

Elaine's stories

27 March

Written by: Louise

Elaine shuffled on her bottom from the block area into the main playroom and stopped just inside the open double doors. She sat still for a moment, then became engrossed in her own special hand movement.

I sat down in front of Elaine, mirrored Elaine's hand pattern with my hand and touched the palm of my hand to hers, then retracted it. Elaine transferred her gaze to my hand. Maintaining the V on my upheld hand, I began moving away from Elaine (shuffling backwards while sitting on the floor). Elaine followed after me, maintaining her focus on my hand. Elaine touched her hand to mine. I moved away again and Elaine followed, her eyes never losing contact with my hand.

While I moved back a third time, one of the children came up and announced morning teatime. Elaine and I were still mirroring our hand movements when I said to Elaine, "Haere ki te kai, Elaine." Elaine looked at me, clapped her hands together three times, and patted her chest twice. "You're ready for some kai? Come on, we'll wash our hands."

Parent's voice

At home time, when Phyllis came to collect Elaine, I relayed the learning story to her. Phyllis said, "I say that to her at home ('Haere ki te kai'), and she claps her hands and pats her chest."

Teacher's voice

I was really excited by this experience and felt a real connection with Elaine. Elaine will often become involved in self-stimulating behaviour, and this is the first time I've been able to break into the activity to achieve a response.

On previous occasions we have experienced reciprocal back patting – I've had Elaine in my arms to console her or carry her to another area, and I've patted her back, and she's patted my back in return. I was particularly surprised by her response to "Haere ki te kai" and immediately felt she was signing.

The experience has highlighted the importance of getting down to the child's level and following the child's lead.

Short-term review

- Elaine recognised and expressed interest in a familiar manual sign made by another person.
- Elaine was able to move towards something of interest.
- Elaine may understand some spoken language.
- Elaine may be using some manual signs to communicate.

What next?

- All working with Elaine to observe closely and look for other examples of manual signing, especially clapping and patting her chest.
- Provide opportunities for engagement with another person, using Elaine's own hand movement as ignition.

Early intervention team member's voice

At Elaine's IP meeting, the team discussed Elaine's communication skills. Elaine's caregiver shared that Elaine would often clap her hands when she was happy. The team agreed that they would focus on encouraging joint attention and establishing a reliable yes/no response.

I pointed out that this learning story illustrates an extension of a reliable yes/no response. There is joint attention but also, more significantly, there appears to be communicative intent. Elaine is telling us more than "yes"; she is also signalling that she wants morning tea.

9 October

Written by: Louise

Elaine shuffles on her bottom down to the bottom of the ramp where she stops and begins watching the children riding round the concrete on bikes and scooters. A teacher approaches, and Elaine starts to vocalise in a grizzly way. The teacher asks, "Do you want a ride on the trike, Elaine?" Jakob is riding past on the tandem trike - he has no passenger. The teacher speaks to Jakob: "Jakob, Elaine would like to have a ride on the new bike. Would you be the driver and let Elaine be your passenger?" Jakob pulls the bike up beside Elaine. The teacher helps Elaine into the passenger seat, and off they go. The teacher stays in close proximity. Elaine is observed clapping her hands and patting her chest.



Short-term review

- Elaine can move to different areas of the centre environment independently.
- Elaine expresses interest in what is happening in the environment.
- Elaine is willing to try new things.
- Elaine is using body language and personal signs.

What's happening here?

In the first story, Elaine's teacher documents the moment when she engages with Elaine and, by mirroring her hand movements, establishes a meaningful interaction. This breakthrough is a very exciting moment for the teacher. In the second story, she documents an extension of that communication. The two stories show Elaine reaching out to communicate with her teacher, using gesture, vocalisation, and eye contact.

What aspects of inclusive assessment does this exemplify?

The voices of Elaine and her teacher are sensitively reflected in these stories as the two interact. Several others also contribute, some within the exemplar:

- Elaine's parent, Phyllis, comments on the first story, saying that she knows Elaine can respond to "Haere ki te kai." When interviewed later, she adds that she "likes to see Elaine expressing herself in front of other people – that's improvement".
- The Interventionist reports on discussions and planning at Elaine's IP meeting.

Two contributions not seen in the actual exemplar are:

- A Māori psychologist working with Elaine says that Elaine's growing ability to express herself – to express her inner essence or *mauri* – is essential for her overall well-being and therefore very important from a Māori perspective.
- A speech-language therapist, reading the stories, says that she would call Elaine's attempts to communicate by clapping her hands and patting her chest "gesture", whereas the teacher calls them "manual" and "personal" "signs".

These examples of shared interpretations enrich the assessment and help to build up a community of inclusive practice.

How might this assessment contribute to this child's learning and development?

Both experiences documented here have important consequences for Elaine, particularly that described in the first story. What happens in that moment of communication is that Elaine's teacher starts *expecting to understand* what Elaine might wish to "say". Looking for what Elaine is telling her makes it much more likely that Elaine's messages will get through, as is apparent in the second assessment.

Documenting the breakthrough may help others to learn from it and to modify their practice – this is an example of an assessment that lifts expectations.

In the second assessment, the teacher describes how another teacher supports Elaine's desire to have a ride on the tandem bike by involving another child. She shares with other people in Elaine's learning community a simple way in which they are able to use a piece of equipment to help Elaine join other children in an activity. As a result of this documentation, others may be encouraged to find similar such opportunities.

What might this tell us about informal noticing, recognising, and responding in this place?

These assessments, especially the first one, describe the teacher noticing exactly what Elaine is doing and joining her at just that point. Recognising the opportunity for learning, the teacher responds and builds a meaningful interaction. In the first story, she tries an action she has never thought of before – just "being with" Elaine by copying what she is doing. The teacher holds back at this point and is careful not to impose herself. She finds that she can interact with Elaine by following her lead.