

HIPPY AUSTRALIA RESEARCH 1998 – 2007

by the School of Psychology,

Victoria University

Concerning THE HOME INTERACTION PROGRAM FOR PARENTS AND YOUNGSTERS

(HIPPY)

Research is a vital part of HIPPY in Australia. An integrated series of independent research studies by the School of Psychology of Victoria University has explored many aspects since the program's introduction to Australia in 1998. Most critically, evaluation of outcomes, and of how these occur, has investigated whether HIPPY can have positive early intervention effects on learning readiness and general development with disadvantaged groups in Australia, as found in communities in the United States, the Netherlands, Turkey, South Africa, New Zealand and Israel.

Benefits for inner city immigrant children and families

The Brotherhood of St Laurence was the first agency to deliver HIPPY in Australia. Research began with a needs study in the inner Melbourne district of Fitzroy, which indicated the likely value of the program for local, newly arrived immigrant families with limited education and other social disadvantages. A systematic qualitative evaluation of the ongoing process of the initial implementation of the program (1998-1999) followed, carried out by the Doctor of Psychology candidate Jacque Grady, under the supervision of Drs Suzanne Dean and Cynthia Leung. 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 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 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, as well as to children's learning and readiness for school. Parents also reported deepening of parent-child attachment, felt by parents to be at the centre of HIPPY activities.

Outcome evaluation, entailing a rigorously matched control group, was then conducted, of the second implementation of HIPPY by the Brotherhood (1999-2000), with a multicultural community of families in the same inner city environment as before. This study was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) SPIRT Grant, and conducted by the PhD candidate Tim Gilley, again supervised by Drs Suzanne Dean and Cynthia Leung, and by Janet Taylor of the Brotherhood of St Laurence. As well as qualitative reports of effects, direct quantitative measures of learning readiness indicated favourable outcomes of HIPPY involvement. This study also used an Israeli measure of teachers' assessments of children's learning readiness (the Gumpel Learning Readiness Scale), which was validated in Melbourne in 1998, by Psychology Honours student Rima Moussa, under the supervision of Dr Cynthia Leung and Dr Suzanne Dean. Significant group effects emerged 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 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 indicated that HIPPY can be an effective early educational intervention in the Australian immigrant 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 are being asked by 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 are anglo-celtic families who have experienced considerable educational, social and economic disadvantage over several generations in this country. 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 Agency and now to HIPPY Australia as well, 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, have evaluated the effect of HIPPY on parental attitudes, values and practices, on family relationships, and on children's social and learning readiness development. One of these projects was conducted by Celia Godfrey, Doctor of Psychology candidate, supervised by Dr Suzanne Dean; a Preliminary Report of Findings has been presented to Glastonbury and HIPPY Australia, and the thesis resulting from the work is currently under examination. The other study was conducted by Jennifer Green, PhD candidate, and was funded by an ARC Linkage Grant, with Dr Suzanne Dean as Supervisor and Ms Judy Wookey, CEO of Glastonbury, as Co-Supervisor: Ms Green's thesis was submitted in January 2007, and a Preliminary Report of Findings is being prepared. 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 is principally qualitative in nature, although it does involve quantitative measures of children's functioning. The second study contrasts direct measures of children's progress in learning readiness with those of a more advantaged comparison group.

Preliminary findings in the Geelong research are that both parents and HIPPY staff have experienced the program as very beneficial for the children in terms of increased enjoyment and self esteem in learning, and confidence in the academic learning situation itself. In the 2001-2002 group, results reveals significant enhancement in direct measures of socio-emotional development and concrete early school skills, which children were 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 relatively high proportion of 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 highly critical to the success of this particular implementation, underlining yet again the centrality of interpersonal relationships in this early intervention program.

The 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 HIPPY children were compared on these dimensions with more advantaged peers.

Both studies of the above studies, like the earlier research in the inner city multicultural communities, appear to reveal 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 of 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 have made it clearer than ever that more detailed record-keeping is required if research is to progress further, and 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 have been completed in Geelong, under the supervision of Anthy Kapsalakis. These finely focused qualitative studies, one exploring the parent's experience of HIPPY by Kate McDonald, and the other exploring the child's experience by Lyndsey Nolan, have complemented the broader evaluation projects. 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.

A third Honours study 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. This qualitative research by Megan Smith, is currently being written into thesis form. The fourth Honours project has comprised a study of the feasibility of conducting follow up research in relation to HIPPY in Australia. Pinar Yurdakul, supervised by Anthy Kapsalakis and Suzanne Dean, has succeeded in gathering data from 11 of the 18 families completing the program in Geelong in 2003, thus comparing outcome data collected with children one year subsequent to HIPPY completion with data she has collected after a further two years. Early indications are that learning readiness has remained within normal limits, as predicted, but that socio-emotional development has actually continued to escalate. Equally importantly, this study has shown that meaningful follow-up research with HIPPY groups in this kind of community may be indeed be possible. This research is also now being written into thesis form.

The overall thrust of HIPPY research in Australia

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research in Australia so far has demonstrated the appropriateness and effectiveness of HIPPY for parents and children of educationally disadvantaged families, in both multicultural immigrant and anglo-celtic communities, and from the multiple perspectives of parent, child, Home Tutor and management experience. Strong gains by parents and families that have been noted in other countries have been 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. Beneficial outcomes for children in learning readiness, found overseas, have similarly emerged in the Australian studies,

with implications for improving the chances of success at school of children from disadvantaged communities. The Australian research has further explored gains in the socio-emotional development of participating children, especially the enhanced parent- child relationship and enhanced family attachment reported by so many parents. This research program has also thrown new light on the use of HIPPY with developmentally delayed children.

In addition a wealth of process information has been gleaned, with implications for such critical elements of the program as its community and interpersonal relationship grounding, its materials and methods, the fortnightly group meeting alternating with home visits, and the need for more detailed record-keeping.

The establishment of a national HIPPY research program would permit larger in-depth studies across programs in different states. Such scope is now much needed. This would also create opportunities for collaborating actively 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 and early educational intervention fields.

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