

**An Action Research Mixed Method Evaluation of
the Implementation of an Anxiety
Intervention/Prevention Program for Year Three
Children at a Language Development Centre
Preparing to Enter into Mainstream Education**

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**This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Psychology of Murdoch University**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Darralynn C Siddall

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of implementing a modified cognitive behavioural (CBT) anxiety intervention/prevention program to meet the specific needs of speech and language impaired (SLI) children enrolled in a Language Development Centre (LDC), as they prepare to exit the LDC and enter into mainstream education. The study implemented the anxiety CBT program over two consecutive school years incorporating two different Year 3 cohorts (age range 7 to 9 years) and is reported in three stages.

The first study aimed to modify an anxiety CBT intervention/prevention program (namely the FRIENDS for Life program) for SLI children enrolled in Year 3 at a LDC as they prepared to exit the LDC and enter into mainstream education. All children offered the program participated in the study however, parent participation was low.

Previous research (Barrett et al, 1996, Barrett, 1999; Bett, 2002; Mendlowitz, 1996 & Rapee et al, 2005) found that in order for anxiety intervention/prevention programs to be efficacious for children, the program focus needed to include parents. The inclusion of parent participation for children with language impairment is considered essential, as the children are more likely to benefit from having the CBT strategies consolidated and supported at home (Bett, 2002).

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Therefore, the second study involved a re-implementation of the modified FRIENDS for Life program to a second cohort of SLI children in Year 3 the following year. Due to low participation of parent involvement in the first study, this study aimed for improved parent involvement and participation of the parent FRIENDS for Life sessions.

Thirty-two children participated in study one and thirty-three children participated in study two. Both studies used an action research mixed method evaluation approach to gain a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the program. The outcomes, using standardised outcome measures showed no significant difference between the control group and the intervention group. However using program specific descriptive and non-traditional measures indicate that differential and positive changes were attained for the intervention group.

Investigation of a complex data set using a variety of methods during various points in the evaluation process provided complementary information, this formed the foundation for more comprehensively assessing children with speech/language impairment. The intervention groups developed an increased awareness of their own and other people's emotions and most importantly they developed a wider array of 'emotion language' when compared to the control group at post intervention. In addition, the intervention group attained a sound understanding of the FRIENDS plan and skills at post intervention.

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A one year follow-up, of the original study, to explore the long-term benefits of the FRIENDS program for SLI children was not completed following a poor response rate. This is discussed and explored as it may benefit the way future research is conducted for families of children with SLI.

The studies highlighted the benefits of the FRIENDS program for children with SLI and the need to explore more effective ways to increase parent participation at the FRIENDS for Life parent sessions. Implications of the findings are examined, alongside limitations and directions for future research.

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PREFACE

In introducing this study, and in the tradition of participant – observer methodology (Jorgensen, 1993), I feel that it is important to clarify my background experience that has crucially influenced my role, actions and perception within this study. Primarily, it is important to be aware of my pre-existing involvement with the Language Development Centre (LDC) at the centre of this study. This involvement spans three levels:

1. I have been a psychologist at the LDC.
2. I have been a teacher at the LDC.
3. I am a parent of two children who were diagnosed with language impairment.

For a period of two years, I was contracted by the LDC to psychometrically assess children to determine whether they met the criteria for entry to the centre. Specifically, this assessment is to determine whether they meet the criteria of having intelligence within the normal range, but have moderate-severe language impairment which seriously affects their progress at school. The assessment involves administering the WPSSI-R, writing psychological reports, meeting with the parents and language program co-ordinator to review the report findings and recommendations.

I worked as a relief teacher at the LDC for a period of five years after my sons exited the LDC. My personal experience with LDC, together with a

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background interest and educational experience of children with special educational needs enabled me to effectively utilise these skills to teach the LDC children taking into consideration their specific language and learning needs. This knowledge was particularly beneficial in this study as it provided the foundation from which to effectively interpret data and to modify the FRIENDS program to meet the specific learning needs of language impaired children.

Two of my sons attended the LDC during pre-primary and Year 1. One of my sons attended from pre-primary to Year 1. He had a diagnosis of Hyperlexia, Semantic and Pragmatic Difficulties¹, and difficulty with receptive language and auditory processing. Another son attended for three terms in Year 1 as there were concerns about his semantic and narrative ability¹. Some difficulty was noted with his expressive language although he was still within the average range for expressive and receptive language. During this time I worked as a volunteer teacher at the school. Socialising and support with other parents in similar circumstances enabled me to learn more about the trials and tribulations of their experiences and consolidated my growing knowledge of the effects of language impairment on the child and also on the family.

My intertwining background experiences led to my interest in this research question and influenced the way I conducted this study as a FRIENDS

¹ Terms defined in Glossary

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facilitator and as a researcher. I was able to consider the parent's and teacher's perspective together with a first hand understanding of the difficulties of the language impaired child. This knowledge enabled me to develop a methodology that was very sensitive to children with language impairment and their accompanying school environment. In saying this, I was also very mindful to take a reflective stance throughout to be vigilant to the potential for over-involvement or participant bias.

Additionally, I felt that the traditional methods of writing a research paper lacked some of the thinking and decision making which influenced each study. So in keeping with the participant – observer methodology I added a reflection page at the end of the discussion section for each study. These pages provided the opportunity for me to document my observations, concerns and thoughts which would otherwise be lost, with the intention for these reflections to benefit future research for children with speech and language disorders.