

2nd International Conference on**Autism**

September 15-16, 2016 Phoenix, USA

Early Childhood Intervention to Enable the Integration of Children with Autism into Mainstream Childhood Services**Lidija Balaz and Mitchell Byrne**
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The purpose of this research is to extend on the award winning project “Understanding our Peers”. It aims to break down barriers and assist typically-developing pre-schoolers in understanding and engaging with their autistic peers in mainstream education centres. This research is particularly pertinent in light of the shift in legislation and cultural attitudes toward increasing opportunities of equal education opportunities for children with disabilities. Children diagnosed with ASD often struggle to cope with the social, emotional and communicational demands of inclusive education settings. Peer victimization and rejection are commonplace experiences. The goal of this research is to increase the number and quality of interactions and engagement between typically-developing peers and children diagnosed with autism, and simultaneously to decrease bullying, victimization, isolation and hostility. To achieve this, researchers utilized and expanded on principles from previously successful research with adolescence (Understanding our Peers), to create a series of children's books. The three story picture books follow characters as they learn key principles pertaining to autism, including celebrating differences, social skills, and communication skills. The program, currently being trialled in Australia, is designed to be used in early education centres where children are encouraged to use these principles in the classroom and on the playground. The success of this research, determined by increased engagements, interactions and communication, is being measured by naturalistic behavioural observations. If successful, the intervention has the potential to be broadly replicated across early childhood education centres throughout the country and internationally.

Biography

Lidija Balaz is a registered psychologist in Sydney, Australia, and is currently completing her Doctorate in Psychology (Clinical) at University of Wollongong. She has experience working in a range of settings and is Director of Psych Perceptions. Associate Professor Mitchell Byrne completed his PhD at University of Wollongong and has 18 year experience as an academic. He is a registered Clinical and Forensic Psychologist with 29-year practitioner experience. He is a Director of Clinical Training in Psychology at the University of Wollongong and has over 50 research publications.

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