

Family Crisis Childcare Pilot Project -
Towards Stability and Independence for Young Families in Crisis



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Family Crisis Childcare Pilot Project - Townsville Centrelink, Queensland

By

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OVERVIEW

The following paper outlines some preliminary findings of the Family Crisis Childcare Pilot Project.

The Pilot Project is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and is a joint initiative with Centrelink - Area Central & Northern Queensland. This partnership between FaCS and Centrelink has seen the commencement of the service on the 17 January 2000, initially for a period of twelve months, located at Townsville Centrelink Youth, Employment and Student Office.

The Project is designed to provide a creative early intervention and prevention service, develop support systems in partnership with other services and explore how childcare can be used to achieve better outcomes for young families and those at high risk. It is one of four pilot projects funded nationally, that are all quite different. This is the only one based in Centrelink

The primary target group is partnered or single young parents aged 15 - 25 years experiencing or at risk of experiencing crisis in their lives. The secondary target group is young people aged 15 - 25 at risk of experiencing early and problematic parenthood.

OBJECTIVES

- *. Improved functioning of young families in crisis and those at high risk of early and problematic parenthood.
- *. Improved outcomes for young people due to better links between service providers.
- *. Participation in education, training or employment where feasible.
- *. Development of sustainable community partnership models focussing on prevention and early intervention with young families and those at high risk.
- *. Better use of child care services to support young families in crisis.

METHODOLOGY

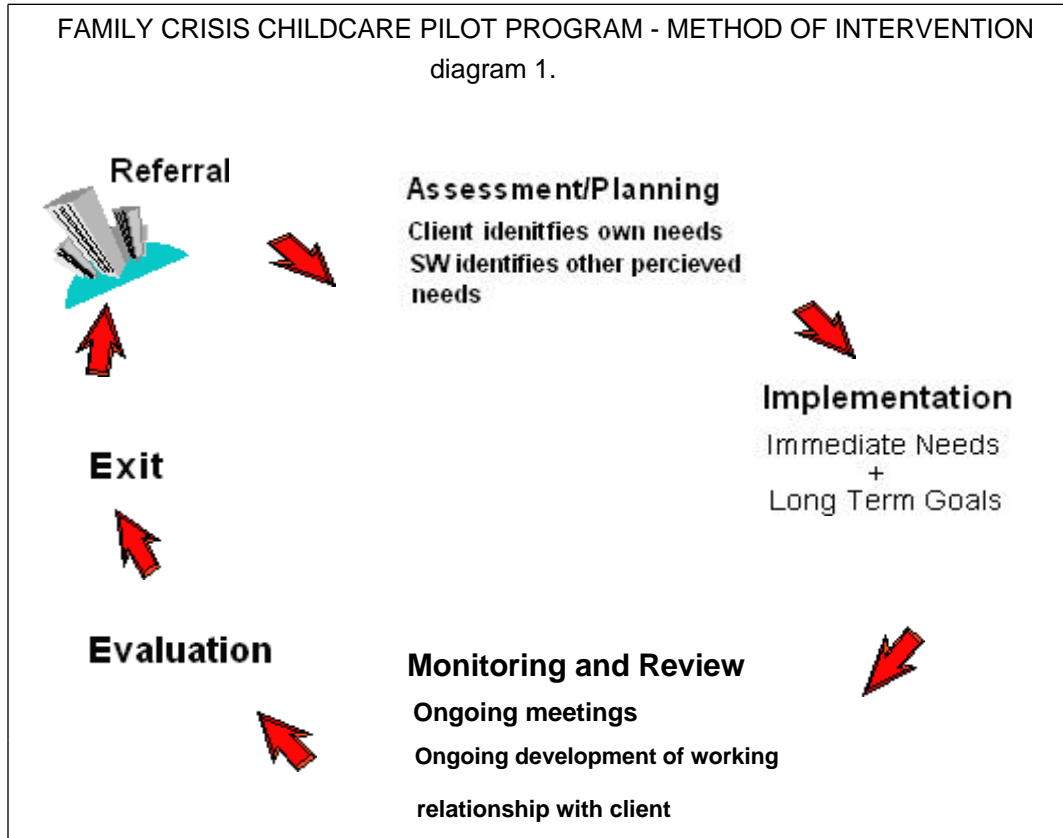
Three primary strategies are identified:

- *. Provision of early intervention and prevention information, assessment, counselling, brokerage and referral services.
- *. Use of childcare services to support young families in addressing their personal issues.

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- *. Development of community partnerships, improving coordination of services and employing a combined learning approach to secure improved outcomes for young people.

The Project is managed by a sole social worker that delivers an intensive case management model of intervention. The intervention requires timely and flexible responses and the development of a detailed plan of intervention that includes the involvement of various relevant service providers in the community. Participants



progress through identifiable stages during their involvement in the Project: referral, assessment, intervention, monitoring and review, exit and evaluation. The length of involvement and type of intervention varies with each participant's needs allowing for individualised and flexible service.

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The key features of the project methodology are as follows:

- ▲ Participation is voluntary
- ▲ Early intervention is critical with initial contact made within 24 hours of referral
- ▲ Service response is flexible with each participant actively involved in setting goals relevant to their needs and developing plans to achieve these
- ▲ Because of the difficulties the target group have in accessing services, most contact is by home visit and phone
- ▲ There is a strong focus on providing practical and emotional support and encouragement as well as short and medium term counselling and advocacy where required
- ▲ Participants are linked in to existing services where possible
- ▲ Brokerage funds are available to access goods or services necessary to achieve participants' goals, eg. educational costs, drivers licence
- ▲ 100% funded childcare and transport funds are available to assist participants access programs and services

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The success of the Project relies on the cooperation of other service providers and their willingness to work in partnership to help participants achieve their goals. The experience of participants is documented and efforts are made to work in partnership with other services and service providers to develop new or more appropriate services.

Location of the Project at Centrelink has proven to have a number of advantages, especially in terms of access to the target groups who are existing customers of the organisation. Centrelink has an extensive network of relationships with other service providers in the community which has been useful in establishing this Project. Given that all the participants are on some form of income support, it has also been useful for the Project social worker to be able to quickly identify and rectify any financial support issues before these escalate to major crises.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Participants

Table 1.

Family Crisis Childcare Pilot Project - Participants

	Age			Childr en	Preg- nant
	15-17	18-20	21-25		
Single	1	1	10	17	-
Partnered	6	7	8	8	4
Single, no children	8	2	-	-	6
TOTAL	15	10	18	25	10

Of the total number of participants, thirty-three are coupled or single families and ten are single young people without children, -(at the beginning of their involvement with the project). Since its inception, a total of sixty-four clients have been referred to the project. Twenty-five did not meet the criteria for participation, e.g.-age inappropriate, unwilling to participate, unable to establish contact.

The experiences of the remaining forty-three participants, who have been involved in the Project since February 2000 are now the focus of this discussion paper.

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Typically, participants are young, isolated females with limited family and social networks available to them and a history of low educational attainment. The issues they are experiencing are complex and varied. Each individual presents with a unique combination of issues and it is this complexity that requires intensive support to assist participants overcome seemingly impossible barriers to make positive changes in their lives.

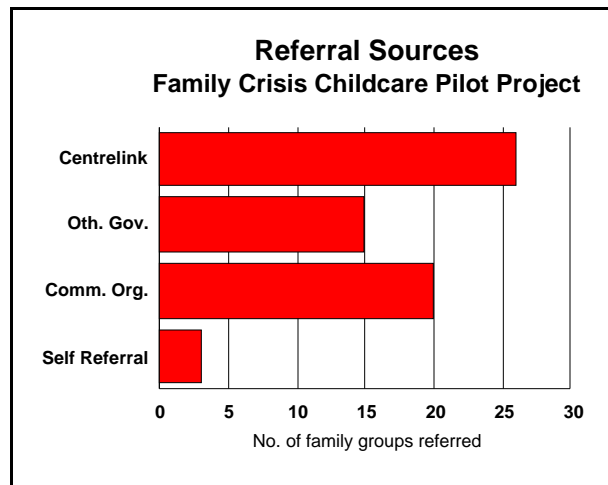
In general, participants have insight into solutions towards greater independence and stability, involving short term and long term plans. They have motivation but lack confidence and experience as well as the financial means to achieve their goals. Often their relationships with families, former or current partners and friends are strained and counterproductive to addressing their issues.

All participants rely solely on income support or are in receipt of a low wage subsidised by government parenting or family payments. Virtually all participants live in private rental accommodation and many, particularly those with children, live in the outer suburbs where rents are cheaper but transport services are limited and expensive.

Referral Sources

Referrals have been received from three main sources, with the largest number being from within Centrelink, followed by community agencies. The “other government” category includes referrals from the state welfare department, the local women's hospital, Health Centre and other health related services. Community referrals originate from youth and non-youth specific services including the Open Youth Project, Lifeline, Centacare and child care centres.

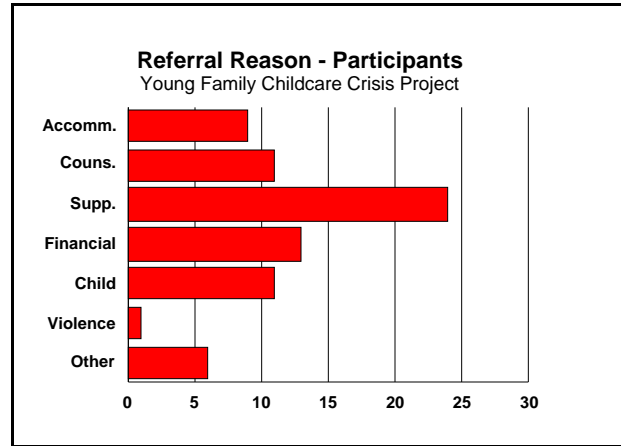
Graph 1.



Referral Reasons

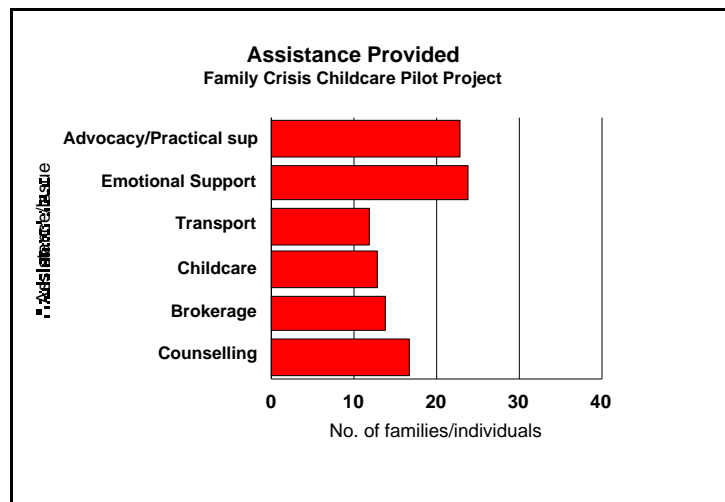
Each referral is made for more than one reason. The predominant reason for referral is the need for ongoing, intensive support. Participants are referred with a variety of complex issues including immediate crisis needs, such as finding stable accommodation and resolving financial difficulties, which are also combined with issues such as relationship problems and parenting concerns.

Graph 2.



Assistance Provided

Graph 3. illustrates the type of support provided to participants by the Project. Eighty-eight percent of participants require ongoing intensive support and/or counselling to assist them achieve their stated goals. This usually means a weekly home visit and regular phone calls to encourage the participant to continue their case plan. In addition to emotional support, support is provided in other ways such as assisting participants to overcome accommodation, financial, legal, health, transport and childcare issues.



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Transport, Childcare and Brokerage funds are crucial in being able to respond to the needs of the participants in a flexible and meaningful way. A total of twenty-four individuals/families have been assisted with these funds.

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- Use of Brokerage

Participants have benefited from brokerage funds that have assisted them to access activities such as education and driving lessons. Brokerage helps participants overcome their financial barriers to access activities and allows them to concentrate on attaining their goals.

Of those accessing brokerage assistance the average cost is \$145.00 per person/family.

- Use of Transport Funds

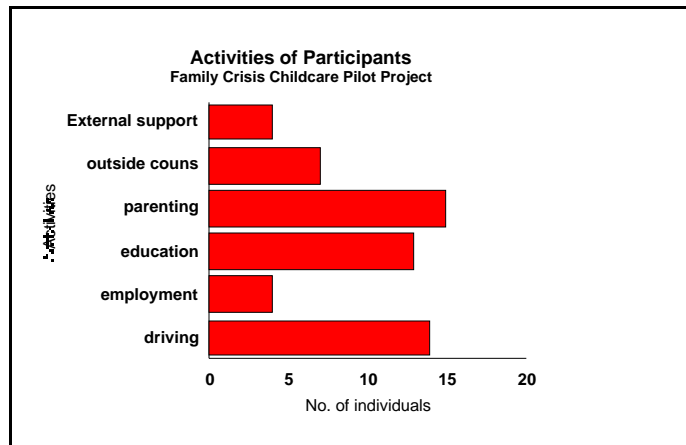
Similar to the benefits of brokerage, transport assistance allows participants to receive services that they could not otherwise access due to difficulties finding transport. Transport funds have been used to assist participants attend counselling, parenting groups, ante-natal support and education.

Of those accessing transport through the project the average cost is \$170.00 per person/family.

- Use of Childcare

Participants are provided with 100% funded childcare tailored to the specific needs of the family and are provided with information and support to facilitate access to childcare. The Project social worker liaises with the FaCS Jobs, Education and Training (JET) staff to secure appropriate childcare places.

Of those accessing childcare the average cost to the project is \$533.00 per child.



Activities of Participants
Graph 4.

Graph 4. Shows the activities participants are currently undertaking as a means to achieve their stated goals. Participants are combining a number of activities including learning to drive, attending formal education, parenting and other support groups. These activities have occurred due to the combination of financial assistance and ongoing emotional support provided by the Project.

Participants' Experience of Using Services

During the first six months of service delivery a number of issues are beginning to emerge from the experiences of participants using the Project and other services.

- Personal Issues

Participants with low self esteem, depression, extreme stress and other emotional issues have difficulty accessing services that may be available to them. Some young mothers have indicated a reluctance to access services because they believe that they are expected to manage on their own and that if they seek support they will be seen by others as non-coping. This has been particularly evident in relation to their parenting role where to leave their child with anyone else is not seen as acceptable.

A relatively small number of participants have acknowledged the impact of drug and alcohol use on their present situation, but none have identified this as a major issue to be addressed.

- Information

A number of issues are emerging regarding information. Many participants are not aware of the services available to them or how to access them. Some participants experience difficulty in understanding complex information provided to them which has resulted in services not being accessed or provided, despite participants meeting eligibility criteria. In other instances participants have been given incorrect or incomplete information which has had adverse impacts on all areas of their lives. Some of the difficulties around information have precluded them from accessing public rental, priority housing and education services, counselling and childcare.

At times, inaccurate or incomplete information is conveyed and this leads the participant to make assumptions which are incorrect. For example a young person was told by service providers that she was unable to apply for a bond loan because she was under eighteen years. This information is not accurate for young people, under eighteen, receiving the homeless rate of Youth Allowance. On occasions where participants have received wrong or misleading information there have been significant effects in other aspects of their lives and in one situation the eventual breakdown of a relationship. In the example cited above, the young person ended up in a refuge when they could have secured more permanent accommodation.

- Child Care

A number of participants report negative experiences attempting to access child care in the past. These include finding an available place in a convenient location, especially for occasional care required to access other services and confusion about the type and cost of childcare available. Many participants have not used childcare prior to their involvement in the Project.

Once accessing childcare through the Project, parents report many positive results for themselves and their children. Children increase their skills in communication, motor skills, and social development. Parents' ability to access support services and having time to themselves has improved their functioning and relationship with their children. Parents report seeing positive changes in themselves and their children, making parenting more effective.

- Agency Practices

Agency practices may affect the participants' likelihood of accessing support and assistance from them. For participants of the Project who experience transport issues, access to available support services in the community is severely affected. Many agencies are unable or reluctant to provide home visiting services and many of the Project participants have difficulty in attending office interviews.

A significant number of Project participants have limited literacy skills. This creates difficulties in accessing programs which require forms to be completed and include reading tasks as part of their involvement in activities. In addition, limited literacy skills affect participants' understanding of information provided verbally by service providers, which leads to misunderstanding and confusion..

The requirement of many service providers that the client must make initial contact means that those with motivation but little confidence in themselves will be less likely to access support. Participants may have had negative experiences with other service providers, making them reluctant to approach services for assistance.

Existing services may be seen by participants as inappropriate for their needs. For example, some young single pregnant women have been reluctant to access ante-natal support because the majority of those attending are older and do so with their partners. The application process to join some support groups involves declaring what *problems* the person is having, rather than areas in which they would like to develop their skills and confidence. This can make the young person feel worse about themselves and their coping abilities.

Some programs also use terms and concepts that are alien to young people and they may not follow up on referrals. For instance, the term "counselling" may be off-putting, whereas a less threatening term like "support" is acceptable.

- Transport

Most participants do not have their own transport and rely on bus and taxi systems as the primary means of accessing services. This proves expensive and not always convenient. One mother explains, "its hard enough relying on a bus to get me into town, but now that I have a baby it is even harder. I have to find a bus which will get me into town on time for the appointment, get the baby ready and hope we don't miss the bus. It's easier to miss the appointment than go through the stress of trying to get there."

Whilst many services and programs are provided free of charge, the cost of getting to the services precludes some people from accessing.

PROJECT INTERVENTIONS

The following case studies offer some insight into the presenting issues and the types of intervention provided through the Project. A key finding to date is how the Project has been able to improve participants' usage of services through the provision of support, information, brokerage and transport. No identifying information is included in the following case studies.

Case Study 1

Jane is 21 years old and a sole mother of two children, aged four years and two years Jane's youngest child was born with a genetic disability. The family live in an outer suburb of town and rely on taxis as their primary means of transport as the bus service is not available in their area. Jane left school, home and an abusive relationship during year ten. She is currently receiving Parenting Payment Single and family payment. Her relationship with the father of the children broke down due to violence and he is currently in jail. While her parents live nearby and can assist with transport, they were very critical of Jane's parenting skills and actually contributed to her feelings of low self esteem.

Jane had attempted to arrange childcare for both her children in the past but was unable to find a suitable child care centre that would cater for the needs of her younger child. The Project assisted Jane find a centre close by and care was arranged once a week while Jane attended a parenting course. Transport was also provided to assist Jane access childcare and the course.

Regular contact with the Project social worker continues to provide emotional support and encouragement. Jane has made some new friends and is more confident in her parenting ability. Her parents have been more supportive of her since she commenced the program. She is going to keep her children in child care once a week as she finds having time to herself has improved her relationship with them. Jane is now considering attending a course to improve her work prospects.

Case Study 2

Cathy and Bob, aged 21, have been married for four years and have a three year old daughter. Bob works in a low wage position which requires shift work and they rent privately in an outer suburb. At the time of referral they had no transport apart from a bicycle. Cathy suffered sexual abuse perpetrated by her father as a child and was pursuing criminal compensation. She has been diagnosed with a personality disorder, post traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Childcare was arranged for Cathy and Bob's daughter whilst Cathy attends counselling and a TAFE course and assistance with transport was provided. The child care centre identified developmental delays with the daughter and referred her for assessment. They have also been assisting Cathy with her parenting in small, practical ways. The Project social worker has provided Cathy with a lot of support through the traumatic compensation process. The criminal compensation case has now been settled, allowing Cathy and Bob to purchase a vehicle, and the Project is helping them acquire their drivers licences.

Case Study 3

Kylie is 17, pregnant and on the homeless rate of Youth Allowance. She shares a flat with her 16 year old younger sister who is also on the homeless rate of Youth Allowance. Due to her rental history, she has been "blacklisted" by real estate agents and had to put the flat in her sister's name. At the time of referral, Kylie was finding it difficult to continue her year twelve studies and was very anxious about her impending parenthood. She has no means of transport apart from the bus.

Transport and emotional support is provided by the Project to assist Kylie to keep up with her studies and she has continued to attend school. Ongoing support and access to ante natal services and information is helping her to prepare for her role as a parent and brokerage funding is assisting her to attain a drivers license.

Partnerships

Apart from responding to individual needs, the Project also aims to develop greater co-ordination of services and to use the experiences of participants to inform the development of new or more appropriate services. The partnership between FACS and Centrelink in establishing this Project is the foundation for seeking to develop partnerships with community agencies to better service clients.

Although the partnership strategy will obviously take some time to evolve, already there are some early observations and initiatives in progress. In the early days of the Project, an extensive program of agency visits was carried out to provide information about the Project and learn more about local services and issues. As a result of working with other services to assist individual participants, the Project social worker has worked with a number of local service providers to develop proposals for new programs. If these proposals are accepted, these new programs will augment existing

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community based programs and better meet the needs of mutual clients. A recent partnership with a number of local service providers has seen the development of an age appropriate support group for young pregnant women incorporating ante-natal preparation and post birth information. This is currently being trialled and is expected to continue independent of the Project. Currently seven young people are involved in the group.

Some other areas to explore in partnership with local services are the support needs of young parents with newborns, parenting skills and service access issues. There is interest among other service providers to address these issues.

CONCLUSION

The twelve month Family Crisis Childcare Pilot Project aims to provide early intervention and prevention services for its participants with intensive, flexible and timely emotional support and practical assistance with transport, brokerage of services and access to childcare.

Through their personal experiences, participants are providing valuable insights about how they access services. While the Project has only been operating for six months a number of issues are emerging around personal issues, information, childcare, agency practices and transport. These will inform further program development both in terms of responses to individuals and working with other service providers.

Participants of the Project are reporting various outcomes including increased self confidence, a reduction in stress factors affecting their lives, improved relationships with their children and partners/families, increased skills in parenting and a greater understanding of support services and how they are accessed. Seventy percent have been assisted to access education or training and seventy-three percent have accessed external support or counselling. The combination of intensive personal and practical support with financial help through brokerage, transport and childcare allow participants to achieve greater independence and stability in their lives.

By developing effective community partnerships the Project hopes to encourage services to modify their existing programs to better cater for the needs of the participants of the Project. Through these partnerships new approaches to assisting young people and young families in crisis will also be identified.

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