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Young Children's Meaning-making About the Causes of Illness  
within the Family Context

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## **Abstract**

With the current prioritising of child health promotion, practitioners in health, education, and social services are facing the challenge of providing effective health education programmes for young children. Appreciation of the role that families play in young children's meaning-making about the causes of illness is likely to assist practitioners to reach this goal. To date, researchers have largely sought to determine children's understanding at various stages of cognitive development rather than exploring how children might acquire, process, and share their knowledge within particular social contexts. However, attention is increasingly turning to sociocultural aspects of children's learning and development, and the need to explore the various ways in which children's knowledge of health and illness is acquired in everyday contexts.

Adopting a socioconstructivist perspective of children's learning and development, and using a narrative methodology, this study sought to identify the ways in which young children's illness causality concepts are embedded in the sociocultural context of the family. In-depth interviews were undertaken with five four-year-old children, their parents/guardians, sibling/s aged five to nine years and two other family members (29 participants in total). Participants reflected a diversity of cultural communities, spiritual orientations, and family structure. To aid the elicitation of young children's narrative accounts of illness causality, children were invited to create a storybook about 'getting sick' utilising art materials and photographs of children experiencing illness. A social interactional approach was then employed to interpret participants' narratives.

Findings indicate that preschoolers draw heavily on their family contexts in their meaning-making about the causes of illness. Furthermore, young children's illness causality constructions are significantly influenced by the particular illness experiences, illness prevention messages and behavioural rules within their families. Consequently, researchers are encouraged to further explore the social construction of children's knowledge, and practitioners are urged to utilise children's existing understandings and associated family practices as the context for children's learning about health and well-being. By viewing family members as essential partners in the education of young children, practitioners may be better placed to develop effective health education programmes and provide enhanced psychosocial support for young children and their families.

## **Preface**

The content of this thesis is based on research undertaken during two separate enrolments with two different faculties between October 2003 and September 2012. I began this thesis under the auspices of the Department of Learning and Teaching at Massey University but, due to ill health in my immediate family, needed to suspend my studies in July 2005. Returning to the doctoral programme in March 2010, with my previous supervisors having retired and/or relocated overseas, I commenced my study under the guidance of health psychology staff within the School of Psychology at Massey University. I believe that this thesis has benefited from my involvement with both faculties, and that the passage of time and ensuing academic, professional and life experiences during the past nine years have served to enhance this study.

The research described in this thesis was also disseminated in three research manuscripts which were published in the following journals: ‘Early Child Development and Care’; ‘Health’; and ‘Psychology, Health and Medicine’ over the period 2012-2013 (see Appendix 1). While my supervisors, Dr Christine Stephens and Dr Antonia Lyons, provided valuable advice regarding the publication of these manuscripts and are included as co-authors on the papers, the ideas contained within this thesis are entirely my own.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (reference number 04/68), and the kindergarten management’s research access and ethics committee (approval granted May 2005). In June 2010 ethical approval was extended for a further two years (to June 2012), and retention of the data extended until June 2014. Additionally, a series of letters were sent to participants informing them of the progress of the research (see Appendices 2-4).

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
<b>Chapter One – Background .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Focus of inquiry .....	8
1.2 Significance of the topic.....	8
1.3 Impetus for the study.....	11
1.4 Continuing research.....	14
1.5 Research question and aims of the study .....	15
1.6 Meaning of terms .....	15
1.7 Outline of the thesis.....	16
<b>Chapter Two – Views on young children’s knowledge of illness causality .....</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	19
2.2 Dominance of maturational models .....	20
2.3 Challenges to traditional approaches.....	21
2.4 Intuitive/naïve theories perspective.....	22
2.5 Everyday understandings in everyday contexts .....	24
2.6 Importance of prior knowledge .....	26
2.7 Advancing research and practice.....	27
2.8 Summary .....	30
<b>Chapter Three – Methodology.....</b>	<b>32</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	32
3.2 Socio-constructivist framework .....	33
3.3 A focus on family.....	35
3.4 Narrative inquiry .....	38
3.5 Notions of childhood.....	41
3.6 Research with young children.....	43
3.7 Summary .....	46
<b>Chapter Four – Method.....</b>	<b>48</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	48
4.2 Participants.....	49

4.3	Data collection .....	51
4.4	Working in relationship.....	55
4.5	Evaluation .....	58
4.6	Summary .....	61
<b>Chapter Five – Analysis.....</b>		<b>62</b>
5.1	Introduction .....	62
5.2	Selecting a method of analysis .....	62
5.3	A social interactional approach .....	64
5.4	Reflections on the interpretive process .....	67
5.5	Summary .....	71
<b>Chapter Six – Young children’s illness causality constructions .....</b>		<b>72</b>
6.1	Introduction .....	72
6.2	Behaviour-based understandings .....	72
6.3	Illness prevention messages and behavioural rules.....	74
6.4	Children’s constructions in relation to theory .....	75
6.5	Folkbiology and the regulation of health behaviours.....	78
6.6	Summary .....	80
<b>Chapter Seven – Young children’s meaning-making within the family context.....</b>		<b>82</b>
7.1	Introduction .....	82
7.2	Constructing meanings via participation in family life.....	82
7.3	Children’s meaning-making in relation to the family context .....	87
7.4	Situating meanings within family understandings and experiences .....	95
7.5	Summary .....	98
<b>Chapter Eight – Conclusions .....</b>		<b>99</b>
8.1	Introduction .....	99
8.2	Aims of the inquiry .....	99
8.3	Key arguments .....	100
8.4	Contributions.....	101
8.5	Implications.....	103
8.6	Recommended strategies in applied settings.....	107
8.7	Strengths and limitations .....	112
8.8	Future research .....	114
8.9	Final reflections.....	115

<b>Summary statements.....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>141</b>
Appendix 1 Manuscript references .....	141
Appendix 2 Letter to participants (14 November 2006).....	142
Appendix 3 Letter to participants (16 July 2010) .....	143
Appendix 4 Letter to participants (23 February 2012) .....	144
Appendix 5 Semi-structured interview questions .....	145
Appendix 6 Authority for the release of tape transcripts .....	147
Appendix 7 Letter to kindergarten management .....	148
Appendix 8 Research access agreement .....	149
Appendix 9 Information sheet for teachers.....	152
Appendix 10 Consent form for head teachers .....	155
Appendix 11 Consent form for teachers .....	156
Appendix 12 Information sheet for parents/guardians .....	157
Appendix 13 Information sheet for family members.....	160
Appendix 14 Consent form for family members .....	162
Appendix 15 Consent form for parents/guardians .....	163
Appendix 16 Consent form for children .....	164
Appendix 17 Transcript notation .....	165
<b>List of tables</b>	
Table 1      Participant details.....	50