

THE COCKATOO ROOM CONVENTION

Listening helped a team at Macquarie University's Banksia Cottage make the lofty ideals of universal rights more meaningful to the specific children and families in their early years learning community. Educator **Leslie Braganza** explains how the project helped adults engage with these 'big ideas' as well.

Our project to consider what a child-rights focus might look like in our educational program began in 2019. As educators working with two-year-old children in the Cockatoo Room at Banksia Cottage, we were first interested to explore how we could encourage a culture of respect through our relationships with each other, and with the children. We also wanted to know how any changes to our practice would affect the children's behaviour.

We examined our current thinking, which emphasises respectful practices in our daily routines; in the Banksia Cottage philosophy, we value each child as a lifelong learner who has the right to actively contribute to our program and practice. We wanted to go further and unpack the respect for individual rights embedded in our practice, based on a shared belief in the importance of supporting the children to understand their rights and the rights of others, as equal members of society, starting from the early years. As we progressed through the year, we began to think deeply about how we could help educate the children more explicitly about the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (1989) and advocacy for their rights within it.

The result of this process came to be called 'The Cockatoo Room Convention on the Rights of the Child'. After listening to children, educators and families and taking their ideas on board, we created a new charter of rights, unique to the children in the Cockatoo Room community at that time. We hoped to encourage their meaningful engagement with these complex ideas by presenting them in a way that was specific to their experience.

Mine and yours

When we began listening to the children for the purposes of the project, we became more aware of the language they used to advocate for their rights in their everyday interactions with each other. We observed how they understood their rights, in relation to their own work, and how they communicated this to their peers. In one example, a child who had built a tower held out her hand and asked

her peers not to knock it down, saying, 'That's my work'. Another child showed his pride in his building by patting it gently. The children demonstrated that they understood they had the right to their own play and learning, and that others should not interfere with it.

Other conversations showed the children starting to understand their own physical needs and the right to have these met. For example, one child would state during nappy change that she wanted nappy rash cream. Another child learned how to express his need for space when he wanted to be alone. These and other examples became evident only once we were attuned to the children's unique voices.

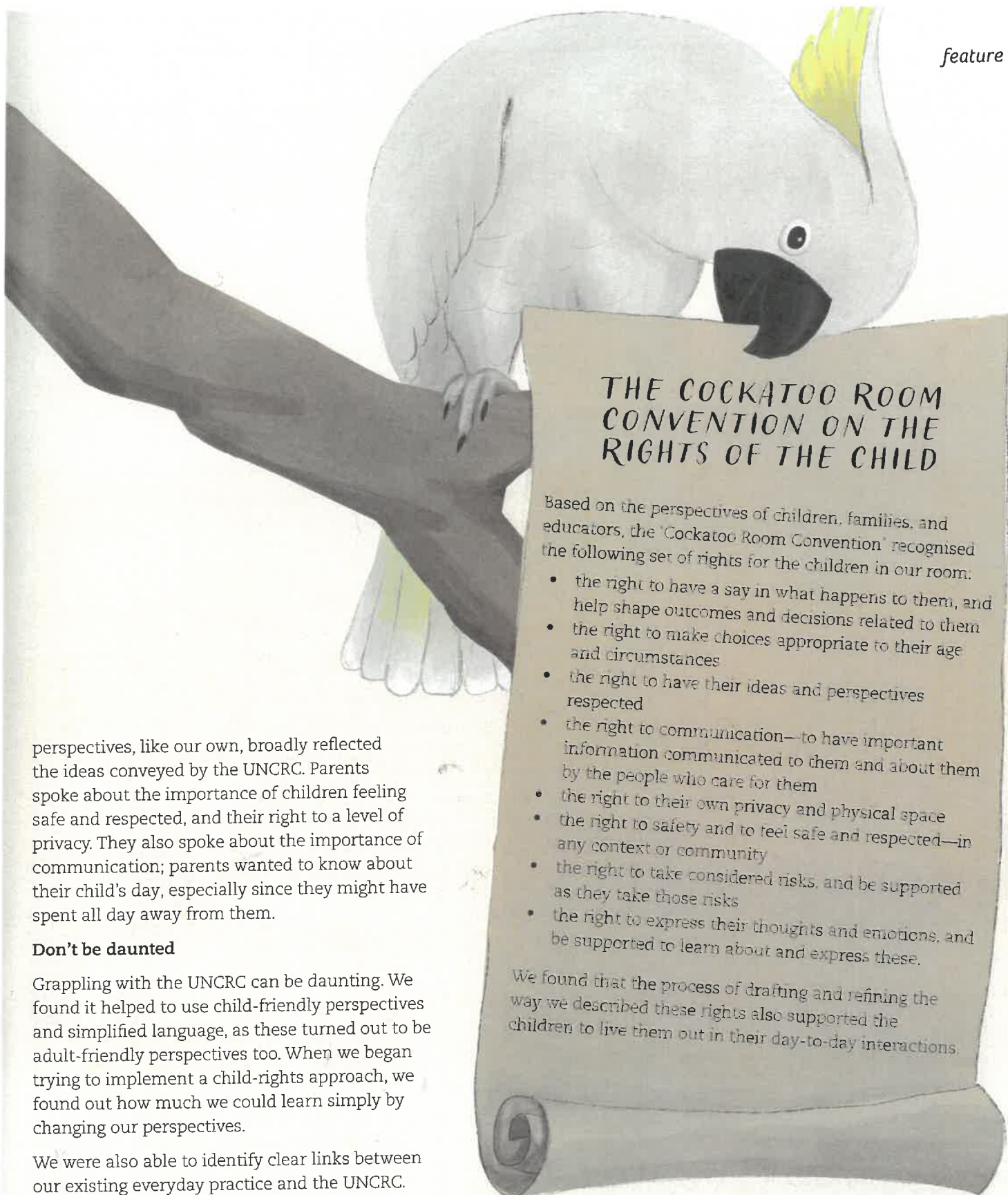
International ideas, local context

When we, as educators, examined our own ideas about children's rights, we found that many of our ideas mirrored those in the UNCRC articles. For example, one educator described the importance of respecting children's ideas and perspectives, just as Article 12 of the UNCRC describes the right of the child to express their views freely. Another of our priorities, on children's health and safety, echoes Article 3, which states that 'the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration', and the child's 'inherent right to life' set out in Article 6 (UNCRC, 1989).

We identified that overall, it was particularly important to provide choice and empower children. Through our discussions, we could see how our own ideas fit under the broader umbrella of children's rights, and were encouraged to continue our exploration of how rights, in our localised context, were situated in a global framework.

Widening the circle

We understood that family perspectives needed to be included in our discussions of children's rights, as families play a direct role in how children experience their rights. At one of three information nights we held during the year, we asked families to share their perspectives and which rights they valued the most. We found that many of the parents'



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Based on the perspectives of children, families, and educators, the 'Cockatoo Room Convention' recognised the following set of rights for the children in our room:

- the right to have a say in what happens to them, and help shape outcomes and decisions related to them
- the right to make choices appropriate to their age and circumstances
- the right to have their ideas and perspectives respected
- the right to communication—to have important information communicated to them and about them by the people who care for them
- the right to their own privacy and physical space
- the right to safety and to feel safe and respected—in any context or community
- the right to take considered risks, and be supported as they take those risks
- the right to express their thoughts and emotions, and be supported to learn about and express these.

We found that the process of drafting and refining the way we described these rights also supported the children to live them out in their day-to-day interactions.

perspectives, like our own, broadly reflected the ideas conveyed by the UNCRC. Parents spoke about the importance of children feeling safe and respected, and their right to a level of privacy. They also spoke about the importance of communication; parents wanted to know about their child's day, especially since they might have spent all day away from them.

Don't be daunted

Grappling with the UNCRC can be daunting. We found it helped to use child-friendly perspectives and simplified language, as these turned out to be adult-friendly perspectives too. When we began trying to implement a child-rights approach, we found out how much we could learn simply by changing our perspectives.

We were also able to identify clear links between our existing everyday practice and the UNCRC. Children, families and educators discovered that we can tackle big ideas together, when we turn them into small ideas that we all understand—an important realisation for the children as they continue to live and embody their rights every day, in their own unique ways.

Reference

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). (1989). <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>