

# Little Luke's a hero to boffins

LUKE Shah is only five, but he's set to help thousands of premature babies.

Born almost three months early, Luke (left) is one of 138 Victorian children whose brains were scanned as newborns as part of a world-first study.

Six years into the project, researchers from Melbourne's Howard Florey Institute are now sending their subjects, including Luke, back to the scanner.

The long-term aim is to match brain abnormalities

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in premature babies with the problems they typically face later in life — and then prevent them.

Scientist Deanne Thompson, who presented the study at last week's international Human Brain Mapping conference in Melbourne, said the key was in monitoring the "white matter" that links the two sides of the brain.

"Premature infants have a reduced connection between the two hemispheres and often have difficulties with thinking, reasoning, problem solving and language," she said.

"So if we can identify that a baby is likely to have certain learning difficulties, for example (by looking at their brain scan), treatments such as speech therapy can be targeted to them early."

Picture: TIM CARRAFA