

The Playing With Gratitude Project: Growing Well-Being In Early Learning Settings ©

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Introduction

The Playing with Gratitude Project began taking form as a heightened awareness of stress, anxiety and depression began to emerge within early childhood settings. As a consequence an urgency to counteract this issue was created within early childhood leaders and educators. Current research into early childhood wellbeing suggests when young children are supported to develop a strong socio-emotional foundation their lives are remarkably changed. The change can be seen in the development of automatic positive neural pathways influencing children's cognitive and social capabilities, increasing their sense of wellbeing, and their relationship with peers and adults (Marbina, 2015).

In the light of this current research to counteract these presenting problems we needed to ensure we were offering an opportunity for children to develop a strong sense of wellbeing in order to have a lifetime of independence and have access to some powerful tools to significantly impact and protect their mental health throughout their life. A big ask, however the research suggests that play, something children love to do, significantly impacts many mental health issues, particularly stress, antisocial behaviour and depression... and interestingly enough so does gratitude. By combining these two influential tools, the formal Playing with Gratitude Project was birthed.

The Playing with Gratitude Project believes the best early start in life will result in a future of achievable possibilities. We know these possibilities have their foundations with a child's right to play and the transformational learning experienced through co-play. Therefore our aim of The Playing with Gratitude Project is to examine the new science of gratitude and combine it with the powerful influence of co-play in order to make a positive change in the wellbeing of children, birth to five.

A Snapshot of Current Research Into Early Childhood Wellbeing?

Young children who have been supported to develop a strong socio-emotional foundation often demonstrate:

- A greater capacity to **manage their own emotions**, assert themselves, articulate feeling (Halberstadt, 2016)
- Stronger verbal reasoning versus emotionally led responses
- More **automatic positive neural pathways** become and the set of cognitive and social capabilities (VIC DEET 2015)
- A developed social and emotional skill set which are essential for **positive mental health** (Start Strong, Aus. Gov. 2016)
- A stimulated a **sense of wellbeing** (Aus. Gov. DEET, 2004)
- A modeling of wellbeing behaviour from their significant adults



The New Science Of Gratitude

The new science of gratitude as researched by Professor Robert Emmons (2007) suggests there are three domains of influence: psychological, social and physical. As you can see here the influence of gratitude has a holistic impact on the human body improving joy, pleasure, liveliness, positive emotion, helping a person become more giving, more outgoing, less lonely, and isolated. Gratitude also impacts the physical domain, lowering blood pressure, helping those who practice gratitude to sleep longer and feel more refreshed upon waking up. It also strengthens the immune system. As you can see practicing gratitude is a very powerful action.

With play being one of the key focuses of the project we needed to develop a working definition to guide our thinking. In response to our research we defined play, in this project, as inspired curiosity and imagination, which captures the whole person. The play experience is about exploring the wonder of living in mind, body and soul. Play should also be about the 'stretch factor'; activating and applying new learning through the process of discovery. All this activity leads to a wonderful sense of pride and capacity in the player (Brown, 2009).

We also needed to try and define gratitude as part of the project. Rothenberg summaries it well defining gratitude as the social emotional process that results in a sense of happiness, joy, or appreciation due to receiving something but it's not on one's own effort but rather an unrestricted gift from another (2015). As part of the project we needed to join play and gratitude in an authentic way. Again in response to our research we decided to use the tool Co-Play to do just that. Co-play is defined by Howard as play with children, supporting and extending the play activities, while preserving the children's freedom and autonomy to

The New Science of Gratitude (Emmons 2007)

Implications of Gratitude:

Psychological	Physical
✓ Higher levels of positive emotions	✓ Stronger immune systems
✓ More alert, alive, and awake	✓ Less bothered by aches and pains
✓ More joy and pleasure	✓ Lower blood pressure
✓ More optimism and happiness	✓ Exercise more and take better care of their health
Social	✓ Sleep longer and feel more refreshed upon waking
✓ More helpful, generous, & compassionate	
✓ More forgiving & outgoing	
✓ Feel less lonely & isolated	

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Why Connect Gratitude To Play?

How did we make the connection?

The way we co-played with gratitude...

Looking for it | Taking it in | Giving it back

(Emmons 2014)

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develop the play as they wish (Whitebread, 2010).

So our mantra for the project using the tool of co – play became... look for it, take it in, and give it back.

Research Methodology

The research project used a practitioner inquiry process. This process engaged people to create and study change as it cut across the theory- practice divide, thus setting researches up to identify, explore, plan and action change, and evaluate their daily, professional practice (Waters-Adams, 2006). In our setting, practitioner inquiry is not about the educator doing more work, but rather analyzing what they do to in order to improve how they influence the outcomes for children.

The practitioner inquiry project began with professional development sessions helping staff to understand the new science of gratitude (Emmons, 2007) and offering them an opportunity to participate in a project, which addressed the need of growing healthy children in mind, body and soul. The aim of sessions was to define gratitude and its work for educators and children, present a possible problem at work in our lives, hypothesize a solution and suggest a possible way forward.

Participating educators were invited to complete a situational analysis reflecting the make up of their community to discover if gratitude was already at work in their early learning communities. Educators were invited to participate in an online survey reflecting on their own gratefulness history, as well as reflecting on the well-being of the children in their care. Staff used the gratefulness indicators as suggested by Robert Emmons in his book, *The New Science Of Gratitude* (2007) as well as using the, *South Australian Wellbeing Observational Scale For Early Childhood*, to measure change. These surveys also became weekly data collection points in order to gather any observational growth as a result of the practice of gratitude through co-play.

Participating educators used intentional teaching moments to introduce gratitude to the children. Educators used role-modelling strategies through co-play opportunities to help children understand the abstract concept of gratitude at work in their play. Educators then recorded any play experiences relating to the growth and development of gratitude knowledge and skills using a pedagogical documentation technique. This technique considers the whole child and analyses change experienced as a result of the play. Educators also met with families as often as possible to share with them the types of gratefulness activities the children had been

involved in at their center, and any observable changes as a result of the gratitude play. Families were also invited to participate in an anonymous online questionnaire reflecting on the indicators from the Wellbeing Observational Scale noting any changes they observed at home.

At the end of the initial phase of the project, a final comparison situational analysis was completed to identify any changes and growth in the community as a result of gratitude at work in play.

Demographics

There were 9 early learning communities involved in the project:

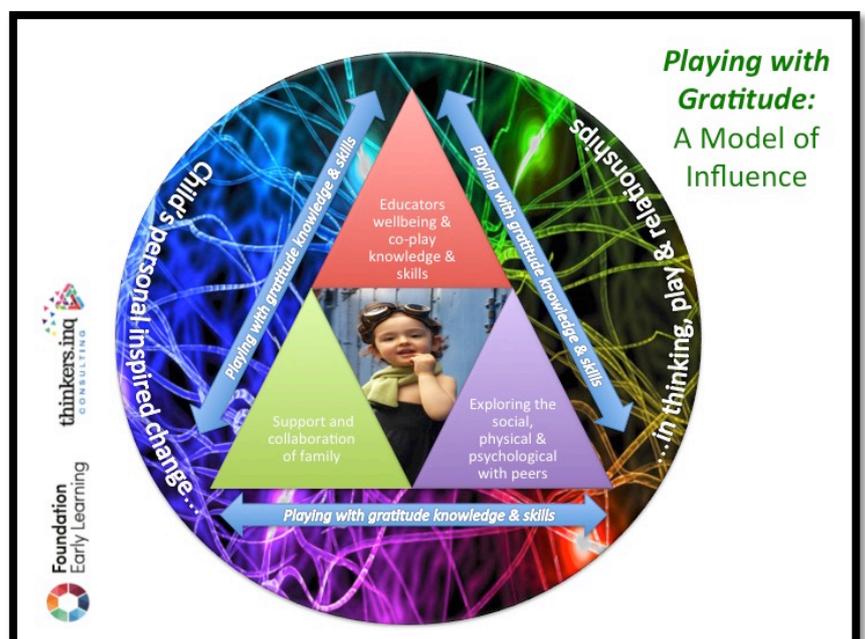
- 2 in Queensland,
- 1 in New South Wales,
- 4 in Australian Capital Territory
- 2 in Victoria

These early learning communities offer education and care to 1530 families. The children in these early learning communities are aged on average between 6 weeks old and 5 years old. These early learning centres are operating on an average of 80% occupancy. Families come from 25 different countries. There are a high proportion of families speaking a first language other than English. 7 centres are in city suburbs and 2 centres are in rural towns, with one of the rural towns having seen a recent decrease in employment opportunities. There were 248 team members employed across these communities all of whom participated in the project. The team members represent 34 countries.

At the time of starting the Playing with Gratitude Project in January 2017, expressions of gratitude were not evident in practice in any of the participating early learning communities.

A Model of Influence

Before reviewing the findings of the project it might be helpful to look at a model of influence developed from the data analysis. The model demonstrates how the child's mind captures the influence of their play as their knowledge and skills of gratitude grows. It was also discovered that as



the children's teachers, peers and families played with gratitude they too were significantly impacted by the work of gratitude. This strengthening network around each child in turn changed how they related to others and how they choose to play. It seems that the stronger these factors became in a child's life the more connected and interdependent each child's play became. The work of gratitude inspired remarkable change in each player, educator, parent and child alike.

The Influence Of Playing With Gratitude On The Teaching Communities

The project started to re-shape the thinking of our teams around curriculum and play after the initial training, as it developed knowledge and skills and offered a new common language to challenge thinking and interactions. The survey data from the early childhood communities revealed a clear trend in heightened inspiration, encouraging teams to invest in cooperation, collaborative approaches and active listening during play. The teams noted this shift was reciprocal as they were shown strengthened levels of support, acceptance and gratitude. In turn these changes influenced open communication with colleagues, children and families. This emotional change started to increase the sharing of ideas, positive interactions, the building of stronger team cohesion and the creation of a sense of contentment with resources and heightened the desire for individuals to give back to the team. Throughout the project, it was identified that educators started to foster real, innovative opportunities to network. One example of this, during the course of the project, educators had access to a closed Facebook page where they were able to share and offer suggestions and be inspired other educator's ideas and progress. The time spent forging these connections and uploading these resources was over and above work expectations and shared an inspiring perspective to others.

Staff Changes Measured

Educators took part in documenting their gratitude journey by completing a weekly online survey for 6 months. This survey comprised of questions in relation to a number of wellbeing indicators as suggest by Dr. Robert Emmons (2007). After collating the data from the initial surveys and comparing and contrasting data to the final surveys, we noted some

Changes Measured: Staff Survey Data

Staff rated their gratitude journey using a number of wellbeing indicators as suggested by Emmons (2007) across the project of six months. 9 of the indicators revealed growth in the healthy and strong rating:

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| ✓ Happiness: (+9.12%) | ✓ Feeling down or Depressed: (-48.44%) |
| ✓ Self Esteem:(+16.51%) | ✓ Envy: (-25.83%) |
| ✓ Optimism: (+14.62%) | ✓ Focus on Material Things: (-34.50%) |
| ✓ Hope:(+18.95%) | |
| ✓ Anxious: (-49.24%) | |
| ✓ Loneliness: (-35.76%) | |

outstanding growth in how the teams rated themselves against the indicators. Happiness, self esteem, optimism and hope were rated on a scale of: terrible, poor, neutral, healthy or strong and transformative. The figures below focus on the difference between educators who rated either *healthy* or *strong and transformative* in the initial survey compared to those who rated *healthy* or *strong and transformative* in the final survey.

- ✓ Happiness: +9.12%
- ✓ Self Esteem: +16.51%
- ✓ Optimism: +14.62%
- ✓ Hope: +18.95%

The cohort of educators rated positive growth across all 4 wellness indicators as a result of daily playing with the gratitude. This in turn impacted educator's way of being, becoming and belonging both at work and at home. As educators listened for and responded to the language and practice of gratitude in their wider lives it was identified that relationships flourished due to the nature and influence of gratitude; there was a new half glass full attitude. The implication of this change for children was expressed in how environments were set up to encourage flourishing relationships between children as they played. It was also noted that these co-play relationships also flourished, influencing the wellbeing, happiness and connectedness of each community. Educators documented evidence that gratitude actions became more common between children and educators, this made educators feel "good and more productive" as they were able to "recognise their own capacity to make a difference and feeling happy to truly embrace the now moments". One group of educators documented that they now look for opportunities to create goodwill projects children within their play.

Educators also measured personal change against the indicators of: anxiousness, loneliness, feeling down or depressed, envy and focusing on material things. These indicators were rated on a scale of: very, somewhat, neutral, virtually never or never. The figures below show the difference between educators who said they felt these *very* or *somewhat* in the initial compared to the final survey data.

- ✓ Anxious: -49.24%
- ✓ Loneliness: -35.76%
- ✓ Feeling down or Depressed: -48.44%
- ✓ Envy: -25.83%
- ✓ Focus on Material Things: -34.50%

Again, as a cohort of educators, there was a decrease in all these indicators at work in their lives in response to playing with gratitude daily. The reduction of these

negative emotions had a considerable impact on relationships across all early learning communities, offering new ways of connecting and being connected. For example, educators remarked that during difficult times the expression of gratitude actually supported them as a group, being able to find things to be grateful for in times of adversity helped keep them focused. They noted that after an internal presenting problem had been resolved, teams felt a great sense freedom to truly flourish in all aspects of their work place. The implication is that when educators are valued they can more effectively provide the same gift to children through their interactions and co-play experiences.

Within our comparison of the survey's data, four indicators displayed a minor negative result between 2.74% and 4.08%:

- General Wellbeing
- Empathy
- Desire to support other's emotionally
- Desire to support others tangibly

During the consultation with team members we discussed possibilities for the reasoning behind the shift in these indicators. It was uncovered that over the course of the project a stronger personal understanding and connection with the meanings of each indicator influenced how educators responded to the surveys. This allowed a more critical perspective of the impact that it had in their lives.

The Implications Of Educator's Gratitude On Co-Play

As educators remained constant in their mindfulness around gratitude, whole teams were drawn together with a common focus, building strong relationships for all stakeholders. Consequently, play environments became more purposeful as educators modelled being grateful, thoughtful and deliberate communicators and children responded to this co-play by adjusting their play and interactions. The evidence showed how playing with gratitude helped whole communities to reconnect. The Gratitude Plate is one example of gratitude in action across communities; influencing change in how people feel about themselves and how they connect to others in their communities. This was a change from the beginning of our journey where there were team relationships that were quite inconsistent, highly problematic, weak and selfishly motivated. For example, within one larger organisation, the project created a lot of interest within their other internal branches, spurring them on to practicing gratitude within their own teams and conferences. Gratitude became an important discussion point within the organisation's wider community too, with new families making contact and mentioning how they had heard about the project and its

influence on families and children.

Evidence was collected during the project about how the work of gratitude influenced educator's sense of value as part of their play setting. The evidence revealed that the changes influenced how teams connected and communicated collectively, consequently influencing their efficiency, mood, productivity and how the children were valued during co-play experiences and routines. For example, one classroom documented an increase in reciprocal gratitude between educators and children as children began assisting with daily cleaning routines. It was noted that influenced play as it strengthened trust, secured relationships and enriched connections.

Throughout the project educators began to focus on making the children's journey visible, across all of the settings, there was an increase in visual displays/project walls of various gratitude projects. This allowed teams to share the gratitude journey with families, communities, and offer children an opportunity to reflect on their own learning.

Educators were also asked an open-ended survey question so that they could provide examples of the work of gratitude in the work place. The evidence collected during the project in relation to the influence of gratitude on co-play highlighted a number of significant changes:

- Educators became happier in response to the work of gratitude, they displayed a more connected attitude and more confidence in their purpose and outworking of play environments.
- It was noted that this change then impacted how educators connected with children which in turn shifted how educators implemented their co-play strategies and how the play environment was used
- Some educators noted a change in how children cared for their play environment, how the children shared during play
- One educator documented that there was a decrease in the amount of guidance and support required in order to achieve co-operative play through sharing.
- There was also a shift in the imagination and thinking explored during play, educators looked for opportunities during co-play to influence gratitude moments.

These changes were noted to be directly linked to the personal work of gratitude each educators undertook. This shift became known as using a gratitude lens and helped educators to clarify thinking and ideation around ongoing co-play throughout the project.

How Playing With Gratitude Influenced Children

Throughout the practitioner inquiry project it was established that children's initiated play and engagement in their community changed in specific ways. Data from the online survey demonstrated that children were settling with greater ease, increasing their creative thinking as an expression of their play and they had an increased general wellbeing. Evidence also highlighted children flourished in pride with strengthened connections to friends validating assistance and partnerships due to playing with gratitude daily.

Through play we observed children determining an increase in patience and random acts of kindness. This was exhibited through models such as "bucket filling". Children used language and completing tasks to assist others and fill their own bucket and that of their friends and family. An increased awareness of empathy was apparent with children being responsive to the emotional needs of their peers, during play through collected pedagogical documentation samples.

Data also recorded that there was positive growth in how playing with gratitude influenced children. Educators recorded their ratings through the online survey based on their observations of children at play revealing growth in taking social initiatives, coping and flexibility. Highlighting that being exposed to and practicing gratitude has an overall positive impact on children's wellbeing.

To support the data from the online surveys, educators recorded in pedagogical documentation and learning stories, the work of gratitude and how it influenced children's behaviour in their play environments. The most significant points of change were as follows:

- Increased number of spontaneous, child-led connections with peers during play. For example, there was an increased, explicit reciprocity during sharing of ideas, objects and an increase in inclusive behaviours across all ages.
- Increased number of spontaneous reciprocated thankfulness among peers influencing how children related to peers, teachers and families.
- Friendships strengthened and widened with peers and teachers due to the

How Playing with Gratitude Influenced Children

Educators used the South Australian Wellbeing Scale (2008) to reflect and measure observable change in children. All, bar one, indicator showed positive growth against the good to strong scale rating over the course of the project. Overall increases are:

- **General wellbeing: +3.99%**
- **Confidence: +18.29%**
- **Self esteem: +19.40%**
- Vitality: +11.94%
- Sense of humour: +15.87%
- Enjoyment: +4.80%
- Ability to rest & relax: +13.48%
- **Taking social initiatives: +25.80%**
- Assertiveness: +17.81%
- **Coping: +24.83%**
- **Flexibility: +19.83%**
- Positive attitude towards warmth and closeness: +10.76%
- Openness and receptivity/pleasure in exploring: +5.57%

connectedness gratitude fostered. This was evident in how children cared for each other during play and how they responded to children in need.

- A higher level of awareness of the value of people and things. For example. Children spoke about how grateful they are for their mums, dads, cuddles, kisses, animals, toys and love. Children we observed verbally and physically responding to these elements throughout their day and demonstrating why and how these matter to them.

An example of gratitude influencing children was recorded at one early learning setting where staff participate in a daily gratitude huddle session. At these meetings educators have the opportunity to share 3 things that they are grateful for, setting the tone for the day. Children are welcome to join in as they wish. One child, Fletcher aged 3 years, is a constant at these meetings and he thoughtfully responds when asked, “what are you grateful for today Fletcher?” Fletcher’s response of gratitude includes his mummy, daddy and brother.

One final note on the data reflecting on children’s play, one indicator did not record a positive growth score. *Pleasure in sensory experiences* actually received a negative rating comparison from educators. Upon reflection the lack of growth in this indicator could be due to how the question was proposed in the survey, leaving it ambiguous in its interpretation. Further discussions and investigation with educators will need to occur to develop a deeper and more thorough understanding of this result.

How Playing With Gratitude Influenced Families

The participating families recorded via the online surveys awareness that over time thankfulness in their family units had decreased. The influence of gratitude project however saw a renewed appreciation and value of the concept as children brought gratitude to the forefront once again. Parents recorded surprise at their child’s capacity to reflect upon gratitude and then to influence and inspire them to reconnect with a spirit of gratefulness. It was also noted by parents that expressing gratitude had become a lost art in adult relationships and that the project had reminded families that this was important to restore within the family life.

Various gratitude habits were formed within the home to establish appreciation and thankfulness and many families noted how proud they were of their children facilitating and leading this change. For example, one father was asked by his daughter, “what are you grateful for today Daddy?” This really made him stop and think, what am I grateful for today? He then replied I am grateful for you, and your sister and your mummy. The child then gave her father further suggestions of what he could be grateful for. This was a beautiful indication of how gratefulness was

influencing her and how she was sharing this growth with her family.

Families recorded a deepening of warm relationships within their family unit and the pride in their children for bringing families back together again. Noticing the changes in their children's behaviour brought them a sense of achievement and success that they were doing a good job and that their children were exhibiting value in toys, home life and family members. Parents final note of surprise was of their children creating stronger more purpose filled connections through play and the connection this had to the work of gratitude in their child's life.

Project Limitations

The limitations of this single, limited project lay in a couple of areas. Firstly, the concepts and associated language of gratitude being fairly abstract. The challenge became how to practically role model and play with gratitude consistently across the 9 early learning communities throughout the project. There was also a wide range of personal perspectives on gratitude. The consequence of this slowed down the activation of the project as some of the participating educators needed time to build their own confidence and understanding of what gratitude meant for them before playing within the learning environment. There were also differences in how participating educators perceived and documented change. While pedagogical documentation techniques were encouraged, staffs varying capacity meant some analysis in documentation was minimal.

It was also discovered mid point of the project that each early learning community needed a consistent project champion until the process had iterated a number of times thus creating its own momentum. Once the project iterated we found a range of new possibilities being achieved as teams were inspired to keep the work of gratitude alive.

Future Developments

We are also excited about the future possibilities of the Playing with Gratitude Project. In our plenary sessions all nine early learning communities expressed a keen interest being a part of a longitudinal study looking for dispositional shifts in those who play with gratitude. It is suggested the study will go over 5- 10 years with data being collected quarterly to measure possible growth.

We are also interested in researching innovative ways to embed gratitude into programming and the planning cycle for early learning communities. In the Australian context documenting learning and growth is still in considerable need of development. As we research a way forward, with gratitude, we hope to offer families exceptional pieces of documentation, recording extraordinary change.

Project Summary

The Play with Gratitude Project has had a significant the impact on those participating in the practitioner inquiry research. Gratitude seems to have a universal ability to influence deep and significant changes in people across their life span. As people in early learning communities daily practice gratitude through co-play, they are inspired and empowered to build strong reciprocal connections. This means that as innovative thinking pathways in play are forged because of the work of gratitude, behaviour changes and wellbeing increases, transforming whole communities. Our findings clearly showed that children's play is significantly enriched, in language, behaviour, thinking and relationships, when educators who are feeling valued, connected to each other and have a good sense of wellbeing role model a curious and healthy way of being and playing.

The research has also demonstrated a significant impact on family life. Parents provided evidence of real and significant changes in family life, relationships within early learning communities and child wellbeing as a consequence of playing with gratitude. These changes were most notably observed in strengthened connections within family. The data from teachers collaborated with these findings, as they too were able to observe a shift towards a stronger sense of wellbeing for children across all their relationships. This shift was observable across all 730 participating children.

As this initial stage of the project concludes one thing has become certain. Gratitude is not concerned with where you are from, what you have or don't have or what age you are – when it is practiced authentically by looking for it, taking it in and giving it back, gratitude always nurtures positive change for each individual's wellbeing to flourish.

Acknowledgement

Finally, on behalf of the 1778 people involved in the Playing with Gratitude Project we want to acknowledge with deep gratitude the funding of this research by the philanthropic work of the Chairperson of Foundation Early Learning, Fiona O'Donnell. Fiona is not only an incredible businesswoman but also an outstanding leader of the early childhood community. Therefore Fiona, we would like to thank YOU for believing in us and giving gratitude an opportunity to flourish in so many people's lives.

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