

Why kindergarten is good for Elijah and Elijah is good for kindergarten!

A Parent's Perspective:

I wanted to share a little of Elijah's kindy-experience to encourage every parent to consider the world-class education available to our children through the Queensland kindergarten programme.

One of the premises of the early childhood curriculum at kindergarten is that play is "good enough" – it satisfies all the conditions for human learning. Play encourages innovation, creativity, curiosity, learning, belonging, affiliation, empathy, fairness, cooperation and has many other physical, social, cognitive and emotional benefits. In addition, research behind programmes such as *Responsive Teaching* shows that children play in ways that correspond to their current "thinking, understanding, and reasoning". Children's play behaviour reflects their strengths and interests, providing an opportunity for insight into their world.

Elijah is given many opportunities at kindergarten to explore, investigate, experiment and create according to his interest, ability and a little bit more. Importantly, in spite of the learning difficulties that apraxia presents for Elijah's speech and motor movements, Elijah is always framed as a competent and growing learner. We do not talk about Elijah in terms of 'poor fine motor skills' or 'unable to cut with scissors'. We talk about how he has grown more confident to start conversations, climb the ladder onto the playground, work with a peer to complete a puzzle, teach his friends how to sign, verbalise more words, and so on. One teacher aide, Deb, regularly comes up to me in the afternoon, bursting with excitement, to tell me about something really great that Elijah has done that day. It makes me so happy and I feel that Deb 'sees' Elijah in his own right, without comparisons to lists or other children. It is a huge psychological relief for me to know that Elijah is always growing and developing and I am not being burdened by teacher worries about Elijah's 'readiness for Prep'. The kindergarten programme, while being a great preparation for life-long development, is not being enveloped into the anxiety about 'Prep readiness'.

Many of the activities for children at kindergarten are better than any therapy session I have seen. We have a wall covered in fantastic artwork, which Elijah's Occupational Therapist loves, that is not replicated in any other setting! Also, every week the children are given the opportunity to stand in front of the class to talk about their topic of interest. One of my most outstanding memories is when we first used Elijah's speech generating device (which we named an 'i-talker') to present our family holiday to the class. Elijah pressed the buttons and the children and parents gasped! This was the first time they had heard the voice of the 'i-talker' and were held in rapt attention as Elijah pressed his way through the photos of our holiday. At the end of his talk, Elijah was so thrilled with his success that he ran around his audience, cheering with his arms up in the air – a victory lap! This public success clearly shows to the other children and adults that, despite not being able to speak fluently, Elijah is an active experienter and learner. These opportunities at kindy allow Elijah to be visible and demonstrate that he has something to say.

Furthermore, Sue has taken the opportunity to enhance Elijah's visibility by encouraging us to create PowerPoint presentations which Elijah can share with the class via the i-talker. Sue has then turned these presentations into books, which are now in reading corner. These

opportunities help create interest in Elijah's life and this has been of great benefit to forming friendships. Sue, Deb and Meg (Elijah's teacher aide) have put a lot of thought into the social benefits of play for Elijah. They have worked towards presenting opportunities for Elijah and the other children to play with minimal teaching intervention. Elijah, who loves playing with much older children or adults, has grown in his social awareness of children his age and how to play well with them. Instead of walking away, Elijah is making more of an effort to sign and play cooperatively and the outcome is warm and caring friendships with his kindy peers. The added bonus of attending our local kindy is that Elijah will continue onto school with some of the friends he has made this year. In fact, all research into education for children with disabilities shows that, "Inclusive settings and practices, through their physical and social systems, can enhance children's social interactions as well as physical and cognitive development" (QSA :Inclusion in the early years, p.3). And, Elijah has grown in leaps and bounds.

On a practical note, Sue is very aware of Elijah's additional needs and has adapted the daily timetable (for example, the time and length of breaks) to help Elijah remain in the group at all times. The teachers have high expectations of Elijah, showing in various ways what is required of him and expecting that he will comply, which he does. In addition, Rob and my relationship with the teachers is collaborative: We have worked gently at honesty, open-ness and trust.

As a community kindergarten, Sue and her colleagues have a deep understanding of community and the importance of Elijah's presence to influence attitudes about diversity and ability. Their gentle influence has undoubtedly helped our kindergarten community learn more about the gifts and contributions of every child; how all children need to learn, play, and explore; how all children need a sense of belonging; and how Elijah is no different in these needs.

As parents we are often looking ahead, perhaps worried about this skill or this weakness we see in our child and how it will impact their time in school. Kindergarten, however, is a precious opportunity to enjoy our children where they are – to enjoy their interests, follow their strengths, delight in their view of the world, and to appreciate the beauty of who they are. All too soon, our children are at school and we will be reminded of all the ways we will be striving to get somewhere. Bask in the year or two at kindy and you may well agree with that well-known book title, 'All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten'.

Virginia Lonsdale

A Teacher's Perspective:

As a teacher, I hope that every child that comes to our kindergarten will learn new skills, knowledge and positive dispositions for learning. This holds true for all children including Elijah. Whilst Elijah requires some additional support to ensure that he can access all the learning experiences at kindergarten, he is an equal member of our community of learners. So, inclusion in kindergarten is good for Elijah but it also has great benefits for the other children.

One of the pleasures of having a child with additional needs in kindergarten is seeing the way in which others respond to Elijah. The children demonstrate acceptance, empathy and care. They respect the different way that he communicates and enjoy learning some signing to communicate with him. They enjoy playing alongside him, helping him and watching him master new skills. The challenge is sometimes to avoid children becoming 'over nurturing' and stifling Elijah's growing sense of independence!

Parents also value the opportunity for their children to gain experience of children with diverse learning needs.

“Having Elijah in my son’s kindy class has been such a positive addition in every way. He has brought out a lovely nurturing side in the children, and the lessons they have learnt about acceptance and inclusion will hopefully stay with them always.”

“My personal view is that, anytime something or someone considered 'different' is part of your life, the parts of your life they're connected with are richer for it. Elijah is that. He adds richness to our kindy.”

“Having new learning experiences is not just for our children. Kindy is a community that brings learning to life, for all involved. Fostering these lifelong learning experiences with each other, with the inclusion of Elijah and his family has been truly enriching.”

“The opportunity for our son to be able to share his Kindergarten journey with Elijah has been so enriching, as he has made a strong connection with Elijah and as such the friendship that they share is built upon trust, care and respect of each other- values, traits and lessons which will go beyond the walls of their kindy classroom.”

It is not always straightforward having a child with additional needs at kindergarten. It requires extra time, appropriate funding, additional paperwork, a productive relationship with parents, good support staff, co-ordination with other professionals and minor adjustments to the routine. These tasks, however, are part of our role as teachers. The ‘payoff’ is the benefit that having a child with additional needs brings to our kindergarten community.

Sue Southey, Teacher and Co-Director, Springwood Community Kindergarten

References:

Queensland Studies Authority video ‘Including Children With Disability in Kindergarten’

<http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/26403.html>

Queensland kindergarten learning guideline – Queensland Studies Authority

http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p_10/qklg_pd_inclusion_early_yrs.pdf

Play- http://www.nifplay.org/states_play.html#_4

Responsive Teaching - <http://www.responsiveteaching.org/>

Robert Fulghum, *All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten.*

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