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**TARGETING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS AND PARENTS: HEALTH
EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN A DRUG AND ROAD SAFETY CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of school-based road safety education programs often involves the challenge of finding room in an already crowded curriculum. This paper highlights strategies undertaken in Western Australia to increase implementation of road safety education through creating links with existing drug education programs.

It provides a working example of how research findings have been formulated into strategic action through the development of road safety and drug education programs for young children, 4 to 8 years of age, in Western Australian schools.

The topics covered, include the development of road safety and drug education resources that provide interactive classroom, simulated and real world learning experiences; the focus on literacy strategies and domains of play to increase teacher implementation; the focus on the role of parents; and the provision of professional learning opportunities for early childhood teachers.

This paper also describes links to the Western Australian K-12 Curriculum Framework (a document describing learning outcomes for students) and how the strategic alliance of the Road Aware Program with the School Drug Education Project has resulted in stronger regional networks, greater dissemination capacity to teachers and schools, efficient use of resources, and improved promotion and advocacy.

Examples of practical strategies that can be used by road safety professionals to address the development and implementation of road safety programs in schools will be of interest to conference delegates.

BACKGROUND

In November 2000, Barry Elliott, Independent Research and Communication Psychologist, presented his paper, *Review of Good Practice: Children and Road Safety Education to the Road Safety Council of Western Australia*. The review investigated a number of Australian and international road safety education programs and made recommendations for the development of a comprehensive road safety education program for young Western Australians.

The report, which highlighted the importance of identifying key target age groups; focusing on the role of parents in road safety education; and developing strategic alliances for effective implementation lead to the Road Safety Council establishing the Children and Road Safety Steering Committee. This committee coordinated the initiatives of a number of working parties during 2001 and 2002.

Following Elliot's report and consultation with the working parties, a policy document titled *Road Safety Policy for Infants, Children and Young People in Western Australia*, describing all the initiatives to be implemented, was endorsed by the Minister for Police and Emergency Services in August 2002. The Road Aware Program (Road Aware) was subsequently launched in September 2002.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

The main recommendations in the policy paper related to the identification of three key age groups (0 – 4 year olds, early childhood students and pre-drivers) as 'windows of opportunity' for road safety education.

These age groups were identified as being significant times at which children and young people are engaged in a number of specific road safety issues, including restraints for infants, pedestrian safety for school aged children and driving safety for pre-drivers. In addition, these key times represented periods where parents are actively engaged in their child's road safety.

Road Aware has comprehensively planned three strategies with supporting initiatives in accordance with these key target age groups. They include:

- Road Aware Parents (parents/carers of 0 – 4 year olds)
- Road Aware Kids (4 – 14 years and their parents/carers)
- Road Aware Drivers (15 – 20 years and their parents/carers).

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH SCHOOL DRUG EDUCATION PROJECT

Elliott also reviewed Western Australian programs involved in providing professional learning opportunities for teachers. From this review, the School Drug Education Project (SDEP), launched in 1997, was identified as being highly successful in accessing teachers and delivering workshops focusing on drug education. In addition, the SDEP was seen to be a highly effective model of comprehensive planning and implementation for a health education intervention within the Western Australian context.

As such, a strategic alliance between Road Aware and the SDEP was formed in 2003. This strategic alliance enables the success and sustainability of focused drug and road safety education initiatives for the children and young people of Western Australia through School Drug Education and Road Aware (SDERA).

The alliance has resulted in the two projects sharing a number of key areas. In addition to sharing managerial and administrative personnel, the two projects have the same management group that includes representatives from the two funding bodies, the Drug and Alcohol Office and the Insurance Commission of Western Australia. The three educational systems and sectors, the Catholic Education Office of WA, Association of Independent Schools of WA and the Department of Education and Training are also represented on the group.

SDERA carries out planning and evaluation processes for schools based on the Health Promoting Schools Framework, developed by the World Health Organisation. This Framework highlights the key areas for successful school based health education programs that include curriculum, resources and professional development; policy and guidelines; principles and successful practices; and parent and community involvement.

GETTING ROAD SAFETY EDUCATION INTO A CROWDED CURRICULUM

Elliott's review identified the early childhood phase (Kindergarten to Year 3) as the 'window of opportunity' to deliver road safety education and training. He recognised that early childhood educators are more willing to include road safety in their learning and teaching programs, and that providing curriculum linked resources and professional learning for these teachers, would increase the likelihood of schools and staff implementing road safety education programs in Western Australian schools.

Elliot also highlighted that despite good efforts, the amount of road safety education delivered in schools in Western Australia has been low. One of the main reasons is that road safety education competes with other health-related education, highlighting the need to be innovative and creative in the

development, production and marketing of contemporary curriculum resources.

While developing a scope of work for *Challenges and Choices*, a new early childhood resource for resilience, drug and road safety education, SDERA acknowledged Elliott's comments and recognised the need to also:

- consider curriculum directions of the three Western Australian education systems and sectors and in particular the early childhood phase of schooling
- identify successful learning and teaching strategies and practices used by early childhood teachers to support children's learning and development
- ensure the resource reflects and supports curriculum requirements and early childhood pedagogy by working collaboratively with learning area curriculum officers, early childhood related working parties, teachers and key stakeholders
- combine road safety learning experiences with resilience and drug education learning experiences to avoid duplication and support teachers implement a comprehensive health education program.

Challenges and Choices is unique in its approach in combining resilience, drug education and road safety education in a literacy based health education program. It also seeks to develop a contextual road safety and drug education approach to the delivery of learning outcomes such Self-management Skills, Interpersonal Skills and Attitudes and Values from the *Curriculum Framework*.

SUPPORTING SYSTEM AND SECTORS CURRICULUM DIRECTIVES

Within Western Australia, schools build education programs that ensure students achieve agreed learning outcomes from the *Curriculum Framework for Kindergarten to Year 12 Education in Western Australia*. The framework describes an outcomes-focused approach to education and sets out what all students are expected to know, understand, value and be able to do, as a result of curriculum experiences.

Schools and teachers use the framework to develop their own learning and teaching programs according to the needs and characteristics of students. Programs for early childhood students address outcomes in eight learning areas, with Health and Physical Education being one of these.

The Health and Physical Education Learning Area provides students with an understanding of health and safety issues and the skills needed to enable students to make responsible decisions about health and physical activity and to promote their own and others' health and well being. It describes five learning outcomes: Knowledge and Understandings; Attitudes and Values; Skills for Physical Activity; Self-management Skills; Interpersonal Skills.

The *Challenges and Choices* resource supports an outcomes-focused planning model, guiding teachers through the model by its structure and design. This process is further encouraged and fostered at professional learning workshops. The resource describes four of the Health and Physical Education Learning Area Outcomes in a resilience, drug education and road safety context. Links to relevant curriculum documents are provided. It also models how teachers can select learning experiences from the three contexts (resilience, drug education and road safety) to provide students with opportunities to progress their achievement of the four outcomes from the *Curriculum Framework*.

Health education programs, whether in a road safety or drug education context, need to deliver utility knowledge that children can use to make decisions in range of situations that may affect their health and safety. Placing a greater emphasis on self-management and interpersonal skills highlights to teachers that, while knowledge and understandings differ between contexts, the skills are transferable.

For example, a classroom-based passenger safety program might include knowledge about the effects of not wearing a restraint, the development of values and attitudes that support the decision to always wear a restraint, and opportunities to practise communication skills in order to cope with peer pressure not to wear a restraint. These same communication skills (such as assertiveness) are transferable between this program and another focusing on passive smoking.

Although purposeful in its design, the *Challenges and Choices* resource is not prescriptive and encourages a flexible approach to planning and implementation. The 'grab bag' or 'tool kit' of ideas and activities are suggestions only and teachers can select the learning and teaching strategies suitable for their students.

LITERACY AND PLAY

Early childhood teachers use a variety of learning and teaching strategies and practices to support children's learning and development. These include:

- using literacy to engage students in learning and teaching programs
- using play-based learning experiences as a way of children learning and providing the opportunity for them to demonstrate and to test their knowledge, skills and understandings
- creating situations for children to develop their self-management and interpersonal skills, including communication, cooperation and collaboration
- using a variety of meaningful 'hands on' learning experiences to develop children's knowledge and understandings, skills and attitudes and values across the curriculum.

The *Challenges and Choices* resource supports best practice in early childhood education and provides teachers with a range of learning and teaching strategies. It includes widely used literacy strategies (such as big books, story mapping and barrier games); learning and teaching strategies (such as brainstorm, think-pair-share, placemat activities); play-based learning experiences (both direct and indirect and including home corner, sand play and constructions); and a balance of classroom, simulated and real world learning experiences.

System-wide consultation led to the agreement that the resource should be literacy focused and supported by the inclusion of resources such as big books and discussion photos. It is envisaged that this approach will:

- maximise the implementation of road safety and drug education in schools, and
- effectively engage parents in their child's road safety education.

BALANCE OF CLASSROOM, SIMULATED AND REAL WORLD LEARNING

Research indicates that effective road safety education should be presented through a balance of classroom, real-world and simulated learning. This combination is more effective in achieving behaviour change than a program based purely on classroom based learning experiences.

The *Challenges and Choices* resource is designed to help teachers plan a balanced road safety education program that incorporates classroom, simulated and real-world learning strategies and experiences. The learning experiences must enable children to construct their own understandings of safer road user behaviour and begin to develop self-management strategies, which enable them to interact safely with the road environment.

REAL-WORLD LEARNING

Current evidence suggests that road safety education needs to recognise and emphasize the importance of skill development (not just an attitude or level of awareness) and that these skills are best developed through practice in the real environment where the complexities of the task can be fully processed. The acquisition of road safety skills leads to behaviour change through a clearer understanding of the complexity of the task and the consequences of actions.

Research also suggests that road safety education is best undertaken in the context in which it eventually is to be implemented. Much of young children's learning in relation to road safety is incidental, not properly planned and there is very little practical road-side training as our education system is not set up to encourage or even allow this. Teachers often choose not to provide

real world learning as taking students to a roadside poses hazards and requires assessing and managing risks.

The *Challenges and Choices* resource suggests real-world activities for parents and teachers to implement at school and home. This combination of first-hand experiences in real traffic situations supervised by a parent/carer and school learning will assist children to gain the knowledge, and develop the skills and attitudes required to operate effectively and safely in the traffic environment.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS/CARERS AND REAL-WORLD LEARNING

Reflecting the findings of the Elliot Report that stressed the important role that parents play in road safety education for children, the *Challenges and Choices* resource includes a number of initiatives to involve parents in the road safety education of their children.

Effective road safety education requires development and practise of skills in real-world environments. Parents, therefore play a direct role as the primary educators of children in the traffic environment. Indirectly, they also observe and model adult road user behaviours (both positive and negative). The most effective learning for very young children is practical hands-on learning in real-world environments, such as in the car, on the footpath and by the roadside.

The *Challenges and Choices* resource will encourage parents/carers to become involved in their child's road safety program through the inclusion of information sheets that focus on road safety issues for young children and take-home activities that involve families in practising safer road user behaviours in the real world.

EVALUATION

The Child Health Promotion Research Promotion Unit at Edith Cowan University has been contracted by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet to undertake the collection and analysis of baseline data for the Road Aware Kids components of SDERA. Data has been collected from teachers of Kindergarten and Year 2 students and parents of 0 – 8 year olds by using a combination of telephone interviews and self-complete questionnaires. The baseline data will enable SDERA to be evaluated using process, impact and outcome measures.

CONCLUSION

The strategic alliance of the Road Aware Program with the School Drug Education Project will result in greater dissemination capacity to teachers and schools and enables the success and sustainability of focused road safety and drug education initiatives for the children and young people of Western Australia.

The practical strategies considered by SDERA to address the development and implementation of a unique combination of resilience, drug and road safety education in a literacy based health education program in schools, can be used by a range of road safety professionals in local and/or state-wide contexts.

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