



# Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	Parent Education and Relationships Living Skills (PEARLS)
<b>Project practice</b>	PEARLS offers parent education, parent–child relationship development and parental support activities
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children Project, Oxenford Coomera Community Youth Centre (South-East Queensland)
<b>Start date</b>	December 2005
<b>Focal areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supporting families and parents</li><li>• Early learning and care</li><li>• Child friendly communities</li></ul>
<b>Issue</b>	<p>The Parent Education and Relationships Living Skills (PEARLS) Program is an initiative of the Northern Gold Coast (NGC) Communities for Children (CfC) Project. The Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children Project began in late 2004. Not only were there few services at this time, but the major agencies (government and non-government) did not have the area in their strategic plans. Services and social infrastructure were failing to keep pace with the rapid population growth. The project is located in Australia's fastest population growth area comprising six widely dispersed, largely unconnected and isolated areas. Recent surveys reveal that the region has a 12% population of 0–5 year olds compared to an average of 7% for the remainder of the Gold Coast region. Studies provided by the Gold Coast City Council indicate the NGC population will grow from 50,000 residents in 2006 to 127,000 by 2021. The number of residents under 20 years of age in 2006 was 13,500. On current growth rates this figure is expected to more than double to approximately 30,000 in 2021. In addition, the 2006 ABS Census found:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• larger populations in Ormeau and Upper Coomera than previously expected;</li><li>• a high prevalence of family households: 80.2% of households in the region are families, higher than Gold Coast City (62.7%);</li><li>• of those families 65.1% have children, again higher than Gold Coast City (57.5%) and Queensland (59.2%); and</li><li>• 0–4 year olds represent 9% of the population, much higher than Gold Coast City (5.9%) and Queensland (6.5%).</li></ul> <p>When the project began in 2004, the northern growth corridor had virtually no support services or groups that were available to support a growing community. Many residents and families reported that they felt isolated and lonely with the absence of extended family living close by and lack of networks of friends. Many of the families have relocated from outside South East Queensland leaving behind emotional support as well as physical support with such things as child minding. Many of these families indicated they did not know how to connect to their community. Many families indicated they were disadvantaged living in this growth corridor due to lack of social infrastructure, lack of access to community services and limited access to public transport.</p>

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PEARLS arose out of a vision to create a connected “child-friendly” community, where young children and their families have greater self-reliance and self-determination and are provided with meaningful opportunities to maximise health and well-being, learning capacity, emotional and social support and community connection and cohesion. PEARLS aims to ensure that all families in the Northern Gold Coast community have access to a range of responsive services, supports, education, skills training and relationships which affirm their endeavours and strengths as parents and assist them to manage their family dynamics.

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## Program context

The Northern Gold Coast is one of the fastest growing regions in Australia with a high proportion of the population made up of families with young children aged 0–4 years. PEARLS is one activity within a suite of strategies generated by the Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children Project that aims to provide child, parent and family supports and developmental learnings and simultaneously encourage meaningful and sustainable community connections.

PEARLS offers free parenting programs, free child minding and an opportunity to build social networks whilst building awareness and knowledge in strengthening the immediate family system. Many of the related activities within the Communities for Children (CfC) site provide family activities at the locations where the parenting programs are offered. Once parents access the programs, they are linked into other activities to continue building their social support system.

PEARLS is staffed by two permanent part time and two casual Family Relationships Educators and one part time administrative worker. PEARLS is based in the Oxenford and Coomera Youth Centre and offers programs from there, as well as a range of venues including the various CfC hubs, childcare centres, churches and other local venues. The program is promoted through face-to-face contact with school guidance officers, childcare centres, doctors’ surgeries, chemists, child play centres, hospitals and other service providers. An email of program availability is regularly sent to all relevant service providers across the Gold Coast.

PEARLS utilises a soft-entry approach to engaging with parents outside of structured activities by workers being present at relevant venues, such as local childcare centres, to talk with and listen to parents seeking support in addressing parenting issues and where appropriate inviting their participation in other program activities. The program also recognises that a whole-of-community approach which encompasses collaboration with local childcare, school, medical, child development, child play, child protection and other relevant agencies is intrinsic to its successful connection with families.

Key program activities include:

- *Super Parenting*: Three to four information sessions per term on parenting strategies, offered to the general public and in childcare venues.
  - *Parenting Made Easier (PME1)*: A 5-week program of education and structured skills training for parents and families in small groups.
  - *Parenting Made Easier 2*: Building on PME1 and adding a therapeutic approach to assist parents to adapt the model of PME1 to their own situation.
  - *Emotional Fitness for Children*: Instructional and participatory process aimed at developing the parent–child relationship and communication through engaging parents in purposeful play with their child.
  - *Parents in Action*: Regular parental peer-support activities to build friendship and support networks and to access further needs specific learning.
  - *Childcare Outreach and Collaboration*: Workers choose a childcare centre each term for which they become a regular presence.
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- *Babysitting program*: Trains and mentors young people aged 13–16 years who engage in babysitting, minding of younger sibling or who would like to work in other child related environments.
- *Specialist Parent Support*: An initiative for families experiencing complex issues and those completing programs while still requiring support and guidance.
- *Professional development*: Training to enhance staffing of parenting programs and early childhood and childcare agencies in Northern Gold Coast.

## Practice description

PEARLS has a 3-way focus on family dynamics, parenting skills and connectedness to community in order to strengthen parent knowledge and parent–child relationships. Elements critical to the success of the Pearls program include:

- proactive approach to engagement with parents/families;
- recognition of parents as leaders within their families, who with the necessary knowledge and skills, will address family dynamics and bring about meaningful change;
- accessibility;
- connectivity of information, learning and real life;
- responsive to parental input in program development;
- connected and graduated programs;
- adaptation to meet needs of young parents referred by child protection agencies;
- inclusive of multiple child carers—mother, father, step parents, grandparents, foster carers;
- small groups;
- provides impetus and support for further ongoing connections and peer support;
- training and skills development for workers in strengths-based approaches;
- collaborative engagement with other local and referring agencies; and
- commitment to training and professional development in collaboration with community partners to enhance practitioner child development and family relationships knowledge.

### **Proactive approach to engagement with parents/families**

PEARLS differs from other parent education and family support programs in that it is strongly proactive in both the delivery and ongoing development of its activities. This means PEARLS does not rely solely on referrals and families coming to the program in response to promotion: workers are constantly out in the community connecting with families, other workers and agencies. A very important aspect of the PEARLS program is the informal method of engagement at local childcare centres, chemists, child play activities, shopping centres and other community events. Childcare centres are a particularly significant site of engagement, creating opportunities for parents to informally engage with a PEARLS worker when dropping off or picking up young children. Such engagement often leads to the provision of parent resource material and subsequent enrolment in PEARLS activities. This approach also fosters partnership between parents, childcare staff and PEARLS around behaviours and issues that are identified in childcare. This commitment to going out to where the families exist is especially vital given the geographically dispersed population base, which signifies the site as a “greenfields” region.

Recognition of parents as leaders within their families, who with the necessary knowledge and skills, will address family dynamics and bring about meaningful and sustainable change

All activities within the PEARLS program recognise that parents are the primary caregivers and educators within the family unit. Activities such as Parenting Made Easier provide learning and skill development opportunities for parents and caregivers aimed at maximising the

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effectiveness of their parenting and providing timely intervention in addressing issues which negatively impact on the dynamic of the family unit and the developmental potential of the child. Super Parents and Parents in Action demonstrate that PEARLS recognises each parent and family group as bringing their own individual issues and input to the program by responding to such input and addressing issues as they are raised. In these and all PEARLS activities parents are never sent away having to wait for another time to have their input listened to.

### **Accessibility**

Accessibility to and knowledge of parenting programs is often a barrier to parents taking the step of enrolling in such programs. PEARLS recognises that parents are often reluctant to enrol in long, structured parenting courses without knowledge of what parent education might mean for them. Therefore, PEARLS has adapted the delivery of the Parenting Made Easier sessions and developed introductory activities such as Super Parents to allow parents “soft” entry into program activities. Super Parents provides easy access sessions which require no enrolment or commitment, focuses each session on topical issues of concern to local parents, uses language familiar to and suggested by parents and provides parents with one easy to use strategy to take away from each session.

### **Connectivity of information, learning and real life**

PEARLS workers recognise that often parenting programs lack flexibility in content and delivery, parent friendly language and tangible and relevant resources for parents in the here and now. Both Parenting Made Easier (PME) and Super Parents use an approach that ensures that parents feel connected to the information they are engaging with and are provided with resources that enables them to take this information and learning and use it in their real life family settings. At the outset of each 5-week PME series, parents are provided with a manual which is utilised in every session to connect the issues parents bring to the model. At the completion of every session, parents are also provided with current and relevant resources to add to their emerging parenting tool box. Each session focuses on identifying strategies for each parent.

### **Responsive to parental input in program development**

The PEARLS program is continually flexible and responsive to parents needs, with the parents being the primary source for content changes based on their abilities to synthesize and apply their learnings. Following basic training, parents are encouraged to take a lead role in suggesting future activity content and pathways and are supported to initiate and develop support groups both formally and informally. This acknowledgement of parental capacity reflects the strengths-based approach adopted by workers while recognising that parenting is often hard work requiring support and resources. From the outset of connection with such activities as Super Parents or Childcare Outreach, parents are invited to share their understandings, concerns, issues and suggestions to not only ensure that program delivery is relevant, topical and meaningful to them but also to promote a sense of being valued in their role as parents. Within the Parenting Made Easier sessions, as parental awareness grows and capacity increases, parents are encouraged to take a lead in suggesting future content direction and activity development. Parents in Action, which currently offers two group activities, Sad to Glad and Coffee and Chat, have arisen out of PME parent identification of their need to support one another on their continuing journey through parenthood and learning.

### **Connected and graduated programs**

The PEARLS family support team has found that the most effective structure for the PEARLS activity is to create a range of connected and graduated programs. This has resulted from parents’ requests for more intensive “follow up” programs to help them integrate previous learnings. By providing a connected and graduated range of programs parents are

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able to strip back many of their preconceived parenting ideas largely based on their socialisation and individual patterning. Changing the way parents are brought up cannot be achieved via a short-term, “sticking plaster” task. To really make a difference requires longer-term support that builds around the initial educational programs offered. This requires an integrated “organising idea” that looks at the fundamental needs of people and their expression of these needs. Research suggests that if parents and children do not meet their needs socially, they are inherently driven to meet them and will use anti-social behaviour to do it. It is at this key level of functioning that parents need intervention strategies to support them toward better choices, and therefore model these appropriate choices to their children.

**Adaptation to meet needs of young parents referred by child protection agencies**

While all participants in the PEARLS activities are voluntary, workers have identified the need to respond in a different way to young people parenting or preparing to parent who have been referred to the program by Department of Child Safety. As the development of trust and respect is particularly central to meaningful engagement with this cohort, Parenting Made Easier and Emotional Fitness for Children sessions are currently being specifically adapted to respond to this need. Modification to program content places greater emphasis on the understanding of attachment and the self-identified gaps in information suggested by these young parents, in addition to the core components of the series. PEARLS is also currently negotiating with the Queensland Department of Child Safety to run intense smaller group activities (2–3 families) (on a fee-for-service basis) for those families who have entered the statutory system and who require an even more targeted response to their complex issues and needs.

**Inclusive of multiple child carers—mother, father, step parents, grandparents, foster carers**

In the modern context, the make-up of families can vary significantly from the traditional nuclear family to step and blended families, sole parent families and those lead by grandparents, older siblings, other relatives or foster carers and others. In recognition of such diversity PEARLS invites all carers of the child to participate in program activities and to play an informed and positive role in the future life chances and choices of the child/children they are supporting and nurturing. Involvement of all carers within a family in PEARLS activities brings consistency to the role of caregiver and maximises the positive outcomes for the child. PEARLS provides child-care for many educational activities to enable all of the child/ren’s parents/caregivers to attend.

**Small groups**

In program activities such as Parenting Made Easier and Emotional Fitness for Children, small groups of 10–15 ensure that those participating, their issues, concerns and inputs are not lost in the crowd. Small groups also enable greater capacity for parents to get to know one another and have played a significant role in the development of Parents in Action (i.e., peer support) activities. Without the small group environment, opportunities for parents to develop such peer support and connections are likely to have been lost.

**Provides impetus and support for further ongoing connections and peer support**

It is now generally accepted that on their own, one-off parenting programs do not produce significant sustainable outcomes for many families. One of the unique components of the PEARLS program is that it not only consists of an educational component to produce skilled and capable parents but also focuses strongly on the need to provide the impetus and safe environs for parents to connect with one another and their community. Parents comment on the importance of a fluid program structure that enables opportunities for social interactions. This approach is further supported by

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more formal social networking activities such as “Coffee and Chat” and “Sad to Glad” sessions (weekly or fortnightly) that focus on parent friendships and enjoyment.

### **Training and skills development for workers in strengths-based approaches**

Workers within the PEARLS program possess basic qualifications in counselling; however, they are also required to demonstrate a capacity to respond to parental issues in a positive and supportive manner while maintaining a commitment to the core elements of the program. Workers also need to demonstrate both a capacity and willingness to be open to unstructured engagement with program participants and go with the issues, concerns and input that parents bring with them. Many hours are committed to sourcing and training prospective workers via interview and group processes. Prospective workers are required to volunteer in observation and co-facilitation processes before taking on the worker role. All workers practice from a strengths-based perspective, valuing the strengths of every parent and family and providing the support to achieve meaningful change by encouragement and restoring of hope.

### **Collaborative engagement with other local and referring agencies**

The Northern Gold Coast region is a rapidly expanding and largely geographically disconnected site that requires relevant and timely support services. In response, PEARLS has placed collaboration and co-operation with existing agencies at the centre of its practice. PEARLS workers actively seek out opportunities to liaise with agencies providing services to families in the area, to not only ensure that such collaboration promotes the best possible outcomes for children and families in the Northern Gold Coast community but also to make every possible endeavour to engage the hard-to-reach families. One example of this is the Childcare Outreach and Collaboration initiative. In building on relationships developed with childcare centres, one worker is based in a different childcare centre each school term (2 hours per fortnight) where parents can access this worker for information regarding behavioural and developmental issues. Parents are provided with information and encouraged to engage in other programs outside of the childcare setting. During these visits the PEARLS worker also engages with childcare workers and observes children within the childcare setting. The PEARLS worker is then able to assist the childcare worker to develop strategies to address identified issues. These strategies are reported to parents in a universal and non-stigmatising way through the childcare centre newsletters. Additionally, childcare centres invite parents to a one-off session at the centre to meet the PEARLS team. Here parents are invited to share issues they struggle with and through this open and non-stigmatising approach leave with a new skill and the beginning of a framework. Many of these parents go on to complete PEARLS programs outside of the childcare setting.

### **Commitment to training and professional development in collaboration with community partners to enhance practitioner child development and family relationships knowledge**

As part of the program’s commitment to collaboration with community partners in the wider CfC program and in acknowledgment of the shortage of parent support and personnel able to provide parent support across the Northern Gold Coast site, PEARLS has committed to providing ongoing training opportunities for community partners. Training includes monthly workshops for staff across the CfC program, foster carer training, childcare worker professional development and up-skilling of program facilitators. Additionally, in response to requests from Department of Child Safety workers, PEARLS is currently negotiating with the Department to provide skills training in child behaviour management and the strategies outlined in PME and Emotional Fitness for Children activities.

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## Research base

The literature and current research support the PEARLS program's approach to parent education, parent-child relationship development and parental support activities by consistently suggesting that raising healthy children and maximising their full potential today requires a holistic approach and collective effort. Such an approach encompasses addressing the needs and activities of the whole family, considering not just the psychological interior but also the social exterior of family and community life. The importance of focusing on and building strengths, rather than highlighting deficits is also frequently noted (Scott, 2000; Thegen & Weber, 2002; Tomison & Poole, 2000).

The following aspects of the PEARLS program, drawn from the literature, not only illustrate the program's effectiveness and relevance but also highlight how it differs from existing parenting programs.

### **Promotes relationship development and enhanced community connection**

Deficits in social support and relationship development are strongly associated with a broad range of psychosocial problems including maternal depression and child neglect (Scott, 2000). PEARLS recognises that the delivery of instructional parenting courses without equal attention to providing the opportunities and support for broader relationship development and community connection will not produce relevant and sustainable change for families in the Northern Gold Coast region. Activities that have developed out of parent self-identified needs (including anxiety, depression and loneliness) such as "Sad to Glad" and "Coffee and Chat" clearly demonstrate that the program's approach to relationship development and community connection is working.

### **Develops skills and learning**

Many parenting programs focus upon enhancing knowledge via instruction rather than incorporating methods and approaches that actually teach parents skills and support their learning (Richardson et al, 2005). PEARLS is not merely an instructional parenting program. PEARLS is a collection of facilitated activities which aim to provide support and opportunities to parents so that they may develop skills and understandings which will enhance family life and empower parents to address problematic family issues and dynamics.

### **Reaches isolated and harder to reach families**

It is widely accepted that parent education programs are generally targeted at well-educated and well-resourced parents, with few programs available for parents who are socially and geographically isolated, poor or "at risk" of maltreating their children (Richardson et al., 2005). PEARLS addresses this gap in the delivery of parenting programs by getting out into the community, looking for opportunities to engage with parents and families at every level and by constantly seeking avenues by which to engage with the most isolated, marginalized and hard to reach parents in the NGC region. Connection with hard to reach families is illustrated by the programs growing participation rate of parents in contact with child protection and other support agencies as well as with parents who identify themselves as being socially isolated.

### **Works from a strengths-based approach**

Shifting the focus of working with families to an approach that recognises the family's potential for change and encourages parents to engage in cooperative ventures rather than focusing on deficits is now widely acknowledged (Tomison & Poole, 2000). Focusing on strengths does not deny shortcomings or problems, instead it recognises that focusing on such shortcomings is often not helpful in working to facilitate meaningful and sustainable change (Tomison & Poole, 2000). PEARLS programs strive to build on the strengths that each parent and family bring to the

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table while providing safe and meaningful opportunities for parents to identify and consider their own behaviours and those of their children, the impact of such behaviours and to explore ways of changing or enhancing such behaviours.

**Focuses on understanding entrenched patterns**

The approach shifts from focusing on the idea that irrational thinking causes emotional disturbance to the view that a stimulus from the environment is first pattern matched by the mind to innate knowledge and past learnings, which in turn gives rise to an emotion that inspires thoughts. The key is the process of matching to innate or learned templates that are constantly occurring as we interact with our environment. These patterns can keep people locked in entrenched generational patterns. When parents understand these inborn patterns and templates they are in a better position for sustainable change (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2003). This is known as “The Human Givens” approach (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2003) derived from the latest scientific understanding from neurobiology, psychology, and new original insights. Disseminated and taught for nearly ten years in the UK, and initially focused on the treatment of mental distress, this new school of psychology, Human Givens, is rapidly being recognised as an important shift to our understanding of human functioning. Integrating this approach with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Attachment Therapy provides a new insight into human behaviour.

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**Outcomes**

The desired outcomes from PEARLS include the facilitation of change and empowerment toward positive child and family development. In particular, the program led to:

- enhanced parenting capacity, including:
  - enhanced parenting confidence via identification of individual strengths;
  - increased parental self awareness;
  - parents better supported to understand their role as parent;
  - parents better supported to understand and validate their children’s feelings and needs;
  - parents’ understanding of learned behaviours—why and how behaviours develop and become cyclical and entrenched; and
- increased social connections among parents.

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**Evidence of outcomes**

PEARLS underwent an interim evaluation conducted by Griffith University (local evaluators) covering program activities conducted in the period July 2006–June 2007. This evaluation looked at how various aspects of the program impact on participant families and sought to identify areas where the program contributes to knowledge development in the field of parenting education and support. Sources of data for this evaluation included: quarterly/annual reports; participant satisfaction surveys; program documentation; promotional materials; parent focus group data; interview data (staff); and demographics questionnaire.

**Enhanced parenting capacity**

During July 2006–June 2007, PEARLS worked with 860 families, incorporating 1063 children in the 0–5 age group and a further 548 in the 6–16 age group. Parents participating in PEARLS activities identify the majority of children associated with and benefiting from such activities as being in the 0–5 age group (approx 65%), followed by the 6–16 age group (33%).

Whilst the program collected quantitative data only in the form of satisfaction surveys (demonstrating high/very high satisfaction among respondents), qualitative comments are recorded in a range of data including participant satisfaction surveys, testimonials and one focus group. Common themes of this data are the increase in parenting skills, confidence, and social connections.

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A dominant theme of qualitative data is the increase in skills that are felt to be relevant and valuable:

“I have learnt a great deal of strategies and skills from this program whereas I recall nothing from previous ones I have attended.”

“I can now set boundaries, think things through and follow through.”

“This course goes deeper into what’s going on with you and your child before you use tools to react.”

“I have learnt some amazing skills which I have applied to my parenting and which have helped me tremendously. I am now able to manage my own stress more effectively which in turn creates a happier home life for my two young children. I feel I finally have the right techniques and coping skills to deal with unwanted behaviours in my children and am more equipped to stay on top of certain situations. I feel that I have gained so much.”

“I have not just been given knowledge but have been shown how to use it.”

“Teaches us ways to understand the real messages our children are giving through their responses.”

Parents also identified specific skills development around learned behaviours—why and how behaviours develop and become cyclical and entrenched.

“I apply these skills in most areas of our family life and with what I’ve learnt I’m able to implement these skills by knowing the thoughts or purpose driving the emotion or behaviour. I now respond not react.”

“Other programs give disciplinarian solutions—this program helps us to understand why behaviours happen.”

Another common theme was that of an increase in confidence in the parenting role:

“The program has increased my confidence to parent my children by helping me to understand my own behaviour and strategies for managing it.”

“As a result of doing this program I feel more confident about approaching parenting in a more positive way. The most powerful tool we can have as a parent is to understand our child and what is happening in their little world.”

“Program increased confidence to deal with others—for example, to challenge teachers.”

A lesser theme was that of new understandings of the parenting role and of self-discovery:

“My goal as a parent is now to keep learning to be a better role model for my children.”

“I thought this program would ‘fix’ my children—instead it has helped to fix me and then I teach my children through good role modelling, love, patience and having fun.”

“The ‘Sad to Glad’ group has brought about a tremendous amount of awareness and knowledge which I have found personally helpful in many areas of my life. Through the support and knowledge of the facilitators I feel more positive and able to apply it all to my life. I am very thankful to be involved in such a wonderful group.”

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Parents identified that they felt better supported to understand and validate their children's feelings and needs:

"The program has taught me to listen to and watch my kids in a more understanding way."

"This program has helped me to be more positive, read my children's feelings, work to build their self-esteem."

#### **Increased social connections among parents**

The qualitative data also identified outcomes for participants in terms of increased peer support and social connections. The following are indicative of a number of references to this outcome.

"I have enjoyed my time spent at 'Sad to Glad' and 'Coffee & Chat' groups. I have made strong friendships at the group and now socialize with some of the girls outside of the group."

"Helped me to meet other parents and know I am not the only one having problems—before I looked at other families through rose-coloured glasses."

"I did not know anyone in the area before I joined up for PEARLS. PME and 'Sad to Glad' allowed me to make friendships, to relax, to chat, to learn and to seek advice. The lack of rigid structure was very important to me."

"This is a fantastic way to interact with other mums—I enjoyed the way we all open up and share our expectations."

"I have also found tools and strategies for connecting with other families."

"I am now recognised by others at the shops and meet people from the CfC activities."

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#### **Policy analysis**

The Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children Project—Parent Education and Relationships Living Skills (PEARLS) Program is a positive example of a place-based early intervention and prevention approach to child protection and development. The program contributes a strategic response to parent isolation and skills development in newer residential areas that lack social infrastructure and supports. The program contributes to knowledge about the importance of linking parenting education to existing child and family related service provision, and to strategies for social connectedness.

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#### **Evaluation**

The Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children Project—Parent Education and Relationships Living Skills (PEARLS) Program has been evaluated by researchers from Griffith University in 2007.

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#### **Project related publications**

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**More information**

More information on the Northern Gold Coast Communities for Children Project—Parent Education and Relationships Living Skills (PEARLS) Program and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse of Australia website.

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