

Educator Resource Sheet

Based on: **Shelly the record setting crab** - part of the 'On the Reef' series of books
By *Melanie Atkinson* - published by *PerthLight.com.au* November 2025

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 latest Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF Version 2.0) and is grounded in a deep understanding of how young children grow, learn, and make sense of their emotions.

Overview

This gentle read-along picture book is designed for children aged 2–5 years. It explores themes of **boundary-setting**, **bodily autonomy**, and **assertive communication**. Shelly's story supports children in learning that they have the right to say "no" to unwanted touch or actions, and models how friends can respond respectfully. It also encourages **empathy**, **peer understanding**, **problem-solving**, and introduces **early numeracy through counting to ten**, supporting number sense alongside social and emotional learning.

The book supports early learning outcomes aligned with the **Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF Version 2.0)** and the **UK's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**. It also reflects current **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** research widely used in the **United States**. In particular, Shelly's journey gives children opportunities to practise the five core SEL competencies identified by the **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making**. By embedding these principles in the narrative, the story helps children develop **confidence**, **respect for others**, and a strong sense of **personal safety**.

Theoretical Context

Shelly's story is grounded in well-established theories of child development. Piaget described children aged 2–7 as being in the preoperational stage, when they are beginning to assert independence and test boundaries through symbolic play, early number concepts, and social interaction. Shelly's determination to keep her shell reflects this developmental task of building autonomy while navigating relationships with others, while the counting to ten woven into the story supports the development of symbolic thinking and early numeracy.

Vygotsky emphasised the role of social interaction in learning, with growth taking place in the zone of proximal development when peers and trusted adults provide support. In Shelly's story, encouragement from friends and guidance from Miss Coral demonstrate how respectful scaffolding helps children to assert boundaries while still feeling part of a group. Erikson's early childhood stages, reframed in contemporary practice, also highlight the importance of autonomy and initiative. Children thrive when they are given safe opportunities to make choices, express ownership, and see those choices respected.

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth, also highlights the importance of secure, trusting relationships with adults, which are modelled in the story through Miss Coral's consistent support and guidance.

Contemporary research extends these insights. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory shows that children learn autonomy and consent within family, peer, and community contexts. Bandura's social learning theory demonstrates that children model what they see, and Shelly's peers provide examples of kindness and respect. Current SEL frameworks, particularly CASEL's five competencies, are also visible throughout the story. Shelly's journey fosters self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, while supporting children in developing resilience, confidence, and empathy.

These perspectives align with the EYLF and EYFS, which both emphasise play-based, child-led learning within supportive environments. Shelly provides an open-ended narrative framework in which children can explore body autonomy, boundaries, and peer respect at their own developmental level, while being guided by safe, caring relationships.

About the EYLF (Australia)

Shelly the record setting crab 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 and emotional and mental wellbeing.
- **Outcome 3.3** – Children are aware of and develop strategies to support their own mental and physical health and personal safety.
- **Outcome 5.4** – Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work.

These outcomes are reflected in Shelly's journey of asserting ownership over her shell, learning to express boundaries, and building confidence in respectful peer interactions, while also engaging in early numeracy through counting to ten.

About the EYFS (UK)

This story supports development in two of the prime areas, with additional links to mathematics:

- **Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)** – Children learn to set boundaries, respect the boundaries of others, and practise consent-based play that supports self-confidence and wellbeing.
- **Communication and Language** – The narrative encourages listening, understanding, and using confident, respectful words to express needs and respond to peers.
- **Mathematics** – Counting to ten within the story supports children's number sense, one-to-one correspondence, and use of mathematical language in everyday contexts.



Suggested Discussion Prompts

Use these questions to encourage reflection and discussion:

- How did Shelly feel when Meemee tried to take her shell?
 - What did Miss Coral tell Shelly about saying no?
 - How can we check if our friends are okay with something before we do it?
 - What makes you feel safe?
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Extension Activities

- **Role-play “Ask First” games** – Practise asking permission before borrowing toys, giving hugs, or joining play.
 - **Safety Network Poster** – Children draw or add photos of 5 trusted adults they can talk to.
 - **Feelings Sorting Game** – Match facial expressions or body language pictures to “comfortable” and “uncomfortable” feelings.
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Parent and Carer Summary: Supporting Your Child Through Boundaries and Bodily Autonomy

This story explores boundary-setting and the early stages of bodily autonomy. Children aged 2–5 may not yet have the words to express discomfort or hesitation, but they often feel it in their bodies. Learning to speak up and say “no” assertively is an essential foundation for protective behaviours and emotional safety.

Support strategies:

- Use everyday moments to support your child’s sense of bodily autonomy. For example, you might say, “You don’t have to give a hug if you don’t want to,” or “It’s OK to say no if something doesn’t feel right.” “Would you like a hug, a high five or a wave?”
- Help your child recognise safe people in their network, including trusted adults at home and in care. Reinforce that their voice matters: “I’m glad you told me,” or “Thanks for speaking up.”
- Encourage children to notice how others respond to boundaries. Model respectful behaviour with phrases like, “Let’s ask first,” or “They said no, so we’ll listen and respect that.” Support peer interactions that involve turn-taking, asking permission, and checking in: “Is it OK if I play too?” or “Would you like a turn next?” or “Would you like a hug?”
- Helping children to feel truly seen lays the foundation for a positive learning outlook, growth mindset and strong emotional resilience.

Emotional Learning Activities for the Early Years Classroom

Activity 1: Permission Pebbles

Theme: Asking before acting

- Decorate smooth pebbles with “yes” on one side and “no” on the other.
- Use in role-play to practise giving and receiving permission.

Activity 2: My Shell, My Space

Theme: Personal boundaries

- Children decorate paper shells and decide what’s allowed “inside” their shell. Discuss how we can protect our space and respect others’ spaces.

Activity 3: Starfish Breathing

Theme: Self-regulation

- Trace around your fingers like a starfish: breathe in going up, breathe out going down.
- Repeat to calm when feeling pressured or upset.

Activity 4: Kind Words Coral

Theme: Assertive communication

- Build a paper coral reef where children add phrases like “No, thank you” or “I don’t like that” on coloured strips.

Educator Tips

- Reinforce the idea that saying “no” can be kind, respectful, and important.
- Model asking for consent in everyday routines.
- Praise children when they use confident words or respect a peer’s boundary.
- How can we check if our friend wants a hug or wants to play before we start?
- Would you like a hug, a high five or a wave?

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