



Thomas Warren enjoys a role-playing game at a Challenge Playgroup.

From Pain To Play

Young children with cancer can often become isolated, so playgroups especially for them have been established in West Melbourne and Frankston, writes **Margaret Langdon**.

On average, three to four Victorian children are diagnosed with cancer each week, and an organisation called Challenge is on hand to help families at this intensely difficult time. Challenge provides support to children and families living with cancer and other serious blood disorders: from diagnosis, through treatment and beyond.

As children being treated for cancer are at increased risk of infection, they can't attend their own community playgroups and kindergartens, and sometimes their brothers and sisters can't either. For this reason, special Challenge Playgroups are held weekly at Challenge House in West Melbourne and also in Frankston. Challenge members aged two to five can look forward to these playgroups, which provide a much-needed social outlet and some fun for them and their siblings, as well as a support network for their parents. The playgroups offer a structured program of art, music, play and physical

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activities, including all the pre-school favourites such as painting, playdough, puzzles, sand play and story time.

The chief executive officer of Challenge, David Rogers, says that the playgroups were started with a view to getting younger members out and socialising. "We found that kids under the age of five were sticking in their own home environment, so their social skills were getting lost a little bit." He explains that the playgroup can have a remarkable effect on these children, who are facing some of the toughest challenges imaginable. "Some kids come straight from the hospital to playgroup, having just had an injection," he says. "It gives them something to look forward to. I've seen kids come in looking really ill and having no energy, and by the time they leave they are full of life and they've got it all back again."

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Some children will attend after having chemotherapy and might not be able to participate much in the activities, but they'll lie on the beanbags to rest and still enjoy being part of the group. "Sometimes it's not just about the child. The parent needs a chance for a bit of time-out as well," says Rogers. "There's no handbook on having a child with cancer, and how your family deals with that," he explains. "The playgroup is a really good opportunity for the parents to sit down and have a chat with each other and share, and get some good information for their families as well."

One mother wanted to create something in memory of her little boy who particularly loved the music, dancing and singing at the playgroups. Music had given her son moments away from reality, where he could simply enjoy doing something he loved. And so the Musical Moments Trust was started to offer music scholarships to pre-school children.

Musical Moments scholarships pay for a musical program of the recipient's choice, which may include having a music therapist visit them in hospital, creating and recording a song with the help of a musician, or enrolling for a term's worth of music lessons. Funding is awarded twice a year.

This month Challenge is running its first fundraising event for the Musical Moments Trust. 'One Day in May' is an event that any kindergarten or pre-school centre can participate in. The centre chooses its own 'day in May' when the children wear yellow clothes – yellow being the favourite colour of the little boy in whose memory the Trust was established – and bring in a gold coin to donate to the Trust.

"It's about young people helping other young people less fortunate," says Rogers. "If they raise \$20 it will go to good use, and if they raise a few more dollars it will go to better use. But it's not so much about the money; it's more about people learning who we are and getting an understanding of what we do. Rather than spending our money telling people what we do, we spend our money doing what we do." ●

Challenge was formed in 1983 as a camping program for children with cancer, and has since evolved into a multi-faceted organisation offering practical assistance and fun activities to children, their parents and siblings. The Challenge program includes camps, outings, hospital support, respite and holiday accommodation, parent support and family activity days. For more information about Challenge and the Musical Moments Trust, or to enquire about participating in One Day in May, visit www.challenge.org.au or phone 9329 8474.

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