



Saving Minds and Bodies.

Health and Education Working Together

Tracy Webster

National Learning Program Manager

Ronald McDonald House Charities - Thornleigh, NSW, AUSTRALIA

Introduction

Improvements in medical science mean more and more children are now long term survivors of serious illnesses such as cancer, cystic fibrosis and heart disease. Treatments however, often come at the expense of lengthy convalescence and missed schooling. Additionally, treatments such as chemotherapy and cranial radiation can have damaging effects on the brain.

Research indicates approximately 43.8 % of children who have survived a serious illness and return to school will not cope with the workload.ⁱ

Methodology

The Ronald McDonald Learning Program (RMLP) minimises the negative effects of illness and treatment by providing a multidisciplinary approach. Comprehensive psychometric, academic, speech pathology and occupational therapy assessment is offered to determine the learning strengths and needs of each child. From the results of assessment an individual education plan is developed and implemented by a highly qualified teacher. Each student is provided with weekly one-on-one sessions. In addition, speech pathology and occupational therapy sessions are also provided if required. The RMLP team liaise with the student, their family, the home school and medical team to ensure the best possible outcomes for each individual.

The RMLP is provided free to families and funded by Ronald McDonald House Charities. The RMLP was created in 1998 to address the needs of many families who were reporting their child's missed schooling was having a far greater long term impact than their illness.

The RMLP is available to any student who has had lengthy school absences due to serious illness.

In order to support home school teachers in meeting the needs of children with illness in their classroom or returning to their class the RMLP also provides accredited professional development to schools. The professional development module named EDMed[®] provides information about a range of illnesses such as Cancer, Cystic Fibrosis, Asthma, Burns etc and includes strategies for parents, teachers and the school community to better support the student. An EDMed book is available for parents and teachers. Both the EDMed professional development and EDMed book are provided free to schools and families.

Results

Research reveals academic gains are not the only benefit of the Ronald McDonald Learning Programⁱⁱ. Children feel more confident and have an improved self concept. This greater confidence improves his/her overall capacity for learning.

Our findings reveal the long term impact of missed schooling and some treatments manifests learning difficulties in the area of memory, attention span, problem solving ability and information processing for these children. More than 3000 children have been supported by the program since its inception.



Referrals from medical and education professionals mean the RMLP often has difficulty keeping up with demand.

Conclusion

The Ronald McDonald Learning Program is providing vital educational support to children recovering from acute and chronic illness. Without this support many of these children would fail at school and never reach their full potential. Providing targeted educational support for a child with serious illness is vital for improving his/her long term outcomes. Above all it demonstrates the belief that we are confident of his / her future.

ⁱ 1 Shui, S. Dr (2005). Healthy Solutions For Children – Making the right choice. Paper presented at the 10th National Conference Association for the Welfare of Child Health. Sydney Australia.

ⁱⁱ 2 Jenkins. H. Assoc Prof. (2009). An evaluation of the Ronald McDonald Learning Program (RMLP) to determine its impact on improving the achievement and self-concept of West Australian children who have missed significant amounts of schooling due to prolonged hospitalisation. School of Education Curtin, University of Technology Perth, Western Australia