

ALL PLAY

SEASON IMPROVEMENTS

CONCENTRATION

27%
IMPR

ADAPTABILITY

16%
IMPR

SOCIAL SKILLS

20%
IMPR



MILESTONES

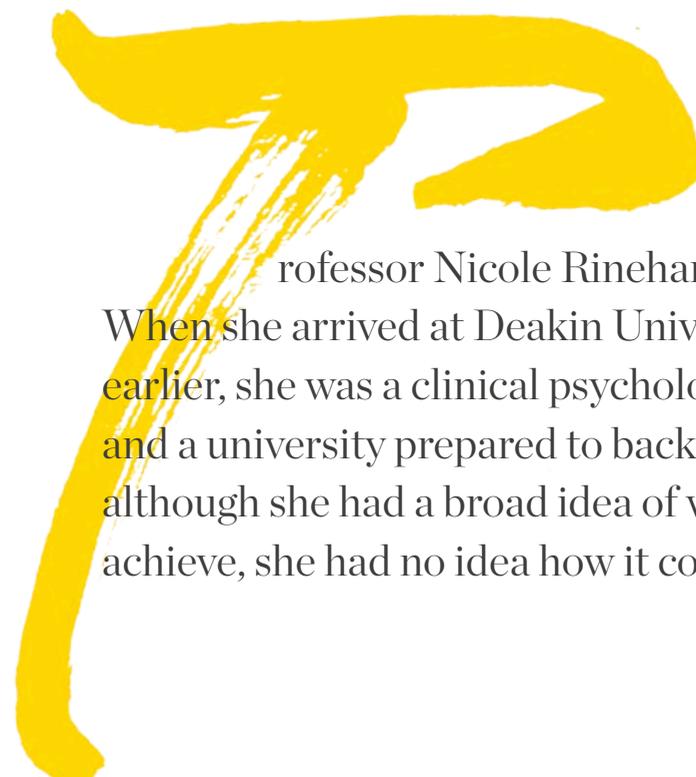
4 NEW FRIENDS

(MICHAEL, BECKY, JOHN & KAT)

IMPROVEMENT IN SELF ESTEEM

REDUCED BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES

ALL STARS



Professor Nicole Rinehart was frustrated. When she arrived at Deakin University, two years earlier, she was a clinical psychologist with a big idea and a university prepared to back it. The problem was, although she had a broad idea of what she wanted to achieve, she had no idea how it could be done.

*Figures opposite are based on some of the expected benefits of participation in Auskick based on past research on sports participation in children. A study on the specific benefits of Auskick participation is underway.

FEATURED: Nicole Rinehart

Director of the Deakin Child Centre & Director of Clinical and Community Partnerships at Deakin University.



OR ALMOST TWO DECADES PROFESSOR

Nicole Rinehart had been researching brain science and the assessment and treatment of neurological disorders. 'I was doing all this research and then on Fridays I would go to the clinic and see families with children with autism and Asperger's,' she remembers.

'Then one day it hit me: for all this research, very little was actually changing for the children and their families.'

The tragic fact is, Prof. Rinehart explains, it can take over a decade for research to be translated into practical interventions. What if, she wondered, she could devise a new platform within the community in which researchers and industry could come together and make a real difference in the lives of children who face developmental challenges?

There was simply nothing in the world on the scale of what she imagined. She knew a pathway had to exist, but here she was two years later, with the big idea yet to materialise.

'I was on the computer registering my son for Auskick,' she remembers, 'and I began to think, *what if my son had autism? What if he couldn't do this?*'

At that moment, Prof. Rinehart knew she had found her idea – sport could be the vehicle for change.

'Kids with autism and Asperger's who have been engaged in sports from an early age do so much better socially than those who for whatever reason haven't' says Prof. Rinehart.

'When you start to unpick it, sport is so powerful – it's important socially, it's a tool for communication, it's a rite of passage.

'If you are born with Asperger's and you are not good at communication and not good at games, but every lunchtime you're kicking a ball around the football field, you are accepted. There is kudos around sport.

'Also, for children who have developmental challenges, movement can make a huge difference. It can be very calming, and it can help them focus.

'Currently, there's this invisible barrier. There are many obstacles in the way for parents who are trying to get their kids involved in sports.'

Suddenly optimistic, she tapped out an email to the AFL, suggesting they get together to talk about how they might create something that would better support children, their families and coaches to facilitate greater participation for children with a developmental disorder on the sporting field.

The email worked its way up through the ranks of the AFL and landed in the inbox of the head of FIDA AFL, Logan Whitaker, who was



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charged with developing a program of AFL for people with an intellectual disability.

'When we spoke, we just went bang!' says Prof. Rinehart. 'We had exactly the same idea. I was coming from a research angle and he was doing it on the ground every day and we were both passionate! So I said, "let's take this mission on!"'

Prof. Rinehart explains that the plan had to be more than a sports program – it needed to be backed by solid research.

'The risk of putting a child with a disability into something and it going wrong can be devastating. It can really set a child back'.



'The AFL had already set up an *Autism Only* AFL Auskick Centre, so we decided to do a small pilot study,' she explains.

'What we discovered was that the kids loved it, and there was also a real improvement in motor skills.'

The study also showed an immediate knock-on effect to the dads' mental health, she says. 'In the clinic I always see mums, not dads – they are usually working.' On the weekends though, she explains, they are cheering from the sidelines with the other dads, they are actually participating in the child's therapy.

In November 2015, the Deakin Child Study Centre formally partnered with the AFL under a three-year research agreement to create the ALLPlay Sports Program.

Word soon got around about the proposed ground-breaking program, and Prof. Rinehart secured a meeting with Manny Stul, head of Moose Toys, an international company with an impressive philanthropic foundation. Six minutes into her pitch, Manny Stul agreed to totally fund the research.

With the AFL on board and funding in place, ALLPlay is now being rolled out.

'ALLPlay is evidence-based and community driven,' Prof. Rinehart says. And that is the game changer.

'The first year of the program is trying to

understand the issues through community driven research,' says Prof. Reinhart. 'We're doing a national survey, which will go to the community, coaches and kids that are engaged in AFL, as well as families who would like to be engaged but aren't.'

'Then next year we will develop the ALLPlay website. There will be information and resources for parents, as well as coach training. We're conceptualising it as a tool kit.'

'ALLPlay', says Prof. Rinehart, 'is a complete departure from the way children with developmental challenges have been treated. When a child has been diagnosed with autism the advice has always been to go and do a solitary sport. You can see why people do that, because people with autism often like to be alone and also it's easier.'

AFL football is the complete opposite. 'It's very different from tennis where there are rules and clean surfaces. When you play AFL it's muddy, it's cold, it's uncomfortable.'

'There's a lot of **reading** the play in AFL,' she adds. 'Kids with autism don't read the play socially, so if they can learn to read the play in sport, maybe it can effect reading the play in other areas.'

A key feature of the ALLPlay program is that the framework is able to be replicated across most sports. It can even be adapted especially for schools.



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For Prof. Rinehart, ALLPlay is the reason she came to Deakin. 'I could have gone on only doing research and publishing papers, but I wanted to actually do something that would deliver tangible outcomes for families now.'

'I think modern research leaders have to be able to move from a scientific panel to a community forum, to holding the hand of a parent, to the business world – and know the language and points of connection. The Deakin difference is that professors are given every opportunity to learn these different languages and come at research in a new way'.

'When I initially met with head of the School of Psychology Professor Greg Tooley, he did not skip a beat and immediately said, "brilliant idea, we back this 100 percent." When you work under leaders like this, amazing things start to happen.' 

Never stop discovering, never stop learning.
www.allplay.org.au

