

# LEARNING BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEARS: BENEFITS FOR LIFE



**Joseph Sparling**

*The University of Melbourne, Victoria*

*Joseph Sparling, PhD, is a professor at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne (Australia) and Senior Scientist Emeritus at the*

*Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina (USA). Professor Sparling's early career experience includes work as a public school teacher and principal. His 50-year career has been focused on bringing educational opportunities to vulnerable children from birth to age 5. With Professor Craig Ramey, he developed an early educational program known as the Abecedarian Approach. This program has been evaluated in a series of randomised scientific studies conducted by colleagues in 10 universities including Harvard, Yale, and Stanford in the USA, and published in more than 200 peer-reviewed journal articles. The research has shown that educational support exemplified in the Abecedarian Approach in the first 5 years of life results in long-lasting improvement in the school and life achievement of at risk and vulnerable children. Sparling is now working with Australian colleagues to implement the Abecedarian Approach in Australia. Recently, the University of Melbourne and the NT Department of Education were awarded an Australian Research Council Linkage grant to study the Abecedarian Approach in remote Aboriginal towns in the Northern Territory, while other funded studies are being conducted in Canada and China. Sparling's publication LearningGames® (a component of the Abecedarian Approach) was recently published in Australia for a general audience by ASG Resources and by the NT Department of Education in a specially adapted Aboriginal version.*

**Susan Krieg**

*Flinders University, South Australia*

*Susan Krieg is Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of the Early Childhood programs at Flinders University. Prior to her 2006 Flinders appointment,*



*Susan worked at Edith Cowan University (2000–2006), leading the development of a Bachelor of Education specifically designed to develop continuity between the early and primary years. Susan's experience includes teaching and leadership at local, state and national levels in her work as a District Coordinator, School Principal, Curriculum Manager and President of the Junior Primary Principals' Association of South Australia. Her work as School Principal in a large suburban integrated early childhood program has been researched and documented in research reports, including 100 Children go to school: Connections and disconnections in literacy development in the year prior to school and the first year of school (S. Hill, B. Comber, B. Loudon, J. Reid, & J. Rivalland, published by Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998). Her educational leadership, research and teaching within the university context focus on social justice and repositioning children in the learning process as a way of achieving more equitable outcomes in early childhood education.*



## Marion Meiers

*Australian Council for Educational Research*

*Marion Meiers has had a career-long focus on the teaching and learning of literacy skills at all levels of education. She has contributed actively to the teaching of English and literacy as a*

*secondary English teacher, P–12 curriculum consultant at regional and state levels, leader of national English professional association research projects, university lecturer, presenter at national and international conferences, and an editor of professional journals. Her extensive publications record includes journal articles, reports and textbooks. In recognition of her work, she was awarded life membership of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association in 2011.*

*As a Senior Research Fellow at ACER, Marion's research work has included projects investigating literacy education in the early years of schooling, longitudinal studies, curriculum development, assessment, program evaluation and teachers' professional learning. In recent years, she has undertaken some international work, for example with the ACER India office in Delhi this year.*

## Abstract

How important is it for parents and childcare workers to engage in play, talking and reading with children before they reach school age?

Professor Joseph Sparling, who has spent his whole career improving educational opportunities for vulnerable children from birth to age 5, will lead this session and discussion, looking at the evidence from local and international research. The Abecedarian Approach commenced in the United States with four basic pillars: language priority, learning games, conversational reading and enriched caregiving. The long-term benefits he observed over decades have led Professor Sparling to use this approach in Australia, supporting parents and care-givers to make language the number-one priority, surrounding every event in a child's day with words, in a playful way.

Associate Professor Susan Krieg will share findings from a South Australian research project in which the researchers tracked children attending combined preschool/childcare centres as they made their transition to school. Children experiencing social disadvantage benefited most from quality early childhood programs and made a successful start at school.

Marion Meiers will report on the ACER Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study: Transitions from Preschool to School. Using data collected during one-to-one teacher-student interviews focused on literacy activities – including responding to the narrative and ideas in a picture storybook – the researchers have developed scales showing growth in literacy learning over time.