

Speech Pathology Australia



Giving people a say in life

Speech Pathology Australia and Literacy

Purpose

The purpose of this briefing paper is to outline Speech Pathology Australia's position on the Federal Government's initiative to provide \$700 to the parents/carers of children who demonstrate literacy difficulties.

Background

1. Approximately 16% of Australian children have difficulties learning to read (Westwood, 2001).
2. Persisting difficulties with reading and spelling can have a serious effect on a child's academic performance with a subsequent impact on vocational and life choices.
3. A large number of reading approaches and programs currently exist for children with difficulties learning to read and write. Many of these literacy approaches do not specifically target the underlying causes of the literacy difficulty.
4. Speech Pathology Australia is the peak body representing speech pathologists in Australia. Speech pathologists are the university educated professionals with specific expertise in the area of sound awareness and oral language skills (Catts, 1991) having completed extensive study in the areas of linguistics, phonetics and phonology.
5. Research demonstrates that children require a solid foundation in oral language before they can learn to read and write. Oral language abilities include being able to put ideas into sentences; tell stories that make sense; understand what the teacher says in the classroom; and understand jokes.
6. In addition, the ability to use auditory skills to process and analyse sounds in words provides a solid foundation for a child to crack the alphabetic code – mapping sounds to letters and letter groups (and vice versa). Sound awareness skills include recognising and producing rhyming words; identifying first sounds in words; and identifying, blending and segmenting sounds in spoken words (Dodd & Gillon, 2001; Roth, Speece & Cooper, 2002)
7. It is widely recognised that early intervention results in best outcomes for children (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, Zhang, 2002). Sound awareness ability at preschool level has a powerful influence on early reading and spelling acquisition. Waiting until a child is failing in school means that neural pathways specific to reading do not develop adequately. The child also experiences feelings of failure and is denied access to education.
8. Speech pathologists are able to recognise children who are at risk of literacy impairments before they start formal education through the assessment and diagnosis of underlying processes and skills necessary for literacy development. This means that literacy problems can be addressed prior to literacy failure occurring.
9. Speech pathologists also specialise in working with older children who are experiencing reading failure. Using a theoretical framework that is based on sound evidence, speech pathologists are able to identify the underlying causes of the literacy problem and provide an intervention program that targets these underlying causes.

Issues

1. Providing \$700 vouchers for tutoring at the point where children are recognised as experiencing difficulty with literacy learning is not cost effective. Less money would be required if children were identified before they started their formal education and a specific program could be developed for their particular needs.
2. Providing money for tutoring does not ensure that the child's literacy difficulties are improved or ameliorated. This is a certainty if the intervention does not target the child's underlying problems. More of the same will only help a few. This is not cost effective nor efficacious. Given that it is estimated that

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in South Australia alone \$1.5 million will be allocated to the predicted 2235 children with literacy difficulties in Year 3, we would witness an appalling waste of tax payer money.

Proposal

Speech Pathology Australia proposes a more effective and efficient model to address the growing social issue of increased rates of literacy failure. The model consists of three distinct approaches that focus on early intervention programs for children at risk of literacy failure; individual programs for children with existing literacy problems; and support for further research into literacy programs.

1. Speech Pathology Australia recommends that the Federal Government provide the financial resources for the employment of speech pathologists to work specifically with early intervention programs. This could include working with specific children who are at risk of literacy problems as well as health promotion encouraging parents/carers to develop the sound awareness and oral language abilities necessary for literacy development.
2. Speech Pathology Australia recommends that funding be used in a targeted manner for children with identified literacy difficulties. Assessment by a speech pathologist will determine the specific nature of the child's difficulty so that the most appropriate intervention is provided. This intervention may be a program provided by a speech pathologist, a specialist literacy teacher, or within a team approach which includes school based speech pathologists, class teachers and the child's family. If the \$700 per child were amalgamated, approximately **30** additional speech pathologists could be employed full-time for one year in South Australia alone, based on the projected figures for children in Grade 3 who have failed national reading tests. This figure would of course rise were both older and younger children included in the projections.
Utilisation of the funds in this way would allow more control of the interventions and a more co-ordinated approach to the support of children with literacy difficulties.
3. Speech Pathology Australia also endorses ongoing research into the most effective ways to teach reading and the most effective ways to help those who have difficulty acquiring literacy skills.

Conclusions

Speech pathologists play a vital role in developing children's key sound awareness and oral language abilities which are the foundation from which literacy skills develop. Unlike many reading programs available currently in Australia, the assessment and intervention for literacy problems provided by speech pathologists is based on sound research that demonstrates its efficacy and effectiveness. Speech Pathology Australia strongly urges politicians to consult speech pathologists in any initiatives addressing the poor literacy rates in Australia.

Speech Pathology Australia is happy to discuss the issues raised in this briefing paper in more depth.

Lindy McAllister, President. June 2004

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