Pioneering early childhood program expands into Indigenous areas

WHAT: National launch of HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) in Albury, NSW.
WHERE: Koori Kindermanna Preschool, 684 Daniel St, Albury
WHEN: Friday, 31 January at 10.30am; Photo opportunities from 10am
WHO: Federal Minister Sussan Ley, Brotherhood Director Tony Nicholson, HIPPY tutor Geraldine Stewart and children doing HIPPY activities.

An early learning program which has seen extraordinary results helping parents and carers take the role of their child's first teacher is opening in 25 new locations with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Assistant Minister for Education Sussan Ley will today launch the national expansion of HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) at the Koori Kindermanna Preschool in Albury.

The two-year, home-based tutoring program supports parents in disadvantaged communities prepare their children for the transition to school. Families take part during the year before school and then during their child's first year at school.

Research has shown children who took part in HIPPY generally begin the program with numeracy and literacy skills well behind the Australian average. After two years they had caught up, and their cognitive skills equalled that of other children.

HIPPY is managed by the anti-poverty group, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, for the Australian Government through HIPPY Australia, and is already delivered by other not-for-profit partner organisations in 50 locations around the country.

The 25 new indigenous communities being added this year are located along the Murray-Darling River, up the eastern seaboard to Far North Queensland, in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley.

The Brotherhood's Executive Director, Tony Nicholson, congratulated the new local HIPPY partners. "Local communities have really embraced this program, and it's helping children who participate get a head start in those critical early years," Mr Nicholson said.

"Building on a modest start in inner-city Melbourne 15 years ago, we have had excellent outcomes for children and families. It's great to be working with local organisations to make sure that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities benefit from the program."
A woman from Alice Springs, Geraldine Stewart, has worked as a tutor and experienced the program's benefits while teaching her three grandchildren whose first language was not English.

"The one-on-one time was a great deal of help to them," she said.

"It gave them confidence to go to school. I saw how they grew. Now if you spoke to them, you'd never know they didn't grow up speaking English. And, of course, they still fluently speak our Pitjantjatjara language."

HIPPY Australia National Manager, Marian Pettit, said the program had tremendous success in improving literacy and numeracy skills in the children who participated.

"A rigorous independent research evaluation found that HIPPY children began the program with numeracy and literacy skills, on average, 30 per cent below the Australian norm. After two years of HIPPY, their cognitive development was the same as the Australian average," she said.

Up to five jobs are being created in each community where HIPPY will operate, with positions frequently filled by parents and carers who have already been involved in the HIPPY with their children.

Gateway Community Health, the local provider in Albury-Wodonga is recruiting tutors and families in the region, with the first intake starting in March.

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