

Connecting *Little J & Big Cuz* with a kindergarten education program

Morphett Vale East Kindergarten

MORPHETT VALE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the children and educators at Morphett Vale East Kindergarten.
Special thanks to Kerry Bosisto, Early Childhood Educator, and Sarah Weightman, Director.

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Printed in Australia by Allanby Press

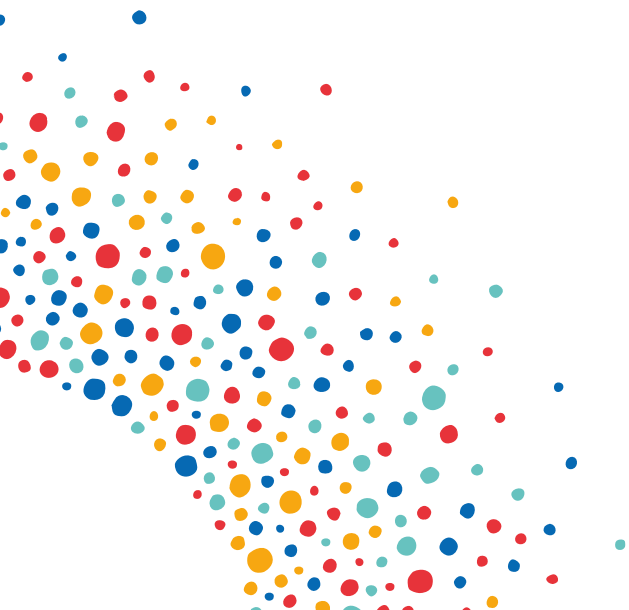
ISBN 978-1-74286-520-1



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Moyle, K. (2019). *Connecting Little J and Big Cuz with a Kindergarten education program*. Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.





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Context

Morphett Vale East Kindergarten is a government-funded kindergarten in Morphett Vale in the Onkaparinga Council area between South and Panalatinga Roads, approximately 25 kilometres from the city of Adelaide in South Australia. It is part of the South Australian Department of Education.

As at Term 4 2017, enrolment hovered between 40 and 45 children aged between three and five years, with over 20 per cent of the children receiving preschool government support. In 2016, over half of the nearly 9500 households in Morphett Vale had an income of less than \$1500 per week. About one third of these households were either single parent families or couples with families.¹

In 2017, Morphett Vale East Kindergarten was evaluated as exceeding all Early Childhood National Quality Standards.

¹ See City of Onkaparinga: <https://profile.id.com.au/onkaparinga/household-income?WebID=270>

“The learning priorities of the Kindergarten focus on developing within the children a ‘growth mindset’.”

EDUCATING PRESCHOOLERS

The learning priorities of the Kindergarten focus on developing within the children:

- a ‘growth mindset’ (i.e. personal recognition that they are intelligent and growth is possible)
- literacy and numeracy skills
- curiosity, creativity, resilience and persistence with regard to their learning
- curiosity about gardening and cooking.²

There is also an education priority to build the children’s understandings of ‘child protection’, at an age-appropriate level.

The Kindergarten is staffed by a Director, a qualified Early Childhood Teacher and a Teacher’s Assistant.

DAILY PROGRAM

The daily program for the Kindergarten includes a small amount of screen time, which is used as a transition activity between a meal break and the scheduled program of learning. *Little J & Big Cuz* was incorporated into the education program as the screen time activity, which was then followed with discussions about each story the children had seen. The choice of episodes was linked to the learning priorities of the Kindergarten. As the internet connectivity into the Kindergarten is poor, the educators streamed the episodes to their mobile phones.

Each day about 20 children watched and discussed the episode they had seen. Three of these children came from families who at enrolment identified as being Indigenous. The children however, did not openly acknowledge their descent. As such, the *Little J & Big Cuz* series provided an unobtrusive way of giving prominence to Indigenous children as the main characters in the stories, without having to uncomfortably draw attention to this fact.

The following episodes were watched, more than once:

- ‘Lucky undies’
- ‘New tricks’
- ‘Right under your nose’
- ‘Goanna ate my homework’
- ‘Big plans’
- ‘Hopalong’ (in Arrernte language)
- ‘Where’s Aaron?’

² The Morphett Vale East Kindergarten 2018 Quality Improvement Plan is available from http://www.mvek.sa.edu.au/docs/mvek_quality_improvement_plan_2018.pdf

EDUCATION RESOURCES

The educators commented that the teaching resources provided them with lots of leads for ways to incorporate activities to support the viewing of each episode. Prior to viewing each of the episodes, the educators checked the teaching resources provided on the *Little J & Big Cuz* website. They also colour-copied the feature image from the teaching resources website to accompany the viewing of each episode by the children.

VIEWING RESPONSES

Viewing each episode led to different conversations about the characters. The main messages portrayed in the episodes were consistent with the learning priorities of Morphett Vale East Kindergarten (outlined previously). The children started to ask to watch *Little J & Big Cuz* in preference to any other media. Once the children became familiar with the characters, they were keen to see what happened to them next. There were audible responses from the children, such as laughter, gasping and relief, at key points in the narratives of the different episodes.

Some of the children indicated they had convinced their parents to download the series onto their personal tablet device or mobile phone. The children did not seem to mind how many times they watched the same episode; they remained engaged every time an episode and the activity based on it were incorporated into the education program. The educators were surprised how well the children followed the stories.

The educators thought that the pace and length of the stories were appropriate for preschoolers, and that repeated viewings allowed for deeper and deeper discussions with the children. They liked the 'child protection' aspects of each episode: Nanna trusting Little J and Big Cuz to know their boundaries, and Big Cuz keeping an eye out for Little J. The *Little J & Big Cuz* series fits well with the 'growth mindset' part of the Kindergarten's education program, which encourages the children to 'have a go'.

EPIISODE REVIEW

LUCKY UNDIES

'Lucky undies' was a popular episode with the children. They liked the humour, and the story resonated with some of their own experiences. After watching this first episode, the educators initiated a conversation about 'lucky things'. They posed the question: "Is luck something that just happens, or is it something that happens because you work at something?" For some children, the story resonated with their own experiences: they spontaneously discussed their own lucky drink bottles. Other children recognised that the headband that was made from the ruined undies was a diversionary tactic, while Little J developed his self-belief.

"There were audible responses from the children such as laughter, gasping and relief at key points in the narratives of the different episodes."

The educators built the conversations around some of the children's previous experiences, including visits to a museum. They thought that the teaching resources combined with this episode allowed them to continue to explore other cultural content (e.g. good luck symbols from around the world). They also thought the links to History/Geography: Past and Present were relevant to the children as they had already read the recommended book: *You and Me Murrawee*.

NEW TRICKS

The children related well to the physical activities presented in this episode and referred back to it for ideas during playtime. The episode resonated well with the children because they regularly achieved new feats, such as swinging, balancing and skipping. They also liked the backyard and 'couch conversations', and were motivated to play 'hide and seek'.

Consistent with the messages in the episode, the educators encouraged the children to plan and set up equipment within the Kindergarten. The educators liked the message in this episode, that, it is necessary to practice motor skills in order to improve and take risks.

The educators found the materials on the website a good reference point for cultural activities. They used the teaching resources *BLAKflip* and *ABC*



'New Tricks'.



'Right Under Your Nose'.

Kids *Hoopla Doopla* because they found these provided good stimuli for focusing on the development of motor skills such as stilt-walking, tight-rope walking and spring board activities.

RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE

The children enjoyed this episode and could easily relate to the frequent links between home and school culture and to the concept of 'show and tell', which is a part of their regular program for sharing news. Some children queried where Little J's parents were, but also provided their own explanations such as "they are on holidays", or "they are dead". Most of the children are in contact with their grandparents, and so were comfortable with the role of 'Nanna'. The nature of the children's family arrangements formed part of the discussion following the episode.

After the episode, the educators set up a campsite in the playground and several of the children recounted the cooking part of this episode. Some of the children said they recognised the clam shell.

The teaching resources were useful to the educators, and the list of questions provided helped them to guide the discussion with the children – to help the children to recount the main parts of the story. The tools and technologies mentioned were familiar to the children because several of them go camping with their families. The blue fish reminded the children and educators of the Bony Bream in a local Njaranderri story.

"The educators often discuss with the children the power of language and how language can be used to include and exclude people. It is an important part of their education program."

“The children liked the way the family talked, and how that differed to the talk at school.”

GOANNA ATE MY HOMEWORK

The children remembered much from this episode, noticing a lot of detail, such as the use of a stick to remove the emu eggs so as to not disturb the nest or make the adult bird abandon the nest and young chicks. One child subsequently noticed golden gum sap on the bark of a tree and wondered out aloud whether that was due to honey ants.

Follow-up activities included the children making tracks in the sandpit and painting using their fingertips. The part in this episode which involved measuring a footprint to check if it was the same as your shoe size was re-enacted. The educators used their own local Indigenous resources, posters and books in the follow up activities.

BIG PLANS

The children picked up easily on the concept of having a ‘best friend’, which forms one of the central narratives of this episode. The educators often discuss with the children the power of language and how language can be used to include and exclude people. It is an important part of their education program.

Following the episode, the discussion focused on how to ‘make up games’. The children asked if they could make their own obstacle course, and so this activity became the afternoon program.

The web links to circus activities were considered useful as they led to new follow-up activities with the children.

HOPALONG

This episode was played in the Arrernte language and the educator read out the English subtitles. The children however, asked the educator to be quiet as they found this episode self-explanatory even in a language other than English. The joey appealed to many of the children, and after the program, this interest led the educators to incorporate further activities about Australia’s indigenous animals. The children are now keen to look at the Kindergarten’s reference books to find wallabies, kangaroos, lizards, goannas, eagles and so on.

The educators used the teaching resources about habitats and the concept of ‘sustainability’ to build the idea of being a member of a family to thrive. The educators also found that the teaching resources enabled them to consider deeper learning opportunities and to tie in ‘big picture thinking’ with the cultural aspects of the episode.



Uncle Mick 'saving' Aaron the class mascot – from 'Where's Aaron?'.

WHERE'S AARON?

The children enjoyed this episode because it connected well with activities in which they had already participated. At the Kindergarten they have a 'Kinder Bear' that sometimes accompanies one of the children home. Losing the doll Aaron and the potential for misadventure within this episode then, resonated well with the children. When Aaron turned up and the truth emerged, the children were relieved there was no fuss made by Nanna or Ms Chen.

The educators were able to connect this episode to other books they had read to the children, such as *Lost Bear*, which has a similar storyline, with the bear ending up at a rubbish dump. The educators commented that they welcomed the reminders of some Aboriginal ways, and big-picture thinking. They particularly mentioned learning by observing, respecting your elders, nature-based learning, and oral storytelling: all of which fit well with the Morphett Vale East Kindergarten early childhood education philosophy.

The educators found the teaching resources useful for the suggestions to explore the local 'high country', and to examine trees, canopies, mica and clay.

"Incorporating Little J & Big Cuz into the education program provided a vehicle for professional conversations among the staff."



'Transformation'.

MAIN CHARACTERS

The children very much liked the character of Old Dog. They found him funny and felt an affinity with him. Many of the children have their own dogs and see them as an equal part of their families. They also liked the other animals in the episodes, which generated interest in Australia's indigenous flora and fauna. But Old Dog was their favourite. The children liked the way the family talked and how that differed to the talk at school (i.e. the use of both Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English). There was a resonance among some of the children of the lifestyle portrayed.

Of the main adult characters, the children liked Nanna, and many of the children were intrigued by the ranger, Uncle Mick.

PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

Incorporating *Little J & Big Cuz* into the education program provided a vehicle for professional conversations among the staff. They discussed the messages in each episode and the way the various characters interacted, behaved and were portrayed. These conversations provided the staff with the opportunity to discuss and clarify their own values and beliefs.





www.littlejandbigcuz.com.au