

Educator Resource Sheet

Based on: *Larry the laid back sunfish* – part of the ‘*On the reef*’ series of books
By Melanie Atkinson – published by PerthLight.com.au June 2026

Disclaimer

These educator notes are not official EYLF or EYFS guidelines. They are an informal discussion resource designed to support reflection and conversation when using the *On the Reef* books with children. Educators should always refer to the current EYLF and EYFS documents for accurate and authoritative guidance and use these notes only as a supplementary tool.

About the author

Melanie Atkinson is an early years educator based in Perth, Western Australia. She earned degrees in teaching and developmental psychology in the 1990s and has worked exclusively in the early learning sector ever since. Her work is based on the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF Version 2.0) and is grounded in a practical understanding of how young children develop emotional regulation, resilience, confidence, and social awareness through relationships, play, and everyday experiences.

Overview

This gentle read-along picture book is designed for children aged 2–5 years. It explores anxiety, overwhelm, self-regulation, and learning to remain calm when the world feels busy or confusing. Larry Sunfish sometimes feels worried when he cannot clearly see what is happening around him. Rather than becoming frightened or giving up, Larry learns to pause, take slow, deep breaths, look carefully around him, and make thoughtful choices.

Throughout the story, Larry demonstrates that calmness is not about avoiding challenges. Instead, children discover that slowing down can help them solve problems, build confidence, notice other people's needs, and enjoy friendships more fully. By the end of the story, Larry's calming strategy begins helping his classmates too, showing how positive emotional habits can spread naturally within a group.

The book supports early learning outcomes aligned with the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF Version 2.0) and the UK Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). It also reflects current Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches widely used internationally. Larry's journey encourages children to develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making through familiar preschool situations and gentle classroom guidance.



Theoretical Context

Larry the laid back sunfish reflects well-established understandings of emotional development and self-regulation during the preschool years.

Piaget described children aged 2–7 as being in the preoperational stage, where emotions, imagination, and immediate experiences strongly influence behaviour. Young children often become overwhelmed by busy environments because they are still developing the ability to organise information, manage uncertainty, and regulate emotional responses. Larry's experiences reflect this normal stage of development.

Vygotsky emphasised that children gradually develop self-regulation through supportive interactions with trusted adults and peers. Larry's breathing strategy begins as a personal way of calming himself but later becomes something his friends learn through observation and shared experience. This illustrates how children develop emotional skills within caring social relationships.

Current research places increasing importance on **co-regulation** as the foundation of **self-regulation**. Children first learn calming strategies through supportive relationships before gradually using those strategies independently. Larry demonstrates this progression throughout the story. His repeated breathing routine becomes an internal strategy that helps him think clearly, solve problems, and confidently participate with his friends.

Research into executive functioning also supports the themes in the story. Skills such as attention control, emotional regulation, flexible thinking, and thoughtful decision-making continue developing rapidly throughout the preschool years. Larry's habit of stopping, breathing, looking around, and thinking carefully demonstrates age-appropriate executive functioning skills in a practical, memorable way.

The story also reflects current Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks, including CASEL's five competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

These ideas align closely with both the EYLF and EYFS, which emphasise children's emotional wellbeing, resilience, confidence, communication, and learning within supportive relationships.



About the EYLF (Australia)

Larry the laid back sunfish connects especially well with:

Outcome 1.1

Children feel safe, secure, and supported.

Outcome 1.2

Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience, and agency.

Outcome 3.1

Children become strong in their social, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Outcome 3.2

Children become aware of their own feelings and the feelings of others.

Outcome 3.3

Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety.

These outcomes are reflected through Larry learning calming strategies, developing confidence, recognising the needs of others, and making thoughtful decisions during everyday play.



About the EYFS (UK)

This story supports development across two of the prime areas of learning.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)

Children explore emotional regulation, resilience, confidence, and recognising feelings of worry or overwhelm. Larry models practical calming strategies that help children participate confidently in social situations.

Communication and Language

The story encourages children to talk about emotions, describe what helps them feel calm, and develop language for problem-solving, empathy, and supportive friendships.



Suggested Discussion Prompts

Use these questions to encourage reflection and conversation.

- Why did Larry keep getting lost?
- What helped Larry begin to feel calm?
- How did taking a deep breath help Larry?
- Why did Larry apologise to Mr Clam?
- What happened when Max tried Larry's calming strategy?
- What helps you feel calm when things feel busy?



Extension Activities



Activity 1: Calm Bubble Breathing

Theme: Self-regulation

Children slowly pretend to blow large bubbles, breathing in through their nose and breathing out gently through their mouth. Encourage children to notice how their bodies feel before and after each breath.

Prompt:

"Breathe and be calm."

Activity 2: Reef Look Around

Theme: Mindfulness

Invite children to slowly look around the classroom and quietly find five different colours, three shapes, or two interesting objects. Discuss how slowing down helps us notice more.

Activity 3: Calm Shell Stacks

Theme: Patience and concentration

Children carefully build shell or block towers while practising slow breathing between each piece. Compare rushing with slowing down and noticing balance.

Connection:

"Larry looked all around before making his next choice."

Activity 4: Calm Helpers

Theme: Peer wellbeing

Children role-play situations where a friend feels worried or overwhelmed. Practise offering calm support using phrases such as:

- "Would you like to take a breath with me?"
- "Let's slow down."
- "Let's have a look around."
- "You're OK."

Parent and Carer Summary: Supporting Children Through Worry, Overwhelm and Self-Regulation

This story explores anxiety, overwhelm, self-regulation, and learning to remain calm in busy environments. Young children sometimes become overwhelmed by noise, movement, uncertainty, or unfamiliar situations because they are still developing the skills needed to manage their emotions and attention.

Support strategies:

Use everyday moments to practise slowing down together. You might say:

- "Let's take a deep breath."
- "Let's stop and have a look around."
- "Would you like to slow down together?"

Help children notice how their bodies feel when they are worried and when they are calm.

Model calming strategies during everyday routines rather than only during difficult moments. Children learn emotional regulation through repeated shared experiences.

Praise thoughtful decisions:

- "You stopped and thought carefully."
- "You stayed calm."
- "You worked out what to do."

Helping children develop these early self-regulation skills supports confidence, resilience, emotional wellbeing, empathy, and positive peer relationships throughout life.

Emotional Learning Activities for the Early Years Classroom

Activity 1: Calm Reef Pause

Theme: Mindfulness

During transitions, invite children to stop, take one slow breath, quietly look around the room, and notice one thing they had not seen before.

Activity 2: Breathe Like Larry

Theme: Emotional regulation

Practise Larry's calming strategy throughout the day by saying together:

"Breathe and be calm."

Gradually encourage children to begin using the strategy independently.

Activity 3: Busy Reef, Calm Reef

Theme: Recognising body signals

Discuss the difference between feeling busy and feeling calm. Invite children to describe how each feels in their body through movement, drawing, or discussion.

Activity 4: Calm Choices Wall

Theme: Thoughtful decision-making

Create a classroom display where children add examples of calm choices they made during the week, such as:

- taking a breath
- asking for help
- slowing down
- noticing a friend's feelings
- solving a problem calmly



Educator Tips

- Reinforce that feeling worried or overwhelmed is a normal part of childhood.
- Model calm breathing and reflective language during everyday routines.
- Encourage children to notice how their bodies feel before and after calming strategies.
- Praise thoughtful choices rather than simply praising outcomes.
- Support co-regulation before expecting independent self-regulation.
- Use open-ended reflection prompts such as:
 - "What helped Larry feel calm?"
 - "How did stopping help him think?"
 - "What helped Max's shell stack stay up?"

Larry's story demonstrates that calmness is a skill children gradually learn through practice, encouragement, and supportive relationships. By slowing down, noticing what is happening around them, and making thoughtful choices, children build confidence that extends well beyond the classroom.