EVERY Child

Australia's premier national early childhood magazine

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Male primary school teachers

Understanding childhood obesity

Who is the boss of normal?
A response to the
'two mums' on *Play School*

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Passionate members of
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Closing the investment gap

With a Federal election around the corner, families, child wellbeing, childhood obesity, child care and education are all hot political topics.

As in previous elections, the family is a major focus - with baby bonuses, one-off family payments, increased child care places and new reading schemes as election sweeteners. While new places are welcome, I do wonder how quickly the 40,000 promised out-of-school care places will become realities, given the infrastructure needed to support such expansion.

And it was disappointing that Labor abandoned the idea of providing a publicly-funded preschool place for all children in the year before school.

Not mentioned has been the issue of staff qualifications, pay and conditions. These are the heart of quality in early childhood education and care, yet the most difficult to tackle.

Imagine the scandal if one-third of staff in primary schools had no relevant qualification. The fact is - that's the situation in child care. Few staff have a degree level qualification and many have no qualification at all. The bulk of staff have a one- or two-year certificate or diploma level qualification.

Issues of staff qualifications are closely linked to quality. US and UK research is unequivocal about this. Poor staff qualifications, high turnover and shortages have a serious impact on continuity of experience and quality outcomes for children in early childhood services, just as they do in schools. Elaborated interactions that result in the best learning and development are closely linked to staff qualifications.

The question of what qualifications are appropriate for persons providing care and education for young children is yet to be decided. We've talked around the issue for decades with no resolution. What we've ended up with is a two- or three-tiered system that perpetuates the traditional 'care' versus 'education' divide. There are no nationally agreed qualification guidelines, standards or frameworks; no plan to include early childhood teachers in the new *The National Institute Quality Teaching and School Leadership;* and no alternative body.

Lack of agreement is understandable given the multitude of government bodies, licensing and regulatory authorities, terminology, unions and industrial awards that cover early childhood education and care; not to mention the territorial claims of some early childhood sectors. Lack of a national uniform school starting age and the Commonwealth – State divide over funding early childhood services exacerbate the problem. The recent Australian Education Union *Preschool Education Review* emphasised the problem at the preschool/kindergarten level. Some states provide publicly-funded preschool education in the year before school, some don't. Some children have more than a year of preschool, some have less; some have several years of preschool and child care, some have nothing. Some preschool education is free, some is not. Preschool (kindergarten) costs range from virtually nothing to a staggering $35-50 per day.

Not surprisingly, many children miss out on early childhood education and care. Australian Bureau of Statistics data for 2002 show that about 83 per cent of four-year-old children and 64 per cent of three-year olds attended centre-based early childhood education and care, and most for only a few hours.

That many Australian children don't have any early educational experiences is worrying, given that good early childhood education is important to later educational success, especially for the most vulnerable children. Despite evidence of the positive impact of quality experiences on outcomes, there is no universal commitment to provide all children with quality early education experiences. The investment gap between rhetoric and reality is huge.

Let's hope policy promises in this current election will finally commit our community to public funding of quality education and care for all children in the years before school, quality staffing and commensurate remuneration, and greater uniformity of preschool education and care experiences to 'make a difference'.

This issue of *Every Child* focuses on 'making a difference'. It contains articles that highlight current issues in early education that 'make a difference', including some that have been controversial in recent months. Boys' education, childen in detention, the debate about whether the ABC's *Play School* should depict real family models or some idealised notion of the family, and the issue of childhood obesity have all been in the news.

Lyndsay Connors' guest statement on the importance of public education is timely. Let's hope there will one day be similar commitment and support for publicly-funded early childhood services. But a recent report called *Do Australians want a private welfare state? Are they getting one anyway?* using data from the 2003 *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* shows that while 34 per cent of Australians believed child care should be provided by the Government, 30 per cent preferred private providers, and 27 per cent believed it should be provided by children's families.

Alison Elliott

Guest Statement

Sharing the responsibility for early learning

We used to think that education began and ended at the school gate. We now understand that learning is an integral part of children's development—that life, for young children, is one steep learning curve. At the heart of this development are children's relationships—with their families, carers, teachers and each other.

Strong relationships are the key to effectively supporting young children's development at all levels. In NSW and Australia more broadly, supporting early childhood education requires collaboration among local, state and federal government agencies. There are ongoing debates about the best framework for the delivery of services for young children, but the integrated nature of early child development will demand co-operation between people, regardless of the structures they work within.

At the local level, a partnership approach is the best way of ensuring that children get a strong start at school. In the past, early childhood professionals outside the school setting have not always seen eye-to-eye with their colleagues inside the classroom. The best of intentions on all sides have fuelled sometimes heated disputes about what and how children do and should learn.

Robust debates can, however, lay the foundation for firm friendships. One of the important outcomes of the NSW Public Education Council's forum on early childhood education last year was a broad consensus on the importance of the early years to later health and wellbeing, and on the implications of this knowledge for supporting children's early learning.

A primary focus of the forum was transition to school. Questions related to transition have received considerable attention in Australia and overseas, with lots of discussion among parents, carers and teachers about what makes children 'ready for school'. At the forum, we were fortunate to have a presentation on transition to school by well-respected early childhood academic Sue Dockett. More important than asking whether children are 'ready' for school, argued Sue, is asking to what extent schools are ready for their children?

For schools to be ready for the next group of young children, they have to know something about them. This is not something schools can achieve alone. One of the best ways we can support children through the transition to school is by developing and supporting strong relationships between teachers of children in their first year at school, parents and early childhood educators.

This is easier said than done. Relationships take time and time is a resource in chronically short supply. Money can buy time, but there often isn't much money to spare in early childhood or school settings either. Nonetheless, collaborative planning and consultation between the adults most important in young children's lives delivers immense benefits, not only through information sharing but through the promotion of joint understandings about curricula and pedagogy.

Strong and trusting relationships between parents, early childhood professionals and teachers are also the best way of ensuring that children's individual needs are met as they make the transition to school. Making a difference for individual children does not always mean taking the actions that our neighbours, acquaintances or the popular press might suggest.

Take, for example, the issue of school readiness for boys. Anecdotal evidence indicates that significant numbers of parents are delaying their sons' entry to school in the belief that they will fare better with an extra year of maturity. This may be true in some cases, but it is equally important to remember that age is not an absolute indicator for school success; younger children who meet age eligibility criteria for school can benefit greatly from attending; and that in some cases, starting school 'early' may be the best developmental option for a child. Good communication will make all the difference to telling which is which.

Children are born 'wired for feelings and ready to learn' (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Given the significance of early childhood experiences to long-term educational, social and economic outcomes, it is the shared responsibility of parents, carers, teachers, communities and governments to help them do well what they do naturally.

Lyndsay Connors
Chair, NSW Public Education Council

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Feature

WHO IS THE BOSS OF NORMAL?

Let's focus on what's important to children

A response to the recent 'two mums' *Play School* controversy

Recently, a mini-tornado of media furore erupted when an episode of ABC's *Play School* showed children going to a park with 'two mums'. Adults argued whether the representation of a lesbian couple on children's television was a good thing or not. I wonder how many children were upset, or even noticed, without the adults in their lives drawing attention to the features of the episode that either peeved or pleased them. I didn't see the episode myself, but presume that the people concerned were depicted as having a good time. Surely this is what is *most* important to children—having and maintaining positive and caring relationships with the adults in their lives? Surely we all want our children to see loving relationships between them and their families represented? Surely, how the family is constructed must come second, after love and care?

The way we represent people, in our media images, words or hidden messages, can create the images that come to stand in for people, groups and categories. Our images provide ways of describing, regarding and thinking about groups. They may affect how the members view themselves and experience the social world around them. Public representation has the power to select, arrange and prioritise assumptions and ideas about different types of people to idealise or demonise them – resulting in positive or negative social images (Pickering, 2001). Do critics of this episode—who saw two mums represented as happy caring parents—really want the smiling children to feel that their mums represent a marginalised, negative sector of our society? We want citizens of Australia to grow up in happy, safe families. These happy young citizens will become tolerant, productive adults. If their parents are demonised by our society, they may have less than happy experiences from which to draw as adults. In Canada last year, a kindergarten teacher felt so strongly about same-sex families being represented in books in his classroom, that, in order to validate the children of these families, he went to the Supreme Court to oppose a ban by his school board. He won the case and has just been awarded the Canadian Library Association *Award for the Advancement of Intellectual Freedom in Canada* (Butcher, 2003).

"What is normal and who decides this? If we cannot represent the vast range of real people's 'normalities' in family pattern and daily realities, what else can't we represent as normal to children?

A representative of the Australian Family Association is reported (Mariner, 2004) to have said that taxpayers deserve to know that their two- and three-year olds 'should be able to get some basic learning skills without political indoctrination being rammed down their throats'. I wonder how many two-year olds felt 'rammed' if no adult became infuriated? I would suggest that those two- and three-year olds, whose taxpayer parents live in same sex relationships, also deserve to see themselves represented in a way that is familiar and meaningful to them from time to time. I suggest that they deserve their friends to see their family structure represented too. Could it possibly be that the 'two mums' were representing another very familiar pattern in Australian life and were a birth mother and a step-mother sharing happy time with children? What is normal and who decides this? If we cannot represent the vast range of real people's 'normalities' in family pattern and daily realities, what else can't we represent as normal to children? There aren't a majority of Australian children who have Spina Bifida. Should we not show them on television in case we upset someone? There aren't a majority of Aboriginal children in Australia. There aren't a majority of visibly Muslim girls in Australia. Should we give all these children the message that their lives are not 'normal' (and by that very definition 'less than normal' or 'deviant')? No, we should not. Thankfully, we have moved past these days and have realised that it is important to represent the real and present diversity in our lives, so that each one of us can feel valued by seeing ourselves represented as actually existing in this world. Thankfully, we have realised how important it is to human beings to see ourselves represented.

Tony Abbott, our Health Minister, was reported (Houlihan, 2004) as saying that when he watched *Play School* with his children 'that kind of thing didn't seem to be a part of it'. Yes Tony, the world *is* changing—and our only certainty is complexity and change. We all view the media from our own perspective. Families are now more open about telling the world what was often hidden in the past. Adults are constructing their relationships with other adults more honestly and openly than in the past (who didn't have two mysterious old 'aunties' or family friends who lived together into old age?). As our perspectives will invariably be different, what we need to focus on is the

Deborah Mailman and Jay Laga'aia on set Photo: Australian Broadcasting Corporation

messages we give to children about love, care and positive relationships. If we focus on our children, we will give them messages that loving and caring promote health and wellbeing (a Minister for Health would surely agree that this is a good thing?). If we focus on our adult biases, we will give messages that some people are 'good' ('normal' – like me – do what I see as valuable), and some people are 'bad' (less than normal – not like me – are different to what I value, do things I don't like, live their life in a way that is not comfortable for me). Young children of two and three are very open to diversity until others (peers and adults) begin to corrupt their thinking. Let's help them to maintain a broad perspective on what is 'OK' so that they grow up to value the richness of life that diversity brings. Let's try to ensure that, as teenagers, they don't engage in the hurtful words and practices that can make 'the children of lesbians [migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, gay people, old people, Indigenous people, single parents, parents with green hair, parents who live in messy houses, parents who work, parents who don't work, parents who garden, parents who don't garden, parents who dance funny etc.] become isolated and lonely in their difference' (Dyson, 2004).

Pickering (2001) refers to the politics of 'normalising' as the 'sociology of censure'. He points out how powerful concepts (and the words that represent them) are. In an historical sense, 'normality appears to have emerged as a social and political state in the early nineteenth century when it ceased to be an ordinary healthy state of being and became a purified state for which we should strive, that represented progress… Normality displaced human nature, a key conception of the Enlightenment, and became the desired goal of social progress. The peculiar power of the word "normal" arises from its conflation of how things are and how they ought to be' (p.175).

Norms can be what is usual or typical, but in an ethical sense, norms comprise the ethical constraints of the 'shoulds' and 'oughts'. This aligns fact and value, 'is' and 'ought'. Therefore, Pickering points out, aspiration becomes tied to being average. Hence, the power of 'normality' as a concept.

As our country, our communities, our families and our children are growing up, we still have opportunities for our value systems to grow and become enriched. If ever we have the need or the opportunity to think of, define, or make our decisions based on a concept of what is normal, as citizens who value the richness, diversity and complexity of the human condition, let's tell our children, in words and actions, that what is normal encompasses endless variations on the wonderful human condition.

Congratulations *Play School* for using my eight cents to help children feel good about their lives, their relationships and those of their friends. Keep it up.

Dr Linda Newman
Senior lecturer in Education
University of Western Sydney

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Popular *Play School* exhibition hits the road

Ten Australian cities and towns are being invited to open wide and come inside to *Hickory Dickory Dock* — a travelling National Museum of Australia exhibition exploring the changing face of *Play School.*

***Hickory Dickory Dock* centres around iconic props donated to the National Museum after a set redesign on *Play School,* which this year clocks up 38 years on Australian television. The exhibition peeks behind the scenes and celebrates some of *Play School's* regular educational features – telling the time and exploring the outside world through the famous arch, round and square windows.**

Developed with the assistance of the ABC and the support of Visions Australia, *Hickory Dickory Dock* is on show in 2004 at: Shepparton Art Gallery, 4 June -11 July; Museum of the Riverina, Wagga, 16 July - 29 August; Museum of Early Childhood, Edith Cowan University, Perth, 9 September - 15 December. The 2005 venues are: Chinchilla White Gums Gallery; National Wool Museum, Geelong; Cobb & Co Branch, Queensland Museum, Toowoomba; Queen Victoria Art Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston. The 2006 venues are: Albury Regional Museum; Global Arts Link, Ipswich; and the Goldfields Arts Centre, Kalgoorlie.

Utopia Homelands School

a family affair

You would think that a place called 'Utopia' should have something positive going for it. With regard to the Utopia Homelands School, located in the remote Sandover River region of the Northern Territory, it most certainly does. Having spent two periods of time as the school's principal, the tale of Utopia Homelands is a good news story, and one worth sharing.

But first of all, what is Utopia's history?

Utopia Station was named in the 1920s by the Kunoth brothers, who were among the first non-Indigenous settlers to take up pastoral leases in the north-eastern desert region of Central Australia. Prior to taking up the lease, the two brothers had traversed this region as artesian bore drillers. They criss-crossed the traditional homelands of *Anmatyerr* and *Alyawarr* people, sinking bores and searching for water that would enable them to establish a cattle station. Not surprisingly, they found water along the course of the Sandover River system and in close proximity to where Aboriginal people had probably been camping for thousands of years.

At this time, the Indigenous population of the region had largely never encountered 'white fellas' before and were ignorant of the fact that the government had annexed their homelands into large rectangular parcels of land to be used for the cattle industry. They were still living as their ancestors had done before them. *Anmatyerr* and *Alyawarr* people were grouped in small extended family groups around water holes and soakages that were dug in the usually dry Sandover River. From these camps, they led a subsistence lifestyle that consisted of hunting and gathering food that was seasonally available on their traditional homelands. Up to this point, their movements within the region were dictated by the seasons, the availability of water and by ceremonial responsibilities. From the 1920s onwards, until the end of the early 1970s, their movements were subject to the directives of the Northern Territory Administration Welfare Branch and to those of the pastoral leaseholders. For fifty years, the backbreaking work of establishing cattle stations in the Sandover River region relied on unpaid Aboriginal labour.

Utopia Homelands School – the beginnings

In the 1950s, Welfare Branch schools had been established on cattle stations throughout the Northern Territory. After protracted discussions with the leaseholders of Utopia Station that went on for a decade or so, the Welfare Branch decided to place a temporary 'silver bullet' trailer school with accommodation for two teachers close to the Utopia Station homestead. The original school site is still the site for a teacher's residential hub and an education resource centre that services a decentralised cluster of five small schools or Homeland Learning Centres.

When the original primary school first opened there were 40 students enrolled, two teachers and one assistant teacher. Twenty five years later, there are 180 students enrolled in preschool and primary programs in the Utopia region, all of which are delivered by five teaching teams.

Utopia Homelands School – today

The model of education at Utopia Homelands School facilitates the involvement of Indigenous people in all aspects of the school, with particular emphasis on the face-to-face teaching of students. Of the present staff of 26, there are two qualified Indigenous teachers and 15 Indigenous community teachers who are employed by the Education Department as assistants or as tutors. As can be imagined, the operation of Utopia School is pretty much a family affair, where *Anmatyerr* and *Alyawarr* teaching staff deliver programs to students who are members of both their immediate and extended family.

There is an expectation at the Utopia Homelands School that all members of the teaching teams will participate in the programming as well as delivery of lessons to students, and that they will be involved in the professional development programs. The comprehensive professional development programs are integrated with various Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education courses that are coordinated by an experienced senior teacher.

For four days each week, qualified teachers travel from the resource centre/residential

hub by 4WD to their Homeland Learning Centre, collecting students from feeder communities along the track. Students attend particular Homeland Learning Centres according to their traditional and family affiliation with the tract of land that the Homeland Learning Centre is located on. The teachers and students travel up to three hours each day along dirt roads that are frequently impassable when wet. This model of education in this region is not dissimilar from other decentralised school operations in the Northern Territory, such as at Maningrida, Yirrkala and Galiwinku in Arnhem Land.

Whilst the language of instruction is English, the teachers frequently communicate with students in their vernacular language, be it *Anmatyerr* or *Alyawarr*. The Indigenous staff at the school are fabulous role models for the students attending the Homeland Learning Centres. Although the teachers themselves were amongst the first generation of their people to be exposed to Western education, their expectations of educational outcomes at the school are high and students are encouraged at every level to try their best.

Overwhelmingly, the structure of Utopia Homelands School, as it has evolved over the years, is one that affirms the students' Indigenous identity whilst proactively promoting biculturalism and options for the future.

Nick Richardson

August is Dental Awareness Month

When we think of our health we often forget about our dental health. August marks Dental Awareness Month, an initiative of the Australian Dental Association - which is a good reminder for us to pay attention to the state of our oral health.

Human teeth begin growing even before birth. By the time a baby is born all the baby teeth are formed and sitting under the gums. As advised by the Australian Dental Association, it is important to brush your teeth using a soft brush and a fluoride toothpaste. Gently jiggle the toothbrush or move it in tiny circles over the tooth and gum; spending about 10 seconds on each tooth. Flossing should be done once a day to help remove plaque that builds up between the teeth.

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Feature

MALE PRIMARY TEACHERS

The experience of crossing over into pink-collar work

Over the past decade, we have frequently heard the cry that 'we need more male primary school teachers'. It has been expressed in the media, education systems and government inquiries and is increasingly being uttered by state and federal politicians. The Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Honourable Brendan Nelson, has recently proposed an amendment to the *Sex Discrimination Act* to provide scholarships for male primary education students to boost the number of male primary teachers. However, whilst these calls commonly assume that greater numbers of male primary teachers will automatically benefit both boys in schools and society in general, other important considerations are silenced and overlooked. In particular, attention is seldom paid to the experience of existing male primary teachers.

In my unpublished doctoral thesis: *Male primary teachers: The experience of crossing over into pink-collar work,* conducted at the University of Canberra, I examined the experience of male primary school teachers and explored the prevailing societal and media debates about them. The understandings were obtained from relevant literature and data from media discourse analysis, statistical analysis and life history interviews. The study focused on male primary teachers' experience of crossing over into a career that is commonly regarded by society as 'women's work', and charts the advantages and disadvantages they face as a result of their maleness. While some of their experiences are similar to those of female primary teachers, the study only focused on the part of their experience that differs from female teachers and comes about as a direct result of their maleness. The study did not examine whether more male primary teachers are needed or whether a teacher's gender has any effect on the learning outcomes or experience of boys or girls in schools.

Even though this study specifically examined the experience of male primary school teachers, it would seem that most of the issues raised are also relevant for male early childhood teachers in early childhood settings.

Findings from the research

The literature and sources of data revealed that the experience of male primary teachers is likely to be complex, contradictory and problematic. Their choice to cross over into women's work such as primary teaching appears to yield a unique and complex combination of advantages and disadvantages that are described below.

Disadvantages and problems that may be faced by male primary teachers

The negative reaction of family, friends and society to their decision and difficulties in training to become a primary teacher

Whilst most male primary teachers receive encouragement and support for their decision to become a primary teacher from their family and friends, they also report some difficult reactions from important people in their lives. As well as negative reactions to their decision, males often find that their time of teacher training is isolating and challenging.

Identity construction as a 'real man' whilst doing 'women's work'

Work and identity are inextricably linked, and work frequently provides people with a sense of belonging. It appears to be particularly challenging for men in our society to construct an identity of being a 'real man' whilst doing 'women's work'.

Societal perceptions of risk and sexual deviance

Male primary teachers report that they are often regarded by society as being risky and deviant because of their decision to work with women and children. Regardless of whether these suspicions are made explicit or remain implicit, it is clear that they impact enormously on the lives of male primary teachers. There is ample evidence that male primary teachers find these perceptions extremely distressing and that they spend a great deal of time and energy justifying and protecting themselves from such accusations.

Unrealistic societal expectations that they will provide role models for boys

The belief that boys in female-led single parent households need male primary school teachers to act as role models and surrogate fathers is now widespread in society. Such beliefs presume that male teachers teach differently to females, meet different needs for boys in schools and that their presence will improve educational outcomes for boys. This sometimes places unrealistic and confusing expectations on male primary school teachers because it conflates parenting and teaching.

The dominance of the discourse of nurturance

Australian primary schools are currently dominated by a discourse of nurturance. This discourse is child-centred and positions teachers as caring, empathetic and patient. This current approach stands in stark contrast to previous primary school discourses that were more didactic and teacher-centred. There is evidence that some male primary school teachers felt more comfortable with earlier approaches because they permitted a physical and emotional distance from children and didn't call on males to be so nurturing. Even if males want to position themselves as nurturers, they run the risk of being accused of being a paedophile if they are seen as being too caring or close.

Status and pay issues

Low status and pay are ongoing issues for male primary teachers because they are frequently reminded that they are earning less than their male friends in other careers.

Working with women, loneliness and lack of socialisation

Many male primary teachers experience feelings of social isolation and loneliness because the vast majority of primary school teachers are female. They report that they both exclude themselves from socialising networks in primary schools and feel excluded from them.

Pressures and extra work because of the declining number of male primary teachers

As the number of male primary teachers continues to decline in Australia, this places additional burdens and duties on the remaining male teachers. They receive extra duties such as attending school excursions and getting a disproportionate number of boys in their classes because of requests from parents for their sons to have a male teacher.

Advantages and benefits that may be enjoyed by male primary teachers

Positive discrimination in gaining employment

Male primary school teachers appear to receive positive discrimination in gaining employment due to the fact that primary schools are keen to secure more male teachers.

Positive discrimination in gaining promotion

Male primary school teachers also appear to receive positive discrimination in gaining promotion. Despite the declining percentage of male primary teachers in Australia, the majority of Australian primary school principals remain male.

Being mentored, noticed and appreciated

It is apparent that male primary school teachers are more likely than females to be mentored and appreciated and that their minority status allows them to form special alliances with male principals and to be noticed and stand out in positive ways. They also enjoy kudos and gratitude from parents for providing role models for their sons.

Developing specialisations

Male primary school teachers frequently carve out specialisations and niches for themselves to separate themselves from their female colleagues, and to align themselves with safe, traditional signifiers of masculinity. These specialisations may include taking responsibility for sport and ICT and teaching upper primary classes.

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It can be seen that the experience of male primary teachers is extremely complex, and that being a male primary school teacher is a simultaneous source of advantage and disadvantage (Allan, 1994, p. 121). It is also apparent that their experience is not being taken into account and their voices are not being heard in the current societal debates. Opportunities must be created whereby schools, education systems and teacher training institutions can listen to and understand the experience of male primary school teachers. Ways need to be found to provide better support and preparation for existing male primary teachers and pre-service teachers, such as the provision of professional development, informed discussion and guidelines on relevant issues. Support and strategies are also needed to assist male primary teachers to overcome the disadvantages and difficulties they face as a result of their maleness. However, attention must also be focused on the advantages they enjoy, with questions asked about whether their advantages translate into disadvantages for female teachers. It is hoped that initiatives such as these will allow more sophisticated societal debates about the need for more male primary teachers and will enable the needs of male primary teachers to be more fully met.

Janet Smith
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Parents' Page

Early Childhood Australia has recently released its latest *Everyday learning series* title, *Everyday learning in the backyard.*

Written by Lyn Bower, lecturer in early childhood at the University of Southern Queensland, *Learning in the backyard* contains a wealth of simple yet creative ideas, to make the most of your backyard space.

'Backyards in Australia come in all sorts of shapes and sizes', writes Bower. 'They can be as small as a courtyard or patio in a block of units or apartments, or as large as a property or farm. They can be on the edge of a beach or river. Some are in the middle of a city or sit atop a high-rise building. Some backyards are green and lush and others are almost barren and dry. Some have very formal gardens, others have native or cottage gardens. No matter what type of backyard you have, this can be a place of wonder, excitement and learning for your children.'

With individual chapters linking backyard learning to babies, toddlers and preschoolers, Bower also explores such things as 'Development – what to expect', 'Things to do', 'Exploring your environment' and 'Useful reference books, children's books, and websites'. Within the chapter on 'Preschoolers' Bower also offers the following suggestion:

How to make a scarecrow

The easiest way to make a scarecrow is to make a cross using two pieces of wood or plastic. Once this is securely joined, cover with old clothes – either children's or adults'. Tie off the ends with string or wire. Stuff with old clothes, pantyhose, straw, hay or newspapers to give the body some form. Use an old pillow-case or sheet or similar-shaped material to make a head. Attach this to the body and stuff this with the same material as the body. Using some old paints, make a face to suit. Hair can be made using straw or old wool or anything that looks good. Add an old hat and accessories to create your own unique scarecrow. Attaching shiny things such as old CDs or anything that gives movement will make your scarecrow more effective. Remember there is no 'right way' to make your scarecrow.

The important part of the process is the making, which involves problem-solving and creativity and lots of discussion. Use what you have at home rather than buying bits and pieces. Your scarecrow doesn't have to be the best dressed but it can be the most interesting!

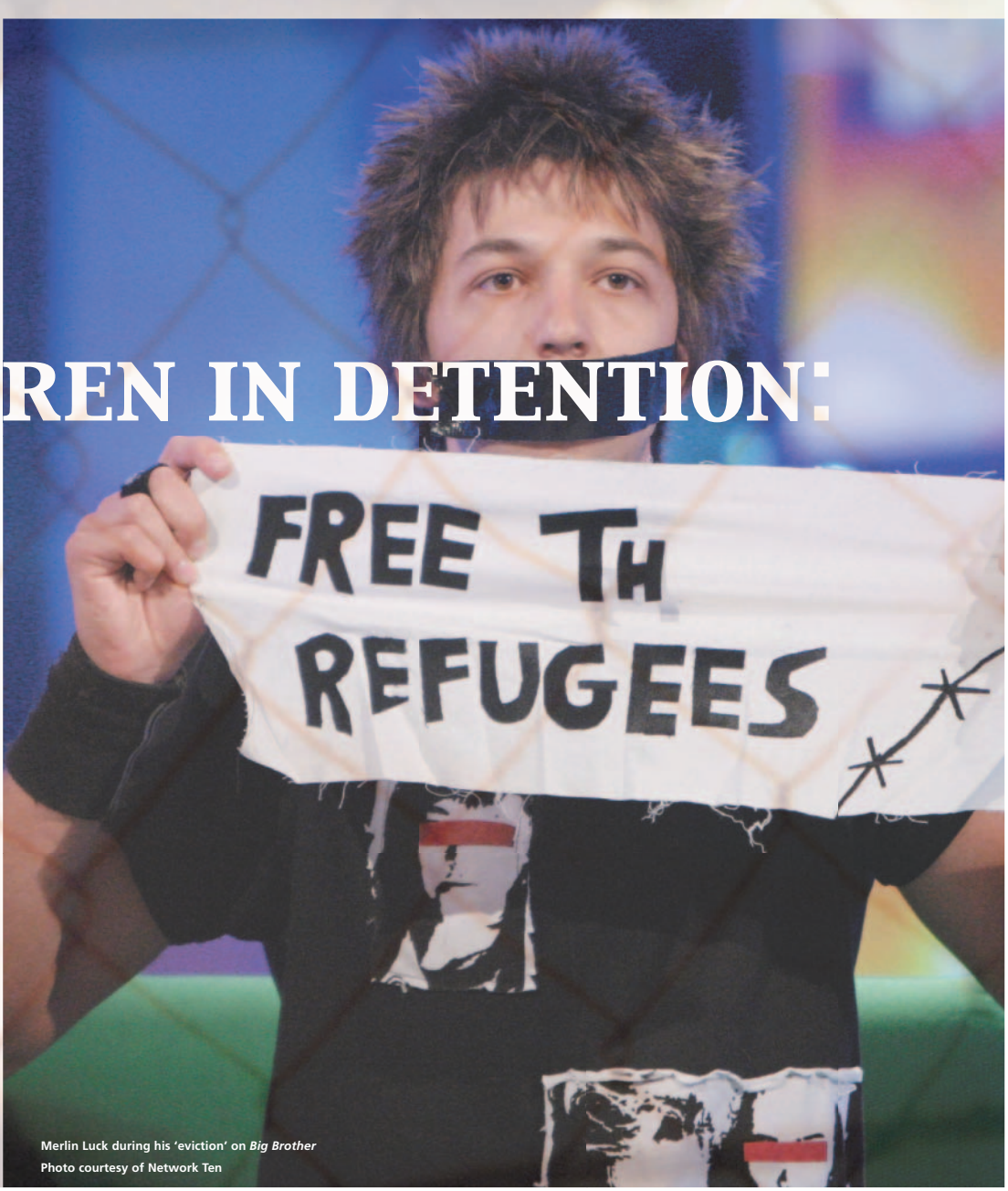
By incorporating diverse opportunities and activities into the outside play children enjoy, *Learning in the backyard* encourages parents and carers to enhance their children's physical skill development, imagination and appreciation of the natural world.

Early Childhood Australia's *Everyday learning series* has been developed to focus attention on the everyday ways in which children can be supported in their growth and development. It is for all those who are involved in children's development and learning, including early childhood professionals in all children's services, parents, grandparents and others with an ongoing responsibility for young children.

To order your copy of ***Everyday learning in the backyard*** ($12.95), or alternatively, purchase all five remaindered titles in the ***Learning at home series*** for $49.95
telephone: 02 6242 1800 or free call: 1800 356 900.

NO CHILDREN IN DETENTION:

Passionate members of the community speak out



Merlin Luck during his 'eviction' on *Big Brother*
Photo courtesy of Network Ten

Children in immigration detention - our national shame

The policy

There is something very wrong with a Government policy that acknowledges it is harming children in order to secure national security interests and 'border protection' but considers this harm 'the lesser of two evils' (quote by Senator Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs).

The policy of mandatory and what amounts to indeterminate detention of children deemed 'unlawful non-citizens' while awaiting final determinations on their refugee status, flies in the face of the Federal Government's National Mental Health Strategy, Crime and Suicide Prevention strategies, Agenda for Early Childhood and many other policies which acknowledge the critical importance of early life experiences and their impact on children's long-term emotional health, wellbeing and learning. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HEREOC) report into children in immigration detention titled *A last resort,* released in May this year, is unequivocal in its condemnation of the mandatory detention of children for not only breaching the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also as being extremely hazardous to the emotional health and development of children, especially infants and young children.

Impact on parenting

The problems for parents are extraordinarily stressful. Many feel painfully guilty about having brought their children to Australia only to be locked up, and this leads in many cases to profound depression. Children experience the daily helplessness and humiliation of their parents' attempts to deal with confusing legal processes and the tedious and cumbersome bureaucratic relations between the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) and the private company running

the detention centres (currently Group4 – GSL but formerly Australian Correctional Management). Practices such as calling children by number not name, head counts and musters have been documented in the report.

Then there are the direct effects of the detention environment itself on parenting and family life. While parents are deemed responsible for the care of their children in detention, their fundamental responsibilities are undermined by the institutional practices and regulations of detention, i.e., they cannot cook (except in the housing project) for their children, nor administer medicines themselves and there is little privacy. Add this to long-term uncertainty about their future and factors already mentioned, it is unsurprising that the capacity to parent is severely reduced. Children, especially very young children, experience this as traumatic neglect. At times, parents have become physically abusive, as they are unable to control their frustrations. This only engenders more guilt and in many cases leads to threats and acts of self-harm which further traumatise children.

It is disturbing to witness child abuse and neglect at any time, but more so when it is a result of our own government policies. It is ironic that the South Australian Government has launched a judicial review into abuse of children in state welfare care while no, as yet, independent judicial review of children in detention under federal jurisdiction.

Ethics of assessment and treatment of mental health in detention

Anyone who has been involved in providing mental health assessments for these families can testify to the nightmarish difficulties in communication between state-run services, GSL and DIMIA. Contradictory messages abound, action plans are not followed through and it is difficult to locate where communication goes astray.

There are difficult ethical issues for professionals (in my case psychiatrists) who become involved with families in immigration detention – the principal dilemma is whether one should try to intervene and treat children when the system in which they are being held is toxic to their development. This is tantamount to colluding with child abuse. For most of us, it is a matter of bearing witness and advocating from our specialist position as much as possible, writing letters and reports, and raising public and professional awareness.

The long-term impact on mental health of children

Recently, many more families have been released on protection and bridging visas, but this does beg the question why now, after three or four years in detention? It is almost universal that the mental health of these children was far better when they first arrived in Australia and has been allowed to deteriorate to a level which is probably only seen in the most deprived of our Australian communities. The cost borne by 'the lesser of two evils' is huge – many of these children who will be future Australian citizens will never recover fully from their experiences.

This could have been prevented. [Former *Big Brother* contestant] Merlin Luck's courageous protest about the plight of children in immigration detention on prime time commercial television recently, was remarkable in its reach to Australians who may not be aware of the issues. Let's hope the public and those with knowledge about the needs of children, especially in the early years, can ignite the changes necessary to prevent this from happening again.

Dr Rosalind Powrie

Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist

South Australia

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A silent protest

Sometimes my four-year old brother is on the brink of a tantrum, only to be circumvented by someone quickly holding up a toy with great enthusiasm to distract him. It's funny to think how easily children are side-tracked. The realisation that many adults can be distracted just as easily is a little depressing.

As a young Australian, I made a statement that millions of my compatriots whole-heartedly support. Yet rather than discuss the issue, many people criticised me for voicing an opinion when I'm not an Australian citizen. Let's focus on the issue - it's one of basic human rights! Do I need to be a citizen to have a valid opinion?

People say it wasn't an appropriate forum, that it was the wrong time, the wrong place. Well give me a better option. Maybe I should stand on the steps of my university and yell: 'Free the Refugees!' If national television isn't an appropriate forum to raise an issue of this magnitude, then that's a pretty sad reflection of our society's priorities.

People say that [during the eviction show of *Big Brother]* there were children in the audience who were confused and frightened. Well obviously I regret that element, but tell me, will they be having nightmares in two weeks as a consequence? Because there are children locked away right now, who will still be living that nightmare in two weeks, two months and two years, if people like us don't speak up - don't have a voice.

My mother always told me, bad things happen when good people don't speak out. Whether it's standing up for a classmate who's being teased in the playground, or being a voice for asylum seekers in detention, the simple fact is you should never just do nothing.

It's too easy to walk away. It's too easy to find a distraction from the things that matter in this world. But for as long as I can remember, I've been told to stand up for what I believe in: to be true to myself and to my convictions, and to never remain silent just because those around me are blindly marching in line. Take a chance to do what's right and you'll always be amazed at how many people are right there by your side.

Merlin Luck

Former *Big Brother* contestant

Merlin Luck made headlines recently when he staged a protest on the night of his live 'eviction' on reality television show *Big Brother.* With black tape stuck across his mouth and a sign saying 'Free th (sic) refugees', Luck remained silent for the entire segment, despite encouragement from *Big Brother* host, Gretel Killeen, to speak. As Luck later explained, the protest was conducted in order to put the mandatory-detention issue back in the public spotlight.

The erosion of children's rights: A plea to the early childhood sector

'Refugee children suffer a form of double jeopardy. A denial of their human rights made them refugees in the first place; and as child refugees they are also frequently abused, as the most vulnerable category of an already vulnerable population.'

-Dennis McNamara, former director, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

As early childhood educators, whose professional life is dedicated to the wellbeing and healthy development of children, we cannot help but be disturbed by these words. Children's vulnerability takes on a new and harsher reality, as we understand the treatment of refugee children across the world and on our own shores.

Some ten million children make up the refugee population. Displacement, disease, violence and fear are the developmental milestones of their childhoods. Distrust and imprisonment mark their vision for the future. The opening words of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ask of humanity the best it can give, yet Australia falls far from the ideal and confirms the double jeopardy. The vulnerability of refugee children is compounded by our current policy of mandatory detention and temporary protection. Early childhood educators cannot fail to see the denial of children's rights and take up their role to speak out in their defence.

The committee who worked to develop the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics could hardly have imagined a time when the voice of early childhood advocates was so desperately needed. Children continue to be detained in prison-like conditions despite numerous reports, a supposed change in policy, and a growing concern within the community. The voice of concern and the shouts of injustice need to be heard. Not just from those who line the streets and march, but those who know what is right and just for children and can speak with authority about what they know—early childhood educators. The commitment we have to children's development must be for all children, not just those enrolled in centres and services, but for those we will never see. Refugee children need our advocacy.

Catharine Hydon

Vice President, Early Childhood Australia – Victoria Branch

One child detained is one child too many

As of 7 July 2004, there were 100 children under the age of 18 imprisoned in secure facilities, including 40 in Nauru, 30 in Villawood and 16 in Port Augusta. Most of these children have been in detention for over two years, some more than four years. The babies and toddlers have only known the inside of an immigration detention centre.

ChilOut (Children Out of Detention) welcomes the recent release of families from the detention centres at Port Augusta and Nauru. However the Federal Government is now more than three weeks past the Human Rights Commissioner's deadline for the release of *all* children from immigration detention - whether they are boat arrivals, plane arrivals, babies born in detention, visa over-stayers, visa-breachers, asylum seekers or trafficking victims.

Not one child should be in detention. One child in detention, other than as a measure of last resort, puts the government in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Australia voluntarily ratified in 1990.

Think what your child has achieved in the last four years: going to school, playing sport, visiting friends' houses, going on holidays. Think how much your child has developed in the past four years.

If a parent locked up their child for four years, they would be charged with child abuse. If the government does it, it is called 'sending a message to people smugglers'. This policy is obscene. It is state-sponsored child abuse and it has to go.

Alanna Sherry

Co-ordinator, ChilOut

ChilOut **www.chilout.org** was established in 2001 by a group of parents deeply concerned about the Federal Government's policy of mandatory, indefinite detention of children and their parents.

Recent releases, by the Australian Government, of children in immigration detention centres

Minister for Immigration, Senator Amanda Vanstone, announced on the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs website (www.dimia.gov.au), that 'only one child [current as of 27 July], whose parents were unauthorised boat arrivals, is in a mainland detention centre.

Said Vanstone: 'His mother was offered a place at the Residential Housing Project in Port Augusta but chose to remain at Baxter with the father at least for the first few months of the child's life.

'Aside from the one remaining child at Baxter', continued Senator Vanstone, 'there are around 30 children of routine compliance cases in mainland detention centres. These children's parents either overstayed their visa or breached their visa conditions and are awaiting removal.'

Similarly, the Department of Immigration's website also noted that 19 children [as of 27 July] are currently detained in Nauru, and 11 on Christmas Island.

To requote Dr Rosalind Powrie, however, the question must be put to the Australian Government, 'why now, after three or four years in detention?'

Regular

Children's Book Week 2004

A DOORWAY INTO FUN FICTION & FANTASY

As with a number of other countries, Australia celebrates children's books with its own special event – Children's Book Week, occurring this year from 21 – 27 August.

For many years now, Children's Book Week has begun with the announcement of the awards for Australian books published during the previous year. The awards are hosted by the Children's Book Council of Australia, and this year will be announced at 12 noon on 20 August. The immediate effect of the awards is the promotion of the winning book, and the public honouring of children's books.

The actual Children's Book awards began in 1946 with Leslie Rees' *Karrawingi the Emu* (with illustrations by Walter Cunningham) receiving the winning medal. Since that time, the categories for the awards have gradually expanded. In fact this year there are five categories: Older Readers, Younger Readers, Early Childhood, Picture Book and The Eve Pownall Award for information books.

The Early Childhood category, which is actually the most recent category, came into being in 2001 as it was felt that many children's picture books were too sophisticated for the early childhood market. Since that time, winners of the Early Childhood category have practically become household names within reading families. Such authors (and illustrators) of the prestigious prize have included: Catherine Jinks, Bob Graham, Narelle Oliver, Simon French, Donna Rawlins and Kim Gamble.

For the 2004 Children's Book awards there were 360 books entered and so the judges had to read 43,667 pages. To make the awards independent of partisan sponsorship, a foundation was set up in 1995 - being proposed and managed by Margaret Hamilton and June Smith. The foundation is aiming to raise $1,000,000 and is under the trusteeship of the Children's Book Council of Australia.

To give focus to Children's Book Week, a new slogan is nominated each year. In 2004 the slogan is *Doorways*. Many schools, libraries and indeed state branches of the Children's Book Council of Australia use the slogan to stimulate reading events throughout Children's Book Week, as well as to raise money for the foundation.

Interested readers may buy a booklet containing the full list of the awards since their inception from *Reading Time* (the Journal of the Children's Book Council of Australia) and copies of *The Short List Information Book* for the current year from state branches of the Children's Book Council of Australia.

Dr John Cohen

Editor/Publisher *Reading Time*
The Journal of the Children's Book Council of Australia

Understanding childhood obesity:

A cause for concern

From 1995 to 2002, the number of overweight and obese four-year-old children in Australia rose from approximately 12.9 per cent to 21.4 per cent of girls, and from 10.2 per cent to 17.3 per cent of boys (Vaska & Volkmer, 2004). This is especially worrying because of the body of evidence linking obesity to future ill health, to earlier onset of serious problems such as Type 2 diabetes, as well as to other significant social and psychological problems (Ebbeling et al, 2002). By 2005 it is predicted that obesity will overtake tobacco as the cause of most preventable deaths in the USA (Mokdad et al, 2004).

Causes of childhood obesity

Clearly obesity is the result of a mismatch between the calories consumed in food and the calories 'spent' during exercise. This rapid increase in obesity over only a few decades makes it highly improbable that genetic factors are principally responsible. Indeed, the 'epidemic' of obesity is more a general increase in weight across society, rather than solely the problem of obese people (Anderson et al. 2003).

Many factors have been implicated as contributing to this problem. They include increases in consumption of foods high in saturated fats and refined sugars, increases in average portion size of food, increases in sedentary activities, increasing use of cars, an increase in time spent watching television and an increase in the hours that mothers work outside the home.

As calories become cheaper to consume in our society and more expensive to burn, 'it is difficult to envision an environment more effective than ours for producing … obesity' (Anderson et al. 2003; Battle & Brownell, 1996).

A number of prominent journals have concluded that this continuing rise in the rate of obesity represents a failure of the approach and the strategies undertaken by health services (Lancet editorial, 2004; Jain, 2004; Van Der Weiden, 2004). Some have even begun to consider the possibility that agencies with greater capacity to work across Government, such as Treasury or Finance, could offer a better prospect of success (Lancet editorial, 2004).

Preventing childhood obesity

Once established, obesity has proved difficult to reverse. Indeed, though some studies have demonstrated improved nutrition and increased exercise in trials, comparatively few have been able to show commensurate population-wide reductions in obesity (Caballero et al., 2003). While it is acknowledged that there is benefit from eating a healthier diet, and from increasing levels of exercise, reductions in obesity clearly require different approaches.

Despite this lack of evidence of efficacy, though, programs to reduce obesity continue to proliferate. However, very few are then rigorously evaluated for their impact on child obesity. Importantly, a few studies have demonstrated significant reductions in obesity amongst populations of school children, but they have required major changes to the children's lifestyles, such as reduction in the time spent viewing television (Robinson, 1999).

Reductions in rates of childhood obesity at the population-level would appear to require very different approaches to those taken with obese individuals (Board on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2003).

What now?

It is clear that better information is needed about the social forces that have generated this epidemic of obesity, and their relative contributions to the problem, if we are to develop strategies that will be more effective in reducing childhood obesity.

In the meantime, common sense measures, which modify the social and economic structures that predispose children to become overweight, offer a useful starting point for intervention. These could include attention to the time spent watching television, the number of meals eaten that were not cooked at home, the amount of time spent playing, the number of advertisements for 'non-nutritive' foods to which we subject our children and the amounts of these 'non-nutritive' foods that children consume. Such interventions are certainly unlikely to do our children any harm.

Associate Professor Victor Nossar

Senior Paediatric Consultant
Child and Youth Health
South Australia

N.B Early Childhood Australia will be running a series of seminars, nation-wide, on childhood obesity. Stay tuned for further information in the next *Every Child*.

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Keeping abreast of your health:

The continued importance of breast cancer awareness

Breast cancer affects us all – as a partner, parent, sister, brother, friend or work colleague. Each year more than 11,000 Australian women are diagnosed with breast cancer. Over 2,500 of these women die, making breast cancer the most common cause of cancer-related death in Australian women. As the early childhood workforce is made up primarily of women, this issue is particularly important.

While the causes of breast cancer still elude us, survival is increasing due to research that has identified better methods of detection and improved treatments. There are a number of ways to ensure early detection that all women should be familiar with.

Breast cancer: What should women do?

Know your breasts

All women should be familiar with their breasts through regular self-examination. Careful examination should be conducted right up to the collarbone and armpits, with any changes reported to your GP. Changes to look out for include changes to the nipple, discharge from the nipple, changes in the shape or size of the breast and changes in the skin of the breast.

Know your family history

While only 10 per cent of breast cancer is familial, it is important to know your family's medical history. Five-10 per cent of Australian women who are diagnosed before the age of 40 have a mutation in the genes BRCA1 and BRCA2. Women who are considered 'high-risk' should be extra vigilant and should be aware of early detection tests that are available from family genetic clinics all over Australia.

Women over 50 should have a mammogram every two years

Breast cancer is the most common cause of cancer death for women in Australia. Early detection practices, such as mammograms, have produced a 30 per cent reduction in mortality in women aged 50-69. While mammography is not infallible, it is still the best test to find breast cancer in older women.

The National Breast Cancer Foundation's ultimate goal is to discover what causes breast cancer, so we have the potential to prevent it. In order to do this, vital funds are needed to support breast cancer research.

Since its inception in 1994, the National Breast Cancer Foundation has been Australia's only independent, not-for-profit, community organisation supporting and promoting research into breast cancer.

Today, Australian research teams funded by the National Breast Cancer Foundation are seeking answers to the many questions that still elude us about this complex disease. This research covers a range of areas including the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

The Foundation is proud to be celebrating 10 years of significant progress in breast cancer support, in the year of its 10th Anniversary. Since being established in 1994, the Foundation has funded 95 research projects and provided research equipment, to a total of $14 million.

In order to maintain such high standards of research, the National Breast Cancer Foundation has set a fundraising target of $10 million to help in the quest for *finding the cure, finding the cause.*

During October, which is internationally recognised as Breast Cancer Month, you can help the Foundation achieve this target in various ways. You can buy a pink ribbon from selected retail outlets, buy a Pink Ribbon magazine from newsagencies or host a Pink Ribbon Breakfast.

The Pink Ribbon breakfasts are an early morning get-together of friends, family or workmates to celebrate the achievements of breast cancer research and raise funds for further research. The breakfasts will be held on or around Pink Ribbon Day, which falls on Monday 25 October this year. Each breakfast may only raise a modest amount of money, but thousands of breakfasts around Australia will raise significant funds for vital breast cancer research.

For more information about breast cancer or these fundraising activities, please contact the National Breast Cancer Foundation on 1800 000 118 or visit the website at www.nbcf.org.au.

Georgina Michael

Publicity Officer
National Breast Cancer Foundation

pink ribbon
for breast cancer research

Book Reviews

Parent Talk

Chick Moorman

Doubleday – Random House (2003)

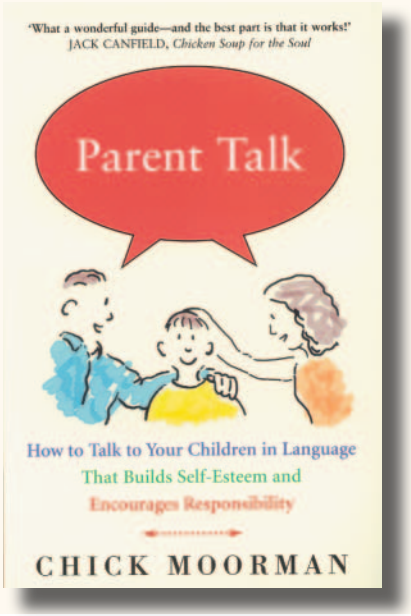
ISBN 1864710691 **RRP: $21.95**

The central aim of *Parent Talk*, as stated on the front cover, is to help parents learn how to talk to their children 'in language that builds self-esteem and encourages responsibility'. *Parent Talk* is a self-help program of prescribed systematic language. The author, a teacher and inspirational speaker, conceptualises *Parent Talk* as a 'tool box' of phrases that parents can pick and choose from when communicating with young children and adolescents. *Parent Talk* phrases are presented to the reader under the following chapter headings**:** 'Choices', 'Response –ability', 'The search for solutions', 'Learned helplessness', 'Praise, criticism and self-esteem', 'Parent talk at its worst', 'Intimacy', 'Feelings', 'Increasing conflict and reducing conflict' and 'Odds and ends'.

Consistent with its philosophy focusing on mutual respect and honesty, *Parent Talk* promotes strategies such as positive phrasing, active listening, problem-solving and empowerment. For example the phrase 'You always have more choices than you think you have' (p.10) is put forward to promote problem-solving ability, feelings of competence and empowerment.

The book's style is informal, personal and chatty. *Parent Talk* phrases are encapsulated in speaking bubbles with lighthearted cartoons interspersed throughout the text. 'Inappropriate' phrases are also interspersed in speaking bubbles throughout the text. The juxtaposition of 'inappropriate' phrases alongside 'appropriate' phrases, however, can be quite confusing at times.

Whilst *Parent Talk* is generally grounded on sound principles and practices, I found the usefulness of this book for contemporary Australian parents problematic on two counts. First: its embeddedness in traditional, middle-American family values and culture. Second: its simplistic, unilateral approach to building relationships and developing self-esteem. I would suggest that raising responsible, respectful, happy, caring children is a more complex process than *Parent Talk* would have us believe.



Rosemary Jones

Department of Learning and Educational Development
University of Melbourne

Cranky Granny

Eleni McDermott and Suzy Brown

Ages to Ages Publications (2002)

ISBN 0958141916 **RRP: $16.95**

Cranky Granny is the second collaborative venture between Eleni McDermott and illustrator Suzy Brown. Conceived, in part, through McDermott's professional interest in attachment theory, this book aims to promote the importance of 'that connection between the first and third generation'.

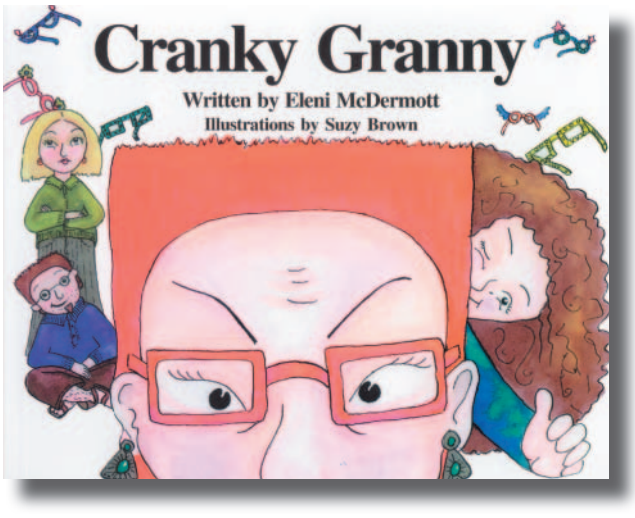
Written in the granddaughter Lily's voice, the storyline reveals a tension between what Lily's parents say about granny and the child's experience of her grandmother. Lily's granny (in Lily's mind) is not cranky, but rather, compassionate, thoughtful, creative, understanding, intuitive and individual. This view of granny unfolds as Lily reveals new ways of seeing her grandmother against the persistent viewpoint of her parents.

McDermott's use of a main repetitive motif works effectively as a means of capturing the limitations inherent in her parents' perception of granny. The illustrations serve as an effective counterpoint, reinforcing the child's perspective by showing the legitimate reasons why granny may be viewed as cranky. As they reveal what motivates granny's behaviour, the unsympathetic and blinkered mindset of the parents is further reinforced.

With eighteen years experience in the early childhood industry, McDermott's commitment to the importance of reading to young children is seen through the inclusion of a final section for adults which details the benefits of story time as well as strategies for reading the book with young children. Written with a clear educational framework in mind, *Cranky Granny* provides both adults and four- to five-year-old children the material to discuss a number of social issues—be they families, relationships or bias.

Jane Page

Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood
Faculty of Education
The University of Melbourne



Parenting after Separation:

Making the most of family changes

Jill Burrett

Finch Publishing (2002)

ISBN 1876 451 378 RRP: **$22.95**

This sensible and concise book, by Sydney psychologist Jill Burrett, is a useful guide to helping families manage the difficulties and stresses of parental separation. In a simple and supportive way, Burrett answers the questions parents so commonly ask.

Parenting after separation is strongly focused on children and takes into account the developmental needs and issues faced by them, throughout the process of separation. I found it quite refreshing to read Burrett's comments about the need for parents to deal with their own emotional issues about separation, and how these could impact on their children's reactions. For example, there is a useful section about coping with one's own reactions when a child says 'I don't want to go back to Mum's (or Dad's)' or 'Mum lets me do this...' and so on.

This book includes a separate chapter for fathers (or mothers) who are part-time parents, offering very practical advice on such things as: transition times, what to do when you have the children, and how to include new relationships. Another chapter deals sensitively with the issue of new partners and step-children, from the view-point of both the natural parent and the step-parent.

The chapter on 'Taking charge' emphasises the need to set clear limits. Burrett points out that children can easily start to manipulate separated parents and strongly supports the need for 'firm, clear leadership' from both parents.

Throughout *Parenting after separation*, Burrett argues the need for both parents to co-operate to make the separation work as well as possible for the children. At the same time, Burrett is quite realistic about emotions getting in the way, and gives many ideas for coping when this happens. Each chapter in the book has a short summary at the end, along with many practical ideas and tips.

Parenting after separation is extremely useful for parents who wish to help their child cope with separation in the best possible way. As Burrett points out: 'Successful cooperative parenting after separation is the most valuable thing you can give your children.'

Diana Roe

Child and Family Psychologist

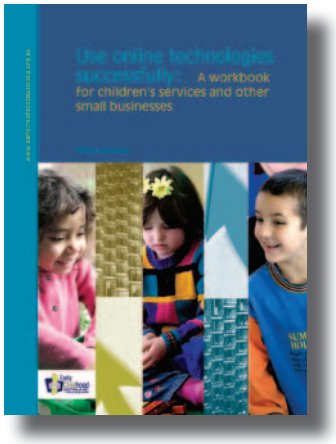
Use online technologies successfully:

A workbook for children's services and other small businesses

Derek Newman

Early Childhood Australia (2004)

ISBN 1875890726
RRP: $25.95



Use online technologies successfully: A workbook for children's services and other small businesses is a welcome addition to the early childhood profession. Author Derek Newman has brought a new dimension to the term 'technology' and aims to guide early childhood services, and small businesses, through the vast sphere of technology. This book is designed to be a framework for services and businesses seeking to introduce or extend their use of technology and associated tools.

Newman has divided the book into eight sections, with content pages introducing each section. There is an abundance of diagrams, illustrations, case studies and testimonials supporting all written content. Handy tips are also incorporated to ensure a practical focus, including: criteria for selecting software, privacy and cookies (and not the edible variety).

The essence of the book is the inclusion of worksheets for services and businesses to complete. They are simplified to assist any budding professional eager to explore the depths of the technological age. The worksheets cover many facets of the business' or service's procedures and policies such as: staff technology, websites, electronic communication and computer hardware.

In *Use online technologies successfully,* the importance of establishing time frames when introducing and adapting technology is emphasised, such as when planning to change the methods of parent communication. Newman also guides the reader through this process of change with check lists and a sample action plan. Websites are discussed in detail through a question and answer format, with many important issues addressed.

Newman offers a persuasive case for adopting technological processes within services and businesses, and the positive implications for stakeholders, families, staff and children. He also adds a new dimension to the term 'e -business' for the early childhood arena. *Use online technologies successfully* would make a valuable addition to any service needing assistance and support with implementing the many facets of technology and, hopefully, shed any fears of working with technology.

Melissa Healy

Lady Gowrie Child Centre
Hobart, Tasmania

Feature

Choosing a school for your child:
Single sex or coeducation?

While much has been written about the need for parents to choose wisely when selecting a school, the process for making this decision is rarely simple. People rely on hearsay, stories of friends' experiences, school brochures, annual reports, visits to school open days and meetings with school principals. However carefully the issue is approached, it remains notoriously difficult to get a picture of what the school is like 'on the inside' i.e. from the perspective of young people in the classrooms. No matter what the level of wonderful resources, tennis courts, pools, gymnasiums and so on, the most important features in determining the quality of school life for the child concerned will be the day to day interactions with teachers and peers.

One feature of schooling that is immediately observable to all and sundry is whether or not the school is mixed or single sex. Perhaps this ready observation is one of the reasons why this feature is often mentioned when people talk about their choice of school, for instance: 'We are an all girl family and so we wanted Anna to have some interactions with boys – so we chose coeducation', or 'His father went to a boys' school and we always assumed he would too'. But how much does it really matter in terms of learning outcomes whether or not the school is mixed or single sex?

In my recent book *Beyond the great divide: Single sex or coeducation?* I provide an overview of the research on this issue and it seems that this feature of schooling, whether it is mixed or single sex, is not all that important in affecting educational outcomes. Undoubtedly, there are some excellent single sex schools – and there are some very ordinary ones – but their excellence derives much more from the quality of their leadership, the excellence of their teachers and the soundness of the teaching than from the fact that they are girls' schools or boys' schools.

For some time there was, in this country, a widely-held impression that single sex schools were more likely to be associated with high academic achievement for both girls and boys. In recent decades, the idea that girls need an all girls' environment in order to be effective learners has been thoroughly disproved. Girls are apparently achieving well across a range of schools and their high achievement is certainly not linked to being at a girls' school. And while many boys who attend the traditional long-established boys' schools also achieve academically impressive results, so too do boys in coeducational environments. It is interesting to note that many of the former boys' only schools have adopted coeducation in recent years, along with the majority of newer schools which are almost universally coeducational. The girls' schools have been less likely to become mixed schools, although some have with considerable success.

What we can detect is a general trend towards coeducation, a trend that becomes particularly clear if one looks at Australian schooling over a fifty year timespan. Whereas once the chance to complete secondary schooling was much higher in the non-government school system, where many schools were single sex, currently a much wider section of the school population finishes twelve or thirteen years of schooling. These changes have made the connection between single sex schools and school completion much less strong. In addition, there are many more non-government coeducational schools than once was the case. Parents, it seems, are ready to embrace coeducation in ever-increasing numbers in selecting a school for their child. What then are the concerns that lead some to choose single sex?

Over twenty years ago, American educator Vivienne Paley commented that 'They (preschoolers) think they have invented the differences between boys and girls and, as with any new invention, must prove that it works' – an observation that may well hold true in many Australian preschools and child care centres today. However, observing children playing out different gender routines is not the same as seeing them as necessarily different in terms of learning capacity. Children are acute observers of their social worlds and some of them see the gender code as one of the operating principles around which society is structured. Cracking this code is analogous to cracking the colour code – and four-year-olds can be wonderfully rule bound. Hence, knowing that red is red and blue is blue and different can also lead to knowing that boys do this and girls do that – and never the twain! But of course, for

many of us, society is no longer rigidly divided into girl things and boy things—probably less so than at any previous time. And the worlds into which today's beginning classes will graduate will probably be less divided still. So it may be important for schools to prepare the next generation of participant citizens to focus on those shared attributes of boys and girls in their classes, rather than seeing them as two different tribes.

> **Schooling should be about preparing young people to enter the wider world with confidence and conviction, without unnecessary historical baggage.**

Do boys and girls learn differently? Fundamentally our children are a product of the culture in which they are raised. In any one classroom there will be a wider range of difference among the girls or the boys than between the girls and boys. Children are not all the same and there are huge variations between them in terms of their reading readiness, their speed with numbers and their comprehension of basic learning. Any teacher of a single sex class will agree. In mixed classes, the fact of gender difference can be mistaken for an indicator of other sorts of difference too. But there will always be some boys who are better at reading than some girls and some girls for whom number work is pure joy. Any generalisation about intellectual ability on the basis of sex is plain dangerous.

Despite a vast amount of popular theorising and pop psychology on this issue, comprehensive longitudinal studies have failed to demonstrate consistent differences between the ways in which male and female brains work. What they do tell us is that the younger the population tested, the more likely one is to find similarity between males and females in terms of mental processing. In other words, the ways in which boys and girls approach learning tasks may be much more conditioned by their social and cultural environment than by any intrinsic or genetically determined qualities. Certainly there is a mass of evidence to support the claim that boys and girls still tend to be treated differently in our culture, from the names they are given, the clothes they wear, the ways in which they are spoken to, the toys they are given, the colours of their bedrooms and so on. However, these cultural trappings do not indicate that they learn differently, nor do they show that either boys or girls are innately more generous, nurturant, caring, kind, competitive, intellectually superior, than the other. Surely then it is preferable to educate on the basis of a shared range of capacities rather than difference?

Not so long ago, when girls and boys were destined for very different life worlds, it made sense to educate them separately—either in separate schools or in separate areas within mixed schools. The legacy we inherit in terms of our cultural institutions bears some testimony to that time of separate spheres. We still have more men in senior public and professional roles than women, but there are now many more careers open to women as well as men. Schooling should be about preparing young people to enter the wider world with confidence and conviction, without unnecessary historical baggage. Perhaps the degree to which schools can do this task is the most important arbiter of choice – certainly much more than whether or not the school is single sex or coeducational.

Dr Judith Gill

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Profile

Louis Bradfield:
Early childhood educator

'The thing that has always driven me', says Louis Bradfield, Director of East Toowoomba kindergarten and preschool, 'is that children have rarely been recognised for their competence, for their knowing, for who they are.'

He is a shining light

Having recently received the Award for Excellence from the Australian College of Educators, it comes as no surprise that Bradfield has strong beliefs about how children should be taught in the early years. Says Bradfield: 'Early childhood programs are completely taken up with adult agendas, and very rarely do children get an opportunity to have their own agenda within that sort of framework….the percentage of programs that just do not recognise children as thinkers and learners is quite alarming. With the introduction of prep, it's more and more of a concern really.'

Indeed with the introduction of prep, at least in Queensland, another one of Bradfield's passions is ignited; that is, the push for children to be 'ready' for grade one. Early childhood education is certainly not the place, says Bradfield, for emphasising to children the acts of sitting up straight, colouring-in neatly and listening out for the school bell. Instead, early childhood educators should be getting their students ready for life—a far more expansive way to think about early childhood education.

Compliance, pliability, sameness. It's these sorts of traits, Bradfield fears, that are being encouraged in early childhood programs, as opposed to the child's unique sense of self. 'There's no reward', says Bradfield, 'for being a risk-taker, or a thinker. Or someone who's going to get up and try something in a completely different way.'

In the field for twenty years, Bradfield spent the early years of his career as a grade one and two teacher, then as an advisory teacher, travelling to many different schools and observing their programs and teaching. Now a Director of a successful kindergarten and preschool, it seems that, right from the beginning, Bradfield was drawn to the sector by the idea that the individual is valued, and that, in early childhood settings, there are many, many ways of thinking and seeing.

Yet, having also worked as a part-time lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Bradfield expresses concern that students, studying to be early childhood educators, aren't seeing enough of young children in action as 'thinkers' and 'learners' – and therefore recognising their potential. It's difficult then, says Bradfield, for these future educators to be able to design an early childhood program that actually challenges children. By way of inspiration, one of Bradfield's recent subjects, at USQ, was *The arts in early childhood*. 'The arts', says Bradfield, 'give children a way of presenting what they think and what they know. The materials that we present here [at East Toowoomba kindergarten and preschool] are so open… there's no right or wrong.'

According to Bradfield, in his kindergarten and preschool there's a huge supply of big tables to work on, boxes, old curtains, all sorts of collage pieces, blocks and cylinders. It's not the expensive 'educational' equipment, asserts Bradfield, geared towards bringing about only one solution or goal, but simple materials, that, in terms of their creative potential, have infinite possibilities. Says Bradfield:

'It's about providing children with plenty of opportunity to experiment and explore and represent what they are thinking, in many different forms…most materials are introduced by adults and controlled by adults and are limited by what children can do with them….but with the arts, whether it's through music, dance, painting, drawing or construction, children are given endless opportunities to tell their stories.'

In receiving his Australian College of Educators Award, Bradfield was in fact one of 20 Queensland teachers selected from some 1200 nominations made by parents, secondary students and school communities. Inspired, so genuinely, by early childhood education and the 'amazing' nature of children—their confidence and capabilities— Bradfield confirms that the early childhood sector is a powerful place to work. As an advocate for play and the arts in early childhood, as well as for the acceptance of difference and diversity, it's clear why Louis Bradfield received that award. He is a shining light.

Bradfield expresses concern that students, studying to be early childhood educators, aren't seeing enough of young children in action as 'thinkers' and 'learners' – and therefore recognising their potential.

Rebecca Meston

New Resource
addresses health, safety and wellbeing in children

The 2004/05 edition of the National Guide to Child Safety & Education is now available. This colourful and informative wall-mountable chart is a valuable yet free resource available to childcare professionals. Its aim is to raise awareness about the specific health, safety and wellbeing issues surrounding children today and what parents and guardians need to know to protect children from harm.

'This important initiative benefits all people who are responsible for the growth and learning of young children, including early childhood professionals, parents and grandparents. It outlines prominent issues relating to the health, safety and education of children as well as crucial contact numbers, which is important information to have at hand,' said Judy Radich, National President of Early Childhood Australia.

Among the topics covered this year is a special section dedicated to 'Anaphylaxis'—its affects, how it can be effectively managed and useful websites for further information.

Allergy-causing foods have recently come under attack in the media with calls being made to blanket ban peanuts and other allergy-causing foods within schools, a move rejected by the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy's guidelines.

Educating severe allergy sufferers and their carers about how to safely manage the child's dietary requirements is the preferred avoidance strategy, as blanket bans could cause the child to become complacent and drop their guard.

About one in 200 school-aged children and one in 100 preschool children are prone to anaphylaxis, the most severe form of allergic reaction requiring immediate medical treatment for the potentially life-threatening symptoms.

The reaction occurs after an extremely sensitive person is exposed to a specific allergen, such as peanuts, insect stings or some medicines. Symptoms include difficulty in breathing, swelling of tongue/face/throat/lips/eyes, hives, wheezing and loss of consciousness.

Produced by Pro-Visual Publishing in association with Early Childhood Australia, over 5,100 copies of the National Guide to Child Safety & Education 2004/05 have been sent nationally to kindergartens & child care centres, the National Family Day Care Council of Australia, and the NSW Department of Education & Training.

The chart also looks at other issues like 'Resilience in Children' – helping to build inner strength to cope with the ups and downs of growing up, such as minimizing stress, building a child's self-esteem and self-control, and the importance of family rituals and routines.

There is growing concern that Australian children are becoming less fit and more overweight. The National Guide to Child Safety & Education 2004/05 has a section dedicated to 'Healthy eating' complete with dietary guidelines for children, listing the important nutrients for child development.

As physical activity is essential in countering this trend, 'Fundamental movement skills' are also detailed on the chart.

'Early Childhood Australia is impressed by the professional quality and the colourful eye-catching format of the chart which is great for any child care centre environment,' said Judy Radich, National President of Early Childhood Australia.

The charts are distributed free of cost to the child care industry thanks to the sponsorship of supply chain companies committed to the health and welfare of children and their carers.

To obtain your *free* copy of the National Guide to Child Safety & Education 2004/05, or for additional copies, contact Pro-Visual Publishing on enquiries@provisual.com.au or phone (02) 9281 2611.

Feature

A time to simply 'be':

Building resilient and happy children through relaxation techniques

In recent years, technological and scientific advances have changed our society. Along with the benefits the information age has brought, the rapid changes have also required the development of special coping skills for adults and children. Youngs (1995) highlights the impact of stress on our lives, stating:

'Virtually no one feels free from stress these days, not even young people supposedly living "the best years of their lives". Childhood innocence is now almost impossible to sustain….. the disruption of the nuclear family and loss of extended family, new work and lifestyle alternatives, changing mores and shifting values in family life – all these are quickly altering the nature of childhood.'

This is even more relevant today. Current figures from the *Australian Bureau of Statistics* reveal marked increases in the number of children receiving child care—both formal and informal. Other recent social trends indicate that people are working longer hours and increasing numbers of households are experiencing financial stress. Additionally, one in four children do not live with both natural parents. Increasing numbers of the population are experiencing mental illness. Drug and alcohol disorders are on the rise. More Australians are experiencing the stress-related problems of a sedentary lifestyle and childhood obesity is increasing at an alarming rate.

Hurried parents and teachers produce harried children. In today's fast paced society, stress is becoming an ever-increasing problem for young children. Teachers and child care workers see frustrated and exhausted children on a daily basis at child care and school. Children are dropped off at one form of child care (such as long day care, preschool or school) and are often collected late by parents who are tired and depleted from a long working day.

Pushing children to achieve too much at an early age can cause them to 'burn out'. We are often so keen for children to live up to their potential that we expect them to be busy and occupied nearly every waking moment. Teachers, child care workers and parents all need to find a balance between encouraging children to experience success in life and allowing them just to be children. Success at school and other activities is important and worthwhile, but not at the expense of a child's wellbeing and happiness.

Making a real difference in children's lives

Western society is slowly coming to understand that health and wellbeing are more than an absence of disease or illness. Health is really about the presence of vitality and the ability to function and live our lives fully, actively, energetically and harmoniously. Incorporating this approach into the daily lives of children involves a shift in mindset for most adults. This mindset shift involves planning daily opportunities in care, school and home settings to allow children to simply 'be' (Thomas & Shepherd, 2000) rather than emphasising 'doing' and 'producing' all day. This notion really is about incorporating balance and peace into the lives of children in order for them to develop resilience—the ability to deal with life's challenges in a positive way (Thomas & Lockwood, 2003). This involves committing ourselves to the importance of providing a holistic and spiritual approach to developing a range of relaxation strategies suitable for young children. Children need a peaceful household and/or child care centre and opportunities for respite from stressful situations (Greenman, 2002). Eastern traditions have much to offer when we are considering how to begin learning to relax and simply 'be' with children.

How relaxation helps boys and girls

Relaxation techniques help children in the following ways, by:

- relaxing the body;
- quietening the mind;
- providing rest and rejuvenation;
- opening creativity and imagination;
- providing time-out and solitude from busy days;
- helping coping skills;
- developing self-awareness; and
- providing enjoyable, uplifting experiences.

Holistic techniques suitable for children

Breathing, Tai Chi (Qi Gong) exercises and visualisation techniques done either in small groups or individually, are effective tools for reaching the relaxation state in people of all ages. When adults and children join together in practising these techniques, the benefits are mutual, as they can learn to unwind and 'let go' of the day's stresses together. The slow movements of Qi Gong enhance strength, flexibility, balance and coordination. They are a welcome alternative to the competitive, fast-paced exercise offered by school and community sports. These exercises are holistic as they are beneficial to the mind, body and spirit. They provide a necessary first step in the relaxation process—'before the mind can relax, the body must learn to relax' (Madders, 1987; Thomas, 2002). When Tai Chi (Qi Gong) exercise is followed by simple progressive muscle relaxation and visualisation techniques (going on an imaginary, peaceful 'journey'), children and adults learn to quieten their minds (from incessant chatter and worry), restore balance to their bodies, explore their creative imagination and soothe away anxiety and fear.

Relaxation is a skill for life

We can build respectful, positive and reciprocal relationships with children by spending time together practising relaxation techniques and developing positive, enjoyable strategies for coping with life. Investing in a 'relaxation time' each day, whether as a parent, teacher or child care worker, will reap its benefits in enhanced communication, respect and positive enjoyment of sharing 'soul' time together.

Implementing relaxation at home or school

One way of introducing a relaxation time is as follows:

- Choose a suitable area or corner for relaxation time. 'Dress' it with the children by hanging posters, lighting candles or lamps, floating flowers or leaves in a beautiful bowl, making a comfortable sitting circle with cushions and play quiet, ambient music in the background.
- Outline your aims for the relaxation session and explain what the children will be doing. For example: 'This is a quiet time where we focus on our breathing and join in simple exercises to help our bodies relax. Then we will lie down on the floor and teach our body parts to relax and let go. We will then go on a relaxing journey in our imagination'.
- Begin with some simple warm-up and breathing exercises.
- Follow on with a few Tai Chi (Qi Gong) movements.
- Lie on the floor and participate in a progressive muscle relaxation and then go on a visualisation 'journey' to a rainforest, a cloud, a garden, a beach or another special, peaceful relaxation place you have created with your children.
- End with a sharing circle, where children and adults talk about their feelings and responses to the exercises and visualisation experiences. Children often love to draw, paint or make models of scenes from their relaxing journeys.

Routine and ritual

Like any other experience we undertake with children, we need to plan carefully and proceed slowly, according to the children's needs and ages. Once a relaxation routine has been established, the children will enthusiastically remind adults to be sure to include it each day. Small rituals like using a favourite music CD, lighting a candle, bringing a peaceful object (a flower or crystal) to the relaxation space, will provide an 'anchor' for each experience. An enjoyable and peaceful rhythm will develop over time and wide-reaching benefits will emerge. These include life skills such as listening to others, appreciating others' stories and experiences, waiting turns to talk, sharing imaginative 'journeys', respecting others' feelings and ideas and a general sense of calmness and contentment.

Simple relaxation techniques empower girls and boys to develop caring attitudes to each other and to feel the freedom of experiencing quietness and the simplicity of 'being' in their daily lives.

Patrice Thomas

Patrice Thomas has been a university lecturer, author and stress management consultant for over 20 years. She is the author of *The magic of relaxation: Tai Chi and visualisation exercises for young children.*

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Support

for young children with additional needs in KU Children's Services

Early childhood intervention services have been part of the children's services scene in Australia since the early 1970s. They were initially developed as research and/or demonstration projects attached to Schools of Education in universities, with those at Macquarie University in Sydney and Monash in Melbourne among the first.

As their number increased, these early childhood intervention services also developed many different forms and soon became part of community-based children's services. One such model saw children and their parents coming to a centre for specialised teaching. This model was based on the child's individual needs as identified by professionals. However, it became increasingly obvious that the above approach did not provide children with the opportunity to learn in the company of their typically developing peers, nor did it recognise family priorities and knowledge about their children.

From the 1980s, in both Australia and many other countries, there was also a drive and commitment towards including people with disabilities in all aspects of society, including education. Children's services quickly searched for ways to make themselves more accessible to families with children who have additional needs. Along with disability, the term additional needs also grew to encompass the needs of children from culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous backgrounds.

KU Children's Services was established in 1895 and is the largest not-for-profit employer of early childhood personnel in NSW outside of government, having management responsibility for over 150 children's services and family programs. KU is committed to excellence in education and care of young children in a way which is responsive to changing individual, family and community needs. This is achieved through the provision of a wide range of Head Office support services. Among these is a team of Special Education consultants who support families and staff in working with children with additional needs. Special Education consultants providing this service are early childhood professionals with additional qualifications and/or experience in Special Education.

Special Education consultants work with staff and families to promote inclusive practices within each centre or family program. This is implemented in a play-based curriculum which focuses on children's needs in the areas of:

- belonging and participation;
- communication;
- thinking and learning; and
- caring for self.

Special Education consultants observe children as they interact with each other, staff and other adults in the service. On the basis of these observations, children's portfolios as documented by staff, and information shared by the child's family and other involved professionals, Special Education consultants liaise closely with KU Centre consultants to advise staff on strategies to optimise the child's inclusion and participation in the service.

Following on from this, Individualised Family Service Plans (IFSPs) are developed and then reviewed on a regular basis. Special Education consultants are also available for families to discuss their child's progress or other needs, such as referral for formal assessments by other agencies or professionals. These might include speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, paediatricians, and early childhood intervention services. Assistance with the children's transition to school is also provided.

On a broader level, KU's Special Education consultants also promote the inclusion of children with additional needs within KU services by:

- writing submissions for funding;
- administering programs made available from different funding sources. For example, in NSW these include the Commonwealth Department of Education Science & Training, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, the NSW Department of Community Services, the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care and the NSW Department of Education and Training;
- interviewing and employing additional support staff;
- providing resources and training;
- responding to consultations and parliamentary briefing papers; and
- participating in a variety of forums and inter-agency meetings.

KU is proud of its long-term commitment to and involvement in early childhood intervention. This is reflected in the number of families of children with additional needs currently seeking enrolment in its services, and the positive feedback provided to KU on an ongoing basis. This has been the vision of Marcia Burgess, KU's Special Education manager, supported by KU's Board of Directors and Head Office management.

Of course, none of it would have been possible without the dedication and hard work of KU staff in all its services. These are the people who make a difference on a day-to-day basis and who make inclusion truly meaningful.

Ken Linfoot, Kerry Burke and Margaret Smith

KU Children's Services
www.ku.com.au.

Diabetes in the school

To overcome the problems of managing school children with Type 1 diabetes, Diabetes Australia has supported the launch of an information pack, *Diabetes in the school.*

Introduced to politicians at Parliament House on 17 June 2004, the pack is designed for teachers and staff and it will provide information about diabetes, how to manage diabetes during hypos, sick days at school, what to eat, school excursions, exercising at school and drugs and alcohol.

The easy-to-use pack, developed by the International Diabetes Federation, includes a comprehensive flip chart, poster, note for parents, diabetes information for schools and a medical alert card.

For more information contact Claudia Haddad from Diabetes Australia-NSW on: **1300 136 588,** or visit: **www.diabetesnsw.com.au.**

TV for toddlers may cause attention troubles

An American study published in the April edition of *Pediatrics* (Vol. 113, No. 4), shows that each hour of television viewing by toddlers increases the possibility of them developing attention problems by age seven.

The study, 'Early television exposure and subsequent attentional problems in children', sampled over 2,500 US one- and three-year olds' TV viewing habits from the (US) *National longitudinal survey of youth.*

The data shows that one-year olds watched an average of 2.2 hours of television per day and an average of 3.6 hours per day by the age of three (the data even shows some toddlers are watching up to 12-16 hours of television per day).

Young Media Australia recommends that parents use a discerning eye when choosing television viewing for your child and make sure that it is selected for age-appropriateness. There are few quality television programmes directed to suit the needs of children aged birth to three and the content can vary. If possible, try to engage your toddlers and preschoolers in stimulating tasks and entertainment other than watching TV. Above all, don't let your television play the babysitter.

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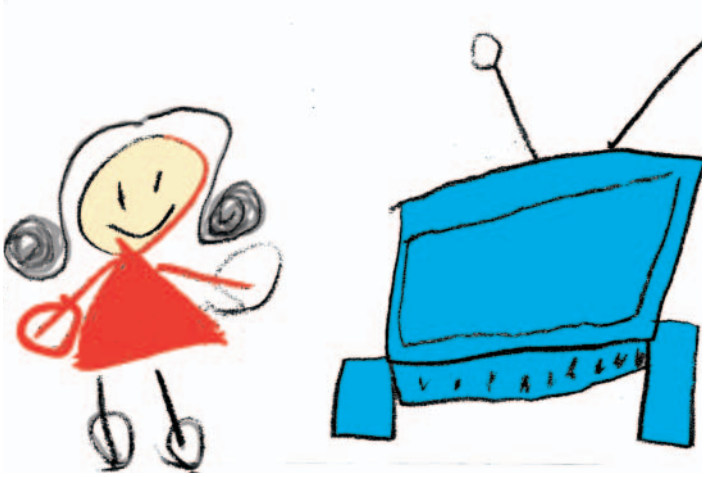
www.youngmedia.org.au.
YMA Helpline: 1800 700 357.



Feature

Oh boy!

The increasing debate about young males and their education

'Boys are said to have only two faults. Everything they say and everything they do.' (Hawkes, 2001).

Since the mid 1990s, international educators have become increasingly aware that the education system does not adequately recognise the distinctive needs of boys, nor does it properly address their particular problems. In launching the 2002 Senate Inquiry into boys' education, the Honourable Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training said:

'..boys are achieving at significantly lower levels than girls in all areas of the assessed cognitive curriculum throughout primary and secondary schools. Teenage boys are doing worse in literacy tests than they were 25 years ago. They are over-represented in the bottom quintile for educational performance, have significantly lower completion rates and comprise 80 per cent of the students in school disciplinary programs.'

The report revealed a staggering gap between boys' and girls' achievement that was widening and universal, affecting all sectors: independent, state and Catholic systems. Wherever one looked, boys were not reading as much and were not engaging intellectually. Girls had longer attention spans, seemed to be performing better academically and were working harder. Some warned that if the status quo was preserved, enrolments at Sydney University would be 70 per cent female within a decade.

So much for the problem! It is the answer that is proving controversial, igniting a passionate debate about how to better engage boys in learning. The Senate Inquiry report recommended a range of strategies, including improving teacher quality, employing more male teachers and a review of teaching methods and assessment so that they (the teachers) better meet the individual learning needs of girls and boys. Essentially, a call went out to create boy-friendly schools that addressed all children's social and cognitive needs and to review policies and practices so that our schools became places where boys wanted to learn.

Federal politicians seized upon the issue and the newly-elected leader of the federal opposition, Mark Latham, made headlines with his 'crisis of masculinity' speech and the debate has continued. Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, planned to amend the *Sex Discrimination Act* to allow male-only teaching scholarships to be offered. The Australian Labor Party rejects this approach, saying it would be better to address the public perception of teaching, particularly primary and early childhood education, as a low-paid, low status, predominantly female occupation. Labor wants to raise the status of teaching as a profession which would then make it more appealing to young men. It also seeks the introduction of a 'Big Brother'-type mentoring system that would encourage men in the wider community to act as mentors and friends for boys.

Some argue that the Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, has got it wrong, that what really matters is the quality of the teaching and learning. While others argue it's more to do with where you live and how poor you are, and regardless of gender, boys and girls in rural areas and from poorer socio-economic backgrounds tend to be the most disadvantaged educationally.

While the debate rages on, the truth is that schools, and to a lesser extent early childhood centres, remain a psychological wasteland where many boys feel neither safe, valued or heard. What baffles psychologists and some educators is the unwillingness of many schools to respond to even the most basic suggestions about catering for boys' often special learning needs.

To cater better for boys' special learning needs, schools and early childhood centres should consider incorporating the following strategies. These proposals come from educators like Peter West, Tim Hawkes, Ian Lilico, Rollo Brown and Richard Fletcher, who have spent years researching and debating issues about boys' education.

1. All teachers should get boys to talk before writing anything.

As writing is a major area of deficit for many boys, it is imperative that boys should communicate before writing anything down. When boys are given the opportunity to talk things through before writing, the ultimate fluency and volume of their writing is dramatically increased.

2. Writing should be scaffolded and within 'teacher-prepared templates'.

It is argued that when teachers use such scaffolds which model the requisite number of pages required—along with styles, headings and

the number of lines required for each section—boys will intrinsically expand their writing, a valuable tool in later learning.

3. Classrooms' lighting, colour and seating.

Classroom lighting and colour need to be reviewed to make lighting less bright; with fluorescent lighting used less often. Some researchers argue that more subdued lighting results in more settled behaviour by both girls and boys and creates an atmosphere in which boys are more able to talk about their feelings and discuss emotive, difficult or relationship issues. Padded seats are also more comfortable than the hard plastic ones, especially for boys who generally have less natural padding on their rears.

4. Explicitly structure time.

Tasks should be quantified so that boys learn to work within a given, explicit time frame. This helps them focus on their work and inhibits the time-wasting they are often prone to, especially during group work.

5. Teachers should use more quizzes.

Who would have thought we need more Eddie McGuire in the classroom? Quizzes are a useful form of classroom learning, consolidation and assessment for boys. Where a conventional test is a contest between teacher and student, a quiz is student vs. student, hence more competitive. Boys are apparently more likely to study for a quiz than a test, especially if there is some small prize involved, and they can work in teams.

6. Teach boys conflict resolution and anger management from the early childhood years.

Anger has become the emotional funnel through which many boys channel their emotions. Aggression and anger have become acceptable responses in many peer groups. Once boys have the words for what they are experiencing—hurt, anxiety, frustration, disappointment, shame—they can begin to deal with it, and help themselves. This and other social emotional competencies should be taught by appropriately trained teachers to all students, and are every bit as important as literacy and numeracy.

7. Identify the boys at risk and resource them.

Educators must be vigilant in seeking out the loners in our early childhood settings and schools. These are the boys and girls who suffer rejection by the peer groups and who feel they are alone. Unless we help loners feel valuable and accepted in early childhood settings and schools, the agonies of school massacres, self-harm and eventual societal rejection that loners face will continue. Loners have a very high risk of depression, anxiety and suicide—if not helped. The Mind Matters Plus projects give educators practical strategies about how to build children's confidence and social and emotional competence.

8. Use more ICT to teach boys.

Learning educator Dr Tim Hawkes (2001) argues that boys learn best using graphs, charts and computer technology, but too much learning still relies on written text. He says that classroom practice should include more interactive class teaching through the use of digital technologies.

9. Teachers should use more rewards and praise.

Boys seek short-term and immediate praise and rewards and every effort should be made to reward boys when they have done something that is praiseworthy. Classroom activities should be broken down into shorter, more intensive periods of time on task. Learning activities need to be dynamic to capture boys' interest and hold it.

10. Give less homework in the school years.

Some educational psychologists argue that homework is unnecessary if class work is fun, purposeful, inspirational and intensive. Homework for homework's sake needs to be eliminated as this is seen to doubly disadvantage students (particularly boys) whose home situations are not conducive to homework, or study generally. Given children's current obesity levels - encouraging more physical activity in the early childhood years has clear benefits.

The Federal Government's boys' education Lighthouse program is currently underway with 110 projects representing 230 schools around Australia. Projects were selected by a national committee to demonstrate a range of innovative approaches to boys' education. But for the non-Lighthouse schools awaiting the results, there is clearly much that can and should be done. What are you doing in your early childhood centre or school?

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References

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Essential connections:
A guide to young children's learning

The following is a speech made by Judy Radich, President of Early Childhood Australia, on 22 March 2004, at the launch of ***Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning.*** The book is the result of a partnership between the Department of Education in Tasmania and the Tasmanian Branch of Early Childhood Australia. The impetus for this project arose from the publication of the new Tasmanian curriculum, the ***Essential learnings framework,*** designed for learners from birth to age 16. ***Essential connections*** elaborates on this, and makes the specific connections between the framework document and child care, and the quality assurance and improvement system.

Minister, distinguished guests and fellow early childhood professionals. Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land.

Recently at an issues day, held by the Australian Education Union, the two New Zealand speakers greeted the other participants in Maori. This is a requirement of the Waitangi Treaty that was signed in 1840, between the British Crown and the Maori chiefs.

Later, when Karen Martin, a Noonucal woman, spoke to the meeting, she commented that she had never heard a white Australian speak in an Aboriginal language in the way the New Zealanders had spoken in Maori. She said too that, for her, real steps would have been made in the process of reconciliation between Aboriginal people and white Australians when this happened.

Afterwards, the person representing Early Childhood Australia spoke to her and said that our organisation would like to do this. Karen gave her permission for me, as a representative of Early Childhood Australia, to address you with this word 'Yura'.

Yura is a deep acknowledgement and greeting from my spirit to yours and to the place where we are meeting. It is a word from the Janidai language of the Noonucal people of Kwandamooka (North Stradbroke Island). It is a pleasure to be here, as the National President of Early Childhood Australia, at the launch of *Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning.*

Congratulations to you Minister for the vision, leadership and commitment to children that has resulted in this really outstanding resource for the early childhood profession in Tasmania.

Congratulations also to the early childhood professionals in the Tasmanian Education Department and in, what was then the Tasmanian Association of Children's Services and is now Early Childhood Australia, for working together to realise that vision and create a resource that will be invaluable not only here in Tasmania, but also to early childhood professionals working in children's services throughout Australia.

I have no doubt that this book will make a major contribution to the way early childhood is thought about and practised in this country.

Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning is evidence of what can be achieved when the Government and the early childhood profession listen to each other and work together in the interests of young children.

Equally, this book is a wonderful illustration of why it is so important that those who work with young children are well-qualified early childhood professionals. The work of supporting young children's early growth and learning is clearly work which demands professional knowledge and expertise.

The early relationships (connections) between young children and those who are responsible for their growth and development are formative, rather than peripheral, to the life course of young children and this book demonstrates that very clearly indeed.

Early childhood professionals, here and in the rest of Australia, are indebted to the five teams of practitioners who undertook the research that provided the 'learning markers and learning stories' featured throughout this book. You have demonstrated wonderfully the discipline, complexity and rigor of the work we do. Thank you.

'Essential connections' abound throughout this book. It clearly references children as active participants in their own development and demonstrates that the most sensitive care and education is that which is aligned with the child's interests, needs, and goals. If children's early experiences are to support rather than diminish their inborn potential - this *is* an essential connection.

Equally important, *Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning,* recognises early childhood as a continuum from birth to eight years of age in which the foundations for all future growth and learning are laid. In doing this, the book makes a major contribution to the status and standing of all of those who work with young children in children's services and in the early years of school.

It also makes a real contribution to the realisation of the potential for the development of a stronger sense of profession between those who work with young children in schools and those who do so in children's services. *Essential connections* will help us to explain to parents what we do and how children learn.

The wonderful explicitness and detail of the links between 'the learning stories' (which is often all that most parents see), 'the learning markers', the Quality Improvement and Accreditation quality areas and our practice as professionals seen in the 'provision for learning sections' will support us in making these explanations to parents.

One of the key markers of a profession is its willingness to put out for public scrutiny the detail of what it does and why. *Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning* does this in a way which will make a real contribution to increasing community understanding of the significance of the early years.

The early childhood years are crucial, not just as an investment in the future, but also because children are themselves intrinsically valuable.

Essential connections illustrates that early relationships matter in the lives and futures of young children, and, because of this, society is wise to value those who relate to young children daily.

Ross A. Thompson, in an article entitled *Development in the first years of life,* says that: 'The irreducible core of the environment during early development is people. Relationships matter. They provide the nurturance that strengthens children's security and wellbeing, offer the cognitive challenges to exercise young minds, impart many essential catalysts to healthy brain growth, and help young children discover who they are and what they can do.'

Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning is evidence of this and for all the other reasons I have alluded to here. Early Childhood Australia is proud to endorse it.

Congratulations to everyone involved.

Judy Radich

President
Early Childhood Australia

For a copy of *Essential connections: A guide to young children's learning*, contact Tony Nichols at the Education Division of the Tasmanian Department of Education on: (03) 6233 7207 or fax: (03) 6233 6979 or e-mail: tony.nichols@education.tas.gov.au. Copies are available for $10 each.

SCHOLARSHIP

THE JEAN DENTON MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP
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This Scholarship fund was established by the Kindergarten Union of South Australia in 1977 and is now administered by the Jean Denton & Lillian de Lissa Scholarships Committee and the Public Trustee.

Applicants are invited for the Jean Denton Memorial Scholarship. The purpose of the scholarship is to advance knowledge in early childhood education. The scholarship is available to any person or persons working in Australia.

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Carol Thompson
E-mail: carolt@senet.com.au
Telephone (08) 8337 7195
Academic enquiries to: Christy Ward (08) 8302 4586

Closing date: Close of Business 8th October, 2004

Acknowledgement of applications will only be sent if the application is received more than 15 working days prior to the closing date. No extensions will be given.

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Kids Universe

Kids Universe will be held at Sydney Showground, Olympic Park, over 4 days during the September school holidays, Sunday 26th to Wednesday 29th. It is a family event and aims to encourage the participation of children with their parents through 60 different concurrent activities.

A main component of Kids Universe is the Children's Literature Festival, which is being presented in association with Scholastic Australia. This Literature Festival provides children of all ages the opportunity to get up close to over 50 of their favourite authors, illustrators and storytellers. Amongst the national and internationally acclaimed authors to present are: Emily Rodda, Mark McBride, John Heffernan, Libby Gleeson, Andy Griffiths, Patricia Bernard, Kay Keck, Peter Sheehan, James Valentine and Margaret Clark.

For more information visit:
www.kidsuniverse.net.au.

A submission for the review of the *Children and Young People Act 1999*

Dianne Hinton, who has had broad professional experience within the NSW and ACT children's services, has recently made a submission for the review of the *Children and Young People Act* 1999, particularly relating to:

- children's services;
- the licensing of centre based care; and
- family day care and school aged care.

As part of Hinton's submission to the Review Committee, she has requested that serious consideration be given to the inclusion, in the Licensing Act, of a section that would require all children's service facilities to adopt the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics. According to Hinton, in its existing form, the Act does not spell out the requirements and obligations of workers within the profession in reference to their conduct with regards to children, families, colleagues and community.

Hinton's aim is to achieve the Code's widespread recognition, acceptance and inclusion, as another most vital standard within the Licensing Act.

Secretariat of National Aboriginal & Islander Child Care:

Seven priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is the national peak body in Australia representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

Too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have experienced the pain and hardship of neglect, abuse and violence and continue to face an uncertain and difficult future.

SNAICC has identified the following seven policy priorities, each of equal importance, that it believes all Australian governments should adopt to extend recent efforts to improve the health, welfare and education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Several of these priorities require leadership from the national level and co-operation from the states and territories. The policy priorities are:

1. **A National Apology**
2. **Healing and Education**
3. **Fewer Contemporary Removals**
4. **Child Protection Reforms**
5. **Early Childhood Programs**
6. **Capacity Building**
7. **Better Planning.**

SNAICC has identified the key reforms and initiatives needed to implement these policy priorities and these are available from SNAICC and on its web site (www.snaicc.asn.au). SNAICC is committed to pursuing these reforms on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and will work in partnership with local services, state and national Indigenous bodies, governments and non-government organisations to have them implemented.

Issues such as poverty, illness, substance abuse and the inter-generational effects of previous Stolen Generations policies mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are more likely to need the services provided by child protection departments. Reforms to the way child protection authorities respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in these circumstances, are urgently needed.

Minimum standards for the care, protection and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in need of care should be developed by communities in partnership with governments, and outcomes in child protection should be independently monitored and reported on at the national level.

Planning for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is currently inadequately thought-through, ad hoc and uncoordinated. SNAICC, a small community-based organisation, is the only national body focusing on these issues. A better-planned response to the urgent problems confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families is urgently needed. This response must involve governments and community-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations working closely together.

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

The national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
www.snaicc.asn.au
Ph: (03) 9482 9380.

Antibiotics for children:

Parents asked not to expect antibiotics for children with a cold.

As part of the annual *Common colds need common sense campaign,* National Prescribing Service Ltd (NPS), a non-profit organisation, is calling on parents not to expect an antibiotic from their GP to treat children with symptoms of a common cold.

The Common colds need common sense campaign is aimed at reducing unnecessary use of antibiotics – a cause of the growing problem of bacterial resistance to antibiotics.

'The common myth is that antibiotics can treat a cold,' said Dr Richard Abbott, a GP and NPS Board Director. 'Antibiotics have been developed to treat bacterial infections not viral infections such as a common cold. Only a small percentage of common cold infections are complicated by bacterial infections that might require antibiotic treatment.'

For further information visit www.nps.org.au.

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Judy Radich – President, Early Childhood Australia

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