

Introducing *new*

Stronger Families Fund projects

In this section, readers are introduced to Stronger Families Fund projects, which have recently commenced. All the projects were asked the same questions – these are their responses.



West Belconnen Good Beginnings Program

The project setting

The program is situated in the Belconnen area in the north-west of Canberra. It encompasses the suburbs of Holt, Higgins, Latham, Dunlop, Flynn, Charnwood, Fraser and Macgregor.

The West Belconnen *Good Beginnings* project is part of the National *Good Beginnings* Parenting Program, of which there are around 40 Australia-wide. The *Good Beginnings* program recognises the very important job of raising children. Its vision is to build a society that gives all children a 'good beginning'.

Why is the project needed?

Analysis of social and economic factors like median income, unemployment rates, percentage of single parents, and the socio-economic indexes (SEIFA) showed West Belconnen was a fairly disadvantaged area not well serviced by local

community services – the Charnwood area, in particular.

Representatives of the ACT Government and ACT Department of Education and Community Services also supported the development of a *Good Beginnings* Program to address some community needs.

What are you trying to do in this project?

The *Good Beginnings* program is an early intervention program aimed at improving parent/child interaction patterns and family functioning. The *Good Beginnings* programs aim to 'create a caring environment with families, community services and Government working together such that children achieve their full potential'.

West Belconnen *Good Beginnings* targets families who are isolated, depressed or lack a positive role model, or who could benefit from extra support in the early years of the child's life. Its objectives are to promote the confidence and self-esteem of the parents; improve parenting skills; and strengthen families. The program also encourages parents to link in with government and community-based organisations to

increase their support networks.

How are you going about it?

The program started in October 2000 with the establishment of a reference group consisting of interested health and child professionals, business people and local residents.

Volunteers (Community Parents) were recruited and participated in a six-week training course. The prerequisite was that they needed to have been in a parenting role at some stage of their lives. Once trained, the volunteers were linked with a particular family and provided weekly ongoing support with a visit or by phone.

Networking with government, educational bodies and community and business organisations raised the awareness of the West Belconnen *Good Beginnings* program in the community. This resulted in referrals to the program of families who were in need of support.

Program initiatives include the creation of a drop-in Centre which functions as an information centre and resource library for families, volunteers and the local community.

Access to good quality toys for low-income families have been recognised as a need in the local community, and are being pursued as an important community development initiative. A playgroup has also been established to encourage networking.

Who is working on the project?

Inez Jessurun, Coordinator, is responsible for ongoing administrative and reporting requirements, liaison with the reference group, and assessment and support of families. Fiona Dale, Assistant Coordinator, recruits,

IMPORTANT

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interviews, trains and supports the volunteers, in addition to providing supports to the families. Both are involved in community development projects and organising events. Twenty-five volunteers provide the primary hands-on support on which the program depends.

The program is part of the Family and Community Work Unit of Belconnen Community Service Inc. This means that West Belconnen *Good Beginnings* program has access to broader resources such as childcare,

behaviour support group work and parenting groups.

How has the community responded to the project so far?

The referrals show there is an ongoing demand for the program. The maximum number of families the staff is able to support is twenty-five, and this target was reached in March 2003.

What has been learned in the last six months that may be of interest and value to other developing projects?

A combined Christmas party of

volunteers and families was well received and connections were made between the families. This has encouraged the development of support networks – one of the program’s aims.

Some families have requested the input of a male Community Parent as a positive role model for the family.

West Belconnen *Good Beginnings* Program has been beneficial to families with children with disabilities.



Young Families Support Service, Townsville

Project Setting

The Young Families Support Service is situated in Townsville in the Tropical North of Australia. The service operates from one of four Centrelink offices in the region of Townsville and Thuringowa (known as the Twin Cities). Townsville and Thuringowa have a combined population of 145,879 people and cover an area of 3735.6 square kilometres. The region has a higher than average population of young people between the ages of 15 to 24 (16.4%) as compared to the Australian average (13.7%). This can be explained to a certain degree by the presence of James Cook University and the Army and Airforce bases.

The Young Families Support Service works with parents and parents-to-be under the age of 25. The Project works with young people on an individual and group basis. It also participates in action research. The service currently consists of two experienced Social Workers who are supervised by a Senior Centrelink Social Worker. The project is managed by the Manager, Social Work, for Central and Northern Queensland. Most of the work with participants is done as outreach in the community.

Why is the Project Needed?

The Project was developed in partnership between the Department of

Family and Community Services (FaCS) and Centrelink. Staff in both organisations identified the special needs of young parents; the multiple barriers faced by them and the failure of any one organisation in the community to comprehensively address these barriers. This project has been developed to assist young people to overcome the barriers in order to promote well-being and positive family functioning.

Barriers that young people have identified include:

- lack of family support;
- personal issues;
- poor educational attainment;
- difficulty securing permanent accommodation;
- lack of transport;
- limited knowledge of available services.

What are you trying to do in this project?

Staff in Centrelink, the Young Families Support Service, and FaCS have developed and agreed on eight major project objectives:

1. To improve family functioning, well-being and self-reliance, including stronger bonds between family members and with their local community, with a particular focus on young families under the age of 25 about to have a child or who have children 0–5 years of age.
2. To enhance coordinated support for young families.
3. To achieve sustainable and inclusive processes for community

participation including self-help support.

4. To increase access to information about human services by young families in the community.
5. To increase the confidence and competence of the participants in their parenting role.
6. To provide opportunities for improved financial security of participants through their completion of education and training courses and access to employment where relevant.
7. To liaise with other projects funded under the Stronger Families Fund and share learnings/best practice.
8. To contribute to the evidence base through participation with the Stronger Families Clearinghouse by providing data about lessons learned from the local community and other Stronger Families Fund projects during the life of the project.

How are you going about it?

The two social workers provide one-on-one tailored intervention that includes emotional and practical support and assistance.

An important component of the service is the use of brokerage funding as a means to help young people to develop and grow in their role as parent/s, and to assist them towards independence. Common uses of brokerage include:

- provision of taxi vouchers to get to and from the groups or special appointments;





Some members of the reference group of the Young Families Support Project
 Back row, left to right: Linda Trewern, Catherine Russo, Caroline Brennan, Jenny Hays, Melinda Scheltens, Carmel Fellows
 Front row left to right: Erin Quinlan, Brooke Hutchinson, Carly Muhling.

- assisting young people to gain their driver's licence by paying for lessons if needed (and sometimes paying for the licence itself); and payment of educational fees and assistance with costs of text books. Use of brokerage funds is negotiated with participants and relates directly to the goals that they identify when we begin working together.

The workers currently co-facilitate two popular groups: an antenatal group and a young parent group. The

antenatal group is run in partnership with Child Health and the Townsville Hospital Midwives, and linked with various community agencies who provide guest speakers and/or co-facilitators. It runs for two hours, once a week for 12 weeks.

The young parents' group runs continuously and has a 'rolling' membership. A variety of parent/child related issues are discussed. The group is co-facilitated by a Child Health nurse, and facilitators and partici-

pants all contribute to the content of sessions. The group is held at the Townsville Women's Centre and runs for 2 hours every week.

Both groups have been designed to work in collaboration with community agencies to increase participants' knowledge of local services; to increase their community support networks; and to maintain local input into the Young Families Support Service program.

Action Research is conducted on a number of levels in order to continually evaluate and improve our service. Our Action Research has so far been supported by:

- the development of a Reference Group which includes participants of the service;
- reflective journal writing by the two workers;
- the development of 'exit' questionnaires;
- the use of evaluation sheets in both groups;
- the development of an electronic database; and
- the collecting of participants' stories.

Having the Project located in a Centrelink office has meant that the two workers have also been able to identify quickly and rectify any financial support issues before these escalate to major crises. This has been a distinct advantage to our participants.



Community Connections: Chances for Children Waverley, Launceston, Tasmania

Why is the project needed?

The Launceston suburb of Waverley has a population of just over 1600 people. Waverley has a high proportion of 0-4 year olds and sole-parent families when compared to Launceston in general. Waverley also has high unemployment rates, and education achievement and retention rates are comparably lower.

Significantly, it is also reported that residents of Waverley have higher hospitalisation rates and attract the attention of child protection services at higher levels than that of the general population.

The resources available to Waverley community members are low: there are two small general stores (though one is quite distanced from the larger Waverley area), and a primary school. There are no 'on site' or visiting support agencies and/or services, and no childcare facility.

The Chances for Children project was developed after the establishment of a steering committee in April 2000 to consider program options and develop opportunities to assist fami-

lies and carers with children aged 0-4 years. The priority issue identified through a partnership agreement was the number of very young children presenting at school with clear indicators of risk - social, emotional and academic. Consultation with community and key stakeholders found wide support for the project.

What are you trying to do in this project?

The project aims to empower community members to participate in the development of sustainable social networks to enhance opportunities for health and general well-being. The project aims to assist the development of the 'social heart' concept in Waverley, and to strengthen the capacity of the community to

participate in the planning and integration of services. Alongside this more 'whole of community' approach, the project also hopes to assist parents and carers to establish strong parenting skills in order to minimise the social, emotional and academic risks observed in the 0–4 age group of children.

How are you going about it?

A project worker has been working in the area for just over four months. Asset mapping has been undertaken. A popular feature is the presence of the Waverley Lake which provides the opportunity for children to fish (it is stocked with trout) and to swim throughout the summer.

Projects and activities undertaken to date by the Chances for Children project have been directed at developing the 'social heart' concept and improving opportunities for families with young children. Various craft activities have been developed – folk art proving popular, along with scrap-book sessions. Monthly visits from a

representative of the National Heart Foundation's Eat Smart organisation provide free cooking demonstrations and sampling. A playgroup now meets every Tuesday and Thursday in the local Community Hall to create opportunities to increase children's social and learning skills. While these cost only \$1 per session per family, they have been able to (mostly) self-fund a number of outings to animal havens, theatrical productions, parks and road safety centres.

The local Child Health Nurse visits the playgroup on a monthly basis. Funding was successfully obtained to purchase a small amount of furniture to create a pleasant environment in which carers and the Child Health Nurse could meet and discuss any concerns in relation to the child's health and/or parent's parenting skills. We hope to run a 'Kids Activity Day' in the Community Hall shortly, with food and free haircuts for the children, with the aim of increasing the number of children attending.

Two major 'whole of community' activities have been held since last November. The first was the hosting of Carols by the Lake just prior to Christmas – which had never happened before in Waverley. This was a huge success; perhaps the most important feature was that once the idea was suggested the community members took the idea and put the whole thing together.

The second event was the arrival of ten members of the St Kilda Football team to run an Aussie Rules football clinic with the children. We didn't get a high number of people attending, but those who did had a great time. We are hoping to organise a 'Community Social', with food and music, in the near future.

A further activity has been the introduction of basketball lessons and dancing lessons for primary school aged children. These are run in the Community Hall every Tuesday afternoon and have proved to be very popular – thanks to the support of some wonderful volunteer coordinators.



FACET Family Outreach Project Inala, Queensland

Project setting

The Family and Community Enhancement Team (FACET) family outreach project is a partnership between the Young Women's Program (CAICP Inc), Inala Youth and Family Support Service, Inala Young Mums Program (Anglicare), the Pathways to Prevention Project (Mission Australia & Griffith University), Community Settlement Program (ICH), Childcare Access and Equity Resource Support Unit (CAERSU) (ICH), and Shared Family Care (ICH). The project operates under the auspices of Inala Community House (ICH).

FACET, in collaboration with the communities of Acacia Ridge, Archerfield, Carole Park, Darra, Doolandella, Durack, Forest Lake, Inala, Oxley, Richlands, Wacol and Willawong, aims to develop early intervention

and strengths-focused approaches to enhance the capacities of these communities to respond to the needs of families. The focus of the project is the inclusion of families with young children (0–5 years), young parents, those from diverse cultural and Indigenous backgrounds and families with children with challenging behaviours or a disability.

Why is the project needed?

Inala and the surrounding suburbs are located approx 10–15 kilometres southwest of Brisbane's CBD and consist predominantly of broad-acre estate housing. The suburbs themselves are further isolated from Inala (as a centre for the district) and each other by industrial estates, highways/freeways, swampland and, in a number of cases, by poor public transport.

As an addition to these physical barriers, the region has a large population of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous backgrounds. Some suburbs have up to seven times Brisbane city's average population percentage for these groups. The region has been

identified as highly disadvantaged under the SEIFA index. Whilst Inala has a number of services with a focus on working with families, due to the above factors, demand on service and limited resources, the outreach capabilities of these services to surrounding suburbs is severely hampered.

What are you trying to do in this project?

To address these barriers to service delivery, the organisations forming the FACET Family Outreach Project partnership came together to look at supporting interventions to be led through community input and direction, encouraging local participation and solutions meeting the needs of local families and communities. The project aims to identify and implement strategies with the community to improve the community's response to the needs of all families with young children.

To do this, FACET aims to work in collaboration with individuals, families, community groups, community sector organisations (both government and non-government operating within or into the area), schools and businesses to ensure that the project is inclusive. ►



The goals are: firstly, to build stronger community networks; secondly, to strengthen integration of services; and thirdly, to establish processes for reflection and collaboration which will assist in strengthening the well-being and self-reliance of families and communities, leading to sustainable outcomes for both into the future.

How are you going about it?

FACET is an action research and learning project using community development principles of inclusion, participation and sustainability. The

project incorporates an action research approach to enhance understanding and practice in the local community, and to work alongside services working with families with young children. It aims to identify the local community's understanding of what is required to strengthen families and communities.

Through this understanding and work, FACET aims to develop and trial innovative and appropriate local responses that will be sustainable in assisting families and communities into the future. Staffing for the project consists

of two workers: Glenys Gibson, the Families' Project Worker; and Steven Weinert, the Community Development Project Worker. Both work in collaboration with the Project Reference Group, made up of representatives of the partnering organisations that take a proactive role in the development and direction of FACET.

The project aims to build on the skills and strengths of families, communities and the community sector to enhance the ability of families to engage both with their community and with services in their community. This will be achieved by linking in with existing networks in the area, and working with them to become more inclusive and to celebrate the diversity of the communities.

Consultations have been taking place in a number of areas that wish to enhance their connections with local families and communities by building partnerships leading to strategic interventions. Through these there are specific focuses which are being developed, including a peer support program for parents of children with disabilities; art based programs for young mums from the Murri community; community celebration programs to enhance family links with their communities; and a community advocate program. At this stage the project has been fully operational for only six weeks.



The FACET team. *Left to Right. Back row:* Steven Weinert, John Rigsby-Jones, Tracey Beckwith, Michele Meredith *Front row:* Pieta Sephton, Dung Tran, Haydee Cummins, Cherie Lamb *Absent:* Glenys Gibson, Lorraine Lowndes

The Third Australian Family & Community Strengths Conference - 'Building a Truly Civil Society' will be held at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia from 30 November to 3 December 2003.

The main themes of the conference are:

- Promoting Strengths-Based Leadership/Management
- Linking Schools, Family and Community
- Working from a Strengths Perspective in a Problem-Focused Environment
- Exploring Resilience
- Mobilising People and Community Resources (practical application)

Strengths-based practice is gaining momentum in Australia. Across the country, practitioners from different disciplines are exploring the potential of the strengths perspective in their work. Community groups are applying it to discover the capacity of their members and policy makers are incorporating it in their recommendations, staff teams are incorporating it in their planning sessions, managers are using it in their staff appraisals and teachers are using it in their classrooms.

The third Family & Community Strengths Conference will offer opportunities to share the joys and struggles of working from a strengths perspective with clients/patients/co-investigators/participants, and also to explore how well the strengths perspective can be incorporated into leadership, staff management, organisational structures, partnership building and interagency networking.

The full program is available on the conference website.

Earlybird registration closes: 12 September 2003

Conference Website: www.pco.com.au/familystrengths

Family Action Centre Website: www.newcastle.edu.au/department/fac

For further information, please visit the conference website or contact:

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