



National Health
Promotion Program



Dr Elise McNamara

Children as 'change agents' for spinal health

By Dr Elise McNamara

My initial impression of Healthy Spines when I signed up for training was that it was some kind of 'spinal class for kids'. I had the idea that I'd go into a school and teach them a bit about their spines and have some fun – which I did! But after completing my training and implementing the program in a school, I soon realised that Healthy Spines is so much more than a spinal class for kids.

Sure it's great for teaching children how important their spine and nervous system are and why they should look after it, but the real gold is in the bigger picture – promoting long term spinal health. This is what makes the Healthy Spines program so different (and so much better) than doing a one off talk at a school. The material in the program helps go beyond just the *knowledge* of spinal health, and looks at putting it into *action*. That's what I love about Healthy Spines – empowering the children to use the knowledge they've gained and decide what needs to be done to have 'healthy spines'.

This is seen in the school 'environment checks' the children do during the program. The children are given the task of assessing their school environment and its spinal safety and then given the opportunity to develop ideas on how they could change it – and they come up with some very imaginative ideas! An example of this from my school was the Year 3 children identifying that sitting on the floor too long whilst reading from the blackboard was bad for their spines. They discussed this with the teacher and have agreed to work more at their desks for board work – a seemingly small change with potentially big, long term benefits.

Of course there are many more changes that could be made in terms of school policies. This is where the repeated exposure to the information comes in. Schools are very busy and policy change takes time. One teacher I worked with commented that "it's like the Sun Smart program; we need to hear the information again and again." We all know the 'slip slop slap' slogan and its significance; imagine if every child could recite our Healthy Spines 'your spine is your lifeline' slogan and know its importance!

Another great aspect of the program is the evaluation. Pre and post-program surveys are performed with the teachers and students to determine the impact of the program. I'm certainly looking forward to comparing this year's evaluation scores with the last! I also found the post program interviews with the teachers and principal very valuable. After all, they know their students very well and have a terrific insight into how things can be improved to cater for their school's needs. A great example of this was our principal suggesting we feature Healthy Spines in the school's weekly newsletter whilst the program is running in 2007 so the parents can be more involved with what's going on in the program. Again, this gets the children thinking about their spines when mum or dad asks "what did you learn about in Healthy Spines this week?" The parents will likely learn a thing or two as well!

I'm excited that the school is enthusiastic about the program and looking for more ways to get the information to their school community. I have the privilege of going back to the school I was with last year and running the program with Year 3 again. I can't wait! I'm looking forward to improving my skills in communicating the message to the children and seeing more powerful outcomes.

I would encourage everyone to participate in the Healthy Spines program. It is so well organised and all the resources from classroom material to the evaluation procedures are all prepared for you! Of course it takes some work doing the training, preparing for the sessions and getting the program into a school, but the outcomes are definitely worth it!

For information on how to get involved in the Healthy Spines Program contact Leanne Jenkins (projects@caa.asn.au) or Jodi Millen (nhq@caa.asn.au) at the CAA National Office or phone 02 4731 8011. More information on Healthy Spines is available at www.healthyspines.com.au where you can download copies of the 2006 Evaluation Report from the Healthy Spines Research section.