

Glen Waverley Anglican Church: A Playgroup in Transition

Does this ring a bell? The ‘craft table’ the focus of the morning. The day’s creation clearly defined – “today we are making...”. A perfect model displayed with pride at the centre of the table.

In our morning program today, the “craft table” no longer holds such significance. Instead, the activities are varied and open ended – box construction, collage (using a variety of materials), or maybe there’ll be finger paint or slime to explore. The emphasis is no longer on the product but the play experience. Although we always used to put out other activities for the children, today we put a lot more thought into selecting from a broad range of “play experiences” for the children to engage with. Any one of these activities, such as building cubby houses, water play or obstacle courses might be chosen as the highlight of the day.

So why the shift?

It was time to evaluate our playgroup program in light of what we were learning about early childhood education. We had also observed changes in the pattern of playgroup attendance, with the average age of the children being much younger. As a Christian playgroup we took time to reflect on our goals. We seek to develop a quality program where children can learn and develop through play experiences, but also to create an environment where we can support and build friendships with the parents and carers who attend, and hopefully have opportunities to share our faith with them.

Many of the activities we used to organise, especially at the craft table, required physical skills beyond the developmental ability of the majority of the children. Many children didn’t enjoy the activities. Often they required a high level of parent participation, with the parents virtually making the craft for the children, leaving the children frustrated, with their creativity stifled rather than enhanced. We realised that the danger of this type of adult directed activity is that it can leave a child feeling discouraged with their efforts. (I believe it also put a number of parents under a lot of pressure, especially if they had 2 or 3 children at playgroup or if they themselves weren’t particularly “crafty”.)

Open-ended craft activities have enabled children across a range of developmental stages to participate at their level of ability. By placing more emphasis on the play experience rather than the end product, the child provides the direction and the adult provides valuable support where useful. This can lead to an intrinsic sense of achievement for the child and a confidence in their own abilities – a positive learning experience.

A recent example of this was seen at the craft table where one child, inspired by his imagination, set out to make a train from a few boxes he had chosen from an assortment of construction materials we had placed on the table. His mum was able to assist him by searching in the storeroom for potential wheels and helping him attach the various parts together. He was able to enjoy the support of his mum whilst still experiencing a sense of satisfaction and pride in *his* finished creation.

More consideration is now given to providing a range of play experiences relevant to the interests and developmental abilities of the children attending each of our playgroups. We've found repeating the same play experience for a few weeks in a row or a few times a term, allows a child to explore different possibilities for using the materials, mastering the skills and gaining confidence to approach new levels and new experiences.

The play experiences we provide at each session come from a broad range of categories, some of which include: Pretend Play, Construction/Problem Solving, Blocks, Drawing/Painting, Collage, Playdough/Clay, Book Corner, Baby Corner, Messy Play, Balls/Bikes/Climbing/Gross Motor, Outdoor Play (could include any activity). As the children have engaged in these play experiences at playgroup, there has been opportunity for development to take place on many levels. At the same time the parents and carers have been able to build friendships and support one another in a more relaxed environment.

Another positive outcome of the changes we've made has been the relieving of pressure on our leaders' time, enabling us to spend more time interacting with the parents and their children. We are able to support them in their parenting, and look for opportunities to help them see the relevance and importance of Jesus to their everyday life.

Vicki John

“GWAC”