

# Developmental and Behavioral News

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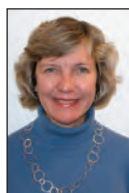
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## Notes from the Chair



Lynn Mowbray Wegner MD, FAAP  
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Greetings and Happy Spring!

This Chair Column is an update on activities the Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics (SODBP) is involved with at a national level. (These are not in any particular order –relative importance is not implied!)

**The AAP Task Force on Mental Health (TFOMH):** This was established in the fall of 2004 and will sunset this spring. The SODBP had representation in this endeavor (along with representatives from a wide range of national related professional groups and patient advocacy organizations) and I believe the interests of both generalists and developmental-behavioral subspecialists were considered. The ‘products’ of the Task Force will be forthcoming later in 2007 and early 2008 and it is anticipated state AAP chapters will be instrumental in implementing many of the recommendations. We will put a notice in our SODBP Newsletter alerting you of the TFOMH “roll out.”

**Developmental Screening Practice Guidelines Revision:** The SODBP was invited by the Council on Children with Disabilities (COCWD) to co-sponsor the revision of the previous guidelines published in 2000. This revision, published in the June 2006 issue of *Pediatrics*, included a special detachable card to help implement the decision

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## Helping parents help their children: *An innovative Australian program*

by Jane Williams, PhD, RN

Encouraging parents to actively participate in the early years of their children's lives is integral to improving early childhood development and long-term cognitive, social, and emotional well-being (Glass, 1999). For the past 25 years, Toddler Kindy GymbaROO ([www.gymbaroo.com.au](http://www.gymbaroo.com.au)) in Australia and New Zealand, and more recently as KindyROO in Asia and Europe, has provided parent education classes for families whose children are aged 6 weeks to 5 years. For a small fee, parents and their children actively engage in developmentally appropriate classes for 45 minutes once a week. GymbaROO was founded in 1982 on the premise that the neurological development of the young child is integrally linked to later learning and development. Based on the ever increasing scientific knowledge about neuro-physiology and neuro-development, the program has evolved into a highly effective and comprehensive series of classes (Sasse, 2006). Teaching staff must have tertiary qualifications, preferably in the areas of teaching, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, or nursing. All teaching staff engage in initial training and ongoing professional development. While children have fun participating in the activities, the involvement and education of parents is a major focus.

### Educating parents

Integral to the GymbaROO/KindyROO program is the education of parents. Information about the neuro-physiological basis for development is woven into every session in a way that does not overload parents, and positively enhances both the parent's and child's enjoyment. This information is disseminated in a number of ways: 'information bites' during classes – brief explanations about why certain activities are neuro-developmentally appropriate; a program of wall charts that clarify the 'information bites'; weekly handouts that explain the link between neuro-development and certain skills, behaviors and emotions. Home activities that link to the developmental stage and skill of the child are also provided to parents. GymbaROO also has produced a series of parent education DVDs/videos, *The Importance of Being...an infant, 1, 2, 3 & 4*, which parents are free to borrow. This series of

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DVDs/videos also is utilized world-wide by tertiary training institutions and professionals involved in early childhood development and parent education. In this way, parents enjoy learning what and why certain activities are developmentally appropriate for their child. Parents who understand the reasons why children can (or cannot) do what they do are more likely to engage in developmentally appropriate activities with their children and seek advice when they are concerned.

### Avoiding the ‘the finger of blame’

Programs such as this are very effective at helping parents understand their children’s developmental needs and at encouraging parents to ask questions when they are concerned about their child’s development. Furthermore, parents are more likely to ask questions if they are well informed and feel they are not personally to blame for their child’s problem (Williams, 2005). Focusing on the neuro-development of the child, rather than on ‘parenting skills’ reduces parents’ feelings of fault and concerns that others will blame them.

### Links to health services

When parents do raise concerns about their child’s development children are referred to professional health services. Importantly, this program usually operates in close conjunction with local maternal, child and family health centres. Many of these health centres also utilize the series of the GymbaROO parent education DVDs/videos.

### Effectiveness of the GymbaROO program

An external review of the Australian GymbaROO program was undertaken by a visiting Churchill Fellow in 2004. Elizabeth Duguid (2004) visited Australia as a representative of Education Scotland. Her brief was to determine the transportability of the early intervention and education programs operating in Australia, to early childhood programs in Scotland. As well as visiting many of the centres, Duguid mailed 750 questionnaires to parents whose children were participating in, or had attended, GymbaROO. While the response rate was only 6.1% (n=42), Duguid found that the questionnaire gave information about a small sample of children “whose parents were motivated enough and well informed enough to want to encourage their children’s development by taking them to Toddler Kindy GymbaROO” (p. 34). Duguid reported that 30% of respondents felt that the most important thing they had gained from the program was knowledge about their children’s development. This finding supported GymbaROO’s internal research undertaken in 2000, where 92% of parents (280 respondents from 1,500 mailed questionnaires - an 18% response rate) reported that the parent information provided by GymbaROO was very helpful. Eighty-four percent of respondents in the 2000 study also reported that the program stimulated their child’s social and motor skills, and promoted confidence and self esteem.

### Further research

Realizing the imperative of undertaking an empirical research study to further validate the program, GymbaROO is in the process of seeking out external sources to undertake such a study. With approximately 200,000 children having attended GymbaROO centers since its inception, and more than 12,000 children currently attending the program, researchers would be provided with an unequalled opportunity to measure the effectiveness of a comprehensive and inclusive early child development and parent-education program.

### Conclusion

When used in conjunction with regular screening and professional early intervention strategies, developmental stimulation programs and parent education programs such as the one offered by GymbaROO will help to provide a positive way of educating parents, improve parent awareness, provide children with developmentally stimulating opportunities, increase early identification of children with developmental problems, and reduce the number of children who are not identified until they fail at school. Inviting parents to actively participate in their child’s early development is an important undertaking.

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*Dr. Williams has spent many years working with young children and their parents. For the past 8 years she has lectured in the School of Nursing, Midwifery & Nutrition, James Cook University, Townsville, QLD, Australia. Her recently completed PhD investigated reasons why children with developmental and behavioural problems are often not detected until the child begins formalized schooling. Dr. Williams currently holds an Adjunct Lecturer position at James Cook University and is the Research and Education Officer for Toddler Kindy GymbaROO.*

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