



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	Family Journeys—Parent Resource Program
Project practice	The Family Journeys—Parent Resource Program is a coordinated parent/carer support program to strengthen and build parenting and relationship skills, support networks, and reduce isolation.
Project undertaken by	St Joseph's Family Services, Port Macquarie (NSW)
Start date	November 2006
Focal areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and children's services working effectively as a team • Supporting families and parents
Program	Local Answers
Issue	<p>Every year a high number of families with young children relocate to the Hastings area. According to government research, recent estimates suggest that the Hastings population will reach approximately 100,000 people by 2026 (Port Macquarie–Hastings Council). The Hastings Social Plan indicates a current population of 71,500. This growth is reflected in birth rates with 725 babies born at Port Macquarie Hastings Base Hospital in 2006.</p> <p>With the challenges of population growth, there are socio-economic factors to be considered. According to 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, the Hastings region is identified as a disadvantaged area. St Joseph's Family Service's research reflects these statistical findings, indicating that many of these families have little or no family or friendship networks.</p> <p>Further to this, research indicates that Hastings has a high number of lone parents—13% of families, compared to the NSW state average of 8.3%. In terms of the socio-economic indicator of family residence, statistical evidence indicates that there are a relatively high number of caravans, cabins or houseboat dwellings—4% as compared to the state average of 1%. This is attributed to a high level of low family income in the area—49% of individuals in the Hastings area have weekly incomes under \$299, compared to the NSW state average of 38%.</p> <p>There are very few facilities with an early intervention and prevention focus for parents of young children in the Hastings area, and access to available facilities is limited. Prior to the Family Journeys Program, there was not one ongoing parenting course operating in the area, nor was there a strategy to implement one.</p> <p>The NSW Department of Community Services Helpline reports a high number of families at Level 3 (vulnerable families eligible for prevention/early interventions services), and the Families NSW Implementation Group indicates there is a dire need to provide flexible and responsive parenting groups in the region in response to the difficulties families face. The Family Journeys—Parent Resource Program is one such response.</p>
Program context	St Joseph's Family Services is an integrated child and family focused hub, offering quality, innovative and responsive childcare, educational services and family support options to approximately 1,100 children in the Hastings Local

Government Area (LGA), and over 250 children's services across the Mid North Coast and NSW North Regions.

The Family Journeys—Parent Resource Program established a designated leadership position to coordinate a parent/carer support project harnessing existing services and programs within St Josephs Family Services. It designed and developed three complementary core programs (see next section) to support families, parents, and other caregivers who reside in the Hastings LGA, and who have children 0–8 years of age. The target group includes young families, carers, grandparents, families with disabilities, and families accessing the support arm of St Joseph's Family Services—these include Hastings Home Start, and community partnerships with UnitingCare Burnside, Mission Australia, Department of Community Services and Centacare. These new complementary programs are responsive to the needs of families and carers in the community and aim to create an “everyday” parenting approach.

Each of the program activities provides opportunities for: informal parenting information through family/social events, mentoring, follow up discussions with parents as to the usefulness of the information/support, meeting other parents, reflecting on parenting practices, and for skill sharing and mutual support.

The integrated and flexible approach of the program strengthens parent skills and support networks. The program aims at giving children a better start in life by targeting parents with children 0–8 years. The delivery of the different styles of core programs specifically aims to address the needs of parents and their various learning styles.

Practice description

The Family Journeys—Parent Resource Program is a coordinated parent/carer support program. It offers a variety of flexible and responsive groups and activities. These aim to strengthen and build parenting and relationship skills, support networks, and reduce isolation. Links with early childhood services within St Joseph's Family Services have been well established, and bring together the work of family support and early childhood education.

Structure of delivery—core programs

The three core programs are:

- Parent Get Togethers (support and network focus);
- Parent Talk (support, mentoring and practical skills focus); and
- Parent Workshops (practical skills and resource focus).

Parent Get Togethers (a focus on support and networking)

Parent Get Togethers is a monthly activity where parents meet each other and share morning tea in a friendly social gathering at a park under a big shady tree. The activity is coordinated by a worker who provides families with a relaxed environment for discussions, encourages and supports networking, and connects new parents and children. Fliers are distributed throughout the community, while personal invitations and reminders (by phone or email) assist the group to be cohesive. This group receives information about other activities which are available, and is linked to community support groups by the Coordinator. The outdoor venue encourages families to invite others along and is easily accessible by public transport or on foot. It is close to a local shopping area and has nearby public amenities and a playground.

Once contact with each family is initiated, details are taken to enable follow up and provide links and support where necessary to the Home Start Volunteer program and other support agencies. This also provides families with a number of access points to the other Family Journey activities.

Parent Talk (a support, mentoring, and practical skills focus).

Parent Talk is a monthly activity that provides an opportunity to explore parenting through group discussion. The discussion group is conducted in a flexible manner that allows families to attend when the topic is of interest or relevant to their needs at that time. Fliers for each monthly activity are produced and circulated in the community. The objective of the group is to provide parents with the opportunity to discuss parenting issues on an informal

basis, learn coping skills to deal with the issues that are discussed, and apply the skills practically to their individual situation. Parents are also able to learn from other parents' experiences, and gain peer support and encouragement. In this way parents are learning to manage, improve, and enjoy their role as a parent in line with early intervention and prevention principles.

Parents benefit from the shared information and are able to reflect on their own parenting practices. It develops new or expanded skills to parents via discussion, information and interaction. The topics are relevant and build on skills for both children and parents. Parents enjoy being involved with their children in activities such as Story Telling, and Music and Movement. Parent Talk is supported by a partnership with UnitingCare Burnside, making the availability of venue and resources more affordable. The partnership enables shared facilitator roles, provision of transport when needed, and support for parents to mentor skills to other participants.

Parent workshops (a practical skills and resource focus)

Various workshops are held throughout the year as a result of parents' request for information in providing a way to learn new skills (and strengthen existing skills) about parenting young children. These 2-hour workshops are facilitated by trained professionals who research and present current information in a setting familiar to many families. Workshops also provide staff within the hub opportunities to share their knowledge and skills with parents. Examples of workshops include: School Readiness for Kindergarten; Developing Children's Fine Motor Skills and Creativity; Guiding Children's Behaviour; and Complexities and Strengths of Being a Parent.

Parents receive handouts relevant to topics, and a gold coin donation is requested towards administration costs, making the activity affordable for parents, and cost-effective for the program.

A reference group was created from staff and parents interested in assisting with the Parent Resource Program. The group meets monthly to design, develop, and implement programs and develop methodology for continuous improvement/action research and evaluation strategy. This group develops the framework for stakeholder partnerships.

It is recognised that families—particularly vulnerable families—are more likely to access services that are easily accessible, attractive to parents and adopt a low-key non-stigmatised approach, and are based in natural settings such as child care centres, community meeting places and schools (UnitingCare Burnside, 2005).

Practice ingredients

Each of these program activities are based on three key practice ingredients that have contributed to their success.

The key practice ingredients are:

- soft entry—linking more conventional forms of childcare with more innovative models of family support;
- focus on peer learning and support; and
- strong links with other professional and community organisations.

Soft entry: linking more conventional forms of child care with more innovative flexible models of family support

The project offers a range of "add-on" activities for families who utilise services provided by St Joseph's Family Services. These include childcare, Home Start, and other services. Other families can also access the Family Journeys program. St Joseph's Family Services provide families a soft entry point to explore all provided service programs.

Follow up support is provided when required through free parenting information, guidance and resources to all families, Family Day Care providers, Long Day Care, Preschool, Occasional Care, volunteers and staff who are registered with any of the St Joseph's Family Service programs. Support is offered via groups and workshops where parents can learn and develop

parenting skills, meet other parents and discuss parenting issues through the Family Journeys Program.

Focus on peer learning, where parents share their own experiences with each other

When parents feel more confident in their parenting abilities, they pass this confidence on to their children, their friends, and their neighbours—a process that benefits the whole community. Families accessing the Family Journeys Programs have a soft entry point where resources are open to all families, and it is “normal” to share the everyday struggles of parenting in a safe environment where their participation is in the best interests of the child. Parents become mentors for other parents through everyday opportunities. Skills learned then become self-perpetuating and capacity is built in the community.

The desired outcome of the project is for the sustained life-long learning and mentoring through parent networks and education.

Strong links with other professional organisations

The Family Journeys Program has developed referral protocols, and has strong links with existing child and family service providers. The program values the shared support and benefits of being part of a broader community network, with partnerships generating referrals as well as those that offer opportunities for program delivery collaboration.

The program has extensive referral networks and links. Referrals are received from:

- Health and Community Services within Families NSW network;
- Department of Community Services;
- Child and Family Health nurses;
- Family Support Workers;
- Early Childhood Services;
- Brighter Futures Program;
- Probation and Parole; and
- Centacare.

Additionally, the program has a range of partnerships that support the delivery of the Family Journeys Program. All partnerships have been created using consultation, negotiation, written communication, shared resources and evaluation. All parties use the evaluations to address their specific program performance indicators. The partnerships also help address the issue of available venues to hold activities and workshops. Through collaboration with other organisations the resources can be shared and made accessible to a greater number of families. The partnerships created have been successful because they have met a need in the community, such as the P5 Program which provides the only long term formal parenting accredited course available in the Hastings area.

Partnerships also support the development of new activities. The Family Journey Program developed partnerships with other agencies to form three supported playgroups, and facilitate activities to promote literacy, nutrition, and a relationship with the natural environment. In all, twelve partnerships have been established and many are ongoing. All activities are delivered and facilitated by professional staff and volunteers in collaboration with the community partnership.

By forming a network of community partnerships, different types of parenting programs will become available to the families through our core programs of Family Get Togethers, Parent Talk, and Parent Workshops.

Research base

Literature and past research supporting the effectiveness of the Family Journeys Parenting Program is considered for the following areas:

- effective early intervention and prevention;
 - promoting strong, functional and well-supported families;
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- reducing social isolation and connecting families to their local community; and
- modelling good parenting practice—staff, teachers, volunteers.

Research demonstrates that the way we support families in the early years of their children's lives has a lasting effect on children's development and their subsequent health, education, and economic outcomes.

Effective early intervention and prevention

In seeking a model and approach that will be flexible and responsive to the data collected, the organisation has researched models from other nationally recognised childcare providers (SDN Children's Services, Coloon Cottage, KU Children's Services), and international models such as the STEEP program (Harris Training Centre, Minnesota).

These projects reflect the need to provide parents a soft entry point to support and intervention. These soft entry points assist to de-stigmatise the support offered while peer mentoring assists both skill development and social support network building (Dolby, 2003). The STEEP program outlines that this has genuine flow on effects to the quality of care for children.

The need for quality early intervention programs is reinforced by research into brain development which shows that children's experiences during the first three years of life are formative and impact on neurological development, the effects of which are life long (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Such research along with Early Childhood research, suggests that good early childhood development programs promote healthy development in children, improving children's behaviour, learning, and health in later life.

Research evidence suggests that programs that have produced the best long-term benefits for children from vulnerable families have combined both a parent and child component (Rogers & Moore, 2003). It is envisaged that the long-term benefits will include more functional and harmonious families, confident parents, stronger community networks and increased self-determination.

Promoting strong, functional and well-supported families

An evaluation of P5 Parenting Program was recently completed by Gold Coast Health Service District and Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus (Hastings & Ludlow, 2006). Results of the study indicated a 32% increase in positive interaction with family members, while 50% of participants were no longer reporting disruptive child behaviour. Overall, 94% of participants would recommend P5 to other parents. These positive trends are encouraging for services offering the P5 Program to the community. They are evidence that parent training programs are an important component of prevention and intervention efforts to assist families of children with disruptive behaviour disorders.

It is recognised that families, particularly vulnerable families, are more likely to access services that are easily accessible, attractive to parents and adopt a low key non-stigmatising approach and that these services should be based in natural settings such as child care centres, community meeting places and schools (UnitingCare Burnside, 2005).

Reducing social isolation and connecting families to their local community

The Brotherhood of St Laurence report entitled *Setting the Hubs Humming: Working Together for Children and Their Families* (2007), is consistent with St Joseph's Family Services' vision of integrated child and family services that are "child focused, community driven, professionally informed services seeking to offer a unique and diverse cohort of programs that respond to the need of children and families within the community" (Catherine Hydon & Anne Kennedy, speaking at the Integrating Children's Services Conference day held in Melbourne, September 2007).

The connecting of services also serves to assist in reducing social isolation for families. Bringing universal and specialist services together to work in collaborative, co-located children's "hubs" enables services to achieve better outcomes for children and families, develop professional understandings between professionals, and aims to strengthen local communities (Leech & McCaffrey, 2007).

Modelling good parenting practice—staff, teachers, volunteers

Research also suggests that effective parenting, which develops strong functional and well-supported families, relies not only on the capacity of an individual or family but also on the health of a neighbourhood and community (Mission Australia, 2005).

Researchers (e.g., High/Scope Education Research Foundation, 2005) are clearly presenting data regarding the consequences for children who did not receive a positive start in life and Australian advocacy groups (e.g., National Investment for the Early Years) call for better support for children and families in the vital first three years.

Parents need support with parenting skills and accessing community services (Hertzman, 2002; Stanley, 2003; Wilms, 2002). Staff need attributes, skills and knowledge to enable them to be supportive/educative with families as well as playing a referral role (Tait, 2001). The wider community also has an important role to play in increasing awareness of—and participation in—a network of family and community support services (Hughes & Stone, 2003; Wise, 2001).

Outcomes

The desired outcome of the project is for sustained life-long learning and mentoring through parent networks and education. Parents therefore become mentors for parents through everyday opportunities and skills learned. This then becomes self-perpetuating and continues to build further supportive capacity.

Towards this end, the project has identified the following outcomes to date:

- increased parent and child participation into the Family Journeys three core programs Family Get Togethers; Parent Talk and Parent workshops;
- increased parenting and relationship skills of participants; and
- the development of partnerships that contribute to the delivery of better services and/or meet unmet needs for local families and communities.

Evidence of outcomes

An internal evaluation has been conducted of the program. Evaluation data were collected on most Family Journey activities by individual parents filling out a demographic data form. Parents also undertook satisfaction surveys designed upon completion of some of the project activities. The project seeks ongoing input from families, to hear their thoughts on how they can best find their own solutions to everyday parenting concerns. Input is sought through written evaluation forms, verbal consultation, feedback from case workers and participants. All of this information forms the evidence that indicates positive outcomes as identified below.

Increased parent participation into the Family Journeys three core programs and activities: Family Get Togethers; Parent Talk; Parent workshops

The Family Journeys Program has seen a steady increase in participation over the 3-year period. In 2006, 178 attended the programs including 51 males and 127 females. In 2007, 217 have attended our programs: 119 males and 98 females.

Increased parenting and relationship skills of participants

Increased participation by parents or primary carers in parenting skills activities

From 2006, 128 parents have returned evaluation forms. Of these, 55 (43%) reported "significant improvement" in their parenting skills because of their

participation in the project's activity. Sixty-seven (52%) reported "some improvement" in their parenting skills as a result of their participation in the project's activity. Six (5%) reported "no improvement" in their parenting skills as a result of their participation in the project's activity.

Increased participation in relationship skills activities

From 2006, 92 parents have returned evaluation forms. Forty-nine (53%) reported "significant improvement" in their relationship skills as a result of their participation in the project's relationship skills activities. Thirty-eight (41%) reported "some improvement" in their relationship skills as a result of their participation in the project's relationship skills activities. Five (5%) reported "no improvement" in their relationship skills as a result of their participation in the project's relationship skills activities.

Improved family relationships

In the last reporting period, 99 parents returned the evaluation. All parents (100%) reported "increased positive time" spent together with family members, and improved relationship with their children/child as a result of their participation in the project's relationship skills activities.

Some examples of what participants have reported include:

"A problem shared normalises my everyday parenting challenges."

"Unbiased advice allows me to try new ideas."

"Suggestions are objective and credible coming from parents own experiences."

"Opportunity to build rapport and trust with peers is developed over time by regular participation in Family Journey activities."

"Families reported that they feel listened to by staff and other participants in the groups."

"The regular social support network provides hope to more isolated and vulnerable families."

The development of partnerships that contribute to the delivery of better services and/or meet unmet needs for local families and communities

The Family Journeys Program has developed 12 partnerships in its three core programs—Family Get Togethers, Parent Talk, and Parent workshops—all of which have contributed to the program's success.

The partnerships have resulted in:

- provision of a new service or meeting an unmet need for local families and/or communities;
- new approaches between local service partners that benefit local families and/or communities; and
- positive change for another local service or services, providing help to local families and/or communities that should outlive the project.

The promotion of and commitment to continually provide a parenting program P5 at regular intervals throughout the year has seen a steady increase in numbers of parents completing the course and of other agencies in the Hastings network referring families to the Family Journeys program.

Parents are now marketing the program to other parents and have provided us with many testimonials to the benefit of P5:

"P5 provided us with the tools and skills to parent positively on a daily basis. It was simple and straight forward leaving us with the confidence to improve our parenting for both our children and ourselves."

"This program didn't just give us answers it provided us with the tools to reach our own solutions. It taught us that we do have control over our own actions and reactions and that we can use these tools to change for the better."

	<p>Two members of the St Joseph's Family Support Network have completed the facilitator 3-day training course and are able to present P5 in the wider community.</p> <p>The development of a calendar of Family Journey events and the promotion of activities through the reference group members has been a success factor for communication, planning and promotion.</p> <p>The continued focus on literacy has led to an ongoing partnership with Hastings Library and a future commitment from the children's librarian to work with our Parent Talk families in 2008.</p> <p>Further to data evaluation, observational reflections and evidence have shown:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased parent participation in Family Journey Activities; • requests from other agencies to include their families in our programs and to work together collaboratively for specific families; • requests to provide support to other agencies through supported playgroup, partnership for specific activities, referral for parent support; • successful financial grant applications for funds for equipment and ongoing parenting programs; and • parents and other services in the community approaching us to request use of our parenting courses.
Policy analysis	<p>The Family Journeys—Parent Resource program is a positive example of project that combats economic and social disadvantage, and builds socially inclusive communities. The project is an example of family support and parenting activities built around a range of “soft entry” points and linked to strong partnerships with community services.</p>
Evaluation	<p>An internal evaluation has been conducted by the Family Journey's Coordinator based on evaluation/participant feedback following attendance, and through quarterly reports and evaluation booklets.</p>
Project related publications	
References	<p>Brotherhood of St Laurence: Hubs strategy group for Hume Communities for children initiative. (2007), <i>Setting the hubs humming: Working together for children and their families</i>. Retrieved 27 November, from http://www.geelongcity.vic.gov.au/library/pdf/5293/41.pdf</p> <p>Dolby, R. (2003). <i>Report on a relationship based intervention across two preschool settings implemented by The Benevolent Society within KU Children's Services preschools</i>. Sydney: The Benevolent Society and KU children's Services.</p> <p>Hastings, S., & Ludlow, T. (2006), P5—A participatory program promoting pleasurable parenting: Preliminary evidence for a community-based parenting program. <i>Journal of Family Studies</i>, 12(2), 223–245.</p> <p>Hertzman, C. (2002). <i>An early child development strategy Australia: Lessons from Canada</i>. Paper presented at Commission for Young People seminar, Sydney. Viewed at http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au/pdf/publications/issues/issue_one_paper.pdf</p> <p>High/Scope Education Research Foundation. (2005). Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40. Michigan. Viewed at http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org/Default.aspx?tabid=32</p> <p>Hughes, I., & Stone, W. (2003). <i>Family Change and community life: Exploring the links</i>. (Research paper 32). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family studies. Retrieved 27 November 2008, from http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/respaper/RP32.pdf</p> <p>Leech, D., & McCaffrey, J. (2007). Planning for the Springvale Integrated Children's Services Facility. <i>Reflections</i>, 29(Summer).</p>

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More information	More information on Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.



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