



Ashton and Amber, *Learning Club* participants

Real People, Real Stories

Thank you for changing lives through your support.

Spring 2020



everyone's family

Your support has never been more critical

I can't thank you enough for being a supporter. Since March, we have seen the biggest disruption to education ever posed to Australian children. Families, schools and communities continue to face difficult times. We are concerned that children who were already living in disadvantage before COVID-19 will face additional hardship. And if they do so, they risk slipping further behind in their education.

We need supporters like you, now more than ever.

As a supporter, you provide access to education support programs which help students with their learning. These programs are delivered outside of school, with many delivered over the phone or online. This additional support was

especially needed when schooling happened remotely. And it will continue to provide vital help not just through this difficult time but into the future as well.

Thank you again for all you do as a supporter. I hope you enjoy seeing how effective your support is in this edition of *Real People, Real Stories*.



Dr Lisa O'Brien
Chief Executive Officer



The programs you make possible have a real impact:

90% of students agreed
student2student made it
easier to do their schoolwork

85% of our students
said going to *Learning Clubs*
made them try harder at school

I would like to thank everyone who donated to our [Winter Appeal](#). I'm thrilled to announce that we surpassed our fundraising goal. Thanks to your generosity, more than **16,000 disadvantaged children will have access to our out-of-school learning programs, providing critical support for their education this year.**

Teyanah needed a different perspective

Teyanah was very young when her mum passed away. Along with her two siblings, she went to live with her grandparents. It was a loving home, but Teyanah's grandparents weren't expecting to be raising children again at that stage of their lives. And it hasn't been without challenges.

"The children came to us almost 10 years ago. My husband is retired and I'm only working part time," said Teyanah's grandmother, Judy.

When Teyanah needed to think about career options, they struggled to help. But talking to a mentor online through our *iTrack* mentoring program gave Teyanah the guidance she needed.

"Teyanah got a lot out of *iTrack*. She really appreciated being able to speak to someone outside of the family to help her with her choices. It has given her encouragement as well, to strive."

Being able to talk to an adult from a professional background gave Teyanah a fresh perspective. Her mentor helped her link her interests to potential careers and build a plan to achieve her goal.

"*iTrack* was really helpful. I didn't know what I wanted to do after school. My mentor pointed out different options. Now I know what I want to do and the program really helped with that. I want to go to university to study modern history," said Teyanah.

When the opportunity arose for Teyanah to also participate in our art enrichment program, she jumped at it. *SmArts* supports students' engagement with school by increasing their

creative skills and self-confidence. For Teyanah, the best part was meeting new people and the sense of community.

"Through *SmArts* we got to be active and learn to be more confident. We had a major dance company come out and show us some stuff," she said.

"It was really fun because we got to meet different people who were also with The Smith Family. I've now got a good friend from that experience. It's good to know that there's more than just my family out there struggling.

"I would like to say thank you to supporters for everything that you do. You have no idea how much you impact and help the students that you support!"



Teyanah, *iTrack* participant, with her grandmother

Lottie helped Mariah achieve not one, but two milestones

Lottie beamed as she read the letter from her younger reading buddy, Mariah. Only 18 weeks earlier Mariah had been stumbling with books that were below her age level. Now her favourite books are the Storey Treehouse books by Andy Griffiths. Lottie felt so proud. But it wasn't the only milestone these buddies achieved through our *student2student* reading program.

One in three children in the most disadvantaged communities is developmentally vulnerable in one or more key areas when they start school.¹ When Year 11 student, Lottie, heard this, she wanted to help.

"The *student2student* Program Coordinator gave a presentation at our school assembly. She was looking for volunteers to help younger students who struggle with reading. When I heard the statistics, I felt like I could make a difference as a volunteer reading buddy," she said.

As a supporter, you give students like Mariah the chance to take part in *student2student*. The program helps students who are two or more years behind in their reading to catch up.

Mariah and Lottie read together over the phone two to three times a week. Each call was meant to last 20 minutes. Yet they enjoyed themselves so much that their calls would often last double that. Over time, Lottie saw an enormous shift in Mariah.

"At the start, Mariah's reading was a bit stilted. I found that she knew how to read the words or sound them out, yet she was reluctant to try. By the end, she was reading quite fluently. And she would have a go at every word. Seeing that she can now tackle a difficult book like Harry Potter exemplifies the change in her confidence," said Lottie.

Receiving phone calls and having an older student take interest in them really motivates a younger student. And for Lottie and Mariah, it blossomed into a friendship that inspired them to come up with their own project.

"Lottie was a friend to talk to and we started knowing each other well. It was really good! Then she said we should make a book. So we did it!" said Mariah.

"Each time Lottie called me, I was really happy. She asked, 'What should we put in the book?' She suggested animals and I said, 'Yes.'"

And they finished it. You can check out their book on page 6.

Although Mariah and Lottie have now completed *student2student*, they will never forget the journey they shared. It was all possible because of supporters like you.

1. Australian Government (2016) *Australian Early Development Census National Report, 2015: A snapshot of early childhood development in Australia*, DET: Canberra.



Lottie, *student2student* reading buddy

“*Student2student* is an amazing program. It showed me how crucial strong literacy foundations are for a child to feel comfortable and more confident at school. But the number one thing I took away from it was the importance of kindness and friendship that’s founded upon mutual trust and understanding,” said Lottie.

Mariah and Lottie's student2student storybook

Dear Mariah,

I hope you like the story we wrote together!
I have really enjoyed reading to you and I hope you've had fun reading as well!

You should be so proud of the progress you have made, you are an amazing reader!

Always keep reading and always be yourself. You are so kind and funny and you should be really proud of who you are.

Thank you for being such an amazing buddy Mariah! I will never forget our friendship!

From Lottie 

Once upon a time, there was a young girl. Her name was Mariah.



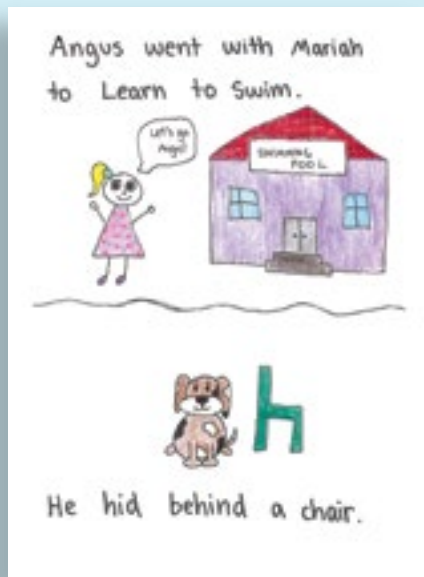
She loved the colour

 PINK! 

Mariah loved her pets so much! She always wished that she could take them to school with her...



Left and below, excerpts from the story book that Lottie and Mariah developed together.



Learning Club taught Amber how to lead and help others

The stopwatch started and squeals filled the room. Each team raced to rescue their Lego person. Older students like 12-year-old Amber helped guide the younger students. Together they built a contraption to save their person from 'quicksand', a mixture of cornflour and water. Triumphant cheers erupted. The experiment was a success. It was just one way the students expanded their thinking at our *Learning Club*.

"The experiments are definitely my favourite activity at *Learning Club*," said Amber. "Some are tricky and we have to put our minds to them. It's fun!"

For a child who is already behind at school, things can move too quickly in the classroom. And many disadvantaged students also don't have anyone at home who is in a position to help them with their homework.

Amber and her brother, Ashton, have been attending our after-school *Learning Club* for three years. They receive assistance from our volunteer tutors so they can complete homework and keep up in class. The social aspect has really boosted Amber's confidence and leadership skills.

"I've had opportunities to help other kids. I'm great with kids and love working with them. And I got chosen to do a PowerPoint presentation about my year at school. It's a nice feeling to know that people trust me to do that stuff," said Amber.

Not only has *Learning Club* helped Amber to do her best in class, but it has also opened her eyes to new possibilities for her future.

"I'd like to be an actress and singer. But I've been told you have to have different options because you might not get that career. So being a teacher is also on my list now," she said.

"I want to say a major 'thank you' to the people who are helping us! It shows how committed you are to supporting us so we can achieve our goals."



Amber, *Learning Club* participant

Ashton has cracked the code for his future

When Amber's younger brother, Ashton, was offered the chance to take part in our *Tech Pros* program, he was really excited. It fired up Ashton's passion for technology. Now he has his sights on a career in this field.

A lack of understanding and limited, or no, access to information and communication technology can lead to barriers such as social isolation, poor academic performance and unemployment. Yet 23% of the families we support don't have a home computer with reliable internet access.

Our Digital Access approach, which now incorporates initiatives like *Tech Pros*, aims to close this digital divide. By ensuring our *Learning for Life* families have access to low cost internet devices as well as tech support and the knowledge on how to make the most of the technology they have, we can help them to keep up in this increasingly digital world.

Ashton loved having access to computers and learning digital skills, such as coding and content creation.

"It was sort of confusing at first. But when I got the gist of it, it was quite fun. There are some games where you need to code your way out. Like there's a bee and you've got to code up to the flower," said Ashton.

"The program got me more interested in what computers can do. I've got a few ideas of what I want to do after school. But the biggest one I'm thinking of right now is a tech expert."



Ashton, *Learning Club* participant

Amber and Ashton's mum, Kelly, is so grateful to supporters like you for enabling her children to develop their skills and aspirations.

"Previously when Ashton found something really tough, he would tend to stop. But since receiving support through The Smith Family programs, he really gives things a go. His resilience has certainly grown," said Kelly.

"It's just lovely for my kids to have these opportunities. I hope the supporters realise how much they actually are having an impact in the lives of the children. I certainly want to say a big thank you!"

How did the COVID-19 crisis affect students?

Our Learning for Life Coordinator, Andrea, gives you an insider's glimpse into the challenges faced by families in need.

Q. What were the key issues facing our families during the crisis?

There was definitely a need for access to tools like a laptop and internet to complete school work.

And it was hard for the parents too. Many worried about not having the educational skills and understanding to assist their children, especially those with older kids. Despite giving it their best shot, some families felt quite overwhelmed by the amount of printed work sent home, especially with multiple children to accommodate in relatively small or shared housing situations.

Q. How did you offer support during this time?

We helped distribute laptops to families, which were donated by our corporate partners. And we focused on our out-of-school programs

like *iTrack* mentoring and the *student2student* reading program, which could still be done online or over the phone. We used videos to promote programs to families so they knew what support was available. And we spent more time on student engagement and training at the start of these programs. Students said 'the feeling of having a good start' was really helpful.

I was also in contact with parents daily to help them navigate any specific problems they were facing and connect them to any additional community support or resources where needed.

Q. How do you think program support helped?

Students and parents kept telling us how valuable program support was. With the *Digital Learning Club* trial, parents said they felt like someone was 'in the room lending a hand' during a period that relied on them to fulfil multiple teacher roles for differently aged children on any given day. For kids who used to regularly attend *Learning Clubs*, it gave them a sense of normality too.

And so many *student2student* participants told me they enjoyed the social element of chatting to their reading buddies each week.

Thanks to supporters like you, students and their families have continued to be supported by our Learning for Life Coordinators and vital learning programs. And it has been essential during this time of crisis and ongoing.



Learning for Life Coordinator, Andrea

What are digital learning clubs?

Over 5,000 students experiencing disadvantage attend our *Learning Clubs* each year. But when schools were closed due to COVID-19, so were our *Learning Clubs*. Thanks to ongoing support from supporters like you, we were able to act quickly to trial moving our clubs to a digital platform.

We started with students in years 10, 11 and 12 as this was a critical point in their education journey. The first digital *Learning Club* was trialed in regional Victoria just a few weeks after school closures began.

Like our physical *Learning Clubs*, volunteer tutors support students with homework and subjects they are struggling with at school. This helped parents who felt they didn't have the skills or education themselves to support their children with learning.

The trial was very well received and gave some students, who previously couldn't attend due to transport or other constraints, the opportunity to take part. It has been rolled out to other locations and we are exploring offering this on an ongoing basis in future.



"Being part of the Digital Learning Club, I'm supported by tutors who I know I can rely on should I need help with anything. The program has provided a way for me to strengthen my understanding of certain concepts across the subjects I am undertaking. The Smith Family staff and tutors are always trying to ensure you are having the best possible experience, whether it be the way tutors are presenting or how your overall tutoring session went, they are always here to help."

Year 12 *Learning Club* participant, Shepparton

Ids doesn't want students to miss out

For years, Ids has been supporting children in need as a sponsor. When he retired, he started volunteering to help deliver our learning programs. And he's making a great impact!

Q. Why did you start supporting The Smith Family?

A. I think it is terrible if kids don't have opportunities. I have been very lucky. I was a teacher earlier in my career, so education is very important to me. After that I was a civil engineer. I hope that all these kids can get jobs that they will find just as satisfying.

Q. What do you do as a Learning Club tutor?

A. The children ask me to help them with their maths homework. I like them to try to do it themselves first, but then I show them how it can be done in the easiest way possible. And you see the next week that they do it themselves. If you can just give them a bit of attention, that's all they need sometimes.

Q. What do you do as an iTrack mentor?

A. It's a program for older students who are starting to think about what they might like to do in life after school. Some have an idea of what they want to do, others don't. As a mentor,



Ids, Learning Club and iTrack volunteer

I try to encourage them to think about other options in case they can't get their first option. We discuss what subjects they should do in their last years of school. And it can include helping them prepare for interviews. I enjoy the interaction and seeing them grow.

We're so grateful to volunteers like Ids. Combined with the support from generous donors like you, it's how we achieve great results for students in need.

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