

# Case study: Sharing stories of disability inclusion

## Springvale Service for Children

**Springvale Service for Children is in the heart of Springvale and was founded on a vision of giving children the best possible start in life.**

Breaking new ground in 2009, Springvale Service for Children (the Service) was one of the first in Australia to develop and implement an integrated early years service. Having run several programs including a childcare facility and kindergarten, they embarked on a brand-new journey of discovery through working with volunteers who have a disability.

Tofu Naitoko, Team Leader - Support Services, saw the need to rebuild the Toy Library which had declined during COVID-19 and was in need of some tender loving care in order to encourage the community to come and enjoy the facilities.

Whilst the Service had a large multi-cultural base and felt in its essence that it was an inclusive community, this was the first time the Service had thought of engaging volunteers with a disability. Discussions were initiated with the Service manager and under the guidance of the volunteer team at South East Volunteers, enquiries were made to engage with local disability groups in the hope of building a volunteer program.

The program started with one volunteer and quickly grew to include two groups: a group of eight from Burke and Beyond and another group of eight from The Bridge. Groups attended on separate days.

One of the biggest challenges for the Service was understanding the capabilities of the groups and assessing the needs on an individual basis. They worked closely with the support workers to ensure the experience was positive for both sides.

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The Service wanted to ensure, where possible, that participants enjoyed tasks and didn't want to assume that a task was too big or too small. This enabled open communication with support workers and participants that led to the group building on the tasks they were given:

- One participant expressed a desire to work in the office and was given the task of shredding the copious amounts of paperwork the Service has. This was a huge benefit to the administration team and the participant felt like they were part of the team.
- Another participant developed a fondness for the lizard that occupies pride of place in the foyer and became the chief carer.
- Another participant who was exceptionally tall became fondly known as the 'King' by the children in the childcare facility and was often seen talking to the children and making them laugh, which was a delight to hear.

***“Over time it was felt that the energy in the Service changed as the group injected their unbridled joy into every task. There were no labels, just volunteers who happen to have a disability.”***

### Impact

- Staff felt that they learnt much from the volunteers; as a group they were comfortable within themselves, not having any of the social constructs often imposed. Staff quickly realised there were no barriers to participation just a cohesive group working together.
- Volunteers learnt basic tasks quickly, which meant that the Service was able to extend tasks to include office admin work and managing the maintenance of the whole Service.
- Volunteers became like family and the Service acknowledges that Tuesdays and Wednesdays were the favourite days of the week.

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- Inclusion was achieved through acceptance and ongoing support. The Service prides itself on being a family and the volunteer groups enhanced that through their hard work, and joy in participating.

***“The Service felt that it was a great opportunity to learn from one another and there was a reciprocal gratitude between volunteers and staff.”***

### **Unseen biases**

The Service is home to many families within the Asian culture. Many families who have a child with disability do not engage with the services nor bring their children with disability out in public. A by-product of having the volunteers with disability was normalising seeing this cohort in a public space.

### **Moving forward**

Due to the success of the pilot program, the Service is now working on extending the program to include more groups and more tasks with the hope of normalising disability within the Service.

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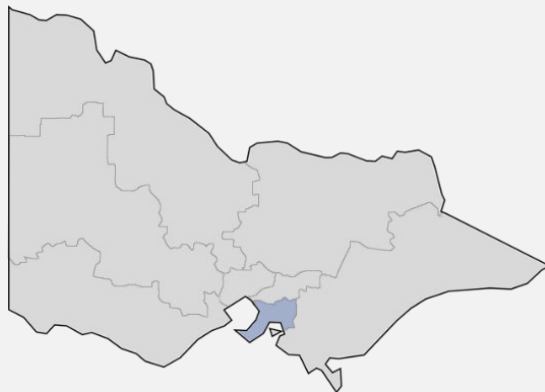
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through Connecting People*



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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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*Volunteering Victoria acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.*