

Family Life's Creating Capable Communities program

A service profile by Jenny Higgins

[The Program is] about the values-led approach, the empowerment, inclusion, respect and community that have to be present in everything that we're doing. ... I'm reluctant to call it a program model because it's actually a culture and a philosophy and a spirit.

Jo Cavanagh, CEO, Family Life

Robyn Parker from the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (see box) and Jenny Higgins from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse met with Family Life staff, Jo Cavanagh (CEO), Judy Latta (Community Relations Manager) and Alison Normanton, to talk about the programs and activities coordinated by Family Life. In this article, Jo Cavanagh talks about Family Life's Creating Capable Communities program and other programs offered by Family Life.

About Family Life

Family Life is a community-owned and managed family and youth service agency established in 1970 to provide services to the community, facilitate community connectedness and respond to the needs of people who are experiencing stress and are at risk of family breakdown. Family Life workers and volunteers help families in the Bayside suburbs of south-east Melbourne, with a particular focus on those residing in public housing neighbourhoods.

The agency provides programs for the whole community, as well as targeted programs to meet the needs of families facing specific challenges.

Family Life has been awarded the inaugural title of National Child Protection Week 2006 Child Friendly Community Champion. This award recognises Family Life for its work in building healthy, caring, capable communities that provide a safe and nurturing environment for children.

Family Life recognises the pressures and stresses on families and endeavours to strengthen families that are struggling and keep them in the community. The agency believes that self-esteem and social connectedness reduce social and economic isolation. Through the Creating Capable Communities program, the agency aims to create a whole-of-community culture that strengthens and empowers the community and its members.

The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) is a new clearinghouse based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It is an information and advisory service, with a focus on synthesising and disseminating current information on family relationships and support services. It facilitates networking and information exchange and highlights useful resources and issues of relevance to practitioners and policy makers. For more information or to access AFRC resources, go to www.aifs.gov.au/afrc

The Creating Capable Communities (CCC)© program

The Creating Capable Communities Program is funded through the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities strategy. The goal of the Creating Capable Communities program is to build social networks and connections to create and promote a community that is safe, healthy and supportive of parents and their children.

All programs contribute something to Creating Capable Communities to make their service accessible to these residents and make them want to get involved.

Creating Capable Communities is reinforced by program strategies that bring the community together, such as the Breakfast Club (which provides breakfasts to children from disadvantaged backgrounds each morning) and the Men's Outreach Program (which organises activities for children and their fathers, such as sports days). For more information on the Breakfast Club, the Men's Outreach Program and Community Days, refer to *Family Relationships Quarterly*, No. 4, www.aifs.gov.au/afrc

Other programs, such as Community Bubs, benefit from the community support and neighbourhood connectedness generated by Creating Capable Communities. For a description of Community Bubs, see the box inset on pages 14–15.

Getting Creating Capable Communities up and running

The original idea for Creating Capable Communities followed a number of tragic events on a public housing estate, which led to an awareness that the Family Life agency needed to provide parenting support, counselling and other services to marginalised and isolated families in a community-inclusive way.

How it started was, in 1998 there were a number of deaths on one of the housing estates. Nobody thinks, 'the city of Bayside and public housing', but there are almost 1,200 households of public housing and they are increasingly marginalised because Bayside is identified for its affluence, not for having pockets of serious disadvantage. In 1998 we were part of the community debriefing for the women who had died. ... Our job was to talk to the children ... and try and understand what had happened. The workers spent a lot of time with the children [on the estates] and came away feeling the children's environment was like an urban war zone. Children talked about how if a siren went off, they raced home to make sure that it wasn't their parents. Kids were frightened to go outside to play. They were really unsafe in their neighbourhood.

Talking with parents about how to make services relevant to them

Family Life workers recognised that their services at that time were not relevant to the marginalised and isolated members of the community, such as those residing on the housing estates. Staff sat down with parents and discussed what kind of services would be helpful to them:

It was a real wake-up call that we were providing services and they were saying, "Who are you?" They thought Family Life was like Child Protection and the police. So what we did was sat down with the parents and said, "What would you like? What would be helpful?" Which was really the start of our listening and empowerment model. How can we get alongside these people, earn their trust, give them what they need, respond to their needs, and out of that work in a way that is not always at the crisis end, so that they are strengthened in the planning of their lives, accessing resources, and getting what they need to achieve wellbeing. The parents said they actually needed something for the children to help them feel safe. So we had a little bucket of trust money and the first thing we did was run a puppet-making workshop with the children in the community centre, and it was all focused around safety and how to be safe. At first the parents sent the children along and by the third session they were saying, "That looks fun, we'd like you to do something for us".

The puppet-making workshop lead firstly to the Creating Capable Kids parenting program and then to the development of the Creating Capable Communities program, with strategies such as the Homework Club, Breakfast Club, Coffee'n'Chat, community activity days and barbecues, and

then Community Bubs. The Men's Outreach Program has been an important related program for encouraging boys and dads to also get involved.

We were funded for three years for Creating Capable Communities, on the understanding that it was for three years only, with a sustainability plan in it, and we would build the integration of a range of other services to be involved in the program. We set up a reference group, including community health, local government, maternal and child health, Office of Housing, Child Protection, the police, etc. But the goal was to go back to the residents and keep building from one thing to the next, with our staff and with volunteers from the broader community, and with local service clubs and businesses contributing.

Drawing on an Indigenous model of "community"

In developing the concept of a 'capable community', Family Life drew on an Indigenous community model. The model differs from the Western nuclear family model, which is more isolated and individualistic. The Indigenous community model involves broader community participation and connectedness between members, which in turn creates a more supportive and inclusive community environment where people share and are concerned for each other's wellbeing:

When I designed the Creating Capable Communities, I drew on the Indigenous understanding of culture and kinship relationships, because we were dealing with a very [culturally] mixed community where clearly the Western model of nuclear, separate families wasn't very relevant. ... We needed to do things differently.

Working from the core values of respect, empowerment, inclusion and community

Family Life's core values of respect, empowerment, inclusion and community shape the way in which programs are developed and implemented. The Creating Capable Communities program embodies these values when working with clients in a number of ways:

- they draw heavily on a volunteer pool of community members who work alongside staff;
- they consult with the community regarding what kind of services are needed and how they should be implemented;
- they deliver both general and targeted services to the community so that the whole community is strengthened and involved;
- they work in the places and spaces where people are, rather than expecting clients to come to them; and
- they use a sustainable model of change so that families, neighbourhoods and communities have the skills and resources to maintain positive change, even when the agency is no longer involved.

The Community Bubs program

Community Bubs is another program initiative of Family Life that draws support from the Creating Capable Communities program. The program works on building trust with parents who have infants living in vulnerable circumstances in order to prevent statutory intervention. The Community Bubs program identifies parents with difficulties who have a range of complex needs. Staff work on the principle that any family facing physical, social and emotional challenges may only need one thing to shift for them to become vulnerable. It is therefore unreasonable to label a family "at risk for child abuse" because of the possibility of something going wrong.

The history of [Community Bubs] is that we were originally part of the Parenting Assessment and Skills Development service, which is a forensically based parenting program. It has all the right intentions for intensive screening to identify the parents who can improve their capacity to care safely for their infants, and identify those who need statutory involvement. We were providing the home-based part of the service and we really found the outcomes unsatisfactory in terms of offering people only 15 weeks of involvement. We felt we were building up their hopes and saying, "well done", but then the intensive service withdrew. A number of parents later had their children removed and placed in care. We actually saw the system as being part of the problem at that point rather than

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Volunteers

Community involvement through a strong volunteer program is integral to Family Life's success. Volunteers, who are community members, act as the 'glue' that binds the community together. The program draws on a volunteer pool of 260 that includes parents and neighbours as well as personnel from local businesses and services:

Volunteers are important in terms of role-modelling parenting skills, being friends to really marginalised, isolated people, and helping everyone to join the community and be part of the community. ... At the broad community level we try to include volunteers in everything that we do. We now have a community caring for families, children and young people. And that has implications for creating the bonds and bridges, which promote reciprocity. If we need something done it's: "Who can we ask? How can we use this opportunity to get someone involved, whether they're a corporate person or the lady who lives on the corner. How do we use this to give someone else a rewarding opportunity of participating and contributing?" With this way of thinking and acting we have maintained the volunteer origins of the agency with more volunteers than employed staff. We now have 50 staff and 260 volunteers.

Community consultation on what services are needed

The agency takes a "ground-up" approach to service development, rather than a "top-down" approach, where the agency is the expert and the community passive recipients. Staff consult with local community members in order to determine what type of programs are needed and how they should be implemented:

Every program has been developed because the residents have said, "This is something we need" and we've said, "How can we help with that?" ... It's a real shift in working with the community, from saying, "We have these services for you, we can see what you need"; but you turn that around to the community informing us, and letting the community tell us what they need for change to happen. They actually know best; they can tell us what's needed and what would make a difference for them. That's the core of the Creating Capable Communities program and the Community Bubs program, which operates inside the caring community context: decisions are made in partnership with the residents and the parents.

Taking a whole-of-community approach to service delivery

Family Life offers services to the whole community, as well as targeted services to address specific needs. Services directed to the whole community enhance social inclusiveness, connectedness and support:

We try and have some services for the whole community, such as parenting programs, so that anyone in the community might feel they can use the agency in some way. This maintains and promotes

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being part of the solution—we identified parents' strengths and capacities but didn't follow through to secure sustainable change. We discontinued our involvement in that program.

One of our benefactors at the time rang and asked the question, "Would you still want to run that program?" And I said, "Yes, but we'd do it very differently". We gave a two-page submission for the Community Bubs program, which was about offering at least 12 months support using the core model of the agency—an employed worker with volunteers working within the neighbourhood context. [We also drew on other programs] so that we could work holistically with these high-needs families with infants that had very complex situations that put them at risk for child protection involvement. We would get in there and work with them one step at a time, but be building their community context and relationships, not just their parenting skills. It's then about what they learn from each other, not what they learn from us.

The Community Bubs program works closely with the local Child Protection service and specialist infant protective workers (SIPW). As an outcome of Community Bubs involvement, parents who rated 'high' on the child protection assessment tool have been able to maintain continuous care of their children. Where respite placements have been needed, parents have worked hard to stabilise the home environment and ensure their children return to their care.

the community ownership of the agency and our mission. And then we go to the focused programs, such as Creating Capable Communities, which is our targeted program out into the public housing estates. ... I've had people say to me, "Why are you trying to provide services for any family in the community? Why don't you focus only on those most at risk?" The reason is that we need the whole community to value having Family Life as a safety net in the community, because this is a major source of our support, generosity and compassion for supporting families who are not doing well.

By providing services to the whole community, the community becomes a resource to members who may have greater needs:

With Creating Capable Communities we're talking about building trust in the neighbourhood out of a model of responding to needs to promote wellbeing. We believe in the residents, their strengths and their capacity to help each other. Then we sit inside the neighbourhood building some very targeted programs and strategies to get to the people who are least likely to get involved and may not knock on our door. In particular, through the neighbourhood network of activities and friendships, we are seeking to be introduced to isolated parents who need assertive support to help them get involved. We can then work with the parents to help them address stresses and difficulties to achieve their desire to do the best they can for their children, supported by friends and services in the neighbourhood. This is the origin of the Community Bubs program.

Bringing services to the neighbourhood

An important aspect of the agency's approach is making community resources available to neighbourhoods and involving neighbourhoods in broader community activities so people feel a sense of belonging and ownership in relation to community activities and services. One way they do this is by bringing services to the places and spaces where people live:

Part of our strategy was to make ourselves and our resources available in the neighbourhood so that people would become more confident to come out of the neighbourhood and into the community. Staff have run activities with other service providers, like going to the zoo, going to the local park, outings to local cafés, a whole range of activities. ... We've tried to make ourselves available in a way that's relevant, and make ourselves the conduit for them to understand how the rest of the community works so that they can get the same resources and amenities that anyone else can use in the community. We found that parents in the high-need neighbourhoods did not see that those amenities and services are there for them. For example, we invited the library to come to the Homework Club, knowing that parents would not come with us as a group to the library, where they would feel self-conscious and possibly uncomfortable. So we needed the library to come to them first for parents to see their children enjoy the activities and learn about how to use the service [and] to become more confident to go out into the community to use the service. We supported the community health centre in a similar way in the early days of Creating Capable Communities, and they now have their own proactive program of community health days and services in the neighbourhoods.

Creating sustainable change

By taking a strengths-based, empowerment approach to service delivery, individuals, families and neighbourhoods become the agent for change that is sustainable over the long term.

This is a sustainable change model. It's not about going in and fixing people; it's about a theory of change, where we seek a legacy of skills and impact from activities and services such that sustainability and self-sufficiency is part of the outcome. ... People have skills and resources to get what they need when next faced with a problem or need. One of the most fundamental measures of change for us is, "Who do you know in the neighbourhood?" If someone has a crisis in the middle of the night, who wants to have the police or Child Protection after hours as your only source of support? Most of us would be able to knock on someone's door or call a friend. And that's one of the most important measures of change for us to identify, that isolation is reduced and parents have friends and neighbours to support them in caring for their children—including if they have a crisis in the middle of the night. That's the more Indigenous model of "Who's in our community?" and creating enough activities and opportunities for people to rub shoulders with one another to find out who they would like to know.

The Creating Capable Communities program has now been running for five years. The program has led to a significant reduction in crime on the Bayside housing estates. For example, the Bayside Neighbourhood Watch newsletter (Area 25) was able to report for September to October 2005 that “for the first time in 15 years no crimes were committed on the estate during the 2 month period”.

The Creating Capable Communities was included in the action research program funded by the Australian Government for the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and is participating in a further 12 month evaluation for 2007–8. The Community Bubs three-year pilot has been researched by Monash University and the final evaluation report will be available on Family Life’s website from February 2007. Community Bubs parents reported a 90 per cent success rate in terms of families meeting their goals and objectives at personal and social, and bonding and attachment levels.

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Guidelines for contributors to the National Child Protection Clearinghouse’s *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter*

The goal of the *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* is to promote the exchange of information and ideas and encourage scholarly debate of child maltreatment and child protection research, policy and practice issues.

Appropriate topics for contributions include:

- child maltreatment and child protection research, policy and practice issues;
- education and training issues;
- program profiles;
- notices about upcoming conferences, workshops, events; and
- book reviews, pointers to new publications, online papers, resources/links, websites, and so on.

Author instructions

The *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* is published bi-annually in February and August. Contributions must be submitted four months in advance of publication to allow for review, revision, typesetting and printing timelines.

The average length of contributions is 1000–1500 words, but may be as short as 300–500 words. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of a piece, contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse to discuss your submission.

Every *Newsletter* comprises at least one major contribution (up to 3000 words). If you would like to submit a major contribution, please contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse prior to submission.

Acceptance of all material is subject to a review process. Consideration will be given as to whether articles are

relevant, clearly written, jargon-free and accessible. Consideration will also be given to the following criteria: timeliness of article; significance of the topic; factual accuracy; clear presentation and logical organisation of material; conclusions substantiated by convincing analytical argument; argument supported by references; quality and balance of the argument or information presented; and balance and relevance of any policy implications drawn.

All submissions must be presented in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, and have a title, an author and the author’s affiliation. References should be consistent with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th edition). Illustrations, diagrams, and so on should be submitted electronically in JPEG, TIF or EPS format. To enable publications to be published in both print and electronic format, the use of footnotes is not permitted.

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