



PART TWO / THREE PART SERIES

THE KEYS TO EXCEED St Luke's Preschool Dapto

In this three part series, Rattler takes a deep dive with a range of services who have achieved Exceeding ratings in all seven Quality Areas to share with you how they reached this high standard. In our March edition we shared the story of Narooma Preschool. In this edition we share the story of St Luke's Preschool in Dapto NSW.

BY CAROLIN WENZEL

Quality Rating: Exceeding

St Luke's Preschool is connected to the Anglican church in Dapto NSW, but emphasis is on inclusion of all local families. Their vision is 'to be Child Focused and to create Collaborative Partnerships' and their values 'aim to serve one another, our families and our community through high quality teaching and continuous quality improvement.'

About 15% of households in Dapto are families with young children. It's a small semi-rural community just south-west of Wollongong near Lake Illawarra with a population of about 12,000. On the Socioeconomic Index of advantage (SEIFA), Dapto rates as slightly disadvantaged with a score of 964 (1000 is the benchmark).

The Dapto area has a high developmental vulnerability rate according to the AEDC, compared with other areas of Wollongong and NSW. Nearly a third of children starting school are vulnerable in one or more domain (compared with 1 in 5 nationally), 14.8% are vulnerable in 2 or more domains compared with around 10% in Wollongong and NSW and 11% nationally.

What makes St Luke's stand apart is their focus on inclusion and how they have collaborated with other service providers to create a community hub for families that includes a café, Anglicare Family Mental Health Service, and an Occupational Therapist to assess and assist children with additional needs.

When current director Blake Stewart took over, he had big shoes to fill. The previous director had been at the service for 13 years and had already achieved an Excellent rating. While Blake was transitioning into the director role, he received notice that the assessment would be happening months earlier than had been expected, and while the outgoing director was still on long service leave – so the team needed to pull together and come up with a good strategy to ensure the best outcome.

1 EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND PRACTICE

St Luke's has an overarching curriculum with a changing fortnightly focus – for example when children start the year they begin with a focus on belonging and wellbeing. During the next fortnight they focus on family, and then move on to culture.

"This enables us to embed each child's individual developmental milestones

and curriculum domains into the cycle," says Blake. "For example, an educator may observe that an additional needs child negatively responds to loud noises. First, they will consult the notes from their individual allied health practitioners (i.e. occupational therapist) and recommended sensory inputs. The Educator then would reflect on how to support that child within our program to ensure the learning experience is prepared and taught in an inclusive way which could involve providing additional sensory items to support the arousal levels of that child.

In response to the significant increase in additional needs children within St Luke's Preschool, the team has established strong links with local occupational therapists and speech pathologists that provided guided practice throughout the daily program. This allows both the allied health practitioner and the teacher to collaborate together whilst teaching the child.



St Luke's Preschool Dapto - garden in extended outdoor area

2 CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY

St Luke's has a 1:4 staff to child ratio, with the aim to provide adequate supervision across all external and internal areas at all times and to avoid hazards and risks. The team includes one staff member trained in fundamental movement skills from a local osteopath, and another trained in healthy eating through the NSW Education Department's Munch & Move program.

"We engage with the children and empower them to understand risks," shares Blake. "Educators will ask the children; what's safe in this area? Where can we jump from? What do we need to make it safe?"

Earlier this year St Luke's invested in doubling their outdoor area to include a larger range of risky and secure play opportunities and equipment, and all risk policies and procedures have now been revised accordingly.

"Through collaborating with our children in regard to safety, we have developed specialised social stories that empower the children to read themselves or read to others about the risks involved in a particular learning experience," says Blake.

3 PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

St Luke's Preschool extended their yard to provide a greater range of heavy gross motor sensory inputs to support and increase the development of the vestibular and proprioceptive sensory processing for all children including those with autism or sensory processing difficulties.

The yard is purpose built to allow for children to run safely. The area includes a higher sensory environment, with climbing structures and 'heavy work' areas for children with autism or sensory processing difficulties to engage first thing in the morning.

"Researchers in New Zealand have found that 16sqm of outdoor space enhances the gross motor development of children, in contrast to the Australian standard size which is only 7sqm," explains Blake. "For other children who are overstimulated, we have features that will help them to calm down – elastic chairs, special round swings, cuddle seats and bamboo huts to hide in. The outdoor environment is now an inclusive wonderland for all children."

4 STAFFING ARRANGEMENTS

St Luke's has 17 staff. Each teacher has a set number of focus children to document, so the documentation load for each educator is reduced and the quality of documentation and teaching increases.

The team includes degree-qualified early childhood teachers (ECT), 2 of those are studying their Masters. Twelve are at a Diploma level or studying for the Diploma. They have 1 teacher with a Cert IV in Speech Pathology and during 2020 an educator will be completing a Cert IV in Occupational Therapy. There is another staff member who is currently completing a Bachelor of Occupational Therapy.

5 RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN

Blake shares that the educators are developing visuals, social stories and routines with children as part of building relationships. Before children are introduced to climbing structures outside, they read a story with pictures about what is safe and what is risky. The outside area also helps children to regulate their emotions and manage challenging behaviour.



Children enjoy the new wooden climbing area

Blake says : “For example, if a child is throwing rocks, an educator can take them out to the climbing apparatus to provide an alternative stimulus to throwing and channel their emotional energy into a more socially appropriate behaviour.”

6 COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

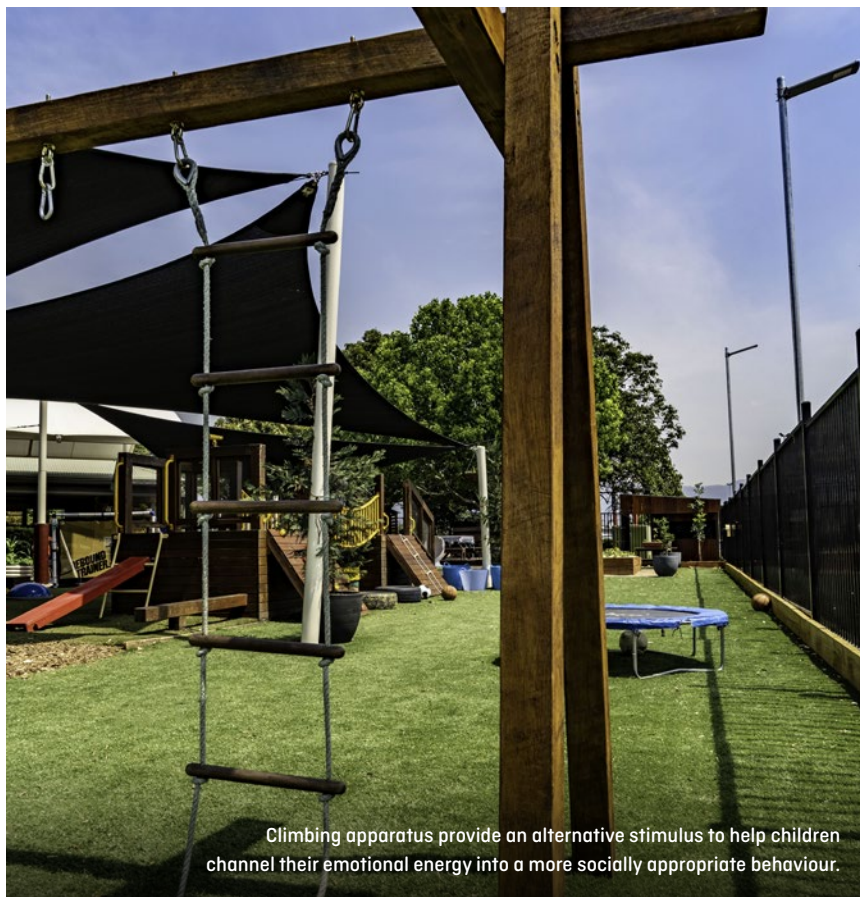
The preschool is part of a community hub which is very responsive to parents’ requests for ways they can be more supportive. For example, they are in the process of creating a support group for those parents with additional needs in response to a parent’s request. Both this parent and the Inclusion Support Facilitator are partnering with a Life Skills Educator from Anglicare to maximise the investment into families in 2020.

“St Luke’s Preschool has been a popular preschool for referrals from local speech pathologists, occupational therapists and paediatricians,” says Blake. “Alongside our low fees and specialised staffing, families are drawn to our family centred preschool. We ensure that we are building capacity for each individual family.

“We want all families to feel included, so in our orientation program we talk with parents about their children and invite them to tell us about their cultural background, and how we can help them feel at home. We had a Macedonian family this year, so we’ve incorporated Macedonian language and culture into our curriculum.”

The multidisciplinary approach is established to support the learning and development of additional needs children in a collaboration between the educator, inclusion support facilitator, the parents and allied health professionals if they are involved in the child’s care plan.

“We all meet to discuss the specifics of the child’s diagnosis and treatment routine and to develop an Individual Learning Plan,” says Inclusion Support Facilitator Amy Lukins. As a parent of a son with ADHD, anxiety and autism,



Climbing apparatus provide an alternative stimulus to help children channel their emotional energy into a more socially appropriate behaviour.

Amy also has a deep understanding of the additional support needs of some families.

7 GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

St Luke’s is a community based not-for-profit preschool attached to the Anglican church. The Management Committee has five representatives from the Anglican church (most who have served on the committee for the last 15 years), and four representatives are parents who tend to only stay on for a couple of years while their children attend.

The preschool has established a strong leadership team – that includes the director, second-in-charge/ community liaison officer (who connects with families and the church community through the community hub, and to the broader community through her local involvement in cultural initiatives), educational leader (who is being mentored as he is new to this role) and an inclusion support facilitator (who works with educators and families to ensure children from all cultures and of all abilities are welcome).

ASSESSMENT PROCESS AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

The last ratings assessment was very stressful for the team, as it happened just before Blake took over as director. It was brought forward so it could happen before their Excellent rating expired, so there was a high bar to reach.

One of the great strategies they used was to assign one of the seven quality areas to every staff member to be thoroughly familiar with. This meant that on any day at least two staff members were across each quality area.

With support from the previous director, Blake ensured that on the assessment days none of the staff on duty felt pressure to perform. They had extra debriefings and reflection time both pre and post visit, and made sure the support tasks were covered in a structured way, so they weren’t forgotten as stress levels were increased.

They were pleased and relieved to maintain their Exceeding rating, but their Excellent rating lapsed.