

Childcare

and Children's Health

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Learning Stories

"How can we describe early childhood outcomes in ways which make valuable statements about learning and progress?"

"How can we assess early childhood outcomes in ways that promote and protect learning?" (Carr, 2001: xiii)

These two questions guided the work of Dr Margaret Carr in the development of 'Learning Stories'. Carr was concerned that conventional record keeping and assessments of children's learning focused on what children could not do. She observed that many reporting mechanisms lack a sense of enthusiasm or interest in the individual learning qualities and progress of the child. The verbal and written reports that parents receive are often standardised and the individual interests of children are not necessarily recorded. Reporting formats frequently focus on specific, quantifiable tasks and measures.

Carr was interested in how narrative – or story telling, where people tell about what is meaningful in their lives – could be used in a new approach to reporting on children's learning. She was concerned with putting the emphasis on the process of an individual child's learning rather than on a predetermined checklist of knowledge or skills. Five domains of learning achievement were identified by Carr:

1. taking an interest
2. being involved
3. persisting with difficulties or uncertainties
4. communicating with others
5. taking responsibility.



With Learning Stories, story telling is used to identify children's unique interests and record challenges and achievements in a way that is both positive and meaningful to children, families and carers.

"The child becomes the subject of the story and his learning journey is captured through a description of what he is doing, as well as what he may be feeling. The stories focus on what children can do as opposed to what they can't, and in this way they provide insights into children's strengths, interests and learning dispositions".

(Ryan, Kate Jigsaw Issue 41)



This approach requires a reorientation away from an “image of the child as needy” with a carer’s role being to “fill the gaps, rather than focus on the strengths and interests of the child”. (Lee and Carr, *Reflections* Issue 25, Summer 2006). Instead, a Learning Stories approach is built on a “credit model” in which the child’s interests and perspective are valued and built upon. Planning activities and further learning experiences are based upon these interests, so the learning stories contribute to curriculum development, not just to reporting learning outcomes.

The focus is on the positives. Children are recognised and respected as capable learners who are actively involved in their own learning, with individual interests and dispositions. In contrast to conventional record keeping of learning outcomes, what children feel about what they are doing is acknowledged and valued.

Learning is recognised as:

- context dependent
- holistic
- enhanced by responsive teaching.

Learning is understood as:

- a process
- a “transaction” and,
- a joint accomplishment between the child and the carer.

To be effective, learning requires a focus on the relationship between the learner and the environment. Children are viewed as “learners-in-action” with scaffolding for their learning provided by the carer who responds to the child’s interest-based lead. Using Learning Stories allows carers to plan experiences that are child-focused, child-initiated and based on children’s observed interests.

Reporting on the process of children’s learning, and learning outcomes:

- includes the child’s perspective
- is not driven by a checklist (with the implication that there are objectively assessed, predetermined skills and knowledge) but is qualitative and interpretive – using narratives (Learning Stories)
- involves observing and listening over a long period of time – trying to find the child’s point of view
- is based on qualitative observations and interpretations made by the carer
- enhances children’s sense of themselves as competent, learners in partnerships with carers
- helps to identify a child’s particular interests, and helps carers build experiences that build upon this interest.

Carers create portfolios for each child, and these are individualised with photos, examples of the child’s work, stories that record special interests, challenges and achievements. Audio and video recordings can also be included.

In this way, Learning Stories provide the basis for a meaningful connection (or bridge) between home and care environments. Parents and other family members gain insight into what happens when their child is in care. This bridge between home and care contexts is two-way, allowing carers to learn more about what happens when the child is with their family and at home.

An example that illustrates the interpretive style and positive focus of a Learning Story is a narrative about Wiremu:

"The little rug is no longer necessary as Wiremu is off exploring the world. His roly-poly antics are leading him in a new direction! He pulls himself into headstand positions (gymnastic potential here!), then flops down and looks up with those dramatic dark eyes as if to say Well what do you think of that?"
(Ryan, Kate *Jigsaw*, Issue 41, p. 25)

For older children the story might include the child's own account of what a picture is about, for example, or how they felt about an experience that has been captured in a photo. Recognising the importance of an audience that includes families, children and carers, the 'stories' are interesting and the language is accessible to all audience members. The stories provide a basis of common communication and reference. Parents and other family members are not just engaged as an audience: they are also encouraged to share stories, photos and items that reflect their child's interests and provide insight into children's learning at home.

Learning Stories are relevant to all care settings, including Family Day Care. The experiences of one Family Day Care field worker, Deb Kelly, are recorded in an article by Kate Ryan (*Jigsaw*, Issue 41). Deb talks about the excitement of using Learning Stories in this setting. She suggests that many Family Day Care providers are already doing something similar "albeit in a fragmented way". Learning Stories provide the carers with a "framework in which to work". The links between home and care are richer and deeper when this approach is adopted and partnerships with parents are enhanced. More specifically Deb notes that a result of using Learning Stories has been that parents "share their thoughts and feelings with us more than they had previously". Deb has also observed that the positive feedback parents provide about Learning Stories reinforces their value, and motivates carers to continue to further develop their use of the stories.

Of particular interest is the point Deb makes about the value of using Learning Stories for families who have a child with additional needs. She notes that "most of these families only hear about what their child cannot

do, as opposed to what they can do, or at least attempt".

Carr's development of Learning Stories began with her questions about how to describe early childhood outcomes in ways which make valuable statements about learning and progress, and how to identify early childhood outcomes in ways that promote and foster learning. Learning Stories are now used in many different care settings and the gains from this approach are summarised by Carr when she concludes that:

"These lively records of learning, enhanced by collaborative describing, documenting, discussing and deciding, have continued to enrich my view of learning outcomes in early childhood".
(Carr, 2001: 189)

References

- Carr, Margaret *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings. Learning Stories*, 2005
- Lee, Wendy and Carr, Margaret 'Documentation of Learning Stories: A Powerful Assessment Tool for Early Childhood' *Reflections*, Gowrie Australia, Winter 2006
- Nuttall, Dr Joyce 'Fostering Learning Dispositions and Developing Concepts' *Reflections*, Gowrie Australia, Summer 2006
- Ryan, Kate *Jigsaw* Issue 41

QIAS: 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3

FDCQA: 1.3, 3.1, 3.2

The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this article is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.ecconnections.com.au

Learning Stories – Case Study

“It works – give it a go! It’s so rewarding.”

After using Learning Stories for the past year and a half, Kay Fitzgerald has become an enthusiastic advocate for what she terms “a celebration of learning”. Kay’s program is at Milleara Gardens Preschool, but the Learning Stories approach is adaptable, and can be used in Long Day Care and Family Day Care settings.

Kay has implemented a Learning Stories program that draws on many different developmental theorists and emphasises the importance of carers “scaffolding” (or providing support for) children’s own learning. Social learning is also emphasised. Individual portfolios are used to record each child’s interests, efforts and achievements. The documentation includes records of observations, photos, artwork, and narrations from the child. Portfolios are not the only way of documenting children’s experiences, but Kay sees them as a valuable way of making a child’s learning visible. When children come into care, a letter is sent home explaining how portfolios will be used to document each child’s overall development. The letter explains that the portfolio “is a collection of your child’s work and other information that provides a picture of your child’s interests, strengths and progress. Each portfolio is unique”. The portfolios are a joint endeavour. Families are invited to contribute material and to use the child’s



portfolio to share information about their child and their current interests, through, for example, a photo of a special family event. Kay has found that an advantage of this approach is that families can see the learning that occurs through play. Learning Stories provide a “snapshot” of a child’s learning in a format that is meaningful and purposeful. They provide a sense of excitement at what has been achieved. The portfolios also provide a positive focus for parent and carer discussions. Kay is passionate in her belief that Learning Stories promote and strengthen true partnerships with families. A recent survey of parents’ attitudes highlighted the pleasure the stories provide for parents, grandparents and for the children themselves.

Children have ready access to their own portfolios; they make suggestions about what they want to see included, can remove items and add favourites or simply look at them individually or with their friends to recall and share past experiences. Kay also observes meaningful, sustained interactions between children, and between the staff and children – positive outcomes that she attributes to the Learning Stories approach. She notes that children are listened to more and are more actively engaged in their own learning.

These are among the many invaluable gains from using a Learning Stories approach, according to Kay who says *“the rewards are immense”*. Other rewards noted include that Learning Stories:

- recognise children as capable learners
- value strengths and interests of the child, rather than deficits
- empower children – enhancing their self-identity
- increase carers’ knowledge of children as individuals.

QIAS: 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3

FDCQA: 1.3, 3.1, 3.2

Head Lice and Nits



Carers have a responsibility to protect children's health and promote practices that contribute to their health and well-being. Head lice and nits present perennial concerns for carers and are a source of anxiety and embarrassment for many parents. Accurate information about head lice and nits is needed and advice to parents needs to be framed in ways that do not add to the anxiety or perpetuate unhelpful and inaccurate myths.

What are Nits and Lice?

Head lice are very small, wingless insects – about the size of a sesame seed. Their colour will vary according to how recently they have eaten: they are a darker, reddish colour if they are full, and are paler if they have not eaten recently. They move fast and can be difficult to find. They cannot fly or jump and they live on the scalp of human heads. Head lice feed by sucking human blood which provides them with their only source of food and fluid. The natural sociability of young children sitting together, with heads touching provides an easy means of transfer of head lice.

Nits are the eggs laid by the head lice. Nits stick to the shafts of hair, close to the scalp. Unhatched nits are a dull grey colour; the shells of hatched nits are white, and they remain attached to the hair for some time after the eggs have hatched. The presence of nits does not necessarily mean that there is an infestation of head lice.

Accurate information is important

Head lice and nits are very common. Because their presence often causes anxiety, it is important

that carers are accurately informed about this common, but not serious irritant. It is also important that this information is passed on to parents.

Carers need to dispel myths about lice and to be sensitive to the embarrassment experienced by many parents when their children are found to have head lice or nits. Care needs to be taken to remove the stigma and any shame associated with an infestation. Families should not be labelled or stigmatised because their child has head lice or nits. The considerable inconvenience caused when children are sent home from care, and the time-consuming efforts to remove lice and nits need also to be considered and sensitively responded to when talking with parents.

Children should never be made to feel responsible for having head lice or nits.

What are the myths?

- Head lice are a result of poor hygiene
- Head lice and nits are a health hazard
- Some children are especially susceptible to head lice and nits.

The reality is that:

- Head lice are **not** related to hygiene – they live on all types of hair and all sorts of people
- Head lice are **not** a health hazard – they do not carry or transfer diseases or infections
- **Any** child who comes into contact with someone who has head lice can become infested with head lice or nits.

Acknowledging these facts when talking with parents may help to reduce any anxiety they may be experiencing.

Additional facts:

- Head lice cannot live on cats and dogs or other pets
- They can only survive for a short time without the food, warmth and moisture of the human scalp

- It is possible to have nits without actually having a case of head lice
- Accurate diagnosis of head lice is difficult and misdiagnosis is common
- It is very unlikely that head lice live in the surrounding environment – including the carpet. In an Australian study of primary school children a total of 7,000 head lice were found, but none were found in the school's carpet
- Catching head lice through sharing hats is possible but very unlikely, unless the hats are swapped directly from one head to another.

How to detect head lice and nits

Head lice are often difficult to detect, but itching and scratching is a possible indicator of an infestation. However itchiness is not a sure sign of head lice and some people who have head lice have no itchiness. The most likely places to find head lice and nits are close to the scalp, behind the ears and at the back of the neck. Putting hair conditioner on to hair and combing through with a fine-toothed head lice comb, then wiping the comb on kitchen paper, is the best way of finding (and removing) head lice.

How to treat head lice

Always check for live head lice before you begin treatment. Remember that the presence of nits (eggs) does not always mean that the child has head lice. If head lice are found, using the procedure described above is an effective way of removing head lice and nits. This should be repeated weekly, until no live head lice remain, as eggs that remain on the hair can take 7 days or more to hatch. Hair brushes and combs should not be shared with a person who has head

lice. Washing bed linen at a water temperature of 60 degrees Celsius will kill head lice, but the most effective treatments focus on the hair and head, rather than the surrounding environment.

Note: Hot water must never be used on hair as a treatment for head lice and nits.

Chemical head lice treatments can be used if the following guidelines are followed:

- Use only specifically labelled head lice treatments
- Australian products must comply with certain safety standards, and should display information that confirms this
- Directions must be carefully followed
- Extra care should be taken before treating young children under the age of 12 months, or with children who have allergies or asthma.

In the past, kerosene has been used, but this treatment is ineffective and harmful.

Useful websites:

www.health.vic.gov.au/headlice/ – this is an especially useful site. <http://www.nitpickers.com.au/links.php>
<http://www.jcu.edu.au/school/phtm/PHTM/hlice/hlinfol.htm>

Additional References:

Canadian Paediatric Society 'Head lice infestations: a clinical update'.

Early Childhood Australia 'Managing health in services', 'Dealing with head lice'.

Speare, Rick 'Head lice information sheet', James Cook University.

QIAS: Principle 6.3

FDCQA: Principle 4.3

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