Creating a dementia-friendly society, starting with kids

Jess Baker presents an update on the Kids4Dementia project, an innovative classroom-based program designed to educate the next generation about dementia

If you married someone with dementia, could you then get it?”, “How can you have no memory, yet still do stuff?”, “If you get dementia does that mean you have to go to one of those awful jail places, where you just sit and watch TV?” This is a small sample of the curiosity I have encountered while developing Kids4Dementia, an innovative dementia education program for Year 5 and 6 schoolchildren.

The children I have met are keen and receptive to learning more about a condition that many did not know ‘was even a thing’. This parallels a large British poll, where 62% of eight- to 17-year-olds reported that they would like to help people with dementia but felt held back by a lack of understanding of the condition (Alzheimer’s Society, 2016).

Kids4Dementia is focused on tackling this stigma by changing attitudes at a generational level – creating positive attitudes amongst today’s children. It is evidence-based and was developed, in part, from the results of focus groups with 49 children in the community and people with dementia and their relatives. The contemporary, classroom-based program presents an accessible population strategy approach for all children with or without an experience of dementia.

Through an engaging animated story, real-life videos and fun activities, students learn that a person with...
dementia is ‘still a person’, and not someone to fear, laugh at or ignore – be they family or a stranger. More specifically, students follow the story of Ollie, a 10-year-old boy, Ruby his 12-year-old sister, and their Pops, who they have noticed start to act a little different to usual.

Seven short modules – including film of people with dementia and their relatives speaking candidly about the condition – cover topics such as: ‘How does it feel to have dementia?’, and ‘What can I do?’ Each module is accompanied by an activity, such as an interactive brain, role-play, or drawing.

Kids4Dementia has been designed with teachers, for teachers. It demands no preparation, minimal resources, and no prior knowledge on the part of the teacher. The program is flexible in that teachers can pick and choose the order of the modules. Moreover, the program purposefully aligns with curriculum outcomes, effectively providing busy teachers with a ‘pick up and go’ lesson plan for the NSW Personal Development Health and Personal Education (PDIPE) syllabus.

The program roll-out
The program has been piloted with three Australian primary schools (195 students aged 10 to 12 years old). Preliminary results were presented at an international conference earlier this year (Baker 2016) and tested the hypothesis that students who took part in the Kids4Dementia program will have an improved understanding of dementia compared to children yet to participate in the program.

The goal for 2017 is to advance the roll-out of Kids4Dementia across 30 primary schools in NSW. We are currently accepting expressions of interest from schools keen to be involved in this initiative (see below).

Nearing the end of a focus group with students who had just completed the Kids4Dementia program, one girl participant looked at me intently and said “Thank you”. I replied, “You’re welcome, but for what exactly?”

“Thank you for this program because if you didn’t do it, people would probably just walk past someone with dementia,” she said.

Our children are smart. They are our future citizens who will grow up to be health professionals, teachers and leaders of tomorrow. A dementia aware and supportive society where the rights, needs and experiences of people living with dementia in the community are understood (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2015) can happen if we inform and review our attitudes where they first begin to form.

Acknowledgments
We thank all the children, parents, grandparents, teachers, Central Coast Adventist School, St Peter’s Primary School and St Agnes’ Primary School, for their contribution to the project. We also thank the advisory committee (Associate Professor Belinda Goodenough, Associate Professor Lee-Fay Low, Christine Bryden, Professor Yun-Hee Jeon, Karen Hutchinson, and Laura Richards), expert reviewers (Dr Teresa Atkinson, Dr Nicole Kochan and Dr Karen Mathe) and Alzheimer’s Australia NSW for their support and contribution to the project.

Kids4Dementia is funded by the Dementia Collaborative Research Centre: Assessment and Better Care as part of an Australian Government Initiative.

References
Dr Jess Baker is a Lecturer with the Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit, UNSW Australia and research collaborator with the Dementia Collaborative Research Centre: Assessment and Better Care. She leads the Kids4Dementia project. Contact her at: jessica.baker@unsw.edu.au

What does school participation in Kids4Dementia involve?

- The participation of at least one Year 5 or Year 6 class.
- The commitment of 115 minutes of class time (approximately four classes) to deliver the education program over one school term.
- Time for students to complete 30 minutes of questionnaires before the program, and 20 minutes of questionnaires after the program.
- Availability of equipment to play videos to a class. Access to a printer to print activity sheets.
- The school must be in NSW and not be involved in any other dementia-related curricular.

NSW schools that would like to be involved in this initiative from 2017 can submit an expression of interest now to Dr Jess Baker at jessica.baker@unsw.edu.au.