



# Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	<b>The Brimbank Children's Circus Project</b>
<b>Project practice</b>	<b>Supported parenting and literacy program for children</b>
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	Westside Circus Incorporated Fitzroy, Melbourne, VIC
<b>Start date</b>	January 2007
<b>Focal areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Creating child friendly communities</li><li>• Supporting families and parents</li><li>• Early learning and care</li></ul>
<b>Program</b>	Communities for Children
<b>Issue</b>	There is a local need to build capacity of parents and families to increase literacy and learning in 3-5 year olds in the City of Brimbank. Traditionally this is a socio-economically deprived area in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. <i>The Brimbank Children's Circus Project</i> targets newly arrived and refugee families including special needs and culturally & linguistically diverse (CALD) groups.
<b>Program context</b>	<p>The Westside Circus is a not for profit, community arts organisation which is based in Fitzroy, Melbourne. As a vibrant and growing community arts organisation, Westside create circus, performance, physical theatre, music and leadership opportunities for young people. Westside's core aim is to make a tangible difference for young people between the ages of 3 and 25 from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to access exciting and challenging programs which build confidence, promote personal wellbeing and create positive relationships both with peers and the community.</p> <p>Westside Circus is a non-animal, non-traditional circus which uses the expression of ideas and interests of its youth participants as a modality to build confidence and resilience. All projects are structured around an ethos of participation, growth and community.</p> <p>This project fits within the Westside Special Projects Unit which aims to initiate projects which extend the use of circus as a medium to engage diverse groups and their wider communities.</p> <p>The work with the community is based on social justice models and incorporates community arts and community development frameworks. This includes working alongside other community organisations, advocating for support and creating opportunities for diverse cultural groups to participate in their local community. In doing so, social circus is used to create healthy and expressive communities.</p> <p>The Brimbank Children's Circus Project is promising in that it combines the faculty of circus arts activities, a strong literacy concept and a community learning approach to enable children and their parents to experience supported parent-child interaction and literacy in a playful and supportive environment. This strategy aims to stimulate early literacy, social inclusion and community participation via the application and encouragement of:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. creative and physical activity;</li><li>2. positive parent child interaction; and</li></ol>

3. participation in the local community.

This reflects the key objectives to:

1. unite families from specified target groups by encouraging participation in a community project;
2. improve literacy and language skills for targeted children in Brimbank; and
3. coach and support parents to engage in positive parent-child interactions (e.g., physical play or reading with their child).

## Practice description

### Model of practice

The Brimbank Children's Circus is based on the Social Circus Model. Its core practice utilises circus as the medium for risk taking, skill development, teamwork, trust, fear reduction and endurance. Creating performances enables participants to be a part of an exciting community activity that builds trust, self-esteem and self-efficacy. The social circus model builds physical, personal and social skills for both the group and the individual.

For the *individual*, it can forge development of a more positive body image that can impact on positive risk-taking and confidence. This can extend to the enhancement of creativity, persistence, limit setting as well as non-verbal communication. For the *group*, the progress can manifest as improved teamwork, social interaction and the use of safe and positive physical contact.

The program provides a series of 10-week circus and literacy workshop programs with parents and children to learn new games, circus activities, performance skills and social skills. Each workshop program hosts 15 parents and 15 children and culminates in a "show and tell" style performances for friends, family and the wider community.

Each of the Brimbank Children's Circus workshops emphasises the key ingredients outlined in the following sections.

### Short, thematic, and playful interactions

Each circus workshop emphasises fun, playful interaction between child and adult and both are actively involved in the class. Tasks and activities are kept short as one activity blends into the next, leaving little time for participants to disengage. Each week there is a different theme, (e.g., colours), which informs the content of games, creative activities and story time for the class. The workshops aim to provide the building blocks for future involvement in a range of activities (not only circus). Fun, play, creativity, coordination, strength, flexibility, community involvement and communication are emphasised.

Interactions between child and adult include learning skills such as acrobalance, manipulation, equilibrastics and performance tasks. Each circus skill brings with it a specific outcome. For instance, manipulation exercises (e.g., juggling), building resilience, developing eye-hand coordination, developing right/left brain activity, and developing eye-tracking strength essential for reading. Each workshop provides a creative space for the encouragement of self-expression, leadership, responsibility, social proficiency and inclusiveness.

### Inclusive community and family involvement

Each workshop involves children of all skill levels and abilities, using accumulative developmental milestones so new participants can begin with basics while others continue being challenged at their own level.

Each workshop brings the community together through:

- parents, family and carers' involvement in classes;
- family watching the end of semester performances; and
- being inclusive of families by allowing younger siblings to engage with the program.

Inclusive community and family involvement is a cornerstone of the actual practice.

---

### **Coordinated partnerships with various local groups**

The design and delivery of the workshops highlight the importance of forging collaborative links with other early childhood services. The workshops were delivered in partnership with local community groups which have included:

- Migrant Resource Centre North West (MRCNW);
- Noah's Ark;
- Sunshine Kindergarten;
- Fairbairn Road Kindergarten;
- Sunshine Heights Kindergarten;
- South Sunshine Kindergarten;
- Ridgeway Parade Preschool;
- Brimbank Preschool Association;
- C4C Playgroup Association;
- BPAC Brimbank Parents and Children Together Vietnamese Playgroup;
- VISION Vietnamese Playgroup;
- MacKillop Family Services; and
- Sunshine Primary School.

Westside approached these groups based on a selection criteria of geographic location and isolation from mainstream services, target group (e.g., disability/refugee communities) and current client base (e.g., the organisation had an existing group of children and parents, or was about to form such a group) and the organisation had an openness to engage their clients in new circus and literacy activities.

In-kind contribution from each group was essential in ensuring the project's success. Each group made various contributions depending on the needs and resources of their client group, including (but not limited to): space/space hire; transportation of participants to and from the workshop venue; staffing at each workshop; recruitment of participants; translation and interpretation; refreshments; child-minding services and liaison with participants outside of the workshop times.

### **A tailored circus kit**

A "Circus Kit" has been specifically designed for the project in consultation with Lady Gowrie Education. It highlights best practice in engaging disadvantaged and CALD families. The kit includes circus equipment; for instance story books, manipulation objects and musical instruments.

The kit plays a vital role in the sustainability of the work and building capacity within the community. A kit is given to each group after their 10 week program ends and group facilitators undertake professional development with Westside in order to continue using the Circus Kit.

### **Capacity building through professional development of relevant workers**

Alongside the workshop program, the Brimbank Children's Circus project engages preschool teachers, playgroup workers and community leaders in a professional development program. This builds the capacity of project workers to learn new ways of creatively working with CALD and disadvantaged groups. Using the Circus Kit as a primary resource, the workshops take the teachers/workers on a 4-day circus and play course (called "The Circus Experience") to enable them to run a Circus Experience Session with their own group and to ensure it's support within the wider community.

### **Community engagement**

To disseminate information about the project and to raise awareness of the capacity for arts projects to build confidence and positive parent-child interaction, a series of Community Circus Days were held. Examples of Community Circus Days include: Brimbank Harmony Day and MacKillop Family Services Health Promotion Day.

---

### **Working towards a goal**

The “show and tell” performance at the end of each workshop program provides an opportunity to celebrate, engage and acknowledge the achievements of the individual, group and the local community.

#### *Limitations*

The traditional funding model enables work with various groups for 10 weeks. This amount of time means a functioning group that has a social network can be left without a core activity after the circus has left. Extended funding would allow long-term activities that inherently build a sustained community around them. This extended funding also responds to the highlighted challenges associated with reaching deeply isolated individuals and families with significant, broad and concentrated needs.

---

## **Research base**

### **Social and educational needs analysis for CALD communities**

Research evidence indicates that newly arrived and CALD communities require varied and targeted services that offer activities and programs for children and parents *outside* of the context of school or sport. These services and programs are currently very limited. Successful settlement for newly arrived families entails support in the areas of health, social inclusion and self-esteem in addition to education and physical activities (Thorell, 2007).

Mulligan et al. (2006) suggest that the arts can be an important medium of social relations particularly around the needs of refugees. The research indicates that the arts may support families by:

- being constructive in helping people to process their emotional responses and facilitate them to realise that there are different ways of interpreting particular experiences;
- elevating the mood of a group or whole community to foster optimism about what can be achieved;
- providing visibility and voice to those who are rarely heard, leading to a more empathetic understanding of the complex reasons for isolation in the contemporary world; and
- providing people with meaning and a stronger sense of purpose.

### **Local needs analysis**

The work and research of the The Smith Family within the local community provides evidence that there is a large number of newly arrived refugees to Australia, who have settled in the Brimbank area. The research indicated a necessity for capacity building of families to increase literacy and learning in pre-schoolers in the City of Brimbank (The Smith Family, 2008).

The outcomes of the Brimbank Children’s Circus Project lie with its marriage of the strategies of the Social Circus Model with the access and receptivity of disadvantaged and isolated individuals and families; namely from CALD and special needs communities.

### **The Social Circus Model**

The Brimbank Children’s Circus has been drawn from the Westside Circus’s Ongoing Training Kinder Circus Program. This kinder circus program has been highly successful in engaging parents and children in positive play; particularly fathers. There has been a marked increase in demand for these classes and attendance has grown substantially since it began in 2005. Classes have grown from one a week to four weekly classes currently, which is a significant growth of 75% in 3 years. There is a reported waiting list of up to 80 families at any one time.

---

## **Outcomes**

Participation in *The Brimbank Children’s Circus* has provided observable, general adjustments in participants. These include:

- increased confidence and self-esteem;

- positive parent–child relationships;
- awareness of local services;
- a sense of belonging to a community; and
- a reduction in social isolation for both parents and children.

Specific outcomes reflecting this adjustment include:

1. parents and children from the target groups attending and participating in the circus program;
2. participants' social networks widening through partaking in the circus;
3. parents and children with improved English literacy and language skills;
4. an increase in children's confidence levels; and
5. increased engagement of parents in positive parent–child interactions.

The project has also allowed linking to disenfranchised families, however tenuously, with a more ongoing structure (e.g., preschool, playgroup). This provided the continuance of social connections.

## Evidence of outcomes

### General findings

Evaluation of the outcomes of the Brimbank Children's Circus (The Smith Family, 2008) comprised:

- surveys/interviews with parents before post-workshop activities regarding their level of engagement in play with their child;
- circus trainer and workshop facilitator observations;
- circus trainer professional diaries; and
- written evaluations by trainers post workshops.

Results of these indicated the following:

- Children engaged in experiences that promote language and literacy skill development. This was assessed by the ways in which:
  - children demonstrated language and literacy skills through the use of play and physical interaction; and
  - language and literacy skills learnt in the workshops were used both in and outside of the workshop context.
- Parents engaged in positive parent–child interaction demonstrated by changes in their relationship with their child. Examples of this include changes with physical interactions, play and reading with their child outside of circus workshop context.
- Reduced social isolation for parents and children was observed. Examples being parents and children making friends, social gatherings and comments regarding connectedness and belonging.

Other survey results include the following findings:

- Pre-workshop surveys revealed that almost all parents (91%), said they were participating in the project because they "wanted to improve their child's confidence", with the next highest response being "to spend time with my child in a fun environment".
- Post-workshop surveys revealed that 95% of parents said that the most noticeable effect on their child was an increase in confidence, particularly in social situations. Seventy-one per cent said the greatest benefit had been spending quality time with their children, and 57% said that learning new skills had been beneficial to themselves and their children.
- Surveys also revealed that following the workshop program, 77% of parents continue to play with their children at home using the circus skills, or that the child continues to practice skills learnt in the program at home.

- Surveys revealed that 100% of community leaders who participated in the Circus Experience Professional Development Short Course continue to use their new skills and are developing the work to suit and expand the activities they do with young families.
- Surveys revealed that 70% of the partner organisations continue to use the Circus Kits in their groups, after the 10-week workshop program had ended. Some partners had also used the kits with new groups.

### **Specific outcomes**

#### **Parents and children from the target groups engaged in the circus program**

“I have never seen so many happy faces!! What a great program, I wanted to kick off my shoes and join in!” (Teresa Stone, Principal, Sunshine Primary School)

This was demonstrated by full and extended families attending the workshops and performances. Mothers usually attended all sessions, and by weeks 3–5, fathers often arrived and watched from the sidelines. By weeks 7–9, they often participated in one or two of the workshops.

#### **Participants’ social networks have widened through participation in the circus**

This was demonstrated by the following:

- By the 6th workshop program (there were seven 10-week workshop programs in total), 40% of participants came to the program by hearing about it via friends.
- Participants started using the workshop space for other activities.
- Participants used the workshop space for longer periods to socialise and connect.
- An increasing, supportive friendship base among the group was observed.
- Enrolment in the workshops was based on the parents’ observed need to be part a social network and not simply for their child’s broader developmental requirements.

“I want to do the workshop to be part of the local community and meet other local parents.” (Participating parent)

#### **Parents and children have improved English literacy and language skills**

Children and parents initially learned a physical language of circus. This was translated into English words. Over time, these “circus words” (e.g., tumble) are added to the participant’s vocabulary and this can increase the confidence and capacity for English.

Vicarious learning of the language was observed. By weeks 2-3, children were observed using English, as their propensity for language acquisition is more advanced compared with adults. By weeks 5-6, mothers were observed using an increase in English language. By weeks 7-9, father’s indicated feeling confident to use English on hearing it spoken in the home.

Parents reported increased time spent reading stories with their children at home. Circus Trainers also reported an enthusiasm for parental involvement with story-time during the workshops.

It is important to qualify, that for all projects an average of 50% of participants spoke English as a second language, however four of the seven programs had 100% of participants who spoke English as a second language.

#### **Children’s confidence levels have increased**

Of the participating parents, 95% reported that the most noticeable effect on their child was an increase in confidence, particularly in social situations. Quotes from parents included:

---

“My child has increased confidence to try new things rather than saying ‘I can’t.’” (Participating parent)

“My daughter has learned another skill—physical play—which she could not have learned from elsewhere.” (Participating parent, BPAC Vietnamese Playgroup)

“Encouraging children in speaking to the whole group, performing & developing confidence in all activities.” (Participating parent)

“Pushing boundaries, physical & psychological—trust, sharing, cooperation, overcoming fear.” (Participating parent)

“The children play more independently and creatively at home now since this program. They are learning to teach themselves things out of their own initiative.” (Thao Ha, Leader BPAC)

### **Parents engage in positive parent–child interactions**

Parents reported having learnt new ways to play with their child at home. This included giving performances for family and friends. Of the participating parents, 100% reported that they enjoyed spending renewed and quality time with their child inside and outside the home. Parents commented on the knowledge they had acquired which was rewarding, meaningful and constructive. There was a reported full family attendance at the performances at the end of the workshop.

Parents were using the Circus Trainers as a resource for positive parenting skills. Some requested “homework” between classes in order to develop their cooperative, positive parenting skills. The following quote highlights the significance of this:

“This project forces parents out of their comfort zone and into their child’s world in a comfortable and supportive environment.” (Parent, West Sunshine Community Centre)

The following case studies are presented to demonstrate the impact of this practice in the lives of the participants:

#### **Case study 1: Sudanese Women’s Learning Group**

The Sudanese Women’s Learning Group and their preschool children had participated in 10 weeks of workshops at Sunshine Primary School, in Westside Circus’s social circus model. At the end of the program, participants knew the English names of colours, directions, body parts and could take turns at tumbling and juggling scarves. Having lived for many years in refugee camps in the Sudan, a circus workshop was most unusual. Over 10 short weeks, it was observed that they had developed the confidence to sing their own songs and dance their own dances again.

Having been isolated in the Sunshine community not knowing many other women in the same situation, one of the classes was empty as all the women had become friends and attended a friend’s wedding together. The women now see Sunshine Primary School as a place for them too, not just for their children. They had the confidence to walk to the gate and go inside, which was not observed prior to the program. The Sudanese Women’s Learning Group and their children performed their circus tricks and their own Sudanese songs at the Community Expo at Victoria University on International Refugee Day (20 June 2007).

#### **Case study 2: “Matthew”**

When asked to select a case study, our trainers thought of Matthew not because he had done anything particularly spectacular but because of the change in his personality. When he first came to the workshops, Matthew had been very shy and didn’t say anything in any of the vocal or creative games, tending to shadow his mother, Narelle, for the whole session.

Matthew struggled with a lot of the physical activities as he didn’t like being upside down and wouldn’t even do a forward roll, no matter how much his mother or the trainers encouraged him. However, rather than ignoring him or rebuking him, the trainers explained to his mother that Matthew was only afraid and they spent a lot of time with them both offering guidance and encouragement. Slowly, Matthew started getting involved with the physical

---

activities and this led to him interacting with other children, who showed him how they did some of the activities he had thought to be difficult. As soon as he was involved with the group socially, he started to get involved vocally and creatively as well. This really showed up when his younger 2.5-year-old brother started attending classes and Matthew would confidently show him how to do the activities, how to count all the animals in the story book and explain the rules of the games we had played.

Towards the end of the workshops, the children did a balance where they stood on their parents' shoulders; their parents then flipped them off, turning them upside down in the process. Matthew initially had reservations about this. But when he saw the group had done it, he climbed up on his mother's shoulders, standing there with a great look of pride and achievement before flipping off.

This growth of confidence in physical ability and within new social situations was seen in the whole group and has well prepared them for engaging with an education environment and later at school.

*(Note: The names of the participants have been changed for this report.)*

### **Local media reports**

Leading Melbourne newspapers have provided reviews and comments on this Westside Circus Program for kindergartens that highlight the positive outcomes for children, their parents and the local community:

"For the circus trainers it's about making kids more resilient and being able to cope with challenges ahead." (Kathy Lord, ABC Stateline, 15 June 2007)

"Ridgeway Kindergarten teacher Sue Horsburgh said the 10-week educational program with Westside Circus performers was a "fantastic" way to get parents and children to work together. Ms Horsburgh said the circus classes provided children with the ideal learning environment by combining physical and thinking skills together. And parents could continue activities learnt during classes at home, Ms Horsburgh said it was a unique experience for children to be learning from the same baseline as their parents." (Circus Forms Bonds, Brimbank Leader, 4 December 2007)

"They have just learnt some important life lessons—trusting others, co-operation, teamwork and working through challenges designed to build self-esteem, pride and a sense of community." (Little Miss Understood, The Age, 20 November 2006)

---

### **Policy analysis**

Building capacities in families and community development to support families is consistent with the logic of the Communities for Children (CfC) funded projects (see [http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-communities for children.htm](http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/aboutfacs/programs/sfsc-communities%20for%20children.htm)). The keys to this health and educational plan incorporated the healthy growth of young families, supporting positive parenting, targeting early learning and care and developing child friendly communities. The importance of local needs assessment and responses are included in the agenda, as well as early childhood prevention and intervention strategies to harness the complex and interwoven requirements for healthy child development and mature, family life. The ingredients of the Brimbank Children's Circus Project represent and demonstrate the intention and content of these two government initiatives.

The outcomes reflect the impact of early investment in linking isolated communities such as CALD and refugees, into educational and social exchanges for children, parents, whole families and communities. The Brimbank Children's Circus Project provides innovative policy schemes in both its structure and delivery of a targeted community service.

It reaches out to children in providing a safe and innovative community that not only reflects early prevention and intervention for literacy, socialisation and physical development, but it enables disenfranchised parents and families to create social meaning, refine their parenting skills and integrate into their *local* communities. Accessibility and availability of local initiatives enable families to experience and provide a continuity of care to their children and for each other.

	<p>Specific resources and evaluation data (The Smith Family, 2008) provides for policy tools that can drive and employ the social capital gained from the project. It can facilitate a response to the impact of isolation for many disadvantaged Australian families with both special needs and from CALD backgrounds. By providing a sense of belonging to families with proficient and contemporary services that enable skill development and the acquisition of a working knowledge for positive child development and community relations, improved outcomes in education, health and social inclusion are verily a possibility.</p>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p>The Brimbank Children's Circus Project has been comprehensively evaluated. This has been overseen by The Smith Family. The Smith Family Evaluation Report was released in June 2008.</p>
<b>Project related publications</b>	
<b>References</b>	<p>Australian Early Development Index: <i>Building Better Communities for Children</i>, AEDI Communities Data 2004 and 2005.</p> <p>Thorell, E. (2007). <i>Attending to the needs of refugee youth: The development of a national comprehensive youth service</i>. Sydney: Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales</p> <p>Mulligan, M., Humphrey, K., James, P., Scanlon, C., Smith, P., &amp; Welch, N. (2006). <i>Creating community: Celebrations, arts and wellbeing within and across local communities</i>. Melbourne: The Globalism Institute.</p> <p>The Smith Family. (2008). <i>Brimbank Children's Circus Project evaluation report</i>.</p> <p>Tom Kvan, Discussion on social use of space in the Faculty of Architecture at The University of Melbourne, 26/2/2008; with reference to Gabarro, J. J. (1990). The development of working relationships. In O. Galegher, R. E. Kraut, C. Egido (Eds), <i>Intellectual teamwork: Social and technological foundations of cooperative work</i>. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum (pp. 79–110).</p>
<b>Contact</b>	<p>Debby Maziarz CEO Westside Circus</p> <p>Ph: (03) 9428 2088 debby@westsidecircus.org.au</p>
<b>Website</b>	<p><a href="http://www.westsidecircus.org.au">http://www.westsidecircus.org.au</a></p>
<b>More information</b>	<p>More information on the Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.</p>



**Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia**

Australian Institute of Family Studies.  
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne Vic 3000.  
Tel: (03) 9214 7888. Fax: (03) 9214 7839.  
Email: [cafca@aifs.gov.au](mailto:cafca@aifs.gov.au).

[www.aifs.gov.au/cafca](http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca)