



Explore & Develop Practice & Pedagogy Tour

Staying connected without losing identity

How Explore & Develop balances independence
and alignment across its dispersed network

CASE STUDY • EARLY CHILDHOOD • NETWORK ENGAGEMENT

Our partnership

Insync helps organisations listen, learn and act with confidence. For over 25 years, we've partnered with organisations across Australia — including education providers — to measure the experiences that matter most and turn insight into real, lasting change.

Our work with Explore & Develop began in 2023, delivering structured surveys across their network of independently owned early childhood services to help leaders understand how their people experience connection, culture and leadership.

This case study draws on conversations with Belinda Ludlow, CEO at the Explore & Develop support office, and two owner-operators: Belinda Barnes of Explore & Develop Leichhardt and Sally Liebke of Explore & Develop Freshwater.

Connection in early childhood: More than proximity

In early childhood education, connection is everything. It shapes the experiences of children and families, and of leaders and educators.

For distributed education networks, however, maintaining connections may be difficult. Geography, service size, leadership style and local community context all introduce layers of complexity. Local services should be empowered to respond meaningfully to their individual, diverse communities, an important marker of quality in early learning.

So, how do you maintain a shared identity and consistent quality without enforcing uniformity?

A network built on independence and shared purpose

Explore & Develop, a network of independently owned and operated services across NSW and the ACT, occupies a distinctive place in the early childhood landscape.

Each service is led by an owner-operator who works on-site and tailors it to their own community. At the same time, all services are united by shared values: Ethical practice, Collaboration, and Excellence, and a collective purpose of giving children the best start in life.

Founder Jenny Mays describes the model as offering:

“The best of both worlds — a small, community-minded service, backed by the resources of a larger organisation.”

To allow this independence while maintaining a strong, cohesive brand, connection across the network must be intentionally designed. Explore & Develop's experience shows how it can be achieved and maintained through shared values and open communication.

Support, not control: A different kind of central structure

A defining feature of the network is its ‘support office’, intentionally not called a head office.

As CEO, Belinda Ludlow explains, this distinction reflects philosophy as much as structure. The role of the support office is to enable, connect and empower owners, not to control them.

That distinction matters in practice.

Over time, owners build strong relationships across the network, knowing who to call for expertise, support or perspective, reducing isolation and strengthening collective capability.

"I wouldn't do this without the support of Explore & Develop. The collective group knowledge is just so valuable."

Belinda Barnes, Co-owner, Explore & Develop Leichhardt

"Everyone is very open about sharing their wins and challenges which makes it easy to seek support from other franchisees; I feel comfortable in picking up the phone to talk things through or gain another perspective."

Sally Liebke, Owner, Explore & Develop Freshwater

Designing connection across a dispersed network

From an engagement perspective, this openness signals something deeper than collegiality. It reflects psychological safety, the confidence to share uncertainty without fear of judgement.

In independent business models, leadership isolation is a genuine risk factor. Explore & Develop counters this by intentionally designing for connection, shifting from informal, ad hoc interactions to a more consistent, structured approach.

Connection across the network is reinforced through multiple, layered touchpoints:

01

Owner meetings

Regular gatherings that sustain relationships and create shared understanding across the network.

02

Role-specific forums

Dedicated spaces for Educational Leaders and Nominated Supervisors to connect and share practice.

03

Shared platforms

Communication tools that keep owners and teams connected between in-person touchpoints.

04

Operations support

Dedicated Operations Support Managers providing ongoing, on-the-ground guidance to owners.

05

Professional development

A varied PD calendar offering opportunities that would be difficult to organise independently.

06

Annual events

Conferences, practice tours and events that strengthen connection and inspire ideas across services.

These are not symbolic gestures; they are consistent mechanisms that sustain relationships over time and create shared understanding across the network.

Learning together: The power of shared practice

Professional development is one tangible outcome of this connected model.

Belinda Barnes describes the PD calendar as varied and valuable, offering opportunities that would be difficult to organise independently. Sally Liebke reflects that seeing innovative practices across the group inspires her team to try new ideas within their own service.

Ideas flow horizontally, not just from the centre outward, strengthening practice across the entire network and creating a culture where knowledge is shared, not held.

Shared identity without sameness

Crucially, shared identity in this network is anchored in values rather than uniformity.

Belinda Ludlow cautions against the assumption that high-quality practice must look identical everywhere. In fact, genuinely child-led practice should look different across regions and communities.

At a local level, this plays out in meaningful ways.

“Shared identity doesn’t mean services have to look the same — team culture differs, but our values and goals remain aligned.”

Sally Liebke, Owner, Explore & Develop Freshwater

“We’re known for kindness, strong relationships and a holistic approach. We see ourselves as part of the community, supporting the whole family, not just the children.”

Belinda Barnes, Co-owner, Explore & Develop Leichhardt

This clarity around what is non-negotiable - core values, ethical standards and mandatory policies - combined with flexibility in execution, is a critical balancing act.

Explore & Develop’s model demonstrates that consistency of purpose is the key to allowing individual services to remain authentic while still aligned.



Listening at scale: The role of insight

Sustaining alignment across a dispersed network requires more than intention; it requires structured listening.

Rather than relying solely on informal impressions of morale, Explore & Develop has partnered with Insync since 2023 to gather regular, structured feedback across the network.

The Insync survey provides an objective lens on engagement, alignment and leadership experience, helping both support office and service owners:

- Identify strengths
- Surface emerging risks
- Guide meaningful conversations

This has supported a shift from assumption to insight, enabling leaders to make decisions based on evidence rather than anecdote, and strengthening shared accountability across the network.

The insights are considered alongside everyday indicators such as participation, collaboration and peer recognition.

When franchisees feel safe raising challenges and seeking different perspectives, Belinda Ludlow sees this as a strong signal of alignment, reinforced when leaders have clear visibility into how their people are experiencing the network.

Independence and connection: Working together

The result is a model where independence and connection reinforce each other.

Owners retain the autonomy to build services that reflect their communities, while benefiting from shared expertise, structured support and a strong sense of belonging.

Across the network, this has supported a shift towards more proactive leadership, in which emerging challenges are identified earlier and addressed collectively rather than in isolation.

For other early childhood organisations navigating similar challenges, several lessons emerge:

01

Connection doesn't happen by chance
It must be intentionally designed with consistent structures, forums and touchpoints across the network

02

Shared values must be clearly articulated
Values that are consistently reinforced create the foundation for alignment without uniformity

03

Psychological safety should be actively cultivated
The confidence to share uncertainty without fear of judgement is a core feature of a high-performing network

04

Engagement should be measured, not assumed
Structured listening tools replace anecdote with evidence, enabling proactive leadership

A network that feels connected

Explore & Develop demonstrates that it is possible to build a dispersed network that feels cohesive, not by making every service identical, but by ensuring that every service feels supported, heard, and aligned around a common purpose.

Through its partnership with Insync, that connection is not only nurtured - it is visible, measurable and continually strengthened.

At its core, this is what makes the model work. Not just the structures, systems, or tools, but the intentional focus on people, relationships, and shared purpose. In a sector where connection underpins quality, that focus is not an added extra. It is essential.



About Insync

Early childhood education runs on connection — between children and educators, between leaders and their teams, and across the networks that hold it all together. At Insync, we partner with education providers to measure what matters most: how people experience leadership, culture and belonging in their organisation.

Our work with Explore & Develop shows what becomes possible when structured listening replaces assumption. When leaders have clear, evidence-based insight into how their network is functioning, they can act with confidence — strengthening alignment, reducing isolation and building the kind of culture where people want to stay.

Because in a sector built on relationships, the quality of the learning environment starts with the quality of the experience for the people who create it.

