

Nine years of early intervention research: the effectiveness of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) in Australia

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In 2009, the Federal Government of Australia commenced investment of \$32.5 million in the nationwide establishment of the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY). HIPPY is an internationally recognised early educational service program targeting relatively disadvantaged families of preschoolers. It operates on widely acknowledged principles relating to the prevention of learning difficulties through enrichment of the experience of children at risk of such difficulties due to environmental circumstances (Halpern, 2000; McLoyd, 1999). First introduced to communities in Australia in 1998, it is managed by HIPPY Australia within the Melbourne-based Brotherhood of St Laurence, which holds the licence to operate HIPPY in Australia. As a result of advocacy by the Brotherhood of St Laurence regarding the potential benefits of this program, the Australian Government, with a strong commitment to early childhood, will establish HIPPY in 50 communities in partnership with the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Up to 3,000 participating families will be involved. This advocacy was successful against the background of a concerted program of process and outcome research, conducted by Victoria University, which formed a vital part of HIPPY for the nine years following its introduction to Australia. This paper reviews the research program and its findings, beginning with a brief description of HIPPY in its international context.

HIPPY and its implementation around the world

Known in most countries as the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters, HIPPY is an intensive, structured program designed to enhance the learning readiness of preschool children (between three and five years of age) within educationally disadvantaged communities, often migrant groups. It was created and pioneered in Israel in the 1960s, at the National Council of Jewish Women Research Institute for Innovation in Education, within the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, by Lombard (1994) and colleagues. HIPPY aims to assist parents with lower levels of education and income to facilitate capacities for learning and associated confidence in their young children.

The program has been unique among structured, home-based early childhood educational programs in using parenting to enhance the learning environment of the child. Firmly grounded in the family, it provides individual and group education to parents by paraprofessional Home Tutors recruited from the local community. Under the guidance of a professional program coordinator, tutors employ role playing techniques with parents to prepare them to interact with their preschool children in brief, clearly planned activity sessions set for each school day, over a period of two or three years. The curriculum involves directions for incremental daily learning activities supported by materials and books promoting general conceptual, verbal,

visual and coordination skills. Every fortnight, the Home Tutor visits the parent in the family home, and on alternate weeks the parent joins a parent group meeting for the week's instruction. These features of the program are further detailed in the *HIPPY Manual* (HIPPY Australia, 1999). The program operates within a community project framework, in that local communities are invited to consider the potential usefulness of the program in the first place, and, during implementation, ongoing interaction between HIPPY and other local service providers of the program is facilitated.

Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, through the efforts of HIPPY International, based at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, HIPPY had been implemented in some 10 countries outside Israel, namely the United States, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Germany, South Africa, Mexico, Chile, Turkey, Canada and Australia. Diverse outcome research studies had been conducted, generally limited by the methodological problems that challenge program evaluation (Adler, 1995). Nevertheless, the small body of research reported across several cultural settings had found that HIPPY had often not only enhanced children's self esteem and capacity to benefit from school, but had also stimulated parents' self-confidence in educational involvement (for an overview of these studies see Westheimer, 2004). Its general success was largely attributed to its being family and community based, and to its creative and careful use of developmentally appropriate activities.

The Victoria University research plan for Australia: aims and methods

At the point of HIPPY's introduction to Australia, an integrated series of independent research studies was planned by a team in the Wellness Promotion Unit of the then School of Psychology of Victoria University. From the start it was recognised that the program would need to operate differently in Australia, where cultural diversity within communities is often greater than in many other countries, and where children enter school at age five instead of age six. It was planned to introduce the program in its two-year format, embracing ages four and five, the preschool year and the first year of school.

It was considered vital that research be conducted with the principal aims of establishing (a) whether HIPPY could be successfully adapted to Australian conditions, (b) whether it could achieve here the outcome goals of the program, and (c) what processes in the program appear critical. Rigorous research was the objective, solving as many of the methodological problems exposed by previous HIPPY research as possible. One way of doing this was by gathering a wide range of data from all relevant sources. Accordingly, a series of projects were planned, focusing on complementary process and outcome research, and using combinations of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Observations, in-depth interviews, and formal psychological and educational assessment techniques would all be used, and the experience of parents, children and all HIPPY staff would be studied. Quasi-experimental designs, employing comparison groups, or other methods of tracking quantitative changes, would be implemented as appropriate and possible.

A series of 10 studies was carried out over a period of nine years, with funding from both Victoria University and the Australian Research Council in collaboration with two of the HIPPY service delivery agencies, namely

the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Glastonbury Child and Family Services. The research program was led by Suzanne Dean, Cynthia Leung and Anthoula Kapsalakis, and conducted by postgraduate and Honours students in the context of research theses. Each study built upon the last, each highlighting a different aspect of HIPPY, as outlined below.

Benefits for inner city migrant and refugee children and families

Research began with a needs study in the inner Melbourne district of Fitzroy, where the Brotherhood of St Laurence proposed to introduce HIPPY (Dean, Leung, Gilley, & Grady, 2004). Documentation of the needs of local preschoolers, as perceived by early childhood and primary school staff in the district, clearly indicated

HIPPY is an internationally recognised early educational service program targeting disadvantaged families of preschoolers.

the likely value of the program for local, newly arrived migrant and refugee families with limited education and other social disadvantages. Next followed a systematic qualitative evaluation of the ongoing process of the initial implementation of the program (1998-1999), carried out by the Doctor of Psychology candidate Jacqueline Grady (2002). This research demonstrated that, according to parent and HIPPY staff views, HIPPY could be adapted and delivered successfully in a typical Australian immigrant community, in which families from a wide range of cultures must be catered for simultaneously. Sensitivity to cultural expectations of participating communities was found to be critical, implying a need to build HIPPY's place within any given community for optimal effect. Factors perceived as facilitating this complex process included the structure of the program itself, appropriate resourcing of the program, the positivity of staff-parent relationships, and liaison with agencies delivering HIPPY in New Zealand. Parents and HIPPY staff overwhelmingly conveyed an experience of great benefit to both parents and Home Tutors, in addition to children's learning and readiness for school. Parents also reported deepening of parent-child attachment, felt by parents to be at the heart of HIPPY activities.

Outcome evaluation, entailing a carefully matched non-HIPPY comparison group, of the second implementation of HIPPY by the Brotherhood (1999-2000) was then conducted with a culturally and linguistically diverse community of families in the same inner city environment as before. This quasi-experimental study was conducted by PhD candidate Tim Gilley (2002). Both qualitative reports of effects and direct quantitative measures of learning readiness, including the 'Who Am I?' technique (De Lemos & Doig, 1999), indicated favourable outcomes of HIPPY involvement. Also used was an Israeli measure of teachers' assessments

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of children's learning readiness, the Gumpel Learning Readiness Scale' (Gumpel, 1999), which had been validated in Melbourne in 1998 by honours student Rima Moussa (2000), is part of the Victoria University research plan. Gilley found significant group effects for children in actual reading and math performance, in overall adjustment to school, and in academic self-esteem. Benefits were demonstrated for children experiencing only one year in the program, but were far greater for two year involvement. Parents again reported enhanced parent-child communication and closeness, an increased sense of their own pride in their children's development, greater engagement with their children's schooling, and increased interest in their own development, particularly among those parents employed as Home Tutors in HIPPY. Some children clearly benefited more than others, and qualitative process evaluation revealed one highly relevant factor to be that the greater the degree of parental commitment to the program, the better the learning readiness outcomes for children.

These two evaluation studies demonstrated that HIPPY can be an effective early educational intervention in an Australian immigrant and refugee context. They provided to HIPPY management feedback on an ongoing basis about the experience of families, especially their desire for more Australian-based materials. They also raised a myriad of useful questions for further research. Crucial examples of the latter, which have implications for research internationally, concerned the usefulness of HIPPY to disadvantaged families in other kinds of Australian communities, what range of factors might interact to both enhance and limit benefits for the parents, the child and the family, exactly how children's educational and social competency may be extended by the program, and the potential usefulness of some form of service follow-up contact with HIPPY children and families. Some of these key

questions were then addressed within the next phase of research, conducted in the Victorian regional centre of Geelong.

Value to children and families in regional Australia

Glastonbury Child and Family Services introduced HIPPY to Geelong in 2000, with a community of disadvantaged families and children typical of those in many areas in Australia. These were Anglo-Celtic families who had experienced considerable educational, social and economic disadvantage over several generations. Many of the participating children in the Glastonbury program experience, in addition, developmental difficulties. Victoria University continued with its research program to determine whether or not the program can deliver to this different population of children and families the early intervention benefits observed elsewhere. Unique aspects of this research were a new focus on the social as well as the intellectual development of the child, and the lived experience of children as well as of parents. Again, ongoing feedback was provided to the service provision agency and to HIPPY Australia, concerning the findings as they emerged. Again, emphasis was placed by families on the need for greater Australian content in the program.

Two studies, of the 2001 and 2002 HIPPY intakes in Geelong, evaluated the effect of HIPPY on parental attitudes, values and practices, on family relationships, and on children's social and learning readiness development. These projects were conducted by Celia Godfrey (2007), Doctor of Psychology candidate, and by Jennifer Green (2007), PhD candidate. In both of these studies, parents, HIPPY staff and the children themselves provided research information in three waves – near the beginning of the program, during its second year, and eight months after its conclusion. The first study included tracking of the progress of a large proportion of children with developmental delay. This study was largely qualitative in nature, but did encompass quantitative measures of

children's developmental functioning. The second study, of the 2002-2003 intake, was quasi-experimental, contrasting direct measures of children's progress in learning readiness with those of a more socio-economically advantaged comparison group, and also looked at effects on the parent-child relationship. Both studies not only examined HIPPY outcomes from the perspectives of all participants, but also the experience of the process of the program for parents, tutoring staff and administrative staff.

This research found the program to be beneficial for the children involved in terms of increased enjoyment and self-esteem in learning, and confidence in the academic learning situation itself. In the 2001-2002 group, Godfrey's (2007) results revealed significant enhancement in direct measures of socio-emotional development and concrete early school skills, and the group of children were also found to be keeping to an upward developmental trajectory in other areas of cognitive development. Highest scores emerged while children were actually involved in the HIPPY program. A highly important finding was that the children experiencing developmental delay in this cohort demonstrated the same pattern of benefit as did the overall sample. Another very valuable finding, relevant to how HIPPY actually works, was that the skill and dedication of Home Tutors was evaluated by the Glastonbury management to be a pivotal factor in the success of this particular implementation, underlining yet again the centrality of interpersonal relationships in this early childhood program.

Green's (2007) study of the 2002-2003 intake, involving the comparison group, found significantly enhanced social development in HIPPY children having been sustained, and having actually escalated after the conclusion of the program. Similar though less striking trends were found in academic development, when the achievements of the group of HIPPY children were compared on these dimensions with those of the group of more advantaged peers.

Both of the above studies, like the

earlier research in the inner-city culturally and linguistically diverse communities, revealed solid benefits for parent-child relationships, and for parents and families as well, on many levels. For example, parents and HIPPY staff often reported HIPPY to be a focus of shared enjoyment in the family, and to have facilitated parental understanding of child development and ability to communicate meaningfully with the child's school. A point of difficulty noted in the process evaluation conducted by both studies was the inability of a large proportion of parents to partake in the group meeting component of the program. Staff and parents had differing views of this phenomenon, but the effect was to increase pressure on Home Tutors, who still felt obliged to deliver the program weekly to all families. These studies made it clearer than ever that more detailed record-keeping is required for research to progress further, and for process issues such as the role of group meetings and mode of delivery to the child in the home to be fully explored.

Four shorter-term Psychology Honours research projects, complementing the broader evaluation projects, were also conducted in Geelong. The first of these finely focused qualitative studies explored the parent's experience of HIPPY (Kate McDonald, 2004), while the second explored the child's experience (Lyndsey Nolan, 2005). In the cross-sectional investigation of parent views, all parents were found to appreciate HIPPY as a flexible, adaptable, supportive and enjoyable program, which they clearly perceived as improving their children's learning readiness, in the context of improved parent-child bonding and communication. Expanded insight into child development was accompanied by pride in the children's achievements. Striking also were frequent reports of HIPPY facilitating general parenting skills and parent abilities in succeeding as the child's first "teacher", and of the process of the program reducing social isolation experienced by parents. This study of parents brought out very strongly how differences in the general social connectedness of parents influenced their experience of the

program, with less connected parents deriving greater benefits. In the study of children's experience, children's enjoyment of HIPPY was found to be closely linked with their perceptions of the parent's enjoyment of and commitment to the program. To extend the potential reach of HIPPY research, the third Honours study (Megan Douch, 2007) has further developed the investigation of children's experience of the program, aiming to establish a set of assessment techniques that may be helpful in tapping children's views of HIPPY at several levels.

The feasibility of follow-up research

From an outcome perspective, the fourth Honours project (Pinar Yurdakul, 2008), the final study in the entire series, has particularly useful. It comprised an investigation of the feasibility of follow-up research in relation to HIPPY in Australia.

The research program reviewed here has established that HIPPY can be successfully adapted to Australian cultural conditions.

It succeeded in gathering data from 11 of the 18 families completing the program in Geelong in 2003, allowing comparison of outcome data collected with children one year subsequent to HIPPY completion (by Green, in 2004) with data collected after a further two years. The results demonstrated that learning readiness remained within normal limits, as predicted, but that socio-emotional development had actually continued to escalate. Equally importantly, this study showed that meaningful follow-up research with HIPPY groups in such a very disadvantaged community can be managed.

Conclusions and the potential future of HIPPY research in Australia

In terms of its principal aims, the research program reviewed here has (a) established that HIPPY can be successfully adapted to Australian cultural conditions, both in culturally and linguistically diverse migrant and refugee communities, and in Anglo-Celtic communities with educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, (b) revealed that it can be generally effective here in achieving its outcome goals of enhancing the learning readiness of participating children, and (c) illuminated processes in HIPPY considered critical from the multiple perspectives of parent, child, Home Tutor and management experience.

Further, gains by HIPPY parents and families that have been noted in other countries were found, particularly in terms of parents' perceptions of themselves as empowered to actively facilitate their children's development, and in terms of parents' sense of themselves as experiencing enhanced development. The Australian research went beyond past studies overseas to demonstrate gains in the socio-emotional development of participating children, including the enhanced parent-child relationship and enhanced family attachment reported by so many parents. This research program has also thrown new light on the usefulness of

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HIPPY with developmentally delayed children. Most importantly, the research has shown that follow-up of gains can be investigated in Australia within a HIPPY population.

Victoria University has now passed on the HIPPY research baton to Monash University in partnership with the Brotherhood of St Laurence Policy and Research Centre, supported by the Australian Government initiative. The current, widespread extension of HIPPY around Australia will permit larger in-depth studies of HIPPY delivery across different states. Such scope is now much needed, to allow further exploration of such critical elements as HIPPY's community and interpersonal relationship grounding, its materials and methods, the fortnightly group meeting alternating with home visits, the need for more detailed record-keeping, and which children and families are likely to benefit most from involvement. Expansion of the research will create opportunities for increased collaboration with HIPPY research internationally. At a different level, such broader scale research would, by using process and outcome evaluation as a springboard, facilitate fundamental integrative research in the broader child development, early educational intervention and prevention of learning difficulties fields.

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