



These seven independent Montessori centres in South Australia are proud to connect and collaborate with each other. We call this network **SA Montessori**.

### A statement from the SA Montessori Ownership Team

The incidents described in the recent Four Corners exposé were reprehensible. There is no excuse for deliberately placing children at risk, for negligently overlooking fundamental safety measures, or for actions and decisions that compound harm following an event. It is shocking that there are so many centres circumventing the regulations that are put in place to protect the children in their care. We are, frankly, horrified and heartbroken to hear that there are children and families enduring these sorts of experiences. We are in early childhood because of a deep personal commitment to providing children with the best possible start in life. It is extremely disturbing to know that there are other providers who do not share those values. We are sure that many of our families are also feeling deeply concerned by that program, and the subsequent media coverage and social media conversations. We wanted to reach out directly to share some information about our own approach that we hope will be reassuring and remind you that your child is in a safe, supportive and uplifting environment. We are sure you already know that your child's educators are passionate and highly-skilled professionals and you will have experienced how incredibly dedicated our Directors are, but some of you may not have had a chance to learn about the ownership team in our SA Montessori community.

### **About our ownership structure & our values**

The Four Corners story focused heavily on an alleged correlation between private (“for profit”) childcare centres and lower quality outcomes for children. There was a particular emphasis on large chains and publicly listed companies with shareholders, with the suggestion that practices in these structures are inevitably driven by a profit incentive rather than a genuine commitment to the welfare and wellbeing of children. Here at SA Montessori, those sorts of operating models are completely foreign to us and we absolutely cannot relate to the mindset of prioritising income over a child's outcomes. We are not a franchise or a chain, we are a family. We encourage you to please read the attached resource, *SA Montessori: A Family, not a Franchise*, for more information.

Yes, we are privately operated, but each of the centres in the SA Montessori community is family-owned by a small group of passionate early childhood professionals. We are a group of five women who are deeply emotionally invested in providing exceptional experiences for children. For those of you who have not yet met us personally, please let me take a moment to introduce our ownership team.



Jessica Langford & Barbara Langford  
(Pictured with Jessica's son Robin)

Barbara Nache    Adriana Francescangeli    Pam Francescangeli

Barbara Langford is the founder and owner of *Jescott Montessori* (Magill), and is a part owner in all of the centres in the SA Montessori network. Her daughter, Jessica, was part of Jescott's inaugural class in 1989 before growing up to become a teacher there, then centre Director, eventually taking the step of going into leadership as co-owner of *Rosemont House Montessori*, *Lilliput Village Montessori*, *Little Oxford Montessori* and *Echoes Montessori*. Barb Nache started her Montessori journey as a mum, then an educator, before embracing the opportunity to become a centre operator when *Cedars Montessori* opened in the early '90s, and again with *Chancery Lane Montessori*. Adriana Francescangeli similarly started her Montessori career as a classroom teacher at Jescott, before transitioning into a partnership initially at *The Sails Montessori* at Westminster, which the college eventually took on internally, and now with *Lilliput Village Montessori* and *Little Oxford Montessori*. Barb N and Adriana both taught Jessica at Jescott, unaware that decades later she'd be working alongside them. Pam Francescangeli, Adriana's sister-in-law, is a proud Montessori mum after her daughters thrived in our classrooms, and after many years of working in administration to support the success of the centres she became a partner in *Rosemont House Montessori*, *Lilliput Village Montessori* and *Little Oxford Montessori*.

Within our ownership team, all five of us have direct teaching experience in our own classrooms, four of us have qualifications in early childhood education, and four of us are parents to children who attended, or currently attend, SA Montessori centres. We don't have any outside "investors", we are not answerable to separate shareholders who are demanding increased profit margins, we are personally responsible for our decision-making and we are driven by a genuine commitment to the children in our care. We do not look at spreadsheets of numbers to make our decisions, we engage with people. Three of our owners, Barbara Langford, Jessica and Pam, are involved on an everyday (and often every night!) basis, deeply immersed in the nuances of delivering quality service and the needs of individual children, families and educators. Two of our owners, Barb Nache and Adriana, have technically retired from a formal role in the classroom or day-to-day management, but both are still regularly involved, completely committed and emotionally invested. We are not anonymous shareholders, we are not outside investors, we are not faceless names listed on a corporate structure sheet. We are *accessible*, and we are *accountable*. We are in constant contact with our centre leaders, we are readily available to our individual educators, and we have frequent personal communication with our families. We can't guarantee perfection every day, because caring for children is incredibly complex and even after 30 years we know there is always more to learn and greater heights to strive for, but if something happens that is any less than the standard a child deserves then *we will be there* to make it right.

The decisions we make about the way that we operate are based on the rights and needs of the children. We do not rely on graphs with profit projections, we have discussions about the human experiences of the individuals in our centres and what we need to do to support, empower and nurture them. We pride ourselves on making child-centred and family-focused decisions, and on valuing our team members. This underlying ethos is largely due to our origins. Our first centre, Jescott Montessori in Magill, was founded back in 1989 by Barbara Langford for her daughter to attend as a two-year-old. "Jescott" is an amalgamation of the names of her children – Jessica and Scott. Barbara wasn't focused on starting a 'business', she had no strategic plan for it to grow, she simply wanted to provide a safe and nurturing place for her little girl to learn and flourish. At the time, she couldn't find an environment that met her expectations for what she felt her child deserved – what she felt *all children* deserved – so she created it herself. That question has been the ethos behind every decision we have made since then: *What can we do to create environments that offer everything that children truly deserve?* By maintaining this commitment to the people who matter most, and providing quality in our settings, our centres have flourished and thrived for decades. Each time a new centre has opened in our little network it has been because we have more families asking to be accommodated and we have responded to that need. Our success measure has never been the bottom line of a balance sheet; it is the feedback from families, the joyful experiences of our children, and the connection that our educators feel to the vital work that they do each day in the classroom.

There are countless examples that we could offer of decisions we make that are driven by our commitment to people, not a desire for profits. In each of our centres we look at its unique strengths, context and characters, and the needs of the families in that community, to find the right ways to go above and beyond in that setting. That can mean exceeding the required number of Early Childhood Teachers on the team, offering better adult-child ratios than required, maintaining smaller class sizes to protect our family-friendly atmosphere, refurbishing the environment to keep it fresh and welcoming, or all of the above. Fundamentally, we are not setting out trying to minimise costs, we are committed to maximising quality.

We operate with a private structure because of the efficiency and flexibility that this provides us with. This approach has allowed us to self-fund opportunities that became available to us, rather than having to wait and hope for grants or outside financial support. This has also given us the ability to move quickly to respond to the needs of children and families, not only in terms of establishing centres but also making decisions following feedback, new regulatory requirements or developments in best practice recommendations. We see this as one of the significant upsides of our model, as we are aware that in some not-for-profit structures there can be a slower approach to change and innovation because those outcomes are heavily dependent on the efficiency and experience of the board. We are certainly not criticising that model, and we absolutely believe that the sector *needs* more community-based services, we are simply explaining what we find to be beneficial about our approach to having a consistent group of highly experienced owners equipped to make effective decisions and willing to personally invest in continuous improvement.

We don't agree with the objection to the fundamental idea of having private operators in the early childhood sector. Just as doctors or psychologists can operate a private practice, while still making Medicare benefits accessible to their patients, we don't feel automatically uncomfortable with a caregiving service being a private structure, and we certainly don't feel that the person *using* that service should have less access to support simply because of the way the provider is structured. The Child Care Subsidy is a benefit owed and provided to the *family* on behalf of the child, and we don't certainly feel that any child or parent should be disadvantaged if the centre they choose, that aligns with their needs and values, happens to be 'private'. However, we are *completely* in favour of regulations or limitations that reduce the risk of operating models where investors are so far removed from the reality of early childhood education that they treat it as a money-making enterprise rather than understanding that doing this work is an absolute *privilege*.

In addition to helping you understand our ethos at the ownership level, we would also like to offer our families some practical reassurance on some of the themes highlighted in the Four Corners exposé. We hope that this will reinforce for you that you have made a positive choice in sending your child to a centre in the SA Montessori family, and that we are striving every single day to protect your child's welfare and enrich their well-being. We truly appreciate your confidence in us, we do not underestimate for a moment what a leap of faith it is to place your child in our care, and we will always endeavour to earn and maintain your trust.

### **Child protection**

We have many procedures in place to ensure that we are protecting the rights, safety and dignity of the child. We maintain our *Child Safe Environment Compliance* with the Department of Human Services, which is an ongoing objective measure of the protocols we have in place to keep children safe in our centres. Our guiding documents include our Child Protection Policy, our Child Safe Code of Conduct and our Well-being Pledge, all of which give our team members explicit instructions about what they must do (and what they must *not* do!) in relation to child protection. These procedures are made available through our Onboarding and Ongoing Development platform to ensure that all new team members immediately understand their obligation and that long-standing educators can regularly revisit these principles. These standards and practices are regularly reinforced through our team meetings and professional development. We also proactively embrace opportunities to reflect upon, and improve, our safety measures. For instance, last year ACECQA released *The National Model Code for Early Childhood Education and Care* to give guidance on best practice when it comes to gathering and storing images of children. This is not a regulation or requirement, simply a recommendation. We immediately dissected the National Model Code with our leadership team and chose to adopt it, collectively developing a range of additional resources to ensure we can uphold those best practice principles consistently.

Child protection is also embedded into our routines, which have an emphasis on teaching bodily autonomy and active consent from a very young age (hence practices like our 'standing nappy changes' for toddlers). Our learning programs equally embrace opportunities to teach children protective behaviours, from simple tools such as using proper names for physical anatomy through to more elaborate structures like implementing the *Keeping Children Safe Curriculum*. We are confident that we protect and uplift children through this two-pronged approach of having strict standards for our team members and providing empowering learning experiences for children.

### **Staff qualifications**

None of our centres have ever applied for, or held, exemptions from requirements around staff qualifications or ratios.

It is no secret that there is a shortage of educators in the early childhood sector, and finding team members can be a challenge. It is also a job that requires an enormous outpouring of emotional, physical and intellectual energy (and often without a lot of recognition from society about how challenging the work actually is) so there is a high degree of 'burn out' amongst early childhood educators which can lead to transitions within teams. So, it is a complex landscape to navigate, and finding and retaining teachers is not a simple task or a flawless process. Yet our leaders and educators alike work *incredibly* hard to ensure that we are never out of ratio, we are always operating with the right qualifications within the team, and that every member of our team is equipped with the right expertise and training to provide exceptional experiences for children.

### **Staff support**

We have many strategies in place to ensure that we have highly-skilled educators who are encouraged to remain with us. We provide an annual scholarship program funding further education and Montessori training to help empower our team members and deepen their connection to their professional 'home away from home'. We are also deeply committed to staff well-being, as evidenced not only by the requirements of our Positive Mental Well-being and Psychosocial Health Policy, but also through projects such as the Well-being Pledge, which was developed as a collaborative process with all of our team members to identify the values they pledge to uphold in supporting each other, families and themselves. We also fund an Employee Assistance Program for all team members, and we are always actively searching for new ways to reduce stress and enhance well-being, such as our upcoming SA Montessori Well-being Day.

### **CCTV**

At present, none of our centres have CCTV installed. Last year we explored this option with an IT consulting firm with experience in the early childhood sector. The recommendation made to us was that this would actually pose *more* of a threat to the privacy and safety of our children, because these CCTV systems are quite vulnerable to being hacked and childcare centres have been targeted by the type of nefarious individuals who are seeking imagery of young children. At this stage, until a more secure system can be provided, we believe that introducing CCTV would increase the risk of harm and we are confident that our robust and rigorous Child Protection measures already keep children safe in our settings. We are very open to the idea of CCTV if/when a system is available that protects the privacy and dignity of children.

### **Quality Ratings**

None of our centres have *ever* been identified as 'Working Towards' the Standard or in breach of the Standards. Two of our centres have held the Excellent Rating for two consecutive terms each. Most of our centres are rated as Exceeding the Standards. Two of our centres that are rated as 'Meeting' the Standards were assessed within their first months of opening, and it is almost impossible to achieve the 'Exceeding' Rating at that point because the Exceeding Themes include demonstrating that practices are 'embedded', which means they occur consistently amongst all staff and are maintained over time. Obviously, a new centre is not able to show that practices are maintained *over time*, so it is openly acknowledged by the Education Standards Board that new centres undergoing their first assessment are not expected to be able to achieve that level. We are proud that our quality is reflected in our high Ratings, but we also believe that the best and most accurate measure is the happiness of our children and the positive feedback from our parents.

As we have mentioned, we take our role and responsibility as early childhood providers very seriously. It is not a business for us, it is a calling. This is our purpose in life, a legacy that we have been building for 35 years, and a commitment that we will uphold for many years to come. It is not only something we do within our own centres, we also advocate for the rights of the child in broader contexts. Our founder, Barbara Langford, has spent 35 years volunteering for a range of not-for-profit organisations and child advocacy groups, including the Australian Childcare Alliance, Montessori Australia Foundation, Australian Institute for Intergenerational Practice and various government stakeholder boards. This commitment to giving back to the community, and campaigning for the rights of the child, is the true north of the moral compass that guides all of us to operate with ethics and integrity.

Our educators and Directors do ensure that we are always informed of feedback from families, but we also welcome parents to contact us directly if you ever have concerns, queries or suggestions.

Pam Francescangeli: [admin@samontessori.com.au](mailto:admin@samontessori.com.au)

Jessica Langford: [jessica@samontessori.com.au](mailto:jessica@samontessori.com.au)

Barbara Langford: [ceo@samontessori.com.au](mailto:ceo@samontessori.com.au)

If you initially reach out by email, but would prefer to speak by phone or meet in person, we will embrace the opportunity to chat or meet you. We learn an enormous amount from our families, and the insights that you give us are translated into what we give back to all the families in our community.

As Barb Nache and Adriana Francescangeli have retired from a formal classroom or day-to-day management role, we will not share their personal contact details here. However, we assure you that we communicate with them closely about the centres that they operate, and they will be involved in any decision-making or responses to your feedback.

If you ever have concerns or complaints that you feel go unheard or unanswered in your centre, we remind you that you can turn to the Education Standards Board for support. While we are confident that this is not likely to be relevant in our settings, due to our collective commitment to hearing your voices and finding positive resolutions, we still want to ensure that all of our families are aware of this option. Details can be found at the link below:

<https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-and-learning/general-information/feedback-and-complaints/child-care-services>

Our work providing early childhood experiences for young children is a privilege. We carry the weight of that responsibility, balanced by the incredible uplift of seeing the discovery and delight that these children enjoy on a daily basis. The children who were the first members of the SA Montessori community are now adults, who can tell us firsthand that they still hold joyful memories of their time in our classrooms. Having children and parents who still connect with us, years or decades after their children graduated, to let us know that they still treasure that time and value those connections. That, to us, is the greatest reward we could ever ask for.

With appreciation,



Jessica Langford

*Also, on behalf of:*  
*Barbara Langford*  
*Barbara Nache*  
*Adriana Francescangeli*  
*Pam Francescangeli*