



# reflections

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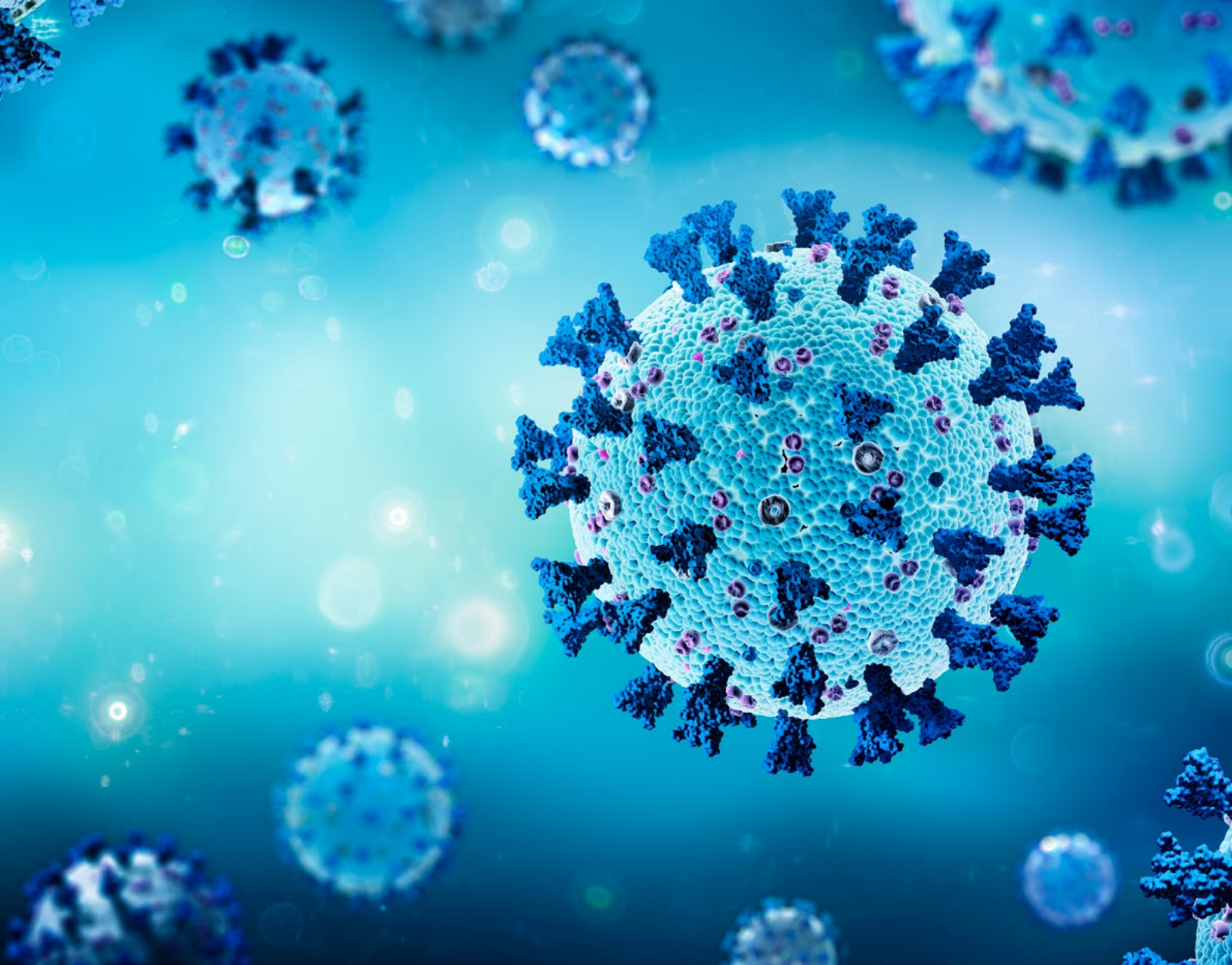
Welcome to the second edition of Reflections for 2022. Reflections is Gowrie Australia's publication for showcasing exemplary work across six Lady Gowrie organisations and a celebration of our connections with children, families, colleagues and research associates.

In this edition, we share how the challenges presented by the COVID 19 pandemic have been addressed through innovative responses that prioritise children's rights and interests. Our first article, by Lynne Rutherford and Krystal Kimble, tells of Gowrie South Australia's consultation with children as key stakeholders, leading to solutions that reduced the impact of the pandemic across their services. In our second article, Asher Roberts shares how changes to Gowrie Western Australia's intergenerational program kept established relationships alive when COVID lockdowns threatened to end them.

## In this edition:

*The Importance of Advocating for Children's Rights During a Pandemic*

*The Young and the Young at Heart, Connecting Generations*



## THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVOCATING FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS DURING A PANDEMIC

**Lynne Rutherford and Krystal Kimble, Gowrie South Australia**

As COVID-19 started to sweep the world, we all had to learn to live a little differently due to the virus' highly infectious nature health impacts. Communities endured lockdowns, uncertainties and practice changes in ways most have not experienced before. Our early childhood education and care (ECEC) services were not immune to these changes and impacts. Unfortunately, targeted communications to the ECEC sector were few and far between and many services felt they had to make decisions in the absence of context specific information and support.

With fundamental philosophies that value the rights of children, the decisions made by Gowrie Child Centres across Australia were viewed through this lens. Putting a child's perspective at the forefront of our minds, we began to think about what children were experiencing when seeing a world where mask wearing was introduced, to be around the fears and anxieties from families and communities, with constant news items on the pandemic,

and lots of discussions around them about people becoming unwell. Looking at the world through children's eyes meant we needed to think about creating spaces in our Child Centres where life continued as normally as possible, while making some adjustments to accommodate safety.

Each state had different requirements and policy settings. In SA, thinking began around our immediate environment and what procedures and play spaces we had that supported our decision making around adjustments for safety. Our large indoor and outdoor spaces, and the practice of accessing the indoor and outdoor environments throughout the day allowed for access to fresh air. Our purpose-built environments supported us to continue many practices as usual. At Gowrie SA, families continued to collect and drop off children in rooms rather than at the entrance or in the car park. We did this as we felt it was important that children could access their room and primary caregivers and arrive and leave each



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day as part of their usual routines. This also supported ongoing communication with families and enabled relationships to be maintained in the most effective way possible.

As the pandemic shifted and changed, so did our planning and thinking. State requirements were introduced requiring family members to wear masks when entering and exiting education settings. Educators working directly with children did not have to wear masks. Discussions about mask wearing and the impact on children became a significant topic and questions were raised and wonderings considered:

- *What would it feel like to build relationship and trust with an educator if children can only see the educator's eyes?*
- *How do children understand and read facial expressions from adults without being able to see the verbal and non-verbal cues?*
- *Will children's speech and language learning be affected?*

Action was taken and we held a consultation with some of the children aged 3-5 years in our service. We asked what their thoughts were about their parents having to wear masks, and here is what they said:

*"A little bit scared."*

*"I have my own mask." "Me too."*

*"Sad because mum and dad don't like it."*

*"Mum does not love the mask. Daddy likes the mask."*

*"I have two masks at my home that I wear."*

*"Mum made me one and one of my friend bought one. I don't wear it."*

*"My mum and dad definitely like maskez."*

*"Parents should not have to wear masks here."*

*"No because there is not much coronavirus in here. In Queensland they are sharing their germs."*

*"And in New South Wales too."*

*"No because there is not much coronavirus here."*



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From this consultation, an advocacy letter was written and sent to the state health department asking them to think about the rights of children in their decisions too. Our decision around mask wearing for educators was to offer them a choice as to whether they would wear masks when working with children. We felt that children have a right to be in an environment where they can engage with educators and see their whole face with a full range of expressions. Educators also had a right to consider how safe they felt and offering a choice empowered their own decision making.

Advice and practices continued to change and children's wellbeing remained at the forefront of our actions. All Gowrie Child Centres worked together to share and support each other in creating balanced pandemic policies, incorporating current state rules, while also thinking about the safety and wellbeing of children, educators and families. Continuity as well as safety have always been addressed in any planning.

We were very aware that once the state borders opened, it was likely that COVID-19 cases would rise quite quickly. This meant we had to plan for this in our children's program. We created an action plan that could be implemented as soon as case numbers climbed. The escalation was swift and we minimised the number of adults in our indoor spaces by utilising several rooms outdoor spaces for child drop off and collection. Adults were asked to wear masks in all communal spaces and family members wore masks for drop off and collection. Educators continued to make a choice about mask wearing in the rooms with children. Family members were asked to limit their time to less than 15 minutes where possible, depending on the needs for their child/ren. Online meetings with colleagues were used to continue building connection and learning together. Staying connected with children who could not attend the service due to isolating or family concerns was also important. Families and children were invited to engage in online sessions to continue relationships and connections to the service, and family meetings continued either in an outdoor space or online or by phone.

Communication with families about changes, decision making and health department requirements occurred regularly, often weekly, so families were well informed and

everyone worked together to support the organisation to keep children, families and staff as safe as possible. With uncertain times we wanted families to feel secure about bringing their child to our service knowing the measures we were taking to minimise risks. A consultation with families and staff about safety measures and vaccinations was also undertaken so we could ensure our future planning and decisions had all perspectives considered.

The impact of COVID-19 and the forever changing requirements is something that we are living and breathing every day. With the winter season coming we now need to turn our thinking to the new challenges, changes and considerations which need to be made. We are planning to continue to provide an environment that is predictable and safe for children, families and educators, while continuing to consider the rights of children's in all our decisions and actions.

### Lynne Rutherford

Lynne Rutherford has worked in the early childhood sector since January 1990, and at Gowrie SA since May 2006. Lynne's leadership roles have included Children's Program Leader, Professional Learning Program Leader and Inclusion Agency Leader. Lynne is now the CEO at Gowrie SA. She has a Master of Education (Leadership), a Bachelor Degree in Early Childhood Education, and is currently a PhD candidate at Western Sydney University. Lynne advocates for the recognition of early childhood as a right for children and enjoys learning about leadership and equity.

### Krystal Kimble

Krystal Kimble has worked at Gowrie SA since December 2004, in various roles across the organisation including Kindergarten Teacher, Project Officer for a Universal Access project and Acting Children's Program Director. She is currently the Director of our Children's programs at Underdale. She has a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and an Advanced Diploma Community Sector Management. Krystal is passionate about the Early Childhood sector, advocating for children's rights, social justice and providing high quality care and learning environments.







## THE YOUNG AND THE YOUNG AT HEART, CONNECTING GENERATIONS

**Asher Roberts, Gowrie Western Australia**

In 2016 Gowrie Community Services (WA) commenced the Young at Heart Program, which was designed to offer older community members and grandparents an opportunity to socialise and connect with young children through an inclusive, intergenerational playgroup program. The Community Services Manager, Michigan Taylor, liaised with and developed ongoing relationships with a variety of aged care facilities and local community groups to ensure that the Young at Heart program was able to benefit a diverse group of community members who had come from all walks of life. In 2020, with the global pandemic striking and the need to minimise the risk of exposing vulnerable community members to COVID-19, the face-to-face program was postponed and a new pen pal program, Kind Hearted, was developed to safely connect older people with young children despite the imposed social restrictions. Although the delivery style of the program changed, the outcome of the new

pen pal program remained consistent with the face-to-face program.

The Young at Heart program was developed to reduce the social isolation and loneliness often experienced by older people, and to provide opportunities for young children to connect to older generations. To address these issues, Gowrie Community Services began hosting monthly morning teas and organised a range of experiences for young and old to encourage social interactions across generations and the development of fine and gross motor skills. The range of experiences included arts and crafts, cooking experiences, finger knitting, playdough, threading and patchwork, reading books, telling stories and singing songs. These experiences encouraged social interactions between young children, older people, educators and support staff, developing a sense of connectedness to all involved.



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Young at Heart commenced with Meath Care Como, where residents from the aged care facility visited Gowrie's Karawara Family and Community Centre on a monthly basis. As years went by Gowrie Early Learning and Gowrie Community Services connected with four other organisations to continue to provide and expand the Young at Heart program to benefit the wider communities of Karawara, Kewdale and Leeming. With these suburbs being highly diverse, many of the Gowrie Early Learning children do not have easy access to their own grandparents who might be living in other parts of the country or world. Similarly, many older people who participated in the program do not have family living nearby. The program therefore provided opportunities for the different generations to interact on a level that they may not be able to with their own families.

Young at Heart sessions encouraged reminiscence opportunities for older people to reconnect with their childhood memories while making new memories and nurturing bonds between other older people, young children between the ages of 0-5 years old, and those facilitating the intergenerational playgroup. During one Young at Heart session, a female participant living with dementia began sharing memories from her younger years, including that she had worked as a teacher. The support workers shared their amazement and explained that they had never heard her talk or express emotions in their time caring for and supporting her.

Intergenerational programs like Young at Heart have a range of benefits and outcomes for all participants. Through the duration of the program, we were able to see these benefits firsthand, evident in the smiles, stories and interactions between the different generations. Research

collated by Playgroup Australia suggests that participation in intergenerational playgroups increases dignity and self-esteem of people living with dementia, promotes social inclusion and social interactions, and increases engagement and enjoyment in aged care residents. Children who participate in intergenerational playgroups have been seen to have increased development in their social and emotional areas and a higher ability to self-regulate resulting in reduced school and care-based problem behaviours (Playgroup Australia, n.d.)

Furthermore, research conducted by Griffith University suggests that the benefits for children participating in intergenerational programs include improved confidence and communication skills (Radford et al., 2019.) When reflecting on the children's participation and learning from the Young at Heart program, Gowrie Early Learning educators noted an increase in confidence in many of the children who participated in the program. In addition to this, educators also noted significant language development of children in the three-to-five-year old's room, as they shared their views on the program. Comments from children participating in the program included "I love the lady who brought her puppets to show us" and "I like when they all did the singing with us, it was loud." Participation in the Young at Heart program and the skills that were developed throughout ensured that children were meeting a variety of outcomes from the Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009.), including outcomes 1.4 Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect, 3.1 Children become strong in their social and



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emotional wellbeing and 5.1 Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.

Throughout the operation of the Young at Heart program, Gowrie Western Australia received wonderful feedback from families of the children who attended, members of the public and the residents and staff from participating organisations. “We experience so much joy every time we attend Young at Heart. Our customers look forward to their monthly visit with the children and are excited to share in morning activities and songs.”

In 2020, with the announcement of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the significant risk to our older community members, Gowrie and the participating organisations agreed to pause the program. To ensure that Gowrie could continue to provide opportunities for young children and older people to connect, the Kind Hearted pen pal program was developed and will continue to operate until such a time when face-to-face interactions can safely resume. Children from Gowrie Early Learning began by drawing pictures, creating artworks, and writing letters to older people, with the help and guidance of their educators. These meaningful pieces of writing and artwork were then sent by mail to aged care facility residents and organisations working with people living with dementia. In response, the children at Gowrie Early Learning receive letters from the older participants who share a little bit about themselves, their families, tell us of cherished memories and share words of wisdom. These interactive exchanges have provided many wonderful learning opportunities for young children, reminiscence opportunities for older people, and opportunities for different generations to continue to connect, despite social restrictions.

In the future, when it is safe to do so, Young at Heart will resume to continue to build on the outcomes already achieved by the two programs, including building positive relationships between older and younger generations through the provision of social interaction opportunities.

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### Asher Roberts, Coordinator of Gowrie Early Learning Centres

Certificate III & IV in Education Support  
Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care  
Studying Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary)

Asher’s career in education and care began in early 2013. She worked in a variety of roles within the sector before commencing with Gowrie WA in 2018. Over her time with Gowrie, Asher has worked in several roles that have given her the innate ability to understand and experience each level of responsibility.

Asher’s passion for children aligns strongly with the Gowrie purpose and values ensuring that children are nurtured to reach their full potential in their early years with the support of educators, their families and the wider community. To further extend her knowledge of children and their development, Asher is studying a Bachelor of Education, Early Childhood and Primary, where she continues to put her learnings in to practice to guide and lead quality care and education for young children.



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