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Early childhood education & care

From little things, big things grow

Claire Jennings and Karen Stagnitti report on an early intervention project that provides the opportunity for children from vulnerable families in country Victoria to learn the essential skills of listening, concentration and curiosity.

On the first day of the year when kindergarten and prep teachers take out a picture book to read a story to a new group of students, they are often dismayed when a percentage of the children see this activity as a signal to fidget or retreat into their private worlds. Such behaviours are an indication that these children lack three of the most important skills for learning to take place—engaged listening, sustained concentration and curiosity.

These three skills are vital for learning at any stage of the life spectrum and underpin the ‘Reading Discovery’ program. The Reading Discovery program is a preschool program that targets vulnerable families in the south-west region of Victoria. Through the program, children and parents are immersed in a range of books, children’s literature and nursery rhymes to broaden and enrich their language and knowledge of the world. While research has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of reading books and nursery rhymes to young children, what distinguishes the Reading Discovery program from others is the focus from birth. Parents in the program report that babies as young as twelve weeks become more curious about books and focus for increasingly longer periods when shown age appropriate books. Learning opportunities are presented in many ways through exploring features such as pattern, colour, shape, touch and feel, sound and pop-up books.

Aspects of the program

The program draws on research by Fraser Mustard and associates who have shown that early stimulation through songs, rhymes and reading aloud to children from birth results in increased brain development at the stage where it is most vital to achieve maximum potential in overall development. From around eighteen months the focus on beginning books is complemented with creative play modelled by the program worker or trained volunteers who visit the homes for one hour per week. Creative play (also called imaginative or pretend play) includes the re-enactment of stories and nursery rhymes and is associated with language, narrative understanding, problem solving, and pre literacy skills such as understanding of story structure. This aspect of the program is unique because re-enactment through play of the stories that have been read to children adds a dimension often missed in literacy programs.

The Reading Discovery program educates parents about the vital role they play in the emerging literacies of their children and the skills necessary for learning-readiness which begin at birth. Families targeted in Reading Discovery are families who are having difficulties with mental health or drug and alcohol issues, are single parents, or who are in Indigenous or migrant resettlement programs. Parents in these situations are struggling in everyday life and often lack the knowledge or personal capacity to read to or play with their children. The Reading Discovery program aims to break the generational cycles of poverty, early school drop-out, low literacy levels and consequent unemployment modelled by many of the families by building parents’ capacities and understanding in how to nurture literacies in their children. The link between initial literacy, reading aloud to preschool children, and later educational achievement has been documented emphatically by linguist and researcher Gordon Wells:

Of all the activities that have been considered as possible helpful preparation for the acquisition of literacy, only one was significantly associated with ... later [educational achievement] ... That was listening to stories.
The effectiveness of Reading Discovery with vulnerable families could also be attributed to the fact that Reading Discovery takes into account the emotional imbalance of vulnerable families and draws on research that demonstrates securely attached children have ‘qualitatively different ways of reading story books with their parents, and conversely, that insecurely attached children often show problems in maintaining and sustaining attention’ (Garton & Pratt 1998). The inclusion of emotional factors in the emergent literacy phase of development is therefore significant and crucial when working with families targeted by Reading Discovery and this is addressed by methods used in the program such as modelling reading stories aloud and play, and working one on one with families to empower parents.

Parents are present during each visit and learn how to select books appropriate for each milestone up to age six and how to read aloud with confidence and enthusiasm. Parents who are not competent with their own literacies are encouraged to talk to the pictures in books and model the early reading skills of pointing to pictures and words. Parents also learn to interact with their children by asking open-ended questions and learn that pausing to listen to their children’s comments and questions will enhance language and emergent literacy development in preparation for play group participation, kindergarten and school. Parents have commented on the increase in vocabulary and concepts of their children after being involved in the Reading Discovery program.

Among the many early childhood intervention programs in place, Reading Discovery has crossed traditional boundaries, having been integrated into the Family Services Program at Community Connections (Vic) Ltd, a not-for-profit community service which runs a wide range of community and social justice programs including Foster Care and Disability Services. It has partnerships with The Department of Human Services, Community Service Organisations, Primary Care Partnerships, The Smith Family, Local Council Children’s Services, Indigenous Play Groups, Rotary Clubs, libraries and bookshops. We believe that it is the first program of its kind that brings together social welfare, health and education within a family and community context in such an intensive way.

Making a difference for families

The Reading Discovery program has been implemented and refined over the past three years. During this period of time in partnership with Community Connections staff, it has been recognised that competency in literacy is an essential part of health and wellbeing and must be nurtured from birth, and that this places parents as the primary ‘teachers’ of their children.

Of particular significance is the success of the Reading Discovery program in indigenous play groups. In this context, Reading Discovery trains mentors to model indigenous literacies (visual and oral) alongside western literacies (reading and writing) promoting the knowledge that all literacies are based on competency in listening and speaking. Parents in these groups now borrow books weekly to read to their children and report an increase in concentration and curiosity about books, play and vocabulary development. One Indigenous parent reported the increasing concepts of her 24-month-old son who, after being immersed in a range of books on the topic of farms, and engaging in creative play with the toy farm animals, classified ducks and geese and chickens separately by name, as opposed to calling all such animals ‘duckies’ in the previous weeks.

Recently, a pilot study, with the involvement of 20 families in the Reading Discovery program, was completed by Deakin University. Early results show not only a growth in the imaginative play of the children 0–6 years, but an increased awareness of the parents in their understandings of the vital role they play in emergent literacy, social and emotional development of their children. Initial results have highlighted the developmental link between quality of children’s creative play and involvement with reading stories to children. It was found that when families were involved in Reading Discovery for six months, children’s ability to concentrate and create stories in play increased by an average of 15 months, meaning that children who were between 12 and 24 months delayed in play ability before the program began, were less than one month delayed in play after involvement in the program. Language and social skills of the children also improved by five months above the expected time spent in the program. Nicolopoulou suggests that stories and play are a continuum, with play being the physical expression of story and narrative being the verbal expression of story.

The narrative thinking in imaginative or creative play, along with immersion in quality stories, prepares children to be more successful at predicting words, phrases and endings in the stories they encounter in their early reading experiences at school, thus making the reading process, and hence learning, a more positive experience. The results of the pilot study add support to the relationship between story and play and also to the effectiveness of the Reading Discovery program with vulnerable families.

References


Claire Jennings is the creator and project manager of Reading Discovery.

Karen Stagnitti is associate professor (Research) in Occupational Science and Therapy at Deakin University.

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