



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	Little Engines—Intensive Supported Play Group
Project practice	Little Engines Early Childhood Education professionals act as co-workers and mentors for staff from community agencies to increase their capacity to offer free supported playgroups for disadvantaged children 0–5 years. The playgroup model includes a community development focus that offers families access to a wide range of services through co-worker/co-facilitator partnerships with local social workers, health professionals and other support workers providing extensive support to families.
Project undertaken by	Uniting Care Wesley Adelaide (facilitating partner), Centacare (community partner)
Start date	June 2005
Focal areas	Family and children’s services working effectively as a team Supporting families and parents Early learning and care
Program	Communities for Children
Issue	<p>Little Engines was developed in response to community consultation in the local area. The consultations showed that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• playgroups in the region were very limited because many services did not have an early childhood education focus;• vulnerable children were not accessing the existing playgroups;• schools in the area had difficulty in sustaining playgroups due to groups being “cliquey” and not inclusive, and because they did not have the resources to support the playgroups;• schools and other agencies lacked the capacity to provide the type of extended service that vulnerable children and their families required;• services in the region were working in isolation and there was a need for partnerships in the area of early childhood; and• there was a need to bring early childhood experiences and expertise into existing support services and spaces. <p>Service providers and workers in the area were very interested in the supported playgroups model. However, many of them felt that they lacked the specific early childhood professional training and the confidence necessary to start up and establish a supported playgroup.</p> <p>Little Engines was developed to provide intensive, supported playgroup sessions, to promote positive early childhood development and increase child safety and wellbeing for particularly disadvantaged families in the North-Western Adelaide region. Little Engines has a community development focus and offers access to a wide range of services through co-worker/co-facilitator partnerships with local social workers, health professionals and other support workers providing extensive support to families whose housing circumstances are impacting upon their ability to parent positively.</p> <p>Little Engines also involves skills transfer via collaborative partnerships with</p>

agencies whose work involves supporting families in the region but does not necessarily have an Early childhood focus.

Program context

Little Engines provides mentoring to community agencies to offer free supported playgroup sessions for disadvantaged children 0–5 years and their families in the North-Western Adelaide region. Staff of community agencies become co-workers and co-facilitators of playgroups and are mentored by Little Engines Early Childhood Education professionals to increase their capacity to provide supported playgroups to this disadvantaged population. A supported playgroup approach includes a community development focus that offers families access to a wide range of services through co-worker/co-facilitator partnerships with local social workers, health professionals and other support workers providing extensive support to families.

The project is run by Uniting Care Wesley Adelaide (as the facilitating partner) and Centacare (as the primary community partner) in collaboration with Migrant Women's Supported Accommodation Service, Talking Realities, Hendon Primary School, Mansfield Park Primary School, Kalaya Children's Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, St Joseph's Primary School Woodville, and Families SA.

Centrecare employs Early Childhood Education professionals to act as mentors to community agencies who offer to run playgroups. Using a mentoring model, these Little Engines workers build the capacity of host agency staff (co-workers and co-facilitators) to support children and families.

The supported playgroup model is based on Centacare's Bilby Bus Project, which runs playgroups attended by families with high support needs in four locations in metropolitan Adelaide. The families attending the supported playgroups are mixed and are provided with culturally and developmentally appropriate play activities. The activities provide opportunities and experiences for strengthening the relationship between parents/carers and children thereby promoting connections. Through the Little Engines supported playgroup program, families become aware of services in the community and supportive relationships are fostered between the families and local services.

Practice description

This section details the key ingredients that have been critical in the effective operation and creation of sustainable playgroups through mentoring of community agencies to build their capacity to deliver early childhood programs. Key ingredients are:

- building and maintaining partnerships between services and community members;
- employing a strengths-based perspective;
- ensuring Little Engines mentors have early childhood expertise;
- employing an ongoing reflective action approach;
- being an available child development resource;
- maintaining an educational perspective/focus;
- providing debriefing sessions.

Building and maintaining partnerships between services and community members

A good working relationship with co-workers and co-facilitators underpins all other key ingredients in the Little Engines mentoring practice. Much care is taken in establishing and maintaining these relationships and they are supported by a formal collaborative agreement between the agency and Little Engines. After identifying key gaps in the local area through community consultation, Little Engines workers approached agencies in the region and those that were interested were asked to provide a worker and a space for two hours per week. Little Engines workers ensured that participating agencies and the co-workers they identified had a commitment to the notion of intensive supported playgroups and to sustainability. In one case, the co-worker/co-facilitator agency sought out the Little Engine team and asked to be a part of the activity.

Little Engines workers believe that if co-workers and co-facilitators are happy then they will have more productive relationships and work. Ways of creating a good working relationships centre on engaging the workers through on-the-job chats,

debriefing, meetings and regular and ongoing communication whether that be via phone calls, visits or email. Little Engines workers consider that “the more effort you put in the more successful you will be” and they also focus on relationship building outside of playgroup time. This means that they often attend other activities with which the co-worker/co-facilitator and clients are involved. In the case of the Talking Realities playgroup, the Little Engines worker attends an activity run by the Parks Primary Health Service every Friday.

In the early stages of the relationship between the Little Engines worker and co-worker/co-facilitator, care is taken to discuss and work through any issues of difference such as “ownership of the clients” or any arising philosophical questions. Space for questioning and discussion are always provided for and kept open in the mentoring relationship.

Employing a strengths-based perspective

In order to create strong links within the mentoring relationship and between the playgroups and the community, Little Engines employs a strengths-based approach. This involves valuing what co-workers/co-facilitators are already doing and creating a sense of ownership in regard to their groups. Little Engines workers always seek to build upon the positives with co-workers and with the parents and highlight their strengths. This approach is especially important when dealing with issues of developmental delays and difficult-to-manage behaviours. Using a strengths-based approach, Little Engines workers facilitate parental involvement so that parents and co-workers:

- know the session routine;
- know how to work with different group dynamics;
- have ownership of the group;
- have skills and resources;
- know what to buy and where to purchase; and
- know how to apply for community grants and resources.

Ensuring Little Engines mentors have early childhood expertise

The Little Engines workers have early childhood expertise and are tertiary trained. Having paid and qualified workers ensures accountability, supervision, training and support. For the Little Engines team, having an early childhood qualification is very important as workers understand and value the importance of play and early childhood learning and development. Early childhood qualifications combined with social work or other human services training have been most valuable within the practice of mentoring other health and human service professionals and given the broader context of intensive support to families who are experiencing disadvantage.

The additional skills of the workers include counselling skills, first aid, leadership skills, nutrition and mandatory notification. As employees of Centacare they benefit from ongoing professional development and supervision throughout year and also have a personally tailored training plan.

Employing an ongoing reflective action approach

In the first 18 months of the Little Engines, activity reflection and reference groups were established. The groups met monthly and were instrumental in building relationships and making agencies and co-workers feel that they were part of something bigger. The reflection groups have now ceased to exist as time became a factor for those participating; however the Little Engines team still views these groups as critical to the success of the overall activity and a key positive ingredient in the mentoring relationship.

Being an available child development resource

Little Engines workers begin and co-facilitate the play group during which time they are role modelling and educating the co-worker. They provide on-the-job support to co-workers and co-facilitators and act as a resource in the areas of getting across the value of playgroups, what to expect of a child at different stages in their development and linking co-workers/co-facilitators in with other agencies and community resources.

Co-workers and co-facilitators are up-skilled in the process and also form valuable links and relationships with relevant professionals in the field such as speech pathologists, nutritionists, and occupational therapists. These new contacts and relationships then become a further resource to the broader context of their work with local families.

Maintaining an educational perspective/focus

Little Engines workers uphold a co-learning approach to mentoring. Here, the emphasis is on learning *with* the co-worker/facilitator in order to tailor the playgroup to best suit the specific and changing needs of their particular group.

Little Engines workers and co-workers/co-facilitators help keep the playgroup environment focused and educative. The educative co-learning process is experienced and constructed through:

1. The use and development of the playgroup tool

The Little Engines playgroup tool is a structured playgroup session system. Parents and workers can learn how to use this tool. This increases the confidence of workers and parents (through familiarity and routine), encourages participation by attending parents and children (as children and parents both begin to anticipate activities leading to more active and creative participation), and increases parental and community involvement in leadership roles.

2. Providing written information for the co-worker and the parents.

Information that is provided include: flyers about specific activities and events; learning books (with information about activities, establishing relationships, child development, and the value of play activity); take home resources that encourage physical, cognitive, emotional and relationship development; and folders with information about other services, training that is available, and community events.

3. Playgroup programming and planning that is age appropriate.

This fosters the active participation of the family, builds relationships between families and workers/agencies, and is hospitable, engaging and welcoming for families.

Providing debriefing sessions

Little Engines mentoring practice recognises that on-the-job mentoring, modelling and co-learning requires off-the job spaces for reflection, discussion and planning. Debriefing sessions are a key ingredient of the mentoring relationship between Little Engines staff and their co-workers/co-facilitators. Debriefing sessions usually occur following a supported playgroup session which is viewed as the ideal time. However, co-workers are occasionally involved in transporting clients so other spaces are made for debriefing. Being flexible so as to ensure that a debriefing session occurs each week is essential. In the debriefing session, workers and co-facilitators have a check-list that is worked through with discussion about issues relating to families/clients and specific follow-up needed, group dynamics, questions and concerns of the co-worker/co-facilitator, as well as planning for the next session. Evaluation data and statistics gathered from each playgroup session are also discussed in debriefing sessions.

Research base

Literature and past research supporting the effectiveness of the Little Engines co-worker mentoring practice is considered here in five areas: the benefit of mentoring partnerships; sustainability through mentoring; a strengths based perspective; parent and child early childhood education; and a partnership approach.

The benefit of mentoring partnerships

The benefits of mentoring partnerships are discussed within a wide range of literature spanning the different disciplines of human services and social work, education, management, and bridging university-based research with community-based practice. Mentoring as an on-the-job collaborative and co-learning relationship allows for effective workplace learning which is constructed within the context of interaction with others (Mullen, 2000; Treston, 1999). The experiential

and reflective nature of mentoring partnerships is seen to be empowering for workers and mentors alike and a “significant catalyst for change” in the community (Mullen, 2000). The benefits of mentoring in an early childhood setting include the facilitation of reciprocal learning and sharing underpinned by support, feedback, and guidance (Pavia et al., 2003). Within the context of supporting families currently experiencing disadvantage in the community, the mentoring partnership can lead to increased feelings of confidence on the part of the co-worker/co-facilitator (Mullen, 2000; Treston, 1999).

Sustainability through mentoring

Workers and co-workers alike appreciate the opportunity to use this timeframe to develop skills and resources that will develop the sustainability of the supported playgroups in the local area. Mentoring, as a practice, has been identified as key to this sustainability. Little Engine workers facilitate sustainable learning and practice through modelling both developmental play and learning tools, and problem solving strategies. With time, assistance to co-facilitators gradually decreases as they “internalise the process and construct their own knowledge” (Treston, 1999, p. 2).

The Little Engines mentoring practice involves both formal and informal communication with co-workers/co-facilitators. This is integral to the relationship building process and enhances the quality of the co-learning experience (Guenther & Millar, 2007). The “modelling [of] good communication and a really good working relationship” within a community collaborative approach contributes to more sustainable outcomes through increasing the knowledge resources available to co-workers/co-facilitators (Guenther & Millar, 2007, p. 29).

A strengths-based perspective

Working from a strengths-based perspective is not only important to the relationship between the Little Engines workers and their co-workers/co-facilitators, but is integral to the way playgroups are established and facilitated. Recent literature has shown that the effectiveness of playgroups as spaces for child development and learning is most evident where the structure and type of support needs are driven by the parents (Turner & Bredhauer, 2005). Little Engines workers and co-workers/co-facilitators model and communicate that the right of parents to take an active role in planning and leadership of the group is “extremely important” to them. Drawing upon the existing good practices, strengths, creativity and knowledge of co-workers/co-facilitators, and the families attending the playgroups is a key element of the mentoring process (Turner & Bredhauer, 2005).

Parent and child early childhood education

Research has shown that what happens to children in their early years has consequences for the rest of their lives. A key to the Little Engines mentoring process lies in imparting the value of early childhood attachment, learning and development to workers from agencies where the prior focus may have been on adults or the family as a whole. This is most pertinent for these co-workers and co-facilitators who, in their own professional capacities, are engaging with families currently experiencing disadvantage. Through the mentoring practice, co-workers come to understand the importance of bringing children and parents together in parent education and playgroups (Turner & Bredhauer, 2005). Spaces for play-based learning and development not only enhance the experiences of families and the co-workers/co-facilitators but are a non-threatening or “soft” gateway to further assisting targeted families such as those attending the Little Engines supported playgroup (Turner & Bredhauer, 2005).

A partnership approach

When local agencies and workers come together and identify gaps in service provision with plans to fill those gaps (such as in the case of the Little Engines intensive supported playgroups and mentoring practice) these local choices are more likely to be sustained (Broadhead & Armistead, 2007). Establishing contact through informal links and then taking time to build and nurture these links has been found to facilitate trust and positive networking leading to improved quality of early childhood resources and greater sustainability of service provision. With collaborative partnerships, workers are more likely to stay connected to the vision of the activity (Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006; Broadhead & Armistead, 2007).

Interagency collaborative relationships have been found to have a direct positive impact upon parents' and families' experiences of early childhood learning and development, as well as significantly impacting upon school readiness (Selden et al., 2006). Collaborative partnerships also enhance educational co-learning within and between local services with workers and co-workers/co-facilitators "drawing on and simultaneously extending their community knowledge" (Broadhead & Armistead, 2007, p. 50).

Outcomes

Little Engines outcomes may be viewed in a hierarchy. The ultimate goal is improved child development through improved family functioning, positive relationships with children and provision of appropriate support. The Little Engines mentoring practice is fundamental to all conditions within the hierarchy in that it facilitates the existence and sustainability of supported playgroups. These playgroups then become spaces where parenting competence increases and where early identification of special needs and provision of appropriate support can occur. Specific outcomes of the mentoring practice of Little Engines are:

- commitment to and valuing of early childhood education and development by co-workers and facilitators;
- increased sustainability of local playgroups;
- families developing confidence in parenting and accessing local supports;
- creative and innovative local partnerships; and
- flexible early childhood education and development that responds to the needs and context of families disadvantaged in the local community.

Evidence of outcomes

Little Engines Intensive Supported Playgroup program has evaluated its effectiveness through both qualitative and quantitative measures. An action-research approach to gathering data has involved feedback through reference and reflection groups and forums, weekly gathering of data by workers and co-workers/co-facilitators, and a recording of discussions and comments arising in debriefing sessions with the relevant school or agency. The Little Engines team has worked closely with Dr. Jo Baulderstone, the local evaluator, around ways of measuring satisfaction of families/clients. Client feedback sessions as well as individual feedback sessions were held.

For the purpose of this Promising Practice Profile and its emphasis on the mentoring for sustainability practice, the local evaluation team worked closely with the Little Engines workers and conducted personal unstructured interviews with the workers. In addition, six phone interviews with co-workers/co facilitators were also conducted using a semi-structured qualitative interview schedule.

The data that have been collected are reported against each outcome area below.

Commitment to and valuing of early childhood education and development by co-workers and facilitators

Co-workers and co-facilitators linked to service provision agencies in the local area all expressed that the Little Engines mentoring practice had challenged previous assumptions about play based learning and highlighted for them the importance of early childhood education and development.

I've done a lot of learning. You just assume that toys are toys. But I have learnt how to really engage parents with children through play and which toys are best for developing which motor skills.

I have learnt to really value early childhood education and the playgroup has lead to extra interest in this area of education and how very important it is ... I never realised that there were these models that worked so well.

Programs that previously focused upon the wellbeing of the parent/s, especially one program working with teenage parents, came to understand the importance of considering and providing for young children's learning and development.

The worker here didn't have any early childhood experience and it was great to get explanations about early childhood development and play ... We are now seeing that with our previous programs the mother might have done well but the children were getting left behind.

For some co-workers/co-facilitators coming to see the value of early childhood play-based learning and development has resulted in a long term commitment to maintaining an early childhood education focus outside of the playgroup space.

Now I know that you have to put effort and resources into early childhood and then you will reap the rewards later on. Building kids' learning at an early age means that then builds into something quite spectacular in their future.

Creative and innovative local partnerships

Co-workers and co-facilitators consistently highlighted the value of the mentoring partnership not just for solidarity and support but for its creativity, flexibility, and innovative nature in bringing together workers from local agencies and increasing social capital.

While many of the playgroups were mixed, all had families currently experiencing disadvantage within the community. Flexibility in working with the families, running the playgroups, and steering the mentoring relationship was a very important aspect of collaborative partnership.

It is an excellent way of working and so flexible too. Those partnerships are really very good. I have been so impressed.

The co-learning partnerships facilitated through the Little Engines mentoring practice have led to more creative, effective and rich early childhood learning environments for the families attending.

Our different networks and disciplines mean that we have different skills and are able to support parents across different age ranges and from different backgrounds. This has been really good.

Working in the room together has been great because we bounce off each other and just have that synergy happening. We support and back each other up and suggest resources to each other. Having two heads is like three rather than just having the one if we were alone.

Such environments identify special needs and the appropriate support services thereby reinforcing the intensive support model that Little Engines embodies.

The partnership strengthens and enhances the work and makes sure that things don't fall through the gaps.

N had a lot of early childhood expertise and I have a lot of mental health expertise so together we brought a rich combination of skills and experience to the group and were have been able to support women in multi-faceted ways.

Increased sustainability of local playgroups

Co-workers and co-facilitators expressed that the mentoring has contributed to sustainable early childhood learning and development practices in a wide variety of ways. These include, the capacity of playgroups to continue beyond the support of the Little Engines activity and/or commit to future resourcing and funding.

The Hendon playgroup is now self-sustaining and no longer requires our support. (Little Engines manager)

One of the playgroups has been taken over by a paid worker from another service. (Little Engines worker)

It is tiring and it requires extra work but what we now have is quite a professional and sustainable group. It does require commitment from the school but it is money well spent. (Host agency)

Little Engines has also resulted in sustainable engagement of families within the local community in terms of participation and inclusion.

They keep coming [and] they bother to get out of bed in the morning and come and they wouldn't do this unless they really wanted to and enjoy it. They enjoy it which is really important. There has been tremendous consistency of attendance from all families involved. Ten

people (from 7 families) attended all of the supervised access playgroup sessions.

The playgroup is far more inclusive. We have never had this before. It is very multicultural and we have families from the Vietnamese, Filipino, Cambodian, Indian, Italian, Anglo, and Chinese communities.

As a result of Little Engines mentoring relationship and a playgroup that was established to target young parents in a particularly low socio-economic area, sustainability in terms of project ideas and new service models is evident.

The worker here didn't have any early childhood experience and it was great to get explanations about early childhood development and play. From this we have developed a peer education program and it is part of preparation for employment pathways. We have applied for a grant to write an early childhood development package. This is because of original feedback from the group about the lack of understanding of the role of a parent. This package would be part of their year 12 and would also involve training to be a peer educator.

Sustainability of environments and specific play-based activities within those environments have also been a spin off from the mentoring partnerships.

We have increased our knowledge about toys and the importance of play. And now we are able to offer other activities. We understand how and why toys work and we have improved our collection of toys. We are especially providing a range of toys for different age groups and stages of development. Before our access room was very basic. (Co-facilitator of a local family access playgroup)

... now we know what sorts of resources are suitable for 0–4 year old whereas before we were just more familiar with the needs of 4yr olds and above.

Families developing confidence in parenting and accessing local supports

Local families, especially those experiencing different forms of disadvantage, have developed more confidence to engage in playgroup activities, take on leadership roles, access other services and join in with other community activities. Parents are engaging more meaningful ways with their children and in ways that enhance their child's learning, attachment and development.

Before the parents tended to choose the toys that engaged the children in the parent's world whereas now the parents chose toys that help them as parents engage in their child's world. This has been a very important change.

Child and parent relationships are improving and we are seeing an increase in child development. The children are speaking a lot more and verbalising and producing language. The women are using more English and asking more questions, they are talking more and there is laughter. (Co-facilitator of a CALD playgroup)

Before parents were not interested in playing with their kids. These are parents who were not parented themselves. "B" has been modelling play and posing problems and problem solving to kids. The parents have started to engage. What I see now are happy kids, and parents not sitting together but sitting down with one or two children individually and working and interacting with the kids.

The intensive support focus of the playgroups has also benefited from the mentoring partnerships. Parents who may have been wary of other agencies are now confident enough to accept referrals and follow through with them.

The parents are using the playgroup as a support and a resource. Many parents have been referred to other services and programs such as Child and Youth Health, psychologists, relationship counselling, the ASIS team, and literacy programs... Through these referrals the parents have then joined in with other things... Now the women have more confidence.

They have a sense of ownership about the group and space. It is a safe place to go to, and it is a good place to come to.

The valuing of early childhood education and learning imparted to the co-workers and co-facilitators through the mentoring relationship is finding its way through to playgroup families.

They [parents] value educating and education. Now they are such good advocates for the need for and content of early childhood development packages for young parents and they talk about the importance of playing. They are also now critical of others because they see them doing things that are not helpful to their child's development.

Flexible early childhood education and development that responds to the needs and context of families disadvantaged in the local community

Mentoring partnerships within the different playgroups have assisted co-workers/co-facilitators to provide intensive support that is flexible and responds to the different needs of families in each playgroup. This has occurred through the sharing of learning philosophies and follow-up support tasks, as well as finding creative ways of working with tensions within communities.

After each Friday session we planned a follow-up with some families. We helped with everything—connecting, referring, housing, parenting, arranging courses, child care, and linking them in with other refugee support services.

It was really great being able to share the philosophy of learning (with “B”) and flexibility in our program was a key ingredient.

Our area is one of the lowest socio-economic areas in all of Australia. “B”, by having such a high level of human capital, raised the level of human capital of the people around her. She understood the tensions in the community around her without worrying about them. She helped parents celebrate that they have given birth, that they have a child ... the joy of parenting.

From the above, there is supporting evidence that Little Engines mentoring practice, which exists as one of a number of practices within the activity, has been found to make a significant contribution to meeting many of the activity's objectives including:

- imparting the value and necessity of spaces for early childhood learning and development to professionals working with families in the region;
- providing a quality supported playgroup service to identified families with young children;
- providing positive social and educational opportunities for children and their families;
- assisting families in accessing community services and local resources;
- providing parents with the opportunity to explore issues and concerns that impair their ability to care for their children; and
- providing an environment where families can develop social support and community networks.

Policy analysis	The Intensive Supported Play Group Program project is a positive example of a place-based early intervention and prevention approach to child protection and development. It achieves outcomes by providing quality early childhood education opportunities (through playgroups) as well as building the capacity of local agencies who may not have an early childhood focus, to better respond to the needs of children and families.
Evaluation	The Little Engines Intensive Supported Play Group project has been evaluated by an external evaluator, Dr Jo Baulderstone.
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More information

More information on the Little Engine Intensive Supported Play Group Program and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.



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