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**Promoting children's social and emotional well-being:
An evaluation of the Positive Living Skills
Early Childhood Wellbeing Program**

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Child mental health problems are common and their prevalence is not declining despite an increase in the use of services. A recent Australian survey found almost 14% of 4- to 17-year-olds have a diagnosable mental health problem which equates to almost 600,000 Australian children and young people (Hafekost et al., 2016). Paediatricians see increasing numbers of children with mental health issues (Hiscock et al., 2016), and teachers report concerns about increased numbers of children with internalising disorders such as anxiety and depression. At school entry almost a quarter of Australian children are rated as being developmentally vulnerable, or at risk, in the domains of social competence (24.2%) and emotional maturity (22.9%) (AEDC, 2018).

The ADEC National Report for 2018 identifies that in regard to social competence, boys continue to be more than twice as likely as girls to be developmentally vulnerable on this domain, a gap that has continued to widen since 2012. Additionally, the gap continues to widen among children with a Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) who were *not* proficient in English and those who *were* proficient in English, with a 31% difference in vulnerability on this domain (AEDC, 2018, p. 23). Nationally the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on the emotional maturity domain continues to increase over the three periods of data collection (2012, 2015 & 2018). And again, in 2018, LBOTE children who were *not* proficient in English were more than four times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in terms of their emotional maturity (24.8%) compared to LBOTE children who *were* proficient in English (5.8%) (AEDC, 2018, p. 28).

The increasing evidence that mental health is influenced by potentially modifiable early life experiences provides an opportunity for public health intervention. The social and environmental conditions under which children are raised directly impacts their development (Moore, Arefadib, Deery, & West, 2017), and specific childhood exposures, such as harsh parenting, parental substance use, and poor housing, are predisposing factors for the development of mental health problems.

Fostering child and family resilience to these adverse events may mitigate their effects. A range of

mental health promotion and prevention programs for parents and young children, (that focus on resilience, social connectedness and mental health and wellbeing), are available for teachers in school-age settings and online. These include frameworks such as Positive Behaviour for Learning (New South Wales Government Department of Education, 2019) and BounceBack! (Noble & McGrath, 2017). “However, there is limited information about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of such programs, especially in an Australian context, making it difficult for health and education professionals to be confident in recommending programs appropriate for their settings” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2018, p. 2).

Within the Australian early childhood sector there are three relatively new resources that parents and /or early childhood educators can utilise that enhance and support understanding of mental health and wellbeing. The first of these is an early childhood educator-focused program called Be You (Australian Government, 2019), which consists of five online professional learning mental health topics, each containing two or three modules. For example, the topic ‘Family Partnerships’ has two modules – ‘Partner’ and ‘Assist’. While these are a very welcome addition to assisting early childhood educators’ understanding of the complexities of mental health and wellbeing, the majority of the topics and modules appear geared towards exactly that, i.e., developing educators’ knowledge and skills in mental health and wellbeing. Only one of the 13 modules ‘Empower’ appears geared towards helping educators develop the social and emotional competence of children.

Also within the early childhood sector is an Australian parenting website, called ‘Raising Children Network’ (2019) which provides easy-to-read and evidence-based advice primarily for parents, on a vast array of topics commencing with pregnancy, and covering infancy, the early years, school years, teens and being a grown up. Interestingly, it has a section that addresses how to build self-esteem in babies and young children, as well as several topics that focus on mental health in toddlers and preschoolers (Raising Children Network, 2019). As before, most of these contemporary articles are very welcome supports in terms of helping parents understand children’s mental health, but there is very little there for parents in terms of how to proactively and positively enhance their children’s mental health: only one brief article called a ‘Positive Thinking Exercise’ appears at the bottom of the Toddlers and Preschoolers sections on Mental Health (Raising Children Network, 2019).

Positive Living Skills

The third of these early childhood mental health resources is called Positive Living Skills (PLS) and

this is a new Australian program that contains “preventative and practical mental wellbeing skills and strategies” (PLS, 2018) for use with infants, toddlers and preschoolers in early childhood settings, and in all stages of primary schools. The PLS philosophy is that “every child has the capacity to reach his or her unique potential and that every child in today’s world needs to learn proactive and practical ways to look after their own mental wellbeing, starting in Early Childhood” (PLS, 2018). The programs developed by PLS aim to *prevent* mental health problems by empowering children and young people to develop strong social and emotional competencies. The programs are based on the work of Dr Terry Orlick, an authority on the psychology of excellence and quality living (Cox & Orlick, 1996; Orlick, 1996; Orlick & Partington, 1988). The PLS mission is three-fold:

1. To assist educators to teach children habitual skills to build their social and emotional competence, starting in early childhood
2. To support and enhance educator wellbeing through the materials and resources in the programs, and with dedicated Professional Development experiences focused on developing educator emotional intelligence.
3. To support families to build mental wellbeing skills, through the resources that come home from children and educators, and through the 'Family link' online resource portal (PLS, 2018).

PLS Early Childhood resources and strategies are designed to help develop:

- Children who are kinder, more socially skilled and with improved cooperation skills
- Children who are more aware of their feelings and the feelings of others
- Children who are calmer and more relaxed with improved focus skills
- Children who understand that to learn skills takes persistence and practice
- Educators who are more equipped to handle challenging behaviours, and who are more engaged and supported
- Educators, children and families who are building their emotional intelligence (PLS, 2018).

The Positive Living Skills Early Childhood program has been designed to meet the elements of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009) and supports the Council of Australian Governments’ vision that: ‘All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation.’ The program also supports early childhood education centres to implement the quality areas of the National Quality Standards (NQS). Accordingly, there are 48 individually scripted learning experiences (with matching resources, and each mapped to the EYLF

Curriculum with extension and adaptation ideas), and these learning experiences are organised into six main concepts:

- noticing everyday positive experiences (called Highlights),
- understanding feelings,
- developing focus skills,
- learning about relaxation,
- fostering cooperation, and
- building self-esteem.

Implementation of the activities within these six units is supported by a puppet called Possa Bill, 20 different audio tracks, 20 learning story templates (with samples and ideas), colour posters and happy highlight clickers and professional development webinars for early childhood educators. Additionally, PLS provide ongoing engagement and support to help embed the program into each early childhood service (PLS, 2018). The program can be implemented in whichever way best responds to the needs of children, but typically, early childhood educators begin by introducing the ‘Highlights’ unit and work through the program towards ‘Self-esteem.’

Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing program develops a child’s secure sense of self, builds children’s awareness and skills to understand emotions and behaviours, and to form healthy and secure relationships, while interacting appropriately with others (PLS, 2018, p. 2). Additionally, PLS aims to teach children positive ways to view themselves and others, give them experiences of success, put them on a positive path, catch them performing well and guide them in positive directions (PLS, 2018, p.4).

Three theoretical approaches guide the implementation of the PLS programs. These are:

- (1) Priming: An implicit memory effect where exposure to one stimulus influences a response to another stimulus;
- (2) Distributed Practice: A learning strategy where practice is broken up into several short sessions over a sustained period of time; and
- (3) Procedural Learning: A strategy of practice and repetition, whereby repeating an activity on multiple occasions promotes embedded, automatic responses (PLS, 2018).

As Positive Living Skills Wellbeing Programs (Primary School & Early Childhood) are currently garnering a great deal of interest, the PLS Directors have commissioned a series of independent

research studies into the efficacy of the programs, with the aim of building an evidence base to share with schools and early childhood settings. The current study is the second in this series but the first conducted in an early childhood centre.

The Current Study

In 2018 Catherine Shaw and Jo Devin, Directors of Positive Living Skills commissioned early childhood researchers from Charles Sturt University to undertake a study into the efficacy of the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing Program in an early childhood centre.

In early 2019, the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing Program commenced in a Sydney-based early childhood education centre, and thus provided an opportunity to canvas the views of the centre's early childhood educators in addressing these two broad research questions:

RQ1 How effective is the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing Program in developing young children's social and emotional wellbeing?

RQ2 What are early childhood educators' experiences of implementing the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing Program?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

Research methodology. The purpose of this study was to examine the efficacy of the Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program in developing children's social and emotional well-being from the perspectives of a small sample of early childhood teachers in one early childhood education centre, where the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing Program was being implemented. In order to understand the educators' views, the study utilised a qualitative research methodology, namely that of 'constructivism' (Mertens, 2005), whereby the understanding of the research phenomena under investigation is formed through analysis of the subjective views of a small group of participants.

Data collection methods. This study employed a qualitative data collection method: namely, a focus group discussion, which was conducted with five early childhood educators. This data collection method was selected as the most appropriate type as it incorporates both open and closed questions (which focus on the issues central to the two research questions) and also creates the

potential for flexible, conversational, two-way communication (Minichiello, Madison, Hays, & Parmenter, 2004). The focus group was conducted on one week-day evening after the early childhood education centre had closed, in order to minimally impact on the busy days of early childhood educators in a long day care setting.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval. An ethics application for this pilot study was submitted to the Charles Sturt University (CSU) Humans Research Ethics Committee (HREC) using the National Ethics Application Form. The study met all the ethical requirements of the National Statement including informed consent, disclosure of the true purpose of the study, confidentiality, potential harm and management strategy and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice (see Appendix 1: Ethics approval). The protocol number issued to the project is H18181.

Communication of findings to PLS, participating educators and families. The final research report was submitted to PLS in August, 2019 and copies were also submitted to the Director of the participating early childhood centre – First Grammar Castle Hill - and all of the participating early childhood educators. First Grammar Castle Hill has given permission for its name to be used in this report.

Research Participants

First Grammar Castle Hill. First Grammar Castle Hill is a privately-owned (G8 Education) long day care centre catering for a maximum of 38 children each day who are aged between six months and 6 years. The centre is located on a busy road in the suburb of Castle Hill, in Sydney New South Wales and its operating hours are from 7 am to 6 pm. Information on the centre's website states:

At First Grammar Castle Hill we believe that the early childhood years are a solid foundation for the journey through lifelong learning. We believe a child's work is play and children deserve the opportunity to learn, explore and create through play environments ... For our busy parent's (sic) convenience, we also supply nappies and provide fresh, nutritious meals including breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea and late snacks. We are proud to offer well-resourced and carefully planned experiences for all children in our care. We hope to instil a closeness and family atmosphere in the service we provide.

On the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2019) website “Starting Blocks” First Grammar Castle Hill was rated in April 2015 and has an overall rating of “Meeting the National Quality Standard,” as it meets the Australian National Quality Standards in all seven quality areas. More information about the early childhood curriculum at all First Grammar Centres can be found at <https://www.firstgrammar.com.au/curriculum/>

At the front entrance to First Grammar, Castle Hill families are welcomed with PLS posters and a ‘lesson in life’ saying from Dr Seuss:

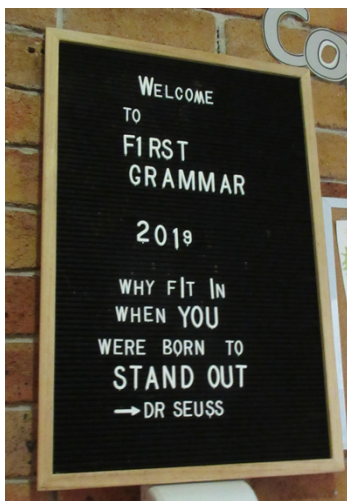


Figure 1: Welcome to First Grammar



Figure 2: Possa Bill Poster at the Front Door

There are three teaching rooms at First Grammar Castle Hill: An Infants' room that caters for 8 young children aged from 6 - 24 months; a Toddlers' room, that caters for 10 children aged from 24 - 36 months; and a Preschoolers' room catering for 16 to 20 children daily, who are aged between 3 to 6 years. At the time of the study (June 2019) 38 children were enrolled, and the centre employed a Centre Director (non-teaching), seven early childhood educators and a cook.

First Grammar Castle Hill was chosen by the Positive Living Skills Directors as a potential site for a study as the centre had purchased the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing Program in 2018 and planned to implement the program as a centre-wide intervention from the beginning of 2019. The Centre Director at First Grammar Castle Hill was keen to participate in the research study and gave her approval for all First Grammar Castle Hill early childhood educators to consider participating in this evaluation of the Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program (see Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Early Childhood Educators & Appendix 3: Consent Form for Early Childhood Educators).

Participating early childhood educators. The research participants were recruited from all three rooms at First Grammar Castle Hill. Six early childhood educators originally consented to participate in the study, but on the day of the focus group one educator was away sick. The remaining five early childhood educators took part in the focus group discussion.

Research Procedures

Focus group discussion. Five early childhood educators participated in one focus group discussion with the researcher in mid-June 2019 (see Appendix 4: Focus group questions). This discussion took place at First Grammar Castle Hill, in the centre's preschool room after the centre had closed for the day, between 6 and 7 pm. The focus group discussion lasted approximately 50 minutes. Questions were created from a review of the PLS Early Childhood Wellbeing program and a brief understanding of how First Grammar Castle Hill intended to implement the program, with some input from the PLS Directors. Questions encouraged educators to reflect on how the children had engaged with the PLS learning activities; which PLS activities children responded to best; the ease of PLS program implementation; how educators shared PLS activities with the children's families; perceived professional and personal benefits; and feedback on the PLS program (Appendix 4).

Data recording and transcription. The focus group discussion was digitally recorded using a Zoom H4n Pro Handy recorder, and with an iPad recording application called Voice Record Pro (Version 7) as a back-up. Subsequently the digital recording was sent electronically to a transcribing service in another Australian State and when completed, the transcription was emailed back to the CSU researcher as a word document. No identifying names of children or educators are used in this report. Participants' responses are only identified as being provided by an educator.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was the approach used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis involves carefully searching across a data set "to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86) and it aims to minimally organise the data set whilst providing rich detailed descriptions of the phenomena being studied (Braun & Clark, 2006). Three stages of data analysis were employed for this study: i) Organisation of the data; ii) Familiarisation with the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003); and iii) Interpretation of the data. These stages are briefly explained:

Organisation of the data. An important first step in the analysis process is to organise data into a manageable configuration (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Accordingly, the transcription was organised into a document with wide margins to facilitate comments.

Familiarisation with the data. This stage is also known as immersion in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006) and it requires repeated reading of the text to allow meanings and themes to emerge.

Interpretation of the data. Searching for themes and the interpretive framework. In this stage of analysis relationships between themes become clearer and links or connections emerge (Braun & Clark, 2006). As these relationships are revealed, the researcher can attach significance to them, offer explanations and draw conclusions (Patton, 2002).

RESULTS

Participating educators were asked about their early childhood qualifications, together with their experience working in the early childhood sector as well as the length of time that they had been employed at First Grammar, Castle Hill. Table 1 summarises their responses.

Table 1: Educators' early childhood qualifications and experience

Educator qualifications	
Certificate III	1
Certificate III + working towards Diploma in Children's Services	2
Diploma in Children's Services	1
Early Childhood Teacher (Degree)	1
Years of experience working in early childhood education	
Less than 1 year	1
Between 1 & 5 years	1
Between 5 & 10 years	2
More than 10 years	1
Time employed at First Grammar	
Less than 1 year	4
Between 1 & 5 years	1

As can be seen, two educators held either a Diploma in Children's Services or a Degree in Early Childhood Education and two Certificate III-trained educators were working towards their

Diploma in Children's Services. Three of the five educators had more than five years' experience in the EC sector, but only one educator had been working at First Grammar for more than a year.

Positive Living Skills: Training and Preparation

First Grammar Castle Hill introduced the Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program in all of its rooms in February 2019. Hence at the time of data collection the program had been running for four months. In regard to PLS training, one of the current educators had undertaken a two-hour training session with a PLS employee the previous year. However subsequently there had been substantial staff turnover at First Grammar and so the PLS program did not begin in earnest until several new staff were recruited and had time to settle into the centre.

At the start of 2019 the same PLS employee met individually with First Grammar educators. In the Preschool room this meant explaining how to introduce PLS to the children, how to engage the children with PLS ideas and how to help children express their feelings. The room leader in the Toddler room, who was also First Grammar's nominated PLS leader, met face-to-face with the PLS trainer who explained how to embed PLS into the toddler program. Afterwards this educator reported that she had watched the PLS training video before engaging with the PLS trainer in an online meeting:

I had a Zoom session ... and pretty much got to ask her about the program, ask how we could do activities to incorporate [things] and then got this folder organised, looked through the [PLS] USB, the books and everything, and the different lesson plans that we could do.

The PLS folder that this educator compiled was the main resource that educators reported utilising, and was central in supporting their programming. All First Grammar educators expressed that they had had enough training to be confident with implementing the program in their respective rooms, but stated that if they “*need any ideas ... we go back to the resources and ... just highlight the things that we need and then ... we choose a topic from there and ... we ask the children about specific points*”.

Getting Started

The suggested order for introducing the PLS concepts is: Highlights, Feelings, Focus, Relaxation, Co-operation and Self-Esteem. However, PLS is designed to be flexible to the needs of educators

and children, and so the program delivery varied in each of the three rooms. In the Infants' room they first introduced the children to Possa Bill, the PLS puppet, together with the ideas of Highlights, Feelings and Self-esteem. In the Toddlers' room they had:

Finished Highlights and Feelings, [and were] currently doing Co-operation, sharing and kindness because a lot of our kids were wanting to play with what someone else has and then trying to snatch it out of their hands and one way to better re-position them or change what they're doing is to do Positive Living Skills with them where they can learn the concepts of sharing & kindness and respect.

In the Preschool room the educators reported that they were using all six PLS elements every day, finding ways to embed the PLS ideas into their existing routines. For example, educators were teaching Relaxation concepts when the children were doing yoga, and linking Feelings concepts with relevant images in children's picture books. The educators referred to a PLS planning guide (see Figure 3) which was displayed at a 'PLS' table for parents to read as they dropped off or collected their children.

Educator Goal 1 of 5: I want to encourage positive energy and build positive focus		
Relevant PLS concept	PLS Learning Experience	Activities from this Learning Experience that could support you with your goal
Highlights	Happy Highlights	Find your Highlights Song/Happy Highlights Visual/ Happy Highlight count/Sing along and Look for Highlights/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Highlights	Any Day Highlights	Possa Bill loves nature Story/Possa Bill loves nature Visual/ Happy Highlight clicker discussion/ Drawing Highlights/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Highlights	Where are Highlights	Treasure hunting for highlights story/Find your Highlights song/Make your own treasure box/Go on a nature hunt for highlights/Count your Highlights
Highlights	Sensational Senses	Sensational Senses Activity/Visual Hand out Activity Sensational senses/Senses Dice Game/Sensory experiences/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Highlights	Laughing Highlights	Laughing track make a Laughing memory Activity/Children write their names/Capture the moment Pretend photo activity
Feelings	Appreciation	Thank you card Activity/Feelings Poster/Feelings flash cards/Feelings discussions
Feelings	Resting in Good Feelings	Smiling Face Imagination activity/Circle Activity/Write your name/Table Activity/fishing rod activity/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Focus	Focused Learning	Farmyard activity/Animal cut out game
Focus	Focused Listening and Seeing	Possa Bill loves to dance activity with visual/Find your Highlights Song/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Focus	I can Focus	Unusual walks activity/Stop and go game/children create their own unusual walks/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Self-Esteem	Physiology of Excellence	Physiology of Excellence/I Feel Great today colouring in Activity/Optional Photo Activity/Possa Bill Discussion/Interaction
Self-Esteem	Self-Respect	I am great Activity (repeating positive phrases)/Discussion with Possa Bill/Educator helping to recognise and acknowledge confidence
Cooperation	Followership	All in Simon Says Game/Discussion about following instructions and learning and growing

Figure 3: Educators' Planning Guide

Possa Bill

As mentioned earlier Possa Bill, the PLS puppet was represented visually at the front door of the centre by way of a poster. In the Infants' room one educator described that they introduced the Possa Bill puppet to the babies *"with the songs, my babies love the one little finger song"* and they say *"good morning, good morning when we sing with Possa Bill and they touch his nose, ears."* In the Toddlers' room the educators reported that the children *"literally try and take [Possa Bill] off my hand"* and call out excitedly *"Possa Bill, Possa Bill!"* when they know he is coming. As

suggested in the PLS program the educators have created a ‘house’ for Possa Bill and so he lives in a box on the PLS table where children and educators can see him (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Possa Bill in his Box

The educators call the box “*Possa Bill’s House*” and they tell the children that he is keeping an eye on them. The educators shared that some children “*put [him] in the box and they close it ... they close the box as they don’t want him to spy [on them]*” ... and some of the children “*put him lying down too like he’s having a sleep*”. When asked how Possa Bill helps them in their learning environments one of the educators stated that “*If a child’s not sharing I would grab Possa Bill*” and ask them “*Would Possa Bill share with his friends? What do you think we should do?*” and she then gets the children’s opinions on what they should be doing. Another educator described how Possa Bill helps them translate the PLS themes to the children, and if they simplify them the children appear to understand them better because the ideas are coming from their friend – Possa Bill; “*We make [the lessons] clear and simple, and they focus on him*”.

Helping Children Understand PLS Concepts

Most of the educators reported introducing the Highlights lessons to the children first, and adapted the language depending on the age of their children. For example, in the Toddlers’ room the educators asked their children “*What makes us happy? What can you actually find in nature that will make you happy?*” The educator reported being “*amazed and stunned*” when “*one of my children outside came up to me one day and said ‘this is my happy highlight’ ... she said bouncing on the balance beam was her happy highlight.*” This educator also shared that on another occasion when they found a butterfly outside “*one of my other [toddlers] said ‘happy’*”.

However, the educators in the Infants' room said it was difficult to teach the concepts of Highlights to their babies and that they relied more on facial expressions and body language to first teach and then interpret the children's understanding:

I can't say anything about Highlights because I have to tell [the children] this is my happy face, this is your sad face; so I have to tell them what's going on according to my face and Possa Bill's face ... It's more with the non-verbal expressions that they give us that makes us realise that what they are feeling at that moment, so one of the babies says 'yay' and things like that, tiny, tiny symbols that they pass on to us to make us realise that they are getting it.

Within the Preschool room, the educators were employing Highlights concepts in various group or circle time activities, for example they asked the children to think about colours that made them feel happy. The educators then wrote up the children's ideas as "a mind map" on to A3 posters with the children's names next to their suggestions. An example of this is shown in Figure 5, but the children's names have been removed.

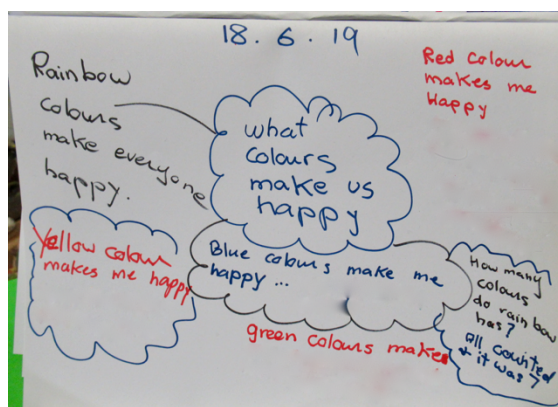


Figure 5: Happy Colours Mind Map

Changes in Children's Behaviours

Educators unanimously agreed that they had noticed changes in some of the children's behaviours and they believed that they could attribute these changes to the activities that they were teaching from the PLS program. Specifically, educators identified positive changes in children's social interactions, their communication and their co-operation. For example, in the Toddlers' room educators reported that the children showed evidence of developing PLS skills as they were "engaging in group experiences... having conversations with each other, and [they] will sit on the floor and play with each other, they'll share, they'll take turns". They had also noticed that a flow

on from this was that the children were showing empathy to each other *“If someone hurts themselves outside, one of them will run over to them and give them cuddle”*.

In the Preschool room after teaching PLS lessons on Focusing and Cooperating the educators said that the children were *“sitting, listening, showing respect”*. They described how they had taught the children about respect. They said:

When you sit in a group you need to listen, this means you are respecting the others ... like if during news time if I'm talking with my friend and another friend is telling us about his news, we're not listening and this is not respectful. The children now understand this concept, they sit quietly and they listen to each other, they show respect to others.

As part of developing the preschool children's understanding of respect, the educators *“did a mind map about it and we put it over there with the children's voices, [you can see] what they understand from respect.”* (Figure 6 shows the mind map that the educators created with the children, but with the children's names removed).



Figure 6: Respect Mind Map

In the Infants' room the educators acknowledged that it was difficult to say exactly how and what the babies were learning in terms of PLS skills. But they reported that *“they get really excited when they see Possa Bill, ... if we're going to get Possa Bill, they're really excited and [they] sit down very nicely and patiently. Okay Possa Bill is coming!”* In the main, the focus of the educators' time was modelling PLS skills to the babies *“because we are teaching them at the moment”*. But one educator shared that the babies did interact *“when they sit in the group, when we do group time ... and we do the faces like a happy face”* and another revealed that earlier that day she had observed the following interaction:

One of the babies had woken up and the other one just followed me when I opened the door in there and then they said 'hello' to each other which was really nice to watch. And this is the first time I noticed them doing that, they're acknowledging the other person and greeting them, so that was good.

Educators also noticed that some of the children were starting to use PLS language in their interaction with each other. For example, in the Preschool room some children had adopted the phrase “*sharing is caring*” and they used this when “*they saw something negative*”. Another boy in the preschool room was using the expressions “*I don't like this, can you change it?*”, “*can you change your behaviour?*” Finally, one educator reflected on something that had happened the previous day that exemplified how a specific aspect of PLS language was resonating with one little boy:

A group of children were playing and one boy was not sharing with them, so I asked [him] to change his channel and I said 'please change your situation, change your channel now'; I linked it to Positive Living Skills, and then I turned my back. Then another child told me 'we're sharing, he's sharing with us now'. And the boy told me 'I changed my situation; I changed my channel'. He used the word channel, and maybe that is because if we are using it, then they are.

Sharing PLS with Families

First Grammar Castle Hill shares information with families about PLS via its weekly newsletter. The newsletter has a designated PLS section (written either by the Director or one of the educators who has the role of PLS program leader), in which they share information about the week's PLS topics that the children are learning about, such as Feelings or Turn Taking.

Educators in the Infants' room reported that they had a “*daily day book*” where they shared with families whatever Positive Living Skill that they were focusing on each day. Additionally, they described how they communicated with parents via the centre's Parent Communication App. One educator said “*today we did the Feelings flashcards again ... and we talked about that. So we did an observation and that went straight to the parents of the children.*”

In the Toddlers' room educators shared with parents how they could incorporate PLS ideas into activities at home and gave families links to the PLS family newsletters about the concepts they were teaching. And in the Preschoolers' room the educators sent learning stories home to the

parents via the Parent Communication App, that not only communicated the educators' perspectives on the Positive Living Skills being taught, but also included the children's voices. Educators in the preschool room referred to the permanent PLS area, which was a table set up in their room, that was clearly visible to families at arrival and on departure. They said that this was so the families:

Know what's going on today or for this week and they read their children's voices ... what they thought, what they think and I'm sure they will talk with them at home like 'wow, you talked about being respectful', 'did you say this and this and that?' ... I think they go through that at home.

Two examples of information shared with families in the permanent PLS area at First Grammar are shown below in Figures 7 and 8.

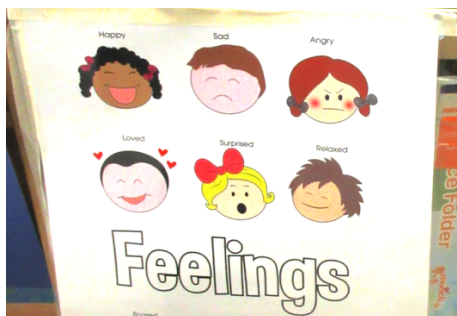


Figure 7: PLS Poster showing Six (of 12) Feelings



Figure 8: Today's Skill is Happiness

Benefits for Educators: Professionally and Personally

First Grammar Castle Hill educators were asked to reflect on whether incorporating Positive Living Skills lessons and activities into their daily routines was supportive to their work as early childhood professionals. Unanimously they agreed that it was, as one educator explained:

Yes, because [PLS] covers EYLF links. On the lesson plans if you flip them over it's got every EYLF link that you need to refer to that unit, so that's really helpful. And [when] we do observations, that's really helpful because if we do an observation on a child that's doing Positive Living Skills ... then we can just go to that unit outline and get the EYLF links for our observations.

Another educator added “the focal point of both the EYLF and PLS is the child, and [PLS] actually helps the Belonging, Being and Becoming concepts that we have in the EYLF, and it's helping [children] reach the potential that they can”. A third educator believed that PLS helped the

children to develop life-long skills that would contribute to them becoming “*good citizens when they grow up*”.

Educators were asked if they could see any flow-on effect from teaching PLS into their own lives and each educator identified something different. One educator nominated that she was now “*a lot more confident*” and better managing her work-related stress by employing PLS skills of “*breathing and relaxing ... rather than responding to a child straight away*”. Another educator felt that she was feeling more “*independent in a positive way*”, and another shared that she had learned to “*just live in the moment where you are, just enjoy the moment*”. Lastly, an educator explained how PLS skills were helping her at home:

Actually, it's helped me in my personal life as well, like communicating with my own kids. They are still little at the moment, so [I'm] helping them recognise their feelings and talking to them about that, like when they're getting frustrated or something is bothering them. Now instead of comforting or just telling them to deal with it, I am talking to them or analysing what's going on, why they are feeling like that and what do they expect from me, how can I help them in getting over that feeling or understanding the feeling?

The focus group discussion concluded with some final reflections on PLS. One educator said “*it's a good program, it's good*” and another agreed with her stating “*You know how busy we are with everything and we are able to include this program during our daily life in the room, so it's a very good one*”. These comments prompted one last insight:

*With this [program] we are implementing it on us also, so if you are happy you can make your surroundings happy. So first **we** need to learn PLS, so that we can make ourselves happy from the inside. So we are talking to the children and feeling happy. You know these things come out, it reflects the way you're talking and [how] you're interacting with the children, interacting with colleagues, interacting with the parents ... it reflects from your body and from your inside. We are learning this from PLS.*

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to undertake an evaluation of the Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program. The study canvassed the views of five early childhood educators employed at First Grammar Castle Hill to understand the efficacy of the PLS program in helping to develop young children's social and emotional wellbeing. This discussion briefly addresses the two research questions 1) How effective is the PLS Early Childhood wellbeing program in developing young

children's social and emotional wellbeing? 2) What are early childhood educators' experiences of implementing the PLS Early Childhood wellbeing program? Some limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are subsequently addressed.

How effective is the PLS Early Childhood wellbeing program in developing young children's social and emotional wellbeing?

Although First Grammar educators had only been implementing the PLS Early Childhood wellbeing program for four months, they all agreed that the children were already understanding the PLS concepts, with one toddler telling her educator that bouncing on the beam was her "*happy highlight*" and another toddler indicating that a butterfly made her feel happy. Educators were also seeing changes in children's social interactions, their communication skills and their co-operation. Educators gave examples of toddlers who were "*engaging in group experiences... having conversations with each other,*" sitting together and playing, as well as sharing and showing empathy.

Educators in the Preschool room told how they had taught the children the concept of respect, first by explaining it simply and then creating a mind map which they displayed on the permanent PLS table. The children were demonstrating that they understood respect by sitting and listening to each other. In the Infants' room educators reported that the children were excited when Possa Bill the PLS puppet came to play. And although it was still early days the educators felt that perhaps two of the babies were responding to their continued modelling of happy greetings as was evidenced by their greeting and acknowledging of each other.

What are early childhood educators' experiences of implementing the PLS Early Childhood wellbeing program?

First Grammar educators began implementing the PLS early childhood wellbeing program in February 2019. Four of the five educators interviewed had only been working at the EC centre for four months prior to this, yet all agreed that implementing PLS was straightforward and complimentary to their work, despite having to adapt to a new workplace, and within the busy nature of an EC education and care setting. The PLS resources were supplied to the centre on a USB, together with a Possa Bill puppet and posters. From these resources, the centre had created its own PLS folder, which the educators used as their guide for teaching PLS concepts and creating lessons. Educators reported that the children all loved Possa Bill who helped them to teach PLS concepts to the children as well as sing PLS songs and finger plays. The centre had also created a

designated PLS area where they shared PLS activities with parents such as the children's mind maps, and which also encouraged parents to have conversations with educators about PLS.

Educators were unanimously positive in their comments about implementing PLS at First Grammar, and not only about the benefits of using PLS with their children, but they were also affirmative about the effects of PLS on their personal and professional lives.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The findings presented in this report must be considered within the limitations of the research. Two limitations have been identified, which are the sample size, and the time frame. The first limitation of this study is that the data about PLS have only been obtained from one Early Childhood Centre and as such the findings cannot be generalised to other EC centres. A second limitation is the timeframe for the implementation of the PLS program. Educators at First Grammar Castle Hill had only been employing PLS in their centre for four months and so the findings presented here are based on a short time frame.

Future research into the PLS early childhood wellbeing program could compare its implementation across diverse EC settings – such as long day care centres, preschool settings and family day care. Another suggestion for future research is to examine educators' views after implementing PLS for a longer period of time, such as at least 12 months, and then revisiting the centres six or 12 months later, to develop an understanding of long-term gains in children's social and emotional wellbeing.

To conclude, the Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program was well received by the educators who took part in this study. Educators described PLS as easy to implement, that it supported the Early Years Learning Framework [EYLF] (DEEWR, 2009), and that children enjoyed the activities and were already understanding PLS concepts and using PLS language. Educators described PLS as a good program, not only for the children in their care, but also because they experienced flow-on effects into their own personal and professional lives. While it is acknowledged that more data are required before the positive effects of this program can be generalised to other EC settings, findings from this study suggest that the Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program was having a positive impact on the social and emotional development of the children, as well as on early childhood educator wellbeing at First Grammar Castle Hill.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Ethics Approval



31 August 2018

Dr Loraine Fordham
Email: lfordham@csu.edu.au

Dear Dr Fordham,

Thank you for providing further information in response to a request from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee relating to your research proposal.

The Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's [*National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*](#) (*National Statement*).

Based on the guidelines in the *National Statement* the Committee has approved your research proposal. Please see below details of your approved research project:

Project Title:	Promoting children's mental well-being: A trial of the Positive Living Skills program
Approved until:	18 September 2019 (subject to annual progress reports being submitted)
Protocol Number:	H18181 (to be included in all correspondence to the Committee)
Progress Report due by:	31 August 2019

You must report to the Committee at least annually, and as soon as possible in relation to the following, by completing the 'Report on Research Project' form:

- any serious and/or unexpected adverse events or outcomes which occur associated with the research project that might affect participants, therefore, the ethical acceptability of the project;
- amendments to the research design and/or any changes to the project (Committee approval required);
- extensions to the approval period (Committee approval required); and
- notification of project completion.

This approval constitutes ethical approval in relation to humans only. If your research involves the use of radiation, biochemical materials, chemicals or animals, separate approval is required by the appropriate University Committee.

Please contact the Governance Officer on (02) 69334213 or ethics@csu.edu.au if you have any queries.

The Committee wishes you well with your research.
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ellen Hannigan".

Ms Ellen Hannigan
Governance Officer
on behalf of Associate Professor Catherine
Allan Presiding Officer, HREC
cc: Dr Tamara Cummings

Appendix 2 Information Sheet for First Grammar Castle Hill Educators



Promoting children's social and emotional well-being: An evaluation of a trial of the Positive Living Skills Program

What is this research project about?

The Positive Living Skills Early Childhood Wellbeing Program is being introduced into all educator rooms at First Grammar Early Education Centre in 2019. This program helps children to develop practical and positive social and emotional skills by focusing on their awareness and understanding of emotions.

All First Grammar Early Education Centre educators will be introducing this program into their classrooms and working through the program in a flexible way, depending on the needs and interests of their children.

Jean Grima, First Grammar Centre Manager supports this research project and has agreed for all First Grammar educators to consider participating in a short research study into this program. *Your participation in this research project is voluntary, and there is no obligation for you to participate.* The research project is being conducted by a researcher from Charles Sturt University.

Who can take part in the project?

Participating educators at First Grammar Early Education Centre

Who is doing the research project?

This research is being carried out by Dr Loraine Fordham who is an early childhood researcher at Charles Sturt University. Loraine is working together with First Grammar to undertake this research project. You'll find her name listed at the end of this information sheet. The research project will conclude in June 2019.

How is the research project going to answer its questions?

- Participating educators will teach the Positive Living Skills (PLS) early childhood wellbeing program in 2019.
- Participating educators will be asked to keep a record of the PLS activities they introduce to the children each week.
- Loraine will conduct one (1) focus group discussion with participating educators in May / June 2019.

What happens after I indicate that I am interested in taking part in the project?

Loraine Fordham will meet with participating educators to explain the project and to answer any questions they may have about it. Participating educators who agree to participate in this study will sign the attached Consent Form. Signing the Consent Form means agreeing to be included in the research project.

What action / information will the research project want from me?

If you agree to take part in the research project, you will be asked to keep a record of the PLS activities that you introduce to the children in your room each week.

At the end May or early June 2019, Loraine will meet with participating educators to ask them some questions about the Positive Living Skills program. This focus group discussion will be digitally audio-recorded but no educator will be identified. The discussion will take place at First Grammar Early Education Centre and will take about an hour.

What will happen to the information that is collected?

All information that is collected will be analysed by Loraine and later stored at Charles Sturt University. All information will be de-identified. You will not be identified in *any* research findings. All information will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked room at Charles Sturt University that can only be accessed by the researcher involved in this project. Only the researcher working on this project will have access to information /data from this project. The data will be kept while the analysis of the data is being undertaken, and then for a sufficient future period as proof that the study was actually undertaken. (This will be for a minimum of 5 years after any publication of findings from the study).

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and if you decide you do not wish to continue, you can ask to withdraw at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data provided.

Should this research study raise any topics that cause you distress you can access the Employer Assistance Program at www.employeeassistanceprogramme.com.au

How do I get information on what the research findings are?

When the project is completed and the results have been analysed you will be provided with a summary of the study's findings to be published in the Centre's newsletter. In addition, findings from this research study will be published in a Research Report, and may also be presented at early childhood conferences and in early childhood professional magazines.

Who is involved in this research project?

Researcher at Charles Sturt University:

Dr Loraine Fordham, School of Teacher Education, CSU, Bathurst, NSW 2795

E: lfordham@csu.edu.au

Ph: 02 6338 4414

Who can I talk to for more information about this research project?

Loraine Fordham: Research Leader
Telephone: 02 6338 4414
Email: lfordham@csu.edu.au

Who should I contact if I have concerns about the conduct of this study?

The research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Charles Sturt University, HREC protocol number: H18181

If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project you may contact the committee through the Governance Officer:

The Governance Officer
Human Research Ethics Committee
Tel: (02) 6933 4213
Email: ethics@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.

**Thank you for considering this invitation.
This information sheet is for you to keep**

Appendix 3 Consent Form for First Grammar Castle Hill Educators



Promoting children's social and emotional well-being: An evaluation of a trial of the Positive Living Skills (PLS) Program

Name:

Name of Researcher: *Dr Loraine Fordham*

1. I consent to participate in this research project. I understand that my participation in the research project is voluntary.
2. Details of the research project have been explained to me, and I have been provided with and read an 'Information Sheet' which describes this research project.
3. I understand that after I sign and return this Consent Form, it will be retained by the researcher.
4. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this research project ...
 - (i) I will keep a record of the PLS activities I use during the intervention period;
 - (ii) At the end of May or early June, 2019, Loraine will meet with all participating educators for one (1) focus group discussion, and will ask them some questions about the Positive Living Skills program.
5. I agree that the researcher may use the results in the way described in the 'Information Sheet.'
6. I acknowledge that:
 - a) I have been informed that my participation in this research is voluntary;
 - b) I am free to withdraw from it at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data provided;
 - c) This project is for the purpose of research;
 - d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information will be safe guarded;
 - e) I have been informed that information collected in this project will be kept at Charles Sturt University for a period required to undertake analysis for the project, and then for a period required by professional practice, after which it will be destroyed;
 - f) No information on my name will be kept as part of the information collected in this project;
 - g) I have been informed that a summary of the research findings will be published in the Centre's newsletter.

Participant signature:

Date:

Appendix 4 Focus Group Questions

1) Some background questions about you

- What Early Childhood qualifications do you have?
- How long have you been working as an early childhood educator?
- How long have you been working here at First Grammar?

2) Some questions about how you introduced Positive Living Skills here at First Grammar

- When did you start PLS in your rooms?
- Did you have any training before you introduced PLS?
 - if yes, what was the training and how useful was it? More training needed?
 - if no, would you have liked some training?

3) Some questions about delivering the Positive Living Skills program to the children

- Can you tell me which parts of the PLS program you have introduced in your rooms?
 - Highlights, Feelings, Focus, Relaxation, Cooperation, Self-esteem?
- How did the children respond to Possa Bill?
- How does Possa Bill help you in your learning environments? Can you give an example?
- How well did the children understand the core concepts of the PLS program (for example Highlights)? Can you give an example?
- Have you noticed any positive changes in the children's behaviours - in any individual children or in your room as a whole? Can you give an example?
- Have you noticed any changes in the children's social competence? Can you give an example?
- Have you noticed any changes in the children's emotional maturity? Can you give an example?
- Have you noticed any changes in the children's communication skills? Can you give an example?
- Have you noticed children using any PLS language? Can you give an example?

4) Some questions about Positive Living Skills and your families

- How have you shared information about PLS with your families?
- Have you shared any of the PLS learning stories with parents?
- Have you received any other feedback from families about PLS?

5) Some questions about Positive Living Skills and you / your teaching practice

- How does PLS support EC services to meet or exceed National quality standards?
- Do you think there has been any flow-on effect into your own personal lives?
- Lastly ... Would you like to tell me anything else that I haven't asked you about PLS, or give me any feedback about PLS either for this research study or to the PLS?

What happens now is that our discussion is written up and then I will read and reflect on your contributions and write them into a report for the PLS authors and I will also send a copy of that report to you at First Grammar.

Thank you so much for your time and your very valuable insights.