



Newsletter - Term 4 (2009)

Welcome

Welcome to the final newsletter for 2009 and a particular welcome to our new subscribers. This newsletter is quite special for us as it is a milestone in the evolution of our not for profit organization; we have great delight in announcing the launch of Early Life Foundations.

Early Life Foundations is committed to promoting a child and family focused world and aims to provide the greatest opportunities for all children to thrive and flourish in an age appropriate way, to enjoy their childhood and to become successful as adults. Early Life Foundations is a not for profit organisation that is committed to providing information, support and commentary that is accessible to as many people and organisations as possible free of charge. The organisation is also committed to children and families who are disadvantaged due to socio-economic, cultural or geographical reasons.

Early Life Foundations has a dedicated team of professional associates including researchers, past school principals, academics, teachers across preschool and primary as well as family therapists and psychologists.

Early Life Foundations is committed to providing excellence in support, consulting and research to ensure best practice for children and families is maximised.

Early Life Foundations has a commitment to exploring and implementing evidence based best practice for children's education. It is proudly an independent organisation which seeks to work cooperatively with Governments but not to be directed by government so as to ensure independent best practice and freedom of expression.

This newsletter celebrates the many achievements we have made in our organization including the rebranding of the Australian Developmental Curriculum to the WALKER Learning Approach (Australian Developmental Curriculum) and the launch of our two new websites:

earlylife.com.au and walkerlearning.com.au. We will give you an update of how the Walker Learning Approach is making a profound difference in children's education across the country. A highlight of this edition of the newsletter is the contribution from eminent researcher and academic Dr David Elkind.



On behalf of Kathy, myself and our associates we hope your year has been one of success, happiness and good health. We hope that the January holidays are a safe and joyous time for you and your family.

Shona Bass
Editor
Chief Executive Officer
Early Life Foundations

In this Issue

Major topics in this issue

- Kathy's Comment: Early Life Foundations
- Feature Article: Learning Through Play by David Elkind
- The WALKER Learning Approach: 2009 Rap
- The WALKER Learning Approach: Schools with Accredited teaching Teams

Associate profile

- Find out a little more about our associates; in this issue we feature our new associate Julie Liptak.

Kathy's Comment

Early Life Foundations

There is nothing more important than the first years of life: "the beginning of something is always the most important, especially when it is young and needs time to grow" (Plato).

The consultancy has a total commitment to providing support, information, education and research and professional development to all people, parents and professionals who work with young children.

This is because we appreciate that the earlier in life we are able to provide a solid foundation to children and families, the more likely we are to prevent future challenges and problems in health, education, mental health and relationships. Research indicates strongly that the more we can get right for children in these early years, the more we can set children up to live fulfilling, productive and happy lives with strong mental health and a range of life options.

Sadly, we often hear about the need to pick up the pieces of disengaged students in the learning environment, or helping children to learn to socialize, or to express emotions or to function in society once they



have reached adolescence (or adulthood).

It is so much harder to unlearn old habits and lifestyle and to relearn alternative ways, than to learn and grow up with as many positive interactions, and appropriate opportunities as possible in the first place.

Unfortunately, we find ourselves in a time that seems eager to rush children through their childhood. To assume that young children are mentally and emotionally equipped to live a lifestyle that is really much more based around adult concepts of time and adult expectations.

Young children need appropriate time to play, to grow, to be unhurried, and to be provided with appropriate opportunities and exposure to experiences that are relevant and appropriate for their age.

I often seek to reassure parents that their 5 year olds do not need to be placed in 3 or 4 extra curricula activities each week on top of preschool or school!!

Time seems to be so restricted these days and hard to find. Time is the essence of what we as humans require in our early years: time to explore, bond and attach with significant adults, to learn, experience and to enjoy life.

It must not be assumed that in attempting to listen and hear the needs, opinions and ideas of children that they

are equipped with the maturity to have to take responsibility for their lifestyle and the choices they make.

I was horrified recently when an academic colleague of mine quoted some research which asked prep children what their preschool teachers should have taught them before going to school. They, in their early weeks of their first year at school answered, "to read and write"!! Does that mean the beauty, the richness and the importance of play based curriculum should be compromised because we listened to the children?

No, it doesn't!!

The early years of life are so important for the development of self esteem, resilience, identity and belonging. The early years of life imprint on the developing brain many experiences, patterns, and thoughts that may last a lifetime.

It is important that we do not make the mistake of thinking that to nurture a child is to patronize them, or that to direct and set some limits or make decisions on behalf of a young child is not being respectful of their own wants. We can listen and take heed of the voices and opinions of children, it doesn't always follow that they know what is best.

The beginning of something is always most important. Especially when it is young and needs time to grow (Plato).

It is important that young children are allowed a childhood because as a species that is why and how we are designed. To grow and experience through time, to not have to be like an adult or teenager when we are 5 years of age.

Life is actually allowed to be about enjoying and living in the moment in time we are actually in, not constantly in hurry or practicing for the future of teenage years and beyond.

Our organization is proud to base all of our work and energy on maintaining a message throughout society that **the early years of life are the most important foundation for the rest of life and that children are allowed a childhood that is rich, filled with lots of play, experiences and relationships that are appropriate to their stage of life.**



Kathy Walker
Founding Director
Early Life
Foundations

Feature Article: Learning Through Play

In our hurried and hurrying society, we have come to think of play as a luxury at best and a waste of precious time at worst. From our adult perspective, we often associate play with fun and relaxation in contrast to the attention and effort required of us by work. All too often, however, we mistakenly project our grown-up conception of play onto the play of children. Yet for children in general, and for young children in particular, self initiated play is a basic mode of learning. Through such play, children create new learning experiences that they might not otherwise encounter. A few examples may help to illustrate this mode of learning.

Perhaps the clearest evidence for the role of play in the learning of young children comes from their babbling. No one teaches an infant to babble and all infants all over the world babble. In the course of babbling children create all of the language sounds they need to speak any of the thousands of extant languages. As infants mature, they progressively select, from the sounds they themselves have created, those which best map onto the sounds of the language of their caregivers. If they never babbled, infants would never learn to speak.

A few other examples may help to give a broader picture of this kind of learning. An infant who drops a rattle over the side of his or her crib discovers gravity. Likewise, an infant who puts everything he or she can grasp, into the mouth discovers that some things are hard, some soft and some taste just awful. Once children are sitting up in a high chair, they make everything they grasp into an object to be banged. In so doing they discover that wooden spoons make one kind of sound, metal spoons another and plastic spoons still another. In all of these examples it is the infant's own self initiated activities that create new learning experiences.

Curiosity, imagination and creativity are like muscles; if you don't use them, you lose them (David Elkind).

We see the same type of self created learning at older age levels as well. A two and three-year-old will often repeat the same activity over and over again. It may be pouring water over a water wheel to watch it turn, or building a tower with blocks, knocking it over and rebuilding it. This repetition is boring for us adults, as is reading the same story to a child over and over again. But for the young child, who is less world savvy or less world weary, than we are, each repetition produces something new that the child did not see as a result of the previous action. We adults may not be able to figure out what the child is discovering through repetition, but the child knows very well what he or she has learned.

Four and five year old children who initiate their own dramatic play are also creating new learning experiences. In playing doctor, or teacher, or fireman, etc., the child is really not preparing to engage in these occupations as an adult. Rather, in taking on these roles the child creates the feeling of omnipotence and power that he or she attributes to adults. Children are little people who are at the mercy of huge grown-ups. By creating the experience of being big like us, of having adult like powers, children deal with this feeling of impotence; at being at the mercy of us giants. As this illustration makes clear, play can also be a means of stress reduction for children.

School age children learn through self created learning experiences as well. When children make and break their own rules when playing a game like "Find and Seek" they learn mutual respect. That is they learn to obey the rules that other children make, and expect other children to follow the rules that they have set down. In addition, while playing a board game such as checkers, or monopoly, children not only learn strategies, but also how to read the body language of the other players. That is to say, each time one player makes a move this brings a reaction (a new learning experience) from the other players in the game.



Accordingly we have to rethink our ideas of play and learning. Psychologists define learning as "the modification of behavior as the result of experience." But play can be defined as "the modification of experience as the result of behavior." Put differently, experience is not always independent of our behavior, but rather can be created by it. As illustrated above children learn from their self created experiences as well as those which are independent of their activity.

For we parents this means we have to rethink our attitudes towards self initiated play. All too many of us believe even young children should be working, learning to read and to do arithmetic and perhaps a few beginning computer skills. While it is important for children to learn these tool skills, it is equally important that they learn all of the things they can only learn from their self created experiences. In many cases such learning provides the foundation for academic learning. A child building with blocks for example, is learning both classifying (all blocks are made of wood) and seriating (blocks can be ordered

by size). This play prepares children for learning cardinal (one, two, three) and ordinal (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. number.

The importance of self initiated play, particularly for the young means that we need to give them the time and the open ended toys like blocks, clay and felt boards that will give children the opportunity to create their own learning experiences. We can encourage this kind of play even when children have play dates. For such interactions we need to provide children with a number of play options but let them decide which play activity, and for how long, they will engage in it.

There are also ways we parents can initiate activities that encourage our children to “think outside the box.” These include word games we can play in the course of our everyday activities. They are not only fun for us and our children but also encourage curiosity, creativity and imagination:

1. Ask a child to think of as many things as he or she can that you can do with a paper clip, pencil or napkin.
2. When riding in the car, play games like finding how many houses have for sale signs, front porches, or identify particular car models that you see.
3. After watching a TV program together talk about the story and characters, what did you like and not like about them.
4. Watch some ads on TV and criticize them.
5. Make up new endings to stories you have just read.

Self created play for children is neither a luxury nor a waste of time, it is a basic mode of learning and children have a need to play. Accordingly, we cannot really prevent children from engaging in such play. But we can limit the time and opportunities available for such activity. As I have argued here, that would be a mistake particularly for young children. Although it is counter intuitive, the more children learn from their own play when they are young, the better prepared they are to learn from academic instruction when they are older.



David Elkind
Author
Professor Emeritus of Child Development



An exciting initiative of Early Life Foundations is the official registration of Australian Developmental Curriculum which is now trademarked as **The Walker Learning Approach (Australian Developmental Curriculum)**. Given that play based curriculum is back on the agenda across the country and in order to maintain quality control and ownership of the approach, we have trademarked and copyrighted the Walker Learning Approach to avoid any confusion about this approach and other 'look alike' programs.

Many make the assumption that children working compliantly are children being engaged in their learning.

There is a profound difference between working compliantly and being engaged.

Children's engagement is the critical starting point for the springboard into explicit teaching of numeracy and literacy (Kathy Walker 2009).

Kathy Walker is proud to have designed a rich, rigorous approach to teaching and learning that reflects the broad Australian community. This pedagogical approach has been proven to successfully promote the holistic development of the child and to have designed and registered the very first officially designed and implemented Australian play based curriculum into schools that has research, theory and of course our book, Play Matters. It is a program that does not require expensive furnishings, infrastructure or huge amounts of expenditure to make it effective and we are delighted to be working with schools across all sectors of education, private, public, Catholic and community schools in all states and territories of Australia.

The Walker Learning Approach - “evidenced based pedagogy”

The Walker Learning Approach is the practical application of the theoretical constructs underpinning the new National and many State Early Years Frameworks

Walker Learning Approach: Schools with Accredited Teaching Teams

This year we have had the pleasure of accrediting teachers who have successfully met the criteria for accreditation in the Walker Learning Approach (ADC). These schools with accredited teaching teams have adopted the philosophy of child centered holistic education and are committed to a pedagogy that balances concrete hands on experiences with explicit teaching.

We are very fortunate that these schools open their classrooms to visitors on Friday mornings before the Friday afternoon Walker Learning Approach symposia.

A child who has had a rich exposure to social play experiences is more likely to become an adult who can manage unpredictable social situations (Sergio M Pellis).

The following provides a synopsis of the first three schools that have teachers accredited in the approach. Over 50 schools have made a commitment towards the journey of their teaching teams being accredited in the approach.

Altona Green Primary School

Altona Green PS is located in the West of Melbourne. It is one of the first schools to have the prep team accredited as staff who is successfully implementing the Walker Learning Approach (ADC). The accredited teachers are prep team teachers: Vera, Deb and Jan, and the assistant principal Karen.

The staff and leadership team have insight and vision in providing a rich, holistic and rigorous approach to teaching and learning that not only emphasizes literacy and numeracy, but recognizes the need for children to be speaking, listening, questioning, interacting, problem solving and actually enjoying their school days.

Before implementing the ADC, transition and behavior had been challenging issues for many years for the school; however, Karen the Assistant principal says that after 35 years of teaching since implementing the ADC has lead to the smoothest and easiest transition for children as they moved from preschool to school. Karen said, "these children simply move across from one learning environment to another which reflects a similar approach, provides active investigation and time to explore, settle and interact with others".

These days, children are sent to Karen and the principal from Prep because they want to show them what they have made, created, explored or learned, rather than because they are in trouble!!

Altona Green PS has followed some important steps we always recommend in the process.

1. Be clear about what the Walker Learning (ADC) actually is and don't assume it is just play!!
2. Ensure ongoing mentoring with authorized staff who can support teams to successfully implement the approach
3. Ensure leadership are up to date with understanding the approach so they can justify and articulate it to the wider community.

Over the past few years, Altona Green PS has not only successfully implemented the ADC; teachers from the school have presented at conferences, hosted interstate visitors from as far away as Arnhem Land in the NT and continue to represent the ADC across Australia.

Early Life Foundations is proud to have this school as one of the leading schools in the Walker Learning Approach (ADC) and we are pleased they are happy for others to visit and learn from them.

Altona Green Primary School
230 Victoria Street
Altona Meadows, 3028
Phone 9360 0777
Principal Karen O'Dowd
ADC Contact: Jan Snowden

St Albans Primary School

St. Albans Primary School is situated in Melbourne's Western Suburbs and is a diverse multicultural socially disadvantaged community. The school's parent community includes refugees, low-income earners, newly arrived migrants and socially and culturally disadvantaged parents. These factors impact largely on the ability of parents/ guardians to affectively engage in the school community and support their children in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills.

In 2006 the school was part of an extensive diagnostic review which looked at the academic and social and emotional performance of our students, the teaching and learning program and pedagogy. The results of this review illustrated a need to run programs that would develop the oral language of our students and improve the transition process from home to school.

Over 90% of our students speak a language other than English at home and approximately 30% of the students are refugees from Sudan and speak a language that is only oral at home and have had no previous schooling prior



to coming to Australia. As a school we also found that our children lacked experiences to bring to their literacy and numeracy, so we needed to provide a curriculum that was rich.

The ADC started in at St Albans PS in 2008 in the preps, the organisation of the classroom and learning areas have changed as we have learnt more about the ADC. The teaching staff was invited to visit the prep classrooms and participate in mentoring and discussion with Kathy and her team. We also visited other schools that were implementing the ADC, attended symposiums all of which helped with classroom organisation and planning. It was following the visit to Altona Green that we realised we needed an outdoor learning area, so the prep classes were relocated at the end of 2008 into the permanent buildings and an outdoor learning area was built over the school holidays.

The program was so successful in the preps that we decided we would move it into the year 1/2 classes this year and build these classes an outdoor learning area too.

The success of the ADC at St Albans PS can be demonstrated through the following:

- Increased attendance and engagement - particularly of the boys
- Improved social skills and cooperative behaviour - evidenced through the time teachers spend on discipline
- Improved oral language - evidenced through the data collected by speech pathologist
- Parent satisfaction - as reported to class teachers at P/T Interviews and through the parent opinion survey
- Increased willingness in students to attempt to write.
- Data on literacy and numeracy outcomes should be reflected in this year's school level report and benchmark data.

Where to from here:

- Further enrich the learning environments with authentic literacy and print
- Further develop the outdoor learning environment
- Continue with the mentoring and modelling for the teachers
- Collect further data to show improved student learning and engagement
- Revisit the program in year 3 - 6 to incorporate project based learning in their inquiry units

St Albans Primary School;
39 West Esplanade
St Albans 3021
Phone 9366 2832
Principal: Graham Haslam
ADC Contact: AP Joanne Richmond



Mount Evelyn Primary School

Mount Evelyn Primary School is situated in the outer-east of Melbourne, some 50km from the Melbourne CBD. The school has a current student population of 400 with this number expected to range between 400 and 440 for the foreseeable future.

Mount Evelyn Primary School's vision has long been premised upon a clear commitment to child-centred, highly personalised learning which was a key driver for the implementation of a Developmental Learning approach. Following a period of intensive internal reflection the decision was made in 2006 to initially work with the Level 1 teacher team and introduce the new approach 'from the bottom up'. Level 2 commenced working with Kathy walker in 2007 and the school is currently extending this into the later years.

The school is currently being rebuilt as part of the DEECD's Building Futures and the planning of the learning environment, from buildings and classrooms within, to outdoor spaces, has been guided by the values and beliefs about childhood learning and reflects contemporary evidence based learning and teaching approaches. The new Early Learning Centre, completed at the beginning of 2009 and the first of the Level 2 spaces have been specifically built to support a Development Curriculum approach and clearly show the benefits to learning of highly flexible and inviting learning spaces.

'Childhood is filled with natural wonder and curiosity. The learning environment must reflect a classroom and outdoor space that is rich, with a sense of wanting to investigate, to find out and to explore' (Walker 2005).

Mount Evelyn Primary School:
Silvan Rd Mount Evelyn
Phone: 9736 2233
Principal-Phil Comport
ADC Contact: AP Cathy Sanders.

Prep is filled with natural wonder and curiosity. The learning environment must reflect a classroom and outdoor space that is rich, with a sense of wanting to investigate, to find out and to explore
Kathy Walker 2005

Associate Profile: Julie Liptak

Hi my name is Julie Liptak and I am thrilled to have the opportunity to join Early Life foundations. My work over the past twenty years as a speech pathologist has taken me into many preschools, childcare centres and schools in NSW, South Australia, the Northern Territory, the UK and now for the past eight years, Victoria. Where possible I work within a preschool or school setting supporting teaching staff to meet the needs of children with communication impairments as I firmly believe that children require functional language skills in order to interact with their peers and to access a play based curriculum.

Observing children in schools and preschools has taught me that some of the simplest language is necessary for a child to be part of the group. In a 3 year old kinder room a child needs to be able to comment on their own play, state what they will do next, express like or dislike and use simple phrases such as 'here you go' when passing an object to a peer. Without these simple words and phrases a child can become isolated. It is therefore so rewarding to watch children who were previously isolated within a class or preschool setting begin to gain the communication tools to approach their peers, request help or start a conversation.

Scaffolding activities, modifying them for different children's communication needs, simplifying language or extending it for others is vital within a play setting to enable every child to be engaged or participate fully.

Having worked with children as young as 10 months I am convinced that learning must take place within a fun, challenging play environment where there is room to explore, try new things and use real objects. I therefore structure any individual sessions with children accordingly.

Children will acquire concepts such as 'cold' more easily if they are playing with polar bears and ice! Similarly children learn to verbalise a sequence of events if they are making real honey sandwiches, milkshakes or porridge rather than looking at pictures.

Children's play and language is linked, one doesn't occur without the other therefore providing real props to encourage and extend a child's play sequence will develop their language too. Play is like a topic of conversation, if a child is interested they are more likely to absorb language models provided by the teacher or

their peers at the same time. I am looking forward immensely to being part of Kathy Walker and her teams invaluable work as The Australian Developmental Curriculum provides so many children across Australia with the opportunity to learn in a stimulating environment that reflects their own interests and ultimately encourages them to be proficient communicators with sound oral language skills.

Julie Liptak
Associate
Speech Pathologist



All of the team at Early Life Foundations wish you a joyous festive season and we look forward to sharing our newsletters with you in 2010