the sixth cup is limitations and limit setting. They need limits!

**Belynda Smith:** Yes!

**Emma DeCicco:** All people, all human beings, need limits. So that's a really important cup to remember as well: how do we put limits in in a way that is honouring that child's development? That might be modelling self-discipline, it might be actually saying "no" to things, whatever that looks like.

We've got these core needs, and basically attunement across those needs is what children thrive on.

**Belynda Smith:** Lovely, thank you.

**Susie Perkins:** Emma, thank you so much. You captivate me, because you break this parenting gig down into really easy to understand language and concepts. I think for parents that are having a tough time parenting their children, the idea of six cups – and where children feel where their cups are at – is fascinating. And I love the word attunement, I think that just sums it up for me. So, thank you, that was amazing.

**Emma DeCicco:** You're making me blush!

(All laugh)

**Susie Perkins:** So, the first thousand days have been highlighted by a great deal of research as an incredibly important time for building the architecture of a child's brain; what do children really need at this time in order to thrive?

**Emma DeCicco:** Such a great question because the thousand-day model was initially introduced to target nutrition. And of course, children need really adequate, more than adequate, nutrition over those first thousand days from conception to around the age of two to really provide the building blocks for their neurological and physical development. That obviously has a big impact on their psychosocial development as well. Nutrition is obviously very, very important, but they then expanded that model to look at the other factors that are really important in those first thousand days.

It's fascinating, children – their brains are growing faster during that time than any other period across human lives. I think they develop over a million neural connections per second during that time. It is just incredible, you can't even fathom what they're doing in their busy little brains! So, they really do need, as I was saying before, they really do thrive off of that attunement. It's really teaching them and honing those neural connections in a way that's developing the skills that they need to thrive in life.

That might be skills around understanding emotions and that leads to coregulation and self-regulation and all these buzzwords that we talk about. But essentially what they need is another human who sees them, gets them, and is able to make their needs important and they thrive!

I was reviewing, we were talking about it earlier, I was reviewing some research, often we talk about 'children' as this kind of global sense of all children, but of course we've got children with different needs within that. We've got what we call *neurotypical* children, and *neurodivergent* children – that might be children who are autistic, or perhaps they've been diagnosed with ADHD – and so their neurology is different. They've [all] got different neurotypes, so they're going to have different needs.

The interesting thing is there was some recent research done by Professor Andrew Whitehouse and his team. [They] conducted a four-year trial and what they did was they looked at babies who were perhaps showing early signs of autism. They looked at this – early intervention they called it, which is not my favourite term, but – and basically what they did was they used video feedback to support parents in their attunement to their baby. These babies were between 9 and 14 months old and these parents were taught how to better attune to them. The results were really quite astounding.

What they found is these children still had developmental difficulties, but by working with each child's unique differences – instead of trying to counter them, which is definitely **not** neuro-affirmative – the therapy just really effectively supported their development through those early years.

**Belynda Smith:** So, really meeting them where they're at

**Emma DeCicco:** Yes, meeting them where they're at!

**Belynda Smith:** And celebrating them as they are.

**Emma DeCicco:** That's exactly right, and they thrive! I think that's so important

**Susie Perkins:** Yeah... How do you think that links back to being attuned with children in terms of their social connection and, from an early age, supporting them to build friendships of their choice? (That social-emotional development)

**Emma DeCicco:** It's the building blocks. Our interactions with our children in those early days build the template or the blueprint for how they then understand themselves, and how they understand themselves in relation to other people. So, it's the building blocks for their social skills, and for who they are. For instance, the attunement is related to higher levels of confidence and self-esteem in children, they're more likely to understand what they like and what they don't like and be able to relate with other people and other children in ways that suit their own personality.

**Susie Perkins:** And I guess that's part of that risk-taking as well because it is risky to engage in social relationships and friendships. So, parents being attuned to their children helps to support them in that too, doesn't it?

**Emma DeCicco:** It really does. I think the important thing to note is when we're talking about this you can get that sense of rising panic of: "Oh my goodness, I've got to be attuned all the time! I've got to feed them, they've got to have their carrots, and their broccoli, and then this, and then that, and then I need to be attuned 100% of the time. No screen time!! Blahbah blah!

And it's exhausting.

**Belynda Smith:** Which brings us back to your first point, doesn't it?

**Emma DeCicco:** Yes!

**Susie Perkins:** Absolutely

**Emma DeCicco:** It's really not necessary either. When we look at the studies, a lot of the research points to securely attached children have parents who are attuned to them about 30% of the time, so we don't need to be perfect. In fact, being not-perfect is really critical to your child's development as well because what children actually need is a generalised sense of "I'm pretty safe in the world, and if things go wrong, we're able to fix it." So, what they actually need is when a parent is mis-attuned or makes a mistake and it causes a rupture in the relationship, that the parent is able to go and repair that rupture with them.

Through that ongoing pattern of attunement, mis-attunement, rupture, and repair they learn this generalised sense of "I'm generally going to get my needs met", but they also learn how to cope when things don't go right. It's actually really important, for resilient children, they need parents that aren't perfect. They need parents who make mistakes, but who come back and try to heal the rupture.

And if you think about how that would then translate to friendships, it's huge! Absolutely, incredibly important that we teach our children that we all make mistakes, and this is how we repair it.

**Belynda Smith:** And I'm thinking about the big rupture that we faced as a community and worldwide, so Susie, do you want to speak about that?

**Susie Perkins:** Yeah, Emma, we're interested in exploring with you what your experiences and challenges of COVID have been, and what kind of strategies or ideas have you been recommending to families or using with you own family to counteract the stress that many of us are feeling at this time?

**Emma DeCicco:** Yeah, it's been, just unbelievable. I can't imagine going back to two years ago and it was just a completely different world, and even what we were recommending two years ago has changed.

I think, again, it comes down to checking in and attuning to what your child's needs are. Some children have predisposition, they're maybe a little bit anxious, perhaps hearing about all of this chaos happening everywhere isn't good for them and they might need to be shielded from that a little bit. Other children might be highly sociable, and they need lots of connections and lots of friends and lots of play time, and so it's about getting really creative for them. If you can meet up in person in a park, then you're able to do that, or you have lots of facetimes, you have different activities that you're able to translate online essentially.

We know that children have definitely suffered from not being able to go to school and day cares and things like that, and we're incredible lucky in Perth, but we try and facilitate as much social interaction as your child needs in other ways.

And then we've also got the side of things around germs and contamination and all of that sort of stuff – seeing everyone in masks...

**Belynda Smith:** And the anxiety

**Emma DeCicco:** Yeah, the building anxiety. So, it's really about having that communication open with your child and explaining it in child-friendly terms of "We're doing this to keep you safe." And making it a bit fun, so we sing silly songs when we wash our hands, and we come up with different ways just to integrate it into our daily routine. And of course, if you're finding that your child is really struggling, then getting the professional in your team on board to support them, I think, is important.

The other thing that is *really* important to mention is looking at how the parents and the caregivers are coping. Because our own stress has a big impact on how we parent and also our children pick up on how we're feeling as well. Its really important to be managing what you're going through. For instance, if you're separated from family and friends and things like that, finding ways to cope with that and get support as much as you can

**Belynda Smith:** I always found that as a parent [was] really good in theory, but as someone who is a older parent and who was very capable in the workplace and was suddenly thrust into this new world where I expected myself to be capable – I knew that asking for help was important, but actually taking that leap-

So, you were talking about fining you support crew, what helped you reach out and say, "Can you watch the children?", "Can you do my dishes?", "I am going to go and see a professional because I need support.". What was it that helped you get to that? (I'm presuming that you have a similar experience to me from what you said?)

**Emma DeCicco:** Absolutely!! Absolutely. I think part of it was my background and I was a little bit like “I’ve got the practice what I preach here, otherwise I’m not really doing a good job, am I?”. So, part of it was that, but it was also knowing that we’re meant to be part of a community. We’re not meant to be doing everything on our own, we’re not designed that way, humans are not designed that way. And then starting to have conversations: conversations with friends, conversations on Facebook with Facebook groups and things like that, and actually just putting it out there, like “I’m actually really struggling at the moment.” OR “Is somebody else really struggling, and what can I do to help? How about we get a group together and have chats or put a hand up whenever we need something.”.

I got very good at saying yes to offers of help and putting my hand up when I felt like I wasn’t going so well, and I think that’s really important that we all do that.

I’m not sure that answered your question!?

**Belynda Smith:** That *perfectly* answered my question. That was definitely my experience too, those conversations [were] the starting point. That we stop trying to have this perfect Instagram life and we start to really, genuinely say “Gosh, I’ve had a hard morning, how about you?” and mostly people who come to classes and workshops and sessions with us as part of our parenting service say “Wow, I’m not the only one.”

That’s the biggest feedback we get.

**Emma DeCicco:** I think that’s really important. To put it out there, the reality of what it is to not only be a parent or a caregiver but, being a parent or caregiver in COVID, its like you’ve levelled up! You’ve levelled up a hundred times over, so it is really challenging.

**Susie Perkins:** Absolutely.

**Belynda Smith:** I was thinking about silver linings of COVID too, and for me that’s been one of them – that people are much more open about the fact that their children might be a home with them while their working from home or about the fact that they’re having difficulty with the great big juggle. Have you noticed anything that’s been silver lining for you personally, or-

**Emma DeCicco:** I think we’ve realised that we can be a lot more flexible and adaptable than we ever imagined. I couldn’t find my headphones, and I had a series of sessions with clients earlier in the year – couldn’t find my headphone anywhere, they turned out to be under my son’s bed – but I found my daughters unicorn headphones. I did therapy in unicorn headphones. And it was great! My teenage boys loved it; they were laughing themselves silly.

So, there have been some silver linings, and we’ve been able to connect in different ways and I think that’s been really wonderful across the board really.

**Susie Perkins:** I agree, yeah

**Belynda Smith:** You talked sort of generally about children's friendships and how important they are for our children to exercise that resilience and that capacity building; I'm wondering about how parents can support young children with those meaningful connections in a really coalface sort of way – right at the moment when there's an altercation or difficulty. What do you recommend bringing to that space as the adult in charge?

**Emma DeCicco:** It's a really good question, isn't it, because I think our instinct is to get right in there and sort it out. You know, we know how to problem solve it, so we just want to get in and sort it out. Sometimes its because the noise is just – eugh!

**Belynda Smith:** Overwhelming!

**Emma DeCicco:** And other times it's because you don't want you child struggling and so you want to rescue them from that. I'll talk about modelling – so if there is an altercation where it does need a caregiver or and adult to step in because it's going to be dangerous in some way, then we step in in a way that doesn't direct the child. We don't say "Stop, don't do that", it's more around, "I'm going to take this train over here because throwing trains can hurt people", and we redirect away from that.

We're really doing a lot of modelling a lot of the time, if we have to intervene. And then its really good to later take your child and do some roleplays. Set up a scenario where there might be something a little bit similar to what happened before and have a play around the different ways that they might be able to solve that problem in the future. It can be fun, it can be silly, but it's such good practice for them to learn these skills without you necessarily coming in and saving theme very time, because, essentially, they do need to acquire these skills as they go.

**Susie Perkins:** I think that's a really great tip for people working with young children in the early years, for our educators. Often, they have the same response as we do as parents, that they want to get in there and come up with a solution. But actually, being able to give children the chance to explore that and roleplay it in a safe way is a really good way to support children [in] learning about their limits and how they attune to one another.

**Emma DeCicco:** Yes, that is a beautiful point. I think it also raises for me that again when we have children who perhaps have different social communication styles, we have this thing called a double empathy problem and we're noticing that more and more, particularly in the space of neurodivergent folks out there. It's really about this expectation that neurotypical social communication is the norm and the expectation. So, we're trying to train all these children who perhaps don't have that communication style or those social skills to become this neurotypical-type person. It doesn't work that way. We're talking about developing empathy on both sides.

It's helping children no matter what neurotype they are, what background they have to develop empathy and understanding for all the different social communication styles out there. Developing different ways to be able to communicate with different people.

**Belynda Smith:** And that brings me to an important one in my life which is the role that siblings can play with all of this. I have read one expert talk about [how] even if your child doesn't have a sibling, they'll tend to set up situations with friends where they can work through some of these challenges. So how the sibling relationship functions just to help each child learn and grow, and what we can do as the carers, if we've got siblings in that space or as the parents to support them to have the best relationship they can, or do they need to have the best relationship, can it be a great thing if things are rough?

**Emma DeCicco:** It's a tricky one, isn't it? I am a big advocate for – if we look at, in the environment, and we look at how (for instance) some lion cubs, they don't sit there nicely parallel playing. They're rough-housing and they're fighting, and they're honing their hunting skills essentially and human siblings are somewhat similar in that they are there to hone their conflict resolution skills. They're there to hone all these different social skills in a safe environment and so they're actually meant to fight. Sorry!

(All laugh)

**Emma DeCicco:** In safe ways, of course! We're not talking about getting baseball bats or anything terrible out. In safe ways, and its about setting up that environment to support them in resolving their own conflicts. And, again, you can do things like roleplaying, you can be having these conversations, striking while the iron is cold – not in the midst of a conflict – and really modelling to them different ways to interact. Sometimes they're just not going to get along as well so they need to learn how to essentially do that in the house in a way that allows both of them to be the unique little people that they are.

**Belynda Smith:** Lovely. What is it that you would love people to take away from listening to us today? If they hold one thing in their minds moving off into their day, having listened to this while doing the dishes, or having listened to this on the way to work – what's something that you really hope people take with them into their day with the children they care for?

**Emma DeCicco:** I think it would have to be that you are not meant to be perfect. And it's actually not good for kids to be perfect; you are meant to be imperfect and meant to make mistakes, and that is okay. We really need to have a huge dose of compassion for ourselves, especially at the moment with all the pressure of COVID. And I really hope that people will walk away going "I can do this, I can fill those cups and attune, but I don't have to be perfect at it, I don't have to" – I was about to say, "I don't have to have a degree in it", but I have a degree in it and I'm far from perfect!

It's ok to just be human, that's all our little people really need.

**Belynda Smith:** Beautiful. For each of the podcasts produced in this series we're going to finish off with some quick questions, just five little quick questions for you.

Name the book You loved most as a child.

**Emma DeCicco:** That's an easy one, *A Wrinkle in Time*.

**Belynda Smith:** Ooh, lovely! Me too.

**Emma DeCicco:** I LOVED it, it's a great book.

**Belynda Smith:** It really is a great book, isn't it?

Who is the first friend you can remember having as a child, and what did you love about them?

**Emma DeCicco:** That would have to be my sister. I don't think I really appreciated it at the time because we would fight like cats and dogs, but I think having her in my world and having a sibling so close in age (we're only 18 months apart) was actually really good for my development. She's just this, she's the total opposite to me and so she brings everything that I don't and we're now very, very good friends which is really lovely to have her in my world and I appreciate her.

**Belynda Smith:** Beautiful.

What's your happiest childhood memory?

**Emma DeCicco:** That would have to be boogie boarding in Dongara and watching my mum get dumped by a wave. It was hilarious

(All laugh)

**Belynda Smith:** Can you describe your favourite outdoor space?

**Emma DeCicco:** Yeah, I've got a few of them. I am a runner, so I am all about bush trails and just getting out and running and hearing the birds and smelling nature.

**Belynda Smith:** Okay, complete this sentence: To help them thrive, children need...

**Emma DeCicco:** Attunement. Easy!

**Belynda Smith:** Haha! I thought you were going to go for that

Finally, how can listeners learn more about your work or get in touch with your organisation?

**Emma DeCicco:** We are based in Carine. We have a practice where there's a group of us psychologists, counsellors, and mental health workers. We are also online at [www.thedashhub.com.au](http://www.thedashhub.com.au) and we're on Facebook and Instagram as well.

We put out quite a few different resources and bits and pieces to support families out there, and we run groups and circle of security and all sorts of things as well.

**Belynda Smith:** Thank you, Emma. It's been such a delight hearing your thoughts and ideas and I totally second Susie that you have such a beautiful way of making it accessible. You've got such an approachable manner and I feel really fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to speak to you in this way and do a bit of a deep dive into some of your thoughts and what you know about this space. Thank you so much for being here.

**Emma DeCicco:** Thank you so much

**Susie Perkins:** Thank you so much, Emma. I'm sure podcast listeners all over the world will be really engaged with your conversation with us today. So, from Meerilinga, thank you very much.

**Emma DeCicco:** It was my pleasure. And if anyone has any questions, always feel free to contact me, I'm always happy to help. Thank you so much for having me, it was great fun!

**Susie Perkins:** Thank you

**Belynda Smith:** Thank you listeners. If you would like more information regarding Meerilinga, please contact [mycf@meerilinga.org.au](mailto:mycf@meerilinga.org.au) or visit our website at [www.meerilinga.org.au](http://www.meerilinga.org.au). Thanks for listening!