

Early intervention and prevention

The evidence base underpinning family and community policy

In recent years, there has been a great deal of research into the way human beings develop, especially in the first five years of life.

It has been recognised for some time that children need to form good attachment to their carers in order to become healthy, productive adults. It has only recently been discovered, however, that patterns of attachment are "hard wired" into the brain during the early years.

In other words, the more positive stimulation a baby has, the more brain cells – as well as the number of connections between those brain cells – are encouraged to develop.

Lack of stimulation, on the other hand, or negative stresses can result in poor brain development so that babies who have been neglected or abused are more likely to grow up experiencing poor physical and mental health, drug and alcohol dependence, a lower standard of education, unemployment and crime.

It is suggested that the rapid social and economic changes taking place may also be contributing to these problems by placing both families and communities under heavy stress. The burden and costs of these problems are enormous and they increase over time. The most effective way to address these problems is early, before they become firmly entrenched.

Along with the research into brain development, there has also been significant international research into the way early intervention and prevention services can help nurture growth during the early years. Prevention averts problems before they arise. Early intervention catches problems early – either early in a child's life, or at early stages in the development of problem situations.

The Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is based on the above assumptions. It has used national and international research to support the notions that:

- families have strengths that can be built on;
- families require advice and support, particularly in times of transition;
- strong communities are characterised by networks that create opportunities for their members and protect vulnerable people;
- strong communities support families, and vice versa; and
- a focus on early intervention and prevention is more effective in the long-term than responding to crises.

Early intervention services which have proven to be effective include:

- home visiting to pregnant women and families with new babies;
- parenting skills training;
- family relationship education;
- family counselling;
- awareness raising about services and resources available in local communities; and
- support services for families with very young children, such as playgroups that provide opportunities for play-based problem solving which helps stimulate brain development.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is working at both the family and community level through a set of early intervention and prevention projects and initiatives to build resilience so that families can break the cycle and deal with issues before they turn into problems. These activities are based on:

- strength-based approaches which enhance and build on strengths rather than focusing on deficits;
- action learning as a process of reflective practice or ongoing evaluation which leads to continuous improvement; and
- evidence-based practice building on national and international knowledge and research.

The families initiatives in the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy include the Early Intervention Parenting and Relationship Initiative, the Stronger Families Fund, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. The Longitudinal Study is managed nationally while funding through first two initiatives is managed by the State and Territory office network of the Department of Family and Community Services.

Community groups can access the funds to:

- provide services – for example, parenting programs such as home visiting, playgroups, and parenting skills training, as well as relationship skills training and counselling in remote areas;
- resource communities to adapt their own approaches to generic programs; and
- coordinate existing services to make sure they reach the people who need them.

For further information about these services, contact the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy hotline toll-free on 1800 300 125.