



Are you sensing what I'm sensing? Multi-sensory storytelling and communication of children with special needs.

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In response to the success of the Better Beginnings Rhyme Time and Storytime program (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2016), the Sensorium Theatre developed the Sensory Storytime program to create accessible stories for young children with special needs. Childhood narratives are performed by professional actors using multi-sensory modes of presentation (with sight, sound, smell, taste and touch stimuli). One of the program's aims is to support children and families to transition into the school environment by linking to the national Early Years Framework of Belonging Being Becoming (EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Of particular interest to the researchers was outcome five of the EYLF that focuses on communication including gestures, sounds, language and assisted communication (p. 38).

Fillmore and Snow (2000) identified the importance of meaningful language experiences during the early years to promote language growth, and storytelling has been found to result in oral language gains (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004) and early literacy development (Phillips, 1999). Multi-sensory storytelling has been identified as being more beneficial for children with disability than standard story-telling for a range of skills (Young, Fenwick, Lambe, & Hogg, 2011; Brug, Van der Putten, Penne, Maes, & Vlaskamp, 2016; Watson, 2002; Preece & Zhao, 2015). The research reported in this paper sought to determine if the Sensorium Sensory storytelling program enhanced the vocabulary of children with complex needs and/or their ability and willingness to communicate. The children were observed using the (revised) Individual Child Engagement Record (Kishida, Kemp, & Carter, 2009) and parents/carers were interviewed to determine their perception of the program and their child's engagement with the sensory storytelling. Parents/carers were specifically asked whether they had noticed their child using words or gestures they encountered in the storytelling or if already developed signs or gestures were being used with greater frequency or accuracy. *

*Please note that this research will be concluding in November at which time a final sentence will be added to this abstract to outline the key findings.