

# *Creating a new form of extended family*

# Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program

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Early experiences and the quality of nurturing and cognitive stimulation that a child receives in the first few years of life have a huge impact in later life. These early years are the period of most rapid brain development. Lack of early nurturing, chaotic and cognitively impoverished environments and intra-familial violence can result in failure to learn, emotional and relationship difficulties and a pre-disposition to impulsive and violent behaviour (Perry 1995).

Families are the primary source of care, love and intellectual stimulation for young children, supported ideally by a network of extended family, friends and by good quality and accessible services. However, many parents today are isolated and lack support networks to help them in the difficult and highly demanding task of parenting.

Early intervention programs like home visiting are one way of supporting parents. Home visiting services have a long history in Britain and Europe and are becoming increasingly popular in the United States and in Australia as a strategy to address some of the difficulties faced by today's families.

## *Focus of Good Beginnings*

- For families: the idea behind Good Beginnings for families is simple – to re-create 'extended families'.
- For communities: to encourage a level of community spirit which has been declining rapidly (to build social capital).
- For government and non-government agencies: to facilitate a collaborative approach to supporting families and communities which will be effective in both social and economic terms.
- For corporations/philanthropic foundations: to encourage organisations to become part of the Good Beginnings extended family by providing support both financially and with business expertise.
- For Australia: to have a model for supporting children, parents and communities which is the best in the world.

## *Support for Good Beginnings*

The Commonwealth Government provided funding for the Good Beginnings National Parenting Project, and the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) was given the responsibility of managing it.

Good Beginnings receives: in principle support from all levels of government; local government and non-government agency support at each pilot site including membership of local management committees; and advice from an Expert Reference Group of professionals on the development of Good Beginnings and its ongoing evaluation.

## *How Good Beginnings works*

Good Beginnings is a program using volunteer parents. The ultimate objective is to ensure that children experience a happy, healthy and loving childhood from the very beginning. Experienced parents in each community 'connect with' new parents, offering friendship, a role model, and emotional and practical support. Their mission is to help new parents build the self-confidence they need to give their children a physically and emotionally healthy start in life.

In each area, an experienced professional coordinator becomes responsible for selecting, training, supporting and supervising volunteer 'community parents'. Community parents are carefully screened, usually in their own homes, before any training begins.

A team of approximately ten potential community parents undertakes six weeks of training at one time. Ultimately, each coordinator will supervise approximately 30–40 fully trained community parents. New parents hear about Good Beginnings through hospitals, general practitioners, child health nurses, community organisations and word of mouth. The program is available to all parents of children up to 24 months of age.

New parents are introduced to a community parent who will visit the

family as required – generally once a week for an hour or two. This will continue for up to 12 months unless the new parents decide to leave the program.

Coordinators keep in touch with new parents by visiting occasionally along with the community parent. Should the new parents decide, for any reason, to ask for another community parent, the coordinator will make alternative arrangements. The same applies if a community parent seeks a change.

## *How children benefit*

When parents are calm relaxed and confident, free of anxiety and stress, their children are usually far more contented. Their physical needs are met, they feel loved and worthwhile, and they can trust and depend on those who care for them. These are the basic necessities for any child to grow into an emotionally, physically and spiritually healthy young adult.

## *How parents benefit*

Learning that they are not alone is the first and perhaps most important step for new parents. With a community parent to guide them through difficult times, congratulate them on their successes and relax into the role of parenting, a new parent's self confidence grows. There is a real sense of achievement as they discover a new pleasure and pride in parenting.

Parents develop a sense of belonging to the community, learn to access community services, share the load and give their children a sense of loving security. In return, most children will become happier and easier to care for.

## *How government and non-government agencies benefit*

Good Beginnings encourages partnerships with professionals to ensure that families are able to access the resource they need in their own community. As recommended by all state and territory governments, these partnerships facilitate the development of strong links and trust between agencies and families.

## Evaluation of the Good Beginnings Program

In 1996, the Minister for Family Services gave a development grant to the Lions Club of Greater Sydney (now joined with the Lions Club of Sydney) to develop a national approach to parenting education built around the creation of a network of Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting programs. The National Parenting Project was the result. The Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program itself was originally developed as a Lions Club of Greater Sydney project. The Commonwealth Government funds the National Project, which is managed by NAPCAN under license from the Lions Club of Sydney.

The Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program is a universal service provided free of charge to parents with babies or small children. Families who choose to use the program and who meet the criteria are linked to trained volunteers known as community parents. The volunteers are drawn from

the local geographic area and are parents themselves. Once linked to a family, the volunteers visit regularly to offer support, information and friendship. A coordinator recruits, trains and provides support and supervision to the volunteers.

Four Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Programs were established to test the effectiveness of volunteer home visiting in enhancing parenting skills for families with new babies and young children in distinctly different but disadvantaged communities. The pilot programs are located in inner western Sydney (New South Wales – urban), Katherine (Northern Territory – remote), Hobart (Tasmania – remote urban), and Moe (Victoria – rural).

An external evaluation has been carried out by Rosemary Cant from Social Systems and Evaluation. The evaluation shows that the program has been successfully implemented at all pilot sites and, even at this early stage, has demonstrated very

positive outcomes for families and local communities.

### *Parents have been assisted*

Parents participating in the Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program were typically isolated, lacking support networks and often highly stressed. They hoped for guidance, support and companionship from the program.

Nearly all had their hopes met. Mothers spoke about 'having found a friend' and gained a 'little bit of sanity'. For many mothers Good Beginnings broke down the isolation they felt by providing companionship and 'someone to talk to'. They were supported, reassured and encouraged by the volunteers. Having a volunteer visit made a difference to the way the mothers (or fathers) coped with day-to-day parenting and home routines.

Apart from general help and support, parents also acquired parenting skills. In many instances the volunteers acted as mentors to parents. They worked on sleeping problems, they helped parents tackle behaviour problems in older children, they modelled playing and reading to the children, they showed mothers that going to the park can be fun, and they introduced them to local amenities.

Referring agencies confirmed that Good Beginnings had had a positive impact on the families that they had referred. Many workers saw as an important aspect of the Program that it provided 'someone there for the parents' and there were stories of significant personal growth as a result. Workers also corroborated that the program had provided parents with information about relevant services and had linked them to services such as playgroups and child care that they may not otherwise have felt able to access.

While the Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program works with fathers as well as mothers, although not as frequently, there is a dearth of programs that address parenting issues for fathers and prospective fathers. The Moe and Hobart Volunteer Home Visiting Programs are testing initiatives for men in their role as parents and carers, which are showing promise.

### *Different and complementary service*

Concern is sometimes expressed about using volunteers for programs like Good Beginnings. This concern appears to be based on the apprehension that they may be used inappropriately to provide a service that should be provided by professional paid staff.

## Parents say . . .

"I didn't know what I was doing or where I was going . . . I learnt how to do things in a more suitable manner. I had to get my life together and I found Good Beginnings fantastic, I had so much support. I don't think I would have done it without Good Beginnings. Being a single mother is not easy – you know, financially everything seemed just shot. I now work a part-time job, my son is walking and sleeping, and everything is going really, really well, and I've found a good friend – thanks Good Beginnings."  
– *Single mother with three-month-old baby.*

"After the flood I found it very stressful and very hard to cope with not a lot of services in town. I was put on to Good Beginnings to see if they could help and it's a brilliant idea. I hope we can keep it in Katherine. It's a huge relief to see that there are other people out there who feel like you do – its just nice to feel good again, and feel happy."  
– *Mother from Katherine with a four-year-old and five-month-old baby (who was sick).*

## Volunteers say . . .

"I had the great privilege of being at home full-time when my first child came home from the hospital. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to form such a strong and vital bond with my child through my constant presence in the first couple of months of her life. Through Good Beginnings I want to heighten an awareness of the importance of the father's role in parenting."

"At sixteen, I was a single mum with very few support structures. I know how difficult it can be trying to be a good parent and raise a child when there is no one to talk to, no one showing an interest in what you are experiencing, no one to celebrate the joys of parenting, and a society that files you away in an isolated government flat. I want to help a young mother who is experiencing what I have experienced."

Good Beginnings works in close collaboration with local agencies that provide services to families with babies and young children and the evidence is that it provides a different but complementary service to them. It has freed professionals from having to take on a 'befriender' or support role that they considered inappropriate for themselves. They welcomed it as providing additional support to the professional support they provided. The parents saw the volunteers as friends.

### *Quality, flexibility and cultural sensitivity*

Good Beginnings has worked in four diverse sites – urban, isolated urban, rural and isolated. While the program has remained fundamentally consistent, there have been subtle adjustments that have enabled it to respond to local needs.

The training, support and supervision of the volunteers are of a very high standard. The training program has been designed for the Australian context and volunteers found it comprehensive and relevant to their role as home visitors. Policies, procedures and the training program are well documented.

Good Beginnings is piloting a program for Vietnamese parents to test the appropriateness of Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting in this cultural context. Funds have been received to pilot the program in an urban Aboriginal community. In each case there has been extensive prior consultation, and Good Beginnings has been sensitive and responsive to cultural issues.

### *Community connectedness and social capital*

Evidence is already emerging of improved community support networks for families and increased social capital in sites as a result of the Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program.

The impact of Good Beginnings on Clarendon Vale, a particularly disadvantaged community, is likely to be very great both as a result of the Good Beginnings sponsored Clarendon Connect Program and of Good Beginnings itself. The empowerment of local women who worked together on a Good Beginnings committee has already been noticed by agencies in contact with them.

### *Sustainability*

As well as creating and testing models of best practice (including volunteer home visiting), the Good Beginnings National Parenting Project has been testing whether programs like the Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program can become self-sustaining. At the National Office level, Good Beginnings has been very successful. Current fund raising has virtually ensured that the National Office will be able to continue beyond the year 2000, and well over half a million dollars has been raised to expand the Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program to new sites.

The process of achieving sustainability at the pilot sites has been slower as local management committees have had difficulty coming to grips with the expectation placed on them for fund raising. However despite a slow start, local management committees

are now beginning to put in place fund raising strategies. Nevertheless it is still unclear whether self-sustainability is achievable at all pilot sites within the next twelve months.

### *Conclusions and recommendations*

The evaluation has demonstrated very positive outcomes for families and communities form the Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting Program. It is now set to expand and should be supported to do so.

In view of the difficulties that disadvantaged communities face in fund raising, the evaluation recommended that the Commonwealth Government subsidy to existing Good Beginnings Volunteer Home Visiting sites be extended to three years.

### *Reference*

Perry, B.D. et al. (1995), 'Childhood trauma, the neurobiology of adaptation, and 'use-dependent' development of the brain: how 'states' become 'traits', *Infant Mental Health Journal*, no. 16, pp. 271-291.

**This article combines an edited version of a paper, 'Good Beginnings: creating a new form of an extended family', presented during the Sixth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference in Melbourne, November 1998, with an executive summary by Rosemary Cant of the evaluation of the program.**

**Further developments in this program will be reported in the next Newsletter.**

**For further details contact the Good Beginnings National Office, Suite 32, 8-24 Kippax Street, Surry Hills 2010. Phone: (02) 9211 6767. Fax: (02) 9211 3775.**

## Family Support for Victims of Paedophiles

The Family Support for Victims of Paedophiles (ACT) Inc. is a free 24-hour telephone support line. It assures privacy and confidentiality to callers and also provides referral to other agencies registered with it.

***It may be reached on its Support Line (02) 6292 9164.***

The aims of this group are to:

- help each other;
- discuss the possible ongoing effects on the victims – guilt, breakdown, blame, antisocial behaviour, suicide, drugs, withdrawal from social situations, questioning their sexuality, nightmares, displaying sexual behaviour beyond their years, and regressing by reverting to baby talk or wetting the bed and flashbacks;

- offer support and comfort to the parents and families during the police investigation and court proceedings or as required;
- develop strategies to raise public awareness of this horrific and 'secret' crime;
- produce pamphlets and flyers listing the common strategies that paedophiles use to access children;
- help parents to recognise indicators that their child is possibly a victim;
- lobby to shorten the waiting time leading to court hearings thus alleviating the stress and fear that the victim feels knowing that the perpetrator is living in the community.

**An information site is provided on the Web: [www.aucom.com.au/-pedorid](http://www.aucom.com.au/-pedorid)**