

A hospital kindergarten experience

Four-year-old Isabella was first admitted to the Kookaburra Ward (children's cancer centre) at The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) in March 2014 when she was diagnosed with leukaemia. Isabella's family learned that her treatment would take place over an extended period of time, potentially for several years, and that the first year would be particularly intensive.

Isabella's treatment plan included frequent hospital admissions that would last up to a month at a time, as well as outpatient treatment in day oncology in between these admissions. Isabella's family was forced to withdraw Isabella from her regular kindergarten program, where Isabella had been very settled and comfortable. This decision was very difficult for the family.

In my role as Early Childhood Educator in the hospital, it was at this stage that I met with Isabella and her family to advise them of the educational support available to Isabella through the RCH Education Institute. The RCH Education Institute is

committed to providing a rich learning experience for children and young people so that their journey as learners can continue in hospital. As Isabella's condition would cause major disruption to her four-year-old kindergarten year, Isabella's family was eager for her to continue her critical early childhood education throughout her treatment.

Isabella, her parents and I discussed Isabella's interests in an initial meeting, and I learned that Isabella was passionate about sculpture, painting and picture storybooks. These interests provided a starting point for us to develop an Individual

Learning Plan (ILP). A key goal of Isabella's ILP was to further develop her interest in art, including her understandings of art-based mediums and the ways that they could be used.

I contacted Isabella's regular kindergarten teacher to discuss Isabella's learning needs, to assist with developing her learning goals in the early weeks of hospitalisation. In addition to an art-based goal, we agreed on a literacy goal in response to Isabella's interest in books. Isabella's teacher provided insight into the specific kinds of books that Isabella would choose to read, and some of the topics she enjoyed. This conversation with Isabella's kindergarten teacher also helped me learn more about Isabella's engagement with the kindergarten program before becoming unwell.

After some initial hesitation, Isabella began attending kindergarten sessions on the hospital ward and soon began to engage in rich learning experiences. Isabella not only created her own artworks during these kindergarten sessions, but also began to collaborate with others to create

sculptures and paintings. Isabella identified some favourite books that we read in our kindergarten sessions and asked that we read them again in future sessions. These books were loaned to the family over weekends so that Isabella's learning goals could be supported during these times as well.

Isabella has attended over 40 kindergarten sessions in hospital since we first developed her ILP six months ago. She contributed greatly to an inquiry-based nature project that we explored during kindergarten sessions, using natural and recycled materials to investigate connections to animals and their habitats. Isabella's contributions to this project are now on display in an exhibition of artworks produced by children in the hospital kindergarten program.

Isabella's family (including aunts, uncles and younger sister) often remain in the room for kindergarten sessions and are very engaged in all aspects of the program. I encourage families to stay

'The RCH Education Institute is committed to providing a rich learning experience for children and young people so that their journey as learners can continue in hospital.'

and engage in kindergarten sessions with their child, to promote a community of learners. It is common to find parents and siblings learning alongside a child during these sessions.

Isabella's engagement in the kindergarten program has also helped her to foster friendships with other children, particularly those who are long-term patients and attend kindergarten regularly. These friendships have developed further beyond the kindergarten room as well, just as you would expect in a regular kindergarten-based friendship.

Isabella and her family regularly request resources and materials so that they can continue working on learning projects between formal kindergarten sessions. Advice has also been shared with the family on where they can source similar materials when Isabella is discharged from hospital—to promote their continued participation in Isabella's ongoing learning.

It was valuable when Isabella's regular kindergarten teacher visited the hospital to meet with me so that we could discuss Isabella's progress towards reaching her learning goals. I was able to share insights from Isabella's learning behaviours in hospital such as how she was engaging in collaborative learning opportunities and forming friendships with others in this context.

Isabella has now achieved the goals set out in her original ILP, including learning to work with and identify a broader variety of materials. Isabella is now confident in using watercolours, clay, wire and textiles. This has been especially important for Isabella, given that her treatment affected her ability

to complete fine motor tasks. Isabella's family reported that 'the art projects in hospital kindergarten help Isabella to sustain the interests that she had before her diagnosis'. When Isabella next returns for treatment, we will begin our kindergarten session by working to develop a new ILP.

Recently, Isabella's family transformed her hospital room into an art gallery, hanging all of her artworks from kindergarten on the walls for her to reflect on and share with members of her family, medical team and visitors.

Isabella's mother says that every morning when she wakes up, Isabella reminds her that it's almost time for kinder and suggests that they walk down to the room so that they are not late. On weekends when kindergarten is not running, Isabella still visits the kindergarten room in the morning to do artwork and maintain her morning routine. Isabella's mother says that the family is 'very grateful to have access to the kinder program' because it has 'made a difference by enhancing their life and ensuring that Isabella's kindergarten experience can continue during this difficult time'.

Isabella is scheduled to begin primary school next year and says that she is particularly excited about doing art at school. As with all young learners who we work with, the Education Institute will be able to provide support for Isabella, her family and the school throughout this transition.

Sonya Nedovic
Early Childhood Educator
Education Institute
The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Subscribe today!
www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/
shop/product/every-child