

Spotlight on Dr Stuart Shanker – another successful visit to Australia!

Dr Shanker is Director of the Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative (MEHRI) and Distinguished Research Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at York University in Toronto, Canada. His book "Calm, Alert and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation" was recently published by Pearson Canada.

Many CCSA members may remember that CCSA and ECA NSW hosted a visit to Australia by child development expert Dr Stuart Shanker in 2011. Following the success of his 2011 visit to Australia, Dr Shanker was appointed as the 2012 Thinker in Residence by the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People, Michelle Scott. Prior to taking up his two-week residency in Perth in June 2012, Dr Shanker was keen to provide another two workshops on self-regulation and to update early childhood professionals on developments in his research.

Dr Shanker argues that in an environment where children and young people face a daunting range of challenges, self-regulation offers a lens to understand and thus reframe the sorts of problems seen in many children and young people. In his work, Dr Shanker has shown how self-regulation alerts us to the ineffectiveness of traditional punitive approaches and to the power of techniques that enhance a child's ability to remain calmly focused and alert.

CCSA and ECA NSW were once again happy to facilitate two seminars in which Dr Shanker spoke with a total of about 100 early childhood professionals in Canberra and Tweed Heads in late May 2012 about the importance of self-regulation for children's learning. This drew on recent advances in neuroscience that have dramatically altered how we understand the educational potential of every child.

During the seminars, Dr Shanker explained that self-regulation is what enables self-control. He discussed how stress impacts on self-regulation, how various experiences influence brain development in early childhood, how educators can create environments and activities that are conducive to helping young children to develop self-regulation, and how self-regulation in individual children leads to long-term benefits for society more broadly as well as for those children and their families.

Those who attended the Canberra and Tweed Heads seminars were very inspired and impressed. Participants indicated that the information Dr Shanker provided was full of practical ideas that could be used at their early childhood education and care service. Educators also valued the opportunity to learn about the science behind children's behaviour. Comments from attendees included:

"I want to learn more. I want to put the information gathered into some form of action to benefit the children as a group and provide better practices."

"Fantastic – could listen to him for hours!"

"Science information was excellent, Dr Shanker blew my mind."

"Enjoyed that it was evidence based information to support my practice."

"Inspired me to keep going and do even more for our kids."

"Absolutely brilliant, invigorating, thought provoking. I have thoughts and ideas for mentoring educators when asked to 'solve' behaviour challenges, to create empathy so the staff can 'see' the child, 'define' the child not the behaviour. Thank you."

"This has been the most worthwhile seminar I have been to for a long time. The information was fantastic – to open thinking and dream of new practice."

“This has given me so much to take back to both my teaching and my family.”

“Loved it. Overwhelmed. Thankful that there is a book coming out that will allow me to absorb more slowly all of the content.”

After his return to Canada, Dr Shanker made some time to answer some questions which arose out of the seminars:

CCSA: What has been the most rewarding part of the work you have done?

Dr Shanker: Every single day brings its rewards. Seeing a child who when he first came to us was withdrawn and never smiled, come into the office happily chattering away, never fails to bring tears to my eyes. Or the child who spontaneously gives his mother a hug and a kiss. The child who is excited to share his new interest with you. And the realisation that we can achieve these kinds of triumphs with every single child.

CCSA: What is one story you think really demonstrates why your work is so important and why?

Dr S: The story of RJ in my new book is typical of how, by treating a child as if he has poor self-control, that he is weak in this regard, the child just shrinks more and more into himself. But as we began to unravel the causes of his poor self-regulation (in his case, mostly to do with his motor system), a new child emerged, full of joy and hope.

CCSA: What are some practical things that educators can do to encourage ‘self-regulation’ in their early childhood setting?

Dr S: Some ideas are:

1. lower the overall amount of stimulus
2. provide calming areas, where children can go when they need to self-soothe
3. provide all sorts of ‘self-regulating’ materials for children to play with, things like play-dough, clay, a sandbox
4. have an ‘exercise area’ (e.g., mats, a swiss ball), where children who need a bit more physical stimulation can go for regular breaks
5. reduce the use of loud bells or buzzers to signal transitions
6. greet each child warmly at the start of every day and say goodbye warmly at the end.

CCSA: What key messages can educators share with parents to help them to understand about self-regulation?

Dr S: There are lots of parenting information packages that accompany my new book. These have been designed for educators to share with parents. Educators could also consider meeting with parents in groups to discuss specific issues, such as the importance of sleep, diet or exercise; or the value of limiting television and video games. Another strategy could be to encourage families to attend parent-child yoga sessions.

CCSA: What do you think about the development of the Australia's new National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care?

Dr S: I think it is wonderful. A lot of thought has gone into this and the result has been very influential here in Canada. The importance of the self-regulation lens is that it can make the framework even more effective.

For more information about Dr Shanker's work, you can:

- read Dr Shanker's book *Calm, Alert and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation*, published in 2012 by Pearson Canada (you can order a copy through www.amazon.ca or www.pearsoncanada.ca/CAL)
- peruse Dr Shanker's report of the 2012 Thinker in Residence, available from the Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia web site at www.ccyp.wa.gov.au
- explore the links at Dr Shanker's web site www.self-regulation.ca