

**The Fun FRIENDS program** was created by Dr. Paula Barrett as a developmentally tailored, downward extension of the pre-existing, evidence-based FRIENDS for Life program for children and youth (aged 7-18 years). The Fun FRIENDS program shares similar principles as the FRIENDS for Life program, although created for children aged 4 to 6 years. The program has been developmentally tailored to this aged group with a strong emphasis on play-based activities and experiential learning (i.e. use of puppets, story telling, puppets, creative art, games). The over-arching aim of Fun FRIENDS is to increase social-emotional competence while decreasing and preventing worry and emotional distress. The program teaches children developmentally sensitive cognitive behavioural strategies (e.g. cognitive restructuring, relaxation, graded exposure to fears) which correspond to several areas of social and emotional learning (e.g. social skills, self regulation, pro-social behaviour, empathy training).

The first universal research trial examining Fun FRIENDS was conducted within 28 preschool classrooms in Brisbane, Australia. Half preschool classrooms received the Fun FRIENDS program delivered by a clinically trained postgraduate student (intervention group) and the other half classrooms belonged to the waitlist control group (WLG). The children in the WLG also received the Fun FRIENDS program in the school term following the intervention group (IG), delivered by their teachers. All teachers involved in the project were required to attend an accredited teacher training workshop in program implementation. Parents were actively involved with this trial as three parent information sessions were held throughout the program to keep parents informed regarding session skills, reinforcement, and home implementation. The Fun FRIENDS program ran for 9 weeks (session 9 & 10 were combined due to term length constraints) and each session lasted approximately 45

minutes to 1 hour. Each session consists of 4 to 5 different learning activities relating to the cognitive-behavioural skills and social-emotional learning strategies mentioned above.

Throughout the research trial, social validity data was collected from parents and teachers. This data gave us an idea of how much parents and teachers enjoyed the program. This feedback allowed us to revise the program immediately following the research trial to make it as user friendly as possible. The current version of Fun FRIENDS (Barrett, 2007) has incorporated all of the feedback from parents, teachers, and program facilitators.

**The final overall evaluation made by the teachers who were in the IG rated the program (on average) as 9/10. They also averaged 9/10 on how they would recommend the program to others.**

- On a scale of 0 (not at all) to 6 (a lot), teachers rated:
- How much they thought *students enjoyed the program*: 5.4 / 6 (**90%**)
- How much *they enjoyed the program*: 5.3 / 6 (**88%**)
- How *easy it was to have the program implemented in the classroom*: 5.2 / 6 (**87%**)
- How well the program *complemented the existing curriculum*: 5.4 / 6 (**90%**)

**Some comments made by teachers when evaluating the program:**

*“Every session was varied enough to maintain the children’s interest and focus”*  
Carole Park Preschool

*“Children responded very well to red light, green light concept”*  
Sherwood Preschool

*“There were many great concepts and strategies used. I really thought the strategies used in red/green thoughts were great. The use of puppets made a great impact. The books used were a great resource also”*  
Emily Foord Preschool

*“The children talk about different aspects of the program. I can see it becoming just a part of their everyday life (how exciting and empowering!)”*

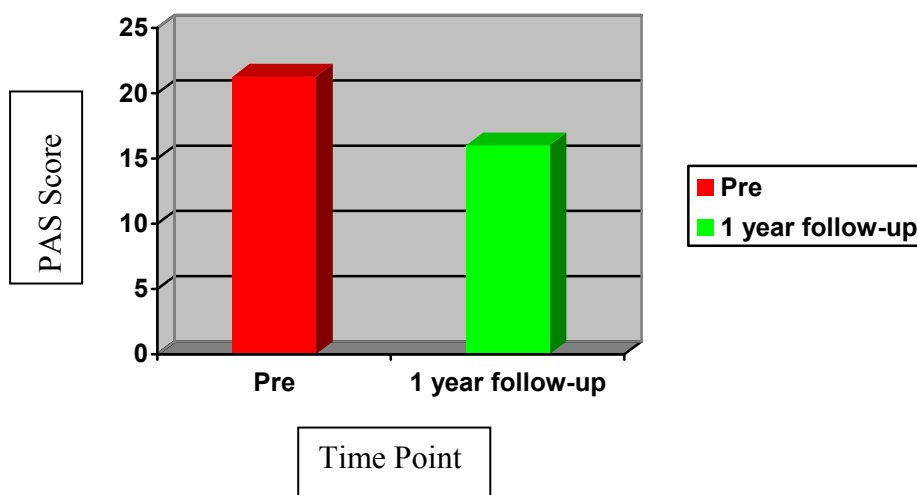
Rosalie Preschool

*“Building resilience is one of the goals of an early childhood program – The program helps to reinforce and perhaps provide language and tags for what is happening”*  
Sherwood Preschool

*“Content was excellent”*  
Crestmead Preschool

*“We have seen some significant change in behaviour by discussing red and green thoughts”*  
Bethania Lutheran Preschool

**Below are some results from the universal trial of Fun FRIENDS (N = 355)**



*Figure 1:* Scores on the Preschool Anxiety Scale (PAS), parent report, at pre and 1 year follow-up for children who received the Fun FRIENDS program

\*Statistically significant decrease in anxiety scores over time, from pre to follow-up.

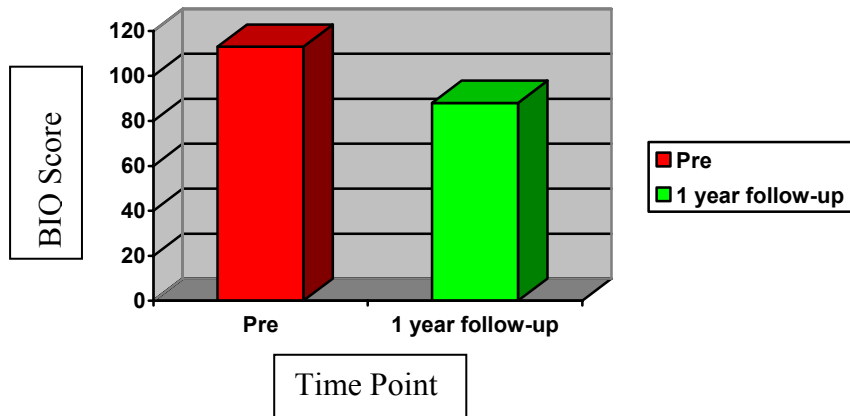


Figure 2: Scores on the Behavioural Inhibition Questionnaire, Parent Report at pre and 1 year follow-up.

\*Statistically significant decrease in behavioural inhibition over time for children who received the Fun FRIENDS program.

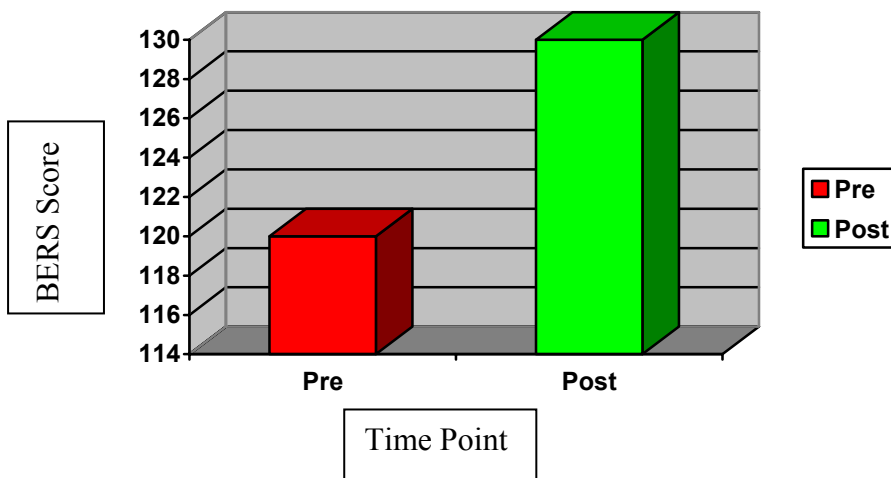


Figure 4: Scores on the Behavioural and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS), teacher report, at pre and post for children who received the Fun FRIENDS program.

\*Statistically significant increase in social and emotional competence in children who received the program from pre to post as reported by their teachers (higher score = higher social-emotional competence).

The results presented above demonstrate the effectiveness of the Fun FRIENDS program. The results from the first universal trial indicate that the program is effective in decreasing anxiety, decreasing behavioural inhibition, and increasing social-emotional competence. The follow-up results highlight the long-term, preventative effect of the program.

### **FUN FRIENDS PARENT TESTIMONIALS**

Our whole family benefited from Jemma's participation in the Friends Program. As we used the ideas with Jemma, we found they were especially relevant for her older sister and we continue to use them often eg calming down techniques, red thought and green thoughts. Almost every night at the dinner table we ask each other 'the best parts of the day'. All our girls enjoy this and sometimes we extend it to discussing how we could have handled things better. For me as a parent, I valued the program because it affirmed things we were trying to do but also gave them more structure and purpose. For example, we were trying to help the girls to think positively, the Friends-' red thoughts and the green thoughts' were similar but easier for the girls to understand. As a secondary HPE teacher, I also found it interesting and helpful in seeing how at early education level, personal development can be taught at school and saw the importance of a team effort with the parents to make the most of the learning experience.

Jennifer Letizia

My son participated in the FRIENDS program through his preschool. He thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of the program. Each week he was provided with fun, age-appropriate strategies to assist him in becoming more emotionally resilient. It was amazing to see his attitudes changing as the program progressed. Often, they were ideas I had attempted to implement at home, but the FRIENDS program offered a practical approach which was apparently very easy for my son to relate to and subsequently implement. I can highly recommend the FRIENDS program to other children and parents.

Tony & Pauline Sinn

I would like to say how great the friends program was and how beneficial it was to my son. We all enjoyed the program and doing the activities. I spoke with many parents and they to felt it was well worth while.

Belinda Sumner

I was impressed to see how quickly my daughter was able to grasp the strategies she had learnt in the sessions and apply them in everyday situations often without my prompting. Through the use child-friendly language (e.g. talking about red thoughts and green thoughts) and fun play-based sessions, my four-year-old daughter was able to grasp quite abstract concepts relating to thoughts and feelings. One of the longest lasting strategies my daughter continued to use after the program had concluded was her desire to share (talk about) our happy experiences for the day before going to sleep each night. She really enjoyed that special time each night and so did I!

Yolanda Reitano