

Seedlings, Discoverers, Explorers, Investigators and Inventors

ToBeMe channels university campus style learning for babies, toddlers and preps, **ET Staff**

Rob Yeldon brought along his background in finance and investment, and his recent experience of growing Sydney-based Montessori Academy from two to 17 childcare centres in under six years, when he joined start-up ToBeMe Early Learning Centres as CEO, tasked with launching two centres for parents wanting high-quality childcare.

He says: “We were looking for opportunities in areas where parents have ‘a yearning for learning’ and we found the first in Burwood. This is a diverse multicultural area, often with both parents working in the CBD and wanting childcare close to the station so they could drop children off in the morning and pick them up in the evening.”

Thirty months of research, planning and construction concluded in January when the first ToBeMe 120-place centre opened on Level 3 of GM Tower in 11–15 Deane Street, a 60-second walk from Burwood station.

Yeldon describes it as “a dream environment”. It’s the work of architect Sarah Scott, author of *Architecture for Children* [ACER Press, 2010 ISBN13: 9780864318541], and an acknowledged expert in the design of built environments for children.

The 1500m² centre is on the third level podium, with generous covered and outdoor play areas and separate spaces for art and craft, science and drama. There’s a library with a book nest for quiet reading, a multi-purpose gym, a music room for formal lessons, and a shared consulting room for professionals including speech pathologists and paediatric occupational therapists. There’s a restaurant as well, where a professional chef caters for the children and is on hand with recipe ideas for parents.

While ToBeMe is a long day care centre, open from 7.00am to 6.00pm, the Preparatory classroom [The Investigators] offers a school readiness program that mirrors the primary school environment with a structured 9.00am to 3.00pm school day. The aim here is to prepare the children for a smooth transfer; they wear a uniform and even have a library card to use when they borrow a book.

“Our parents value education highly and are willing to pay to get it,” Yeldon says.

He acknowledges that the centre’s \$150 daily fee is towards the top range of the childcare price range in expensive Sydney while emphasising that it’s justified by the curriculum and an



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individual learning plan for each child.

The Thought Leadership Team, headed by child learning specialist Dr Rosina McAlpine and staff culture specialist Dr Connie Henson assisted in developing the curriculum and inclusive staff culture.

Yeldon says: “We’ve taken the best elements of the most successful teaching theories, including

Reggio Emilia, Montessori and THRASS phonics and overlaid them with proven behavioural and child psychology principles to create our ToBeMe Early Learning Curriculum.

“Montessori has been going for 100 years and it’s still relevant today, but as new early learning research emerges, we change.”

Phonemic awareness, teaching children to hear the 44 individual sounds in the English language and learn how to manipulate them to make words, starts them on the road to reading and writing and the earlier they start, the better. Thus, when Yeldon contacted CEO Denyse Ritchie to explore how THRASS might be built into the curriculum she didn’t hesitate.

“He told me that several people involved [in the centre] had children and nieces and



Outdoor area



Artspace



Classroom

nephews that go to THRASS schools and were 'over the moon' about the results that they were achieving in their everyday work in literacy.

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A lengthy interview and subsequent in-depth conversations led to Ritchie's first childcare project and every ToBeMe staff member completing THRASS training.

"We have trained all of the staff, including the fabulous chef," Ritchie says. "It wasn't negotiable, so that everyone knows why there are charts all around and why we are doing the process. For example, we will discuss that there is a chef on the chart and what a chef does. We will look at the different foods the chef is preparing and explore to see if they are on the chart and what sounds we can hear in the words. We also look at the spelling of the words and explore links

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between sounds in words, for example, the chef is preparing mushrooms called champignons, there is 'sh' in mushrooms and at the beginning of chef and champignons, we then look at the different spellings.

"Phonemic awareness is an undisputed predictor of early reading and writing success. The earlier that we start developing phonemic awareness the easier it is to develop these other skills. We do this using the charts to explore sounds using a variety of phonemic and oral language activities. We discover rhyming words, listening and matching sounds in words, have fun learning about animals and objects and the sounds they make and build an awareness of sounds in our everyday language and environmental print."

THRASS is a very different process to most early literacy learning and has been an 'eye-opener' for Educational Leader Emma Parle, in charge of The Investigators' (Preparatory room). Educated in the UK, she says: "There was nothing like it when I was growing up. The charts help children from families that do not speak English at home to get used to our sounds and words quickly."

Construction of the second ToBeMe, in Spencer Street, Five Dock, is on time for a September opening. It will offer 132 places in a purpose-built four-floor building with the roof to be an open-air garden and play area and a floor set aside for non-educational facilities for parents, including a hair salon for children.

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