



Dr Nicola Chisnall Memorial Award 2016 Nomination

The Children's Corner Howick: Learning in the Community

Submitted by Diane Cornelius, Centre Owner

In February 2016 The Children's Corner Howick and one of our local rest homes Howick Baptist Healthcare (HBH) began a magical journey to bring old and young together. Here is our story so far...



"An education capable of saving humanity is no small undertaking; it involves the spiritual development of man, the enhancement of his value as an individual and the preparation of young people to understand the times in which they live"

Dr Maria Montessori (Education and Peace)

How the story began...

One of my personal visions as a centre owner is for our preschool to be strongly connected to our local community and for us as educators to provide opportunities for tamariki to learn, grow and flourish as active participants in that community.

We are already involved in community initiatives but we are always looking at ways to build further connections. Fortuitously in late 2015 I started to notice news coverage of American kindergarten children who were given opportunities to spend time with elderly members of their local rest homes and the impact it had on both young and old.

I began reflecting on my own family dynamics; my 4 children had never known their grandfathers who had passed away and despite having annual visits from their Scottish grandmothers they really didn't have any connections with older people. A lot of our preschool children are in the same position with their families dispersed across many countries and they miss out on the opportunity for inter-generational learning and sharing. In turn this could result in a lack of empathy and respect for older people which may lead to seniors feeling lonely and isolated.

I made contact with one of our local rest homes. In my initial meeting with Kim Thwaites Volunteer Co-coordinator, she asked me if I had heard of the "Eden Alternative". She explained that it is an international non-profit organisation working to creating a quality of life for elderly people. This meant trying to provide the residents with as close to a home from home environment as possible and as such preschool visits would complement this.

The plan was for up to 8 children to participate in every visit to help them build up confidence in a new environment and start forming meaningful connections with their new elderly friends. We decided that the participating children should be 4 years+, settled members of our preschool learning community with a good level of social competence.



What did we want to achieve from the visits?

As a preschool we define who we are through 4 Core Values and we wanted to support children's learning in each of these areas;

Independence...outside of preschool in the community.

Inquisitiveness...making sense of the world around us. We will invite and entice participation from children relating to what happens in the community and the different roles and responsibilities people have.

Inclusion...learning from others with different perspectives and experiences. An opportunity for children to engage with older people and make friendships.

Individuality...foster children's sense of belonging as we affirm them as active participants in their local community



What do the visits entail?

On our first few visits the children brought along their portfolio's to share with the residents. We believed that this would be a great way for children and adults to start talking to one another and this was indeed the case. It was heartwarming to see the residents looking through the photos and stories in the portfolio's and the children proudly pointing out some of their special moments at preschool. Connections between young and old started to develop.

Our visits usually begin with a shared morning tea with children sitting amongst the residents. We then give children access to some resources from preschool.

More often than not the residents will join in too and work purposefully alongside the children. What we observe is a calm atmosphere of collaboration, concentration and mutual respect just as we would expect within a Montessori classroom environment.

We have created a special memory book with photos and keepsakes from our visits. We bring this along each time and the residents love looking at the photos of themselves with

the preschool children. We always end our visits with a few songs.

How do the residents benefit?

The elderly are often regarded as a burden and do not receive the respect they deserve. Organisations like Age Concern are working hard to support our older citizens who may face loneliness and in extreme cases abuse. Each year, Age Concern's Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention (EANP) services receive more than 2000 referrals for older people who may be facing elder abuse or neglect. That's **eight referrals every working day**. About three quarters of these situations are confirmed to involve elder abuse or neglect.

Through education comes understanding and empathy and if we start fostering this in our preschool children they will grow up to respect the older members of our society. What we have observed on our visits is the open minded nature of the child who embarks on friendships without bias or judgment. They don't define the person in front of them as "old" or "incapable"; they are simply learning to connect with another human being in the purest of ways - from the heart.

Our visits have short and long term benefits for our older generation. In the short term these preschool children really do provide an excitement and energy around the rest home. They brighten up the day of some people who may not receive many visitors or whose own grandchildren live overseas. In the long term we are fostering in children an acceptance and understanding of an older generation who have much to give. They often have the patience and time to sit and work with the child on a puzzle for as long as it takes. They spend time getting to know the children, asking them questions and building their esteem through meaningful exchanges. It is truly magical to watch!

"...The child is both a hope and a promise for mankind"

Dr Maria Montessori (Education and Peace)

The next chapter...

We surveyed parents at the end of term 1 and the feedback on our visits has been extremely positive and appreciative. It is clear to see on our visits that our parent helpers find the experience grounding and rewarding. Our parents actively engage in discussions with the residents and know many of them on first name terms. Every time we visit we find out more about the life of these special people, where they were born, how many children they had and what they enjoyed doing in their life.

We will continue to schedule visits and hope to do so on a long-term basis. We will undertake another review at the end of 2016 and seek input from the residents to find out what they think of the visits and whether they have any ideas or suggestions. It has been

one of the most valuable initiatives our preschool has been involved in and has touched the hearts of everyone who has participated.

