EVERY Child

Toy libraries

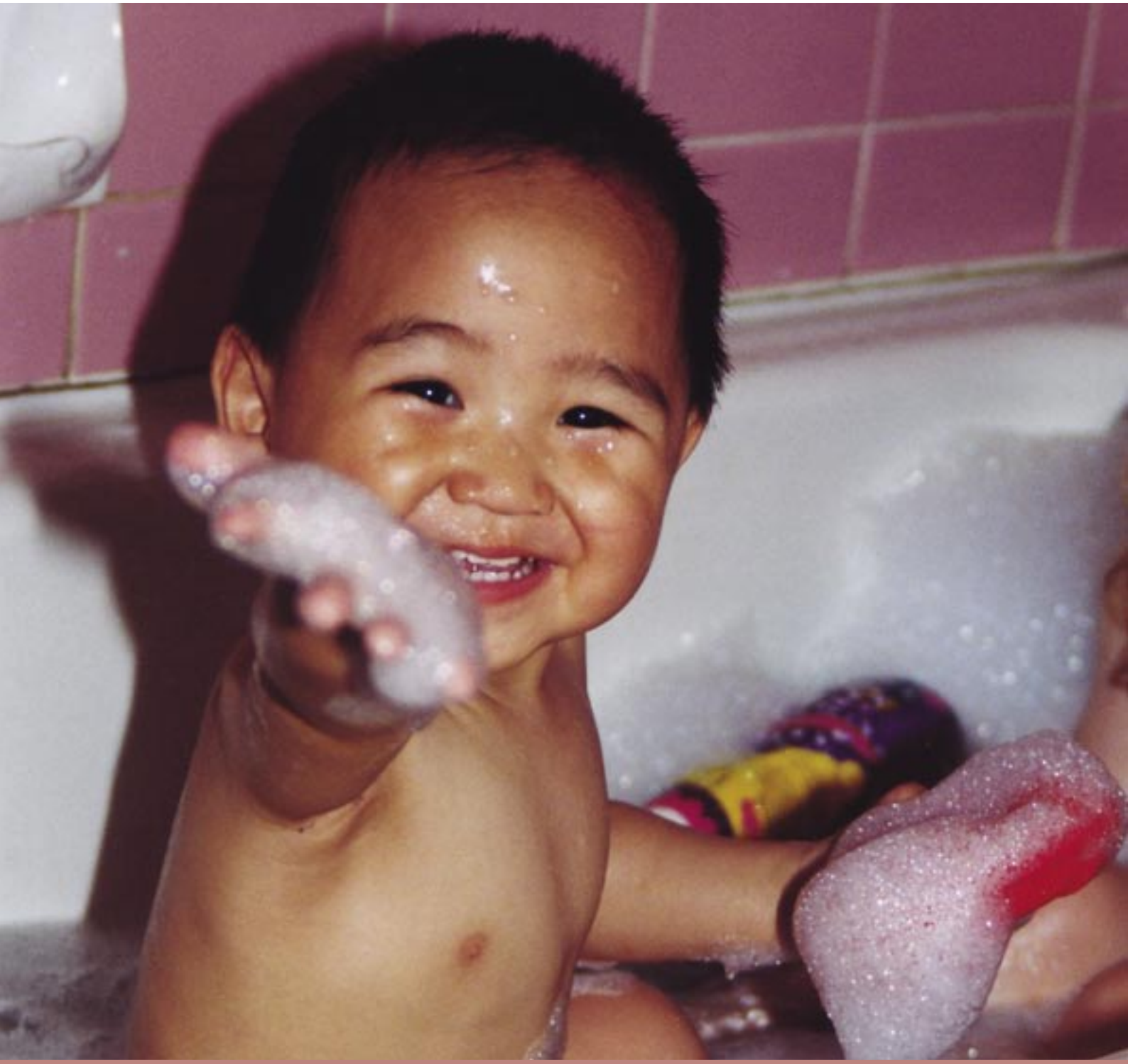
Welfare reform

National Child Protection Week

Surviving the bully in early childhood

Code of Ethics Agenda – special update

VOL.11 NO. 3 2005



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Keynote Speakers

Joe Tobin, Professor Early Childhood Education, Arizona State University, USA

Children, their families and cultures are a total package. Joe Tobin's presentation will help us tackle what this means for our everyday work. He will draw on his innovative international project that looks at children of immigrant families from the perspective of the parents and preschool staff.

Also conducting workshop about children, their families and culture being a total package and what this means for our everyday work with children.

Dr Jackie Marsh, University of Sheffield, UK

Marsh advocates the incorporation of cultural icons, such as the Teletubbies, into the curriculum so that children can make the link more easily between their home and school environments. She undertook a study to explore the potential that popular culture has for motivating literacy and oracy practices.

Also conducting workshop tackling the practicalities of using children's television/films, toys and computer games to support early literacy.

Associate Professor Margaret Carr, University of Waikato, NZ

Unless we find ways to assess complex outcomes in early childhood, children will be excluded from teaching and learning.

Carr describes a way of assessment that stays close to the children's real experiences and provides an alternative to mechanistic and fragmented approaches.

Also conducting workshop talking about using Learning Stories, stories about a child's learning journey, to describe, discuss, document and decide what to do next.

Associate Professor Ann Sanson, University of Melbourne,

Sanson has played a central role in the Australian Temperament Project that has involved detailed observation of the interaction between child temperament, parenting and social context with social and emotional outcomes for young children.

Professor Andrew Hills, Queensland University of Technology,

Childhood obesity is one of the major health problems of the 21st century. Hills will challenge us to tackle this issue in our day to day work with young children.

Dr Rosemary Stanton,

One of Australia's best-known nutritionists, Stanton has been awarded an OAM for her services to the community. She says that, in relation to the increase in childhood obesity, 'it is tempting to focus on the positive as it doesn't offend anyone. (Clearly) physical activity is important but we must also address food issues.'

Conference Patron

QUT Queensland University of Technology School of Early Childhood

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The opinions expressed in this magazine are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Early Childhood Australia.

By publishing a diversity of opinion, we hope to provide a forum which promotes professional growth, creativity and debate in the early childhood field.

Editorial Policy:

The material published in the magazine will aim to be inclusive of children in Australia wherever they live, regardless of race, gender, class, culture, or disability. The magazine will not publish material which runs counter to the wellbeing and equality of all children and their families, and those who work with them. Early Childhood Australia is a registered commercial publisher with DEST.

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Ensuring children's futures

A recent meeting in Canberra brought the *National Agenda for Early Childhood* much closer. The *National Agenda* is an Australian Government initiative designed to provide a national vision and framework for the early years. It is being informed by input from wide-ranging consultation around the country.

Mapping the best path for early childhood provision is critical to children's wellbeing and academic success and the *National Agenda* is a major step in the right direction.

The social and educational benefits of early childhood education are as important as safe care while parents work. Evidence that these benefits are especially significant for children from more vulnerable and lower income families is compelling.

Nationally, there are a growing number of families and children with multiple risk factors who need community support and early intervention—whole communities in some areas. Yet, many of the neediest families still miss out on early childhood educational services or access the poorest quality services.

Failure to provide rich, integrated developmental programs for children in the years before school, compromises social wellbeing and school success, especially for the most needy and vulnerable children.

Nationally, in 2003-2004, about $2.4 billion was spent on early childhood services. Most ($1.8 billion, 79 per cent) was Commonwealth money. But of this, $1.4 billion was financial assistance to families via the Child Care Benefit to help cover child care centre fees. Relatively little money goes to strengthening the actual quality of developmental and educational programs and Australia does not compare well with other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in terms of expenditure on early childhood services.

Further, the complex mix of national and State and Territory government involvement in early childhood education and care means that levels of expenditure between and within States are difficult to compare. Expenditure is applied to different groups and services on behalf of children of different ages. For example, the Australian Government's funding covers children up to 12, while state funding is typically for children three to five years of age.

Any doubts about the value of quality early childhood services have long been dispelled. The evidence is clear. The early years are important to later social and academic competence.

Well-planned learning experiences impact positively on children's social and cognitive outcomes. They help close the traditional school-entry 'achievement gap' between children from lower income groups and those from middle and upper income family backgrounds.

The socioeconomic-linked differences in early childhood support and educational participation are particularly disturbing. The resulting social and academic disadvantages experienced by children from low-income families when they begin school are difficult to overcome. North American data show more than a year's gap between low-income and middle-class children on an array of school entry achievement tasks. There are similar gaps in Australia.

When children do participate in an early childhood program, staff and setting have a major impact on wellbeing and learning. Staff knowledge of learning and development, the richness of interactions with children and their warmth and sensitivity are key factors influencing children's developmental outcomes.

Children's school entry social and academic skills have long-lasting effects with longer-term impacts on academic achievement.

Quality preschool education programs and parenting support, complemented by quality school education can narrow the achievement gap and improve academic outcomes and school retention. The most vulnerable children need the strongest early childhood education programs, the best curricula and the most professional educators.

Research illustrates that developmental gaps at age five or six are often difficult to close, even with well-targeted school interventions. An interesting Australian Council for Educational Research study showed that although rich, well-targeted literacy programs helped improve children's reading skills in the first three years of school, the best predictor of reading achievement in Year Three was entry level reading and language skills (Ainley & Fleming, 2003).

Many children, from the most vulnerable families, have little opportunity for sustained participation in rich preschool language and learning environments—at home or in formal care and education programs. This puts them at an immediate disadvantage at school entry.

For the sake of equity, issues relating to quality and effectiveness of early childhood services must be addressed as part of a coherent early childhood services vision and framework.

Fundamental to the issue of quality and outcomes for young children is dismantling the 'care'–'education' divide to create more seamless, development and learning programs for young children. That this divide still exerts such strong influence on policy, practice and perception of early childhood services—despite contemporary knowledge about children's patterns of growth and development—is worrying.

Terminology can set perception and while the distinction between 'care' and 'education' and between 'early childhood teacher' and 'child care worker' may be fuzzy in practice, the different terminology can affect community perception and confidence, industrial awards, working conditions and ultimately, program quality for young children.

Today, the evidence about what works for young children is strong. What's needed now is commitment to quality, comprehensive, integrated early childhood developmental and education programs, stakeholder cooperation within and between jurisdictions, and strong bi-partisan collaboration, legislative and funding commitments across jurisdictions.

As usual, this edition of *Every Child* focuses on a range of advocacy, policy and practice issues that promote quality and equity in early childhood services. It also includes the first instalment of contemporary research from the National ECA Early Childhood Conference to be held in Brisbane from Sept 28th to October 2nd. The next edition of *Every Child* will include further articles by conference speakers.

Alison Elliott

Editor

Letters to the Editor

Every Child readers are invited to respond to articles published in the magazine. Publishing a diversity of opinions (which are not necessarily those of Early Childhood Australia) provides a forum which promotes professional growth, creativity and debate in the early childhood field. By encouraging letters, we would like to build a community around *Every Child*, where readers are involved and engaged. *Every Child* is for you—so let us know what you think!

Please send your letters, marked 'Every Child' to either:
PO Box 7105 Watson ACT 2602 or by email to:
publishing@earlychildhood.org.au.

Following the publication of the last Every Child, Volume 11 No. 2, we had this response:

Bravo for the creative arts issue!

Dear Alison Elliott

It was a joy to read and digest some very potent and responsible creative material/views in the last *Every Child*. I also appreciated the valuable nutrition article. Being primarily an artist/writer and one who deeply understands the self-awareness which grows into other awareness via the Arts (a primary foundation of our societies), I found this edition very refreshing, as I have re-entered the profession three years ago with a lot of focus on the positives, as well as valid questions and learning/growth forward.

A very valuable and professional publication.

Bravo, and many thanks.

With respect and regards,

Pamela Bridgefoot
Freelance Writer

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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.

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Protecting children:

The challenge for parents and early childhood professionals

The most important professionals involved in child protection are those in early childhood care and education. That may surprise you, given that this importance is not widely acknowledged by universities, child protection agencies, education authorities or even professional associations. Some university deans and teachers' unions deny that child protection is relevant to educators, despite the Federal Government's *Safe School Framework* to be adopted nationwide in 2006.

So why are early childhood professionals so important?

First, young children are the most vulnerable to all forms of abuse, given that they are easily manipulated and powerless, being wholly dependent on adults for their care and safety.

Second, most abuse victims attend early childhood centres or schools.

Third, early childhood professionals have a background in child development and their professional role involves the observation of children, noting changes in their behaviour and responding to special needs.

In 2002-3, I was child protection consultant for Minister Brendan Nelson's *Safe School Framework*. This involved meeting with representatives from all education sectors. Early childhood administrators confirmed that one of the most unpleasant problems facing staff today is the highly sexualised preschool child who seeks or offers oral sex. Staff tend to dismiss this as early sexual curiosity or 'maybe the child has seen pornography or parents engaging in sex'. Exposing children to pornography constitutes child abuse and should be reported. Sexual curiosity involves equal sharing: 'You show me yours and I'll show you mine', looking rather than touching. Sexual curiosity does not involve sexual demands, the insertion of objects or the use of tricks, bribes or blackmail. An obsession with sex is likely to be an indication that the child has been abused. Such situations should be reported to child protection services for assessment and possibly treatment.

When sexually abused children are unable to talk about what happens, they often give clues in their behaviour and artwork. The child who has to provide oral sex may draw a large oval mouth with exaggerated jagged teeth. While the child looks sad, the abuser is usually depicted with a grin. Children who feel helpless may draw self-portraits as armless when other figures have limbs. Those who carry the burden of a terrible secret may draw themselves mouthless or even faceless when pictures of others have facial features. Victims may use angry colours: red, purple and black, when a range of colours is available; they may also use phallic symbols or draw outsize erect genitals on male figures. Uninformed teachers tend to respond with shock rather than ask artists who is in the picture, what is he doing and where this happens. I should emphasise that not all abused children give artistic clues and a lack of them should not be interpreted as evidence that a child has not been abused. Telltale drawings usually confirm teachers' pre-existing concerns.

So how can we help?

Teachers are often told not to ask questions because you might 'contaminate the evidence' – but without adult witnesses, offenders are rarely prosecuted. Without putting words into children's mouths, the more information you can provide, the more likely there will be an investigation. If you ignore cries for help, you allow abuse to continue. Professor Bruce Perry (who has presented at several international and Australian child abuse conferences), has research which shows that trauma associated with abuse can cause irreparable brain damage in victims under the age of four.

As responsible early childhood educators, we must ensure that we are sufficiently knowledgeable to identify and report abuse, and provide support to victims. We can also help children to stay safe by introducing explicit, developmentally-appropriate child protection curriculum. The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services is currently trialling a new program catering for child care through to Year 12. Young children can be taught personal safety skills and will practice them if activity methods are used with reinforcement. Our research confirms US findings that the children with the best safety knowledge and skills are those who have undertaken a comprehensive child protection program with parental reinforcement. In New Zealand (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996), parents are told what is being taught, why it is taught and how they can help. This minimises the risk of parents accidentally undermining the program by promoting secrecy, not listening to children and defending those who touch them inappropriately. Parents consistently said that the program resulted in more open relationships, and more confident children who knew their rights and what constituted reportable behaviour.

As responsible early childhood educators, we must ensure that we are sufficiently knowledgeable to identify and report abuse, and provide support to victims.

Although it seems unfair that children should have to take responsibility for protecting themselves from adults, safety strategies are sadly necessary in today's society. Given that the so-called justice system does not protect young children, safety programs are essential. However, unless we tell parents how they can help, they may unwittingly undermine all that has been taught.

Freda Briggs AO

Emeritus Professor
Child Development
Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences
University of South Australia – Magill Campus

Reference

Briggs, F., & Hawkins, R. M. F. (1996). *The evaluation of Keeping Ourselves Safe with intermediate school students and their parents.* University of South Australia. A report for the Commissioner of Police and Minister of Education, NZ.

National Child Protection Week

4 – 10 September, 2005

'Child-friendly communities prevent abuse and neglect of children'

In September last year, 100,000 Australians came together and made children's wellbeing their business. Organised annually by the NAPCAN Foundation—the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect—National Child Protection Week is a key event on the community calendar. NAPCAN's focus during the week is to increase awareness of the problem of and solutions to child abuse and neglect, inspire people with the simple things we can all do to help, and enable sustained community action to help prevent it.

The week provides a good opportunity to challenge the misperception that this issue can be dealt with by the child protection and welfare sector alone. It provides an opportunity for organisations working with children to involve the wider community.

In 2005, NAPCAN is seeking to further broaden the involvement and responsibility of the whole of communities. The theme 'Child-friendly communities prevent abuse and neglect of children' seeks to reinforce this message, and we will be seeking to involve every Australian to 'take the child-friendly challenge' and do simple things that help reduce the risk of abuse and neglect of children. These 'challenges' apply equally to individuals, workplaces, community organisations, sporting groups, local neighbourhoods, and all the other communities that make up our society.

An estimated 96,500 people participated directly in National Child Protection Week in 2004, compared to 49,000 in 2003, and the total number of activities doubled from 337 to 737. The range of activities organised during the week were diverse and included numerous breakfasts, information sessions and displays, as well as creative and family fun days. Some fun and simple activities were taken directly from the suggestions on NAPCAN's website (www.napcan.org.au) and in the National Child Protection Week organiser's booklet—such as the staff who raised valuable funds for NAPCAN through a baby photo guessing competition.

Other activities showed originality and initiative. The Hawkesbury Child Protection Interest Group in NSW organised the display of positive child protection messages on school noticeboards and placed banners on council sites at key traffic locations. In the Northern Territory, the Oenpelli Community—which had come together to create parenting resources using traditional stories and paintings in their own Bininj language—used NAPCAN child protection grants to create a CD-Rom about their community taking responsibility for maternal health.

One of the highlights of National Child Protection Week was the support of children's champions, particularly Cathy Freeman who attended a Police Citizens' Youth Clubs family fun day in Queensland. TV weather presenter Nuala Hafner showed her support by hosting the national launch—it was held in regional Armidale, with more than 350 people attending a day of youth entertainment and children's activities.

At the Queensland breakfast launch, former Australian cricket captain and 1989 Australian of the Year, Allan Border, spoke about his commitment to NAPCAN's vision of communities taking action to prevent child abuse and neglect. In Victoria, Courageous and Inspired Community Awards were presented to 12 such communities during the week.

In the ACT, a community forum brainstormed ideas that individuals and community groups could use to better support children and their carers. This event arose out of direct recommendations in the Vardon Report, which examined the abuse of children in care in the ACT.

Community engagement is essential to National Child Protection Week. In each of these activities awareness was raised, involvement was enabled, and community capacity to improve the wellbeing of children was strengthened.

Please keep National Child Protection Week (4-10 September) free in your calendar of child-friendly community activities, and log on to NAPCAN's website (www.napcan.org.au) for more information about getting involved.

This article was previously published in *NAPCAN News*.

Toy libraries are best known for their access to a seemingly endless supply of toys. Yet if you peek in on an average borrowing session, you realise the toys are just the tip of the iceberg. You can see Luke running around excitedly trying to decide if he should borrow the Thomas the Tank Engine train set, the big digger that would go perfectly in his sand-pit or perhaps some other treasure he is yet to uncover. In the corner, Alexis is transfixed over a new dolls' house, wondering whether her Barbies will fit inside and Matthew is lying under a play gym, gurgling contentedly. Three mums are engrossed in conversation about which kinder is best, while another is on the computer checking toys in and out. The coordinator is advising Luke's parents about appropriate toys for his developmental stage and Matthew's dad is reading the notice board about play ideas and community activities. Over a coffee, on the far side, you can just make out two committee members discussing how best to apply for a community grant to buy more toys.

Toy libraries:

A resource for the whole community

This humble toy library is clearly not just a substitute for a toy shop but a hub of activity—encompassing networking amongst families, information on stages of development and age-appropriate play, community involvement, and skills development and maintenance, as well as the magical opportunity to make friends and be part of a community.

Better than a toy shop

For a young child, there is no division between playing and learning. Playing is their 'work' and helps them develop physical, mental and social skills. When children play they concentrate; create; use initiative; cooperate with others; act with confidence; question; solve problems; make decisions; take responsibility for what they do; experiment; discover; persevere and practise what they are learning. Toys are not only fun but are tools for discovering the world. The greater the variety in the toys children have to play with, the broader their learning.

There are, of course, thousands of toys on the market so it can be mind-boggling as to which are the most appropriate to buy. It can also become expensive trying to keep up with the latest toys or buying a range of new toys as a child's developmental skills and interests change. Toy libraries provide the perfect solution, allowing children to access different toys every week without it costing a fortune.

Like book libraries, toy libraries lend to registered borrowers who can then choose from a stock of toys. Being a member of a toy library is like having access to an entire toy shop every week. The children think it is Christmas!

Toy libraries vary in where they are located, what they charge and the age range they provide for. The majority, however, cater for at least birth- to six-year olds (including children with special needs) and stock quality brand toys, puzzles, games, puppets, dress-ups, tapes, CDs and, increasingly, CD-ROMs. Toy libraries have the advantage of being able to draw on the knowledge and experience of many parents and child development professionals, so they purchase stock that is known to be fun, appropriate to the different developmental stages and of good quality. Many ensure they have a good supply of larger, more expensive toys that families might not otherwise be able to afford or store long-term.

Increasingly, grandparents are discovering the benefits of toy libraries when they find themselves providing care for their preschool-aged grandchildren. Toy libraries are a fantastic resource for bolstering what toys they may have in their own home, as well as providing an outing with their grandchildren and offering contact with other people caring for young children. Such benefits also extend to Family Day Care Carers or any other organisation in the role of caring for children. In addition, many libraries offer temporary or short-term memberships, which are perfect for when a young family is visiting relatives or friends on holidays.

Raising awareness

While toy libraries are described as catering for children, the value they add to the family unit cannot be highlighted enough. Toy libraries are in an excellent position to raise awareness of the importance of play in children's learning experiences and development. Many carers of young children have no knowledge of the stages of child development, yet quickly gain some understanding by chatting to others on duty or using the toy library. They also benefit from learning about providing play experiences which are appropriate, safe and make a significant contribution to early childhood education. This play, of course, includes incorporating items from around the house and all of those to be found in nature, rather than just the toys borrowed from a toy library. Families are also reminded of the value of spending time together in some old-fashioned play, which is increasingly important as our lives get busier.

Everyone can have fun with toys whether they are two or 102: enjoy being served a 'meal' from the toy kitchen, getting tangled up together in a game of Twister, or watching the premiere performance of a puppet show. The toys, though, really are just a means to an end—having new toys every fortnight makes it easy to be involved with children's learning, as you help with a puzzle, explain the intricacies of a game or develop a novel play idea. But the key is to be **involved.**

Building a community

Beyond enhancing the bonds within families, toy libraries are also about building a strong sense of community. Membership of a toy library can help many families find a niche within their community. Whether it is a family arriving from another country, a new parent who has spent their preceding years in the workforce, or someone who has been unemployed, these people are often isolated and desire opportunities to develop links to the community. Toy libraries provide a friendly, non-threatening environment where these links can be made and people have an opportunity to do some valuable grassroots networking—gathering information about local family and professional services, and even making new friends.

The majority of toy libraries are community-run and require members to help with rosters, busy bees and behind-the-scenes management. These tasks are rarely onerous but provide members and other people in the community wishing to volunteer with an opportunity to contribute time and skills to their community and also to learn new skills. Performing a role on a toy library committee of management can be the starting point for developing 'management' experience. Alternatively, it can help parents to maintain the skills that they have developed in the workplace but may not otherwise be using in their direct parenting role. While it can be difficult attracting people to management committees, there seem to be few people who leave a committee without having found it stimulating and rewarding. Many toy library members go on to other positions of responsibility in the broader community. Thus, the toy library adds to the spirit of the local community and positively influences the quality of life of those living in it.

Toy libraries are located throughout Australia (and the world) so there is often one nearby. If not, you can always start your own. Western Australia and Victoria have state associations (see contact details below) that can help people find their nearest toy library or offer guidance in starting a toy library. In other states, local councils or public libraries will usually know where toy libraries are operating in the area. Toy libraries provide an affordable avenue to expand a child's learning—the bonus is that families and the community benefit along the way.

Ann Kent

Western Australian Association of Toy Libraries Inc (WAATL)

Phone: (08) 9228 4525 or visit:
www.waatl.org.au

Jo Silver

Toy Libraries Victoria

Phone: (03) 9555 4055 or visit:
www.toylibraries.org.au

CODE OF ETHICS AGENDA

Special update

Getting your copy of ECA's Code of Ethics

Early Childhood Australia sell the Code of Ethics as a laminated poster for $13.95.

You can also purchase the Code of Ethics pack, which includes:

- **Professional ethics: The issues (Australian Journal of Early Childhood Volume 16, Number 1, 1991)**
- **Our code of ethics at work**
- **Getting ethical: A resource book for workshop leaders**
- **A Code of Ethics poster**
- **Ethics in action: Introducing the ethical response cycle**
- **ECA Code of Ethics brochure.**

The Ethics pack is priced at $49.95.

To make a purchase, call Early Childhood Australia on:
02 6242 1800 or free call: 1800 356 900.

The work on the Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics is progressing well. The steering committee has grown (thanks to interested volunteers) to include representation from each state and territory. The committee is comprised of: Lyn Fasoli, Gillian Styles, Lennie Barblett, Anne Kennedy, Margaret Clyde, Catherine Hydon, Sandra Cheeseman, Lois Pollnitz, Linda Newman, Christine Woodrow and Kris Barnett. The first phase of our study has been completed by Dr Kerry Dally, and the Literature Review is available for comment on the Early Childhood Australia website at http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au.

The next stage of the Ethics Agenda has just been completed and many of you would have participated in the Ethics Focus Groups that were held in each state and territory. At these groups, participants were asked to discuss a number of questions set by the steering committee. Firstly, participants were asked about a professional dilemma that they have recently faced and to distinguish between those that were legal and those that were ethical. This initiated much discussion in all groups and showed that people do face many dilemmas in their work places on a day-to-day basis—both ethical and legal. It was apparent from some discussions that having mandatory child abuse reporting in most states (not all) has assisted in the ethical/legal distinction. The other questions discussed were:

1. Are the ethical challenges you encounter in the early childhood field in Australia different now than they were 10 years ago? If so, how?
2. What new ethical challenges do you think will confront the early childhood field in 10 years time?
3. Who do you think the Code of Ethics has served well?
4. Who may currently not be represented in the Code of Ethics—for example, in the way it is written, what it emphasises, the values it espouses, and/or the audiences it addresses?
5. How well does the Code in its current form help us with ethical challenges, such as the ones you discussed in the first part of the proceedings?
6. If the Code, in its present form, does address these issues satisfactorily, are there any amendments you would suggest to ensure that it addresses current and future issues?
7. If the Code, in its present form, is not helpful for resolving ethical challenges or no longer reflects your thinking about ethical practice, what changes would you make to it? What would your code of ethics look like?

Currently, the comments from the focus groups have been collated and are being discussed by the Steering Committee. The focus group discussions are to be used to inform the next part of the consultative process—a national survey. It has been an interesting process with much discussion at every stage amongst the committee members. This continues with the survey construction stage. We anticipate that the survey will be posted to members and available on the ECA website in early August. We hope that as many people involved in early childhood as possible will respond to the survey, not just ECA members.

Following the analysis of the survey data during September and October, the Steering Committee will report to the Executive of Early Childhood Australia. If anyone has not had a chance to be involved in the focus groups and would like to comment on any of the questions above, please contact Lennie Barblett on l.barblett@ecu.edu.au.

Lennie Barblett

Member, Steering Committee

WELFARE REFORM:

WHAT IT MEANS FOR SOLE PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Recently, I attended two meetings instigated by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC). One, late last year, with the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews; and one this year, with the Parent Policy Branch of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), about the potential negative impact of the proposed welfare reform changes on single parents.

The proposed changes in the name of 'welfare reform' have alarming implications for single parents and their children, who could be significantly worse off under the new regime. These changes were announced in the 2005 budget—and include: new workforce participation requirements for parenting payment recipients once their youngest child turns six, changes to payment rates, taper rates on earnings, an indexation base, and changes to compliance requirements.

Research evidence (National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, 2005; Smyth & Weston, 2000) tells us that single parents are at the highest risk of poverty, yet parents applying on or after 1 July 2006 for income support will receive less. The effect will be to increase the risk of poverty for sole parent households.

Participation requirements and activity tests—including the requirement that the single parent does 15 hours of paid work or face a reduction in their parenting payments—will place unreasonable pressure on single parents' families. All parents' first obligation is to parent their children. This policy creates a real tension between that obligation and meeting the workforce participation requirements of the welfare reform policy.

The policy assumes that there are part-time jobs that these parents will be able to get easily and still meet their parenting obligations. Where are these part-time jobs? The likelihood is that many, many of them will be casual, low-paid and non-permanent. Many are likely to be at night, at weekends and at times when children are home. How are these parents meant to manage school holidays, before- and after-school care, sick children, without actually being in a worse financial position than they were prior to the implementation of this policy? At the same time, there are real additional costs associated with going to work, such as transport, clothing, child care etc. The jobs these parents are likely to get are unlikely to be well-paid. Children will be the real losers as a result of this policy.

Just to spell it out. If parents do not do 15 hours paid work, their parenting payment will be reduced. If, after 12 weeks of paid employment, the job they get fails for one reason or another, they will get a reduced parenting payment. Even if they do get work, there is a real likelihood that they will be worse off financially, see their children less and often have to make hard choices between work and meeting their children's needs. Increase in family stress is a likely outcome for many of these families, potentially increasing child and parent health problems.

Children will be the real losers as a result of this policy.

Workforce and Job Network outcomes may pressure agencies to push parents into work activities that are against their own or their children's needs and interests. There is also the concern that newly separated families will be afforded no reasonable time to address family needs such as re-housing, family law, dealing with domestic violence etc.

As Dr Elspeth McInnes, the Convenor of NCSMC says, 'If we follow the experience and evidence of workforce policies in North America, we will find children receive less parental care, they experience more family stress and minimal or temporary gains in income.'

McInnes says, 'Parents seeking to return to paid work (and most want to and do once their children start school) need the support of family-friendly workplace reforms, appropriate child care, and access to skills education, adequate housing and transport for their barriers to paid work to be properly addressed.'

'We have a problem when punishment becomes the principal policy response to social disadvantage, while the support to help parents receive their career aspirations are limited.'

We must have legislation that protects the rights of parents to provide care to their children without the added risk of loss or reduction in income support. We know these children are our most vulnerable. Yet the new workforce participation requirements and compliance regimes will expose children to even greater risk.

Most parents want to be out of the poverty cycle. This will not be achieved by policies which are insensitive to the real pressures these families face. What is needed are policies which can be responsive to each families' circumstances and which support rather than coerce parents into the workforce.

The wellbeing of our nation's children must be the first priority of any government, not labour force participation. I urge *Every Child* readers, Early Childhood Australia members and friends to find out more about these reforms and to stand up for these children. A child has no choice about who their parent is—we need a policy that reflects the Government's obligation to protect and support our youngest citizens no matter what the situation of his/her parent/s.

For more comprehensive information, visit the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children website: www.ncsmc.org.au.

Judy Radich

National President
Early Childhood Australia

Northern Territory children:
How old should they be before entering pre-compulsory school?

In 2004, the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training began a policy trial for Age of Entry to pre-compulsory school. Georgie Nutton reports.

In the Northern Territory (NT), pre-compulsory programs include preschool and transition (two years and one year prior to compulsory schooling respectively). Compulsory enrolment remains at six years of age. The current policy in NT government schools for enrolment in preschool and Transition is continuous throughout the year. This policy has operated since 1980. Only one other state, South Australia, has continuous enrolment for these non-compulsory stages of schooling.

The following is a summary of the current policy:

- preschool enrolment in urban schools is from a child's fourth birthday provided a place is available;
- preschool enrolment in remote schools is from a child's third birthday and attendance is in the company of a parent or guardian; and
- transition enrolment follows a child's fifth birthday. Schools must have a minimum of three intakes over the school year. Children must have turned five by 30 June to enrol in the same year. Commencement in Year One is based on 'readiness'.

One of the strongest criticisms levelled at the current policy is that it is not clearly understood by the wider public. This perception is possibly due to the level of transient families coming into the NT schooling system with experiences of single intake policies in most other states.

The second major concern for families and school administrators is that the current policy's flexibility, with a 'minimum of three intakes' over the year has resulted in inconsistency between schools. This is largely an urban issue where parents can 'shop around' for convenient service as school zoning is rarely applied. Many schools have used this flexibility to address their management and administrative issues. This inconsistency has resulted in rigorous lobbying from families, principals and teachers.

The primary issues raised by teachers about the current policy are centred on transition programs. Many children starting in the second semester have been disadvantaged by quick progression into the formal academic programs of Year One without access to adequate preparatory programs. The lock-step nature of progression through schooling and the assumptions this may impose on some children's experiences and demonstrated achievements, in the context of outcome-focused learning, is problematic and difficult to articulate for many teachers, let alone the wider public.

Many qualified and long-experienced early childhood educators have been concerned about the formal academic creep into the pre-compulsory and preparatory programs. Teachers express concern for ensuring that children in the pre-compulsory stages of schooling in particular, have appropriate play-based and foundation learning necessary for children to succeed in academic achievement, school retention and life outcomes. In the Northern Territory context, a large proportion of the population have limited access to early learning experiences to support preparation for school culture. Related to this is the limited access to services for early identification of children at risk. Under the current policy, this is recognised and is, in part, addressed for some of the cohort by providing access to three-year-old remote Indigenous children to preschool. The policy review does not propose any change to this aspect of remote Indigenous access.

The policy trial — which was conducted in nine schools in 2004 and has continued in 2005 — provides for enrolment of children turning four by 30 June in preschool from the commencement of the school year. Children in trial schools may be enrolled in Transition programs from the beginning of the school year if they turn five by 30 June. Trial schools were given flexibility to negotiate with their school community on the intake for preschool so that parents wishing to enrol children during the year could do so, on the understanding that children turning four in the second semester would have access to more than 12 months of preschool (as with the current policy). It should be reiterated that both preschool and transition are non-compulsory and, as such, the enrolment of children is at the parents' discretion.

The greatest opportunity presented by the trial has been for teachers to refocus their current practice on play-based learning. Trial schools have provided a range of working models for building partnerships

In the Northern Territory context, a large proportion of the population have limited access to early learning experiences to support preparation for school culture. Related to this is the limited access to services for early identification of children at risk.

with other service providers such as child care centres to achieve better continuity for children and their families. Teachers have been encouraged to re-examine student-centred approaches to pedagogy, quality environments, partnerships with parents and colleagues. The variety of ways in which trial schools have approached this has been helpful in building capacity and an early childhood learning community. One of the exciting parallel projects for the trial is the development of an explicit guide to quality practice in preschool and transition for the diverse teaching/learning contexts of the Territory.

Trial schools have taken a range of opportunities to rethink various aspects of their physical and organisational structures. One trial school has developed an early learning centre with shared space, play areas and resources for preschool and Transition (with future access for the adjacent child care centre). Continuity of quality programs and shared knowledge of children has been explored in a number of trial schools. One trial school has developed collaborative programming between the child care centre (co-located on campus), preschool and Transition staff.

At this stage there is widespread support for the single intake at the beginning of the school year for Transition. The trial cut-off date of 30 June allows the anticipated cohort to be included. Further, there is much anticipation about the National Common School Starting Age project and proposed options. The major areas to be examined in the course of the trial during 2005 include further development of the ways to identify and respond to children at risk, capacity of current infrastructure and capacity building for quality staff and programs.

A change in policy alone will not address the range of issues for delivering quality programs in the pre-compulsory years of schooling. The intent of the Age of Entry policy trial is reflected in the aspects of quality practices being examined through the trial. Specifically, timely and enthusiastic attention is being given to quality programs and staff capacity; environments; partnerships with parents and community (including continuity between services) and, responding to children at risk with timely and enthusiastic attention.

For more details on the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training Age of Entry Policy Trial, see www.ageofentry.nt.gov.au.

Georgie Nutton

Early Years Manager
Curriculum Services Branch
Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

Supporting children through disasters

Today, disasters are beamed into our homes pretty well as they happen with events shown over and over again. The loss and suffering in the London bombings or the tsunami disaster were catastrophic and so vivid to us because of their 24/7 coverage on TV and on the Internet. Other tragic disasters, such as the Tangshan (China) earthquake in 1976—that killed over 242,000 people and obliterated the city, didn't have quite the same impact on us as telecommunications were not as well developed.

Who didn't dream water-related dreams after the tsunami? Who didn't look carefully at fellow travellers after 9/11 or the London bombings? That national and international travel declined dramatically after the World Trade Centre disaster in New York showed that adults in the US and elsewhere were affected by the disaster.

If adults are fearful after such disasters, so too are children. And probably more so in many cases because they don't always understand the context of the event. It may seem much closer than it really is.

Even children far removed from the tragedy can show signs of anxiety. Helping them understand what is going on and simultaneously achieving a balance between reality and something manageable for a young mind is not easy.

Our children were spared from the tsunami's direct effects or the Bali or London bombings, but the 24/7 coverage of war and disaster stories means that few are spared the graphic and disturbing images of death, destruction and despair. Few children can avoid exposure to the suffering that confronts people at home and beyond.

This year seems to have been a peak disaster period. There was injury, death and destruction caused by bushfires, floods, mud slides, wars, bombings, starvation and of course, the tsunami.

Young children seeing the repeated images on TV can be confused in terms of the sense of time, place and space. Watching crushed trains, rushing water, mud or flames over and over again can be traumatic. Seeing distressed and distraught children separated from their parents is disturbing.

While very young children can be shielded from these images, it's more difficult to keep them from children aged four and five and older. Even if TV news is banned in their own homes, they are likely to see the images somewhere.

Older children, from about six or seven, are probably most at risk from the images in these disaster events. They are more likely to be exposed to TV and Internet images and can better understand the magnitude of the events. Younger children are also affected, but sometimes less so because they don't understand the scale or reality of the events.

As parents, carers and educators, it's important to emphasise children's safety. They need assurance that they are safe and protected from such events by parents and others in their community. At the same time, even the youngest child needs to develop a sense of responsibility for personal and home safety. No playing with matches, being aware of road safety and so on. So getting the right balance is tricky. Children are vulnerable, but at the same time resilient. Protecting and supporting children through these events is most important.

The main signs that children are being adversely affected by disaster events include:

- difficulty getting to sleep;
- interrupted sleep;
- nightmares;
- clinging or wanting to sleep with parents;
- bedwetting or soiling;
- reluctance to eat or wanting special foods;
- thumbsucking;
- difficulty concentrating;
- irritable, acting out or aggressive behaviours;
- a new fear of water, fire, trains, planes, or something related to the disaster; and
- not wanting to go to child care, preschool or school.

What can we do?

Limit TV viewing, especially the 24-hour news channels.

Talk to children about what is happening. Listen to their questions and respond sensibly and truthfully, but carefully and thoughtfully.

Let them know that these are unusual events and that everyone is anxious and concerned but that the people in our community (who help in such cases) are working on assisting those affected and that we can all help in a small way.

Encourage children to donate pocket money, raise money, give flowers or write letters or emails to the victims.

Keep children busy with planned indoor and outdoor activities. Creative and physical activities provide opportunities for emotional clarification and release.

Ensure children have structure, routines, clear boundaries and continuity in their day-to-day lives.

Visit fire stations, police stations, and relief and welfare organisations, where they can see the people who keep us safe and help those in need.

Give children choices from limited options or alternatives. Making decisions is important but within child-sized boundaries.

And finally, children need to know they are wanted and loved unconditionally. An abundance of smiles, praise, hugs, touches and hand-holding works wonderfully.

Alison Elliot

Editor, *Every Child* and Research Director,
Early Childhood Education
Australian Council for Educational Research

The Blue Mountains Transition to School project:

A community working together for its children

Building ongoing relationships between parents, early childhood professionals and teachers at local schools is at the heart of the Blue Mountains Transition to School Project. Under the auspice of Connect Child and Family Services (CCFS, formally Possum Children's Support Service), this Families First project commenced in January 2004 with the aim of developing a model to promote a smooth adjustment to school for parents and children. The model aims to address the needs of all families experiencing transition to school, however those families with children unable to access early childhood services prior to starting school are being targeted.

'Starting School' playgroups

Central to the development of this model has been the establishment of three 'Starting School' playgroups which provide parents and children with the opportunity to gradually experience the school environment together. These supported playgroups commenced in term three in local schools and are facilitated for two hours each week by qualified early childhood teachers from CCFS.

The playgroups can be attended regularly or on a drop-in basis and children do not need to be enrolling in any of the particular schools. At present, an average of 32 families attend on a regular basis and of these, half do not access prior-to-school services.

In addition to providing supportive early childhood learning environments, these playgroups are providing many incidental opportunities for children and their parents or carers to meet and build relationships with teachers and other school students, and for families to explore the feelings associated with a child beginning school.

Parents have also noted the value of being able to observe their children's interactions with other children and with adults other than themselves.

The playgroups are being held in school halls or classrooms and casual visits to other parts of the school such as the library and kindergarten classroom give teachers, parents and carers the opportunity to reach a shared understanding of the education system that children are about to enter.

Benefits

The following anecdotal evidence from parents, carers, early childhood professionals and school staff, highlights the important role that facilitated playgroups can play in supporting all stakeholders in the transition to school process. As mentioned earlier, half of the children currently attending the playgroups are not attending any other early childhood service. These playgroups are therefore providing children with high-quality early learning experiences that are known to be important to later educational success. They are also providing the opportunity for all children and their families to develop realistic expectations of school, another contributing factor to positive educational outcomes (Glazier, 2001; Elliott, 2004).

Parents have also noted the value of being able to observe their children's interactions with other children and with adults other than themselves. This is an aspect they believe to be important in assessing their children's ability to cope in the school environment.

Similarly, parents have commented that the family-centred nature of the playgroups allows both parents and siblings to 'share' the older child's experience of starting school – which assists in the promotion of continuity between home and school.

From a professional perspective, early childhood and school staff who have collaborated closely during the development and implementation stages of the playgroups, continue to express their satisfaction at contributing to a project that furthers the growth of social capacity by bringing the broader community 'into' the school environment.

Conclusion

The Blue Mountains Transition to School project is demonstrating that facilitated playgroups can play an important role in the transition to school process, especially for children who are unable to access other early childhood services. The ongoing relationships that have resulted from collaboration between local families, early childhood professionals and teachers is a powerful demonstration of what can be achieved when a community works together for the benefit of its children.

Dianne Jackson

Manager, Connect Child and Family Services
Coordinator, Blue Mountains Transition to School Project

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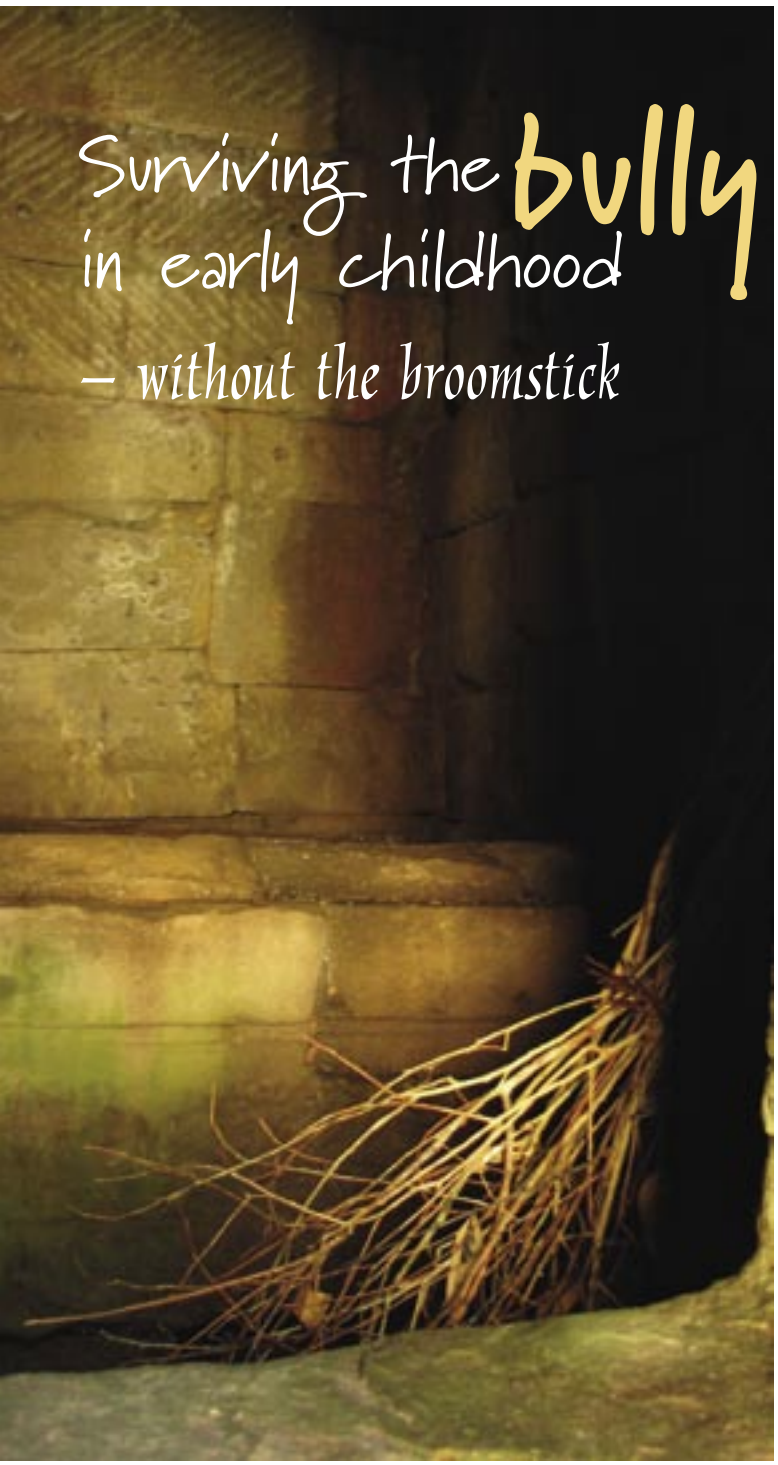
Surviving the bully in early childhood – without the broomstick

Hogwartz School of Witchcraft wasn't all smooth broom-riding for Harry Potter. His Quidditch stick was broken by bullies. Even his owl, Hedwig, was tormented. Anne of Green Gables was teasingly referred to as 'Carrots', Roald Dahl's Matilda was taunted as a 'bookworm'. And five-year-old Sean, who started kindergarten in Moree last year, was teased on the school bus, jostled in the corridors and dreaded the approach of recess and lunch.



According to a new study, Harry's nemesis, Draco Malfoy, and all of the other bullies who haunt the schoolyards of the world, have one thing in common. They hit their aggressive peak between 24 and 42 months. And unlike most of us, they haven't learnt to interact and achieve goals without aggression.

The study on the development of physical aggression in infancy by Dr Richard Tremblay, a researcher at the University of Montréal, has been published in the *Infant Mental Health Journal.* The study shows that aggression starts in the first year of birth. 'This suggests that rather than learning to physically aggress, children are learning not to physically aggress,' Dr Tremblay said. 'The results we have been getting over the past few years tell an intriguing, albeit, not unanticipated story about human nature. Physical aggression appears during the first year after birth. Its frequency increases rapidly during the second year after birth, reaches a peak between 24 and 42 months after birth, and then decreases steadily.'

Judy Radich, Director of Cooloon Childcare Centre and President of Early Childhood Australia, says the results of the study have implications for children's services, early childhood educators and parents. As she sees it, with child care centres more in demand than ever before, the question is whether child care staff will have the time to take the implications of the new study into account. 'We have been putting more kids into child care over the last 10 years and we haven't yet seen what kind of adults these kids have turned into—there have been no studies,' she says.

Radich sees the 'appalling' staff/child ratios—with one staff member caring for five babies in some centres—as exacerbating aggressive behavior. 'We get a lot of calls from people saying that they have an 18-month-old child and they want their kids to socialise so they send them to child care. I think this is detrimental if the child care centre is not a good one.'

In the fantasy world, the Hogwartz School of Witchcraft ratio is a good one. Wizard/student ratios are literally out of this world and as a result, Harry graduates unscarred (apart from a small lightening bolt on his forehead). But what would have become of Harry without the kindly Professor Dumbledore or Matilda without a caring Miss Honey?

Dr Robin Harvey, a psychologist at the Child Study Centre at the University of Western Australia, is adamant that with early intervention from skilled and dedicated professionals, children can learn how to negotiate their world without aggression. Dr Harvey uses the centre's facilities—which include three kindergartens—to study early intervention with children experiencing behavioural and emotional problems. She sees a lack of specific training and a lack of time inhibiting child care workers' ability to intervene.

'From my experience, I think [early childhood educators] get quite a lot of training about children's development but perhaps not enough training in managing difficult behaviour. Of more concern is the high staff/child ratios, the huge number of expectations placed on child care workers and the lack of support when they do encounter a child who is very difficult,' Dr Harvey says.

Dr Harvey says it takes a special kind of person to work as an early childhood educator. A drought in qualified staff—such as the one currently being experienced across the country—makes it doubly difficult to do the job well. 'The ideal child care worker needs to have warmth and enthusiasm for children and have the intellectual skills to develop a program based on the needs and developmental levels of the children in her/his care,' Dr Harvey says. Such workers are as important in arming the Matildas and Harrys of this world with skills to defend themselves against bullies as they are in reforming the behavior of the bullies themselves.

In the fantasy world, the Hogwartz School of Witchcraft ratio is a good one. Wizard/student ratios are literally out of this world and as a result, Harry graduates unscarred (apart from a small lightening bolt on his forehead).

Dr Ken Rigby, author of *Bullying in Schools and what to do about it,* says that helping children become more resilient is an important part of combating the effects of bullying. 'We know that children who feel supported by teachers and parents can take a great deal more bullying. Support acts as a protective pillow.'

If children do not have the support they require to develop resilience and skills in handling bullies, the psychological effects can be ongoing, he says. 'Children who have been bullied are scared of certain social situations. They get nervous amongst groups of strangers; they can have bouts of depression. A small minority of children who are bullied do strike back. There was a case in a UK paper that I read about where a child who was bullied constantly stabbed the child who had been bullying him.'

In the short term, bullied children like Sean (who has made it to Year One without a broomstick) can lose self-confidence and become anxious, even depressed. Ten per cent of children who are bullied stop trying to endure it and skip school. In the case of five-year-old Sean, he begged to stay home from school. His grandmother, Yvonne Walsh, received anxious phone calls from her daughter unsure what approach she should take. Should she tell Sean to 'just ignore them', 'keep his chin up' and 'grin and bear it'? Or should she tell him that he didn't and shouldn't have to put up with being bullied?

'It was right from when he was on the bus. Once his face was pushed into the bubbler, just jostling and if you know you're going to get picked on when you get on the bus … I remember one time he just ran back into the house and said he didn't want to go,' Yvonne says.

When she asked her boss, Judy Radich, for advice, she had no doubt that the outcome of Sean's bullying would not be a thick skin and that it had to be stopped. Yvonne passed on the message. 'Sometimes we think, "Oh this will just go away", but Judy was adamant, and I learnt the importance of nipping it in the bud and taking it seriously, just thinking this is not allowed to happen,' Yvonne says.

'I think the support from his mum, the one-on-one interaction and the way he was made to feel special and supported helped him. It was taken seriously rather than just, you know, "get over it". He is a very special kid, but I'm biased I suppose.'

In a recent question-and-answer session on her website, J.K Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter* series, offered some advice for victims without a broomstick or a wizard at their disposal. 'I know that it is very hard to admit that you are being bullied but it is absolutely crucial if you are to end the misery. Life in school can be very tough and any adult who has forgotten that is an idiot, so don't be ashamed, just tell,' Rowling said.

If only it were as simple as overcoming a fear of 'dibba-dobbing'. 'Just telling' may not be so simple to a child. Staff ratios mean one child care worker for every five babies, one for every eight under three-year-olds, and one for every 10 three to six-year-olds. In primary schools, one teacher has to supervise an average of 16.9 students. 'You can have all the knowledge in the world but without the time to plan and the appropriate number of people to assist, you can't do much,' Dr Harvey says.

Jen Reid

Jen is a freelance writer and journalism student at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), with a specific interest in social justice and early childhood issues.

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Further information about aggression

For a further resource on early childhood aggression, see *Aggression and young children* by Diane Louise Szarkowicz. Published by Early Childhood Australia and priced at $14.95, it can be purchased by calling:
(02) 6242 1800.

In addition, the Australian Council of Educational Research is running a series of professional development workshops focusing on building social competence and managing difficult behaviours for staff in early childhood centres. The workshops are run by expert presenters and sponsored by the Telstra Foundation so there is no cost to participants. If you would like to discuss running a workshop for your centre or group of centres, please email Alison Elliott (elliott@acer.edu.au).

As emphatic debate and interest around children's health, parenting and work-family balance increasingly fills the media and informs the political agenda, early childhood development has become a focus of attention in Australia and around the world. This interest is gathering more and more momentum as compelling research suggests that if we don't invest in children when they are young, then it will cost our society significantly more time, effort and money trying to fix problems when they arise later in life.

Acting together to give our kids a head start

Tackling the early years

Although it is heartening to see early childhood developmental issues being adopted by our political leaders and agenda setters, how we nurture and support young children and families has not yet fully permeated our decision-making avenues. While there may be a growing awareness, there is not yet a solid commitment across a range of social and economic areas. To help bridge this gap, the NSW and Queensland Commissions for Children and Young People, together with the National Investment for the Early Years (NIFTeY), published a report called *A Head Start for Australia: An Early Years Framework*.

A Head Start for Australia is designed to promote a more widespread understanding of the importance of the early years—one that crosses state boundaries and political divides. To this end, the Framework is aimed at all levels of government, the community sector and the business sector. Its audience, therefore, is a broad one—consisting of decision-makers, policy-makers, researchers, professionals and the wider community.

The outright benefit of the Framework is that it provides an agreed set of priorities and a way of organising our thinking about how we might achieve those priorities over the medium- to long-term. As advocates for children, our aim is to provide decision-makers with the data they need to make informed, effective decisions in the interests of children and young people.

A Head Start for Australia draws together the best local and international research to provide a comprehensive overview of why the early years are so critical. It also identifies nine key areas in which we can take action to give our kids the best possible start in life and outlines suggested actions to implement them.

The nine areas nominated in the Framework are:

1. supporting the wellbeing of women of childbearing age;
2. promoting child wellbeing;
3. supporting the choices of families in their parental and working roles;
4. enriching, safe and supportive environments for kids;
5. improving economic security for families and reducing child poverty;
6. achieving success in learning and development;
7. protecting the safety of children;
8. promoting connections across generations, families, cultures and communities; and
9. increasing children's participation: policy action, awareness-raising and advocacy.

The Framework explains why each of these outcome areas is important and then sets out some concrete examples of how we might better achieve them. It is not prescriptive, so it can be adapted to the local circumstances of different individuals, organisations and communities.

A Head Start for Australia also sets out four underpinning strategies which will be critical in achieving big picture goals. These are:

1. a skilled and safe workforce;
2. evidence-based policy and program development and implementation;
3. redesigning systems and services to support coordinated action; and
4. a sustained communication strategy to focus attention and action.

While there is a substantial body of evidence on which to base policy and program development, the health, education and welfare systems face workforce challenges in attracting and retaining staff (particularly education) in rural, remote and outer urban areas. In addition, the delivery of health and welfare services is affected by a set of bureaucratic, geographical and funding barriers impeding the development of a co-ordinated, collaborative response to the complexity of issues in children's lives.

The wellbeing of Australia's children (birth – eight years)

Aside from the moral responsibility a society holds towards its children, there are critical social and economic reasons to invest in the health and development of our children. With the current decline in Australia's birthrate, a smaller number of workers and taxpayers will be supporting a larger ageing

population. It is in our own interests to keep them as physically healthy, emotionally high, functioning and well-educated as possible.

Australia is a wealthy country and most of our children are doing well. Considering our wealth, however, our children could be doing better. While the Framework is concerned with maximising the health and wellbeing of all our children, there are some groups of Australian children whose outcomes are particularly poor. These include:

- Indigenous children;
- children living in poverty;
- children with mental health problems;
- children who have been abused;
- children living in out of home care;
- children in the juvenile justice system;
- children with a disability; and
- refugee children.

These groups are not mutually exclusive and illustrate that many health and wellbeing outcomes have common determinants. The challenges facing our most disadvantaged children stretch far beyond what is within the scope of one part of the service system to respond to. Improving the wellbeing of these children will involve a significant and sustained investment, working across the service system, across different levels of government and spread over a range of social and economic policy domains.

Reducing the impact of poor developmental outcomes on our children will only occur with concerted action from all levels of government and with valuable contributions from the community and private sectors. It requires sustained effort working across policy and service divides, as well as a long-term commitment to reducing the problem. This commitment will only come if there is greater understanding of both the short- and long-term impacts on the individual and the broader community of an inadequate response. The Framework is intended to broaden this understanding.

Gillian Calvert

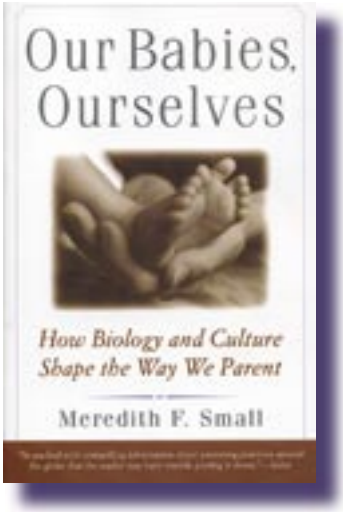
NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People.

A Head Start for Australia: An Early Years Framework can be downloaded in PDF format from www.kids.nsw.gov.au or by contacting the NSW Commission for Children and Young People on 02 9286 7276 for a printed copy.

Nine key outcome areas:

1. **Supporting the wellbeing of women of childbearing age.**
2. **Promoting child wellbeing.**
3. **Supporting the choices of families in their parental and working roles.**
4. **Enriching, safe and supportive environments for kids.**
5. **Improving economic security for families and reducing child poverty.**
6. **Achieving success in learning and development.**
7. **Protecting the safety of children.**
8. **Promoting connections across generations, families, cultures and communities.**
9. **Increasing children's participation: policy action, awareness-raising and advocacy.**

Our Babies, Ourselves



By Meredith F Small

Anchor Books [available by order, through Random House] (1998)
ISBN 0385483627
RRP: $37.50

When I first opened this book I wasn't sure what to expect. The title and cover were interesting; the overall design of the book was clean—but rather sterile and boring. A few photos were placed in the middle of the book and I wondered why? Was it to reduce printing or publication costs or was this another 'boring' text book?

However, once I started reading the book it was a completely different story. Meredith Small is able to capture our attention and hold it for the duration of the book. Her background is anthropology, with an interest in the interaction of human biology and culture. She was at the 'birth' of the new science of ethnopediatrics, which is concerned about the study of parents and infants across cultures. By now you may be thinking this book is not for me. It's too involved or academic, not in my area or well above my head. But that is not the case with *Our babies ourselves*. The statement on the cover: ' the reader may have trouble putting it down' is absolutely correct.

This book is refreshing in that it challenges our beliefs and practices about parenting which are mainly culturally-based, but biologically may not always be the best practice. Should we leave a baby to cry? Should he/she (the baby) sleep in another room? Is personality set at birth or changed through parenting? and many other questions.

The introduction is relatively lengthy, but needs to be read to set the scene. The first two chapters—'The evolution of babies' and 'The anthropology of parenting'—are well written and very interesting. The following chapters start the challenges. Meredith Small uses examples from a number of cultures to illustrate her points and challenge our thinking. She uses current research to support her points, but again, this is clearly explained to the reader. There is also a feeling of support for all parents as they travel this journey of parenthood. There is something for everyone in this book. I found in the reasonable sleep chapter that humans are biphasic sleepers and therefore should have two sleeps in a 24 hour period—so everyone should have an afternoon nap and not feel guilty about it. I'm off for my nap now—after I give this book to my neighbour who has just had a new baby and is looking for parenting books to read.

Lyn Bower

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The Bilbies of Bliss

By Margaret Wild and Noela Young

ABC Books (2005)
ISBN 073330768X
RRP: $27.95

Bliss is a home for old, retired bilbies. Even though it looks beautiful, it isn't the best place to live. Matron is strict and has lots of mean rules that make everyone feel like they are trapped in a little cage. One day, Nina, a new bilby, comes to stay and finds it isn't the beautiful home she is expecting. Nina helps the bilbies to realise it is a bad place by disagreeing with the rules and saying, 'This home may appear beautiful but it is not a fit place to live in.' Sometimes I think it is good to challenge rules because it can make people's lives better. This book has lovely illustrations with beautiful colours to show what bliss can look like.

P.S. Bliss means perfect happiness.

Laura Marshall

(7.5 years old)

The Bilbies of Bliss is the latest book by multi-award winning author Margaret Wild. The main storyline revolves around a group of elderly bilbies whose lives are governed by the punitive and mean-spirited rules of Matron, the caretaker of Bliss. Their lives regain some dignity and meaning as a new resident, Nina, questions the foundations on which the rules are based and calls for a more compassionate and caring way of life. The themes of friendship and community spirit that drive the main narrative are brought to life by Noela Young's luminous watercolour illustrations. This is a thought-provoking book that should generate interesting discussions with children in early childhood and the early years of school settings, around the values that drive the ways in which people interact with each other.

Jane Page

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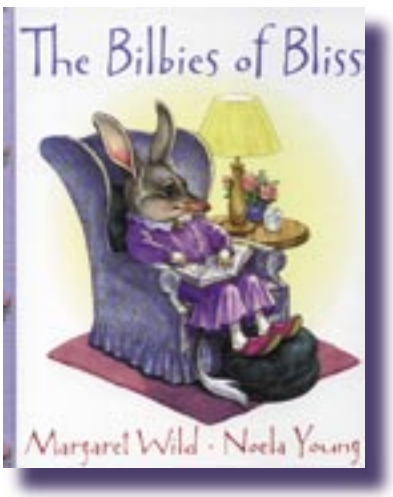
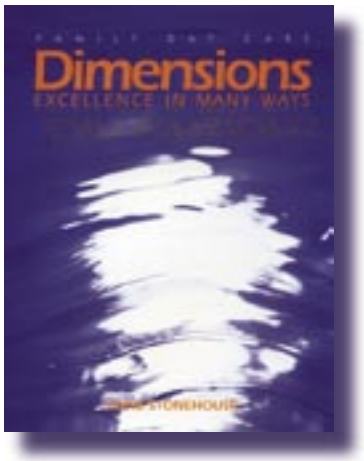




Dimensions

Excellence in many ways

By Anne Stonehouse

National Family Day Care Council of Australia (2004)
ISBN 095780484-9
RRP: $33 (members); $45.25 (non-members)

Dimensions is indeed about the many ways that excellence can be achieved in the provision of child care, specifically family day care. Although by its own description it is aimed primarily at family day care carers, there is a great deal of information, suggestions and ideas that are also beneficial for family day care staff and the parents of children already in, or considering using, family day care.

Dimensions illustrates the importance of relationships, partnerships, inclusion and diversity and the contribution that they make in and to the lives of those involved, particularly children. These issues are explained, discussed and detailed in a number of practical and thought-provoking ways. Carers are also encouraged to question how and why they plan and provide activities and experiences for children, and to look at things through the eyes and minds of the children and families for whom they are providing care.

While the focus of *Dimensions* is on children and the provision of a meaningful, positive and stimulating child care experience, it also recognises the difficulties faced by family day care carers in adhering to licensing requirements, and the impact on carers' homes and families. *Dimensions* also demonstrates, through actual accounts from family day care carers, how to ensure that the family day care experience, while supporting excellent practice, is a positive, rewarding and enriching experience for everyone involved.

Family day care carers, whether new to the experience or having been involved for many years, will find this book a great resource. As one carer said, 'It places family day care on the map and acknowledges what carers do and what they're about. Simple to read and very effective.'

Sue Perdriau

Family day care carer
Wyong Shire Family Day Care Scheme

Zen Shorts

By Jon Muth

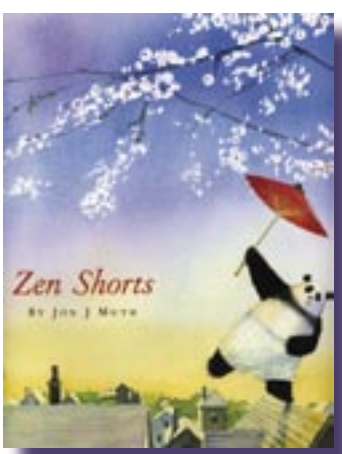
Scholastic Press (2005)
ISBN 0439339111
RRP: $29.95

I picked this book up and gave it a quick read, and had some doubts about it. BUT … the *quick read* turned out to be significant. Later, when I was able to make the time to read this at a much more contemplative pace, I fell in love with it; and making space and time for stopping and thinking is the *key* to this beautiful book. Wrapped into a narrative about a panda and three children, are three *short* stories that are simple yet profound, grounded in traditional Zen meditation. This does not mean that the book is religious propaganda of any persuasion, but it does address the spiritual. It addresses the bigger questions that we sometimes neglect to teach children, in our rush to teach all the other 'stuff' that we think they need to know. This book is wonderful for those bigger goals of teaching—educating for peace and sustainable futures.

The Zen stories are simply engaging stories (like any of the classic and enduring fairy stories/myths/legends) which leave you with some food for thought, long after you have put the book down. I particularly liked the story of the two monks, which teaches us to put down our burdens and stop carrying them around. I have thought about this story every day since I read the book.

I wondered if this might be one of those books which appeals to the adult reader more than the children it is meant for. So I 'tried it out' on some children (ages five, six, eight and nine) and gave it a test run. They loved it. The book can be read on different levels. My younger 'guinea pig' children enjoyed the 'big' story, and the older children 'got' some of the smaller stories. I suspect that those profound stories will be revisited, as they were with me. Like all good picture books, the stories are also told through the use of art as language. The children gazed at the beautiful, soft watercolour washes for the main narrative. They are subtle, soothing and referential to the culture in which the story is set (I'm not too sure about the accuracy of a Panda in Japan, but nevertheless, he is a wise and gentle Panda). Then, the children 'read' the switch, when you come to the Zen stories, which are illustrated in black and white, pen and ink drawings.

In short (the word short has multiple layers in this book!), I think *Zen Shorts* is a treasure. It is respectful of children as competent and creative beings, and does not 'talk down' to them, like some children's books do. In fact, I think this book could lead the way in lifting the benchmark for children's authors to aim for the capabilities of their audiences. I highly recommend it as a book for inspiring learning about art, cultural understandings, and friendships—but more importantly—profound lessons about life and how we should strive to live it.



Felicity McArdle

School of Early Childhood
Queensland University of Technology

A process of *discovery*

Indigenous students, enrolled in pre-service teacher education at Macquarie University, share their thoughts on the study of maths, science and technology. Marina Papic and Camilla Gordon report.

Macquarie University offers Aboriginal Child Care workers, currently working in the field, the opportunity to become qualified Early Childhood teachers. Students from as far away as Northern Queensland, Victoria and the far west of NSW attend four on-campus sessions each year of the five- to six-year course. In their fourth year, they are introduced to Maths, Science and Technology (MST). Traditionally, these curriculum areas have been treated with much apprehension by students.

> 'When I read what we were studying in our fourth year: maths, science and technology, I was scared! But I certainly changed my views.'

> 'I originally thought, "My goodness, I failed maths and science at high school and I don't feel confident at all doing this subject."' (G. from Qld)

Aboriginal teachers are beginning to influence and take control of the decision-making process which determines the structure and nature of schooling for Aboriginal students (Jones, Kershaw & Sparrow, 1995, p. 3). Effective pre-service programs that value their culture and acknowledge their visual-spatial approach to learning have enabled Indigenous pre-service teachers—perhaps for the first time—to grasp complex ideas and see them as pedagogically and culturally appropriate for their children.

This course places maths and science within a framework of wonder & discovery.

As a result of this new approach, these pre-service teachers are becoming well grounded in teaching strategies that promote learning of science and maths. It is not the knowledge expected of a practising mathematician or scientist, but rather, a collective working knowledge that enables the teacher to re-cast these subjects in a way that effectively communicates understanding to the learner.

> 'The lessons were very enjoyable, plenty of hands on, that is how Indigenous students learn.' (L. from NSW)

The content of the science course was on earth and space, promoting an understanding of soil and rocks, wind and weather, shadows, the sun and moon, and the majesty of the day and night sky. Students broke up sandstone into sand, shale into mud and relished the delights of breaking light into rainbows and melting chocolate with sunlight. They investigated the mathematical concepts and processes in number, measurement, space, data and algebra. Through hands-on activities and problem-solving, they discerned the possibilities of making activities both culturally appropriate and linked to other curriculum areas. Students explored mathematics and science through literature, art, music, Dreamtime stories, cooking, nature and movement. They were encouraged to become both learner and teacher, and to reflect on their experiences in both roles.

This course places maths and science within a framework of wonder and discovery.

Through engagement in practical enquiry and social interaction, students discovered the fun of maths and science and now are passing on this understanding to the children in their communities.

'When the parents came to collect their child at the end of the day, the children didn't want to go home (they virtually cried to stay).' (G. from Qld)

'Our hands-on, minds-on constructivism approach to MST during our on-campus was brilliant. Participatory experiences which are simple, fun, easy and relative will be etched in our minds long after some reading materials. The experiences can be adjusted culturally, still etching the necessary MST outcome. I initially read our unit objectives for maths, science and technology, and I wondered where this journey would lead! All experiences captivated my interest with a drive to want to learn more.' (K. from Vic)

The richest and most satisfying experience for a teacher is seeing that you are making a difference. We believe we have made a difference to these students and consequently, have been enriched ourselves. They, in turn, are experiencing the fruits of real learning, changing the lives of their students and themselves. And so the cycle goes on.

Marina Papic

Lecturer, Macquarie University
Institute of Early Childhood

Camilla Gordon

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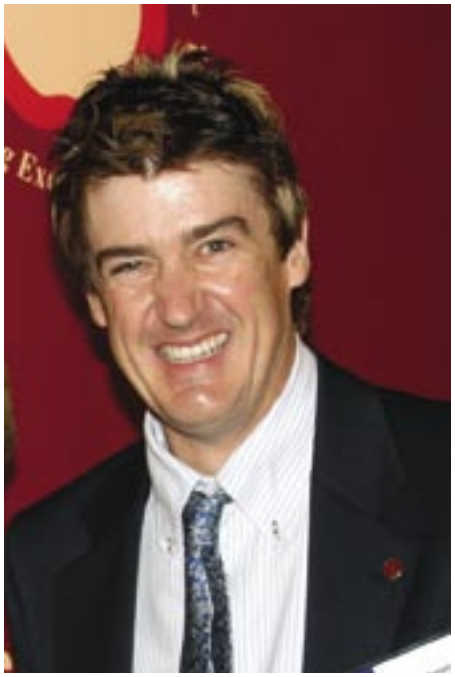
Q&A

Interview with Neville Dwyer



Neville is the Director at community-based service, the Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning, Griffith NSW and the President of Country Children's Services. He is also the recent winner of the National Excellence in Teaching Award.

1. What drew you to the area of early childhood?

I come from a small community 70 km out of Griffith. I grew up on a farm and went to school just down the road at a one-teacher, 11-student school. I never got to attend preschool, but I did grow up in a caring, tolerant and extraordinary community.

I trained as a primary school teacher, and in 1981, when I completed my training, there were few jobs for teachers—certainly not like today. During my training I had opted to undertake a stream of early childhood subjects and really enjoyed the connection I could make with younger children. My first paid job after college was with the Griffith Mobile Resource Unit. This was a mobile service that worked out of Griffith, providing a range of unfocused children's programs in Hillston, Rankins Springs, Darlington Point and Yamma. Its primary focus seemed to be working with adults. The parents wanted something different and we refocused on children and depending on the community, the service provided preschool to playgroup sessions. We still did adult education, but both services now were equal.

I stayed with the Mobile for five years. We had added Whitton, Weethalle, Goolgowi to our timetable, and developed a 'playgroup in a box' for centres we would only visit once a month. We had also run sessions in caravan parks, housing estates and also established the Griffith Early Intervention Itinerant Project and a Respite Care service.

So why did I stay with the young kids? The buzz. It was and still is chaos. It is just the best high you could ever get: the constant surprise, the delight of young smiles and the immediacy of what we can do and achieve.

2. Name one of the most memorable experiences you've had, whilst being in the early childhood sector?

There are too many, but I think the thing that gets me is the incredible trust that parents place in us each day. To hand over this most precious person to the care of strangers—to trust that they will love them, care for them, nurture them, instil a sense of wonder and delight, awaken a desire to learn—gets me every time. It is what drives me to ensure that what I do and what my team does, acknowledges the gift that families give our society and our world.

I like the fact that what we do is appreciated within our community and indeed across many communities. Earlier this year, I received a National Excellence in Teaching Award, which recognised my contribution to early childhood. I accepted this on behalf of my team and the parents and community I work for. It isn't any one person, it's a shared journey. I get the greatest joy out of sharing the journey of children with people, the opportunities to create a difference.

3. What are the issues you're most passionate about right now?

How I can make stronger connections with families. I think this is the key to societal change and how we can protect children, families and ultimately our communities. At our service, there is a strong focus on family and how we can connect and support them—not just with child care, but about the parenting role they have fallen into.

I think our society has changed significantly and that parenting isn't embedded at birth, it is learned. Mostly from our own parents, and those around us. But too many families are dislocated from family and indeed, friends. Early childhood is in the perfect location to reconnect and share the responsibility of parenting. This is one of the key components of the NSW Curriculum Framework *The Practice of Relationships*, a document which inspires me to do better each and every day.

There is a strong movement within government to also do better on how it supports family and the benefits this has on the family, the child and society. They have finally cottoned-on to the notion that early childhood is quite important.

I also have a strong belief that we, early childhood practitioners, need to do it better. There is an incredible amount of inconsistency in what we offer families and children. This is about the type of services we offer, the quality of the curriculum, how we connect with children and how we view ourselves. I am increasingly concerned that early childhood is locking itself into service types and ignoring the changing nature of family and their needs and indeed the needs of community. I have been criticised for this recently, but am prepared to argue that every early childhood service has a responsibility to the families, children and community it serves—not just the staff who can be quite comfortable in the traditional role they have played.

4. What inspires you about early childhood?

The incredible diversity of what we do across the country. Every service is different, even those that operate under the big commercial enterprises still have differences.

The difference is the people who work in the service, the families, the children and the community. You can't create a 'one model fits all' service.

What really inspires me are the babies—I work primarily with children under two years—13 children and a team of five adults. I am on the floor from 8am through till 2pm, and I am the director of a 73-place service! Kids under two years are chaos (the best kind), and young children astound me with how quickly they change and grow. How they play—together, in the same game, reacting to each other—stuns me each day.

5. In your own childhood, what was your most magical experience?

When I was a kid at school we went on an excursion to Griffith, which was a huge day out because the road wasn't fully sealed. We went to see a puppet show, *The Tintookies*. There were amazing marionettes filled with Australian animals and characters, it was awesome and just took me away. One of my early experiences with theatre!

6. When it comes to the education of Australian children, particularly in the early years, what do you think children most need, and what would you like to see more of?

Children need to be trusted, and have opportunities to be creative, resourceful, capable and resilient. I think there is a great big 'dumb down' happening at the moment, everything is being made too easy, so that everyone succeeds.

Children are born to learn. Our role is to support, nurture and instil a sense of enquiry and desire to learn in young children, but also to support and nurture their family and ultimately the community. To be flexible in the services we provide, catering for the needs of each community as they arise and how these programs are delivered.

I don't know how that can happen when children and their educators are being snowed under with misinformation about children, how they learn and what they need. The stencil is the teacher's audit trail, proving to someone higher up that the children have completed a task, never quite sure if they understand the process. The focus on product is disconcerting, especially as we (early childhood practitioners) know that process is the key to understanding.

7. Who are, or have been, the most influential people in your career?

I am here because of the giants in my life:

- the people who inspire me each day—my family, and the communities I grew up in;
- the professionals who work in early childhood services across the country, who each day create wonder and inspire children to learn, question and build knowledge;
- the families who come back year after year; and
- the children who light up my life.

I am here because I am passionate about creating the best environment for young children to grow up in—not only physically, but also emotionally and socially. I succeed because the people around me are passionate about this too.

It isn't until some time in their second or third year that babies get to the toilet training stage—and until they do, they need to wear nappies. This makes choosing and using nappies a major part of their life, and yours.

Cloth nappies

The most commonly available cloth nappy is a simple terry towelling square or rectangle, quick to dry when hung out unfolded and very absorbent when folded into several layers. White towelling nappies are what most of us think of when we think of cloth nappies, but you can also get flannelette, brushed cotton or cotton muslin nappies, even bright colours. Whatever you choose, you'll need at least two or three dozen if you're only using cloth nappies.

You can also buy fitted cloth nappies, which are shaped much like a disposable, with elastic at the legs and waist and, usually, velcro tabs for fastening. They generally feature some form of absorbent padding, maybe adjustable in size and available in several choices of exterior fabric and colour. There's a range of brands on the market—sold through some pharmacies, baby shops, department stores and by mail order—offering variations on the theme.

At their best, they are easy to get on and off, provide good containment and are a neater, less bulky fit than the standard square nappy. They're more expensive than the basic squares, and take longer to dry, but for people who don't want or can't afford to use disposables—yet like the convenience they offer—the advantages of fitted nappies could be worth the extra costs.

The other point to remember when using cloth nappies is that careful laundering is essential. For instance, without thorough rinsing, residue from the washing powder can remain embedded in the nappy, irritating baby's skin and ultimately causing nappy rash.

Disposable nappies

Disposable nappies have taken over from cloth: according to 2001 industry data, 89 per cent of all nappies changed in Australia are disposables, up from 40 per cent in 1993. The perfect disposable nappy should:

- absorb moisture quickly to prevent leaks and 'lock it in' to keep your baby's bottom relatively dry;
- be easy and quick to fasten;
- stay closed during use;
- fit various shapes and sizes; and
- contain absorbent material that doesn't shift or disintegrate during use.

Some brands have a wetness indicator—a picture that disappears when the nappy is wet—which may come in handy if you're unfamiliar with changing nappies and are unsure when a change is due.

Disposable nappies vary in price and quality. You can expect to pay around 26 to 50 cents per nappy, depending on the brand and packet size you choose. Bulk packs are usually most economical.

Nappies Environmental impact

For years there's been an ongoing debate over which type of nappy has the least impact on the environment. While it might seem clear-cut that reusable cloth nappies would be a more environmentally friendly option than disposables, in fact there are environmental costs associated with using both.

Many conflicting studies have been published, but unfortunately not many independent ones. Most research has been funded or

sponsored by a company or organisation with a barrow to push, be it disposable nappy companies or environmental groups.

It takes more raw materials to make disposables than cloth nappies. They also have an obvious impact on waste disposal and landfill—in 1999 it was estimated that using an average of six nappies a day over two and a half years produces about 734 kg of solid waste. Multiply that by the number of disposable-wearing babies born in Australia each year and that's a lot of disposable nappies taking up space in landfill. For just one baby you're talking about roughly 8000 nappies. And while it's possible the weight of the disposables themselves may have decreased, the number of people using them has increased.

Parts of a disposable nappy are potentially biodegradable, but whether they do biodegrade and how long it takes will depend on the type of landfill, and whether bacteria—needed …for decomposition—have access to air, water and light.

Cloth nappies also have an environmental cost. Growing cotton requires the use of pesticides and water, although new strains of genetically modified cotton claim to reduce the use of chemicals. However, the most significant environmental impact of cloth nappies occurs during their use, rather than production or disposal. Washing and cleaning them requires water and energy that you don't use with disposable. You can minimise this by using cold water to wash and by drying on the line.

Unfortunately, the expensive option of nappy services is probably the best from an environmental perspective, due to economies of scale. As a cheaper alternative and environmental compromise, you might consider using cloth nappies at home and disposables when you're out.

Nappies
Cloth vs disposable

- Disposables are more convenient than cloth nappies, especially when away from home, but they produce a lot of waste.
- Disposables don't require accessories such as pilchers or fasteners, but have to be bought regularly and are much more expensive than cloth nappies washed at home.
- Disposables are more absorbent and tend to keep your baby drier.

As far as nappy rash is concerned, some medical evidence suggests that high-quality disposable nappies with absorbent polymers may reduce the incidence of more severe nappy rash. Other studies suggest that it's more important how clean the nappy is rather than what it's made from. To prevent nappy rash as much as possible, all types of nappy should be changed regularly.

Cloth nappies washed at home create little solid waste but use more water—which could be an issue in drought affected areas—and energy. They're much cheaper than disposables, but require some time to maintain. Apart from a few dozen cloth nappies, you'll also need accessories such as pilchers or fluffy overpants, a fastener or pins, and perhaps disposable or reusable nappy liners.

One of the most important advantages of cloth nappies is that their most significant environmental impact occurs during the use (rather than the production) stage of their lives—so you can minimise that impact by changing the way you wash them. For example, if you use a nappy treatment and wash them, use cold or warm water rather than hot and dry them on the line when possible.

Cloth nappies from a nappy wash service are great for people who prefer cloth over disposable nappies but still want convenience. It'll save you time, wear and tear on your washing machine and dryer, and electricity and water costs. While it'll end up much more expensive than home laundering, using a nappy wash service is generally less environmentally damaging due to economies of scale.

This article is an extract from the article 'Nappies', published in Choice Magazine, of the Australian Consumers' Association.

School readiness

When should we consider early entry?

Over the years, there has been considerable debate about what constitutes 'school readiness' and, as is the case in most debates, there are a number of answers. This article will attempt to synthesise current research as well as address the issue of when parents should consider early entry for potentially gifted preschoolers.

Starting school is a major milestone for both child and parent. For parents, it means compulsory education, the handing over of their child to the wider community—in this case the school—for the next 12 years. Many families feel a sense of vulnerability when faced with this milestone, and questions invariably arise: 'Will my child cope, have we done a good job in socialising our child, does my child have the skills needed, has my child the necessary knowledge to start school?' Early childhood educators can help families by providing them with updated information.

Overall, 'school readiness' depends on a number of issues, and at least one of these, surprisingly the age of the child, has little to do with actual readiness or abilities.

Age

The main criterion over time has been the age of the child. Some states offer school entry as early as four years and seven months, while here in NSW, it is four years and nine months. There is an exception to this, namely when a child is potentially gifted. Again, the age of the child considered for early entry may vary. In NSW government schools, a child who has been identified as gifted can now enter school at 'four years or older (at 31 January of the year of enrolment)' provided the principal agrees to the enrolment (State of NSW, 2004, p. 6). In some countries, children start school much later. In Germany, intake time is at six years of age, and in Sweden, Norway and Finland, children start as late as seven years of age. As can be seen, the age criterion in itself has little to do with the child's readiness or abilities.

An early entry anecdote

Emma*, a gifted child, was four years five months when she started Kindergarten. She was tall for her age, so she did not appear different from the other children in her class.

Negative experiences:

Tiredness-induced tantrums at home in the evening and at the end of the week.

Positive experiences:
Seeing Emma happy and thriving at school, motivated by her peers.

**Real names have not been used*

So what factors make up school readiness?

In order to weigh up whether a child is ready for school, you have to consider the requirements of the stakeholders: the child, the parents, the teachers and the system.

The child

Attachment

Research on attachment has shown that by the time children are four years of age, they are generally ready and eager to leave their mums and dads and venture out on their own into a secure environment to interact with other children and responsive adults. By four, most children are only mildly upset at the point of separation, can wait securely until their parents come to collect them and initiate relationships and respond increasingly to others. It has also been found that four-year-olds—especially boys—are less likely to want to be in close proximity to their mothers when they return to pick them up from preschool.

Cognitive skills, language, general knowledge and skills

It has been found that intellectually inquisitive children, who are able to use language to communicate, adapt more quickly to school (Watson, 2003). Additionally, most investigators have found the 'ability to communicate effectively' with both teachers and peers as important for school readiness (for instance, using the same words as others when referring to concepts and ideas).

Social competence

There is evidence that children need to be at least minimally socially competent in order to cope at school. It has been found that children who are generally disliked are at serious risk, especially where the dislike stems from their aggressive and disruptive behaviour. It is worthwhile to note here that one in six children identified as aggressive at the start of school have delinquent behaviours by the age of 14.

Social competence in a child is shown by:

- a generally positive mood;
- being fairly independent of adults;
- a willingness to attend child care/preschool;
- coping with rebuffs;
- having the capacity for empathy;
- having one or two positive friendships;
- having a sense of humour;
- not being apparently lonely;
- positive and successful approach to others;
- ability to give clear reasons for actions;
- being appropriately self-assertive;
- not being easily intimidated by bullies;
- having appropriate expressions of frustration and anger;
- entering discussions;
- taking turns;
- showing interest in others;
- negotiating compromises;
- not drawing attention to themselves inappropriately;
- accepting and interacting with others from other ethnic groups;
- being accepted by others;
- sometimes being invited by others; and
- being named by others as a friend.

The parents

Parents put equal importance on **skills** (shoelaces, lunch boxes) and **knowledge** (ability to count, write), whereas teachers placed more importance on **skills.** Despite teachers' emphasis on skills as more important, findings indicate that children are most likely to be held back by parents if they lack knowledge.

The teachers

Research indicates that teacher beliefs about school readiness include the ability of children to:

- understand and follow instruction;
- communicate needs and thoughts;
- play cooperatively;
- be physically well;
- listen;
- attend to and finish a task;
- look after belongings; and
- hold a pencil correctly.

Research has also found that 75 per cent of teachers indicated motor coordination as essential for school readiness. Additionally, researchers found that teachers have negative attitudes towards children who are easily distracted or demanding on entering school.

Exceptional children

A very young (not early) entry

Jack* was very demanding, wanting social contact and the stimulation of extra learning his mum could not provide at home. It was decided that Jack should start school, which he did at four years and 10 months. He coped well with the work but was bullied from the beginning, and this affected him badly because of his sensitive nature. He always hated being the youngest kid in the class—there were children in his class who had repeated and were two years older than Jack. Jack is now in Year Three, and a few other children his age have joined the class. He is enjoying school more this year and the bullying diminished with the advent of a new principal, who deals with this more effectively.

**Real names have not been used*

Children with disabilities and children who are gifted may not show many of the readiness signs discussed above, but may nevertheless be ready for school. For instance, a child with a physical disability may still be very able in other ways, including academically. Children with certain disabilities (e.g. autism) are generally included in school programmes at entry age, and in some areas there are preparatory classes for children with disabilities to help familiarise them with school routines and expectations.

A child who is gifted may be socially and emotionally different. This difference could be perceived as immaturity, but is often a sign that the child does not fit in with his or her chronologically-aged peers, whereas they may get on perfectly well with adults and older children. Such a child may never fit in with his or her chronologically-aged peers during the school years. Early entry, rather than delaying schooling, may therefore be the answer here, especially if the child communicates effectively, is socially competent and has mastered a majority of the skills mentioned previously. There is one exception to these skills: according to research boys are generally less able than girls in small motor areas (writing, tying shoelaces, etc). However, this should not deter a parent of a boy to hold him back, as research findings indicate that he may continue to have problems even at the end of the second year of school. Delaying school may therefore not provide any advantages, whilst robbing the bored preschooler of stimulating opportunities.

The system

Parents of young gifted preschoolers should shop around and visit several schools. They should be encouraged to arrange meetings with principals and ask about the school's programs for and policy on gifted children, early entry and past experiences involving early entry. Sympathetic principals will show interest in the child and suggest testing by either a school counsellor or a registered psychologist in preparation for possible early entry.

A final word on readiness

Even if children do not seem ready for school, there is a possibility that attending school will actually mature them. Most parents, however, want the transition to school to be smooth and easy. In this case, delaying school for one year would be an option. This option, however, will only be available once, because whatever their level of readiness, children in NSW must be enrolled at a school by the time they turn six years of age.

Mimi Wellisch

This article first appeared in Gifted and has been reprinted with permission and relevant updated changes.

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What's happening?

Children's Book Week

Presented by the Children's Book Council of Australia, Children's Book Week will be celebrated this year from 20 – 26 August, the theme being 'Reading Rocks!'

Each state and territory branch of the Children's Book Council organises a variety of activities to celebrate Book Week. On the Friday immediately before the start of Book Week, the winning and honour books of the Children's Book of the Year Awards are announced. Certificates, medallions and monetary prizes are presented to the authors and illustrators of these books.

For more information on Book Week and the Children's Book Council, visit: **www.cbc.org.au**.

Kids 'Eat Smart, Play Smart' at out-of-school hours care

The National Heart Foundation of Australia has recently launched *Eat Smart, Play Smart*—a manual specifically developed for the quarter of a million children who attend out-of-school hours care (OSHC) nationally. The 230-page manual is filled with fun, healthy ideas that can easily be incorporated into any OSHC program to encourage children aged five-12 years to enjoy food preparation, healthy eating and physical activity on a daily basis.

Long before overweight and obesity became the hot topic it is today, the Heart Foundation identified OSHC workers would have a critical role in positively influencing children's eating and physical activity habits. After extensive consultation it became apparent that a customised manual was needed to support the sector.

The manual contains over 100 recipes, from afternoon tea ideas to breakfast dishes and kids' cooking activities. Importantly, the manual offers young children an enjoyable and practical approach to food and nutrition.

Priced at $45.00, a copy of the manual can be ordered by contacting the Heart Foundation Heartline on: 1300 36 27 87, or visiting the website: www.heartfoundation.com.au.

Farewell to the *Every Child* In-house editor

Rebecca Meston

Thank you for all your hard work, dedication and for making us laugh. The publications and marketing team at Early Childhood Australia, Canberra.

Arborio at the Sydney Opera House, 19 September – 2 October

Armed with a violin, piano accordion and a grain of rice, *Arborio*—a new theatre show for children and adults—steams up big ideas from world security to culinary travel. The enchanting score of live music, composed by John Shortis, draws on musical traditions of cultures stretching from Eastern Europe to Eastern Asia, mirroring the journey of the ancient silk trade route.

Arborio is presented by Jigsaw Theatre Company which turns 30 this year. Jigsaw has taken its young audiences on a journey of emotions from despair to delight, while putting value on friendship, determination, self-discipline, prudence and ingenuity.

Season details: *Arborio*

Dates: 19 September – 2 October

Times: Monday – Thursday, 10.30am and 1pm

Venue: Utzon Room

Tickets: Standard $18, Family 4+ Groups $16, Childcare/Parenting Groups $10

Bookings: 9250 7777 or **www.sydneyoperahouse.com**

2005 National Awards for quality schooling

Australian school communities are full of committed people using their knowledge and skills, and large measures of imagination, ingenuity and resourcefulness to make schools better places in which to learn and develop.

In order to celebrate the achievements of these people, the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership is inviting nominations for the 2005 National Awards for Quality Schooling, for which the Australian Government is providing over $1 million in prize money.

Nominations are now open!

The awards are open to teachers, principals, support staff and schools in the early childhood field (government and non-government), with prizes for both individuals and schools. These awards are of immense value in building a better understanding and greater appreciation in the wider community of the work done in Australian schools. They are also a way of sharing good ideas and practices.

For the selection criteria, application forms and the many and varied stories of the 2004 winners, visit: www.niqtsl.edu.au or phone 1800 131 323 (freecall).

Applications for the awards close on 21 October 2005.

New children's employment regulation

The *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection – Child Employment) Regulation 2005* was recently introduced, covering children under 15 years who work in the entertainment industry, exhibitions, stills photography and door-to-door sales. The new Regulation replaced the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection – Child Employment) Regulation 2004* on 1 April 2005.

The statutory review of the Regulation has provided an opportunity to streamline the requirements of employers without compromising the protection of child employees. The Office of the Children's Guardian has consulted with employers and key industry associations, as well as child protection advocates. This office believes the education of people who work in the entertainment, exhibitions and still photography industries is a powerful tool in making employers aware of their responsibilities when employing children in these fields.

The new Regulation and the updated guidelines called 'A Guide to Child Employment in NSW', which includes the Code of Practice, are available on the Office of the Children's Guardian's website at: www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au.

An Evolving Trial:

Reviewing staffing levels in a long day care centre

Staffing is always difficult in early childhood centres. In this article Doreen Blyth explores one early childhood centre's approach to reviewing staffing levels and structures to better meet the needs of children, improve developmental outcomes and capitalise on the staff members' skills and education, rather than simply applying state licensing minimum standards.

Curtin University Guild Child Care Centre is a 133-place centre on the Bentley campus of the university, 10 minutes from the centre of Perth. The centre has a stable staff team, most of whom have been together for many years. Over the last year, we looked at the staffing of the centre, to better determine how it affected the quality of care of the children and their families, and how it affected our staff.

What started our exploration of staffing levels? It started with a dilemma in our four- to five-year olds room.

In October, the children were well settled with a stable staff team, usually of three. Numbers dropped after University exams, so we were averaging 18 children a day. As the state licensing is 1:10, we changed the staffing to that level. We worked with the staff to help them devise systems to help this occur. But we noted a rapid rise in staff stress levels.

Staff reported:

- increased stress levels in themselves (sleep issues, tiredness, eating issues, short temper, feeling like they had been abandoned, desire to resign);
- increased disagreements among children;
- decreased achievement in program objectives; and
- parents were upset that they had to wait longer to see a staff member.

We reviewed the issues that may have affected the scenario, and it was acknowledged that the parents, children and staff were possibly entrenched in behaviours that required three staff. Indeed, we may not have given the changes enough time, however the children *were* affected because of the lower staff levels.

State licensing levels had not worked for us; we needed to see what other tool could we have used.

A staff survey indicated that the preferred staff team composition should be based on the *actual* needs of the children and skills and education of staff. So we looked at what the literature said about staffing levels and skill and their impact on children. According to some researchers, 'three key variables make up an "iron triangle" of features that predict child care quality:

- **group size;**
- **staff/child ratio; and**
- **staff qualifications** (including education, ongoing training and experience).'

Recent research also indicates that positive teacher-child relationships—which are directly affected by both ratio and group size—are related to better outcomes for children.

Of course there are other things that identify high quality care, including:

- caregiver stability;
- curriculum;
- the adequacy of physical facilities;
- administrative and support services; and
- parent involvement.

Parents and staff all agreed that quality care and quality staff go hand in hand (we were unanimous on that!). However, quality staff have to be supported with time, resources and the total environment in which to create quality care.

The variable is always the children, or rather, each individual child. It is children's needs that govern our day. As individuals and as members of a group, children have different needs that we must cater for. State licensing levels don't take this into account.

How do we provide for children's needs at the standards that we as professionals require of ourselves? We identify the needs of each child and his or her family through discussion, observation and care provision. We seek to provide for each child according to the philosophy of the centre, and the ethics of our profession.

The physical resources of our centre are all planned for, and continue to evolve. Staffing is another matter. The complexity of the work required when caring for children leads to the question, 'How many children should we have in a group, how many staff do you need and what skills/experience should they have?' As child care is in demand here, we decided to hold the group size steady while we looked at the other two points.

Staff/child ratio minimums are set by State Licensing regulations, but there was no information available that provided us with insights into how those staffing levels were reached.

The 'one size fits all' formula offers no specific support when considering children's individual needs. So, what was the centre to do about setting more appropriate staffing levels?

In the absence of clear guidance, a staff discussion led to the idea of examining staffing in each room to see if needs were:

1. low (current staff levels able to meet centre standards);
2. medium (issues arising that have the potential to affect the group and the individuals, extra staff member required at certain times); and
3. high (issues that are now affecting the group and or individuals in it. When we were looking at the standards that we wanted, we had to decide, 'did the room need extra staff with targeted skills?)'

To assist rapid decision-making, and consistent application, we put the ideas into a simple grid. We would ensure that state levels were maintained, whilst applying our new methodology. We would evaluate it regularly.

Staffing Methodology Grid

Higher needs:

- Room has children with diagnosed/ observed specific special needs.
- Room has children recently enrolled who come from CALD backgrounds and need specialised cultural support.
- Cohort of children has changed.
- Room has difficulty supporting the achievement of programming goals.
- Several new families.
- New staff member or current staff member has a special need.
- Relief staff not experienced in the area.

Lower needs:

- Few children with identified special needs.
- Cohort of children has been together for some time.
- Few new families.
- All staff appropriately qualified and experienced.
- No new staff/all current staff well settled.
- No staffing issues such as a staff member returning from an injury.

Trial results: A summary of the full version!

In the two birth to one-year-old rooms prior to the trial, staff described difficulty with 'peak' times, i.e. times when all babies were awake and more staff were needed for direct care. Staff felt frustrated that they could not give all the care they wanted to at the time that it was most needed. During the day we determined their room needs as high, medium or low according to the grid. We also gave a short anecdote to describe when and why the room was pegged at that level. We then knew when to allocate extra staff.

During the trial staff reported increased job satisfaction, and that all programmed plans were completed and there was increased time to 'just sit and play'. Parents reported that they were able to spend more time with staff. The children showed settled behaviours. All described the room as 'calm' and 'fun'.

In the three- to four-year olds room prior to the trial, staff reported difficulty with 'peak' times when there were several children with special needs attending the centre.

As a result of this trial we found we had enough data to justify this room receiving an additional full-time employee.

As this was a planned trial and some funds had been allocated, the permanent staffing increase was acceptable. The long-term budget implications are a larger staffing bill but we have had some *major* savings that have offset most of this. These include: a lower sick leave bill; zero staff turnover; and, a dramatic increase in the number of parents on our waiting list as word of our quality initiative spreads.

We have also used the results to revisit the 'skills mix' of staff in each area, and have looked at the professional development plans of each staff member in the light of the professional development needs of the centre. With a low staff turnover we must plan for the needs of our future through investing in the staff we have now.

We devised a system that gives staff the reassurance that their needs are respected and that decisions for support allocation are made fairly.

Yes, this staffing methodology costs more money. But isn't the quality worth it, for the children, families and staff?

Doreen Blyth
Curtin University Guild Child Care Centre and 2005 Kaleidoscope conference speaker.

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* Full list available from the centre.

Advocating for our children, valuing our work

This is an excerpt from a speech by Judy Radich, National President of Early Childhood Australia, where she explains that the worth of early childhood professionals should never be underestimated. The speech was delivered to the Tasmanian branch in Hobart on 2 July 2005.

We share responsibility as adults to guarantee for each child the opportunity to thrive in the early years of life. This shared responsibility raises more questions than answers.

Society's commitment to ensuring the healthy development of every child requires far more than hoping that market forces will make available high-quality, affordable care for young children.

We have new players in the early childhood arena. Some are increasing their presence in the sector at a very rapid pace. We have to move on from saying all community-based services are good and all private or corporate services are bad. To move on we must accept the situation and find new and different ways of seeing and doing.

No one says doctors cannot make a profit out of seeing sick and vulnerable people. What we have to do is find ways to achieve:

- regulations—across the country—that reflect the research findings about what is necessary to ensure good outcomes for children;
- a rigorous quality assurance system that sits on top of solid regulations; and
- a workforce that is stable, well-trained, well-paid, recognised for the significance of the work it does and is well-resourced.

We have to say it doesn't matter who owns the service. What really matters are guarantees for children and the staff who work with them that will ensure a high-quality experience for children and those who work with and care for them. The net effect is that some (in my view many) children have very poor early experiences outside the home. I am sure you can all name services where this occurs.

We have loopholes in regulations that allow private schools to open prep classes where three-year–olds have no dedicated play space, no sandpit and have to wear a uniform with shoes and socks all day—for heaven's sake what happened to childhood?

We have a workforce which has a very high turnover, good people driven out by sheer exhaustion, poor working conditions, low pay and little recognition of the significance of the role they play.

We also have colleagues and friends who underestimate themselves and what they do, who don't know the regulations and feel isolated and unsupported. Who, because of this, feel unable to let authorities know when breaches occur and things are not okay for kids.

We know that right now, state regulations across this country are at odds with what research says matters for children. For example, the research tells us that to deliver high-quality experiences for infants under 12 months, we must have ratios of one carer to three children. It does not matter how good individual staff are, how well-trained and resourced they are, it is physically impossible to achieve this with a one–five or one–four ratio. How many babies can you hold, comfort, bottle feed, engage with, at once?

This is not to say that we, as staff, are not doing the very best we can, but we must begin to be honest with ourselves and parents if we want to bring about change.

Staff shortages have led to significant numbers of services having staff endorsed or deemed as qualified. What does this say about the significance of qualifications for those who work with young children? How long are we prepared to just stand back and allow this to happen?

Quality assurance is supposed to be a quality improvement process built on over time, with rigorous discussion and debate around each principle and quality indicator, with individual, contextual ways to meet each indicator. How can this happen when staff are given no paid release time to do this? Instead, they have to snatch a few moments when children are asleep or they do this after work, tired—unpaid of course.

We, as child care workers, must no longer be satisfied with a few slices of free pizza. It's not good enough. When we work overtime, we must be paid accordingly.

We have concerns around training—it's being watered down; 'tick and flick' mentality—with very few specialist early childhood courses across this country. I could not teach maths and science to high school students with my early childhood teaching degree—but it seems anyone can teach young children. We have to stop this and keep saying that early childhood pedagogy is a specialist area of learning, as we know it is.

We all know programs in schools where the curriculum from Year One is watered down for the kindy class rather than a curriculum being built that begins with the child. So where does this leave us?

Nelson Mandela said:

> 'We all have a role to play—leaders and citizens, public and private organisations, children and young people. What we demand of our leaders, we also demand of ourselves. The Global Movement for Children calls on everyone, everywhere, to do as much as possible, in their own time and their own way, for and with children.'

That is a call to each and every one of us to become advocates for children.

Judy Radich

National President
Early Childhood Australia

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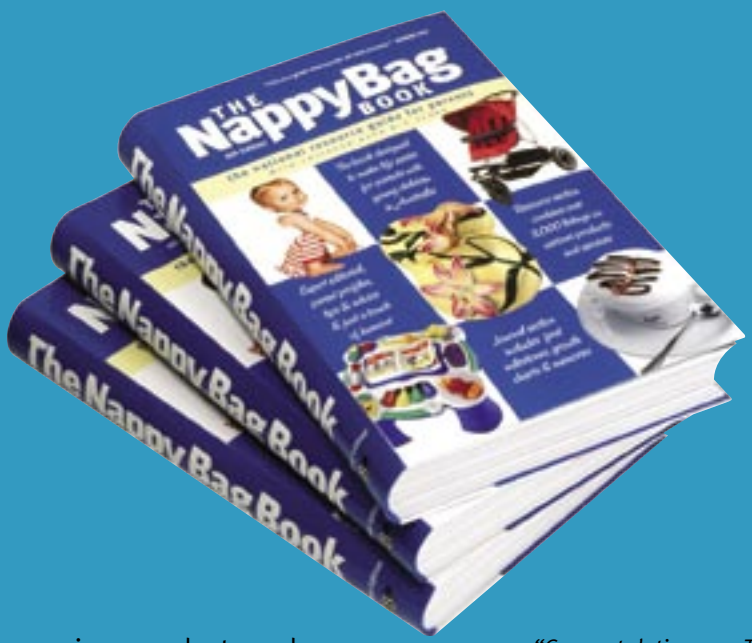

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