

# Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

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## Child Care Links

There are nineteen Child Care Links pilots currently taking place around Australia. Part of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the pilots support the National Agenda for Early Childhood which is currently in development.

Child Care Links are designed to increase in parents and communities an understanding of the importance of early childhood development and care and its influence on outcomes later in life. It also is designed to build awareness of and capacity to access services, facilities, information and other supports that are available.



The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) was announced by the Prime Minister on 16 April 2000, and emphasises capacity building through early intervention and prevention. Last year, on 16 May 2003 the Prime Minister announced the commitment of \$10 million from the SFCS for projects specifically designed for early childhood intervention and prevention initiatives.

These Early Childhood Initiatives (ECI) are the first practical steps under the National Agenda for Early Childhood. Child Care Links, piloting the use of child care centres as neighbourhood hubs, was one of five initiatives intended to build on work already being funded by the government.

### **Aims of the Child Care Links Pilots**

Child Care Links aims to improve the health and well-being of young children and to strengthen the resilience of their caregivers by using child care services to foster the development of child-friendly communities.

Under the initiative, a Child Care Links worker will be funded at each site to facilitate the development of networks and linkages between the child care service and other family and children's services. It is expected that there will be greater use of child care centres for community activities which promote community connectedness and stronger families. The projects will work towards the establishment of child friendly communities, a key activity area of the National Agenda for Early Childhood.

Child Care Links is proposed as an early-intervention strategy that addresses the importance of the early childhood years in children's subsequent successful development. Research evidence now demonstrates that improvement in child health, development and well being is likely to impact on adolescents and adults as measured by a number of indicators including

alcohol and drug use, rates of juvenile crime, rates of teenage pregnancy, graduation from high school and subsequent employment opportunities.

### **Targeting of Child Care Links**

The ultimate target groups expected to benefit from the Child Care Links initiative are children aged 0-5 years and their parents/caregivers in communities experiencing social disadvantage. Notwithstanding this, the service delivery model of the Child Care Links initiative has a community development focus-it aims to assist the target group by strengthening community capacity.

The effective target group for this program thus includes child and family professionals and community organisations in selected areas across Australia.

The broad elements of the Child Care Links Initiative are:

- Community development; and,
- Service co-ordination and enhancement.

The model will be implemented using FaCS funded child care infrastructure. This will be primarily long day care but in some locations may include family day care and mobile children's services. Sites have been chosen to include metropolitan, rural and remote and Indigenous communities which can be shown to experience disadvantage and which have at least one FaCS funded service in the area.

### **Role of Community Hubs**

The Child Care Links projects will coordinate and integrate early childhood services in areas of high disadvantage, using Commonwealth funded child care services as community hubs. The model features a commitment to a community development approach to engage communities and develop and implement service models in keeping with community identified need and preference.

Each of the Child Care Links projects is supported by a sponsor organisation that employs a Child Care Links Worker. The Child Care Links worker will work with families, community based organisations and services (eg community centres, child care services, schools, women's centres) and government agencies to implement service responses to identified gaps in the region and to link services that already exist.

Some Child Care Links workers will be based at the Child Care sites, some will not. This will depend on local conditions, the service type and the organisation that has assumed sponsorship of the project. It is anticipated that the Child Care Links worker will act as an enabler to support service integration, and provide a 'road map' of services to help families access what they need, when they need it.

It is recognised, however, that to develop capacity

building within a community takes time. To this end, it is anticipated that the model will be developed in three phases:

Phase One: Community capacity building within the child care service itself.

Phase Two: Community capacity building external to the child care service. The key feature of this phase is the identification and linking of existing services that will improve and strengthen family and children's resilience.

Phase Three: Developing the model in terms of sustainability, and capacity to maintain the network of services delivered to children and families.

### **Child Care Link Worker Activities**

The Child Care Links model is expected to vary in operation from one community to another, to reflect local conditions and community needs and expectations.

However, it is anticipated that the Child Care Links worker will engage in the following activities:

- Establish a working relationship and mutual understanding of the project with the identified child care site. Where appropriate this may include professional development concerned with the importance of the early years and early childhood development.
- Identify and approach stakeholders to establish a project advisory group.
- Develop networks with other child care services including family and children's services.
- Identify community needs (needs assessment) through a mapping exercise. This mapping would not be undertaken in circumstances where this information was readily available.
- Develop a project work plan and prioritise according to need.
- Identify and map local services and resources.
- Develop strategies to disseminate this information to community members, agencies and service providers.
- Promote child care services as potential partners and as resources for local service providers and agencies to engage with parents in the community.
- Develop mechanisms for collaboration and partnership within the community to foster the on-going function of child care services as a community resource.
- Support child care services to establish links to parents in the local community.
- Develop targeted project activities with local stakeholders/partners.



- Develop, promote and implement strategies and practices for use in child care services as venues for local agencies to deliver programs and parenting resources eg parenting education, nutrition programs and other relevant activities to the targeted community.

This will also include the provision of flexible child care in response to community need eg supported playgroups, JET crèches.

- Develop mechanisms to improve linkages between families and local agencies.
- Develop strategies for families to increase their knowledge and understanding of existing social services and how to access them at their point of need.

*Sourced from the Department of Family and Community Services*

Further information is available on the FaCS websites:

[www.facs.gov.au/fcs](http://www.facs.gov.au/fcs) and

[www.facs.gov.au/early\\_childhood](http://www.facs.gov.au/early_childhood) Go to the “Stronger Families and Communities Strategy” and the “Towards a National Agenda for Early Childhood” pages.

## Evaluation of Child Care Links

The Centre for Community Child Health has been contracted to undertake an evaluation of the Child Care Links initiative.

The purpose of evaluating the Child Care Links initiative is to determine if the activities of the projects have been useful and relevant to the targeted communities; to assess what interventions work; and to build an evidence base to inform future development.

During the evaluation of Child Care Links three levels of data will be collected.

- Project level information that will be collected by each site
- Amalgamation and analysis of the data collected by each site to give an overarching picture of the Child Care Links initiative
- Evaluation and reporting of how this links with the overall National Agenda for Early Childhood.

The objectives of the Child Care Links initiative include:

*Objective One:*

*Child and family professions have increased knowledge of early childhood development and collaborate in providing services to young children and their families.*

- ◆ Whether local strategies were employed to increase the knowledge and appreciation of child and family professions about early childhood development.
- ◆ Whether contact between child care and early childhood services for vulnerable families has improved and how.
- ◆ Whether child care staff of the service are also participating in the early childhood network, as opposed to the delivery of child care.

*Objective Two:*

*Caregivers of young children are further supported in their parenting role.*

- ◆ Whether local strategies were deployed to engage the target population who are not currently using child care services and other social networks and whether they were successful. E.g. playgroups
- ◆ Whether families’ knowledge of the importance of early childhood is different from being involved in the Initiative at six, twelve and eighteen months?
- ◆ Whether local strategies were employed to increase caregivers’ confidence in their role as parents and which were most successful and why.

*Objective Three:*

*Communities recognise the importance of the early years and support early childhood development.*

- ◆ Whether there were strategies to increase the awareness of the community and whether they were successful.
- ◆ Whether strategies were applied that resulted in increased use of child care resources for community activities and what those resources were.

*Objective Four:*

*To promote best practice in providing services to children and their families.*

- ◆ Whether the Child Care Links Initiative promoted activities within the child care services and the community that support best practice in providing services to children and their families.
- ◆ Whether program performance at some program sites

is significantly stronger than others and what environmental factors impact on performance both positively and negatively

- ◆ Whether other improvements have been achieved as a result of Child Care Links.

For further information about the evaluation please contact

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## Case Study

### From the Child Care Links Worker at Athol Park

In December I attended a community consultation initiated by Local Government. The site for the consultation was directly adjoining our child care centre. This site was chosen largely because of the connections we have made with the local community and service providers. Whilst the Centre was able to support the community consultation (the Centre provided logistical support - toilets, access to electricity etc), I was also able to use the day to connect, in a different way, with local people and service providers.

In particular I reconnected with a young mother, Julie (not her real name) who had previously used the child care service for her eldest son (now 2 1/2 yrs). She had cancelled her elder son's care shortly before the birth of her second son (now 7 mths). While talking with Julie she expressed frustration at the lack of suitable activities for young mothers and children in the local area. She had recently begun attending a playgroup with a friend but had to travel a considerable distance that she found difficult due to cost of and time for travel. Julie acknowledged the benefits for her children and herself of attending such a group, and talked about the benefits her eldest son had experienced when he had attended child care. We chatted for a while and I suggested we start a playgroup at the Centre. Perhaps she could come and discuss the idea with me.

In January Julie came and saw me about starting a playgroup. She had not felt confident about running a playgroup because she was young and felt many people would look down on her but she did have lots of ideas and was happy to take a lead with my support.

The playgroup has now been running for 3 months and has gone from strength to strength. Attendance has not been high but the young families who attend provide support for each other. Julie will often bring extra fruit because she knows someone may not bring any, or a particular child has not had breakfast. We have begun inviting workers from local health and welfare services to the group and regularly talk about issues impacting on children's health and wellbeing. Over the past months Julie has grown in confidence and will now occasionally run the group without me. She is now keen to start a young mother's group - where the focus can be the mother's health and wellbeing!

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