

# Parents and kids *together:* Supporting families early

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In answer to the question “What is PaKT?” one nine-year old child replied in their evaluation, “working together for better friendships.” This sentiment encapsulates the value of connectedness and the importance for all of us to have a sense of belonging. The sentiment expressed about the Parents and Kids Together project, represents the possibility that problems do not seem so insurmountable when family members are bound together by strong, positive relationships. It also highlights that working together, through partnerships at every level of service delivery, is significant in strengthening the capacity and resilience of children and families.

The aim of the Parents and Kids Together pilot was to develop an early intervention family relationship support service for children of primary school age (6-12 year olds) and their families. Established in 2002, the pilot was funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. An

action research framework, with its emphasis on participation by stakeholders, underpins PaKT. This has enabled the service to adapt according to the needs of the families, schools and communities in which we work. Here we describe the development and outcomes of the Parents and Kids Together program through the cyclical action research format of *plan, act, observe, reflect*.

## Reflections: Where did we start?

Much research expounds the benefits of early intervention and preventative approaches. Effective early intervention approaches are those that prevent or arrest problems in early childhood and refer to the early attention to problems that could otherwise become more established and entrenched (Fish 2003). They are cost effective both socially and economically, as benefits accumulate and are compounded over time. The earlier the appropriate intervention is offered, the greater the gains (Sims 2002).

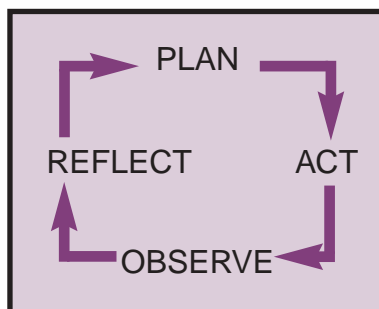
Early intervention support for families of children of primary school age, has received little attention in the literature. This gap in the literature is mirrored by the lack of integrated early intervention services in our area. This is particularly apparent in relation to support for families facing the challenge of parenting children aged 6-12. Parents and Kids Together has evolved in recognition of this need, and the local experience of the Hobart Reconnect program, funded to work with young people aged 12-18. Reconnect is a national early intervention program designed to prevent young people from becoming homeless and to build stronger families and communities.

## Plans: What did we want to try?

Parents and Kids Together aimed to adapt the Reconnect model to work with families:

- earlier, in terms of the age of young people, and in the identification of relationship strain and conflict; and
- before the risk of difficulties becomes entrenched or develops into crisis.

Parents and Kids Together aimed to link the key domains of home and school by building relationships with primary schools. The project acknowledged that schools are key institutions in the lives of families and an essential community focal point. The





pilot aimed to take form with support from key agencies working to strengthen children and families in our community.

### **Actions: What did we actually do?**

#### *Partnerships with primary schools*

We began by establishing the program with five primary schools in the Northern suburbs of Hobart. We developed referral systems and partnership understandings with the Education Department's District Support Service. Parents and Kids Together offers long-term, flexible early intervention support, complementing the existing crisis-oriented school support system.

#### *Family-centred practice*

We aim to work in partnership with parents and children, family members' individual and collective strengths and abilities serving as the foundation for determining goals and building competence. The core of Parents and Kids Together's work is intensive work with individual families. The project utilises the Hobart Reconnect model of a two-worker team, one worker being available for the child or children and another for the parent/s or carer/s. This means that parents *and* children have the opportunity to explore their own goals, needs and concerns. We seek opportunities for parents and children to discuss and work on things as a whole

family, and have used and developed various activities, games and tools that encourage communication and problem solving.

*Family group work.* Parents and Kids Together has worked with schools to deliver group work programs for children and parents. We have been able to fund a project worker to focus full-time on group work processes that we have found to be effective for strengthening family relationships, and connections between home and school. Our group work emphasises activity-based programs that bring parents and children together in the school environment to explore strong relationships in real time.

#### *Action research and evaluation*

Action research has remained central throughout the PaKT project. We have sought to utilise action research in a manner that is transparent and accessible to others, creative, dynamic and rigorous. Key features of our action research have been:

- Our commitment to hearing and including the voices of families. We have endeavoured to be responsive to the experiences and insights of parents and children. For example, we have developed an Evaluation Game that children use to critique Parents and Kids Together. Through this playful, accessible tool children have made frank and often unexpected observations and

reflections about their experiences of the project. These have resulted in refinements and changes to our service.

- The ways we integrate action research into our daily practice. For example, the Action Research Wall. This public and immediate form of journal keeping reminds us – and invites others – to document insights and ideas that might otherwise be lost.
- Our success in engaging stakeholders in action research. The Parents and Kids Together Partnership Group (PG), comprised of representatives from a range of community and government agencies, have developed a reputation as a unique, dynamic forum for reflection and exchange. We have utilised creative, interactive processes at PG meetings to tap into participants' ideas and wisdom. The genuinely participatory nature of meetings has encouraged people to enter a space where the barriers often present at inter-agency meetings are dissolved and true dialogue and collaboration can occur. Our commitment to meaningful, interactive meeting processes has seen the PG remaining strong and involved in action research for the life of the project.

This paper is drawn from our action research, and the findings of self and external evaluations.



## Observations: What is happening? What do people think?

“PaKT taught me to be really really strong and really really calm at the same time.”

*Carer*

“The bad things have got better and the good things much better. PaKT have done their bit, and now it's time for us to do our bit.”

*Child, aged 10*

“PaKT gave me the confidence – not tips or handy hints about what I should do – but the confidence to think out my own things.”

*Parent*

The Parents and Kids Together project has received positive evaluations from schools and families for the flexibility of the service; our ability to be family-centred and to offer families intensive and long-term support as required (sometimes over 12 months). People we work with consistently tell us about the importance of the two-worker support team and whole-of-family approach.

“I like having my own worker, it means we get one on one time together and don't have to worry about the kids knowing what we talk about.”

*Parent*

PaKT's approach to working in partnerships with families reflects the value we place on each person voicing and sharing their own experiences, aspirations and concerns. Both children and their parents/carers identify their own goals and explore their strengths and capacities in the context of the family.

The Parents and Kids Together project has applied the values important in individual and family work, such as building on assets, needs and interests, to group work programs offered through primary schools. For example, in one community we joined with a family we were working with and the school to develop a Bike Group. Parents led their children through maintenance activities structured to emphasis communication,

negotiation, problem solving and fun. Each parent-child pair undertook homework that picked up on hands-on activities and relationship themes.

The Bike Group was a great success and has served as a model for our subsequent group-work programs. We have since explored various activities from cooking to kite making. While each program has been unique, they have all demonstrated the capacity to:

- provide a forum for parents *and* children to meet and work together in a supportive environment;
- provide opportunities for participants to explore elements of strong relationships (communication, sharing, problem solving, negotiation, working and playing together): and
- acknowledge parents' strengths, expertise and capacity to lead, guide and support their children.

“It has been really good. You don't usually have this amount of time to spend with your children one on one at home.”

*Parent*

“It has been really good, not just for the children but the parents as well. If you watch, you can learn how other parents interact with their own children.”

*Parent*

These groups have facilitated stronger home-school relationships, engaged parents in their children's school life and success, and reduced social isolation for parents and children.

“They can see what home life is all about and connect with school life.”

*Parent*

“PaKT helps us do our job better.”

*School Principal*

“PaKT is our best hope of making a real difference.”

*Education Department staff*

The school has provided a legitimate context for such programs to occur. This, coupled with the emphasis on participants' contributions and strengths, has resulted in Parents and

Kids Together's groupwork being viewed positively by participants, school staff and the wider school community. This in turn has encouraged participation and avoided stigmatisation of stressed or isolated families. One parent who attended a group said he had never met his son's teacher before, as his previous contact with the school had been for largely negative reasons associated with his son's behaviour. He now felt comfortable entering the school.

The partnership Parents and Kids Together has built with primary schools has illustrated the significant role schools can play in amplifying the triumphs and personal achievements of children and families. We have often reflected that this would not have been possible if the PaKT project had worked in isolation.

## Reflections: What is working? What does that mean?

Our evaluation has emphasised the efficacy of Parents and Kids Together as an early intervention family support service, delivered in reference to school and community systems. To summarise the reflections of others, and ourselves we have captured the key elements of PaKT under the following themes.



**P**is for Partnerships. The PaKT pilot has reminded us that when we work in partnerships we increase the potential for positive outcomes for children and families. Partnerships have been vital across all the domains we work in. There is a need for strong partnerships within a two-worker team, and if we are to join with families in family-centred practice.

We've also been reminded that this can be challenging. It has taken time to establish our role with schools,

particularly in clarifying what we mean by early intervention and therefore which families we work with. We have maintained this partnership through: constant communication; having a presence around schools; the ability to meet children and parents at school where appropriate, and by connection with teachers to share what is working with families. Schools have positively embraced the project and have been highly supportive of the need for programs such as Parents and Kids Together. Our vibrant Partnership Group has been a crucial component in the development of the PaKT program, and an essential voice in supporting and advocating for intervention support for children of primary school age and their families.

**A is for Access.** By this we mean that Parents and Kids Together offers multiple ways in which families can access a range of supports. In PaKT these have included broader, preventative initiatives such as involving members of the school community in a family group work program, to more focused approaches for working with vulnerable and isolated families. Schools can provide a non-stigmatising setting and valuable access point for services and supports that are otherwise not always easy to navigate.

**K is for "Kids".** And kids' need for early intervention support across the life course. The most significant factor in our partnership with schools is children, aged 6 to 12. The Parents and Kids Together project has alerted us to the important need for support to be available to families with children in primary schools. The dearth of services of this nature and for this age group has been striking, typically existing between parenting services

focused on the early years (0 to 5 years of age) and youth services oriented to young people over 12 years of age.

We prefer however, to see this "gap" as an opportunity. Children bring to our work a preparedness to play and explore issues, ease with optimism and imagination, and often a concern to be in positive relationships with those around them. They have an understanding of family dynamics, and with support, can play an active role in family work and in determining how they can build stronger relationships.

**T is for Talk to Schools.** Schools are an opportune setting for early intervention programs and can play a major role in building resilience in children. Primary schools are often a vital community hub because they have consistent contact with children during developmentally critical times and contact with many families, often for long periods. Services need to be proactive in finding out how they can support schools' effort in promoting the wellbeing of children and young people, and in building connections with their communities. Schools are increasingly asked to do so much, so it critical for community and family programs to show willingness to collaborate with them.

We hope that we have portrayed some of the possibilities, opportunities, and importance of early intervention support for families that have arisen during the Parents and Kids Together pilot. The PaKT project will continue to listen to families, schools and communities to ensure that we remain relevant to their concerns and strengths.

At this stage, Parents and Kids Together is funded under Local Answers until December 2005. We have applied under the latest round of Local Answers funding for a Community Action Research Project. This project will emphasise community development and building early-intervention focused partnerships between families, schools and agencies. We are also exploring ways to



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secure funding and other support from local, state and national sources.

Parents and Kids Together will continue to advocate for the provision of early intervention support to families with children of primary school age. We welcome opportunities to explore and reflect upon this with others.

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