

Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia

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Policy-makers and practitioners across Australia are working to address the issues for children and families that stem from area-based disadvantage. Research and a strong evidence base can enable policy-makers and practitioners to readily distinguish programs or policies that are backed by rigorous evidence so that they can use this knowledge to improve the lives of the communities they serve.

The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA) aims to provide policy-makers and practitioners with practical, easy-to-use resources for developing and using rigorous evidence to improve program performance. The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia provides policy-makers and practitioners with clear, actionable information on programs that work, along with advice and information about research and evidence-based practice.

What is a clearinghouse?

A clearinghouse is a central resource point that collects, organises and disseminates information to people who are interested in or working in a specific field. The work undertaken by clearinghouses has been described as “informed harvesting and repackaging” (Mediascape, 2005). Clearinghouses are supported by sector experts and may be linked to specific government departments and non-profit organisations. There are Australian-based clearinghouses for a vast range of issues, including domestic violence, youth, gambling and family relationships.

The Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS) manages the following five clearinghouses:

- Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia;
- Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault;
- Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse;
- National Child Protection Clearinghouse; and
- Closing the Gap Indigenous Clearinghouse.¹

Introducing the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia

The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia is part of AIFS and is funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

CAFCA produces, collates, synthesises and disseminates research and evidence-based resources to help policy-makers and practitioners plan and deliver services to children (aged 0–12 years) and families within disadvantaged Australian communities. The clearinghouse provides research evidence and resources that are relevant and up-to-date in a format that is accessible and user-friendly.

By providing a central site for accessible and user-friendly evidence-based resources in this field, the clearinghouse can assist policy-makers and practitioners to:

- enhance services for children and families in disadvantaged Australian communities; and
- enhance the ability of the relevant sectors to build the capacity of disadvantaged communities so that communities themselves are better able to improve outcomes for children and families.

The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia aims to improve outcomes for children and families in disadvantaged Australian communities by facilitating evidence-informed policy and practice.

Why do we need a clearinghouse to support the provision of child and family services?

Like most other Western nations, Australia is grappling with the challenges posed by area-based disadvantage (Baum, O'Connor, & Stimson, 2005; Hunter, 2003; Vinson, 2009), where disadvantage is concentrated in specific geographical locations, throughout their communities and across generations. This is of particular concern for young children as it has the potential to negatively affect multiple spheres of their development (see, for example, Edwards, 2005; Edwards & Bromfield, 2009; Homel & Burns, 1989; Leventhal & Brooks Gunn, 2000; McCulloch & Joshi, 2001). There is further research that suggests the “geography of disadvantage” is becoming more pronounced in Australia (McNamara, Harding, Daly, & Tanton, 2008, p. 3).

Research plays a key role in improving outcomes for children and families living in disadvantaged Australian communities by providing an evidence base for effective policy and practice. Without an evidence base, there is a risk that intervention programs for children and families living in disadvantaged communities might not be effective

or, in the worst case scenario, could do more harm (Bromfield & Arney, 2008, p. 1).

There are, however, well-documented challenges in disseminating and applying research within the policy and practice sectors. These challenges relate to a range of factors, including individual factors, such as information overload; organisational factors, such as workplace culture; and the characteristics of research itself, such as the relevance of research to policy and practice (Holzer, Lewig, Bromfield, & Arney, 2007, p. 8).

The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia seeks to address some of the challenges associated with the dissemination and application of research in the policy and practice sectors by providing a central site at which policy-makers and practitioners can access research in a way that meets their specific needs. It is hoped that the contribution the clearinghouse makes to the policy and practice sectors will flow on to children and families living in disadvantaged Australian communities by increasing the use and, perhaps more importantly, usability of research findings among policy-makers and practitioners working in relevant fields.

What services does CAFCA provide?

Since 2009, CAFCA has been building upon and adding to many of the services it has provided in the past. The services provided by the clearinghouse include the following.

CAFCA website

CAFCA's website provides access to a range of resources, including: information about what approaches and programs

are effective for children and families in disadvantaged communities, latest news and announcements in the field, and relevant conferences and events.

CAFCA publications

Over 2009–10, the clearinghouse is producing a series of Practice and Fact Sheets. These resources will summarise research and provide tips and guidance for policy-makers and practitioners on specific aspects of service delivery.

Past publications and research produced by AIFS as part of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange are also available on the CAFCA website, as well as reports produced as part of the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–09.

Promising Practice Profiles

One of the clearinghouse's most popular resources is the Promising Practice Profiles database. Currently there are 52 Promising Practice Profiles available on the CAFCA website on a range of topics, including engaging "hard-to-reach" families, parenting skills and school readiness.

Each Promising Practice Profile describes a practice that has been utilised by a child and family service or agency in Australia and shown to be effective. Promising Practice Profiles have been written by service providers or local evaluators and thus draw directly upon the experience of professionals in the field. During 2010, CAFCA will be adding more profiles to the Promising Practice Profile database.

Outreach

CAFCA will also be undertaking outreach activities. The clearinghouse outreach activities will be responsive to the evolving needs of the sector, but might include activities

History of the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia

2000–04

In 2000, AIFS was funded to operate a unit called the Stronger Families Learning Exchange, as part of the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2000–04. The purpose of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange was to contribute to the formation of an evidence base from which to inform policy, practice and research in strengthening families and communities. Primarily, the Stronger Families Learning Exchange supported the formation of an evidence base through hands-on evaluation and program development support, with a focus on action research techniques. The Stronger Families Learning Exchange also supported its stakeholders through the provision of a help desk to provide access to resources on community development, a website, workshops, and regular printed and electronic newsletters known as the Bulletin.

2004–09

In 2004, the (now former) Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was changed to include three new streams: Invest to Grow, Local Answers and Communities for Children. The Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia was funded as part of the strategy. A key aspect of the strategy was that it contributed to the development of a robust evidence-base. Outcomes evaluations investigating the effectiveness of individual funded programs and the strategy as a whole were undertaken. CAFCA had a central role in these evaluations. Specifically, the clearinghouse:

- as part of AIFS and in partnership with the Social Policy Research Centre, conducted the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–09;
- supported local evaluators and service providers to document and evaluate their programs through the provision of a website with evaluation resources, workshops and specialist advice; and
- provided a conduit for disseminating information about the evaluation of the SFCS.

Given their relevance to CAFCA stakeholders, resources developed as part of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange were made available through the CAFCA website.

2009–11

CAFCA has been funded from 2009–11 by FaHCSIA, primarily as a resource for programs funded under the Family Support Program's Community and Family Partnerships core service stream. While in the past the clearinghouse's primary role has been to support the development of an Australian evidence base for child and family services in disadvantaged areas, CAFCA's role over the next two years is to disseminate user-friendly, relevant and practical research to stakeholders working in fields relating to children and families in disadvantaged communities.



such as presenting at conferences, conducting workshops and seminars, providing specialist advice, and sitting on relevant working groups and committees.

Research Helpdesk

CAFCA provides a phone-based help desk for professionals working in the sector. The CAFCA Research Helpdesk assists professionals with questions they have about the planning and delivery of services to children and families in disadvantaged Australian communities. Help desk staff draw on the former SFCS national evaluation evidence base, as well as national and international research literature to respond to the questions of policy-makers.

To contact the CAFCA Research Helpdesk, call (03) 9214 7888.

CAFCA library services

CAFCA provides access to the AIFS library collection, which holds a comprehensive collection of national and international literature and resources—such as books, journal articles, reports, education resources and DVDs—on topics such as early intervention, child development and strengthening families and communities.

CAFCA Library Membership Scheme

Professionals within the sector who work for an Australian not-for-profit, non-government service are eligible to become a CAFCA library member. Library membership is free and entitles members to borrow books, reports and audiovisual materials from the Institute's library collection. Members can also access journals held in the Institute's library.

Want to know more?

Visit our website at <www.aifs.gov.au/cafca>.

Endnotes

¹ The Australian Institute of Family Studies operates this clearinghouse in partnership with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

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