



Rising Star Award

Submission Form, 2015

Nominee Name:	Emma Larsen
Position:	Preschool Teacher
Service Name:	Avenel Preschool

Professional Philosophy (100 words maximum):

Summarise your philosophy towards early childhood education and care

I believe high quality education takes place when children, families, educators and the wider community work together to create a safe, stimulating, sustainable and nurturing learning environment that is responsive to each person's needs and recognises individuals as life-long learners.

I take a holistic view of all children's learning and growth, viewing children as unique and capable learners.

I believe children are given the best opportunity to flourish when they participate in a play-based, indoor- outdoor program that allows for extended periods of uninterrupted play in a nature-inspired, homelike environment where they are encouraged to take risks, explore and imagine.

1. WELLBEING:

Have you identified a specific need (developmental, emotional, social and/or physical wellbeing) in a child/group of children you care for? Describe what you have done to meet this need, including the impact this has had on the children/families. (max 200 words)

Last year, I had a child enrol at Avenel Kindergarten that had previously attended another service. We discovered through conversations with the child's family and ECIS practitioner that she had been unsettled at her previous service and did not interact with other children. The child presented with significant communication delays and her family were very nervous about enrolling her at another service.

Working in conjunction with the family and the ECIS practitioner, we were able to implement strategies to encourage the child to become an active member of the kindergarten community. My co-educator and I enrolled in a Keyword Sign workshop to enable us to enhance our communication with the child. We worked with the child's family around strategies to help her settle in the morning (using a social story and visual routine) and provided opportunities for small group play to encourage interaction with other children. Through observation, we discovered the child's interest in zoo animals and incorporated songs about these animals into our programming. I was also able to use these observations to support the family in their journey towards a formal diagnosis.

Both the child and her family are now happy members of our kindergarten community.

2. PROGRAMMING:

Describe one innovative change you have made/helped to make to the children's program that has scaffolded learning and provided authentic experiences for the children. (max 200 words)

Our biggest programming change has been the move to an indoor-outdoor program. I believe that children have the best opportunity learn and grow when they are provided with uninterrupted periods of play and are encouraged to choose their own resources.

Our indoor-outdoor program is also encompasses the wider Avenel community. As active community members, children and educators are often found to be eating lunch on the local football oval or in the paddock next door. We regularly collect acorns, play on the enormous slide or search for insects in our local park or the primary school and often visit our local general store to purchase ingredients to compliment the vegetables from our garden for cooking experiences. I encourage the children to take the lead on these community visits, encouraging their agency.

When given the opportunity to take charge of their own learning, children have the potential to examine and explore ideas in a far richer way than they would if given concrete parameters and directions. It is our challenge as Early Childhood Educators to equip them, not only with exposure to a wide range of topics, but with the tools that allow them to facilitate their own lifelong learning journey.

3. SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS:

Have you identified in your service an area that you consider could be improved (physical space, operations, structure etc)? How would you go about doing this or, if you have already started, describe your involvement. (max 200 words)

When I started at Avenel Kindergarten in 2014, the space was uninviting, dingy and had been neglected for several years. The back corner of the yard was cordoned off due to an unsafe tile structure and the main play-area was a hotchpotch of colours.

Working with families, the committee, our cluster manager and local council, I applied for and received a grant from the Victorian Government to upgrade our dilapidated bathroom area- work will begin on this project in April this year. I was also able to work with local council to remove the tile structure, build a multipurpose 'stage' area and to obtain a grant to resurface our floors.

Working with my co-educator, we identified that some children were over-stimulated by the multi-coloured walls. As the committee was not able to afford a painter, I worked alongside the families to sand and paint the main play-area a warm, natural colour.

Service improvements are an ongoing process. I am currently working with our newly developed Sustainability and Wellbeing team to fundraise to re-develop our outdoor space, incorporating an orchard, worm farm and chicken coop, and to continue to maintain our insect and vegetable gardens.

4. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Describe your studies in early childhood education. Explain if a specific pedagogy, theory or unit of study has influenced your understanding and practice. What/who influenced you to enter a career as an early year's educator? (max 200 words)

When I was a little girl growing up in a regional area, I chanced upon an inspirational teacher who inspired in me a love of learning, and sharing my knowledge with others. I think I knew, even then, that I was going to be a teacher.

In 2010, I was accepted into the Early Achiever's Program at Australian Catholic University in Ballarat and started my Bachelor of Primary & Early Childhood Education. After my first kindergarten placement, I knew that early childhood education was going to be the right choice for me. I was able to refine my skills when I was offered a position as a room leader at Mountain View Children's Centre in Myrtleford in 2012 .

My final teaching placement found me in at Nagambie Pre-School, where I fell in love with this part of Victoria. When a position in Avenel was advertised, I jumped at the chance!

My philosophy has a variety of influences. I draw upon the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia often and I believe whole-heartedly in Louise Porter's theories of intrinsic motivation in children. I am currently fascinated by the Scandinavian Forest Schools and am working towards incorporating this into my practice.

5. FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS:

Describe your community of families and the steps that you have taken to build and encourage interaction between families and your service. What, if any, challenges did you face and were they overcome? What benefits did you achieve? (max 200 words)

Our families are the heart and soul of our kindergarten. In the 1980's, the Avenel community identified the need for a kindergarten and worked tirelessly selling bags of manure at the Melbourne market to raise funds to build one. The families form a close-knit community who are always willing to take part in working bees, excursions, committee meetings, special events, fundraising, taking care of our pets and the Stay&Play; program.

In 2014, I sent out a survey to families regarding methods of communication, leading us to establish a Facebook page. This has been an invaluable tool for fostering two way communications with parents and educators and for advocating the value of Early Childhood Education.

Another factor highlighted in the survey was the lack of opportunity for our families to socialise. To help counteract this, once a month the kindergarten hosts a Chat & Chew afternoon. Families are encouraged to bring a plate of healthy food to share and to stay for about an hour after the end of the kindergarten session to enjoy a cup of tea and a chat while their children play. We have had a huge response- we even had to purchase more coffee mugs!

DESCRIBE FUTURE PLANS

1. *These awards can create opportunities even for those who do not win (eg networking, PR, reflective practice etc). What opportunities do you see for yourself as a result of being involved in the awards and how might you use these opportunities professionally? (max 200 words)*

To be nominated for the Rising Star Awards is a huge honour. For me, the award is recognition of the work I have put in so far and provides an amazing springboard for future growth.

Involvement in these awards has encouraged me to critically examine elements of my pedagogy and philosophy and to explore the skills I bring to the community. In completing this nomination form, I have had the chance to think about the impact that an Early Childhood Educator can have, not only on the life of a child, but on families and on the community at large.

Living and working in the country can be quite isolating, with limited opportunities to collaborate. Being involved in these awards provides an opportunity to network with inspirational educators across the country and share information with leaders in the sector.

Nomination in this award also offers my service an opportunity for advertising and public relations.

2. *What are your career/professional goals for the next 3-5 years? If you were to win the National Rising Star Award, what would you do with the prize (\$4000 One World for Children training grant and \$4000 professional development grant)? (max 200 words)*

Growing up in rural Victoria gave me an insight into the challenging but hugely rewarding pathway that is country education. I have a huge passion for working in regional areas, and intend to continue to do so for a long time yet.

A huge part of my philosophy is the idea of a community of life-long learners. I believe that the only way to refine your teaching practise is through ongoing professional development. I would relish the opportunity to develop my understanding of supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children to fully engage in education - winning a \$4000 training grant would help to provide me with this opportunity.

Over the next few years, I plan to continue teaching and I am considering the possibility of commencing a Masters of Educational Leadership with a specialisation in Early Childhood Education.