



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	It Takes a Village (ITAV)
Project practice	A mentoring and training program to strengthen the capacity of children's services workers to respond to vulnerable children/families.
Project undertaken by	Lower Mountains Family Support Service, Blaxland, NSW
Start date	November 2004
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>It Takes a Village was developed in response to research conducted by the Nepean Families First Service Network Development Project (Nepean Families First, 2002). The project's consultations with the Children's Services Sector highlighted the lack of knowledge and interaction between Children's Services (i.e., child care and other pre-school educational services) and other community/health services. More specifically, the services themselves identified lack of time and resources as a constraint in accessing information, training and initiating contacts with other services.</p> <p>It Takes a Village addresses the identified priority areas highlighted in the report which are workers being able to: "recognise parents who need extra assistance, engage families with special/complex needs; know where/how to refer families for assistance" (Nepean Families First, 2000, p. 2). In addition, the project is premised on research that has indicated the significant role that early childhood services play in enhancing resilience in vulnerable children and their families. This research along with anecdotal evidence (gathered during consultations with local directors/coordinators) confirmed that children's services workers are very often the first contact and support for vulnerable children and families. However, a significant proportion of staff indicated that they felt they were venturing into areas outside of their expertise. In addition, workers reported that they were often unsure of where their professional boundaries lay. Finally, many workers reported that policy and protocols around working with vulnerable families were ad hoc at best or non-existent.</p> <p>It Takes a Village recognises that for any intervention program to be effective, staff must be trained and supported to provide high-quality services to children and families (ECIA NSW, 2005). The project provides opportunities for early childhood services to strengthen their capacity to respond to vulnerable children (and families) by developing and supporting their "first contact" role with families.</p>
Program context	It Takes a Village (ITAV) is a project of the Lower Mountains Family Support Service (LMFSS). LMFSS is based in Blaxland in the Blue Mountains and manages seven projects, some of them mountain wide. The core work of LMFSS is family support work, parent group work and provision of emergency relief. The primary target group is families with dependent children who are experiencing stress or crisis. The range of services provided includes early intervention strategies as well as support for families in crisis including those

who are part of the child protection system. The projects are funded by the NSW Department of Community Services, the Commonwealth Government, the Blue Mountains City Council, as well as donations/fundraising.

ITAV is one of the early intervention strategies of the service, which builds the capacity of early childhood services to identify and support vulnerable families. Through the activities of ITAV, children's workers are made aware of the potential referral options for families and are able to link families to appropriate services. They are also able to seek information themselves through the ITAV network which may help them to more thoroughly address the needs of the children and parents. Other early intervention strategies such as the Families NSW Early Intervention Family Work projects are also linked to the partner services to provide extra support for families. Through ITAV and the ITAV newsletter, families are given information about the range of supportive services that are available across the Blue Mountains service system.

The ITAV partner services are: Lapstone Out of Hours School Care, Blackheath Pre-school, and Blue Mountains Family Day Care (Upper/ Mid and Lower mountains groups), Winmalee District Pre-school and Euroka Children's Centre. The profile of children's services staff encompasses Directors/Coordinators, qualified and unqualified childcare workers, early childhood teachers, Family Day Care Coordinators, Family Day Care Children's Support Officers (CSO's), Family Day Carers, Outside Schools Hours Coordinators and staff, permanent and casual staff across the network.

The project provides workers in a broad range of early childhood education services in the Blue Mountains region with on-site training and professional development opportunities to enable them to more successfully identify and support vulnerable parents and children. This allows workers to build on and enhance their existing skills and knowledge base around early intervention principles and practices. In addition, the project provides workers with opportunities to build confidence and skills in approaching and working with families whose child/ren may be at risk. The project introduces workers to "best practices" that will assist them to build relationships of trust with families who access their service. This in turn builds the capacity of workers to engage families with other community supports early in the life of problems.

The project has developed a continuity of support model that facilitates the development of workers' knowledge and skills base and provides ongoing support to embed worker's learning into new models of practice.

Practice description

This section details the activities and ways of working that are critical to the operation of It Takes a Village. These include:

- collaborative partnerships between family support services and children's services;
- collaborative partnerships between family support services and other community/health services;
- individually tailored training/professional development packages;
- training and learning opportunities are provided by qualified facilitators/trainers;
- training and learning programs are evidence based and embedded in "best practice";
- "one-stop" service for staff who require support, mentoring, information or referrals; and
- on-site "drop-ins"—being there at the right time.

Collaborative partnerships with individual children's services

Partnerships with children's services are considered the logical place to embed the project. The guiding principles for engagement with children's services include mutual respect and a shared vision for capacity building amongst the community of professionals working with families. It is imperative that the needs

and concerns of workers in the partner services are continually acknowledged and respected. Formal individual service agreements are completed in collaboration with each project partner. The agreements provide a documented framework for implementing specific components of the project for individual services. For example, project partners formally agree to participate in the following:

- training programs for staff;
- mentoring and information services;
- referral protocols; and
- development of policy and “drop-in” services (where appropriate).

Draft agreements are presented to staff and management committees before services formally sign on to become ITAV project partners. Project partner services work with one project worker who is positioned as that service’s primary contact. The project worker is responsible for implementing and evaluating the training packages and/or organises for other health/community services to meet specific training/mentoring needs. Most importantly, the project worker becomes “the face” behind the name, the first point of contact for workers in children’s services who are dealing with vulnerable children and families. The project worker can take and make referrals, give support and information and provide opportunities to de-brief and strengthen early intervention skills. A key “selling point” of the project is that ITAV supports workers to better manage the concerns they are already facing with vulnerable families. It is a project that equips them to do better what they were already doing.

Collaborative partnerships with other community/health services

For project outcomes to be sustainable, it is considered imperative that staff in children’s services have knowledge of and access to other health/community services. With this in mind, ITAV contracts for a proportion of specific workshops to be run by other health/community services. In addition, workers from local Family Support services are contracted to run information sessions that focus on early intervention strategies. This provides staff with opportunities to become familiar with other services and referral pathways for vulnerable families. In addition, ITAV has purchased training packages from the Family Worker Training and Development Programme Inc. (www.fwtdp.org.au). This project has been set up to provide for the professional development of workers in children’s and family support services in NSW. This has enabled the project worker to run programs for staff that are evidence based, have been independently evaluated and are focused on the professional development needs of staff in children’s services.

Individually tailored training/professional development packages

An important feature of ITAV is providing flexible training and development packages to individual service partners. The project has avoided the assumption that the Children’s Services sector is an homogenous community with uniform needs and expectations. The partner services demonstrate diversity in the following areas: organisational structures; qualifications and ages of staff; levels of turnover; role expectations; and practices “on the ground”. It has been critical that ITAV recognises that each service type experiences its own unique challenges. As a result, individual responses have been negotiated with each service. In addition, programs are modified to reflect workers’ “real world” issues and experiences in their particular work environment. ITAV has introduced post-training “reflecting on practice” forums at each partner service. These forums provide staff with opportunities to conceptualise and integrate new learning and skills within existing work practices. The sessions focus on building skills in reflection, observation, planning, de-briefing, information sharing and team building.

Training is delivered on site and at times when staff would normally be present at their service (i.e., staff meetings). Programs are packaged as integrated modules which can be delivered in flexible ways. This has meant that staff

members are not required to be “off the floor” for extended periods of time. Each service is provided with packages that contain worksheets and handouts. Staff are able to refer back to their training notes when needed. Offering training packages where staff are not required to travel or participate outside normal work hours has ensured that services are able to offer all staff increased opportunities for professional development.

Training and learning opportunities are provided by qualified facilitators/trainers

All facilitators engaged by the project are tertiary qualified and have expertise in social work, social sciences, early childhood education, counselling, education, and psychology. The project worker/s have participated in Train the Trainer workshops for “Talking to Parents About the Hard Stuff”, “On the Run Counselling” and “Work Practice Reflection”. These workshops are delivered by the Family Worker Training and Development Programme (as part of the Nepean Families First Learning & Development Project).

Training and learning programs are evidence based and embedded in current principles of “best practice”

The program specifically targets those workers who are new to the Children’s Services Sector and/or are new to early intervention concepts and practices. The three primary training packages offered to project partners are:

- Talking to Parents About the Hard Stuff;
- Noticing Change in Children (developed and produced by ITAV as a complementary training program to Talking to Parents About the Hard Stuff. It targets early childhood staff who are new to, or less experienced in, concepts around early intervention and is designed to prepare them for participation in Talking to Parents); and
- On the Run Counselling (a program to increase the informal counselling skills of early childhood workers when dealing with presenting issues from parents).

The training programs were developed and evaluated by the Family Worker Training and Development Program. The suite of training programs are embedded in strengths-based approaches to working with families and children with a focus on early identification/intervention and child protection. This approach is premised on evidence demonstrating that practices that build strengths and help to develop resilience can reduce identifiable risk factors. The learning programs enhance the capacity of staff to recognise their own expertise and wisdom and that of the families that access their services.

“One-stop” model of service for staff who require support, mentoring, information or links to other community services

The project worker is responsible for managing the project partner’s portfolio. Staff (in the project partner’s network) are able to develop a primary working relationship with one person. This means, that staff spend less time trying to negotiate multiple relationships across a diversity of services in an attempt to access relevant information and support. A significant amount of time has been devoted to the development of effective relationships between the project worker and the project partners. These relationships are developed in an environment where respect for the different—though sometimes complementary—skills of the workers in both sectors (family support/children’s services) are acknowledged. This has resulted in staff approaching the project worker with “hard stuff” issues and requests for information and referrals. This in turn has increased the capacity of staff to respond to the needs of vulnerable children in a timely manner. Staff access the project worker through various means including: telephone/email; face-to-face meetings; training sessions; informal “drop-ins”; staff and inter-agency meetings; and training. This flexible approach enables staff to access support where and when they need it.

On-site “drop-ins”: Family support workers being there at the right time

The project worker and/or other early intervention family support workers conduct regular “drop-ins” at partner services. Children’s services workers have access to a family support worker in their centre at times that suit them. This has provided staff with a “soft entry” point in which to share concerns, issues around practice and determine risk and safety issues for children at their service. This has enhanced worker’s confidence and their capacity to respond to vulnerable children and their families in a timely and sensitive manner.

Research base

The benefits of early intervention

There exists a solid base of evidence indicating that the early years of life are crucial in setting the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes (Fish, 2002; ECIA NSW, 2005). ITAV acknowledges that the early years of childhood represent “prime times” where negative experiences are more likely to have sustained effects. A child’s experiences, in the early years, can influence the wiring of his/her brain and the function of his/her nervous system (Families and Work Institute, 1996). Overall, there is strong evidence that emotional and social deprivation, chronic stress and trauma leaves their mark on the growing brain and can place limitations on the child’s development and functioning. This places increased emphasis on considering the care environment of young children both within their family and in early childhood services (ECIA NSW, 2005).

Evidence over the last decade points to the importance of prevention and early intervention in order to promote healthy development and improve the prospects of vulnerable children (Families and Work Institute, 1996; University of Maine, 2007). According to Fish (2002), “a focus on early intervention and prevention ... is socially and economically more effective in the long term” (p. 10). ITAV is premised on evidence that early intervention programs can improve children’s mental and physical health, enhance their cognitive skills, encourage their social and emotional development, enhance protective factors in their environment and provide protection for children. Research indicates that investment in the wellbeing of young children produces long-term social and economic benefits for families and communities. Evidence produced from the Perry Pre-School, Head Start and Elmira Early Intervention Programs has provided models for working with young children and families in the context of early childhood services (in Fish, 2002; ECIA NSW, 2005).

The benefits of strengthening skills in identifying children and need, and promoting help-giving skills in children’s services workers

To quote Galinsky (cited in Shimoni & Baxter, 2001), “working with families, especially parents, is widely accepted among caregivers as an integral aspect of the early childhood teacher’s job” (p. 232). It is increasingly recognised that Early Childhood services play a very important role in supporting families in their local communities. Services that are family-centred and strengths-based focus on identifying children and families with additional needs, provide emotional and practical support to parents, have participatory planning and case management, and good information and referral systems (Rogers & Moore, 2003).

A proportion of the literature identifies that when childhood professionals are unclear of their roles, lack knowledge of services that are available to families and are unfamiliar with concepts around family-centred practice, they may experience increased stress and frustration within their workplace (Shimoni & Baxter, 2001).

Elements of effective help-giving for workers in children’s services include: technical knowledge and skills; effective help-giving behaviours and attributes; knowledge of other health/community services; and the capacity to encourage participatory involvement of families when planning interventions (Rogers & Moore, 2003, p. 17). Family-centred approaches to service delivery have been shown to be effective in creating positive outcomes for children and families

(Rogers & Moore, 2003).

Some local examples of capacity building approaches include the Partnerships in Early Childhood project (PIEC), which is run in partnership by KU Children's Services (a childcare provider) and the Benevolent Society NSW (a family services provider). The PIEC project focuses on working with staff in early childhood services to enhance their capacity to identify and support vulnerable children and families using relationships as the context for intervention. Key components of the project include: locating a Family Support Worker on-site in selected early childhood services; staff provided with specific training around attachment theory; and staff provided with mentoring from a psychologist, who is also present at "drop-off" and "pick-up" times. In addition, the Family Worker partners with staff in order to develop their capacity for family-centred and reflective work practices. Reported outcomes arising from the PIEC project have included: greater access to support services for parents and informal support for the family; better quality care for children enrolled at participating centres; and increased capacity of childcare staff to foster healthy emotional and social development for children (Swan & Dolby, 2002).

The benefits of a coordinated early intervention network

ITAV acknowledges children's services as an important component of early intervention responses. Research locates early childhood education providers on the service delivery continuum in areas concerning the safety and wellbeing of children (Anderson, 2007). The need for a coordinated investment in early childhood has been a significant factor in determining the objectives of the project, and hence the project's focus on creating partnerships with centres that provide services for young children (0–5 yrs) as well as those supporting families. The project is based on principles that focus on building on existing structures, encouraging partnerships, flexibility, adding value, are evidence based, can be evaluated, and are replicable (Oberklaid & Wangman, 2006). ITAV aims to create "villages of care" that offer a supportive environment to staff and families, a better interface between services and families and a better integrated service system (Oberklaid & Wangman, 2006).

At its core, ITAV utilises one of the key objectives of Nepean Families First Implementation Plan which is "to develop an improved service network which makes it easier for families (and workers) to know about and access the support they need" (Nepean Families First, 2002).

Problems that can be associated with less coordinated delivery of services to families can include: lack of focus on prevention and early intervention; fragmented delivery; general lack of understanding and capacity of workers to form partnerships with families; and failures in recognising and responding to "at risk" families (Rogers & Moore, 2003). Initial consultations with project partners indicated that a good proportion of staff felt "out of their depth" when attempting to approach parents with their concerns about their child. The research carried out by the Nepean Families First (2002) project affirmed that there was little quality interaction between the children's and community services sectors. ITAV hypothesised that partnerships developed between children's services and family support services would increase workers' (and families') ease of access to relevant information and support. In addition, staff would be able to more easily access mentoring around approaching parents with "hard stuff" issues.

This hypothesis is supported by literature that identifies increased outcomes for children and families as a result of coordinated and comprehensive services for children (Rogers & Moore, 2003). This published literature review identifies that early childhood workers are more likely to adopt best practices in their work when they are part of a coordinated or linked up service system. This includes via one-stop shop approaches to the coordination of services. Means of coordination can include training, though also extend across decision making and service delivery, among other factors. A comprehensive service attempts to address all the needs of the child. Services that evidenced comprehensive links to a wide array of other supports and resources, tended to achieve higher outcomes for children (Rogers & Moore, 2003). ITAV draws on these ideas to provide additional resources across a range of services, and coordinate training,

	mentoring and support.
Outcomes	<p>The project has been successful in engaging a high number of children’s services staff across the range of early childhood education services to participate in various on-site learning and development activities and mentoring activities. In total, 60 Blue Mountains Children’s Services workers participated in the following activities organised by ITAV:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in “Kids and Feelings” workshops; • Work practice reflection sessions for staff at individual services; • 10 packages of “Talking to Parents About the Hard Stuff”; • 2 packages of “Noticing Change in Children”; • 2 session of “Managing Work-Stress”; • 1 session of “Managing Separation Anxiety”; • 2 workshops—“Breathing Spaces” for Family Day Care • 5 sessions of “Kids & Feelings”; • 2 packages of “On the Run Counselling”; and • 3 sessions of Work Practice Reflection Forums. <p>As a result of the various activities conducted and collaborative partnerships established across the range of children’s and community services, the project has achieved a range of outcomes for staff in children’s services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased knowledge of child development, health, positive behaviour management and when to seek assistance; • increased confidence and esteem with approaching parents about issues relating to their child; • improved access to professional development opportunities & learning; • increased access to and knowledge of referral pathways for vulnerable families; and • increased ease of access to other health and community services.
Evidence of outcomes	<p>The project has utilised an action research framework as the model to assess, evaluate and plan for the project. ITAV has employed a variety of means for collecting data and evaluating practice effectiveness. These include the following methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pre- and post-training questionnaires; • staff activity reports; and • follow-up reflection on practice forums. <p>A substantial amount of time has been allocated (throughout the project) to building collaborative working relationships with project partners. Many of the contacts between project worker and staff were informal (i.e., worker “drop-ins”, telephone conversations, informal chats out in the play area). As a result, staff “activity reports” were created in order to capture (in the course of project worker/staff interactions) anecdotal evidence of new learning and practice among staff.</p> <p>Given that the project has also focussed on providing on-site workshops for parents, separate evaluation and summary reports were created for staff and parents. Evidence against outcomes is reported below.</p> <p>Increased knowledge of child development, health, positive behaviour management and when to seek assistance</p> <p>Staff activity reports indicate that 70% of staff reported positive changes in this</p>

area.

Increased confidence and esteem with approaching parents about issues relating to their child.

Staff Activity Reports indicate that 80% of staff reported positive changes in this area. Interviews conducted with Service Coordinators and Directors also generated data to evidence this outcome:

... this project provided some much needed support for beginning dialogue with staff around reflective practice. The training provided supported our work with families and gave staff some much needed and valuable skills in building and maintaining relationships with parents. (Director, long daycare service)

Improved access to professional development opportunities and learning

Staff activity reports indicate that 100% of staff reported positive changes in this area. In addition, interviews were also conducted with Service Coordinators and Directors to evaluate their service's participation in the project. The following quotes reflect achievement in the area of increased access to professional development:

The project has provided affordable and accessible training to staff at convenient times and locations. Many families are also aware that helpful advice and support is only a phone call away. (Coordinator, Outside School Hours Care)

Previously we have had difficulty accessing quality in-services and training opportunities due to our "isolated" location. This often involved staff travelling long distances to participate in quality training and development. We finally feel we are now able to access training, information, in-services and counselling for staff and parents within easy reach and with minimum delay. (Director, Pre-school/kindergarten)

The project worker is becoming a familiar face at the service and this is helping to create a feeling of community. (Coordinator, Pre-school Kindergarten)

Increased access to and knowledge of referral pathways for vulnerable families

Staff activity reports indicate that 70% of staff reported positive change in this area. In addition, interviews were conducted with Service Coordinators and Directors and identified services' sense of support and referral possibilities:

Frequently in early childhood services the staff are the first to know that families are under stress. All too often we have been powerless to help. The "It takes a Village" project has given us a support service and worker to call upon: a person whom we know and trust, who can support us in our work with vulnerable families. (Director, Pre-school Kindergarten)

Increased ease of access to other health and community services

Staff Activity Reports indicate that 75% of staff reported positive changes in this area.

Staff capacity to recognise and respond to vulnerable children has also been measured via pre & post training questionnaires

Post-training evaluations highlighted positive feedback from staff:

"The training heightened to me the need for children to feel safe."

"The workshop affirmed much of what I do."

	<p>“I enjoyed sharing ideas and thoughts with my workers.”</p> <p>“The workshop provided a reminder and development of current skills.”</p> <p>“The project worker makes it fun not boring ... so ideas stick.”</p> <p>In summary, there is supporting evidence that It Takes a Village has been found to be effective in meeting a number of the project objectives, which include: increasing the capacity of staff to recognise and respond to the needs of vulnerable children; increasing workers’ competency in strengths based approaches; increasing workers’ knowledge of best practice evidence base in the topic area; increase workers’ knowledge of and access to other health/community services; increasing workers’ capacity for developing conscious work practice; and enhancing the early intervention and strengths based culture within children’s services.</p>
Policy analysis	<p>The It Takes a Village project is a positive example of a project designed to combat economic and social disadvantage and build socially inclusive communities. It has contributed to practice to support policy focusing on the increased networking across early childhood and family services, and to address the identified needs of vulnerable families and children.</p>
Evaluation	<p>The It Takes a Village project was submitted for consideration for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) Promising Practice Profiles (PPP). The project was assessed across a range of criteria relating to how the service results in positive outcomes for children, families and communities. The submission was peer reviewed and validated as evidencing promising practice. More information on the PPP selection process may be found at:</p> <p>http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/pppprocess.html</p> <p>The It Takes a Village project has been internally evaluated by the service manager using a range of data collection strategies.</p>
Project related publications	
References	<p>Anderson, A. (2007). <i>Evidence informed practice: Discussion paper</i>. Sydney: The Benevolent Society.</p> <p>Commonwealth Taskforce on Child Development, Health and Well-Being. (2003). <i>Towards the development of a national agenda for early childhood</i>. Canberra: Australian Government.</p> <p>Early Intervention Australia (ECIA) NSW. (2005). <i>Does this child need help?</i> (2nd ed.). NSW: Author.</p> <p>Families and Work Institute. (1996). <i>Rethinking the brain: New insights into early development. Conference report—Brain development in young children: New frontiers for research, policy and practice</i>. New York: Families and Work Institute.</p> <p>Fish, E. (2002). The benefits of early intervention. <i>Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin</i>, 2(Spring/Summer).</p> <p>Nepean Families First. (2002). <i>Supporting families: understanding parents’ and carers’ needs project report. Learning & Development Project</i>. NSW: Nepean Families First.</p> <p>Oberklaid, F., & Wangman, J. (2006). <i>Early brain development: Implications for community development work with families</i>. Melbourne: Centre for Community Child Health.</p> <p>Rogers, R., & Moore, T. (2003). <i>The Early Years Project: Refocusing community based services for young children and their families. A Literature Review</i>. Melbourne: Centre for Community Child Health.</p>

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More information

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



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