



What can we do to help?

Raising successful and happy children

The motto of East Torrens Primary School – *We believe it takes all of us to raise successful and happy children* – is a proud clarion call and reflection of a culture deeply rooted in acceptance and connection. The school passionately believes that everyone – teachers, parents, carers and the wider community – has a part to play in each child's learning and that positive relationships are essential for every child's health and well-being.

Principal Sandra Mauger said many children are disadvantaged and face challenges to reach their full potential. "The most fundamental asset for all children is life skills. Focusing on social and emotional learning and developing a curriculum that supports this is the essential way we deliver teaching and learning at East Torrens," Sandra said.

The school provides education for three distinct groups of children: a community school that operates as the local primary school in the area; two special education classes for children with profound disabilities (20 students); and a program for children who are newly arrived in Australia. The New Arrivals Program hosts 80 children, all non-English speaking, and offers them intensive English classes for up to two years.

Many of the 300 students enrolled at East Torrens are from families who are living with disadvantage and in difficult circumstances. Approximately 60 percent of families are dependent on government funding, with the majority of these families not in employment.

Creating an engaging learning environment

The school applied to become a KidsMatter school to help address growing concerns about mental health issues that were presenting in children and parents/carers. "We have a number of challenging issues we wanted to address, including complex family circumstances, poverty, disability and the anxiety and trauma associated with refugee resettlement," Assistant Principal Silvia McMullen explained.

The KidsMatter initiative has helped the school take a whole-of-school perspective addressing attendance, behaviour, engagement, learning and achievement through the lens of mental health and wellbeing. As a result, the school is implementing and exploring a number of programs and activities. Introducing KidsMatter helped the school to identify the issues to be addressed and work out what to look for. "Now we have a range of strategies to put in place which are powerful responses and solutions to the issues that KidsMatter has helped identify," Sandra said.

School staff use a number of key strategies to help create a learning environment where children are engaged and motivated to be successful. "One of our key strategies is that each child will have the same teacher for a minimum of two years, usually three. We want children to see that there is a regular and stable routine at school. It is important children know that they will see the same faces at school and that the welcome for them and the connection is unconditional at school," Sandra said.

Forging relationships beyond the school gate

Every child in the school has an Individual Learning Plan that is negotiated and developed with the child, the teacher and a parent or carer on a six-monthly basis. Another strategy, one that clearly reflects the school's motto, is forging relationships with agencies beyond the school gate.

The school has developed a rich and complementary relationship with the local Rotary club, Campbelltown Rotary. Invited as a guest speaker by the club last year, Sandra's passionate presentation about the school had an immediate impact on the club members. Campbelltown Rotary Club's Community Services Director, Scott Nicholls, said many Rotarians were very surprised to learn about the levels of disadvantage in their own backyard. "Sandra's enthusiasm was so infectious. It was energising to be around her but also very confronting as we learnt that there were so many children and families locally that had enormous needs. We were also surprised by the number of newly-arrived families and the special challenges that they faced. The members of the club had really strong reactions to Sandra. They were asking '*what can we do to help?*' Our relationship with the school has been pushed by a strong interest by our members to do what they can to help," Scott said.

Talks with the school resulted in Campbelltown Rotary Club donating \$3700 to the school to enable it to continue a Community Mentoring Program that had been running with state government funding. "The aim of the mentoring program is to help a child from primary school make a successful transition to high school. We have found that some students struggle to make a successful transition to high school after being in such a supportive primary school environment. We are hoping the mentoring program will help to scaffold these students." Sandra said.

In this program local adult community mentors are teamed with 12- and 13-year-olds and engage in activities of interest to the student. The activities are a means of engaging the young person in conversations about how they can learn new skills and coping strategies to enable them to have a successful future. Sandra said the school has a growing and significant number of single parents/carers (especially grandmothers) as primary caregivers and this has resulted in some boys not having successful male role models. The mentoring program will hopefully assist in providing these positive male connections.

Staff and students benefit from KidsMatter

While it is still early days, the school has seen some immediate changes since implementing KidsMatter. "There has been an increase in school attendance and the number of incidences involving inappropriate behaviours has dropped dramatically. We are now looking at what is happening in the playground where social mores are different and children require higher levels of social skills to operate effectively. We have addressed this through a range of playground programs with more staff outside working with groups of children and teaching them how to play," Sandra said.

Silvia can also see positive changes taking place in staff, who now feel more supported and have a better understanding of mental health and well-being issues. This year the school will look at ways to inform parents and families about local services and available support.

At this stage of KidsMatter the Campbelltown Rotary Club is looking to expand its relationship with the school – a relationship which has proved to be deeply rewarding for its members. "We greatly value the opportunity to be involved with the school community. It is wonderful to be able to keep an important program such as the mentoring program going. Some of our members have expressed interest in volunteering at the school – for example, being involved in a reading program. Hopefully the next step will be that some of our members will actually become mentors themselves," Scott said.

Continuing to nurture relationships of this calibre will go a long way to ensuring a healthier future for East Torrens Primary School, its amazing children, and the community beyond the school gate.



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