

Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods

Season 2 Episode 5 with Emma Cross

Belynda Smith

Welcome, welcome everyone to Meerilinga Positive Childhood podcast. This podcast is recorded on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people, and I'd like to respectfully acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, and community and honour their elders past and present and First Nations people everywhere in the spirit of reconciliation and particularly their parents.

Secondly, I'd like to appreciate and thank the Department for Education and Lotterywest for funding this podcast as part of the Children Week celebrations in WA.

Thank you so much to those educators, parents and others listening in today, we really appreciate everything it took for you to tune into this podcast. We know how busy you are, so finding time and that busy day to learn more about how you can support the needs of those children is really vital work. Thank you.

I'm Belynda Smith, parenting facilitator with Meerilinga Parenting Service and I'm really passionate about meeting the needs of parents so that we can help families and children to thrive.

Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation and a registered charity. We promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, working with children and their families, early childhood professionals, planners, and the community to raise the status of children in WA.

The 2022 Children's Week theme is: "All children have the right to a standard of living that supports their well-being and healthy development". So that's our focus for this series of podcasts.

So, our guest today is Emma Cross. I'll just tell you a little bit about Emma. She's a PhD candidate and a lecturer at Curtin University and is also a researcher with the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. Her research interests, which I found really fascinating, include leadership structures and how these lead to the empowerment early childhood educators resulting in quality outcomes. She also actively researches the digitisation of childhood, and with a 9 and a 12 year old this is fascinating to me, and how it influences their creativity. Emma is a Western Australian ECA Branch committee member and cochair of the leadership in the early years' subcommittee. Emma utilises social media to promote equitable access to research and evidence across the sector.

I'm really looking forward to speaking with you. Thanks for coming along.

Emma Cross

Well, thank you for having me.

Belynda Smith

So, let's see here, we've got lots of questions for you today. Do you want to just start by introducing yourself, telling us a little bit more about your work and how you came to do it?

Emma Cross

Yeah, absolutely. So, as you've introduced me very kindly, I am Emma Cross. I thought I would maybe start by sharing kind of my professional journey because I used to think it was really unique. But after teaching master students have come to realise that it's actually a journey that quite a number of our early childhood professionals have followed.

I actually started in a Bachelor of Commerce in management and marketing. I thought I was going to be a marketing manager and you know, that was my calling in life. But at the same time while I was studying, I had the opportunity to be a researcher in in in a project at Curtin Uni. And through that I actually really enjoyed what I was doing and what I observed. And I thought, "Hey, you know, this could be something for me."

So, I approached the centre that we were working with, and I asked them if they'd be interested in a music and movement program. They were really interested in that, but the catch was that I had to do my Cert III and I was still finishing my undergraduate degree.

So, I did my certificate, I finished my undergraduate degree, and while I was doing that, I had multiple opportunities to work in all different research projects, which continue to spark my passion and my enthusiasm for the sector and for the quality provision in the sector.

I went on to do my Masters in teaching in early childhood because I really have a strong belief that – because I ultimately wanted to be a manager or director of a service – I felt as though I couldn't manage what I didn't understand. And I really couldn't support educators if I didn't understand what they were going through. So I did my masters and at the same time kind of worked my way through the ranks. I worked as an educational leader, as an early childhood teacher.

Belynda Smith

While studying?

Emma Cross

While studying.

Belynda Smith

That's impressive – that's a lot!

Emma Cross

I worked full time when I studied full time, so yeah, it was full on. But well worth it.

I eventually became a centre director, and I just absolutely loved the work that I was doing. And I felt as though I had the opportunity to work with the educators in my immediate teams and to support them to enhance their practices.

It came to a point that I felt as though, you know, we were really working to develop something beautiful in our centre, but I had more to give and I wanted to share that further, so I ended up enrolling in my PhD. Silly me. But here I am doing my PhD now!

But that also drove me to move into the university where I could really help to spread the quality further and really support and empower educators from our state. So now I'm working as a lecturer and course coordinator of Early Childhood Education at Curtin. I'm a researcher as well, yes, working here with the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. I'm a committee member for ECA, which is our national organisation and OMEP as well, which is our world organisation for early childhood. So, I'm very busy.

Belynda Smith

You are very busy!

Emma Cross

But I'm very passionate as well.

Belynda Smith

Yeah, you'd need passion to drive all of that. So, all of this work, how do you see it building better outcomes for children in WA?

Emma Cross

Yeah, I think ultimately, I hope what I'm doing is really advocating for quality provision within the sector and really driving the quality practices and ongoing improvements that we want to be seeing.

I think that everybody has the capacity to be an advocate for the sector and I think we really need to work with our educators, and families as well, to empower them and to allow them to feel as though they *can* be advocates and they *can* fight for that improvement. I think it's really helpful as well having the engagement with external providers and organisations to really spread that awareness and to provide opportunities for that engagement.

At the moment we're doing things like networking and mentorship opportunities, but ultimately, again like I said, that goal is to empower people to be able to advocate and see that change.

Belynda Smith

Beautiful.

I was particularly fascinated that you're working with the Lego Foundation because I have two boys who are 9 and 12 and they LOVE Lego. So, can you tell us a little bit more about that? How that's going and how it influences children subjective well-being? Sounds really fascinating.

Emma Cross

Yeah, absolutely. The Lego Project is what we affectionately call it, it is a huge project that is contributed to by researchers all over the world. We are basically ants in respect of this Lego project, it's huge. At the moment we are working, at my team at the ARC Central of Excellence for the Digital Child at Curtin we're working in partnership with Sheffield University, who are really driving the project. We're just one case study, we're just one component. But I know the colleagues that I work with nationally in the Centre of Excellence, they're also contributing different components to the large project.

Essentially what it is, is the Lego Foundation has come together with UNICEF and they've developed a framework that outlines how we can be supporting children's well-being while we're working with digital technologies. That was actually funded by the Lego Group and hence the collaboration with the Lego Foundation. So that's called the RITEC Framework, it stands for Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children. It was developed by Western Sydney University, which is I think really interesting the way that they went about that because they worked in partnership with children as opposed to a kind of researching on the children. So the definitions of well-being and the way that it's explored was defined by those children. So, they worked with 113 children from 13 countries, and they also used survey data that came from 34 000 children across 30 countries, and they used all of that data to develop and shape the RITEC framework.

Belynda Smith

Tell me more about this framework. What did they come up with on the basis of all this data and this information, particularly from children, what have what have we figured out so far?

Emma Cross

So, at the moment they're using it as a sort of a lens for understanding how children are engaging with the technologies and how conducive they are of their well-being Obviously in the ways that the children have identified their well-being what that looks like. So, at the moment, it's really a set of outcomes that we're looking for, but what we're hoping will come out of that is some really clear guidelines for other, you know, digital manufacturers or even government policymakers to really drive and bring the child to the centre of the development

Belynda Smith

That would be great, because it does feel like some of the digital experiences are not looking at the well-being of the child, they're just looking at how long we can keep the children on a screen, or just screens in and off themselves. Which leads me to my next question: screens in and of themselves can be a positive, digital technology for parents is huge, I know, as a parent. What do you see as the positives of children in that digital world? What are some of the challenges? What are you, what are you noticing?

Emma Cross

Yeah, I think like all things, there's always going to be positives and challenges. I think a positive is really the ways that we're seeing children engaging with digital technologies and the research that we do in, in the immediate team that I work with, we really look at children's creativity and how children can be using digital technologies to create as opposed to just hear that passive consumption.

So in one of the first research projects I worked in, we developed what's called the A-to-E of creativity and it is literally A-B-C-D-E. And that helps us to identify whether a child is being creative.

Belynda Smith

Oh, please tell me!

Emma Cross

Because one of the challenges is that, you know, we see children and we think "Wow, this is so creative. What they're doing is amazing." But we really need to interrogate what they're doing and say, is it the child being creative, or is it the app, or is it me doing the creative thinking on their behalf?

So we really want to kind of unveil that a bit.

Belynda Smith

Yeah, make it really high quality.

Emma Cross

Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Belynda Smith

Wow, that sounds fascinating. In all your research and you're learning about the evidence around children well-being in this space, what are the core ideas that you're coming up with again and again that you're seeing sort of stand out that parents or early educators can, I guess, take away with them?

Emma Cross

I think it's really important for young children to have opportunities to form quality relationships and you know, I think digital technologies can be a vessel to facilitate that if they're being used in the right way. I think that it's important that they have communication skills, and they continue to develop those skills so that they can engage with other people, and they can really express their ideas, but also their emotions and how they're feeling.

It's really important that we give children the voice and we allow them to make decisions on matters that affect them, and I think that's where the RITEC framework was done really well in giving children that. But I think also something that's really, really critical is the way that we guide children behaviour.

Quite often we hear people saying, "You can't say no!" or things like that and that is true, but we still need to have an understanding of well then what can I say? So, you know it's just about reframing that language and instead of saying we don't do this or don't do that, it's a learning opportunity where we say this is what we should be doing, and this is how we do it. But I did want to actually talk here about some other research that I've been doing.

Belynda Smith

Great!

Emma Cross

Because what we're seeing in another project that I'm doing as a part of my PhD is some really concerning quality ratings in some of our remote and regional services. So, at the moment 50% of our services in the Pilbara are our lowest rated services of the state. And we're seeing 40% coming from the Kimberly as well. Which is really concerning when we think about how high the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is. You know, and it is something that we need to be aware of but of course, you know we still want solutions, right?

So, through that research I've been putting through recommendations for how we can support services to increasing enhance that quality that they have, so that we can see quality improvements and then ultimately better outcomes for children. It's really, really important.

Belynda Smith

You sound really passionate

Emma Cross

I am!

Belynda Smith

Great! Makes me think all these lucky, lucky kids and lucky and services that, that get to have that passion leading them! Yeah, it's amazing.

So, for each of the podcasts we produce, we like to ask five quick questions to finish up just about you. What was your favourite book as a child?

Emma Cross

I think my favourite book was probably *Guess How Much I Love You*. And I used to read that with my mum, and it was so special.

Belynda Smith

What are the kind of core building blocks of well-being for you?

Emma Cross

I think it's really; it comes down to being connected, creative, and having that socialisation and the ability to form those connections. I think without that, it's difficult to have that sense of well-being, yeah.

Belynda Smith

What's your happiest childhood memory?

Emma Cross

That's a tough one.

There's so many..... Actually, this one is a little bit rude.

Belynda Smith

Okay!

Emma Cross

But it's PG.

Belynda Smith

[laughs]

Emma Cross

I'm the youngest of three children and when we were really young, our house had this enormous, enormously large shower. Really, really long. And I remember we would treat it like a water slide, and we would take turns running down the shower and sliding in our stomachs because it was insanely long and just the time I got to spend with my brother and sister was really special.

Belynda Smith

That sounds really cute.

What's your favourite outdoor space?

Emma Cross

I have the world smallest unit that I live in. It's about 80 square meters, but the outside of my house is 130 square metres.

Belynda Smith

OK.

Emma Cross

And so I absolutely love being out there and I have red tail cockatoos that fly past. Yeah, absolutely spectacular.

So, I sit outside and watch them.

Belynda Smith

Beautiful, yeah.

And complete this sentence: To help them thrive, children need.

Emma Cross

A commitment to ongoing early years quality improvement.

Belynda Smith

I like it. Thank you.

So how can this news learn more about your work or get in touch with you if they'd like to? Is there a specific website or can they email you? What's the best way?

Emma Cross

Yeah, if they're interested in the work that the Digital Child is doing, they can check out the digital child website. And if they wanted to get in contact with me, they can send me an email, it's emma.cross1@curtin.edu.au

Belynda Smith

Thank you so much for joining us. It's been really lovely hearing about your work and hearing your passion. It's really great to be around people who are that passionate. So, thank you.

Emma Cross

Well, thank you for having me

Belynda Smith

And thank you to our listeners for tuning in. If you'd like any more information about Meerilinga you can contact us via email on mycf@meerilinga.org.au or visit www.meerilinga.org.au.
Thank you.