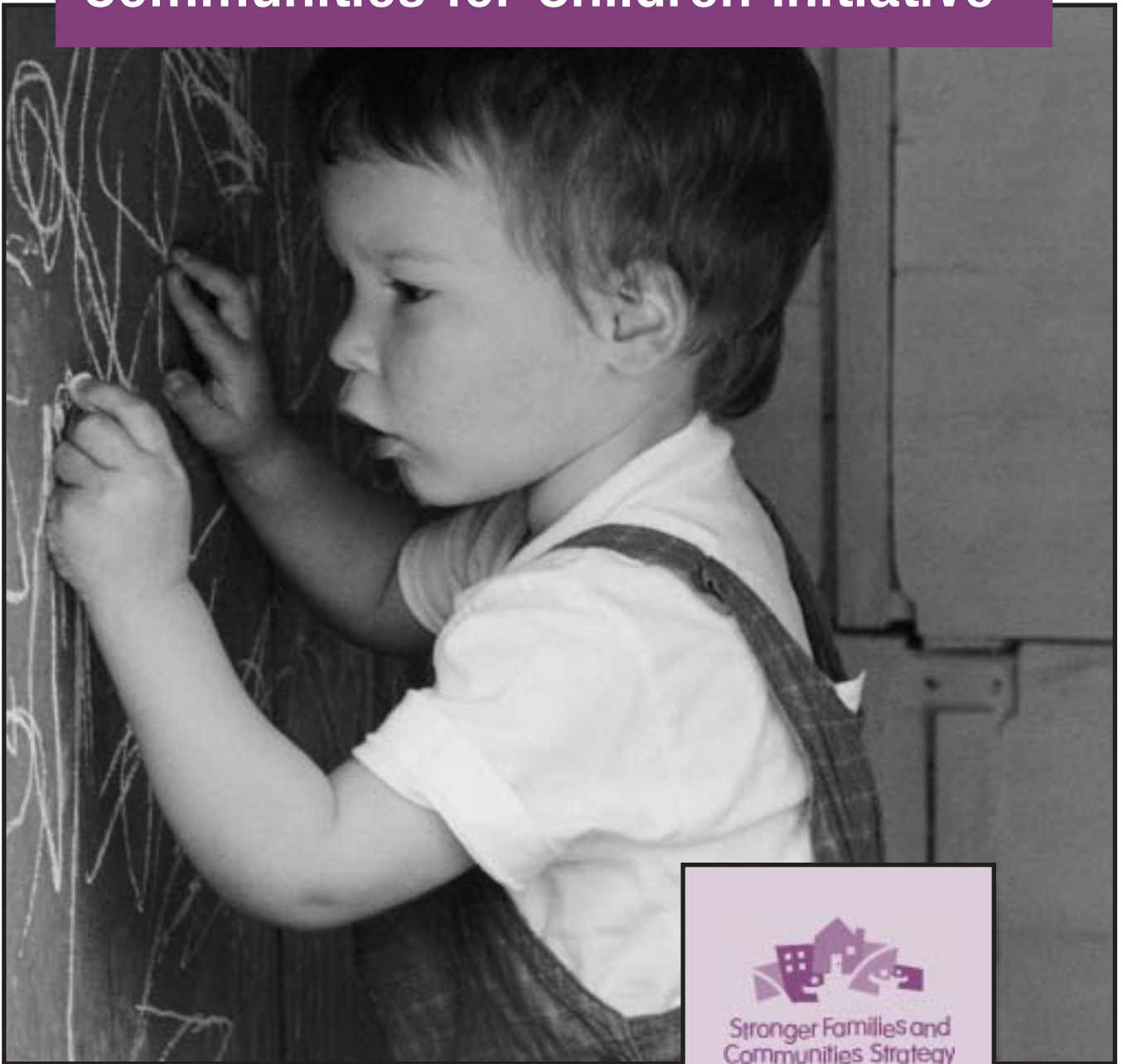


# Communities for Children initiative



Stronger Families and  
Communities Strategy

An Australian Government Initiative

**U**nder the *Communities for Children* initiative, the Australian Government is breaking new ground in policy development and service delivery by providing a national framework focused on sustainability and capacity building, which allows for individual approaches at the local level. This approach recognises that families and communities have differing needs and strengths that can be built on. It also recognises that effective support for families and communities requires partnerships and governance

arrangements that involve all levels of government, the community sector, non-government organisations and business, and that the level of support will differ from community to community.

The initiative articulates high-level policy outcomes and provides communities with the opportunity to implement this policy in flexible and innovative ways that best reflect their circumstances. It is an approach grounded in community development, although not based on a purist community development model. It is in

one sense a hybrid model much like *Sure Start* in the United Kingdom, where a template or framework is used to assist with speedy and effective engagement. It is focused on building strong partnerships and collaborative action and making use of the evidence of what works in early intervention. The initiative has redefined the role of non-government organisations from that of traditional service delivery to facilitator or enabler.



## National Agenda for Early Childhood

The *Communities for Children* initiative is considered by the Australian Government to be an important vehicle for delivering the *National Agenda for Early Childhood* (NAEC). The NAEC responded to evidence that the seeds for poor outcomes like drug dependency, school failure, welfare dependency, poor health and criminal behaviour, are usually planted in a child's early years, and that adverse conditions in early childhood establish risks. These risks can be grouped as: child characteristics (poor attachment or poor social

*Children* initiative is already making a significant contribution to these key action areas.

## Communities for Children

*Communities for Children* aims to assist children aged 0-5 years to have the best possible start in life and to influence the contexts within which they live - their family and community, and the broader social, economic and cultural environments. The initiative responds in part to the need to improve the coordination of public, private and community sector activity, particularly in areas experiencing high levels of economic

principles of the initiative and to achieving positive outcomes for children, families and communities. Members include parents, and community leaders, as well as representatives from the business, research, academic and non-government sectors; state and local governments are involved in an advisory capacity and to promote cross government links.

The Committee is the key decision making mechanism for the initiative. They develop the four-year Strategic Plan, support the implementation of the Plan and manage the disbursement of the funds to deliver the activities identified in the Plan.

In addition to establishing the Committee, the lead NGO must also undertake to:

- bring the community together to talk about local issues that affect young children;
- engage community leaders and build local ownership;
- engage existing service providers and strengthen existing infrastructure;
- promote, integrate and coordinate effort of local stakeholders and service providers;
- build partnerships with local business;
- establish working relationships with early childhood experts so that all the programs or activities funded are based on existing evidence and suitable for our community;
- to help evaluate what we achieve over the four years;
- manage funding; and
- provide progress reports to the Australian Government.

## Flexible model

*Communities for Children* is a model that is adaptable to suit local environments and circumstances. This flexibility is demonstrated through



***The seeds for poor outcomes like drug dependency, school failure, welfare dependency, poor health and criminal behaviour, are usually planted in a child's early years, and that adverse conditions in early childhood establish risks.***

skills); parents and parenting style (single parentage or lack of warmth or affection); family factors and life events (poverty or marital disharmony); and community factors (socio-economic disadvantage or lack of support services). However, these risks can be offset by good antenatal and maternal nutrition, positive attention from parents, family harmony and participation in social networks<sup>1</sup>.

Consultation with community and early childhood experts identified the following four key action areas for the NAEC: healthy families with young children; early learning and care; child-friendly communities; and supporting families and parenting. The *Communities for*

and social disadvantage. It is a new and innovative strengths-based approach to build on the existing strengths of families and communities, rather than a deficit-based approach that focuses on gaps and inadequacies. The initiative links service providers under a lead non-government organisation (NGO) that considers the particular issues and characteristics of a community and tailors social policy interventions and service delivery mechanisms accordingly.

The lead NGO oversees broad community consultation through a *Communities for Children* Committee. The Committee is comprised of community members with an interest in, and commitment to, the

1 Commonwealth Taskforce on Child Development, Health and Well-Being, *Towards the Development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood*, Australian Government, 2003.

the implementation of the initiative in urban, rural, regional and remote communities across Australia. The needs of families and children in these communities vary significantly as do the existing supports, services and infrastructure in the communities. For example a consortium of non-government organisations receives funding of \$2 million to implement *Communities for Children* in the remote East Kimberley in Western Australia. The East Kimberley site has a population of approximately 14,500 people spread across about 25,000 kilometres. The region is made up of rural and remote communities, including over 100 small Indigenous communities. In contrast, a large non-government organisation has been funded \$3 million for a site in western Sydney with an ethnically and socio-economically diverse population of around 32,000 across four suburbs.

### Stronger Families and Communities Partnership

Another innovative feature and key component of the Strategy, is engaging a social coalition to provide strategic and operational advice to the Government. The Stronger Families and Communities Partnership consists of leaders from the community, business and research sectors. They provide high-level oversight of the initiative and act as an advisory body to the Federal Minister for Family and Community Services. They advise the Minister and FaCS on emerging issues and needs, gaps in service delivery and improvements that could be made to the initiative. Our experience to this point is that Partnership members are committed and passionate and bring expertise to Partnership discussions that is contributing significantly to the capacity of *Communities for Children* to deliver positive outcomes for families and communities.

### Progress to date

The initiative provides funding of \$142 million over four years. Since its announcement in April 2004, NGOs have been selected, through a competitive tender process, to implement



## CASE STUDY

*Raymond Terrace in NSW is a diverse community with defence families, Indigenous communities, public housing, residential caravan parks, etc. An intensive asset mapping process was conducted in a process that acknowledged local community members as local experts and encouraged them to focus on the strengths of their community and themselves rather than the deficits. This built a comprehensive picture of the community and has been such a successful experience other communities are incorporating the principles and values, practices and processes being utilised by Raymond Terrace.*



## CASE STUDY

*A school in the Miller community has a large number of CALD & refugee children. The parents and small children remained near the school while the older children attended classes. The Communities for Children Community Development Officer assisted the school principal to write a funding submission for a playgroup – they were successful. The playgroup has not only engaged the parents but has linked the school into other agencies. The school has applied to be a hub for the Communities for Children initiative.*

*Communities for Children* in 45 sites across Australia. The selection process was undertaken in three waves. NGOs selected during the first two waves have consulted extensively with local service providers, other governments and families within their communities; mapped existing services; identified gaps; implemented administrative and governance structures; and are in the process of implementing and developing Strategic Plans.

The following list provides an indication of the flexibility and diversity of activities being implemented under the *Communities for Children*:

- promoting breastfeeding, supporting new parents, bonding and reading to children;
- involving fathers in parenting and developing links with grandparents;
- developing child-friendly communities with supportive, integrated children and family services and improved access to public facilities;
- improving the health, wellbeing and participation of Indigenous children;
- increasing the participation rates of children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities in playgroups and transition to school programs;
- developing professional training programs for early childhood workers;
- mapping local early childhood services; and
- using early intervention and prevention research to inform policy formulation, service delivery and professional practice.

