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Universal Design for Learning



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If a child is in a wheelchair, offer chairs to other children so that everyone is at the same height.”

– Educator insight

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning outlines a set of principles that gives all children and young people equal opportunities to learn.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework based on the idea that we all learn in different ways and therefore need different ways to access information and to demonstrate what we know.

The 'typical' or 'average' child doesn't exist. Children and young people have different interests and motivations for wanting to learn or discover things, and the way they do this best is diverse too. For some, reading is the best way to get information, while for others, hearing or seeing information is more effective. As well, the way a child or young person feels most comfortable – and competent – at demonstrating what they've learned will vary.

The principles of UDL encourage educators to support learning in different ways, provide choice and options to assess learning, and consider how to sustain children and young people's motivation and engagement.

“By providing a range of resources and flexibility, children and young people are empowered to engage in learning. Empowering learning environments support all children to feel a sense of belonging and to thrive in learning and in relationships. This is a protective factor for mental health,” says Early Childhood Australia.



A framework for all learners

It's important to understand that while the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework may be particularly helpful for a child or young person with developmental delay or disability, it's a framework designed with every learner in mind – it's helpful for all children and young people.

To understand this concept, consider the accessibility features you regularly encounter on a day-to-day basis: automatic doors, closed captions during a TV program, or a ramp that provides alternative access into a building. The ramp is incredibly useful for someone who uses a wheelchair for mobility, but it also ensures easier access for a person who's pushing a pram or delivering an item on a trolley.

In a learning community, the UDL framework may help to inform curriculum adaptations or environmental design elements that allow children and young people who have developmental delay or disability to

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Visual aids and modelling are vital to ensure students with English as a second or additional language can feel included, too”

– Educator insight

participate and learn equally, but every child or young person in the learning community can benefit, too.

While the framework is more likely to be recognisable in school environments, where the emphasis is on learning and achieving academic goals, the principles of UDL are applicable in early learning services. In this section, under the heading titled Universal Design for Learning: An Early childhood perspective, you'll find examples of how UDL might apply in an early learning context.



The Universal Design for Learning principles

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is based on three main principles or objectives.

1. Providing multiple means of engagement

Children and young people at school are engaged and motivated to learn in different ways. Likewise in early learning services – children are supported to engage in relationships and learning experiences in different ways. For example, some children and young people in school find it much easier to engage and stay motivated when they're working on a project as part of a group, while the opposite is true for others. Similarly, children in early learning services may prefer to participate in different ways, whether that's individually or through small or larger group collaboration.

Noise, movement and spontaneous changes to routine can also affect engagement. For some children and young people, it's helpful and highly engaging. For others, it's disruptive, disengaging and even upsetting. No single strategy for engagement will work for every child or young person in your learning community, so this principle offers educators the flexibility to provide multiple options, allowing children and young people choice and autonomy in how they engage.

For reflection

- How well do I understand what motivates or supports a child or young person in my learning community to participate? And what could I do to improve my understanding and knowledge?
- Do children and young people have choice and autonomy in how they participate in their learning environment?
- What adjustments or modifications can I make to activities that ensure children can participate according to their strengths, abilities or interests?



2. Providing multiple means of representation

In other words, offering or delivering teaching and learning experiences in more than one format. While some children and young people find it easier to grasp information if it's delivered via a textbook, for others, information is much easier to comprehend if it's presented visually, or orally, or in a hands-on format. Many children will also benefit from using a combination of formats when it comes to understanding new concepts. No single type of representation will work best for every child or young person in your learning community, so UDL supports providing multiple options.

For reflection

- Can the text and materials (charts, posters) that children and young people use be customised to suit them better? For example, can they adjust fonts sizes and background colours?
- Are there tactile, hands-on strategies I could use, too? For example, when introducing a new concept to children, such as number sense, have I combined printed charts and posters with concrete, tactile items to consolidate the child or young person's understanding?
- What visual or auditory delivery methods could I introduce? And how would access to digital tools and platforms help?

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Some strategies in my class are a set seat for consistency, the timetable for the day on display to allow for predictability, and allowing students to sit on a wobble cushion or use a fidget toy.”

– Educator insight

3. Providing multiple means of action and expression

This principle is about how children and young people share or demonstrate their learning. For example, while pen-and-paper tests suit some learners at school, verbal presentations, podcasts or visual representations will better suit others. In early childhood, while some children may be able to express their feelings verbally by saying “I’m angry” or “I’m sad”, other children will express this through movement, dance or art. It’s important to consider what opportunities and means are available to children for self-expression.

Children and young people also have different needs when it comes to mobility and using sensory tools effectively. Some learners vary significantly in terms of how much practice and organisation they require. Just like the first two principles, there’s not one type of action and expression that will work best for every child or young person in your learning community, so providing a variety of options is crucial.

For reflection

- Have we organised and designed the physical learning space so that children and young people can access what they need without having to ask?
- Are we providing more than one way for children and young people in our learning community to show who they are, what they know and what they need.
- Are we giving children and young people enough flexibility in time and opportunities?



Archie's story

In this story, teachers provide opportunities for multiple means of expression to help facilitate self-directed learning for Archie, who was born with cerebral palsy.

Fourteen-year-old Archie is a sweet-natured, sensitive teenager who has a good sense of humour and a keen interest in sports. He was born with cerebral palsy, which affects his motor control on the right side of his body, and he also has an intellectual disability, low vision and a speech impairment. Recently, he transitioned to secondary school where he enjoys spending time with his classmates. He's made a couple of good friends since starting at his new school, and makes a conscious effort to seek out and sit next to them in class. His teachers have noticed that he learns best when he's with his friends. He tends to listen closely to what they say and often repeats it, so it's something his teachers encourage.

Archie's teachers have also observed that he responds best to tactile, hands-on learning opportunities. When these are paired with spoken information and instructions, he learns new concepts well. He's also able to verbalise his choices and preferences effectively when he's comfortable in his surroundings. When Archie's teachers give him options for activities, he'll enthusiastically respond verbally to the options he prefers, and stay silent as a response to the other options.



For reflection

- What are Archie's strengths as a learner?
- How are Archie's teachers currently applying Universal Design for Learning principles to facilitate his inclusion and participation in the learning community?
- Thinking about your own learning community, how could you apply the principles in your own curriculum?

Universal Design for Learning: An early childhood perspective

You might have noticed that you're already using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in your work as an early childhood educator, guided by the [Early Years Learning Framework](#) (EYLF) and its principles, such as 'Equity, inclusion and high expectations' and 'Respect for diversity'.

For example, if your service welcomes children across a wide age range, it may be that children of all ages and stages in your community have more opportunities to interact and participate in activities together than they might in a school setting. That means you're probably already providing multiple means of engagement, representation and action and expression.

Early learning services inherently require participation, and the following examples may help you better understand how UDL applies in an early learning service.

Block play

Providing access and opportunities for children to play with blocks is important in early learning due to the way it supports fine motor development and dexterity, problem solving, imagination, creativity and emerging communication and literacy skills.

Given the different ages and abilities of children, it's important to provide blocks in a variety of sizes, textures and materials, including foam blocks and hollow blocks. For example, younger children may delight in simply touching the blocks or exploring sounds the blocks make when they touch. Older children may be curious about the different shapes and angles of the blocks.

Use a variety of strategies to support block play, too. For example, you could set up different spaces to support individual, small group and large group collaboration.

Giving children choice and autonomy over how they use the blocks is key.

To stretch a child's imagination and thinking skills, you could provide sketchbooks for those children who are motivated to take part in block play by conceptualising and planning what they'd like to build first. Other resources you might use include rulers for exploring length and comparing size, baskets for sorting blocks based on their shapes or attributes, miniature figures to extend the complexity of block play or books on architecture and design.

This highlights the 'provide multiple means of engagement' principle in Universal Design for Learning, while also using the Early Years Learning Framework's principle 'Equity, inclusion and high expectations' and the 'assessment for learning' practice for these outcomes:

- children are confident and involved learners
- children have a strong sense of wellbeing.



The literacy space

In your environment's literacy space, you'll probably already have a wide variety of books to suit children's different ages, interests, stages and abilities.

Some additional ideas to consider would be having big floor books available to facilitate peer reading and learning; books that are essentially free of text so that they portray a story visually; and some books where the visual representations and pictures are very clear and obvious, and others that are more artistic and abstract. It's also vital to provide books that represent diverse cultures, traditions and languages.

You could also provide audio books as an alternative method to supporting children's language, literacy and communication skills. Hearing stories, singing songs and even saying rhymes are useful here, too. You could encourage the development of fine and gross motor skills through writing using varied mediums, providing children with opportunities to draw, scribble and write.

This highlights the UDL principles of 'provide multiple means of engagement' and 'provide multiple means of representation'.

A multi-faceted literacy space acknowledges that children grasp information and concepts in different ways. This connects to the principles 'Equity, inclusion and high expectations' and 'Respect for diversity' in the Early Years Learning Framework.

It also supports the practices of being responsive to children and cultural competence, related to these outcomes:

- children have a strong sense of identity
- children are connected with and contribute to their world
- children are effective communicators.



The sign-in process

Many services encourage children to record their attendance themselves to foster a sense of belonging (aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework outcome 'children are connected with and contribute to their world').

Provide options to allow for children's varied ability and interest in recording their attendance or signing in. Options might include children writing their names down; identifying their name badge, choosing it and placing it on the sign-in board. Or supply photos of the children and each child signs in by finding or identifying their own photo.

By providing these different sign-in options, you're using the UDL principle 'providing multiple means of action and expression' to allow children to demonstrate that they understand and have learned what's expected of them. You're also embedding the Early Years Learning Framework's principles 'Partnerships', 'Equity, inclusion and high expectations' and 'Respect for diversity' by allowing children to use the sign-in method that suits their abilities and preferences.

Milly's story

This story sees educators and a support team providing multiple means of engagement for Milly, who has delayed expressive language skills, to support her participation at kindergarten.

Milly is four years old and has recently transitioned from a long-day-care centre to a kindergarten. She's a content, confident girl who spends most of her time at kindergarten exploring the outdoor area, enjoys hands-on activities like finger painting and block play and loves animals – particularly farm animals. She doesn't interact or acknowledge the other children at kindergarten very much and, while she can talk and has good receptive language, she has delayed expressive language skills. Milly requires considerable support to participate in the routine activities of the day, particularly during group activities and mealtimes. As a result, the kindergarten has received additional funding to increase the educator-child ratios to ensure all children, including Milly, have their needs met and to help ensure inclusion for everyone in the learning community.

The kindergarten works closely with Milly's support team, including her speech pathologist, to create, share and implement strategies that support her inclusion. These include the use of visual strategies, such as schedules and choice boards. Milly is beginning to interact well with these by selecting her play preferences and reflecting through non-verbal communication that she's feeling more at ease and confident in the room, and with upcoming transitions. Milly's special interest in farm animals and tactile objects is also being used during the routines and learning experiences that she finds challenging, such as group time. Her educators have found that when Milly has these objects to touch or simply close by, she's able to concentrate and engage. This option is available for all children, along with other adjustments like sitting on bean bags.



For reflection

- What are Milly's strengths?
- Thinking about the steps Milly's educators have already taken to support her inclusion, which Universal Design for Learning and Early Years Learning Framework principles, practices and learning outcomes do you think they're using?
- How might you use Milly's strengths and special interests to support her communicating more effectively and being understood by her peers and others?



Learn more

Read Minds Wide Open's [information on Universal Design for Learning](#) and check out the [helpful examples](#) of why it works in practice, provided by UNSW.

In the early learning space, refamiliarise yourself with the [Early Years Learning Framework](#) and reflect on inclusion in your setting.

References

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Understood, [What is Universal Design for Learning](#) (online document).

UNSW Sydney, [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) (online document).

Be You resources for educators

Delivered by Beyond Blue, in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and headspace, **Be You** empowers educators and every learning community to be their most mentally healthy, positive and inclusive.

Now you've read the Be You Disability Inclusion Guide, browse the Be You website for educator resources related to supporting children and young people with developmental delay or disability.

Fact Sheets

Gain knowledge and to share information with your learning community.

- [Overview of mental health services](#)
- [Help-seeking in early childhood](#)
- [Help-seeking for children and young people in schools](#)
- [Recommending additional support](#)

Webinars

Learn from the Be You team and other educators across Australia through sessions, events and webinars.

- [Supporting Children with Complex Needs](#)
- [Professional Boundaries and Difficult Conversations](#)

Educator wellbeing

Wellbeing Tools for You is a collection of online apps and resources that Be You has compiled for educators. This resource offers guidance and practical strategies to look after your wellbeing, and to put yourself in a better position to support others in your care.

Join Be You today

Join **Be You** today and be part of building lasting positive mental health and wellbeing for children and young people in Australia.

The best way to sign up is as a **Be You Learning Community**, giving you access to the full range of resources and support from a Be You Consultant.

Be You resources include free online interactive sessions and events, accredited Professional Learning, Fact Sheets, a Programs Directory, planning and implementation tools, and more.

[Get in touch](#) to find out how Be You can support your early learning service or school.

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