

# Communities for Children Forum

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## Summary Report

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## The CfC Conference

### Overall themes

The Communities for Children conference was a success. Responding to advice from the grass roots, the conference was designed to maximise interaction between CfC practitioners. Participants, both Program Managers and Local Evaluators, came together and shared their professional knowledge and skills with other members of the CfC network. They had many opportunities for conversations about how to refine and improve their practices. Participants recharged their batteries in a warm and friendly environment with colleagues and friends. People understood and appreciated the difficulties associated with holding a government conference with an impending election. They valued the opportunity to come together as a community and review their involvement in CfC.

The two day Conference had a number of elements. On day 1:

1. Meeting new colleagues
2. A plenary session on collaboration
3. A briefing session on the national evaluation and reporting
4. A plenary session on sustainability - the world café
5. An extended session for Local Evaluators....

On day 2:

1. A presentation by Julian Pocock from the Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
2. Playback theatre - stories from practitioners working with Indigenous families and their children
3. A feedback report from Local Evaluators on their conference deliberations
4. A number of break out sessions addressing specific issues in community engagement

Across the sessions, some common themes emerged. The commitment to collaboration runs deep in the CfC community and emerges in manifold ways. Therefore skills in relationship building lie at the heart of the CfC endeavour. Program Managers walk a daily tightrope in managing the complex interests at the core of the program. They have learned many valuable lessons that, potentially, constitute an important legacy for human services.

Sustainability remains a challenge, and is being addressed with persistence and creativity. In some communities, a change is visible in the level of interaction between services, and the vision of a child-friendly community has tangible presence.

Participants were keen to explore some of the more challenging aspects of their role. Indigenous participation was a strong theme of the conference, and is being addressed in many sites, urban and remote. In the break out sessions, participants explored strategies and solutions for specific communities - fathers, the 'hard to reach' - and for creative community engagement.

## Collaboration

This session created extensive conversations in response to some key questions.

Practitioners are passionate and articulate about collaboration. They understand and appreciate the challenge of managing the complex balancing act required by the role of Facilitating Partners. The model is a positive force for collaboration, shaping a concerted focus on creating child-friendly communities. CfC gives the Facilitating Partners an unusual role as the 'social glue' among local services – coordinating, communicating, catalysing strategic approaches to early intervention, building capacity among local services. The core skills are in managing relationships and creating trust.

The Facilitation role is sustained by a commitment to the vision of child friendly communities. It also requires openness to the particular contributions that can be made by local agencies and individuals. While FP's need to play a visionary role, the 'little steps' are important too.

Program Managers are tightrope walkers. They have to manage the tension between contract management and relationship-building with Community Partners. For some Managers, even after two years in the role, it doesn't get easier. Many Managers noted that the challenges and difficulties are multiplied in remote communities. Constant, persistent communication is essential ("Keep telling the story", "listen!"). When things go wrong it is important to intervene early ("Nip it in the bud"). Program Managers set clear and transparent expectations about the Partners' responsibilities ("Manage CPs as a team - make sure there are clear roles"). They treat Community Partners as equals on a journey of mutual professional development. They are open and flexible about adapting to emerging realities. They celebrate achievements and milestones. They talk about the need to 'develop a common language'.

Participants noted many challenges about reporting and accountability to FaHCSIA, especially for Community Partners, and have dealt with these constraints with patience and persistence. One participant noted that it was important not to create an "'us and them' in relation to accountability". Some participants had a much stronger understanding of the tension between local service provision and central accountability. Many people thought that the reporting arrangements could be simplified. They were also keen to see the aggregate results of their endeavours available in national reports.

## Sustainability

Participants were proud of their legacy. Many reported significant achievement. They had significantly increased level of communication amongst services in the local community. Referral pathways were working better. The communities had higher understanding and awareness of early childhood development and the value of preventative work. There had been a “change of thinking” with services refocused on the ‘whole community’. Some talked of a new value in hearing children’s voices. Some had created tangible spaces for families to use and enjoy. There was more recognition of the value of agencies working together for the common good of the whole community.

The most common challenge around sustainability was time. Change takes time. There were a few comments about ‘short term funding’. One commented: “Don’t go near vulnerable communities unless you are there for the long haul”.

Another challenge was in managing the community expectations: while most Facilitating Partners had sent very clear messages to Community Partners about CfC not offering ongoing funding, it was harder to convey this to the broader community. One commented that it was “hard to plan cessation when the program is running full steam”.

Many programs were responding to these challenges with careful planning around sustainability. Some were seeking alternative sources of funding. Some were scaling down activities while maintaining focus on the Communities for Children model. Others saw that outcomes for families can be achieved in some other ways. Others were adopting a kind of ‘Train the trainer’ model for spreading their skills and approaches. They were keen to see a ‘Footprint of knowledge’ established – capacity and knowledge that will stay in community. One commented that it ‘Doesn’t need to be expensive to be effective’.

Program Managers talked about how to develop and sustain a ‘community of practice’ for professionals interested in creating child-friendly communities. The important lesson was that the message about the importance of early childhood needs to be put constantly (“like ‘quit smoking’”). Another important lesson was the value in partnerships with a whole range of organisations to promote the child friendly message. One commented that funding is key to getting people around table but not necessarily key to keeping people there.

Participants reviewed the sustainability of the Facilitating Partner role itself – the role as the ‘glue’ in CfC: coordinating, communicating, capacity-building. Many thought this was a crucial role in communities – advocacy, co-ordination

of a range of activities, facilitating opportunities for community partners, gaining community trust, lessening stress for Community Partners, assisting NGOs to be more realistic about funding and what can be achieved without letting community down. Some noted that we should be able to gently move out of Facilitating Partner role and community can take over and continue role. In other areas, with a community brokerage model, there was no need to continue Facilitating Partner role. Others noted that the Facilitating Partner is fulfilling interagency facilitation role in some communities and this needed to continue in some form. Others thought the community development aspect deserved ongoing funding.

## **Julian Pocock – SNAICC**

Julian Pocock, CEO of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), introduced his organisation. He highlighted SNAICC's intention to expand its focus on early childhood, prevention and early intervention. He argued that, at a policy, program, agency, community and family level, we need to plan for children's well being rather than react to welfare issues. He noted that children's connection to family, land and culture are the critical foundations for their well being.

Julian, spoke movingly about his own journey into working with Indigenous communities. He talked of the need to encourage NGOs to take an active role in the lives of Aboriginal children. He argued for the need to dispel the myth that Aboriginals are 'hopeless and hapless'.

He invited people to find their own personal connection to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story. He talked of the need to connect with the community, to build relationships. It was preferable if money is not the starting point for the relationship, and that the motivation was about relationship because it is the "good thing to do".

Julian introduced the concept of a 'Cultural Competence Continuum'<sup>1</sup> and invited people to commit to developing this competence<sup>2</sup> The highest level of development would be characterised by organisations that hold culture in high

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<sup>1</sup> This continuum, from Julian's presentation, is available on the CAFCA web site at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/evaluation/networkresources.html>

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the continuum travels from 'cultural destructiveness' to 'cultural proficiency'  
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esteem. They seek to add to the knowledge base of culturally competent practice by conducting research, influencing approaches to care, and improving relations between cultures. They would promote self-determination. Julian acknowledged the tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations and encouraged the latter to choose to be involved.

Julian provided examples of useful resources available to support these initiatives. The SNAICC web site provides a valuable source of advice and information on these issues ([www.snaicc.asn.au](http://www.snaicc.asn.au))

## **Playback Theatre**

This session, focussed on indigenous themes, was led by the Playback Theatre Sydney group. Playback invited participants to have their stories interpreted by actors and 'played back' to the CfC community. Three main stories were presented. The first, from Deception Bay was about an Indigenous community that wanted to organise the next Family Fun Day – "The Big Day Out". The Facilitating Partner had to work through a lot of red tape to get this to happen. The story highlighted the stress we feel when we want to meet the expectations of our communities, and the joy when we get others involved in successful activities. The next story, from Miller, was about an Indigenous supported playgroup. The FP was not able to attract sufficient numbers to the playgroup until opened up to non-Indigenous families (with agreement of Indigenous families). Now all playgroups are mixed unless there is a specific request. This has led to increasing awareness of issues in Indigenous health. People are making connections. The last story, performed with some gusto, was about the complicated life of a non-Indigenous mother of an Indigenous child. Mum was trying to preserve her professional boundaries in negotiations with important stakeholders. But circumstances conspired to ensure that domestic and community interest kept erupting across these boundaries. In the end, she just had to accept her circumstances and let the world unfold, to a happy conclusion.

## Local Evaluators

The Local Evaluator Feedback session presented conclusions from an intensive discussion between Local Evaluators on the first day of the Conference. It was presented by Rachel Robinson & Kristy Muir and a panel with Sue Hayes (FaHCSIA), Sue Christophers (Onkaparinga site) and Bernadette Barry (The Smith Family).

Rachel and Kristy provided a comprehensive review of the intentions, processes and challenges faced by FP's and Local Evaluators. They drew specific conclusions about where we can 'move forward'<sup>3</sup>. It is important to ensure role clarity and complementarities in the respective roles. FPs are the 'hub' for all communications and they need to initiate face to face strategy meetings with Local Evaluators. Participants should conduct joint reviews of program logic and associated outcomes. We need to promote links between Local Evaluators to reduce their isolation. It is important to share successes. There is room for more value in developing stronger relationships between Local Evaluators, FaHCSIA and the National Evaluation.

In the question and answer session, Kristy highlighted the finding that there is clear evidence that there has been an increase in children's services available in local communities. . Another Program Manager commented on the value of LE's for programs that had learned much more about evaluation works and how to do it. In particular, smaller NGOs would not have a lot of experience with formal evaluation.

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<sup>3</sup> See the power points available on the CAFCA web site at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/evaluation/networkresources.html>  
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## Day 2 Break out sessions

The last session on Day two was organised in break-out sessions – providing opportunities for extended smaller group discussion around nominated issues

### **Creative community engagement**

One session challenged participants to work through more creative forms of community engagement. The group first established basic principles: involve and consult with the community, engage with purpose. Participants noted that it is important to use varied methods of engagement and communication. People need opportunities for individual expression. The strategies must be open, flexible and non-judgemental. There must be time and space for ideas to emerge.

The group then identified a diverse range of creative forms through which to engage the community. Under broad headings - music, craft, play, excursions, community mapping, drama, reading - a number of detailed strategies were reviewed. A copy of the workshop notes from this session is available on the CAFCA web site and includes principles for engagement and ideas for engagement.

### **Who have we not reached that we should have?**

This session invited participants to discuss how to reach communities that remain outside the CfC umbrella but should be included. The group was clear that there were a range of definitions for the 'hard to reach' and it was not necessarily homogenous, easy to categorise, communities. The causes and barriers were multiple: transport, social isolation, sub cultures, people who just don't see the relevance of the service.

The participants discussed strategies to address a range of individuals and communities who were not yet engaged in CfC services. Programs need to go where the need is (Outreach services, shopping centres, milk bars, sports events, door knocking, "it's most successful to connect with a small group in the community"). The importance of 'soft entry' programs was highlighted – gentle, informal points of interaction that gave plenty of space and choice to clients. The form, indeed the very language, of communications to potential clients is of vital importance. No particular approach is guaranteed, so multiple contact strategies are recommended. Successful communication strategies most often emerge from direct consultation with the client group. Participants also noted some common themes and features underlying effective strategies - don't emphasise the 'deficit', understand and work with sub cultures, be aware that they might not want or need our interventions (some people do 'choose' not to access our services for a range of reasons). It is essential to

better understand the needs, interests and motivations of client groups. Don't make assumptions.

### **Working with fathers**

The group addressed the challenge of working with fathers. They concluded that it was important to work with what makes them comfortable e.g. music, play models. It was important to 'Keep listening' and find the right way to do it. The best place to start is "not always what we think". They were cautioned to "Resist aggressive education". "If you know it's worth doing, keep persisting to find the right way". It takes time. Engaging the 'first dad' is a crucial step. Other important lessons were modelling of behaviours for dads, getting dads to come with their children. Make personal invitations that the parents can't refuse. Work with dads should be "activity focused", providing opportunities for them to interact with their children.

### **Wrap up**

Sue Hayes closed the program, thanking participants for their enthusiastic participation and their valuable contributions.

## List of presentations and documents available from CAFCA

URL: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/evaluation/networkresources.html>

To obtain a free copy of the presentations from the November 2007 CfC Forum on CD please contact Ren Adams at The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA) by email on [Ren.Adams@aifs.gov.au](mailto:Ren.Adams@aifs.gov.au) or phone 03 9214 7891.

Presentations and notes from the forum are listed below. All items on the CD are in Portable Document Format (PDF).

### Summary of sessions and workshop notes

1. Summary of Sessions held at CfC Forum – Ian Colley (facilitator)
2. Principles for Engagement – Workshop Notes - Sharn Rocco (facilitator)

### List of presentations available under forum sessions

#### *Local Evaluators Session*

Three presentations outlining different approaches to local evaluation

3. Local Evaluation in Kingston Loganlea site - Kym Macfarlane
4. Local Evaluation in Greater Dandenong site - Tracey Delaney
5. Local Evaluation in Wyong and Campbelltown site - Paul Bullen

#### *Evaluation and Reporting Session*

6. SFCS 2004-2008 Evaluation – Progress to Date – Wendy Mouat (FaHCSIA)
7. CfC Baseline – Dr Kristy Muir (SPRC)
8. Stronger Families in Australia Study – Sarah Wise (AIFS)

#### *Snapshots presentations of some measurable outcomes achieved to date*

9. Kingston Loganlea site – Geraldine Harris and Sarah Chandler
10. NW Adelaide site – Kerry Blackmore and Judyth Roberts
11. Armadale site – Helen Burgess and Maria Harries

#### *Presentation from Guest Speaker*

12. CfC - A place for Aboriginal & Torres children - Julian Pocock - Executive Officer - SNAICC

#### *Feedback from Local Evaluators Session*

13. Local Evaluators Report Back - 8 Nov

#### *Engagement Sessions*

14. Working with Fathers – Judi Geggi – Family Action Centre