



# Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Sports Mentoring Project—Coonamble</b>
<b>Project practice</b>	<b>Teaching life skills to disengaged young males through sports-based mentoring</b>
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	Stride Foundation, Coonamble (north-west NSW)
<b>Start date</b>	September 2006
<b>Focal areas</b>	Creating Child Friendly Communities
<b>Program</b>	Local Answers
<b>Issue</b>	<p>Coonamble is a very disadvantaged community in north-west NSW. It does not score well across a range of social indicators. Average weekly incomes are low and approximately 8.5% of the labour force is unemployed. Single-parent families have been increasing over the past 10 years.</p> <p>A significant proportion of the population (reported 20.9%, but likely to be higher in reality) identify as being of Indigenous origin. School outcomes of Indigenous students are still a long way from parity with their non-Indigenous peers.</p> <p>These socio-economic circumstances are having negative consequences on the development of youth in Coonamble. Given the number of single-parent families, boys in Coonamble often lack adequate male role models. The majority of these young males have a history of high levels of truancy, behavioural problems and a genuine lack of interest in school and community activities.</p> <p>The issue that Stride Foundation is addressing through the sports mentoring project is the promotion of healthy youth development through the teaching of life skills, thereby increasing the young people's connection to their community, school and peers. In addition, providing them with the opportunity to engage in activities that have valued outcomes for themselves and their community.</p>
<b>Program context</b>	<p>Stride Foundation is a non-profit, non-government organisation dedicated to helping improve the physical, mental and social wellbeing of young people and their communities. It runs empowering and holistic prevention programs.</p> <p>Stride provides leadership in mentor, role-model and peer-based youth development training at a national level. The Foundation has more than 20 years' experience working with young people throughout Australia.</p> <p>Stride incorporates best-practice education and training into youth wellbeing programs that aim to develop in young people a sense of responsibility for their own personal pathways. This is done by utilising the support of peers, mentors, role models and an informed community. A multi-dimensional approach is utilised for the development and delivery of both education and mentor-based community development programs for students, teachers, parents and community youth leaders.</p> <p>Stride currently delivers a variety of innovative mentoring programs in regional areas across Australia. These programs engage young people and work with them to achieve their education and health goals. All programs are driven from within the community, based on identified need and guided by a local reference group.</p>

Stride's mentoring projects aim to develop self-confidence and resilience in young people to assist them in overcoming disadvantage.

Over a 2-year period, the Coonamble project has involved 30 young males who may not normally have engaged in school activities or health promotion programs. Research and experience has proven that boys often lack adequate male role models in life and are often distracted or overlooked by unisex programs, which can also be inappropriate to their needs. The majority of these young males have a history of high levels of truancy, behavioural problems and a genuine lack of interest in school and community activities.

The project's emphasis is on safe and supported participation and the ability of the mentors to engage the young people, model good social and emotional competencies, and talk openly about their life experiences including how to cope with adversity.

### **Project objectives**

The objectives of the Sports Mentoring Project are to:

- help young people develop positive life skills;
- enhance opportunities for young people to apply these skills through increasing involvement in school and the community;
- create supportive environments for the young people to attain their goals;
- increase the young person's level of involvement in school and community initiatives;
- decrease the young person's number of school absences and/or inappropriate behaviour leading to increased prospects of employment; and
- increase overall community connectedness.

### **Practice description**

Stride Foundation's Sports Mentoring Project involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous adolescent males in Coonamble is targeted at 12 to 18-year-old males identified as being disengaged from school. The project aims to re-integrate students into the school environment, improve their employment prospects, build skills and help them set goals for the future, thereby increasing the young people's connection to their community, school and peers. It also provides them with the opportunity to engage in activities which have valued outcomes for themselves and their community.

The mentors involved in the project have an association with one or more sporting clubs in the community. They also undertake specific mentor training before being matched with a youth whom they will mentor over a 12-month period. Aside from meeting individually during this period, the group will also work together towards completing an important community project.

Local mentoring has been identified as an appropriate way of working with disengaged males in rural Australia. As well as having a positive impact on the lives of Coonamble's at risk youth, the project aims to develop leaders and mentors in the community, decrease school absenteeism, decrease unemployment, and increase linkages between families, educators, sporting clubs, welfare groups and other service providers.

The key ingredients critical to the effective operation of Stride Foundation's Sports Mentoring Project in Coonamble are:

- building community ownership and connections within the community;
- having an integrated, inclusive approach within the community;
- focusing on sports as a springboard for positive engagement;
- drawing on voluntary participation of mentors and mentees;
- using qualified, well-respected mentors (with a variety of backgrounds); and
- creating opportunities for young people and mentors to be acknowledged and rewarded for their contributions.

### **Building community ownership and connections within the community**

An important aspect of the Sports Mentoring Project in Coonamble is the strong, continuous support and guidance provided by the local Community Reference Group.

Set up in the initial stages of the project, the reference group includes a representative from almost every group of the small community in Coonamble, including the local high school, each of the rugby clubs, the local Indigenous community, the police and the local council.

The school committee and reference group have taken positive levels of ownership over the project to date, including the identification and matching of mentors and mentees, allocating management roles within the community, establishing channels of communication, identifying opportunities to become involved in community projects, investigating fundraising opportunities, and collaborating with relevant groups within the community.

Through spending time on the ground in the community and involving respected and influential people in the project from the outset, the project has been able to generate a significant amount of interest, support and guidance in and for the project.

The reference group was engaged through initial meetings with key community groups, followed by a community dinner where everyone was invited to hear more about the project. This was a very positive step as it quickly brought people together, roles were allocated among the group, the pros and cons of the project for the community were identified and the first steps for establishment of the project were initiated.

The reference group meets regularly to discuss the progress, outcomes and ways forward for the project. Support from the School and reference group is maintained through regular consultation and correspondence, positive feedback and associated remuneration.

### **An integrated, inclusive approach within the community**

Based on Stride Foundation's experience working in communities with Indigenous populations and advice from the Coonamble community, this project is not only targeted towards Indigenous young people. It is strongly felt that including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people will prevent alienation of cultures within the town, in a community that is working hard to address this issue. The project involves a mixed racial group of young people and mentors, to prevent segregation and promote positive relationships across the community as a whole. However, the project matched Indigenous participants to Indigenous mentors to ensure that culturally sensitive and appropriate mentor partnerships were established.

Stride Foundation holds the values and opinions of the reference group in high esteem and uses any recommendations made by the community to manage and adapt the project to suit community needs.

### **Focus on sports as a springboard for positive engagement**

Participation and involvement in sport has been identified as an important, healthy factor for positive engagement within the community of Coonamble, particularly among the men. The small community includes any number of well-supported, successful sporting clubs including the rugby club. Sport is a great social leveller and is able to draw people of different ages and backgrounds together to work towards a mutual goal and adopt a sense of pride in their community. Each of the boys identified for participation in this project see sport as a major draw card for their involvement and the skills they have developed as a result (i.e., fostering and maintaining effective team work, leadership, problem solving, etc.) can be applied to other areas of their life.

This project has also brought people of different sporting backgrounds together. For example at the end of the year the mentors, mentees, and reference group organised a Sports Award night to acknowledge and recognise those who had made a contribution in a variety of sporting fields, and also to raise money to build a sports equipment storage shed on the local oval. The sports equipment shed services a number of different sporting clubs in the community and the involvement of the Sports Mentoring Project with this project has increased the

positive perceptions of the young men involved as well, the mentors and mentees now have a sense of pride and ownership in the shed and their achievement.

#### **Voluntary mentor and mentee participation**

Potential mentors and mentees are identified by the school committee (consisting of Coordinators, Aboriginal Education Workers and other support staff) and overseen by the reference group. However, mentor and mentee participation is ultimately voluntary.

Any previously identified mentors who indicate their interest are invited to participate in a specific mentor training session in order to gain an understanding of exactly what the role entails and the issues and challenges they might expect to face. At this stage they can also choose to opt out.

The amount of time and effort which each mentor devotes to his mentee (and the project) varies considerably and is therefore difficult to quantify in terms of remuneration. The mentors are involved because they believe that disengagement of young boys is an important issue to address within the community and they have a passion to become involved. They are aware that they will be rewarded in other, more meaningful ways.

Voluntary participation by the boys is considered important as the young people involved are often involved in a number of mandatory projects (e.g., through school). This project is promoted to young boys through opportunities to engage with sports stars and role models through project activities. Although the young people are encouraged to participate in the Sports Mentoring Project, they do so because they are actually interested and willing. Ultimately it is up to them to make their own informed decision to participate. Their voluntary involvement gives them a personal responsibility to their mentor, onus to manage their own issues and relationships, and ensures the mentoring takes place around their school commitments.

#### **Use of qualified, well-respected mentors (with a variety of backgrounds)**

All mentors are required to undertake two days of formal, externally recognised mentor training prior to commencement of the project. During the project they receive ongoing support, supervision, advice and access to professional development opportunities. Approximately one-third of all mentors are of Indigenous background.

Mentors are identified by the School committee and the community reference group as being admirable, successful, enthusiastic role models in the community. The mentees parents must also approve of the matching process. Mentors come from a variety of professional and socio-cultural backgrounds from engineering to farming. They are often matched according to interest. That way, although the draw card of the project is sport, the mentees are introduced to a number of different pastimes including fishing, mechanics, reporting, writing, building etc. all of which help them establish what job/s they would like to undertake in the future.

#### **Creating opportunities for young people and mentors to be acknowledged and rewarded for their contribution**

Throughout the lifespan of the project, the young people and their mentors are presented with many opportunities to be involved in community initiatives and group activities. These may include: organising, participating and running a community event (i.e., the Coonamble Sports Awards night); undertaking a joint community project (i.e., building a community sports shed); and going on a team camp (i.e., attending a Canterbury Bulldogs game in Sydney over the weekend).

Through these activities, mentors and mentees are given a unique opportunity to interact and work together towards obtaining shared goals. One of the key reward factors was experiencing the thrill of attending a national sporting event in Sydney, which many had not visited before. The project found that the team camp was a great way to develop and maintain the motivation and enthusiasm of mentees and mentors throughout the lifespan of the project.

## Research base

Literature and past research/evidence/experience supporting the effectiveness of the approach adopted in the Coonamble Sports Mentoring Project is considered here in three key areas:

- community involvement and building community ownership;
- the case for volunteer mentoring especially for young men; and
- using sport as a springboard for engagement.

### **Community involvement and building community ownership**

It should be community driven and if it is a community need, it would work better. (Klinck et al., 2005)

People in small rural and isolated communities like Coonamble do not generally have access to the same level of learning facilities as youth or adults in larger metropolitan communities. Consequently, learning pathways for young people have to be locally grown and supported beyond the formal, through collaboration, involving mentoring and management from local providers (Golding, 2001).

Local mentoring projects that are implemented because of identified community need and have continual community involvement are considered most successful. For example, the successful Co-pilots Program was developed as a direct response to a need that was identified by stakeholders in the Launceston community (McGowan, 2004).

There is a growing amount of evidence to suggest the need for supervision beyond the confines of the school day. School and community based programs can promote learning, protect youth from negative peer pressure and create opportunities for them to form relationships with caring, non-parent adults (Rhodes, 2001). An example of this is the City of Rockingham's Youth Mentoring project. As a community-based model the program allows for mentee/mentor engagement in a variety of settings, linking mentees with new and different social environments.

Mentoring is a useful way to develop motivation within young, disengaged students including those of Indigenous descent. A national evaluation of the Indigenous Mentoring Pilots project has shown that for many young Indigenous students, the mentoring relationships provided them with a context to participate (MacCallum, Beltman, & Palmer, 2005). This has certainly been the case with our project in Coonamble.

Stride Foundation's experience in the field indicates that community based mentoring is a significant means of reaching out to others, of sharing and developing skills and insights, and of fulfilling the basic social obligations we feel from one to another. In everyday terms, a mentor is an experienced and trusted friend who provides one-to-one support, guidance and encouragement. It is a relationship between strangers demanding an unusual level of social intimacy (Spierings, 2001).

The formation of a community advisory group for guidance and support is essential for program success and sustainability, especially for programs involving outside organisations (Klinck et al., 2005). Community involvement encompasses two key sub-themes: protocol/politics and ownership. Following proper protocol within a community conveys respect and trust, and it involves approaching the appropriate community leaders (e.g., chief, school principal, council, elders) from the outset.

### **The case for volunteer mentoring of young men**

Young people in rural communities who feel connected to school and have pro-social relationships within the community are less likely to experience negative health and life outcomes including emotional/mental ill health and disorder, substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, early school leaving and violence (Dawes & Dawes, 2005; Godwell, 2000). A growing number of evaluations suggest that volunteer mentoring relationships can positively

influence a range of outcomes including improvements in peer and parental relationships and academic achievement (Rhodes, 2001).

Australian non-metropolitan men are frequently excluded as learners of all ages for a range of reasons. Partly as a consequence, young men have few adult learning models or mentors (Golding, 2001). This highlights the need for a program such as the Coonamble Sports Mentoring project.

The sustainable outcomes demonstrated in the evaluation of the Stride Foundation's Strengthening Communities in Colac Project (2007) included: reduced rates of school-drop out; improved self-esteem; increased connection to the community; and skills in positive decision-making. These led to positive outcomes in terms of school attendance, employment, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal and anti-social behaviour and overall health.

Mentoring can have a range of benefits for the mentee. School-based outcomes include increased achievement in specific school subjects, as well increased retention and participation. Other reported school-based outcomes relate to personal and social development, such as reduced feelings of sadness and loneliness, and improved relationships with peers. A strong theme from the literature and case studies is that the mentoring experience leads to increased feelings of self-worth and self-confidence. This results in students being more willing to attempt school tasks. These positive outcomes are also evident in other contexts, for example, better decision-making skills regarding current and future life choices (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002).

From the literature and the case studies, it is evident that mentoring also results in perceived benefits for the mentors, the families, the schools and the community (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002). Mentors report feelings of fulfilment through passing on their skills and knowledge to a younger generation. Feedback from parents indicates their pleasure and pride in the extent of their children's achievements. For schools, mentoring promotes positive school-community links.

### **Using sport as a springboard for engagement**

Research identifies involvement in sport as an important factor to consider in seeking increased Indigenous retention in non-Indigenous dominated fields such as education, employment and professional careers (Godwell, 2000). Sport and physical activity programs provide an effective vehicle through which personal and social development in young people can be positively affected (Morris, Sallybanks, Willis, & Makkai, 2003). The focus on sport and use of talented sports people is also attractive and interesting to students from a variety of at risk backgrounds (Ferguson, 2007).

## **Outcomes**

Twelve months into the project, according to the latest progress reports and a preliminary evaluation, the key outcome arising from the practice is increased community ownership of the project, leading to:

- increased community involvement;
- increased volunteer participation; and
- development of successful partnerships and linkages.

Other mentee-related outcomes include:

- improved mentee attendance, behaviour and retention at school;
- increased social, emotional and relationship development; and
- empowering young people with skills and motivation to achieve their goals.

## **Evidence of outcomes**

Participation and involvement in sport has been identified as an important, healthy factor for positive engagement within the community of Coonamble, particularly amongst the male population. Each of the boys identified for participation in this project see sport as a major draw card for their involvement and it is recognised that the skills they have developed as a result (i.e., fostering and maintaining effective team work, leadership, problem solving etc.) can be applied to other areas of their life.

In summary, the project is meeting the needs of young Indigenous and non-Indigenous males in Coonamble by providing them with access to male role-models—trained local mentors who are well respected in the community—who they are able to build meaningful relationships with and talk to about their hopes, fears and aspirations. Through the various activities which the mentors and mentees engage in, either as a group or individually with their match, the young males involved are developing a range of skills and confidence in their ability to break the cycle of disadvantage in their community. Throughout the project they have and will be introduced to a range of sporting opportunities, with which they otherwise may not have dreamed of being involved. These include opportunities to run sports awards nights, where they are encouraged to interact with local sports stars from a variety of backgrounds, to embarking on trips to Sydney to meet personally with professional athletes.

This project has also had positive spin-off affects on the mentors themselves and their communities. So much so, that they feel empowered to provide leadership and form partnerships to scope out new opportunities. For example, based on the success of the project to date, the proactive community reference group have flagged interest in setting up a sports academy to service the region. Several mentors have since opted to continue their mentoring roles with their mentees, both officially and unofficially, so that the good work they have started is continued.

The information used to verify/support the outcomes has been collected through surveys, interviews and anecdotal reports of mentees, mentors and school contacts.

### **Increased community ownership of the project**

As mentioned, the school committee and Community Reference Group have demonstrated positive levels of ownership over the project, including the identification and matching of mentors and mentees, allocating management roles within the community, establishing channels of communication, identifying opportunities to become involved in community projects, investigating fundraising opportunities and collaborating with relevant groups within the community.

Feedback from preliminary interviews conducted with school contacts and mentors involved reveals the community has benefited in the following ways:

- greater input from the various sporting clubs in town;
- the creation of the Coonamble Sports Award night where over 150 nominations were received and a significant amount of money raised for the local community project;
- connections made within and outside the community including with the local Council and the Canterbury Bulldogs in Sydney;
- 15 trained and active mentors giving back to the community who have an active relationship with the young men of the town; and
- voluntary commitment of all mentors and mentees.

The group project (building a sports storage shed at the local oval) has helped unite the Coonamble Community and has already proved beneficial to more than the 30 people directly involved in the project.

The Community Reference Group worked hard to establish partnerships and linkages in an effort to raise money and gain in-kind contributions towards the project from organisations including:

- the Coonamble Shire;
- the Australian Barley Board;
- Boral; and
- Fair Dinkum Homes & Sheds.

In addition, four sporting clubs who were to benefit from construction of the shed contributed money towards this project.

Benefits to the school included a rise in its profile through awareness of the

project. For example, in 2007, the Coonamble School received a highly coveted Director Generals Award for their mentoring projects. There is also potential for the school to develop links with other schools in Sydney.

The most noted success of this project, according to those interviewed, was the trip to Sydney. Both the boys and the adults who participated had a wonderful time for a number of reasons, ranging from going to Sydney for the first time, going to a professional “real” footy match, meeting the players afterwards, and simply hanging out together.

### **Improved mentee attendance and retention at school**

Speaking directly with the boys involved, they were specific in their self-assessments and attributed their new found goals and self improvement to their involvement in the project. One stated that he is:

... more at school now than when the project began. Not sure when the change happened, but know it has. I want to get a “good job” so I’ll now aim to stay at school. (Year 8 student)

According to verbal reports from school coordinators, 14 of the 15 (93%) of mentees involved in the first year of the Sports Mentoring Project have stayed on at school or obtained gainful employment in the following year. This is an unprecedented event in the school, especially considering the level of truancy at the beginning of the project, and the low proportion of students that go on to complete high school in Coonamble.

Whether this will translate into greater long-term retention rates, increased engagement by students and improved academic achievements is yet to be determined. The School Principal acknowledges that this is a measure that may take some time to become evident.

### **Increased social, emotional and relationship development**

Most (90%) of the 14 mentees surveyed noticed some improvement in their relationship skills during the project while 10% noticed a significant improvement. A Year 10 mentee stated that the main benefit of the project for him is that he is not as shy anymore, and is better able to articulate himself. This outcome was very pleasing to both the staff at the school and his mentor. Several mentors have since opted to continue their mentoring roles with their mentees, both officially and unofficially, so that the good work they have started is continued.

### **Empowering young people with skills and motivation to achieve their goals**

70% of the 14 mentees surveyed noticed some improvement in their skills as a direct result of their participation in this project while 20% noticed a significant improvement. One respondent did not answer this question.

At the end of the project, the mentees indicated they enjoyed:

- learning new skills;
- having something to do; and
- creating something.

All of the 14 mentors surveyed stated that the training they received for their role was good to very good, with all noting it prepared them with the necessary skills to facilitate the project, while providing them with new thoughts and different approaches.

They all believed that their role as a mentor was important in helping young people develop positive life skills that will benefit them throughout their lives, for reasons such as:

- “Self-belief is extremely important.”
- “If you can make a connection with the kid it is very important.”
- “It gives them self-respect.”
- “To keep kids and young adults for negative outlook on lives.”
- “I can only guide the ultimate decisions on choices (which) falls on the mentees.”

The overall importance of the project is summed up in the words of one of the

	<p>local mentors from 2007:</p> <p>“If this project works for only one single kid I think it will be worthwhile.”</p>
<b>Policy analysis</b>	<p>The Sports Mentoring Project—Coonamble is a positive example of a project designed to combat economic and social disadvantage and to build socially inclusive communities. It has built on the highly valued sporting organisations in the Coonamble community as the basis for a life-skills mentoring initiative involving members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Initial evidence suggests that the project has been successful in building self esteem in the disaffected target group and in achieving levels of reintegration in school and other community activities.</p> <p>The mentoring model has been used by Stride and other organisations elsewhere in Australia, and appears to be particularly successful in its ‘reach’ and flexibility.</p> <p>This is a good example of a small local initiative which potentially has wide applicability in diverse communities.</p>
<b>Project evaluations</b>	<p>At the time of writing the project was still running and has not yet been subject to external evaluation</p>
<b>Project related publications</b>	<p>See discussion in section on Research Base</p>
<b>References</b>	<p>Dawes, G., &amp; Dawes, C. (2005). Mentoring 2: A program for “at risk” Indigenous youth. <i>Youth Studies Australia</i>, 24(4), 45-49.</p> <p>Department of Family and Community Services. (2005). <i>Evaluation of the Mentor Marketplace Program: Final Report</i>. Canberra: Author</p> <p>Ferguson, A. Vic Health Letter No.29 Autumn 2007 and Online: <a href="http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentfiles/VHletterNo%2029-2007.pdf">http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentfiles/VHletterNo%2029-2007.pdf</a></p> <p>Godwell, D. (2000). Playing the game: Is sport as good for race relations as we’d like to think? <i>Australian Aboriginal Studies</i>, 1 &amp; 2, 12-19.</p> <p>Golding, B. (2001). <i>Great divides in learning: Youth pathways in rural and remote Australian towns</i>. Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE. ACER Research Conference “Understanding Youth Pathways”.</p> <p>Klinck, J., Cardinal, C., Edwards, K., Gibson, N., Bisanz, J., &amp; da Costa, J. (2005). Mentoring programs for Aboriginal Youth. <i>A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health</i>. 3(2): Pimatisiwin.</p> <p>MacCallum, J., &amp; Beltman, S. (1999). <i>Report: International year of older persons mentoring research project</i>. Commissioned by Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Centre for Curriculum and Professional Development, Murdoch University.</p> <p>MacCallum, J., &amp; Beltman, S. (2002). <i>Role models for young people: What makes an effective role model program</i>. Hobart: National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.</p> <p>MacCallum, J., Beltman, S., &amp; Palmer, D. (November 2005). <i>Mentoring as a context for developing motivation</i>. Murdoch University &amp; Curtin University of Technology, Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Sydney, November 29, 2005.</p> <p>McGowan, L. F. (2004). <i>Community mentoring—Building community capacity</i>. Launceston: Launceston City Council.</p> <p>Morris, L., Sallybanks, J., Willis, K., Makkai, T. (April 2003). Sport, physical activity and antisocial behaviour in youth. <i>Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice</i>. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.</p> <p>Rhodes, J. E. (2001). Youth Mentoring in Perspective. <i>The Center</i>. Summer. Republished in the encyclopedia of informal education, <a href="http://www.infed.org/learningmentors/youth_mentoring_in_perspective.htm">www.infed.org/learningmentors/youth_mentoring_in_perspective.htm</a></p>

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**More information**

More information on Sports Mentor Project—Coonamble and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the PPP pages of the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html>.



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