

*In 2002, the National Child Protection Clearinghouse is attempting to encourage agencies running child abuse prevention programs to write a short piece about their program and their experiences of being involved in those programs. As a result of mail out to agencies and a flier placed on the Clearinghouse web page, we have received information from several agencies, including those listed below. If your agency is conducting a child abuse prevention program or service and you are interested in making a contribution to future Clearinghouse Newsletters, then we would be delighted to hear from you.*



## *An early intervention/prevention program using a mentoring approach Child and Family Services Ballarat*

### ***Lyn Featherstone***

Raising a family is a very challenging and sometimes daunting task. It is one for which new parents receive very little training, and in today's society it is possible for parents to feel isolated and unsupported as they endeavour to deal with all of the issues that arrive with a growing child.

If this is true for all parents, how much more must it be for parents who may have been poorly parented themselves; have suffered childhood abuse; are involved in a violent relationship; have some level of drug and/or alcohol dependency; or have an intellectual or psychiatric disability. The family situations may be further complicated by the necessity to parent alone or with partners who are not the biological father/mother of at least some of the children in the household. Add poverty, social isolation and the lack of capability to sustain and nurture relationships, and you have parents who cannot, despite their best intentions, offer their child/children the start in life they need and deserve.

In 2001, Child and Family Services, Ballarat (CAFS), combined with Lisa Lodge Ballarat, to develop a mentoring program to

support such families with young children. Funding obtained from the Ian Potter Foundation has enabled this pilot project to proceed for the current year.

Some families who have been involved with CAFS "Parenting Assessment and Skills Development Service (PASDS) were identified as having long term, lower intensity support needs. PASDS is a Victorian Government funded program for high-risk infants. Families who utilise the mentoring program are no longer clients of PASDS, however require an on-going level of service and support in order to ensure that gains made from that program are sustained. We recognize that there would also be long term benefits for these families if they were more fully integrated into their local communities; knew how to use universal services, and were provided with some monitoring of their child's safety and development.

In simple terms, the family, (in particular, the mother), often needs a friendly visitor, a reliable person with whom to develop a relationship of implicit trust and unconditional support and assistance. It was believed that a mentor as a positive role model could play a strategic role of non-professional support in the lives of a family of a high-risk infant. At that

time there was no service in the Ballarat community that could take on this type of role.

Therefore, an 8-week training program for potential mentors was adapted from Lisa Lodge's award-winning initiative, "The Champions Mentoring Program", which offered intensive support, via a mentor, for high-risk adolescents. Modules on parenting skills, developed from CAFS Parenting Assessment and Skills Development Service, were incorporated into this new program.

Recruitment of the mentors began in December 2001, with advertisements placed in the local newspaper. An editorial article accompanied the original advertisement. A number of women aged 30 to 60 from various walks of life responded, attending an information evening. As a result, 12 applications were received and ten women went on to complete the training course.

Training ran weekly from February to April, and covered topics such as "Understanding the Client Group"; "Values, Trust and Confidentiality"; "Communication Skills"; "Assertiveness, Conflict Resolution"; "Developmental Stages of Children 0-5 Years" and "Parenting Skills". The program co-coordinators conducted the program in a way that stimulated much discussion, questioning and sharing of the personal experiences of the would-be mentors, who bonded relatively quickly into a cohesive group. We are sure that it was this and not the delicious suppers that kept absenteeism extremely low.

After training was completed an extensive accreditation process then took place. The women were required to complete an interview booklet, which explored their values and attitudes toward the raising of children. This formed the basis of a 1/2-hour interview in their own homes. From the information gained, personal profiles of the women were constructed displaying their strengths and weaknesses in relation to parenting, personal motivation, values and family dynamics, lifestyle, and coping strategies. At this point, two women withdrew from the program for personal reasons. Also, the coordinator resigned to take up full-time employment. A mentor, who had the required professional qualifications, took up this role. Having completed the training, the knowledge she had of both the course content and the potential mentors was valuable in ensuring continuity of the program.

A panel of professionals from CAFS and Lisa Lodge sat on 19 June for the purpose of assessing the mentors for accreditation. A graduation ceremony was held on 1 July, and certificates and flowers were presented to each woman as a token of appreciation for the work that she had faithfully completed thus far. The harder work was about to begin!

Six families, former clients of PASDS, were approached to take part in this program. All accepted and it was encouraging to see the face of each woman light up with pleasure when the notion of having a friend was proposed. The matching of mentors with families was done by comparing the skills, background, attitudes and interests of mentors with the needs and interests of the families.

Mentors were informed regarding the relevant background of their families, three of whom were single mothers. The initial appointment was made to meet their family in the family's home. This meeting had both mother and mentor somewhat nervous. As one young mum said, "It feels a bit weird!" For this reason the introductory meeting was limited to 15-20 minutes - enough time to get to know the basics about each other, to put a face to the name and to arrange another

time to get together. All six mentor/mum dyads connected at this visit.

To this time, mentors have met with their families approximately four times. They are using this early stage to develop a trusting relationship and get to know the other members of the family. Some meetings take place in the mentoree's home,



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others involve outings such as a walk, a visit to an indoor or outdoor playground, a picnic, the library or just for a coffee and chat - in other words, the normal things that friends do together. The mentor uses opportunities, as they arise, to model good parenting skills and discuss issues, particularly those relating to the children in the family.

Each mentor is contacted weekly by the coordinator to discuss the progress of the relationship as well as any issues that may have arisen during their time together. The coordinator encourages the mentor in her role and researches any information that is requested, consulting also with the supervisor of the service. In addition to this weekly contact, the mentors are expected to attend a monthly meeting where they receive on-going training on topics dictated by need. This also provides an opportunity for mentors to share information/experiences (within confidentiality boundaries) and receive feedback on their work.

Mentors are given a small amount of money each month to cover costs incurred in the program. This is a comfortable arrangement for both parties as neither is indebted to the other in monetary terms and it enables access to community facilities that might otherwise be out of consideration.

As with any program, the question arises: "How do we know if this program is actually making a difference to the quality of life for these families?" Formal evaluation of the program will take the form of an initial six-month internal evaluation followed by an external evaluation at the end of the twelve-month period. Information to inform the evaluation will be obtained through surveying the mothers and the mentors at six monthly intervals. For the mothers, a questionnaire has been prepared which focuses on self esteem issues and attitudes towards parenting. For the mentors, the survey details observable parenting skills. Anecdotal evidence from mentors is positive at this stage.

The mentoring program should prove to be cost effective. Costs include the salary of a part-time coordinator (0.4 EFT), mentor reimbursement, and training expenses.

A program such as this has great potential to enrich the lives of all participants: - the mentors, a group of caring, optimistic and lively women; and the mentorees, a group of women who are looking to improve their life situation. Most of all, through this relationship, which we hope will last for several years, we aim to improve the life opportunities for the infants in these families who are, at present, considered to be potentially at risk.

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