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Program helping kids launch into school

Paediatric speech pathologists and occupational therapists at Liverpool Hospital are making sure children with communication difficulties get the best possible start to school.

Paediatric Team Leader, Jennie Cusiter, who co-ordinates the Launch to School program, says it is designed to ensure children with speech, language and fine motor difficulties can make a successful and confident transition to school.

“There is strong evidence to show children with communication difficulties, and those with limited fine motorskills, struggle more than others when they start school, and in particular in learning to read,” she said.

“We work closely with several local schools to make sure we are getting to all the children who need help. Communication difficulties affect a large number of children with Speech Pathology Australia reporting that 1 in 5 children will experience communication difficulties. This makes it as common as childhood obesity.

“This year we’ve also partnered with Liverpool Library and Paint Liverpool Read to reinforce to parents the importance and value of reading.”

The program involves speech pathologists and occupational therapists working together to provide the best outcome for children with language and developmental delays, a lack of fine motor skills and some behavioural problems.

Ms Cusiter said the program grew out of a need to better prepare children with communication and fine motor difficulties for school, and it has since become her PhD project.

“Launch to School normally consists of eight two-hour sessions in a simulated classroom environment,” she said.

“The children are assessed before and after the program to evaluate their progress.

“Parents are also given training on how best to support their children in their transition to school and in learning to read.”

Ms Cusiter said they had received positive feedback from schools and had seen many good outcomes in the children who took part in the program.

“We’ve had teachers say they could see the difference in children who attended Launch to School,” she said.

“We’ve seen some children who have come through and they’ve really struggled at the beginning and at the end they’re more confident and capable and their parents are more empowered.

“This is a highly specialised program that aims to ensure these children don’t get left behind when they start school.

“We will have had 200 children who are starting school in 2018 benefit from Launch to School.”

Over the past two years the team has collected amount of vast data to formally evaluate Launch to School.

“My hope is our work and experience will provide an evidence base that other Districts and services can draw on to develop similar programs and benefit a larger number of children.”