Joseph Sparling talks about the Abecedarian Approach

New Zealand’s Little Schools

Helping children publish their stories

Expert fundraising tips

The University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre: a model for arts-based intentional teaching
Contents

3 The Magic of Boorai—The Children’s Art Gallery
4 The University of Melbourne ELC—a model for arts-based intentional teaching
6 Professor Sparling’s lifelong love of learning
8 Founder of New Zealand’s Little Schools takes her philosophy to the world
10 The importance of risk-taking
11 Reward an outstanding educator
12 Australian university building world-class autism research centre
14 Helping children tell their own stories
16 A new crossroad for early childhood road safety
18 Fundraising tips from the experts
20 One hundred years of caring

Feature

4 A model for arts-based intentional teaching

The University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre is a research and demonstration preschool nestled in the historic arts precinct of the Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne.

Director Jan Deans shares her experience in the early education sector, as well as the landmark preschool she has created over a 20-year period. We celebrate her contribution and share a little of the magic she has created for the children in her care.
The magic of Boorai—The Children’s Art Gallery

Within a treasured early learning centre near the Yarra River in Melbourne is a special place for children to share their artworks and stories.

Sharon Lapkin

Boorai is the word used by the local Indigenous people, the Wurundjeri, to describe a baby or child. And for Jan Deans—Director of The University of Melbourne's Early Learning Centre in Abbotsford—it was the perfect name for a children's art gallery.

Deans founded the gallery in 1999, and over the past 15 years Boorai: The Children’s Art Gallery has given voice to the feelings, thoughts and inspirations of hundreds of children. The unique perspective of the child's view is celebrated at Boorai, and visitors to the gallery are treated to a rainbow-lit Milky Way of children’s artworks that gives them so much more than they bargained for.

"I opened the children's art gallery", Deans said, "because I thought it was an important venue to respond to the rights of the child or the voices of children. The space—although it's not permanently open to the public—is there, and it has an outreach program attached to it”.

The gallery provides a permanent venue for children’s artworks and a quiet, respectful place where their stories can be heard. Located within the early learning centre, at one end of a brightly lit corridor, the gallery is a simple room with white walls, a wooden floor and light streaming in through the windows. The walls, however, are a kaleidoscope of colour. Each painting or drawing is framed professionally and displayed thoughtfully.

The gallery, according to Deans, is a place where the outcomes of children's learning can be shared.

"We've exhibited children's artwork in a number of international environments,” she said. "Last year works went to Japan, China and the US, and over the years, when I look back at the number of travelling exhibitions that have presented children's voices in a public environment, it has been a great outcome.”

Children's artefacts, such as performed dancing and paintings, are the celebration of their knowledge. Deans said, and good outcomes are the result of a harmonious and beautiful environment that creates and supports a culture of learning.

The early learning centre is also a vibrant community of learners, where each group—children, educators and parents—learn from each other.

The gallery has also worked with Indigenous people. Aboriginal elders have told stories to the children, and they have then drawn and painted memories of those stories. Deans went to Northern Queensland as part of her work for the gallery and she “got a real sense of connection to Indigenous Australians and recognising the contribution that their storylines have had on us”.

The gallery is an enchanting and important place that celebrates the natural creativity of children. Deans' belief that children's outcomes should be shared, encouraged and celebrated is the reason it exists today, and to her credit, it will likely continue to provide joy and empower small children for many years to come.

Boorai: The Children's Art Gallery is located within The University of Melbourne’s Early Learning Centre at 40 Clarke Street in Abbotsford, Melbourne.

Early Horizons Vol 3, Issue 1, 2014
A model for arts-based intentional teaching

The University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre is a research and demonstration preschool that exceeds all expectations.

Sharon Lapkin

More than 20 years ago when Jan Deans walked into the rundown former primary school that was operating as a sessional kindergarten and playgroup, she knew her job was going to require a lot of courage and all of her determination.

"It just didn't have any soul," she said. "It was extremely rundown; it looked very much like the 1950s school that it was, and I remember thinking 'This needs so much work.' There was disorganisation in the staff room," Deans said, "the resources were all shabby, the furniture was all plastic," and she recalled thinking deeply about Reggio Emilia's emphasis on the environment as the third educator.

"When children walk into a space the first thing they see is the physical environment," she said, about the importance of the task ahead of her in 1992. Employed as a kindergarten teacher in her first year, then appointed coordinator in her second year, Deans’s vision for The University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre (ELC) developed organically and her intellectual flexibility was tested regularly.

"I was teaching dance to the children and running the centre, and suddenly I felt this sort of energy starting to grow," she said, describing the beginnings of the ELC in Abbotsford that she created. Before long she had employed a visual arts specialist and a music specialist, and the impetus kept growing. A ceramic artist came along, and so did a choir, a children's art gallery and an art specialist, and the impetus kept unfolding and just make sure the child was safe," she said. Rather, she saw herself as unfolding and just make sure the child was safe," she said. Rather, she saw herself as a "very sensory-rich learning environment where families, children and teachers all learn from each other. There's a beautiful interweaving of relationships," she explained. "Together we learn and grow" and "we create something very powerful for children".

Deans wasn't convinced, unlike many other educators in the 1970s and '80s, that children would learn naturally if they were immersed in a landscape of learning opportunities. "I was not there to sit alongside the child as they naturally unfolded and just make sure the child was safe," she said. Rather, she saw herself as having multiple roles including providing a "very sensory-rich learning environment where beauty and the spirit of learning could actually be excited." In a nutshell, she saw her role as "modelling and scaffolding" rather than observing and supervising.

Over the years, Deans replaced the plastic furniture with chairs and tables in warm timber tones. Natural materials and plants also punctuate the walls, windows and tables of the centre's five playrooms. The children's artwork is exquisite and you can almost hear the walls sighing with its beauty. The focal point of the centre, though, is a garden reminiscent of a children's fairy tale. The physical walls of the rooms merge into the garden blurring the edges between inside and outside.

Handmade clay wind chimes sway gently from the branches of trees, and sitting at the centre of this space is a round eco-cubby with solar panels and its own rainwater tank. Built from earth, timber and tin, it demonstrates the commitment of Deans to education for sustainable development. "I realised one major responsibility that teachers have to children is a responsibility to earth matters," she said, of the perfect little building.

The garden is full of children scampering happily among magic places built entirely for them. It's a special space where each encounter delivers yet more sweetness. But it's more than a beautiful place, it's also a place for growing, collaborating and learning. "I was very conscious that children need a beautiful environment to live and play and learn in," Deans said. It's obvious she's accomplished that goal when she describes the centre today: "It's about expressive learning, it's about beauty, it's about reverence, it's about challenge, it's about thinking deeply"—and in a nod to the theorists, she adds, "it's about being a head taller, as Vygotsky says."

While Deans's strong pedagogical background shaped the ELC from its onset, her journey to the current thriving centre, with 179 students enrolled, 30 teachers and a permanent waiting list, wasn't without its challenges. Always a strong believer in intentional teaching...
and the celebration of children's learning outcomes, her teaching practices were not always synonymous with the prescribed pedagogy of the day. But then along came Professor Barbara Rogoff—who draws on Vygotskian theory and extends it—and Harvard University's Project Zero—which placed more emphasis on objectives and assessment of children's learning—and the wave caught up with her.

"It's all about balance," Deans said. "Children need time to construct their knowledge. They need open time, free time, play time, but they also need time to focus in and hear what the more informed adult, or even the more informed child has to say."

Deans, at 64 years of age, is on the verge of completing her PhD. She also lectures at the Graduate School of Education within The University of Melbourne—which is a role she loves. When she began transforming the rundown building 21 years ago into the leading early education centre it is today, Deans knew little about administration. "I had to prove to the university that it could run as a self-sustaining business and I hadn't had any background in that," she said. "There was no real interest in keeping this kindergarten off-campus unless it was self-sustaining."

In 1992, the ELC had 54 places and a budget of $240,000. Today it accommodates almost 200 children, 30 teachers and an admin team—with a budget of $2.5million. "I was writing fees out on a card", Deans said of her early career, "now there's about 25 different databases that we have to use."

The ELC opens its doors to many visitors including international and interstate academics, early childhood delegates and teaching staff. It also hosts a range of teacher preparation programs for teacher candidates from prominent universities and is a model ELC that delights and inspires.

Deans' respect and admiration for her team is surpassed only by her love for the small children in her care. "The presence of the leader is very, very important," she said, "and I see it as a great honour to be the leader of a team and I take the role on very seriously." Deans comes to work at 8 am every day, and at 8.15 am "We all stand together as a group," she said. "There's a lot about leadership that I've learnt over 20 years," she added, and being a 'present' leader who engages with her staff, her students and their parents is vitally important to her.

Tenacity is a word that means a lot to Deans. "If ever I speak about leadership, 'tenacity' is a really important quality," she said, "to be able to hang on and still want to do it, to keep your passion and drive going, and keep feeding that somehow—so you stay really invigorated."

Other inspirational people have shared the same quality. Louis Pasteur, who discovered the principles of vaccination and who invented the process of pasteurisation once said: "Let me tell you a secret that has led me to my goal. My strength lies solely in my tenacity."

This must be Jan Deans' secret too because her accomplishments over two decades in the practical application of early childhood education could only have been achieved through her great determination and perseverance.

"I was very conscious that children need a beautiful environment to live and play and learn in."
For most of his life Professor Joseph Sparling has been intrigued by teaching and learning. His mother, a teacher, taught him in second grade and it must have made a big impression because within a few years he was contemplating the noble profession himself.

“I just chose that career right from the beginning,” Sparling said. But what he didn’t anticipate was that he would gravitate towards teaching younger and younger students. He assumed he would teach high school students because of his love for maths and science, but he soon discovered his intellectual fascination with child development outweighed his talent for the pure sciences.

“I taught sixth grade, then fifth grade, then fourth grade, then second grade,” Sparling said, “before eventually I became a school principal”. He knew that “What was happening early on was very important especially for those kids who didn’t do so well or who had less advantages”; hence, he “began to migrate down age levels”.

Sparling studied his bachelors and masters degrees before commencing teaching, and when his curiosity was piqued about how children develop and learn he went back and earned his PhD in child development.

It was the mid-1960s by then, and serendipitously for Sparling an important institute was also opening its doors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the United States.

In 1967, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) invited Sparling to join its team, and the outcomes of that union are now written up in educational literature as some of the most important and unique research into child development ever carried out. Even more interesting is the longevity of the research. The subjects from that first study are now 40 years old and still providing ongoing data to the researchers.

It was Sparling’s first university job and he commenced as principal of the institute’s childcare centre. “I was there right at the beginning,” he said, of the FPG Child Development Institute, which has become the premier child development institute in the US. As well as operating as a working childcare centre, it employed physicians, psychologists and educators who studied and researched early childhood.

Dr Craig Ramey was recruited about the same time as Sparling “to add research strengths in the area of infancy”, and together the two scholars began writing grant applications for a project that was to become the landmark Carolina Abecedarian Project. They wanted to study children from birth to five years of age, and their unusual plan to start a program at birth made the study unique. “There are several well-known research projects in the United States that are well respected for having effects on children’s learning”, Sparling recalled, “but ours is the only one that has longterm effects on children’s learning, and their IQ and their health”.

The first Abecedarian project was designed as a randomised controlled trial. Conducted in the institute’s childcare centre, 57 infants and their families were assigned to the experimental group and 54 to the control group. Those in the experimental group received high-quality educational intervention from birth to five years of age. And those in the control group received no educational intervention at all, although some of them went to other childcare centres. The children in the experimental group receiving full-time educational intervention were stimulated with a regular schedule of educational activities, usually implemented as games incorporated throughout their day. The games placed emphasis on emotional, social and cognitive development using...
They were eager to see if they could improve the quality of life, mental health and developmental progress of children in an institutional setting, and their results demonstrated that it could be initiated and sustained by an intervention that included additional resources and training.

LearningGames is the most well-known element of the approach. Based on the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, the set of 200 interactive, individualised games focus on adult–child interactions, many of which are integrated into the routines of daily caregiving. “The reason you play games”, Sparling said, “is because you need to have something that’s interactive that goes back and forth.” An important consequence of playing games with children, he added, is that as well as the children learning, their parents and caregivers grow more responsive to the children.

Conversational Reading focuses on “joint attention” by the caregiver. It requires readers to go back and forth as in a conversation and is guided by the strategy ‘See, Show, Say’. Sparling stresses the importance of reading to children from birth, and caregivers who are not used to having books around should train to effectively engage children in language and literature.

“The results were profound and significant and are now cited worldwide as evidence of the long-lasting benefits of good quality early childcare.”

Another important element of the Abecedarian Approach is Enriched Caregiving and its basic principles include speaking softly and directly to the child, using eye contact and responding as quickly as possible when they are crying. Naming and repetition should be integrated into caregiving, as well as encouraging the child to take on specific responsibilities related to their caregiving.

Sparling said that while “caregiving events might be different in different cultures”, there is a “universal, or near universal, set of techniques”. Adolescents, he explained, face a vastly different landscape today than a few decades ago, but for two-year-olds it’s not that different. “The way adults and very young children interact has a remarkable stability in the first three years of life throughout the world.”

In early 2014, Sparling brought his expertise to the Northern Territory of Australia where, in collaboration with the Northern Territory Department of Education, he and his colleagues from The University of Melbourne are studying the implementation of the Abecedarian Approach with infants in two remote Indigenous communities in the Top End. They’ve been piloting the program—which is named 3a, an acronym of Australian Abecedarian Approach—for a couple of years and have based it on a playgroup approach because there is no formal childcare in the Aboriginal communities.

“They’re working hard to be faithful to the program, get it in place and run parent–child playgroups five days a week,” Sparling said. The project will follow a group of children from birth to preschool, which starts at 36 months for Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory, and in order to have more contact with the parents the 3a program will do home visits as well.

At the same time, Sparling is overseeing Abecedarian projects in China, Canada, Peru and Mexico. His pioneering research, which spans almost 50 years, continues to improve the lives of countless children, and is still evident decades later when they continue to exhibit higher functioning and, as recent follow-up has shown, even better physical health.

“A rising tide lifts all boats,” Sparling said of the snowball phenomenon of his work with infants. “If you get things going better for children in one area ... there’s a possibility they will go better in other areas as well.”

Children, Sparling believes, are simply better equipped to cope with what life throws at them if they’ve been recipients of the Abecedarian Approach. “It’s like compound interest”, he said, “that keeps building on things that were not part of the intervention.”

---

Photos: pages 6, 7: Professor Joseph Sparling in Melbourne.

---

Early Horizons Vol 3, Issue 1, 2014
There’s a saying that when a door shuts a window opens, but for Maria Johnson—the founder of New Zealand’s Little Schools—life’s been more about creating her own opportunities. After establishing four preschools in New Zealand, Johnson’s intuition and expertise led her to China, where her first international preschool is set to open shortly in one of its oldest cities, Xian. There are plans later in the year, as well, to open two more preschools in China and to take the Little Schools’ concept to the Middle East.

Backtrack 12 years, and Johnson—a trained primary school teacher—had four young children of her own. Through her daily experiences as a parent she realised there was “a massive gap in the market for proper preschool education and early childhood facilities that provided… a nurturing as well as an educational environment for children”. So Johnson, who is now president of the Early Childcare Council in New Zealand, seized the opportunity to work in an area she loved and started her own business.

The first Little School opened in Khandallah, a suburb of Wellington in the North Island of New Zealand, and, despite Johnson’s initial plan to operate only one preschool, she soon changed her mind. “The waiting list was so huge,” she said. “It confirmed to me that there was such need for the philosophy and the concept that Little School had—so it was driven by demand of what the parents wanted.” Before long, Johnson was back at the planning board and embarking on a second Little School and a third and fourth. Today, there are three Little Schools in Wellington and a fourth in Auckland.

“One I’d opened up three schools, I decided to go back and gain my early childhood qualifications so that I had the expertise and was being acknowledged for what I was saying,” Johnson said. So after graduating from Hamilton Teachers College in 1989 and Waikato University in 1990, she returned to full-time study and graduated with her early childhood qualifications in 2006. She also travelled to Australia and studied to become a licensed listening practitioner in 2007.

With a strong academic background Johnson’s Little School philosophy was formalised. “We’re quite different in the early childhood sector in New Zealand”, she explained, “we’re structured and we have a daily routine and a daily timetable”. The coordinated learning environment operates in a similar way to a new entry classroom with four terms a year and comparable hours. The children are also organised into age-appropriate groups, with a two- and three-year-old group and a four-year-old group.

They all have a morning mat time where there is a lot of singing and movement— with the two- and three-year-olds on a different mat to the four-year-olds. The children also discuss daily activities and explore new topics including news items, and number and literacy concepts.

Each child is involved in a sensory motor development program that aims to build a framework for academic learning, and this essential aspect of the Little School philosophy also aims to ensure a smooth transition to school.

“We believe that children need to be academically ready to learn, and to be able...”
to be academically ready to learn they need to have worked through developmental processes so that their brains are ready to start that learning process," Johnson said. So, before her teachers commence instructing children in the fundamentals of reading, writing and maths they build on sensory motor development that enables these types of learning.

By the time children in Little Schools are four years old, each of them is on an individual reading program. "What we try to do is to develop a love of reading so they continue to read for a lifetime," Johnson said. As well as reading to the children, teachers encourage reading for meaning, story prediction and starting to develop the children's imaginations for story writing. "It's really important to teach them about all different types of reading," Johnson said, "and that reading can come from recipes, newspapers and all different areas."

Creating a print-saturated environment is essential to Johnson's philosophy. The environments in her preschools are laden with pictures and associated text. There are books out in the sandpits, and books on the carpentry tables. "We don't just have books in the library corner," she said.

Johnson has created her own maths program, which focuses on number, positions, pattern, shape, mathematical language and games. She also emphasised the importance of music. "Research shows that if you've got music with children it reaches all seven parts of their brain," she added. She stressed the importance of reading for meaning, and while they're not Montessori-based "some of Montessori's ideas can be seen" throughout the Little School program.

"If you believe in your program and children are at the centre of your program, then you can only succeed."

Johnson is unapologetic about incorporating the work of multiple early childhood leaders. She is a keen scholar of theory and emphasised the need to use it as a base for developing programs. "If you can't sit and look at your philosophy and see the theorists who are actually involved in your program there is something fundamentally wrong with how your program is set up," she said.

While Johnson was aware she had developed something unique in Little Schools, she didn't realise she had an exportable brand until a few years ago when the Singapore government visited New Zealand. After touring the country and looking at early childhood centres, they selected Little Schools as the concept they wanted to take back to Singapore.

"The Singapore option didn't prove financially viable, but it prompted Johnson to consider establishing a teacher training institute in China to service her preschools. International teachers will be brought in to work alongside the Chinese teachers, whose training is taking longer than anticipated, and this has prompted Johnson to consider a few years ago when the Singapore government visited New Zealand. After touring the country and looking at early childhood centres, they selected Little Schools as the concept they wanted to take back to Singapore. In 2011, Johnson won the Best Small/Medium Business award in Wellington. In the same year she was selected as the Wellington Businesswoman of the Year, and in 2012 she was a finalist in the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year, as well as an Education Finalist in the Pandora Awards.

There is no doubt that Johnson is a leading light in the international early childhood sector, and her advice to anybody considering setting up an early childcare centre is indicative of her philosophy. "To become involved in early childhood you need to be passionate about children," she said. "If you believe in your program and children are at the centre of your program, then you can only succeed."

But Johnson saved her final words for those who implement her program. "Our teachers compliment our program; they're incredibly dedicated. They are my asset—they help me carry out my dream."
Children are born to take risks. Their earliest learning occurs through the ongoing cycle of trial and error, and the neurological feedback they gain from unsuccessful attempts. Recent advances in neuroscience demonstrate that this cycle of feedback is vital to optimum neurological development in the early years. Therefore, children need a range of experiences that involve high cognitive load, and are holistic and repetitive in order to maximise their development during this phase.

Traditionally, education has tended to negate the natural risk-taking drive children possess in their early years of life, and yet risk-taking and attempting the unknown are key to children’s successful engagement as effective learners within the rest of the curriculum. So, at what point does our intrinsic drive to protect children from harm become a harmful act in itself?

Education in contemporary society has adopted more of a ‘risk averse’ stance in relation to children’s everyday engagement in the curriculum, and their earliest risk-taking experiences are sanitised to such a level that the risk is not much of a risk at all. By definition, learning is the experience or process of acquiring new skills, knowledge or information. Yet the desire to protect children from harm can very often remove one of the most important life lessons for children—how to safely assess and manage risks.

Paulson, McKell-Carter, Platt, Huettel and Brannon conducted research in 2012 that suggested children need to make decisions in risky situations to employ areas of the brain such as the insula, hippocampus and amygdala in order for the more ‘adult-like’ risk-management processes to develop. They also found that an aversion to risk can impact on the maturation of neural processes, which are employed in making decisions where risk is a factor.

Adults often assess a risk by the potential for harm to the people involved. When educators collectively make judgements, the terms risk and hazard are often bandied about and used interchangeably, however, there are some distinct differences. A ‘hazard’ is anything that has the potential to cause harm to those who engage with it. A ‘risk’ is the likelihood of potential harm from an identified hazard being realised by those who engage with it (Archimedes Training Ltd, 2013).

Identified hazards in educational services are typically dealt with in the same way—the removal of the hazard. With the hazard removed, the likelihood for potential harm is significantly reduced and, therefore, the risk is also removed. Far too often,

---

**From my chair**

**Steven Cameron**

Early childhood leader Steven Cameron writes about how children learn by taking risks—and why we need to resist the urge to step in instead of stepping back.

It’s far better, he says, to involve children in the process of risk assessment so they can learn to make their own judgements.
decisions of this nature are made as a snap judgement rather than through a process of deliberation.

The introduction of the National Quality Standards in 2012 provides the opportunity for educators to engage in risk assessments where the potential for harm is weighed against the likelihood of harm. Educators can make a collective decision about whether to provide opportunities for children to engage in a specific experience or learning environment.

I believe there is a missing element to this process that needs to become a larger consideration in the educator’s decision-making process. It is the children’s evaluation of the risk, which includes their perceived benefits of engaging with a specific experience or environment.

The development of mature risk aversion occurs over time, with experience developing neural networks that are used to assess the effectiveness of decision-making under conditions of risk. If these neural networks do not develop, an imbalance between the reward-related and executive control regions of the brain can occur.

“So at what point does our intrinsic drive to protect children from harm become a harmful act in itself?”

The maturation of those neural networks shifts children’s assessment of risk from a dominance of reward influencing the decisions, and they begin to learn to balance the risk against the reward.

Educators can assist children’s neurological development in terms of managing risk through including them in the process of conducting risk assessments. The opportunity to think and reflect on the potential and likelihood of harm from engaging with specific learning experiences and environments serves to shift children’s thinking from a purely reward perspective, and they balance reward against the potential for harm.

The idea of risk is not always an easy one for educators to accept, with personal views and stances towards risk heavily influencing the educational decisions they make. However, taking risks is such a vital part of a child’s success for learning—and educators need to bring that element of risk back into education. Being highly risk averse often acts like a virus that spreads through education and care settings affecting staff, children and parents alike. The cure, fortunately, is quite simple. It is a small dose of risk on a daily basis taken by children and educators alike.

Reward an outstanding educator or teacher

Do you know an inspirational educator who deserves to be recognised for their great work?

The National Excellence in Teaching Awards (NEiTA), an initiative of the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG), provides annual awards to inspiring educators, centre directors, teachers and principals across Australia.

Founded in 1994, for the past 20 years the NEiTA Foundation has established itself as a leader in identifying and promoting the good work of outstanding educators and teachers.

Great teachers change the future, and the NEiTA awards are a celebration of teaching and learning for the entire educational community.

The awards are presented annually and to be eligible to nominate an educator or director in an early learning centre or kindergarten you must be a parent, grandparent or guardian of a child at the centre. Nominators can also be official representatives of the parent association, board, council, early childhood committee of management or a community organisation.

To be nominated in the early childhood categories educators, teachers and centre directors must be fully qualified with a minimum of two years teaching experience in Australia. They must also currently be teaching a minimum of 28 hours a fortnight in a licensed early learning centre.

ASG NEiTA Awards are presented to 60 state and territory recipients across all categories, and 12 of those are selected as recipients of the national awards. There were more than 1500 nominations in 2013 for the early childhood, primary and secondary categories.

The ASG National Awards and Grants are awarded to 12 educators and teachers in the categories of leadership and development, innovation and community engagement. National award recipients receive a specially crafted NEiTA crystal apple and an ASG grant of $5000, which must be used for their professional development or a community relations initiative.

One national award recipient also receives the Disability Inclusion Grant of $2000, and a NEiTA Teacher Ambassador of the Year is selected to represent Australia at the International Space Camp, which is held at the US Space and Rocket Center in Alabama in the United States.

If you want to know more about these important awards go to www.asg.com.au/neita; email neita@asg.com; telephone 03 9276 7768, or freecall 1800 624 487.
Professor of Clinical Psychology Nicole Rinehart is a shining light in the area of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). An academic with a formidable list of accomplishments, and on-the-ground experience as a clinical psychologist, Rinehart has published more than 85 journal articles on autism, Asperger’s disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She’s also contributed to the revision of the Australian Therapeutic Guidelines for Developmental Disabilities and is on the editorial board of the American Journal of Autism.

Autism affects about one in 100 people across Australia and New Zealand, and is associated with multiple risk factors including social isolation, family breakdown and poor mental health. Rinehart, as a PhD student, was interested in the differences between Asperger’s disorder and autism. Other academics, who have inspired her research, such as Emeritus Professor John Bradshaw and Emeritus Professor Bruce Tonge, have found, respectively, that autism and Asperger’s disorder are not homogenous, and that children with Asperger’s have more emotional-behavioural problems than those with autism.

Rinehart’s own research examined the motor differences between these two groups of children, and her results pointed to a number of key differences in the motor profiles between those with Asperger’s disorder and autism. Those with Asperger’s had specific impairments in walking, which implicated the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls movement precision. This research, Rinehart hopes, will lead to ‘tailored interventions’ in the diagnosis and treatment of individuals with Asperger’s disorder.

The new Deakin Child Study Centre, which has received funding from the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Research Council, will have state-of-the-art research facilities and Rinehart’s team of researchers will seek to study children over a period of time.

The relationship with Irabina Childhood Autism Services is vital to achieving this goal, and so is assisting and supporting the parents and families of children with autism and Asperger’s.

“We found through research we did with Professor Bruce Tonge in 2006, Rinehart said, ‘that parent-focused intervention, learning about autism and teaching skills was very effective in reducing parental mental health issues because if you’ve got a child with autism you’ve got an increased burden and a stressful life.’

Rinehart said much of the research to date has just looked at children at one point in time and there hasn’t been a lot of follow-up research—so we might know that an intervention works for a child at one point in time, but what does that mean over time? Part of the relationship with Irabina, she said, ‘will be to establish good research where we can look at what happens to children over time and what works’.

The team will also be ‘looking to engage in research that bridges between the university and what’s actually happening in the community.'


Rinehart, whose passion for unravelling the mysteries of autism, is obviously thrilled about the prospective clinical outcomes of the new centre. "We're looking for new ways of potentially treating autism, as well as assessing and understanding it," she said. The centre—which will be based within the university's new faculty of health—will bring together leaders in the field of autism, mental health and physical activity with the aim of preventing unhealthy weight gain, and improving physical and mental health outcomes in the ASD population.

Early diagnosis and treatment provide the best opportunity for children with ASD, and Rinehart recommends that early childhood educators "talk to parents about their concerns", if they are worried about a particular child. It's also important to "provide parents with information about what next steps they can take", she said, such as offering them a referral to a psychologist or pointing out where they could go for advice.

"We all know that early intervention is good, we all know that early assessment can be useful, but it's important to work with children on their journey," Rinehart said. "All parents will be on different journeys. Respect their rights to make decisions for their child and work with them—and that's not easy to do if the parents don't fully recognise the difficulties being conveyed. But what's important", she added, "is to maintain that communication and relationship".

Rinehart said that "whether there's a label or not a label, what's most important and the message that teachers can convey is about the child's strengths and weaknesses and what could be done to support the child more". Parents, she said, are more likely to open up and discuss possibilities about their child's developmental profile and where their needs are, if their child's strengths are also recognised and noted.

"No parent wants to hear just about their child's weaknesses and where they're not doing well."

Tonge wrote about five red flags, or alerts, that can be used by general practitioners, in identifying children on the autism spectrum (Australian Family Physician, Vol 40, September 2011). While diagnosis is clear by 30–36 months, he wrote that symptoms are apparent during the second year of life. These symptoms cause impairments in "social interaction, communication and behaviour with restricted and stereotyped interests".

Children who do not babble, coo or gesture by 12 months, who do not say single words by 16 months (or have any loss of language or social skill at any age) and who do not speak two-word phrases independently by 24 months could be displaying characteristics of autism.

Children with Asperger's disorder are different from children with autistic disorder. They do not have delayed "receptive or expressive language development or cognitive development". Instead they have "significant impairment in their social interactions" and repetitive, restrictive patterns of behaviour. Children with Asperger's disorder may not come to clinical attention until they are at preschool or primary school, Tonge said, when their behaviours are more noticeable and problematic.  

*These kids deserve better*, she said, "we're still a long way from understanding the aetiology of autism. We're a long way from having lots of good evidence-based intervention approaches." Rinehart also said there was a lot of work to do to "prevent downstream-related comorbidities with autism", and she noted that children with autism have very poor sleep, impaired motor function and are at increased risk of having ADHD.

Associate Professor Peter Enticott, formerly from the Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre at Monash University, joined the Deakin team late last year, and his current work into the first potential biomedical treatment for autism is promising, and many hope it is a bellwether for ASD research.

Published in November in New Scientist, Endicott and his team conducted a randomised, double-blind clinical trial where they stimulated the region of the brain known as the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC) using repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) in 28 adults diagnosed with Asperger’s disorder or high-functioning autism.

The dmPFC is known to be underactive in people with autism and, according to Endicott, is the part of the brain linked with understanding other people's 'thoughts, beliefs and intentions'. The results were promising, and showed that those who received rTMS for 15 minutes over a 10-day period had improved social skills one month later. Those who received the placebo recorded no change in their social skills. Interestingly, those who received the rTMS also showed reduced anxiety, but no improvement in computer tasks that assessed their insight into the mental state of others.

Rinehart added, "that if you've met one child with autism, you've met one child with autism; if you've met one family who has a child with autism, you've met one family who has a child with autism'. And she warned that autism is "not a homogenous condition and it doesn't affect families in the same way."

"No parent wants to hear just about their child's weaknesses and where they're not doing well."

Tonge wrote about five red flags, or alerts, that can be used by general practitioners, in identifying children on the autism spectrum (Australian Family Physician, Vol 40, September 2011). While diagnosis is clear by 30–36 months, he wrote that symptoms are apparent during the second year of life. These symptoms cause impairments in "social interaction, communication and behaviour with restricted and stereotyped interests".

Children who do not babble, coo or gesture by 12 months, who do not say single words by 16 months (or have any loss of language or social skill at any age) and who do not speak two-word phrases independently by 24 months could be displaying characteristics of autism.

Children with Asperger’s disorder are different from children with autistic disorder. They do not have delayed “receptive or expressive language development or cognitive development”. Instead they have “significant impairment in their social interactions” and repetitive, restrictive patterns of behaviour. Children with Asperger’s disorder may not come to clinical attention until they are at preschool or primary school, Tonge said, when their behaviours are more noticeable and problematic.  

*Photo: Professor Nicole Rinehart leading the way in autism research.*
Helping children tell their own stories

An advocate of the whole language approach, Victoria Ryle has spent the last three decades putting the publishing process at the centre of early literacy teaching.

Sharon Lapkin

Victoria Ryle loves it when children tell her stories. But for the former school teacher, the true joy is in empowering children to write, illustrate and publish their own stories to a wide audience.

As a school teacher in London in the 1980s, Ryle was very much at the centre of the whole language movement, which saw the emphasis shift from rigid learning structures and prescribed readers, to children writing and sharing their own stories.

"Everything was interconnected," Ryle said, of the whole language movement. "The children would talk about their experiences, they would write about their experiences, and some of those experiences would be shared with their peers." For Ryle, there were extended benefits for the children where they'd be "reading about their own lives and worlds" and in editing their own writing, "they'd be developing their skills both as writers and readers in an interdependent way".

While children were writing and printing their own stories in class and their teachers were producing whole-class books, Ryle nurtured a vision to extend children's own publishing beyond the classroom.

Deeply passionate about the whole language approach to teaching reading and writing, she joined forces with her husband, Simon Spain, a printmaker. "My connection with Simon catapulted me into seeing firsthand the power of publishing multiple copies of their book and what impact that had on children," Ryle said.
Making one book is a very, very different thing to actually having a set of books that beg a whole range of questions,” she said. Questions such as “Who am I going to read this to?, Who am I going to give it to?, What will be the responses of different people in my life to what I have written?”—and it’s the power of that, which embeds all the literacy learning in a rich context of social relationships in the child’s world.”

Simon had begun conducting week-long residencies in schools and producing handprinted, limited editions of children’s books—usually about 100 copies. He worked alongside the children to illustrate their written content, make up the screens and then assist them to print each colour, each layer of the book on large sheets of paper so that when they folded it up they had small-scale handprinted books.

Back then “It was the all-or-nothing world of mainstream publishing,” Ryle said, and Simon’s innovative work helped launch her vision for Kids’ Own Publishing, which the two started up in Ireland in 1997. It proved a successful venture that is still thriving today under new management, despite their move to the Antipodes.

“It was a marriage of my passion for early literacy ... and his skills as an artist, in particular a printmaker”, Ryle said, of the not-for-profit publishing enterprise that enabled young children in Ireland to publish their own stories.

While Ryle’s personal passion is early literacy, she also recognises, she said, that the publishing process “is simply a lovely container into which you can pour some very specific ingredients that meet the needs of very particular communities”.

When Ryle moved to Australia with her family, she found her business model needed to be restructured because “Children’s community publishing happens in a community context, it has to grow from the ground up,” she said. “You can’t just take a particular approach or methodology and impose it onto a different community.”

Ryle said it is more about working with the local community and building a project together, than transferring a mindset from one country to another.

Storytelling is an ancient tradition. Dr Pamela Rutledge, Director of the Media Psychology Research Centre in the United States, writes that “Stories are authentic human experiences ... they are timeless links to ancient traditions, legends, archetypes, myths and to symbols. They connect us to a larger self and universal truths.” Stories, she adds, also “transcend generations, engage us through emotions” and “connect us to others”.

According to Rutledge, stories are “how we think ... how we make meaning from life ... how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we understand our place in the world, create our identities, and define and teach social values”.

Ryle measures the success of her work by whether she has embedded “reading in the social context of relationships and increased motivation and increased engagement in books”. Although, she said, “if we chose to focus on children’s reading skills we believe we would find amazing data.”

While Ryle believes the publishing process is good for all children, the target demographic of Kids’ Own Publishing is “those children, for whom, when they step from their home into the world of the school, there is a huge gap”. These children “are stepping into a world that has very powerful expectations about what they should be doing in the literacy arena”, Ryle said, “how they should behave, the things they have to learn, the behaviours they need to take on”.

For many children, the experience of school is like “crossing over a huge chasm”, and “sometimes they don’t cross that bridge, they don’t manage to make it”, Ryle said.

“They look at a book and don’t know what it has to do with their lives,” but once they experience the publishing process “We’ve wheeled them into this literacy club and they can never get out of it.”

It seems obvious that Ryle would connect with refugee and indigenous children as she believes they, in particular, would benefit from publishing their own stories. One example is Kids’ Own Publishing partnership with the Bor Orphanage & Community Education Project in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria. Together they published Donkeys can’t fly on planes, a collection of stories by South Sudanese refugee children living in Australia.

Available on the Bor Orphanage Community website at www.bocep.org.au, the book is a collection of stories of survival that depict the images the young children ‘see at night when they close their eyes’.

Kids’ Own Publishing published 28 books in the 2012–13 financial year, all with individual ISBNs, and their work included many visits to writers festivals, workshops and forums for education, discussion and advocacy.

The small organisation has also published books in three at-risk languages. Kids’ Own Publishing has published a book in Cant—the language of Irish travellers; in Fatalaklu, the language spoken in the Lautem district of East Timor; and in Chin, the language of a hill tribe on the border between Burma and Thailand.

Currently situated at the Abbotsford Convent in an arts precinct by the Yarra River in Melbourne, they are shortly moving to a larger office in the same building. Kids’ Own Publishing works across all Australian states and aims to make the publishing process accessible to educational organisations. Ryle hopes to open up resources that are transferrable and downloadable for all communities to access. “The technology has really caught up with our dreams,” she said, and has made the publishing process within easy reach of everybody with a computer and a printer.

Operating as a not-for-profit literary arts organisation, Kids’ Own Publishing has doubled its turnover over the last two consecutive years. “We can’t keep up with the demand,” Ryle said, and it’s clear she’s excited about the future of children’s publishing. There’s very little sense of propriety in Ryle’s attitude and, as the founding director of the organisation, she is acutely interested in sharing her expertise and enabling others to develop their own skills.

“At the centre of our ethos”, Ryle said, “we build the capacity of the community to take on ways that they can continue to tell community stories and support their children to making and publishing their own books”.

Kids’ Own Publishing can be found online at www.kidsownpublishing.com. Recently, a second website was launched to support the growing network of children’s community publishers around the country. Called ‘WePublish’, it can be found online at www.wepublish.net.au.

A subscription model is also being developed for people to be sent books at regular intervals in return for supporting Kids’ Own Publishing. For Ryle, and the rest of her dedicated team, giving children a voice, a forum and a platform to explore their own life stories is a gift that keeps giving.

“The journey of Kids’ Own Publishing in Australia has led us on an ever-broadening network of paths into the potential of the publishing process’, she said, “which we don’t believe we’ve begun to tap yet”.  


Early Horizons Vol 3, Issue 1, 2014
Local walking excursions—where educators take children on a stroll around the block to a nearby park or shop—are becoming increasingly popular as a mechanism to teach preschoolers about road safety. The excursions are part of a seachange in early childhood road safety education in Victoria where educators are embedding road safety education into their daily activities, rather than providing one-off activities or experiences. The approach is being fuelled by new national research, which merges early childhood education and road safety evidence. This research, commissioned by the Road Safety Education Reference Group Australasia, resulted in the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education, a set of eight practices guiding educators in evidence-based road safety education curriculum. Putting this new research into practice challenges some commonly held beliefs about teaching road safety to children. “Traditionally, what we’ve done as parents and early childhood educators is provide children with a dose of road safety education—you get it for a week and then you’re done,” leading early childhood consultant Catharine Hydon said. “The shift in thinking involves what the research evidence shows about how children learn. They learn through encounters and participation. “If we offer them one outing and one activity, such as making traffic lights, it’s not enough to embed those ideas into their thinking. But if educators and children regularly step out into their community then this real experience provides a rich learning environment to assist children to develop skills and attitudes for safe road use—holding hands, being aware of driveways, road signs and traffic lights—children can participate in their own safety and the safety of others. Those types of habits last for a lifetime.” Originally developed in 1989, Victoria's early childhood road safety education program, known as Starting Out Safely, responded to national changes in Australian early childhood education resulting in a renewed program. Since 2011, Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA), a peak organisation representing parents and early learning services including kindergartens, child care centres and family daycare, has been delivering the new program.

Children are being encouraged to explore their neighbourhoods as part of a new approach to road safety education in early childhood learning services. The team at Early Learning Association Australia, which is delivering the program, explains more about it.
ELAA has been instrumental in turning research into practice. Hydon is a facilitator involved in delivering professional development sessions to educators in the sector.

Starting Out Safely aims to reduce injuries and death to children from road trauma and to support children in being active community participants. The stakes are high, especially for young children.

Road trauma is the leading cause of death among children aged 0–14 years in Australia and the second most frequent cause of hospitalisation, according to the World Health Organization.

On average each year, 30 children aged between 0 and 18 years are killed and 622 are seriously injured on Victorian roads, according to VicRoads data.

So far, under the statewide rollout of the Starting Out Safely program, ELAA has delivered road safety education professional development, including resource materials, to more than 1000 educators in Victorian early learning services.

The resource materials include a play mat with accurate Victorian signage that reflects what children see outside on the streets. The play mat encourages conversation and learning about road safety. Educators extend on this learning by taking children on walking excursions along the surrounding streets or on other types of excursions using public transport.

By encouraging services to introduce neighbourhood excursions Starting Out Safely also achieves a key goal of Australia’s national Early Years Learning Framework, which is to help children be active participants in their community.

Hydon said families and educators liked the idea of neighbourhood excursions, but often raised concerns about whether they could be done safely and if they had educational value. It is, therefore, crucial that educators consult thoroughly with parents before implementing such excursions under the Starting Out Safely program.

"Parents have a legitimate anxiety about children being out in the world because as a society we’ve done a good job of telling children that the world is a dangerous place," Hydon said.

"But parents are also increasingly receptive to the idea of not wanting to bubble-wrap their children, of wanting them to go out into their neighbourhood and be part of their community.

"As educators we need to help parents understand the value of that and how it benefits their child’s learning.”

ELAA has collected many examples of neighbourhood excursions, sparked by ideas from children and educators. In a kindergarten in Melbourne’s northern suburbs, a child brought in a real estate brochure showing the new house his family had moved into nearby.

It led to a lively discussion. The educator collected more brochures from the local real estate agent and the children brought in photos of houses in their street. They created a map of their neighbourhood, put the houses on the map, discussed the streets and road safety issues and then went on excursions to locate the houses.

Other examples involve children drawing up a list of ingredients to cook something and walking to the local shops to purchase the ingredients, or walking to the local park to gather sticks and leaves for a craft project.

“These are learning experiences dripping with literacy, numeracy, language development and team work,” Hydon said. "Parents often ask what children are going to learn about literacy and numeracy if they walk down to the shops. So it’s our job as educators to be really clear about the learning that takes place when we take children out into the community.”

At Poets Grove Family and Children’s Centre in the inner-Melbourne bayside suburb of Elwood, children often go on neighbourhood excursions, with road safety education embedded into each outing.

“Road safety is more than just teaching children to ‘Stop, Look, Listen and Think.”

The 15-minute walk to the nearby beach is one of the centre’s most popular excursions. In spring, children go on daily neighborhood walks with educators to examine plant growth and flowers blooming in gardens and parks.

The centre’s excursions have been operating for more than two years. Its parent management committee established the program because they wanted children to become more familiar with their neighbourhood.

Kay Mondon, the centre’s manager, said many early childhood services were reluctant to get involved in excursions because of misplaced fears about legal liability issues.

“Centres are petrified about legal liability, but that legal liability exists whether you’re with the children inside or outside,” said Mondon, who is also a former co-ordinator of postgraduate education courses at a TAFE institution.

Mondon said feedback from the centre’s staff revealed the excursions progressively became easier to supervise because the children became more knowledgeable about road safety and their neighbourhood after each outing.

“The more that teachers go out on neighbourhood excursions with children, the more they’ll be released from their fear of the unknown,” Mondon said. “Just like children, teachers learn from doing.”

Shane Lucas, CEO of ELAA, said some early learning services are reluctant to embrace neighbourhood excursions. But that attitude is changing as more educators participate in the Starting Out Safely program. The program helps educators consider the benefits and manage the mandatory risk assessments for each outing.

Lucas said educators and families welcomed the shift to a more holistic approach to early childhood road safety education. “Road safety is more than just teaching children to ‘Stop, Look, Listen and Think;’” he said. “It’s about engaging with families and children, embedding it in everyday life and seeing it as an enabler for children to become active participants in their communities.”

For more information visit: www.roadssafetyeducation.vic.gov.au
How does fundraising bring together a community?
Fundraising is a great concept where you are able to connect an individual to a project or activity that inspires them. Fundraising is about saving a life—or changing a life. Communities come together because they aspire to see the same outcome. A fundraiser helps communicate what that outcome could be. It’s important to help people understand where they are right now and what the problem is.

Communities seeking funding can approach this process by inviting various stakeholders to share their vision, and also how generating funds would make a tremendous difference. Once a group has determined where the funds should go, then it’s a matter of asking people to financially help to support this vision.

It’s also a process of the collectiveness of a group coming together to fundraise for one purpose. There’s a sense of accomplishment and achievement at being able to meet a fundraising goal.

It’s not about what people get in return, but about what they did together.

Are Australians good givers?
Australians are very good crisis givers, and they’re getting better at other types of philanthropy. In the past 18 months, Australia has attracted philanthropists have given nearly $200 million to scholarships and research in higher education across the country.

In the higher-education fundraising sector this demonstrates that all the years of hard work, of helping people understand why education is so important, is starting to translate through what are called transformational gifts—or somebody’s ultimate gift in their lifetime. This gift will have a legacy forever because it will change the way people can be educated.

Why is it important to donate money?
We have a professional explanation and a human explanation for why it’s important to donate money to help others.

When people give they create, within themselves, opportunities for others to give to them. When people become natural givers, they become more grateful by nature, and so life looks different. When you give, as a person, you get to see a tangible outcome and you get to see other people benefit from something you’ve worked hard to give away, but that opposite side is inside yourself. You become more grateful because you start to understand life on a different level.

It often doesn’t matter the amount that’s given, it’s the act itself. However, people who have the capacity to give a transformational gift often won’t give unless they are asked. There are very few who will actively seek to make large donations—they only come if you ask.

Do people sometimes not give because they believe they can’t give enough?
Usually people don’t give because they haven’t had the opportunity to understand the impact their gift could have.

A fundraiser’s job is to help them understand the impact they could have with their donation.

What advice do you have for people who feel uncomfortable about asking for money?
With major gift fundraising when you’re having a conversation about what it is you want to raise money for, consider posing the question: Do you see this as something you might be able to help us with? Can you see yourself in this? Would you consider looking at a proposal to help us make this dream a reality? All you’re asking for is their permission to read something, and if they say yes it is then up to the individual on how they want to interpret it and where they see themselves in the giving level.

With smaller amounts, you also have to connect with the prospective donor and make an ask—this is also part of the relationship-building process.
Perhaps give the individual a tour of the centre or kindergarten, speak to [older] children who have scholarships about the huge impact it’s had on their lives. Volunteers should always be donors even if it’s a smaller amount because it’s difficult to ask someone for a donation if you haven’t made one yourself. You can say ‘I’ve invested in this myself; I really believe in it and I’d like to ask if you’d join us.’

Stewardship is an important part of ongoing fundraising. It’s important to put a lot of time and attention into saying thank you to donors and making sure they are updated on new projects, outcomes, research or findings. If they’re supporting a student scholarship, for example, the student could write them a letter to say thank you and explain: ‘This is how your money has helped me progress through my studies this year.’ Donors are always very proud because they had the opportunity to change a life and inspire someone to achieve something great.

Australian Tax Office requirements

If a person has made a donation, you’re allowed to give them a gift to say thank you and not impact your DGR (Deductible Gift Recipient) status. All not-for-profits, or charities, must have a DGR number, which is a registered number through the Australian Tax Office (ATO) to be able to give receipts for donations, so donors can then put those receipts into their tax returns to reduce their taxable income. You can give a donor a gift up to a certain dollar value. You are encouraged to visit the ATO website to familiarise yourself with the regulations. Anything over and above that is classified as a tangible benefit for the donor, which means it isn’t a donation, but a sponsorship and they have to pay GST.

Planning a fundraising event

If you are hosting an event and want to raise a particular amount of funds to create or build something special, you could connect with an identified group of stakeholders within your organisation who may have the capacity to give a gift. Look outside the early learning centre or kindergarten at local businesses in the geographical area where the kindergarten or centre is—milk bars, sporting clubs, local shops and offices—and ask for a donation or even an ‘in kind’ gift such as a hairdressing voucher, as it may be easier for them to give away product than cash.

Silent auctions, raffles and trivia nights are great ways to raise money. Another easy way to raise funds is a 50/50 raffle, where everyone at the function puts in $10 or $20 and then a raffle is conducted. When it’s drawn one winner gets half the funds and the other half goes towards the organisation. It often happens that the person who wins the money donates it back to the organisation, so it’s a great fundraising activity.

When an event is running, such as an end-of-year concert, use the opportunity to run a raffle or ask for a small donation. Send letters out asking for funds for projects, and make sure it is set up so that it is easy for people to give.

Those people most connected to the organisation are the obvious place to start. Engage with the right people at the right time, and plan the right fundraising event and you will have a better outcome. In this technological age people still give best when you are sitting in front of them. Meeting with someone face to face has a much higher success rate for securing a gift. Set up a group of volunteers who are tasked with the responsibility of raising a set sum of money and have them report back with their activities.

Potential problems

Good communication is vital. Make sure that whatever is communicated is what every member wants. Loose wheels within an organisation can create big problems. Make sure everybody really believes in what you want to fundraise for because there is nothing worse than surprises.

Make sure you’re tax compliant. There is information on the ATO website under ‘Gifts and fundraising’ at www.ato.gov.au/Non-profit/Gifts-and-fundraising. Make sure all legal requirements are satisfied as well. You can do this by asking a local lawyer to donate some of their time to your organisation. Task one person, or a team, with the responsibility of checking that everything you do is compliant.

Also Google fundraising ideas. There are a tremendous number of fundraising ideas on the internet.

Always remember to say thank you to your donors—and most of all, have fun!
The old MacRobertson buildings in the inner-city Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy are converted into quirky New York-style apartments. But many of the residents are probably unaware they’re living in the same buildings that churned out the first Freddo Frog, Cherry Ripe and Crunchie, as well as the very first Roses boxed chocolates. They’d probably know even less about the man who built the chocolate empire, or how he started it in 1880 boiling lollies in the bathroom of his family’s Fitzroy home.

But the streets of Fitzroy were not always paved with sugar. The notorious gangster Squizzy Taylor spent years prowling its backstreets and laneways. Among his crimes was a robbery-gone-wrong in 1913 when, along with an accomplice, he broke into the home of a MacRobertson travelling salesman to steal a case of cash and inadvertently shot the man dead.

During that same time, a dozen blocks away, a small creche and kindergarten popped up opposite the Fitzroy Town Hall. It bordered an area known as ‘The Narrows’. An infamous slum, The Narrows was also the epicentre of a gangland war between Taylor and rival mob leader Snowy Cutmore. It lay on one side of the new creche while the MacRobertson chocolate factory, known then as ‘White City’, was on the south side.

In contrast to Taylor’s scandalous life, Robertson would become known as the most generous philanthropist in contemporary Australian history. His renown would also extend beyond Fitzroy. Part of Antarctica is named MacRobertson Land after explorer Douglas Mawson named it in honour of his financial sponsorship.

Sandwiched between these two diverse worlds, the good people of Fitzroy erected a creche for the families with young children struggling with parental responsibilities. Mrs Grace Catherine Ferguson, whose husband operated nearby Ferguson Mantles, Costumes & Co, and who had nine children herself, was alarmed at the number of small children on the streets and wanted to help. She donated several hundred pounds and—along with a group of other hardworking women, plus 100 pounds from the local council—raised enough money to build the childcare centre and provide care for 25 local children.

The Fitzroy Creche was completed a year before the First World War broke out in 1914, and it operated through difficult times with meagre resources. During the Great Depression, between 1930 and 1939, there was no money for repairs or maintenance because every dollar was needed for food and clothing. It functioned as a wartime children’s centre during the Second World War, and again there was little money for anything during the six long years Australia was at war.
In 1947, the creche was expanded to care for 50 children, with the capacity to provide a further 12 children with residential care. But the building was falling into disrepair and the high cost of maintenance forced the committee of management to consider its options. By 1963, it had purchased land at the edge of The Narrows and built a new creche and kindergarten catering for 40–50 local children. This development, however, was short-lived because in 1965 the Housing Commission decided to demolish all the buildings in The Narrows and erect large-scale public housing.

By way of compensation they offered the creche committee a plot of land under the eaves of the Fitzroy Town Hall where it still stands today. The creche's colourful history provides intrigue and interest. But for locals it is the hard work of the committee and its refusal to give up when times were tough (and closure was a heartbeat away) that has made the childcare centre an icon in a steadily gentrifying suburb.

Fitzroy today is one of Australia’s smallest and most densely populated areas. Almost 45 per cent of its residents were born overseas and 62 per cent speak only English at home. Renamed Acacia Fitzroy Creche in 1999, after it came close to shutting its doors permanently but instead became part of the Acacia IndoChinese Community Association’s childcare service, it is stronger than any time in its 100-year history.

For Director Olivia Liron and Deputy Director Dilruba Deniz, the daily challenges are a large part of the joy. The creche’s success, they say, is due to its historic tradition of looking after its community, and the two women—who lead a multicultural team of educators—put this principle at the forefront of their work.

‘It was part of the founders’ aim’, Liron said, ‘to look after mothers who had to go back to work’. Maintaining that commitment, she explained, means ‘we always try to look after the underprivileged children’. Another important aspect of that promise is keeping the fees as low as possible, which can be tricky in a centre where many families and children need regular assistance.

“We get donated goods from the community”, Liron said. “They just walk in and give us things”, and this overt generosity is part of the institutional ethos at Acacia where a number of children are classified as ‘children-at-risk’. Liron lobbies on their behalf to the state government to secure funding for their fees because it means she can ensure they are in a safe educational environment.

The daily challenges are outweighed by the immense satisfaction of caring for and educating the small children in their care. Liron said she “would never go anywhere else because it’s fantastic,” and for Deniz, the satisfaction she derives from seeing the centre “make a difference” in a child’s life is all the reward she needs. “We’re a creche that not only looks after the children, and that’s how we connect with the community,” Liron added.

True to form, Acacia doesn’t skimp on food. They ensure the children have plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables to munch on. At Open Night last year they provided pineapples, grapes and mandarins for their potential parents—a substantial number who were refugees from Sudan and Somalia—and, as is indicative of their community, the parents had never seen such fruits and thought they were plastic. For this same reason Acacia also has a vegetable garden and fruit trees.

“Call it early intervention but they get to primary school and all of this massive funding is needed to get them to fit in with the structure of school.”

Regarding pedagogy, Liron is straightforward. “The old developmental checklists don’t fit children from overseas,” she said, and with almost half the families at Acacia fleeing warzones in the Horn of Africa and North Africa many of the children are part of severely traumatised families. Attendance too can be spasmodic as refugee families can only afford to send their children to childcare when government funding is available. This is a particular bugbear of Liron’s who sees early childcare as a normalising agent in the child’s life that prepares them for school. “Call it early intervention,” she said, “but they get to primary school and all of this massive funding is needed to get them to fit in with the structure of school.”

Liron and Deniz focus on the child’s interest and use this as a platform for their learning. Their approach developed intuitively and later, after studying Barbara Rogoff’s and Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theories and approaches to cognitive development, their educative methods were validated.

Their approach is successful in a community of children who need emotional support and social acceptance, as well as academic learning. The demographic of the early learning centre is so multi-faceted that all the educators, bar one, are multilingual. The range of languages spoken on any one day are English, Arabic, Turkish, Sudanese, Somali, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, Indian, Timorese and several different dialects of Chinese. The educators readily switch between one or more of these languages in dance and music, although the universal language of laughter could likely be the common denominator.

Back in 2000, “we were advertising everywhere to get kids in,” Liron said, referring to the Howard government’s large fee hike and restrictions on childcare subsidies for mothers who were part-time employees or students. But these days Acacia has 55 children in daily care and a long waiting list. It’s especially affirming, Deniz said, when “parents want to go on the waiting list because they’ve heard lovely things about the creche”.

It’s likely the great care and deep commitment at Acacia will continue for many years. Liron and Deniz have cared and nurtured the small children of Fitzroy for 38 years between them, and they can’t see themselves working anywhere else. “Olivia is always looking for ways to support children,” Deniz said. “We always try to help”.

Photos:

p20: celebration at Acacia; playground with Fitzroy Town Hall in background.
p21: Deputy Director Dilruba Deniz (left), Director Olivia Liron (right).
Building social and emotional learning skills in young children

Professor Michael E. Bernard

While there is little question that strong parent–child relationships are crucial for healthy adjustment and for young children to thrive, it is also clear that the development of social and emotional learning skills (SELs) is an important foundation for young children’s later academic success and wellbeing.

The challenge ahead lies in findings reported by the National Academy of Sciences that 60 per cent of children enter school with the cognitive skills needed to be successful, but only 40 per cent have the SELs needed to succeed in kindergarten and preparatory years (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2011).

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Early Childhood Australia, 2009) explicitly recognises learning dispositions as important outcomes. Outcome 3 describes how children should develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination, and reflectivity.

Defining social and emotional learning skills in the early years

Several years ago, I convened a team of early childhood educators, consisting of teachers from Australia and the USA to translate the findings from early childhood research concerning SELs into attitudes and concrete behaviours that could be readily taught by the teachers and parents of young children. We used a framework I developed in ‘You Can Do It! Education’ (Bernard, In K. Yamasaki (Ed.) School-based prevention education for health and adjustment problems in the world, 2013), which is a social-emotional learning program for school-age children to generate clear definitions, behaviours and ways of thinking that can be taught to young children. Following are the five SELs fundamental to learning and wellbeing (for the more complete list, email: m.bernard@unimelb.edu.au).

- **Confidence** — Believing if you try to do something, you can do it. Believing you can make friends. Believing that when you go to school, everything will be okay and that you will be safe and happy. Not being afraid to make mistakes or meet new people. Not being afraid to tell someone what you think and what you want to do. Looking and sounding like you can do things and make friends.
- **Persistence** — Trying hard and keeping trying when something feels like it is too hard to do, or you are tired.
- **Organisation** — Setting out to do your best. Listening carefully to what your teacher is saying. Getting started with your work on time and not wasting too much time playing. Taking care of your things by putting them away when you have finished using them and taking care of yourself by keeping your clothes clean and tidy.
- **Getting Along** — Working and playing nicely together; behaving responsibly towards others (being honest, respectful, fair, caring); solving disagreements without squabbling or fighting; following important rules of the classroom; and doing things to make your classroom and school cleaner and safer.
- **Resilience** — Being able to calm down within 10 minutes of being extremely upset without immediate adult-initiated support and guidance; being able to control your behaviour when you become extremely upset without immediate adult-initiated support and guidance.

Social and emotional learning skills can be explicitly taught to young children

There is some disagreement in the early childhood field concerning optimum and developmentally appropriate ways to teach young children SELs. Some early childhood scholars assert that—for developmental reasons—teacher-led, explicit curriculum lessons are not appropriate. They indicate that social and emotional development is best fostered by placing children in carefully tailored, caring environments with adults who respond in particular ways. Many early childhood educators advocate the use of games and stories to teach social and emotional competencies.

Several years ago, a team of expert international early childhood educators helped me put together an early childhood curriculum program, The You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program: Developing Social-Emotional-Motivational Competencies (4–6-year-olds), which contains lessons and lesson plans to teach young children the five SELs fundamental to learning and wellbeing. Also included are songs for young children about the SELs, posters of children displaying various degrees of the SELs, and a guide for teachers to help parents support the development of SELs at home.

Research published in the Early Childhood Education Journal (Ashdowne & Bernard, 2012) showed that children in prep and year one can learn SELs through explicit instruction. Moreover, strengthening their SELs produced a positive impact on their reading achievement and wellbeing.

It is vitally important that teachers and parents have well-developed practices for helping young children become socially and emotionally up-skilled (Bernard, Reading and Writing Quarterly, 2006).

For more information on the You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program, visit www.youcandoiteducation.com.au or phone 1800 803 135.
You Can Do It! Education

The program includes:
• lessons to teach positive habits of the mind, and the five foundations of success: Confidence, Persistence, Organisation, Getting along, and Emotional Resilience
• five puppets to support role-playing activities
• music CD with sing-along lyrics
• 18 posters for teacher resources in A3 format
• parents’ guide and school home notes
• survey for assessing social/emotional capabilities

The complete program packed in a durable box for easy storage

$395* inc. GST
* Plus $16 for postage and handling

www.youcandoiteducation.com.au
To order, or for more information
Phone: 1800 803 135 Email: youcandoit@asg.com.au

Expand young children’s capabilities with the You Can Do It! Education Early Childhood Program

The You Can Do It! Education Early Childhood Program, developed by Professor Michael Bernard, provides preschools and homes with the tools to expand young children’s capabilities and develop social-emotional competence.

You Can Do It! Education is proudly supported by Australian Scholarships Group

ALL MARCOM PROJECTS CATALOGUES ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE OR IN PDF FORMAT FROM WWW.MARCOM.COM.AU

To order please visit www.marcom.com.au
P (07) 3340 8900 F (07) 3340 8999

50% OFF ANY TITLE IN 2014 EARLY CHILDHOOD CATALOGUE
Purchase any title from the current Early Childhood Catalogue, www.marcom.com.au/download_zone/catalogues.php, and receive 50% off your order when you quote the word “MEMBER” on your order.
Hurry! Sale ends Friday the 27th of June 2014

Marcom Projects is a member of Australian Scholarships Group
Nominate an inspirational teacher or educator now


To request a promotional kit visit www.asg.com.au/neita
For general enquiries call 1800 624 487

@ASGEducation #teachersrock /AustralianScholarshipsGroup