



## Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Ravenswood Early Learning Centre—Family Based Program</b>
<b>Project practice</b>	<b>Ravenswood Early Learning Centre—Family Based Program is a pre-school based early intervention program for hard-to-reach, educationally “disenfranchised” families. The program helps teachers and parents identify developmental delays, learning disabilities and behavioural issues in at-risk children and provides appropriate intervention prior to the child starting formal schooling.</b>
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	Ravenswood Early Learning Centre, Launceston (Tasmania)
<b>Start date</b>	April 2005
<b>Focal areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supporting families and parents</li><li>• Early learning and Care</li></ul>
<b>Issue</b>	<p>In recent years, staff at Ravenswood Heights Primary School have noticed a number of Early Years issues impacting on children and families in the area. These issues include a steady decline in the level of school readiness of children and their families and an increase in the number of children presenting with needs that require early intervention.</p> <p>These issues suggested, among other things, that parents were requiring more support in their parenting roles. The Ravenswood Early Learning Centre aimed to address these issues through the introduction of early intervention programs and playgroups for children aged 0–4 years and their parents. Children, who attend the centre prior to beginning Kindergarten, are able to have appropriate intervention planned prior to beginning formal schooling.</p>
<b>Program context</b>	<p>The Ravenswood community demographic is predominantly public housing, single parent, low-income families. It has a high proportion of lone parent families (24%; ABS, 2006) and Indigenous families (7.4%; ABS, 2006) with children aged under five. In 2001, Ravenswood had the highest proportion of low-income families with a gross weekly income below \$500 in the entire Launceston/East Tamar region (comprising 11 localities), representing over half (55%) of low income families with children aged 0–5 years (ABS, 2001). The region as a whole experiences a higher than national average unemployment rate (DEWR, 2005). These community features provide a basis for children growing up “at risk”.</p> <p>The Ravenswood Early Learning Centre is run by the Ravenswood Heights Primary School. The Ravenswood Early Learning Centre fits within the School Familiarisation and Readiness strategy of the Launceston/East Tamar Communities for Children Initiative and has the following objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• encouraging early learning, particularly with hard to reach families and those families who are educationally “disenfranchised”;</li><li>• early identification of potential developmental delays and early intervention to address identified delays;</li></ul>

- providing early learning opportunities that will enable children to be well prepared for school and for future learning;
- further developing linkages between schools, local families and their local communities; and
- ensuring local children are being provided with every possible opportunity to reach their full potential—educationally, developmentally, emotionally and socially.

The centre caters for children 0–4 years and their families. The centre provides two programs:

- Playgroup (0–4 year olds); and
- Early Start for pre-kinder children (3-year-olds who are turning 4).

Both encompass a Family Based Program providing individual sessions for children “at risk”, focusing on the child’s individual needs such as developmental delays, learning disabilities and behavioural issues, as well as role modelling and supporting parents to continue the learning at home. The Early Start Program is the focus of this Promising Practice Profile.

Early Start is a pre kinder program, targeted at children who will be starting Kindergarten in the following year. The program operates over three terms. Two groups attend twice each week for a 2-hour block, with approximately 15 children in each group. The Early Start program is a natural extension of the playgroup which has been operating at the school for a number of years. Over time Early Start has become the expected pathway to school.

Early Start offers children the opportunity to get used to the school environment on a more casual basis. Early Start also provides an opportunity for children who may otherwise not be assessed for special needs, learning disabilities and developmental delays prior to starting school, to have appropriate interventions and plans put in place. The program acts as an information resource for parents in terms of education and developmental issues.

## Practice description

This section details the key practice approaches of the Early Start program. A range of program ingredients have been evaluated as effective in this program. These include: parent–teacher communication; referrals; teachers acknowledging that parents are their children’s first teachers; role modelling to parents to encourage learning in the home; home visiting; play-based learning; early identification and intervention of developmental delays.

Key elements of the program are described below and include specific practice strategies or approaches such as the:

- building of trust and rapport;
- use of individualised learning plans; and
- facilitating of parents as teachers.
- In addition, there are two significant program elements:
- the complementary Family Based Program that runs alongside the Early Start program; and
- the inclusion of specialist therapy staff in the Early Years program.

### Key program elements

- Family Based Program (FBP)
- Inclusion of specialist therapy staff.

### Family Based program (FBP)

The Family Based Program works towards the objectives of enhancing interaction between the parent and child. Parent, child and teacher meet regularly for tutoring sessions that are tailored to the needs of the child and the family, based on the plan developed for the child. Attendance in the FBP is by open invitation to all families of Early Start (3+ year olds). The program is also open to families identified by Early Years staff as needing additional support for things such as developmental delays of cognitive, fine/gross motor, social emotional skills, as well as those with children with disabilities or needing behaviour support.

In the Family Based Program teachers consult with parents about the needs of

their children keeping the lines of communication open. The teachers recognise that parents are also their child's teacher. Teachers provide a role model to parents of how to facilitate learning at home while providing the resources needed to enable this to occur. The teacher negotiates with the family as to whether they prefer the sessions to be held in the family home or at the school. The one-on-one session provides an ideal opportunity for the teacher to assess the child's developmental stage without classroom distractions. As part of the program, the teacher also provides referrals to other service providers and the support to incorporate the use of plans made by other professionals in both the classroom and Family Based Program.

The FBP is based upon the research evidence of individual learning plans, play-based learning, parents as children's first teachers, role modelling, home learning, home visiting programs, early detection and intervention of learning disabilities and developmental delays and also the importance of communication between the family and the school.

The Family Based Program is a substantial element of the success of the Early Start program, however FBP cannot stand alone. To be successful, it requires the Early Start program to provide the all-round school readiness for all children. The children and families utilising the FBP still need the essential elements of Early Start to prepare the child for school, for instance; class room etiquette, socialisation, parental separation, and group interaction.

### **Inclusion of specialist therapy staff**

The Early Start program provides an oral language aide to work with all children on language and speech development. The oral language aide liaises closely with the speech therapist to implement the plans for children seeing the speech therapist, to provide suitable activities for children needing additional speech assistance, and also liaises about suitable language extension activities for the remainder of the children. The aide also either plays games or reads books with children individually.

Various key practice ingredients are incorporated as part of the two program elements discussed above.

### **Key practice ingredients**

- Role modelling to the parents/parents as teachers
- Building trust and rapport with families
- Individual Learning Plans (ILP)

### **Role modelling to the parents/parents as teachers**

The FBP gives the teacher the opportunity to work one to one with the child, with the parent present. The teacher designs an individual plan for the child that focuses on the area that is of concern, and designs activities and games for the child to do with the teacher. The teacher and child share the experiences detailed in the child's plan and the parent also takes part. A game or an activity with a specific focus is then given to the family to use until the next session. The game or activity is played between the teacher and child while the parent watches. This fosters the skills of the parent in:

- the type of language and interaction to be modelled;
- how to explain the rules of the game;
- how to help the child to take turns; and
- how to keep the child interested in the game.

It also gives the parent an opportunity to observe their child interacting in a different way from which they usually interact and to see the enjoyment their child received from taking part in such an activity. This often motivates the parents to reproduce the activity at home.

### **Building trust and rapport with families**

The key innovation of Early Start program is the Early Years teacher's ability to build relationships and trust with the parents in the area. It is vital to build trust and a positive rapport with families before being able to approach sensitive issues (e.g., language delays). The Early Years teacher actively engages with

the community to gain trust and respect and to encourage parents to attend the activities with their children. In the beginning, if parents miss a session, the Early Years teacher will conduct a follow-up with this parent. The Early Years teacher also conducts home visits to encourage families to attend the activity. Once rapport has been established, the parents are willing to attend one-on-one family sessions, which achieve better outcomes.

The personal qualities of the staff in the early intervention programs are a key factor in building a positive rapport with families and consequently the outcomes achieved for children. Enthusiasm and passion towards the importance of Early Years intervention, as well as highly developed communication skills enable relationship building with families.

### **Individual Learning Plans (ILP)**

Every child attending Early Start has a plan created by the Early Years teacher that focuses on what they most need to achieve. Parents have input into their child's plan (often via time spent in the Family Based Program) and the staff explain all aspects of the plan to parents. An individual learning plan for each child is designed to ensure that they are receiving adequate attention, learning, development, and assessment during the Early Start program. Plans include the areas of development that a child needs more assistance with as well as extension activities for any tasks with which they do not have problems. The plan provides useful information to the parents in terms of ways to interact with their child.

Supplementary to this, every class session has a plan that details how the session time will be spent and what activities each child must do during the session. The activities are based upon individual needs and also provide extension activities to help children who do not need further assistance so that they too are getting personal time with both the teacher and aide during sessions.

While individual children are receiving individual teaching, the remainder of the children play at the activity stations placed around the room. These include activities such as painting, play dough, dress-ups, home corner, books, toys, and games. The children rotate between staff and free play activities throughout the first half of the session. For the remainder of the session, children who have completed their activities are allowed to play outside, before returning for story-time, group game time, singing and or music.

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## **Research base**

A range of literature identifies the effective program elements for school readiness, especially school readiness for children identified as "at risk". Eight elements are summarised below. These elements reflect evidence from research, as well as learnings from program delivery (such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool program and the Carolina Abecedarian project).

### **Play based learning**

Studies have shown that play training can enhance play and related areas of child development, and is especially valuable for children of low socio-economic status. Providing an early childhood setting that is child-initiated, child-directed, and involves teacher supported play that serves as the primary context in and the majority activity through which young children learn is considered to be developmentally appropriate and thus "best practice" in general, as reported by Hanline (1999).

### **Communication**

Communication has been identified as one of the most important elements of any program that aims to improve the educational outcomes of children "at risk". The lines of communication need to be open between teachers, parents, children and the school. What makes communication so important is that if parents are not consulted and contributing to their child's education, the educating process is not supported and complemented in the family home (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007).

### **Role modelling**

Parents as children's first teachers have the most prominent influence on their

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children's lives. The way in which parents model to their children is the way that their children learn how to communicate, learn, behave, engage, etc. If a program is to be successful it needs to acknowledge this and provide opportunities for parents to learn the appropriate ways to interact with their children (Powell, 1989).

**Individual Learning Plans**

Pretti-Frontczak and Bricker (2000) examined enhancing the quality of the Individualised Education Plan (IEP), as it was found that they are often poorly written and questioned the individualised nature of the Plans. They noted that "individualised service is a cornerstone of early childhood special education" (p. 92). Well-written individualised IEPs were likely to improve outcomes for young children if the goals and objectives were functional, generative, understandable, measurable, and related, as well as based upon family priorities and values (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2007).

**Parents as teachers**

Parenting programs are an alternative approach to assisting children's development indirectly. Parents are a child's first teachers and if parents are given the right skills and knowledge about their children's developmental needs, these parents are more equipped to assist their children to succeed. The results are improved cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes for children (Powell, 1989).

**Home learning**

Home learning activities and preschool attendance affects achievement in Kindergarten (Kelly, 2005). Past research has shown that enriched home learning environments and preschool attendance were much more likely to have improved academic performance in formal schooling. The results are particularly robust for children who live in low income or poverty settings. Children whose parents engage in stimulating home learning activities have higher mathematics and reading scores when compared to children who have no experience with home learning activities.

**Home Visiting Programs**

Home Visiting Programs can be another element of an intensive early intervention program. The benefits of this element are that the teacher has the opportunity to tailor a learning plan to the individual child based on the knowledge of the resources available in the family home. Another benefit is that teachers have the opportunity to observe and understand the child and family in a more natural setting (Powell, 1989).

**Early detection**

Early detection increases the likelihood of positive outcomes and reduces the financial burden of addressing entrenched developmental problems or delays. Early interventions are far more effective than later, remedial or compensatory programs, but early intervention requires early identification of problems. Identification of severe or major problems and developmental delays is generally not difficult, but mild to moderate problems may be more difficult to identify. Evidence shows that parents are generally accurate observers of their children and may be aware of problems before they become apparent to outside observers if parents are educated to the possible signs (Brookes-Gunn, 2003).

<p><b>Outcomes</b></p>	<p>The Early Start Program evidences outcomes consistent with those targeted by the Launceston/East Tamar Communities for Children, School Readiness and Familiarisation Strategy. This profile reports on two outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• early identification of developmental delays; and</li> <li>• educational readiness across social, emotional and physical domains.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evidence of outcomes</b></p>	<p>Data evidencing outcomes was collected from three main sources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centre for Community Child Health Review, 2006;</li> <li>• Launceston/East Tamar Communities for Children Local Evaluation Report 1, 2007;</li> </ul>

- Social work student—research project.

An independent review of the Communities for Children Activities in Launceston/East Tamar site was carried out by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) in 2006. Aims of the review included, but were not limited to, an assessment of the strength and weaknesses of the activities, assessment of the progress made to date in terms of reaching desired outcomes and identification of activities that were showing promise. CCCH used the Elements of Good Practice Activity Checklist, which identified eight practice criteria that were rated on a five-point scale ranging from poor to excellent.

During 2007 Launceston/East Tamar Communities for Children completed the Local Evaluation Report 1. Over 100 parent carer surveys were completed as well as parent and service provider interviews across a range of programs. Ravenswood Early Learning Centre parents completed these surveys and were involved in interviews. The data relevant to this cohort is presented below.

A research project was undertaken in October 2007 by a University of Tasmania 4th Year Social Work student. The research used the elements of good practice (identified by the CCCH evaluation) as a basis for data collection via interviews with program staff, non-program staff, and families. Further, these identified elements were used to develop an observation checklist and recording tool for use in classroom observations to record the elements of best practice against the checklist in a typical classroom session. Interviews were also conducted with four Early Start parents, the Early Year's teacher, and also the Kindergarten teacher.

Conclusions based on this data are outlined below.

#### **Early identification of developmental delays**

The outcome "early identification of developmental delay" was considered of great importance by the community partners. This was based on many local reports of children's developmental delays only being identified when they presented at Kindergarten or school. As stated by one early childhood teacher during an interview undertaken for the local evaluation:

The main reason that we started Early Start was that children were turning up to kinder that we had never met and some of them had significant developmental delays.

Teachers, school staff and allied health specialists indicated that school based early education programs would be an important point for the early identification and would be able to provide early interventions with the additional supports to address developmental delays.

In the interviews conducted, the Kindergarten teacher at Ravenswood Heights Primary School was asked what her professional opinion was of the impact the Early Start program has in relation to the student's school readiness. The teacher explained, "For children with special needs the program was considered almost essential". Further explanation revealed that when children begin Kindergarten with previously identified developmental delays that the teacher is aware of she is able to design activities for these children so that they can perform well and not become frustrated and cause disruptions to the rest of the children. The alternative is that when children begin Kindergarten with unidentified developmental delays, the child is "at risk" of failing in the classroom.

The Early Years teacher reports that in 2007, from a total of 36 enrolments she has identified eight children (21%) as having additional needs with seven of these identified as high needs. Referrals have been made for these children to St Giles and Early Learning Tasmania. These children had not previously been identified; the most severe case was of a child who has now been diagnosed with moderate to severe Autism. Additionally, four children (11%) have been referred for speech and language and one child has been referred to Child Health for hearing and eye checks. Two children have been referred to Early Learning Tasmania. Neither of these children had previously been identified or referred to services by any other agency, including their General Practitioner or child health nurses. These children are now able to be left by their parents in the classroom under the care of their teacher, with modified activities and special arrangements, without causing a great deal of disruption to the other children.

However, had these children not had the opportunity to attend the Early Start Program and have their developmental delays identified prior to beginning Kindergarten, these children would not have been school ready.

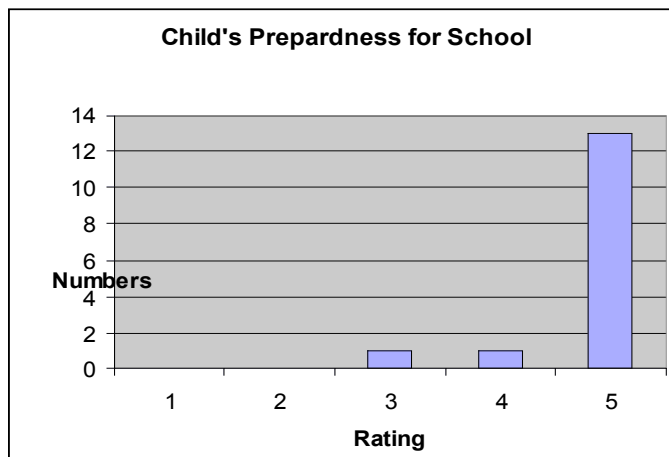
Evaluation has also found that parents who regularly attend the Centre reported feeling empowered because of their improved knowledge of parenting and improved skill base. For instance, some parents are self-identifying speech problems in their children and are expressing the need for their children to be assessed.

### **Educational readiness across social, emotional and physical domains**

The following data was collected from parent/carer self-report questionnaire conducted as part of the Launceston/East Tamar local evaluation.

Seventeen parents participating in the Ravenswood Early Learning Centre completed a survey regarding their involvement in the activities. Parents were asked whether there had been an improvement in their child's overall preparedness for school, rating this on a 5-point scale (5 as highest level).

*Figure 1: Parents self report of their child's overall preparedness for school*



As shown in the figure above, 14 parents reported that participation in the activity had greatly improved their child's overall preparedness for school (rating of 4 or 5), one indicated that their participation had improved their child's preparedness for school "somewhat" (rating of 3) and 2 parents did not respond to this question.

Parents were asked whether there had been an improvement in their child's cognitive development in the areas of literacy, numeracy, and play and imagination skills. They reported results against the following areas:

- *literacy skills*—17 parents responded to this question, with all of these (100%) giving a rating of four or above which indicated a significant amount of improvement;
- *numeracy skills*—19 parents responded to the question, with 17 (89%) of these giving a rating of four or above which indicated a significant amount of improvement; and
- *play and imagination*—17 parents responded to this question, with 12 (71%) of these rating a great deal of improvement.

Parents were asked whether there had been an improvement in their child's social and emotional development, particularly in relation to the areas of being comfortable within a group, playing with other children, relationships with other adults, child's confidence, social skills, coping and problem solving skills. Parents reported results against the following areas:

- *children are comfortable in a group*—17 parents responded to this question, with 15 (88%) of these reporting a great deal of improvement;
- *playing with other children*—17 parents responded to the question, with 13 (76%) reporting that participation in the activity had greatly improved their child's skills;

- *relationships with other adults*—17 parents responded to the question, with 13 (76%) reporting that participation in the activity had greatly improved their child's skills;
- *child's confidence*—18 parents responded to this question, with 16 (89%) reporting that their child's confidence had greatly improved;
- *social skills*—17 parents responded to the question, with 13 (76%) reporting that participation in the activity had greatly improved their child's skills;
- *coping and problem solving skills*—17 parents responded to the question, with 13 (76%) a great improvement in their child's skills; and
- *play and imagination*—17 parents responded to the question, with 15 (88%) reporting that participation in the activity had greatly improved their child's skills.

From the perspective of parents, participation is greatly enhancing children's school readiness across many domains. Parent interviews documented comments from parents about Early Start and children's school preparedness, and increased comfort of parents with their child starting school. One Kindergarten parent commented:

I feel that the most important part of the Early Start program for my son was that he was given special assistance through the Family Based Program and was able to begin Kindergarten this year on a more equal level with the other children.

Parents reported feeling more comfortable with the staff in the Kindergarten and other parents due to the Early Start program. In addition, the program provided three case studies documenting positive changes in relation to children's readiness for school and emotional/social development. These case studies were reviewed as part of the AIFS peer review process.

Outcomes around increased educational readiness are further supported by interviews undertaken with the kinder teacher who reports that two-thirds of children who entered Kindergarten in 2007 had attended Early Start in 2006. There were notable differences between the children and families that had not attended Early Start compared with those who had attended Early Start. Participants in Early Start evidenced ability to:

- negotiate the Kindergarten classroom and equipment more confidently;
- separate from parent more readily and settle in the class room;
- follow task instructions more easily; and
- negotiate and settle into class routine and school culture more readily.

Other reported benefits are that the Kindergarten staff are able to access children's files from Early Start and are familiarised with student needs when allocating students to classes and are aware of students' and families' needs when preparing class activities. Children with special needs started the Kindergarten year with an existing plan, which enabled activities to be organised that were developmentally appropriate. The Kindergarten teacher reported:

The communication between the early year's teacher and the Kindergarten teacher is an important part of children and families successful transition into Kindergarten.

School teachers also reported an increase in school readiness among children who attended the Early Start program compared to those children who had not attended the program.

These findings were confirmed in observations of the Early Years classroom conducted by the social work student researcher that evidenced a range of school-ready behaviours. During six session observations it was noted that, with two exceptions (i.e., children with specific complex needs):

- all children parted easily from their parents;
- most were able to interact in a group and take turns;
- most were able to listen and follow instructions including special needs children who were able to reasonably listen to instructions and participate;
- most children could negotiate their own needs with the staff; and

- all children were able to be comforted by staff when a problem occurred.

### Evaluation of practice approach

The CCCH evaluation conducted in 2006 used the checklist of good practice to evaluate 15 program activities undertaken by the CfC in the Launceston/East Tamar site, of which the Ravenswood Early Learning Centre was one. Of the 15 programs evaluated against this checklist, the Ravenswood Early Learning Centre was the only program to score a perfect five on every checklist item of good practice. It was one of only two sites that scored a "5" for the criterion "Builds trust and relationships with community members", an identified key practice ingredient.

<b>Policy analysis</b>	The Ravenswood Early Learning Centre—Family Based Program project is a positive example of a place-based early intervention and prevention approach to child protection and development in a disadvantaged area. The project adds to a growing evidence base regarding the positive outcomes of early learning opportunities with a particular focus on literacy, and early identification of developmental delay and disability. The program combines pre-Kindergarten formal learning opportunities with a home-based and family based focus to support parents to foster educational readiness.
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p>The Ravenswood Early Learning Centre—Family Based Program project was submitted for consideration as a Promising Practice Profiles (PPP). The project was assessed across a range of criteria relating to how the service results in positive outcomes for children, families and communities. The submission was peer reviewed and validated as evidencing promising practice. More information on the PPP selection process may be found at <a href="http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/pppprocess.html">http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/pppprocess.html</a></p> <p>The Ravenswood Early Learning Centre—Family Based Program project has undergone a range of evaluations including internal and external evaluation. This includes its inclusion in a larger evaluation of the Launceston/East Tamar Communities for Children site conducted by the Centre for Community Child Health, Melbourne in 2006.</p>
<b>Project related publications</b>	Centre for Community Child Health. (2006). <i>Emerging models of good practice: A review of Communities for Children activities in Launceston/East Tamar, Tasmania. Final Report.</i> Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital: Melbourne.
<b>References</b>	<p>Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). <i>Census of Population and Housing.</i> Author: Canberra.</p> <p>Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. (2007). <i>School Readiness.</i> Evidence into action topical paper-February 2007. Retrieved 15 June 2008, from <a href="http://www.aracy.org.au/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Evidence_into_Action_Topical_Papers">http://www.aracy.org.au/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Evidence_into_Action_Topical_Papers</a></p> <p>Bagdi, A., &amp; Vacca, J. (2005). Supporting early childhood social-emotional wellbeing: The building blocks for early learning and school readiness. <i>Early Childhood Education Journal, 33</i>(3).</p> <p>Brookes-Gunn, J. (2003). Do you believe in magic? What we can expect from early childhood intervention programs. <i>Social Policy Report, Giving Child and Youth Development Knowledge Away, 27</i>(1).</p> <p>Carolina Abecedarian project viewed at <a href="https://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/">https://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/</a> on 15 June 2008.</p> <p>Department of Workplace Relations. (2005). <i>Small area labour markets Australia,</i> September Quarter 2005. Retrieved 15 June 2008, from <a href="http://www.dewr.gov.au">http://www.dewr.gov.au</a></p> <p>Hanline, M. (1999). Developing a preschool play-based curriculum. <i>International Journal of disability, development and education, 46</i>(3).</p> <p>High/Scope Perry Pre School Program. Retrieved 15 June 2008, from <a href="http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219">http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219</a></p>

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**Website**

N/A

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**More information**

More information on the Ravenswood Early Learning Centre—Family Based Program and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.

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**Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia**

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