Recruiting and retaining families in HIPPY

Final report

Fatoumata Diallo Roost, Nicky McColl Jones, Malita Allan and Eric Dommers

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Brotherhood
of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit <www.bsl.org.au>.

The authors are Fatoumata Diallo Roost, Senior Research Officer, Nicky McColl Jones, Research Officer, Malita Allan, Research Officer, and Eric Dommers, Senior Research Manager, in the Early Years and Community transition team in the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre.

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Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse
DOE	Commonwealth Department of Education
HIPPY	Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters
RPC	Research and Policy Centre (Brotherhood of St Laurence)

Summary

What is HIPPY?

The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is an early childhood learning and parenting program designed to enhance school readiness by engaging parents as their child's first teacher. It is a home-based, two-year structured learning program for families with four-year-old children living in communities identified as disadvantaged. Participation is voluntary and free. Developed at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the 1960s, HIPPY is internationally licensed.

In Australia, HIPPY is delivered at communities across all states and territories by local providers overseen by HIPPY Australia and funded by the Australian Department of Education. Local providers employ people to run HIPPY within their community and to facilitate families connecting with local services and support networks. When this study was undertaken (in 2013) HIPPY was delivered in 50 communities. This has risen to 75 communities by December 2014.

HIPPY offers a suite of learning activities consistent with the Australian Early Learning Framework. These learning activities are first taught to the parents and carers by HIPPY tutors, and the parents or carers then deliver the program to their child in the home environment, usually for 10–15 minutes per day. Parents are given 45 packs of stimulus and instructional materials (including shapes and short books) over the two years, as well as supported tuition in both home-based and group delivery formats. In addition to enhancing children's school readiness, the program is designed to build parents' confidence and skills to create a positive home learning environment for their child.

HIPPY is intended for families experiencing disadvantage, and the program benefits are generally understood to be maximised when disadvantaged families are engaged and retained for the full duration of the two-year program.

The Recruitment and Retention Project

In October 2012, the BSL Research and Policy Centre's Early Years team was asked by HIPPY Australia to conduct some internal quality assurance workshops with all (50) HIPPY coordinators with the aim of identifying opportunities to enhance the processes used to recruit and retain HIPPY parents. Following these workshops, the RPC Early Years team was also asked to undertake further exploratory research with nominated HIPPY sites to obtain key stakeholder feedback about opportunities to improve recruitment and retention processes. The major study questions were:

1. How can the recruitment process be improved?
2. What aspects of program delivery can be improved to enhance retention rates?

The research program included a literature review; consultations with senior HIPPY Australia staff; analysis of HIPPY Australia client profiles and exit data; focus groups with parents and tutors, and interviews with other HIPPY staff at eleven sites across Australia; and a national survey of HIPPY coordinators. In addition, one HIPPY site (Inala) agreed to provide data from parents who had exited early. Data collected by the RPC team was analysed using a modified version of the McCurdy and Daro 'Conceptual Model of Parent Involvement' (2001). This model describes a series of individual, provider, program and neighbourhood level factors that impact on parents' decisions about enrolment, and their ongoing program participation and engagement (retention).

Key findings

Recruiting the intended population

HIPPY administrative data indicate that most HIPPY sites experience few difficulties in attracting the required number of families, and that more than 60 per cent of HIPPY families can be described as disadvantaged when using criteria such as employment, health care card status or single parent status. While all sites appear to use the core eligibility criteria (the child's age, and place of living), HIPPY Australia allows HIPPY providers to determine the best way to identify eligible families in their location, and many sites report using additional information on their community in an attempt to recruit families experiencing disadvantage.

Given that targeting disadvantaged communities will not always result in attracting disadvantaged families, these two findings (that HIPPY recruits a high number of disadvantaged families; and that HIPPY agencies actively recruit disadvantaged families) offer a positive reflection on the HIPPY recruitment approach.

Factors impacting on recruitment

Using the core elements of the McCurdy and Daro (2001) framework, we examined a range of factors at individual, program and provider levels that might impact positively or adversely on HIPPY recruitment.

Individual level factors which can impact positively on recruitment include:

- the desire of parents for their children to be school-ready
- positive perceptions about the HIPPY program
- the fact that HIPPY is cost free.

Individual level factors that can impact adversely on HIPPY recruitment include:

- competing family commitments and complex circumstances
- the negative experiences of some parents from their own schooling
- the views of some parents that teaching their child is not their role or responsibility
- parent language or literacy issues
- perceived stigma associated with participating in early intervention programs.

Program level factors that support recruitment include the fact that HIPPY is cost-free, and is largely a home-based service. Program level factors which can impact adversely on recruitment success include:

- narrowly defined catchment areas
- uncertainty felt by many HIPPY providers with respect to ongoing funding, and an associated inadequate lead-in time and resources for recruitment
- the two-year length and perceived intensity of HIPPY.

Staff at some sites also indicated that there was scope for HIPPY Australia to provide greater clarity about family eligibility criteria.

Provider level factors which were identified as potentially impacting either positively or adversely on family recruitment included:

- the local agency reputation among families, often communicated through 'word of mouth'

- the scope and strength of links with local community agencies and services, which can help to generate new referrals to HIPPY

- the quality of home tutors, with many sites reporting that their tutors were among their greatest local assets, and some sites reporting difficulties in hiring and retaining suitable tutors.

How can the recruitment process be improved?

Coordinators do not keep detailed records about their recruitment strategies, or their degree of effectiveness, but they were strong in their view that networking with early childhood services, word of mouth and presence at community events were the most effective methods for recruiting families into HIPPY. Coordinators and other stakeholders also identified a number of potential areas for improving recruitment, outlined below.

National marketing to raise HIPPY profile

HIPPY coordinators and consultants suggested that some changes to the national and local marketing approach might enable sites to attract more parents, and potentially more parents from the 'intended' target group. The suggestions included HIPPY Australia adopting a more proactive approach to inform government agencies with a local presence (e.g. Centrelink, health authorities, education providers) of both the existence and value of HIPPY, as well as how the program is aligned with broader government policy and strategies designed to redress disadvantage. Such strategies would complement local networking arrangements (see below) and would assist in creating referral pathways into HIPPY.

Using local networks to attract the target group

Coordinators, home tutors and parents also stressed that it was vital for local HIPPY agencies to raise local awareness of HIPPY by working closely with playgroups, preschools, welfare services and schools, and having a presence at community events. The development of strong local networks with other health, education and welfare services was consistently highlighted as a key mechanism for attracting, supporting (and retaining) target families.

Capitalising on 'word-of-mouth' publicity and promoting the 'HIPPY value proposition'

Word of mouth was reported by most research participants as one of the most powerful local tools for attracting new HIPPY families: the majority of parents and home tutors reported that they first heard about the program in conversation with friends and family who promoted the benefits of HIPPY for their children and who encouraged them to enrol. It was therefore suggested that using the testimonies of current or past HIPPY families—in conjunction with research evidence of the effectiveness of HIPPY, and publicity about the program's broader merits (free resources, social connections, potential employment opportunities etc)—would assist in building a positive and attractive local reputation for the HIPPY program.

Contract conditions to support recruitment

Some two thirds of respondents indicated that aspects of the HIPPY funding contracts had influenced recruitment. Although HIPPY is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and is subject to a budgetary cycle, almost all line managers indicated that late notice of funding approval for the 2012/13 period created staff and community uncertainty, impacted

adversely on morale, and hindered effective and timely recruitment processes. Some line managers and coordinators also suggested that catchment areas were too small and should be expanded, noting that many interested target families just outside the catchment area were 'missing out'.

Making a two-year program more achievable through greater flexibility

A two-year program was a significant commitment for some potential HIPPY families, according to HIPPY coordinators, tutors and parents. For this reason, suggestions relating to HIPPY program design were most commonly about enabling local agencies to adopt a more flexible approach to the program length and intensity (that is, dose), with the aim of making the program seem more achievable for families.

Other program delivery suggestions for improving recruitment included:

- providing better transport support for families

- developing good practice training for HIPPY coordinators and tutors about how to recruit and retain HIPPY families.

Factors that impact on retention

Several features of the HIPPY program clearly help to make it both popular with parents and children, and also support family retention. These include:

- the use of stimulating, high quality and free educational packs suitable for age 4 and age 5 children, and which involve active participation

- the use of a delivery method which is designed to build parents' confidence

- peer tutoring by experienced local parents

- the convenience of an educationally sound program delivered in the home.

The McCurdy and Daro (2001) framework was also used to examine factors that can impact positively or adversely on HIPPY retention.

Individual level factors that can impact adversely on the engagement and retention of families include challenging family circumstances (e.g. illness, lack of secure employment, or changes in housing), particularly for families with multiple, complex needs.

Program factors that may affect retention include the length and intensity of the program, curriculum content and group meeting formats.

Length and intensity

Some families indicated that the first year is too intensive and that the second year makes the program 'too long'. Within this group, several families also reported that the overlap between the second year of the HIPPY program and their child's first year at school was overwhelming for themselves, and for their child. While parents from CALD communities generally reported that two years of HIPPY was 'about the right length', Indigenous Australian parents and carers expressed the view that two years was too long and therefore challenging.

- Some families suggested a program starting at age 3 to reduce the overlap between the second year of the HIPPY program and the child's first year of school

- Some families suggested a shorter program that finishes earlier in the second year.

Curriculum content

Some parents indicated that 30 packs in the first year was too many, and that some packs were 'repetitive and boring'. In this regard, it was suggested that home visits were sometimes too short, especially for families with several children. Some families suggested that longer home visits (rather than more frequent home visits), would enable tutors and families to cover more packs or materials in a single visit.

Parent group meetings

The parent group meetings and the use of 'role play' as a parent teaching/learning strategy were also described as 'challenging' for some families. Parents also reported difficulties in attending group meetings due to time constraints, lack of transport or, in several instances, the lack of connection and social cohesion between HIPPY parents.

While many HIPPY sites indicated they have successfully adapted to address concerns about group meetings by offering flexible participation options such as having tutors meet with several families together to deliver activity packs, either in a home or off-site (e.g. a park or cafe), participation in group meetings was nonetheless reported to be low at numerous sites, with some parents describing public role play as not suited to their learning style. Feedback from the additional Inala study also indicated that some parents experience very complex lives—which in turn can impact on their confidence in their own parenting skills.

Other suggestions put forward by parents, tutors and coordinators for changing parent group meetings included reducing the frequency of these meetings; providing food and cultural activities; and inviting guest speakers based on the needs and interests of the parents.

Provider level factors that impact on retention rates include tutor turnover and the quality and consistency of tutor training.

Tutor training and supervision

Parent feedback suggested very high levels of satisfaction with the general professionalism and skills of the tutors. Staff training was also widely acknowledged by HIPPY consultants, line managers, coordinators and tutors as a critical success factor for high quality HIPPY program delivery and parent retention. Feedback from tutors, however, suggested that there may be considerable variation across sites in the scope and quality of tutor training, and that this variation may extend to the levels, and quality of supervision provided by individual coordinators to their tutors.

For parents who do experience difficulties with their tutor, the absence of a clear complaint procedure may also limit the opportunity to resolve problems and prevent withdrawal from the program.

Implications for improving HIPPY engagement and retention

In view of the findings of this study about factors supporting or limiting recruitment and retention of HIPPY families, it is also recommended that HIPPY Australia consider:

- implementing mechanisms which formally enable sites to deliver HIPPY more flexibly, while retaining program fidelity

- working with HIPPY site management and staff to develop mechanisms for enhancing the scope, quality and consistency of tutor training, with a strong focus on building parenting confidence

- developing guidelines for local HIPPY agencies to strengthen networks and links between HIPPY providers and other relevant local agencies

- reviewing and redesigning the process for collecting parent feedback and exit data.

1 Introduction

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The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is an early childhood learning and parenting program designed to enhance school readiness by engaging parents as their child's first teacher. It is a home-based, two-year structured learning program for families with four-year-old children living in communities identified as disadvantaged. Participation is voluntary and free. Developed at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the 1960s, HIPPY is internationally licensed.

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HIPPY offers a suite of learning activities consistent with the Australian Early Learning Framework. These learning activities are first taught to the parents and carers by HIPPY tutors, and the parents or carers then deliver the program to their child in the home environment, usually for 10–15 minutes per day. Parents are given 45 packs of stimulus and instructional materials (including shapes and short books) over the two years, as well as supported tuition in both home-based and group delivery formats. In addition to enhancing children's school readiness, the program is designed to build parents' confidence and skills to create a positive home learning environment for their child.

HIPPY has been implemented within Australia on a small scale for more than a decade; however, a significant national roll-out phase funded by the Department of Education (DOE; formerly the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) started in 2009. At the time the present research was being undertaken (2013), HIPPY was being delivered in 50 disadvantaged communities across Australia. By December 2014 this has increased to 75 communities.

HIPPY is based on ten guiding principles (see Appendix A) and has five essential features which describe a mix of teaching, program delivery and content principles:

- 'everywhere learning', which means that learning can be transferred from one situation (a HIPPY activity) to another (an everyday situation)

- home tutors, who are typically parents in HIPPY who demonstrate a capacity to teach other parents. Home tutors are trained on a weekly basis by coordinators who have early learning or teaching experience and/or qualifications

- two years of structured learning activities with the child in their year before school and during their transition to school. A child undertakes 45 activity packs with their parent

- role play, which is used by the home tutor to teach the parent/carer the learning activities so the parent then teaches the child the activities, usually for 10–15 minutes per day

- home visits and participant groups to engage, support and reinforce to the parents the importance of teaching their child on a regular structured basis, followed by the child completing the activity.

As the funding agency, the Commonwealth Department of Education (DoE) identifies each HIPPY site, and sets the enrolment target for each site—usually 30 children aged 4 to be recruited and retained for two years through to graduation.. As with most early intervention programs that target disadvantaged communities and families, retaining families is one of the bigger challenges for HIPPY.

HIPPY retention data

Data provided by HIPPY Australia indicates that the 2013 cohort had a retention rate of 72%, which appears to be within the average retention range for international HIPPY programs (for example, 75% in HIPPY New York and 56% in HIPPY New Zealand), as well as home visiting programs in general. Gomby, Culross and Behrman (1999) found that the attrition rate in home visiting programs can fluctuate between 25% and 65%.

Cooney, Small and O'Connor (2007) note that poor recruitment and retention can significantly undermine the efficiency of even the strongest home visiting programs, and so the effectiveness of HIPPY in assisting disadvantaged families depends heavily on the extent to which these families engage with the program.

The research project

Given the link between parental engagement and program effectiveness, and as part of its quality improvement process, HIPPY Australia commissioned exploratory research around mechanisms for improving HIPPY recruitment and retention rates.

This process commenced in late 2012, with a series of exploratory focus groups undertaken by the Research and Policy Centre (RPC) with 49 HIPPY coordinators. The aim of the focus groups was to identify coordinators' views about aspects of HIPPY program design and implementation that could impact positively or adversely on family recruitment and retention rates.

The coordinators identified a number of structural factors about HIPPY—its two-year length; the use of tutors for in-home visits; the regular parent group meetings; attracting and retaining a 'hard to reach' group, etc.) that they felt were both very important about the program, but which also made it harder to both attract, and retain families.

Following the national focus groups, a literature review was undertaken with the aim of identifying those factors which are known to impact on recruitment and retention in home visit – based parenting programs with 'hard-to-reach' populations. One outcome of the literature review was the identification of a framework of explanatory factors which impact on recruitment and retention with 'hard to reach' groups. In addition to using the framework as an analytic tool for making sense of recruitment and retention patterns across HIPPY sites, it was also hoped that such a framework might provide a useful tool for benchmarking 'good practice' in both the recruitment and retention aspects of the program.

Literature review: factors that influence recruitment and retention

Research indicates that although parents value the benefits of services designed to assist with parenting and early learning, many parents nonetheless fail to engage fully and continuously with such programs (Eisner & Meidert 2011). The term 'engagement' is generally used in the literature to describe attendance, participation, involvement, adherence and compliance; however, there is

also broad agreement that parental engagement is a dynamic, multidimensional and multi-stage process involving both parents and service providers.

The broader field of behavioural research has identified both a wide range of factors, such as program cost, location, duration, previous exposure to similar programs, family beliefs, and cultural amenability, which can influence aspects of the engagement process; as well as a number of frameworks or models which describe the core stages or components of recruitment and engagement/retention. For example, Eisner and Meidert (2011) suggest a four-stage model (enrolment, participation, completion and utilisation), while Wagner et al. (2000) have proposed a five-dimensional model (Say yes, Be there, Be involved, Do the homework and Look for more engagement).

McCurdy and Daro (2001) have attempted to synthesise the proposed factors and stages into a framework (Figure 1.1) which conceptualises engagement in three stages or dimensions: (i) intent to enrol, (ii) enrolment and (iii) retention. Each of these dimensions is, in turn, influenced by a range of factors operating at four levels: individual, service provider, program and neighbourhood context.

Figure 1.1   Conceptual model of parent involvement (McCurdy & Daro 2001)
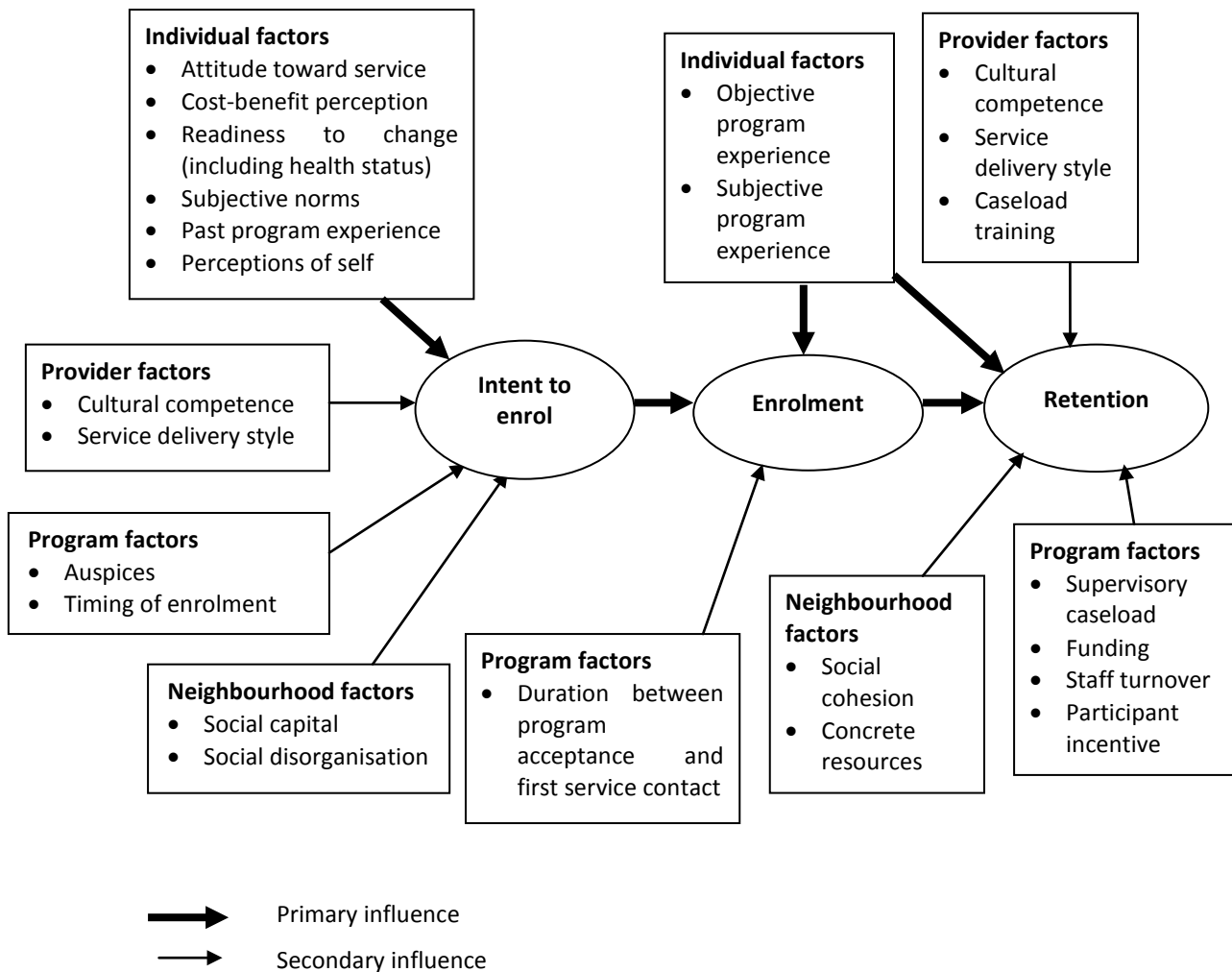
Individual factors influencing engagement

Various social cognitive researchers have demonstrated the link between intention and behaviour. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and Fishbein et al. (1997) have demonstrated that the strongest predictor of an individual's engagement in a specific behaviour is her/his stated intention to do so. However, there is also evidence that even when parents express their intent to participate in parenting programs, some fail to follow through to actual enrolment and program commencement (McCurdy & Daro 2001). Individual factors that have been found to influence parents' participation include demographics, psychological characteristics, values, beliefs, motivation and readiness for change (Bundy 2004; Korfmacher et al. 2008; McCurdy & Daro 2001; Prochaska & DiClemente 1983); a match between parents' actual needs and the program content (McCurdy & Daro 2001; Korfmacher et al. 2008); and maternal perceptions of self and the alignment of these perceptions with the program design (McCurdy & Daro 2001; Daro, McCurdy & Nelson 2005).

According to Rots-de Vries et al. 2011), families experiencing chronic and complex socioeconomic and psycho-social problems are both 'hard to reach' and 'hard to engage' with mainstream services. These families often experience stressful life events or circumstances that impact on their willingness or readiness to engage and complete home based (and other) early intervention programs. Spoth, Redmond and Shin (2000) found strong correlations between family income and intention to enrol in early childhood or family-based programs; and Redmond, Spoth and Trudeau (2002) highlight evidence that those who fail to enrol generally experience greater levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and life stress. According to Moore and colleagues (2012), the discrepancy between identified community need and service take-up can be explained by the fact that vulnerable parents have to balance competing needs and that sometimes 'survival' needs to take priority over attendance at a service.

Other factors found to influence parental enrolment in early intervention programs include maternal age, number of children in the household and substance use. For example, Katz, La Placa and Hunter (2007) found that mothers who refused enrolment were older, had more children, had more limited prenatal care, had less health insurance and had used alcohol and illicit substances more commonly.

Keller and McDade (2000), and Schultz and Vaughn (1999) found that ethnic minority parents may be less willing than ethnic majority parents to enrol in early intervention programs due to perceived racism, mistrust of providers, and fears of stigmatisation.

In terms of early exit or 'attrition', families with more risk factors and, in particular, lower education and income, tend to disengage and exit from programs sooner (Wagner et al. 2003), and numerous other studies have confirmed the importance of low socioeconomic status, single-parent status, ethnic minority status and parental depression as predictors of disengagement or lower quality participation in parenting programs (Fontana et al. 1996; Kazdin, Holland & Crowley 1997; Nix, Bierman & McMahon 2009, cited in Winslow et al. 2009; Wagner et al. 2000). Other risk factors associated with lower rates of parental involvement or engagement are substance abuse (Navaie-Waliser et al. 2000); being a mother who experiences high levels of family conflict (Herzog, Cherniss & Menzel 1986); having a new-born in poor health (Wagner et al. 2000); frequent family crises (St Pierre & Layzer 1999); competing responsibilities such as work or school (Gomby, Culross & Behrman 1999; Roggman et al. 2002); and the resistance of other family members (Daro & Harding 1999).

Several psychological factors are also known to impact on program involvement and engagement. For example, Florian, Mikulincer and Yaubman (1995) found that securely attached parents with fewer symptoms of depression are more likely to use emotional and instrumental support; and Brookes et al. (2006) similarly found such parents to be more likely to form quality relationships with early intervention program staff. Avis, Bulman & Leighton (2007), and Koshinsky and Clipsal (2006 cited in Barrett 2008) found several key psychological factors that affect parental involvement and engagement:

- lack of social confidence

- distrust of other parents and staff

- fear of the unknown and authority

- lack of history of help-seeking behaviour

- feeling of hopelessness

- communication difficulties.

Models of individual change

A number of theorists have also developed frameworks of factors that propose to explain the types of behaviour change that many early intervention programs are designed to achieve. Working mainly within the fields of health and education behaviour change, and drawing on the work of key theories such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986) and Reasoned Action and Planned Behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein 1985), Bundy (2004) identified seven factors that influence individual people's decisions to participate in new behaviours. These are motivation or intention to change, beliefs about what the behaviour involves, the perceived value of the behaviour, the perceived costs and benefits of making a change, the perceived barriers to making a change, confidence-related beliefs about one's ability to perform the behaviours, and the support and reinforcement of 'important others'.

Similar factors are also widely adopted in other theoretical models such as the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (Prochaska & diClemente 1983) and Social Influence theory (Rashotte 2006), which also seek to describe the factors and circumstances which impact on the scope and extent of people's engagement in various intervention programs.

Transtheoretical Model of Change

Developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), the Transtheoretical Model of Change combines key ideas from other theories (Velicer et al. 2000), including Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986, 1998). According to the stages of change model, an individual's ability to make behavioural changes recommended by educational interventions is tied to their stage of readiness. The four stages of readiness are described as: the precontemplative stage (not yet thinking about change), the contemplative stage (thinking about change), the action stage (making efforts toward change) and the maintenance stage (maintaining the change). Numerous barriers to participation and engagement can arise at any of these stages, and resistance has been found to be very common in the early stages of change, when individuals are still grappling with self-confidence and the perceived difficulties and benefits of continued engagement (Prochaska & DiClemente 1983; McCurdy & Daro 2001).

Instead of assuming that all individuals will want to participate, will benefit and will thrive on various early intervention programs, the transtheoretical model recognises that different individuals will be at

different stages of readiness. On this basis, Velicer et al. (2000) suggest that wherever possible, interventions should be tailored to the stage of change of the individual or family unit, and that interventions should be designed to acknowledge the importance of each of the four stages. One implication this raises for HIPPY is how best to work at a pace that suits individual families, whilst still maintaining the overall structure and fidelity of the HIPPY program.

Social Influence

Social Influence has been described 'as change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviours that results from interaction with another individual or a group' (Rashotte 2006). According to social influence theory, three key variables can influence an individual's decisions to change their behaviour or beliefs: (i) a willingness to adjust their own beliefs with respect to individuals or groups to whom they feel similar or share psychological principles (Rashotte 2006), (ii) a willingness to adjust their behaviour with respect to individuals or groups in positions of authority or trust (Cialdini & Trost 1998) and (iii) a willingness to adjust their behaviour with respect to individuals or groups who are perceived to be subject experts (Rashotte 2006).

Strategies that facilitate an individual's decision to engage in, or continue, a new behaviour include the following:

- reciprocation: people are more willing to comply with requests from those who have provided something first ('Scratch my back and I will scratch yours')

- commitment/consistency: people are more inclined to comply with a request if it is consistent with other commitments

- expertise: people are more willing to comply when the person making the request is perceived as an authority

- social validation: individuals are more likely to take a recommended step when they see evidence that similar others are doing it

- scarcity: people find scarce opportunities more attractive

- liking/friendship: people prefer to say 'yes' to people they like.

Potential implications of Social Influence theory for programs like HIPPY, which rely heavily on 'word of mouth within the community' and 'in-the-home peer support', are that the tutors should be regarded as trusted subject experts who are well liked and are welcome in the family home; that HIPPY parents are part of a much larger, yet 'special' group or movement; and that the expectations by tutors and coordinators of participating families are consistent, and reciprocated (e.g. by tutors delivering home packs punctually).

McCurdy and Daro (2001) and Daro, McCurdy and Nelson (2005) suggest that parental engagement is also affected by other important perceptions or beliefs, such as subjective norms, past experience with programs in general, and perceptions of a service delivery organisation and its operating style. For example, parents who regard their friends and family as supportive of parenting programs are also more likely to participate in such programs. Similarly, parents who have previously participated in other support programs and found them beneficial generally indicate a greater willingness to enrol and engage. Finally, McCurdy and Daro (2001) report that parents are more likely to express intent to enrol if the recruiter has an empathic and competent service delivery style.

Provider factors influencing engagement

Interacting with the individual factors are various other factors which relate to the quality or perceived qualities of the host organisation, the manner in which the program is likely to be delivered, as well as the neighbourhood where the program operates. All combine to exert influence over both the enrolment and engagement stages of participation in home-based early intervention or parenting programs. For example, provider attributes such as cultural awareness and service delivery style predict parent involvement, and indeed, researchers such as McCurdy and Daro (2001) report that the service provider's awareness of, sensitivity to and responsiveness to the parents' cultural background and history can all increase their likelihood of successfully enrolling a higher percentage of parents. Along with cultural competence, the literature suggests that aspects of service delivery such as communication style and the focus of the services are potentially influential determinants of interest in, and intent to enrol in, family support programs (Tyron & Tyron 1986 cited in McCurdy & Jones 2000).

Program factors influencing engagement

Various factors related to specific program attributes such as sponsorship or auspices can also influence parental intent to enrol in family support programs. A study conducted by McCurdy and Jones (2000) found that programs connected with state departments responsible for child welfare or social service often have a difficult time attracting potential participants, partly due to the potential for stigma being associated with participation in such programs. In contrast, the authors found that parents were more willing to engage with services provided by non-profit organisations.

Other structural program factors can also create barriers to parents' enrolment in parenting programs. Ajzen (1996) reports that despite clients' intent to enrol, intervening factors such as promotion and recruitment strategies, poor communication during follow-up, the nature of program components, or the characteristics of the person running the program can all impact on actual engagement behaviour.

Similarly, the way a program is advertised and packaged can significantly influence parents' decisions to participate. In this respect, the application of tools such as social marketing has been found to have a positive impact on recruitment rates in early intervention programs.

Aimed at improving personal and social welfare, social marketing is based on the philosophy that people will adopt new behaviours or ideas if they feel that something of value is exchanged between them and the 'social marketer' (Solomon 1989). Using commercial marketing tools to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare (Andreasen 1995), social marketing adopts an optimal 'mix' of five elements known as the '5 Ps': product, price, place, positioning and promotion (Levant 1987):

- **product:** the behaviour or idea that is being promoted. The behaviour must be serious enough for potential participants to be interested, and the product must also be socially and culturally acceptable to the target population.

- **price:** the cost, including time, effort, and financial costs of participating in the intervention and making any behaviour changes. Minimising these costs increases the likelihood of successful recruitment and retention

- **place:** the distribution sites of the product or intervention. Improving accessibility to the places where recruitment occurs and where the program takes place improves recruitment and retention. Accessibility can involve location, convenience or cultural acceptability

- **positioning:** the psychological 'image' of the product. For example, promoting an intervention as a way to enhance parent and child interaction as well as children's later outcomes can position the program as a means of improving personal and social welfare.

- **promotion:** the ways in which the audience is made aware of the product. Using marketing techniques such as consumer-oriented market research, segmentation and targeting can provide good indications as to how best to advertise or promote a program.

The literature suggests that traditional methods of recruitment by publicising programs, such as placing advertisements in local papers, do not result in contact with those most in need of the service (Howard & Chaplin 1997; Areán et al., 2003, cited in Nichols et al. 2004). When recruiting families for early intervention, face-to-face contact with potential participants is recommended, at their home, at supermarkets, fast-food outlets or on the streets (Dumka et al. 1997; Howard & Chaplin 1997). For example, Duggan and colleagues found that when attempting to engage 'at risk' parents in a home visiting program, mothers contacted in person were twice as likely to accept the service as those contacted by telephone (Duggan et al. 2000, cited in Stanley & Kovacs 2003). Additionally, using visual promotion such graphics in posters has been found to be an effective strategy for accessing families, especially vulnerable families, many of whom have difficulties with literacy (Cortis, Katz & Patulny 2009).

Promoting programs in positive terms—for example, as helping parents to raise happy and healthy children—has also been found to improve reach when compared with a deficits approach (Dumka et al. 1997, cited in Stanley & Kovacs 2003). Spoth and Redmond (1995) also emphasise providing prospective participants with accurate information, particularly about the time commitment required, as a determinant in recruiting and retaining parents.

Research also highlights the value of building on cross-institutional support (Prinz et al. 2001). For example, findings from the supportive playgroup program conducted by Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD 2011) suggest that developing partnerships with local early childhood services, health providers and community agencies was not only crucial in referring families into programs but also provided opportunities for outreach, as well as for supplementary funding to support recruitment and retention of families.

Towards a framework of individual, program, provider and neighbourhood factors which influence enrolment and engagement

There is a considerable body of evidence that describes the various factors that influence parental participation and engagement in home-based interventions; however, there are few frameworks that explain how these factors relate to each other, and how they can be incorporated into a design that supports high quality recruitment and retention activities for hard-to-reach groups. McCurdy and Daro's (2001) own review of the engagement and retention literature essentially found that most engagement and retention factors had either been examined at the level of individuals rather than of groups, and/or they had been examined in isolation from other explanatory factors, such as program, provider and neighbourhood factors. They concluded that very few of the factors examined held any real explanatory or predictive power, but when combined within a coherent structure, the factors were not only more relevant in describing a valuable mix of recruitment and retention strategies, but also had more predictive power.

2 Methods

2.1 Data collection

The data collection consisted of four main methods:

- a literature review of factors affecting enrolment and retention in parenting and early intervention programs

- one-day site visits[1] to 11 HIPPY sites across Australia from September 2013 to February 2014, which included focus group discussions with 90 HIPPY parents and 40 home tutors, and interviews with 11 coordinators, 9 line managers and 6 HIPPY consultants

- a national survey completed by 49 out of 50 HIPPY coordinators in February 2014

- review of HIPPY Australia administrative data for 50 sites.

Literature review

Ten online databases which cover the relevant academic literature in psychology, sociology, early childhood care and education were accessed: Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), Education Research Complete (EBSCO), ERIC (CSA), Family & Society Plus Text (Informit), JSTOR, PsycINFO (CSA), ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Web of Science (ISI), and Wiley InterScience Journals and Google scholar. Publications from 1990 to 2012 were identified using key words and their derivations, including: parent-parents-parenting, parenting program, parenting training, involvement, participation, recruitment, retention, engagement, intervention, attrition, dropout and research participant, home visits, in-home, and child behaviour.

Articles identified initially were manually assessed for relevance to this review's purposes based on a set of criteria, including (i) studies about parenting program or parenting programs similar to HIPPY; early prevention programs; parent support programs; voluntary participation in early intervention programs; behaviour change programs; parent training or parent education programs; parenting interventions for children under formal schooling age; home visits; (ii) theoretical papers and reviews on recruitment and retention of participants in family interventions; empirical studies of interventions designed to improve recruitment, involvement and retention; and papers or reports that made recommendations about engagement and retention strategies. Studies that were not published in English, or were published prior to 1980, were excluded.

The next step in the review involved a systematic search of the reference lists in relevant articles for studies that also fitted the search criteria. A further search was conducted to include program/project reports and working papers. Following these processes, 95 articles were initially identified for further assessment against quality criteria including type of publication, peer review status, and type of design used. Following this final selection, 40 high quality documents were identified as relevant for inclusion in the review.

HIPPY site visits

Eleven site visits were undertaken to allow us to develop a richer understanding of local context and engagement issues, and how the different stakeholders at the sites were responding to these

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[1] These are site visits conducted by RPC and not to be confused with HIPPY Australia site visits.

issues. We undertook qualitative analysis of this in-depth data, which was coded using NVivo 10 qualitative research software (QSR International 2012).

HIPPY sites

The sites for in-depth, qualitative data collection were selected in consultation with HIPPY Australia management, who provided advice to ensure that the sites were broadly representative of the characteristics of HIPPY sites, including state, urban or regional status, and demographic mix (CALD and/or Indigenous). Table 2.1 shows the sites visited.

Table 2.1   Locations of the one-day HIPPY site visits

State or territory	Location	Geographical classification
Australian Capital Territory	Charnwood	Metropolitan
New South Wales	Bidwill	Metropolitan
	Fairfield	Metropolitan
Queensland	Inala	Metropolitan
	Riverview	Regional
Victoria	Frankston North	Metropolitan
	Dandenong	Metropolitan
	Colac	Regional
South Australia	Davoren Park	Metropolitan
Tasmania	Sheffield	Regional
Western Australia	Rockingham	Metropolitan

HIPPY parents

HIPPY coordinators at the 11 sites were given background information about the study, and then informed parents about it and invited parents to take part in the focus groups. Coordinators, tutors and line managers were not invited to the parent focus groups, and researchers emphasised that the purpose of these focus groups was to identify program strengths and improvement opportunities while maintaining the confidentiality of the participants. A total of 90 parents enrolled in HIPPY participated in focus group discussions.

HIPPY home tutors

HIPPY home tutors at the 11 sites were invited to take part in the study and 38 participated—either in focus groups (37) at the site or by individual interview (1) over the phone. As with the parent focus groups, to ensure confidentiality, neither line managers nor coordinators were invited to the focus groups, and tutors were asked to focus on program strengths and improvement opportunities.

HIPPY coordinators

A total of 11 HIPPY coordinators took part, with nine coordinators interviewed face to face and two via telephone. Coordinators were asked about recruitment processes, the program's intended group, support and retention.

HIPPY line managers

Nine HIPPY line managers were interviewed, five face to face and four via telephone. Line manager interviews focused on management aspects of the program such as contract details, funding, tutor and coordinator quality, internal and external support, and factors impacting on recruitment and retention.

HIPPY consultants

Information gathered from the site visits was supplemented by ongoing advice and feedback from all six HIPPY Australia consultants. The key responsibilities of HIPPY consultants include supporting sites to deliver the program in line with the HIPPY model, networking, training coordinators and tutors at the commencement of the program, site assessments and program development. Three participated in a focus group; two were interviewed face to face and one via telephone.

The national coordinator survey

The third main method of data collection involved a national survey of all HIPPY coordinators, who play a critical role in the delivery of HIPPY. All coordinators were contacted via email with a link to the survey, which was designed using Survey Monkey to enable them to comment on and clarify the recruitment and retention strategies. Responses were received from 49 of the 50 coordinators.

HIPPY Australia administrative data

The final type of data collected was administrative data sourced from the HIPPY Australia database. This information assisted in determining some of the characteristics and exit reasons of parents who exited the program, and importantly, tracked attrition rates over time.

Limitations of the data

- Data from the one-day HIPPY site visits was collected from 11 out of 50 HIPPY sites (22%) that were operating across Australia in 2012. The sites were identified by HIPPY Australia as broadly representative, but the restricted sample size means that the interpretation relies more heavily on qualitative than quantitative analysis.

- Parents who agreed to participate in the evaluation had been invited by local HIPPY coordinators, raising the possibility of participant bias.

- Administrative data collected by HIPPY Australia failed to link exiting family data (e.g. socioeconomic status, demographics) with exit reasons.

- The evaluation team had poor access to 'exited parents'. Although coordinators were asked to invite any exited parents to participate in an interview with the researchers during the site visits, a total of only five exited parents offered to be interviewed and only one interview was conducted. An alternative case study approach was used with the Inala site, where the agency coordinator offered to interview exited parents. This resulted in nine parent interviews; however caution is required in the data interpretation as the sample size was small, and may not be representative of exited parents across HIPPY sites (see Appendix C for the report).

2.2 Ethics

The evaluation procedures were approved by the Brotherhood of St Laurence Research and Policy Centre ethics committee. All research participants were presented with a plain language statement and a consent form which outlined the research aims as well as their rights to confidentiality and withdrawal.

2.3 Action research

Facilitated action research informed this process evaluation. Action research is participative, as stakeholders are involved as partners in the process; qualitative, dealing more with language than numbers; and reflective, working through a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000). As already stated, data from the 2012 HIPPY coordinator focus groups shaped the research questions for this evaluation. Furthermore, the research team consulted with representatives from HIPPY Australia at many stages of the research process:

- presentation to BSL HIPPY Steering Committee of the research proposal (August 2013)

- two meetings with HIPPY Australia to select sites (August–September 2013)

- three meetings with HIPPY Australia consultants reflecting on the site visits (November–December 2013)

- presentation to HIPPY Australia of preliminary findings (December 2013)

- presentation to the BSL HIPPY Steering Committee and DOE of interim findings from site visits (February 2014)

- two presentations to (i) the BSL HIPPY Steering Committee, and (ii) HIPPY Australia, of a summary of evaluation findings (May 2014)

- feedback from HIPPY Australia on draft report (June–November 2014).

Additionally, there was continuous email exchange between the research team and HIPPY Australia.

2.4 Analysis

In order to analyse data collected from the one-day HIPPY site visits and the national coordinator survey, Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) analysis framework was used. This process employs the following steps: data familiarisation; identify thematic framework; index themes; chart themes; map and interpret. Data familiarisation involved coding the data into relevant themes. The thematic framework was borrowed from McCurdy and Daro's (2001) conceptual model of parent involvement (see Figure 1.1), which was then used to index and chart themes, and to further map and interpret the data.

To better reflect the HIPPY processes and language, the McCurdy and Daro's model was adapted to HIPPY, as shown in Figure 2.2. This version combines 'intent to enrol' and 'enrolment' under the one process, 'recruitment'. We believe that in addition to the individual and program factors that McCurdy and Daro describe, provider factors (such as the quality of relationship and communication between the provider and parents) also influence enrolment.

The second part of the model identifies the various individual, provider, program and neighbourhood factors that influence why families remain engaged or stay active in a program.

Figure 2.2   **HIPPY version of McCurdy and Daro's (2001) conceptual model of parent involvement**

Individual factors
- Socioeconomic characteristics
- Psychological characteristics
- Attitude toward service
- Cost-benefit perception
- Readiness to change
- Subjective norms
- Past program experience

Provider factors
- Cultural competence
- Service delivery style

Individual factors
- Subjective norms

Provider factors
- Cultural competence
- Service delivery style
- Caseload training

Neighbourhood factors
- Social cohesion
- Concrete resources

Recruitment

Intent to enrol

Enrolment

Retention

Individual factors
- Socioeconomic characteristics
- Psychological characteristics
- Objective program experience

Program factors
- Auspices
- Timing of enrolment
- Promotion

Neighbourhood factors
- Social capital
- Social disorganisation

Program factors
- Time between program acceptance and first service contact

Provider factors
- Quality of relationship with parent
- Quality of communication with parent

Program factors
- Supervisory caseload
- Funding
- Staff turnover
- Participant incentive

→ Primary influence

→ Secondary influence

3 Findings: improving the HIPPY recruitment process

This chapter examines:

- who is being recruited into HIPPY

- challenges and strengths associated with the recruitment process

- suggestions for improving recruitment.

## 3.1 Is HIPPY recruiting its intended group?

HIPPY is a voluntary program for parents with 4-year-old children living in communities characterised by low socioeconomic status. The Department of Education funds HIPPY Australia to run programs in fifty pre-determined locations, all of which satisfy the department's funding criteria, including their definitions of low socioeconomic status. Although HIPPY program documentation and evaluation reports (Liddell et al. 2011) describe HIPPY as a program that is designed to support socioeconomically disadvantaged families, recruitment into the program requires the satisfaction of only two essential eligibility criteria: (i) residence within identified catchment area and (ii) having a child aged four. HIPPY Australia does, however, encourage HIPPY line managers and coordinators to use additional eligibility criteria, particularly if the number of local families wanting to participate in HIPPY is high, and if there is opportunity to include families experiencing higher levels of disadvantage. As the handbook for coordinators explains:

> Sites develop their own criteria for entry into the program based on the needs of the local community and the requirements of their program funding. Criteria for entry may include: language background other than English, identified need for additional support, age of parent (HIPPY Australia coordinator handbook 2013, p.11)

Data from the national coordinator survey, as well as HIPPY Australia administrative data, confirm that all (50) HIPPY sites are using the core eligibility criteria (the child's age, and place of living). HIPPY Administrative data also confirm that the majority of HIPPY families are disadvantaged. HIPPY Australia enrolment data in the 2013 year indicate that approximately 60% of HIPPY families hold a Health Care Card, and 13% of fathers are not employed. These figures also, however, show that while HIPPY is generally recruiting the intended group, there is still a proportion of HIPPY participants who, at the time of recruitment, may not have been experiencing disadvantage.

In order to understand how HIPPY coordinators identify disadvantaged families, coordinators were asked via a national coordinator survey to describe the inclusion criteria they used when recruiting families. As shown in Figure 3.1, coordinators report that in addition to the two essential criteria (child age and location of residence), some coordinators also use criteria such as 'low socioeconomic background', 'CALD background and Indigenous status', 'social isolation', and 'low educational background'. While some three-quarters of all HIPPY coordinators (37) relied mainly on the two essential criteria, around one-quarter commonly used additional eligibility criteria. Coordinators who used these additional criteria generally indicated that a family's actual status in any of these criteria was, or could be confirmed by 'local knowledge'.

Figure 3.1   Coordinators' criteria for recruiting families into HIPPY
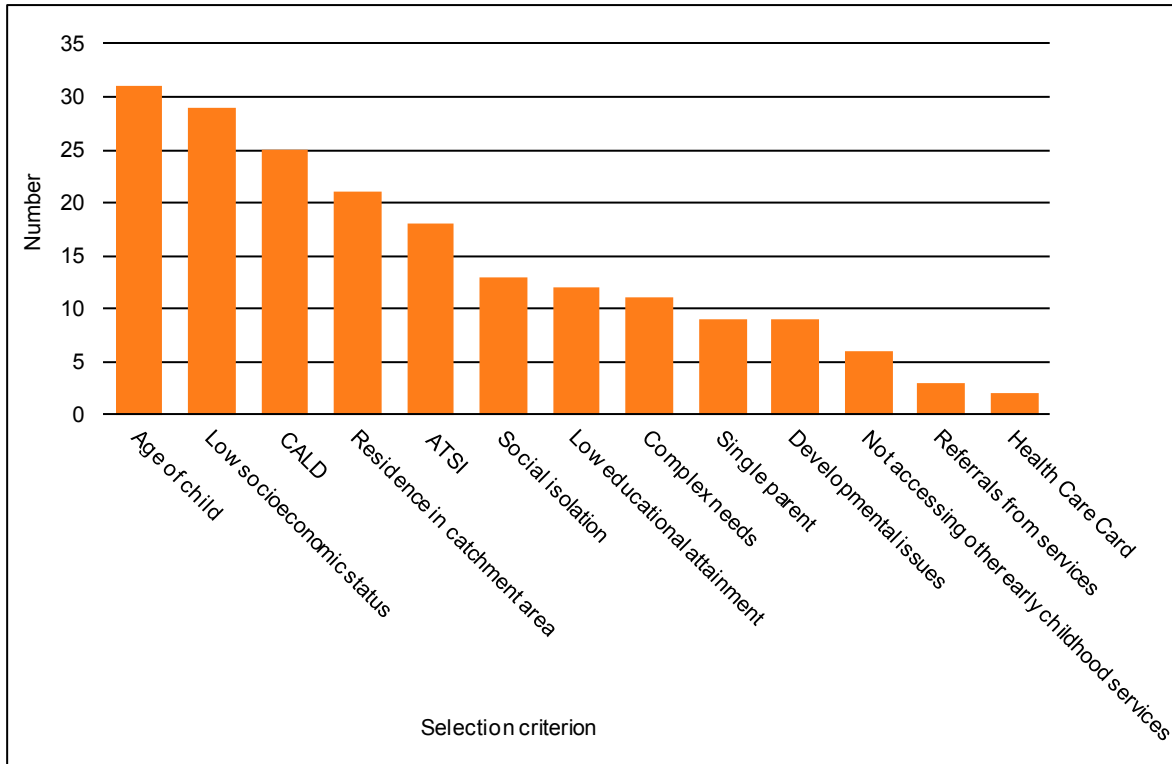
It is also worth noting that most of the additional (non-essential) selection criteria used by coordinators align well with commonly used categories of social exclusion and disadvantage, for example, the categories listed in the Social Exclusion Monitor developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (2014).

In discussing the use of additional selection criteria with HIPPY line managers and coordinators during the site visits, it became quite clear that in terms of recruitment, there was a degree of tension between at least three important factors: (i) recruiting the target number of families prior to commencement, (ii) ensuring the families met the essential eligibility criteria (child aged 4, and residence in the catchment area) and (iii) ensuring the families were disadvantaged. For many coordinators, the last of these factors was subsidiary to the first two, and these coordinators often reported that they saw the HIPPY program as 'universal', or open to all who met the two essential criteria:

> We don't select families; we are open to anyone who wishes to enrol. (Coordinator)

Some coordinators also indicated that they did not focus their recruitment efforts only on disadvantaged families, because they felt pressure to recruit the right number of families, regardless of who the families were, because throughput was seen as the main driver of program funding:

> I haven't had the luxury of being able to select. (Coordinator)

During the eleven site visits, two coordinators reported that in some cases, disadvantaged families were not recruited if it was perceived by local HIPPY agency staff that the family was not ready for HIPPY—often because the family was already engaged with a range of other services, and was dealing with very complex life circumstances, and because the HIPPY service staff did not feel equipped to meet their complex needs or did not want to add to their stress.

> With clients who lack stability (e.g. might have drug or mental health issues), we usually refer them to other, more suitable programs. It is a fine judgment line, and familiarity with the program and our client base helps teach you who to call in or out. (Coordinator)

> We try to enrol families who we think will be successful, as we do not want to set families up to fail. (Line manager)

However, while most coordinators interviewed during the site visits acknowledged that the most vulnerable families were usually the ones who disengaged early, they generally felt unable to refuse access to such families. The justification for enrolment in such cases tended to be that 'six months of HIPPY is better than none'.

## 3.2 What are the most effective methods to reach the intended group?

Findings from the focus groups conducted with HIPPY coordinators in late 2012 showed that a wide range of promotional activities was undertaken by coordinators (and some tutors) at the various HIPPY sites. The strategies reported at the focus groups have been categorised into (i) promotional techniques and (ii) promotional locations or 'spaces' of HIPPY (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1   Promotional activities undertaken by staff at HIPPY sites

| Promotional techniques	Promotional spaces
Distributing HIPPY flyers to letter boxes, services and businesses	Early years services such as pre-schools, play groups and child-care centres
Personal visits to homes, services and businesses	Commercial facilities such as shopping centres, local shopping strips and gyms
Phone calls and emails to families, services and businesses	Local community events such as school fetes, book week, expos, children's week and early childhood events
Coverage in local newspapers, and advertising in local school newsletters	Community health centres, neighbourhood centre's, Indigenous medical services, local GPs, Centrelink
Meetings with local networks and interagency meetings	

As a consequence of the suite of awareness-raising activities undertaken by coordinators and line managers, prospective HIPPY families can enrol spontaneously, but they can also be 'referred' by local agencies. As HIPPY is a voluntary program, the term 'referral' in this context generally means a form of encouragement by local agencies (preschools, playgroups, schools, and health or social welfare services) to prospective HIPPY families to learn more about the HIPPY program, and to see if they would like to participate. Site visit discussions with line managers, coordinators and parents confirmed that many families are 'referred' to HIPPY by other agencies, and in the 2014 national survey (see Figure 3.2), coordinators reported that the most successful community links (in terms of generating enrolments) were playgroups, preschools, welfare services and schools.

Figure 3.2   Coordinator perspective—Community links which generated the most HIPPY enrolments
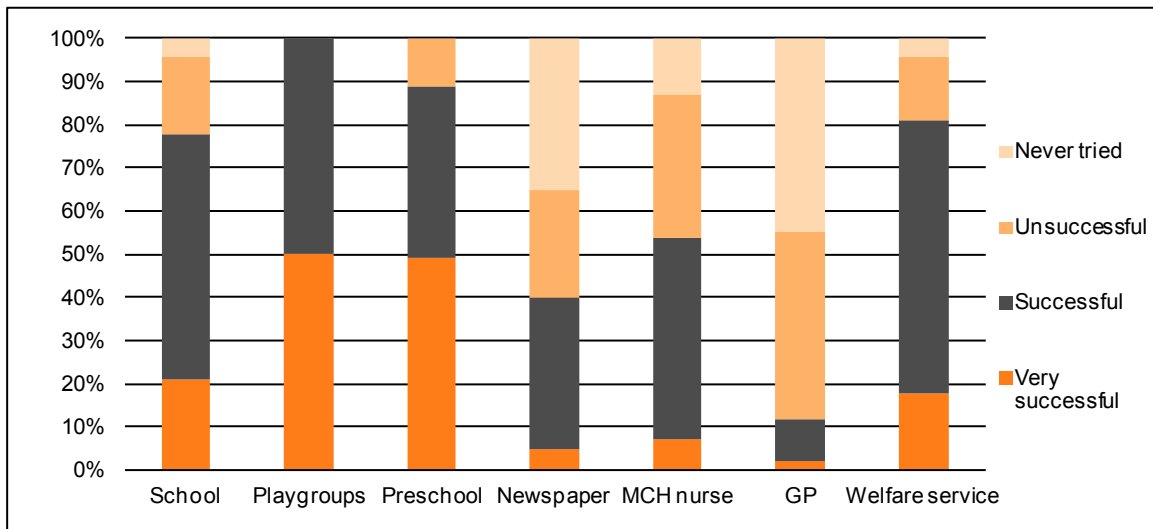
Coordinators were also asked to rate which promotional activities/strategies they found to be most successful in actual recruitment to HIPPY. As shown in Figure 3.3, the three most successful recruitment strategies/activities used, according to the coordinators, were word of mouth, visits to playgroups and distributing brochures at preschools.

Figure 3.3   Coordinator perspective—Successful recruitment activities/strategies
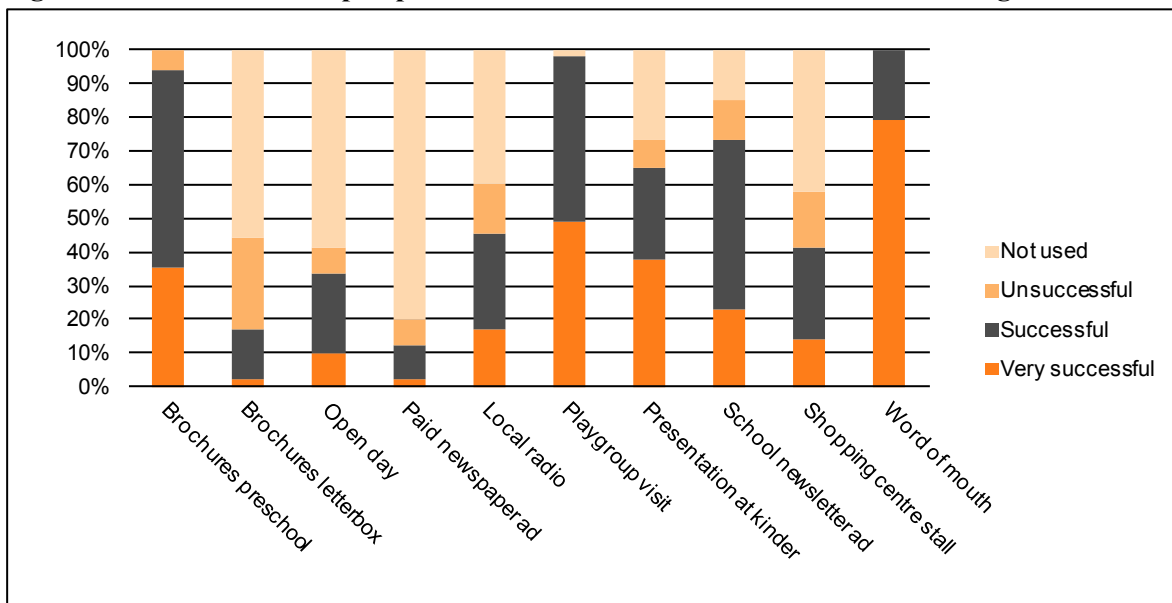
These survey findings were reinforced during the 2013/14 site visits when parents and home tutors were asked how they had first heard about HIPPY. Again, early childhood services, word of mouth, and community events were the most frequent responses provided by parents, coordinators and tutors during the site visit discussions:

> The coordinator and a tutor came to preschool to talk about HIPPY. (Parent)

> Preschool teacher suggested HIPPY for my child. (Tutor)

Word of mouth has long been understood to play an important role in promoting the adoption of a activities or behaviours, or program engagement (Rashotte 2006); and Stanley and Kovacs (2003) report that in 'at-risk' communities, word of mouth is the dominant form of communication in creating knowledge about locally valued programs. Similarly, during the site visits discussions, numerous parents and tutors reported that they first heard about HIPPY in conversation with friends and family, who had promoted its benefits and encouraged them to enrol:

> I heard about it at playgroup from other parents who were doing HIPPY. (Parent)

The combination of word of mouth and presence at community events and in locations such as shopping centres was identified by HIPPY staff and parents during the site visits and focus groups as a 'powerful combination' in promoting HIPPY participation. A number of parents reported that they first heard about HIPPY when they met the program coordinator at a school fete, community picnic or shopping centre stall:

> At the 'Kids' day in the park', all the local early childhood services and programs were there and I met the HIPPY coordinator. She gave me information about HIPPY. (Parent)

> The coordinator and a tutor had a stand at the local shopping centre. (Parent)

These findings also confirm the critical role played by coordinators in establishing and maintaining strong community networks that can lead to invitations to speak at playgroups, preschools and primary schools and in turn generate HIPPY recommendations ('referrals') to 'intended families'. The importance of raising local awareness of the HIPPY program with relevant feeder agencies is also highlighted in the literature (e.g. about Social Cognitive Theory [Bandura 1986]; about Social Influence Theory [Rashotte 2006]) which reports that people respond more favourably when programs are recommended by perceived experts or when other role models are doing the same thing.

3.3 What are the challenges of recruiting families to HIPPY?

Participant feedback from the 2014 national coordinator survey and the 2013/14 HIPPY site visits identified challenges at the individual, program and provider level in reaching and recruiting families who would most benefit from HIPPY. These are discussed below.

Individual factors impacting recruitment

HIPPY focuses on families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Although many of these families experience multiple and complex needs, they may be less likely to seek help, either because their family circumstances don't adapt easily to formal service offerings, or because they feel marginalised, or distrust service providers due to previous negative experiences (Doherty, Scott & Kinder 2004).

When HIPPY coordinators were asked in the 2014 national survey to describe the challenges they encountered when recruiting families, the individual factors most commonly reported were family characteristics and circumstances, family experiences and perceptions, and language barriers.

About one-third of coordinators highlighted personal/family circumstances such as transient or insecure housing, full-time work or family commitments as important individual barriers to recruitment. HIPPY tutors and parents also listed family difficulties, having a newborn, poor health, experiencing a transient life, lack of social confidence, and feelings of hopelessness as barriers to recruitment. These HIPPY specific barriers are also cited as frequent barriers to participation in other early intervention programs targeted at 'hard to reach' families (Gomby,

Culross & Behrman 1999; Roggman et al. 2002; Avis et al. 2007; Koshinsky & Clipsal 2006, cited in Barrett 2008).

Family perceptions and beliefs were also reported in the 2014 survey as a barrier to recruitment. Coordinators suggested that some parents may resist joining early childhood programs because of their own negative experiences of school, because they do not perceive teaching their children to be part of their role or responsibility as parents, because they feel that their language or literacy skills are not adequate to enable them to teach their children about reading, or because they may sense that some type of stigma is associated with participation in such programs:

> They may have had unhappy school experiences themselves; or just not wish to be involved in their child's learning, assuming that the school or preschool will do the teaching. (Coordinator)

Conversely, some coordinators and tutors also reported that some prospective parents are very confident and keen to teach their child themselves; or believe that their child would not benefit from the HIPPY program.

Program factors impacting recruitment

HIPPY staff and participants identified several program factors which impact adversely on recruitment of the intended groups. The most common program factor barriers identified were aspects of the HIPPY contracts, and the structure of the HIPPY program itself.

HIPPY contracts

Several participants highlighted the restriction of the catchment area as impacting significantly on parent recruitment at their site. Comments included:

> The catchment area is too confined and the population is transient—there are only 72 children under 5 in the area. (Coordinator)

> Every couple of years we run out of 4-year-old children and have to reach out to families in surrounding suburbs. (Coordinator)

> [The] HIPPY catchment area is too small—so because of that, some parents who are interested in joining the program could not access it. (Tutor)

> I have a friend who was really interested in and suited for HIPPY, but could not join because she was living out of the catchment area. (Parent)

Some line managers and coordinators, particularly those employed by smaller agencies in rural areas, noted that the delay in funding notification from DOE (in 2012/13) also acted as a barrier to recruitment. These HIPPY managers and coordinators reported that the delay in funding reduced the time they had to recruit families, and also impacted adversely on the program's reputation in the community, especially among other service providers. HIPPY sites advise that funding approval by early November enables them to keep staff, and organise and implement their recruitment plans in a timely fashion.

> Late notice of funding confirmation was stressful. HIPPY Australia kept saying that we would be getting the funding back but there was nothing in writing. It made the recruitment process a real rush. (Coordinator)

Discontinuity in HIPPY funding for a number of sites during this period resulted in disruption of the program in local communities where coordinators had worked hard to establish HIPPY.

> The program stopped and then started again. This makes it hard for parents to trust it. (Parent)

> Due to funding [restrictions] we completed one two-year cycle and then we [didn't] commence recruiting again [for two years] and it was like starting over from the beginning. (Coordinator)

> The fact the site lost funding … in the past had a knock-on effect in recruiting families and for referrals from other agencies. (Coordinator)

Program structure

HIPPY is structured as a two-year program starting around age 4, which teaches or mentors parents to be their child's first teacher. The tutoring of parents is undertaken by a HIPPY tutor (usually a parent or carer who has already completed the HIPPY program), and is delivered through a combination of home visits and parent group meetings. Although the HIPPY program structure has been successfully adopted in numerous countries over several decades, some aspects of its design, including its two-year length and parent group meetings, were identified by some coordinators in the 2014 national survey as a potential barrier to parent recruitment:

> The length of the program puts a lot of families off joining. (Coordinator)

> Indigenous community coordinators think that the program is 'not for our fellas'. It is too long and they are too mobile. (Coordinator)

The use of home visits was also mentioned by some parents and tutors as a barrier to recruitment, with some parents and tutors suggesting that families can be reluctant to enrol in the program because they perceive home visits as 'too invasive', or stigmatising.

> Home visits can be challenging and can feel uncomfortable—with 'strangers' visiting. (Tutor)

> Some parents are worried about tutors visiting their home because of suggestions of involvement with child protection. (Tutor)

In addition to emphasising the need to explain the rationale behind a home delivery approach when describing the program to parents, some line managers and coordinators suggested that HIPPY Australia could offer HIPPY sites even greater flexibility in working with parents to develop the most appropriate delivery options.

Provider factors impacting recruitment

There are several provider factors which can act to either assist or hinder to recruitment, including (i) the mechanisms the local HIPPY provider uses to conduct its parent recruitment and marketing, (ii) the quality of local tutors and local tutor training, (iii) the success of parent group meetings and associated 'word of mouth' stories around these meetings and (iv) the scope and quality of local networks with potential referral agencies (see 3.2 What are the most effective methods to reach the intended group?).

Promotion strategies: networking, promotional materials and good tutors

Although the importance of partnerships with other local service providers and agencies professionals in successful program promotion is widely reported (Cortiz, Katz & Patulny 2009; DEECD 2011), findings from the 2014 coordinator survey and HIPPY site visits indicate that some sites still struggle to build strong, functional networks with other child service providers:

> Early childhood educators don't know much about HIPPY. They need to be educated about the program. (Tutor)

> Some coordinators struggle to build relationships and develop networks with key local agencies, schools and early childhood services. (Coordinator)

> Recruiting families can be very difficult in some communities where the program doesn't have support from preschools and schools. (Coordinator)

Parents and tutors also indicated that HIPPY should be promoted more widely, and that many local families simply did not know enough about the program. During the site visits, participants consistently highlighted the importance of quality promotional materials for engaging both families and service providers. In particular, they noted the need for simple key messages, emphasising that the message on the HIPPY flyers was not (always) clear, and that by themselves, the flyers were not effective in attracting families to the program:

> Some of the HIPPY flyers are not so great—without face-to-face explanation. (Tutor)

> It is sometime difficult to explain to parents the benefits of the HIPPY program. (Tutor)

> There is a need to be clear with families what the HIPPY aims are. HIPPY Australia need to develop a catch phrase that will help parents understand what HIPPY is and its aims in a nutshell. The message should emphasise the program goals and outcomes for both parents and children rather than school readiness alone. (Consultant)

Tutors can be crucial to the recruitment process simply because they generally have good connections with local families. HIPPY tutors are parents of young children, live in the local community or catchment area and usually have quality relationships with other service providers. While these networks enable tutors to promote and endorse the HIPPY program, the feedback from HIPPY staff was that the tutors would benefit from additional training in how to describe the purpose and benefits of HIPPY, and better promotional materials to support them.

Some coordinators also suggested that a small amount of additional funding would allow agencies to recruit and employ tutors well before the beginning of the Age 4 course, and thereby enable longer and better training. Coordinators also noted that while they endeavour to employ tutors who represent a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, in communities that highly culturally diverse some groups may miss out because there is funding for only a limited number of tutors.

> Finding an Aboriginal tutor or suitable tutors to accommodate language needs is not easy. (Coordinator)

3.4 What would improve recruitment of families to HIPPY?

Feedback from HIPPY parents and staff about their top three recommendations for improving recruitment of families to HIPPY consistently generated suggestions related to program and provider factors. As shown in Figure 3.4 , the most consistent suggestions from HIPPY agencies were (i) improved or expanded involvement by HIPPY Australia in local program promotion, (ii) increased flexibility around the program model or structure, (iii) extra funding for coordinator and tutor positions and (iv) expanding the HIPPY catchment areas.

Figure 3.4   Coordinators' wishes—Recruitment magic wand question: program factors
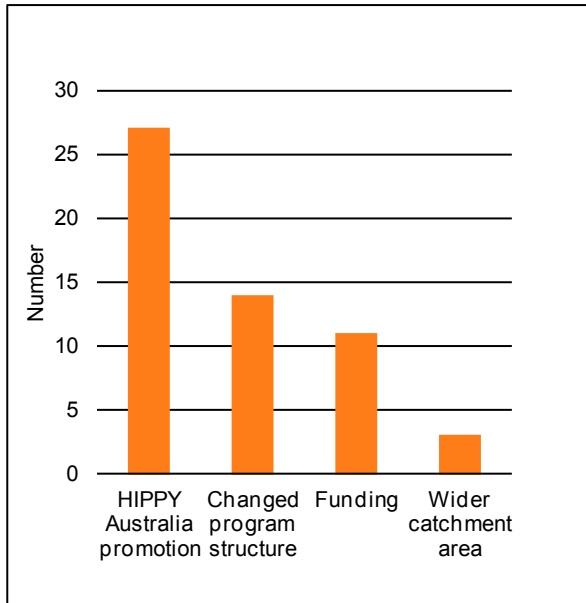
HIPPY Australia involvement in promotion at the local level

Coordinators recommended that HIPPY Australia become more directly involved in promoting HIPPY at the local level. Suggestions included HIPPY Australia communicating the benefits of the program directly to local early childhood programs, state and territory education departments, welfare organisations and community leaders. Coordinators indicated that direct support from HIPPY Australia would help them to build stronger relationships with local services providers, resulting in more referrals of families and broader community endorsement of the program.

> A publicised endorsement of the program by the federal government. (Coordinator)

> Direct support from HIPPY Australia to engage local agencies, e.g. community health ... access to the school communities. This message needs to come from a position of more authority than mine. (Coordinator)

Coordinators and some line managers also suggested that HIPPY Australia could develop national promotional materials, including YouTube type promotional videos on the HIPPY Australia website; new flyers and posters; more HIPPY t-shirts for staff; HIPPY balloons and stickers for parents; site-specific promotional materials; and in particular, improved 'catch phrases'—clear, simple messages that help to better describe HIPPY to service providers and families.

Program structure

Despite HIPPY being a two-year licensed program, coordinators recommended changes to the program structure to improve recruitment of families. Suggestions included (i) adapting the length of the program to client need and speed; (ii) simplifying enrolment forms; (iii) a flexible recruitment time frame, e.g. allowing late starts; (iv) more flexible delivery options; and (v) expanded catchment areas.

Early notification of annual funding was considered important to help ensure local program stability and local reputation. Line managers and coordinators also indicated that building relationships with families during the recruitment process and maintaining relationships with early childhood services and other organisations takes time and therefore requires funds:

> [We need]..sufficient funding to allow the coordinator ample time for recruitment of families, including building relationships with schools, preschools, early childhood centres, door knocking. (Coordinator)

Some coordinators also expressed the need for extra funding to cover interpreter and travel costs. With some families in regional and remote areas living considerable distances from the HIPPY site, some coordinators felt that providing transport for parents (to and from group meetings) could overcome an access barrier, and motivate more parents to engage and stay involved in HIPPY.

Improving connections and networks

Feedback from HIPPY coordinators and line managers suggested that HIPPY networks could be improved by (i) building/maintaining quality relationships with local schools, preschools and health and welfare staff, (ii) having HIPPY tutors and coordinators attend community events, and make regular contact with community groups and services to talk about HIPPY, (iii) building relationships with CALD and Indigenous Australian community leaders to ensure these groups felt welcome to participate and (iv) maintaining stronger contact with families from the first point of contact until they start the HIPPY program.

3.5 Summary: factors that support recruitment

HIPPY administrative data indicates that HIPPY sites use the core eligibility criteria, and do generally recruit disadvantaged families. However, there are competing priorities between HIPPY agencies responsibilities to (i) recruit the right number of families, (ii) ensure families satisfy the core eligibility criteria and (iii) ensure the cohort represents the broader community profile around disadvantage. Approximately one-quarter of HIPPY sites use additional criteria to assist them in identifying more 'disadvantaged' families; however, these criteria have not been universally agreed.

Other challenges associated with recruiting families to HIPPY include:

- **individual factors** such as competing family commitments and complex circumstances, parents' past negative experiences of school, parents' perception that teaching their child is not their role or responsibility, possible stigma associated with participating in such programs, and language and literacy difficulties

- **program factors** such as restrictive catchment areas, uncertain funding cycles, inadequate lead-in time and resources for recruitment, the length and intensity of HIPPY, and lack of clear eligibility criteria

- **provider factors** such as weak links with local community agencies and services, and difficulties in hiring and retaining suitable tutors.

Coordinators believe the most effective methods of recruiting families are through networking with early childhood services, word of mouth, and presence at community events. Participants have indicated that potential areas for improving recruitment include:

- HIPPY Australia becoming more involved in the promotion of HIPPY locally; considering changes to the program length and intensity to make it more attractive for intended families; predictable and extra funding; and expanding the catchment areas.

- HIPPY sites focusing on improving their networks within the community, particularly among early childhood services, welfare and health services, and community leaders; improving tutor recruitment; and provision of supported transport for families.

4 Findings: improving HIPPY retention rates

While the first research question examined barriers and opportunities to expand the reach of HIPPY to eligible families, the second research question explored how agencies can avoid unnecessary disengagement and early 'exits'; and how families can be assisted to stay engaged in a two-year program, despite experiencing periodic or ongoing problems and pressures.

High exit rates for programs aimed at 'hard to reach' populations are quite common (Gomby, Culross & Behrman 1999; Sanders, Turner & Markie-Dadds 2003). It is therefore encouraging that HIPPY Australia administrative data shows that the HIPPY attrition rate peaked at 50% in 2010, and has since fallen to 40% in 2011 and 28.1% in 2013 (see Figure 4.1). This quite dramatic fall could be explained by several factors, including increased awareness within the HIPPY communities of the program and its benefits, the adoption of more flexible delivery approaches as each site improves its understanding of local families' needs, and/or improved HIPPY coordinator and tutor recruitment and training.

Notwithstanding all these positive changes over time, our findings suggest that there may still be some room for further improvement.

Figure 4.1   HIPPY attrition rate, 2009–2013 cohorts
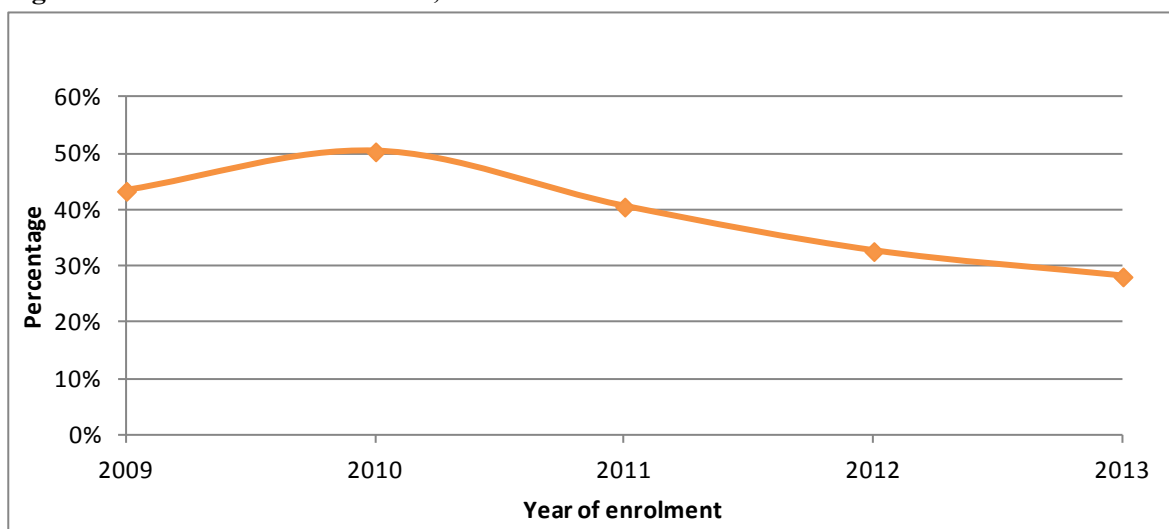
4.1 What are the challenges of retaining families in HIPPY?

Participants in both the 2014 national coordinator survey and the 2013/2014 site visits were asked to consider the challenges faced by the HIPPY program in retaining families. The majority of participants identified HIPPY materials, delivery method and staffing as both strengths and challenges, noting that aspects of the program that worked well for some families could also contribute to other families leaving the program early.

Individual level factors impacting on the retention of HIPPY families

Family circumstances
HIPPY parents indicated that time constraints for working families and difficulties in juggling weekly time commitments were the most common factors operating at the level of the individual that impacted and challenged ongoing HIPPY engagement and commitment. Parents are generally

required to spend an hour a week either role playing HIPPY activities with their home tutor, or attending a parent group meeting, for a period of around two years. Additionally, they are encouraged to spend fifteen minutes each day doing HIPPY activities with their child. Parents who were 'time poor' found these levels of participation and commitment very challenging.

Approximately one-third (17) of the 50 HIPPY coordinators indicated that they had a problem retaining families at their site, and identified that the most common reasons for disengagement or early exits as: changes in family circumstances such as relocation out of the catchment; unstable housing, family breakdown; welfare issues; and Centrelink requirements that parents actively seek work, leaving many parents with limited time to participate in HIPPY. Coordinators also reported that some families exited the program once their child was aged 5, had started school and found that managing school and HIPPY was 'too much'. Comments by coordinators which reflect these reasons for early exits include:

> Starting school and changes in family situation such as going back to work or having another baby. (Coordinator)

> Relocation, 'chaotic' lives not necessarily accustomed to long-term programs (Coordinator)

> Return to work requirements. Busyness of Centrelink-dependent families. Limited transport and many appointments, sometimes they are sole carer ... (Coordinator)

> Parents who may have challenges around fitting HIPPY activities into complex lives, and then feel 'bad' about not finishing all the activities—despite staff reassurance (Coordinator)

Program factors impacting on the retention of HIPPY families

Consistent with feedback from families and tutors obtained during the site visits, HIPPY coordinators identified program length, home visits, role play and group meetings as the program design factors which contributed most to the attrition rate (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2   Coordinator perspective—Program and provider factors contributing to program attrition
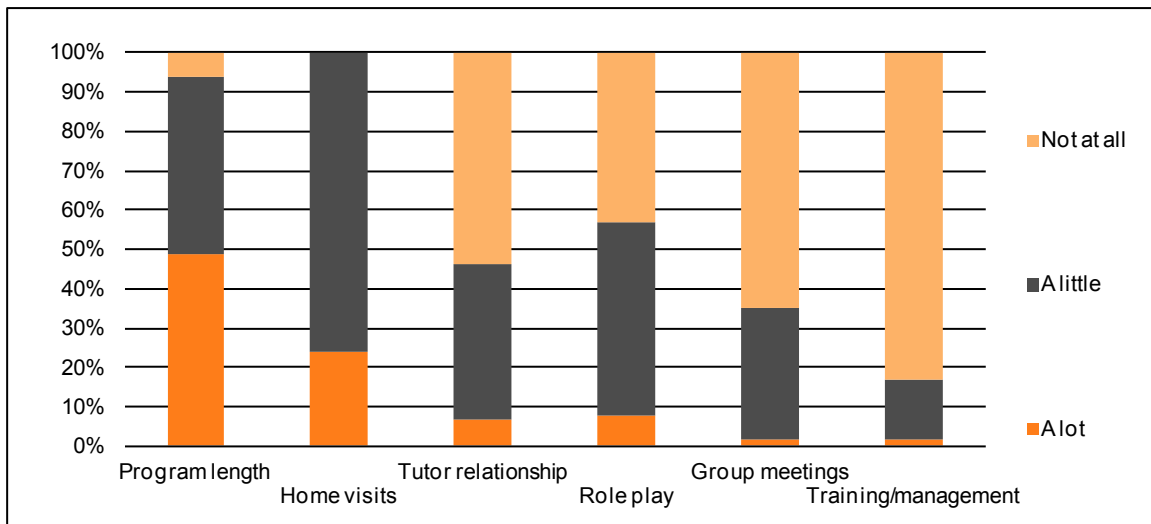
Length and intensity of the program

HIPPY is a free, voluntary and internationally licensed program which asks families to make a two-year commitment to build relationships with HIPPY tutors, develop a love of learning and prepare children for schooling. The purpose of the two-year commitment is to consolidate parents' capacity

to be their child's first teacher, and to enhance the educational interactions between parents and their children:

> It takes time before a substantial, lifelong change takes place. But with continuity comes habit. Age 4 sets the foundation and routine. Age 5 is about practising it. It is the long-term intensive nature of this home delivery program that sets it apart. (HIPPY consultant)

Based on their interview feedback, HIPPY consultants generally held the view that although the length of the HIPPY program was a virtue, the delivery methods could contribute to the view of some families that the program is too long:

> I have a sense that it is what we do and how we engage with families that impacts on the feeling that it is too long.

> It is not possible for families to do Age 4 quicker, and Age 5 is spread over fortnights so that children aren't overloaded with learning when they start school

> When we see families really take on board the idea of generalisation, every day becomes an opportunity to practice their parenting and teaching skills.

Despite the reasoning behind the two-year commitment, some parents and tutors identified that the length of the program and the commitment involved were factors that led to early exits, and many parents who participated in the focus groups reported that it was difficult to commit to the second year of HIPPY because this is when their child starts school.

> Age 5 is more difficult because of the commitment to school. (Parent)

> The first half of the second year (aged 5) is difficult because the child is settling into school- would rather start in Feb for second year. (Parent)

This feedback from parents is also consistent with findings from Dean (2007), whose review of nine years of HIPPY research in Victoria concluded that managing schoolwork and HIPPY activities simultaneously was often a challenge to a child's stamina.

Role play and home visits

Although role play provides parents with the opportunity to practise teaching the HIPPY pack activities, it was also identified as another program design factor that can encourage early exits from HIPPY. While some parents liked the role play approach, other parents described it as patronising and as not suited to everybody's learning style:

> Role play can be a bit condescending and not needed sometimes. It is not fair to use role play when it doesn't fit every parent's learning style.

Some parents and home tutors suggested the possibility that parents who have several children might find it difficult to find the time required for weekly home visits. We were unable to confirm this suggestion with data from other sources.

Group meetings

Dean (2007) reported that group meetings were identified as the single most challenging issue for HIPPY in Australia—a finding that was broadly confirmed in this research. Our interviews and focus groups with parents, tutors and coordinators identified multiple factors which regularly impacted on attendance at group meetings, and which could impact on retention. These included sick children, unexpected commitments, time constraints, shyness and lack of social skills,

inflexible scheduling, relevance of the agenda or topics presented by guest speakers, lack of connection and cohesion between different cultural groups, lack of transport to and from the meetings, overcrowded facilities and inadequate child care during meetings.

While these quite clear findings suggest that different formats and/or less frequent parent group meetings would be appropriate, a HIPPY consultant indicated that from a program structure perspective, less frequent group meetings could actually increase program delivery costs:

> Reducing the number of group meetings will mean providing an extra home visit to every parent—which will create extra cost. (Consultant)

Program content quality

Parents in our focus groups affirmed the importance of their child's response to the HIPPY learning materials. They generally reported that the materials were engaging for their child; however, some parents reported feeling that the first year of the program was too intensive, too long, too wordy and at times too repetitive. This in turn impacted child engagement, and in the view of some parents, ultimately contributed to some early exits.

> The Age 4 program is very intense. Thirty weeks is too much. (Parent)

> Age 4 HIPPY packs involve a lot of text and there are no separate parents' and kids' packs. (Tutor)

> The first year is a bit repetitive. Spend three weeks doing the same thing, and it becomes boring. (Parent)

For some parents, the instructions and prompts included in the activity scripts were also too long, and could be difficult to understand and use:

> The way the packs are written for us to say to our child is not the way I would speak to my child—my child didn't get it—[I] don't want to follow the script. (Parent)

Lack of a clear and transparent process for recording why parents leave HIPPY

Although HIPPY coordinators are sometimes able to pinpoint factors that lead to early HIPPY exits, documenting these reasons in the HIPPY database or other report formats is described by coordinators and line managers as problematic. HIPPY consultants noted that the structure and process for using the 2013/14 exit form did not fully support an open and honest discussion of the real reasons for exit, and numerous coordinators suggested that many parents would feel comfortable in disclosing performance problems or parent dissatisfaction with the HIPPY product.

Provider factors – challenges in retaining families

Training and supervision

Gomby (2005) reports that a high level of training is critical for staff who work with families facing multiple needs or who work in programs with multiple goals. Although coordinators generally expressed the view that staff training was the factor contributing least to attrition, several tutors reported that a lack of training and supervision impacted on their performance and on their ability to engage and retain families.

Although staff training was universally described by tutors, coordinators and consultants as a critical success factor in ensuring successful program delivery and parent retention, tutors' feedback indicated that there was significant variation across HIPPY sites in terms of both the

quality and quantity of training and support they were offered. While some tutors reported receiving only the basic two days initial training plus weekly or fortnightly training on the activity packs, others had been offered extra training in areas including parenting training, management and organisation training, nutrition and lifestyle, community services, mental health literacy, domestic violence, and how to run a playgroup.

The lack of regular training and supervision could impact on home tutors' ability to advocate for the program. Several home tutors noted their difficulty in explaining to families the aims of the program and its methods (especially role play) and why the program needs two years to complete. This could be attributed to deficiencies in the tutor training, the varying levels of experience of tutors or their confidence and understanding about the program.

A lack of refresher training for coordinators was a concern which impacted on both coordinators and tutors. Given the differences in the backgrounds and expertise of HIPPY coordinators, some coordinators and consultants stressed the importance of ongoing training on the HIPPY model and goals. Consultants felt that the differences in coordinators' professional background could influence:

- their understanding of the HIPPY aims

- what they perceived they could and could not do in terms of program flexibility

- the focus of HIPPY at their site

Our findings also suggest inconsistent levels of supervision by coordinators for home tutors. According to Gomby, Culross & Behrman (1999), regardless of staff skills, close supervision is needed not only to help home visitors deal with emotional stress and maintain objectivity but also to prevent drift from program protocols and enable reflection and professional growth. While at some sites tutors received regular, frequent and formal one-on-one supervision from their coordinator, at other sites tutors reported irregular supervision meetings and postponements.

Tutor turnover

Parents were asked during the focus groups if they had the same tutor working with them since enrolment. While most responded they had only the one tutor, some parents expressed frustration and disappointment that their allocated tutor changed:

> Having a change of tutor brings a lot of frustration, miscommunication—and it breaks attachment and motivation.

One parent in our focus groups described having multiple tutors:

> I had four different tutors. It leads to miscommunication and because of that I wanted to stop the program [because I was] getting frustrated.

Complaint procedures

A small number of parents also indicated the possibility of a mismatch between the tutor and family, and noted that in such circumstances, user friendly communication or complaint procedures for parents were vital. A view was expressed by some parents that the absence of a quality complaint process in such cases could actually lead to exits, rather than a request for change:

> If there is a problem with a tutor, it is difficult to voice your concern. (Parent)

4.2 Are the families who exit HIPPY the most vulnerable?

Around one-third of coordinators reported that the families who exited HIPPY were, in their view, among the 'most vulnerable' in their community. Among coordinators who reported that their site was experiencing a problem in retaining vulnerable families, the most common reasons for disengagement were described as:

> Domestic violence drug and alcohol problems, family break-up and leaving town.

> The families who have exited have all been experiencing multiple challenging circumstances and have moved out of the area to receive additional support from family or services.

Interviews with HIPPY coordinators identified two broad views around the problem of retaining vulnerable families: (i) that highly vulnerable families will gain the most benefit from participation and completion of the HIPPY program, so efforts should be made to retain them; and (ii) that all families will benefit and there is little that can be done about those who drop out.

> The dilemma is that we want to engage with families who will gain the most benefit, but they are often also more likely to be vulnerable to factors that may cause them to exit.

> Every family is vulnerable. Every family needs the HIPPY program. Families are unique and circumstances are sometimes beyond families control and contribute to families having to withdraw from this amazing program.

Some coordinators held the view that with the right amount of support these families would be able to maintain their involvement in HIPPY:

> Some of our families have drug and alcohol issues, housing crises. Some are single mothers with a number of children. But the most important thing to focus on is what and how we can do better for their kids.

> Some of the families have many challenges and still [get by and] end up graduating from HIPPY. Some very vulnerable families remain engaged due to the flexibility of staff.

When line managers and coordinators were asked how they retained vulnerable families, they described three main strategies:

- regular meetings with, and active support for HIPPY coordinators and tutors so that program and family issues were identified and discussed

- placing families in a holding pattern ('on hold')

- linking or referring 'at risk' families to other services for additional support.

4.3 What features of HIPPY support the retention of families?

Coordinators were asked in the 2014 survey to rate aspects of HIPPY that contributed to family retention. Figure 4.3 shows that among the factors selected most frequently by coordinators as contributing to family retention in HIPPY were individual factors, such as child engagement with HIPPY and parent confidence as a teacher; provider factors such as parent relationship with home tutors; and program factors such as quality of the HIPPY packs.

Figure 4.3   Coordinator perspective—Factors contributing to retention
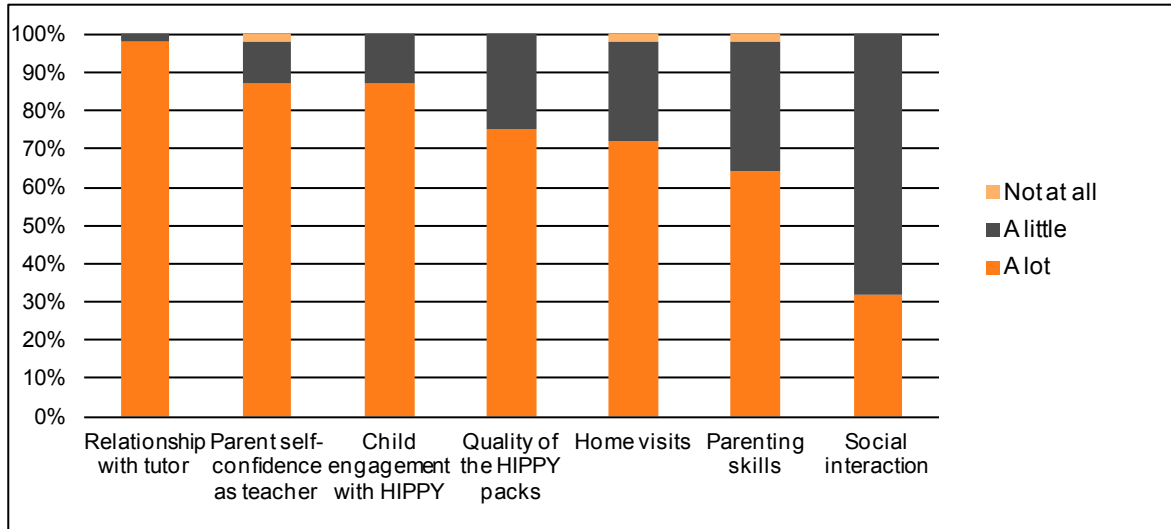
Individual factors contributing to family retention

Parent confidence as a teacher

Parents reported that the skills both they and their child acquire are very important in developing the confidence and encouragement they need to continue with the program. For example, HIPPY encourages parents to use a teaching strategy called the 3 Cs:

- **confirm:** when the child responds and the answer is correct, the parent repeats the answer

- **complete:** when the child gives part of an answer, the parent repeats the child's answer and then completes the response with the missing detail

- **correct:** if the child does not respond or does not know the answer or gives an answer that does not fit the question, the parent will say the correct answer.

Parents and tutors reported that using the 3 Cs enabled parents to be more constructive and positive in the way they respond to their child's efforts, helps to create a safe place for children to make mistakes and thereby encourages their child to try new things:

> The 3Cs are very helpful in helping our relationship. It is a good strategy to get our child engaged. (Parent)

Parents also reported that they gained skills in parenting, teaching, learning to play and spending one-on-one time with their children:

> It has helped me to teach my child; previously I was doing homework with my child but getting frustrated.

> I can also use the skills and strategies learned from HIPPY with my other children and in other settings.

> The program gives you permission to take time out and spend time with your child one on one.

Program factors contributing to family retention

Most parents (and tutors) reported in the focus groups that they believed that in general HIPPY had made a positive impact on their child's confidence and school readiness, and given them a head start:

> [HIPPY] helps children develop reading confidence. (Parent)

> [HIPPY] teaches children fine motor skills. (Parent)

> Teach child the ability to follow directions and instructions and understand teachers' language. (Tutor)

Specific program factors that parents and tutors felt contributed to retention in HIPPY included the educational quality of HIPPY packs, the alignment of the HIPPY curriculum with early childhood education teaching and learning strategies, the development of parenting skills, the delivery methods (in home role play, and group meetings) and the absence of program costs.

Quality of the HIPPY packs

The majority of parents reported that HIPPY activities were generally fun, hands-on and engaging:

> It makes learning fun, encourages learning so that children want to learn.

> The story books are very attractive and prompt questions in the books keep children engaged.

Parents and home tutors also praised the clear layout and instructions of the packs and the educational value of the HIPPY activities, and they appreciated the fact that most activities were designed as building blocks to the next activities:

> HIPPY exposes children to sounds and letters and concepts such as 'same and different' which are very important.

> One of the strengths is that each activity pack contains information about what the child will be learning and the skills they might develop through the activities.

> The program is challenging for the children but doesn't overwhelm them. It progresses gradually.

HIPPY consultants also advised the research team that the HIPPY curriculum aligns with and supports the five learning goals of the national EYLF (see Appendix B), noting that the HIPPY curriculum aims to improve children's school readiness.

Delivery methods (role play and group meetings)

HIPPY uses role play as the primary teaching and learning method for the parent. During each home visit, the HIPPY tutor uses role play to help parents practise the activities, and the parent later uses the same activity with their child. Some parents indicated that this method was instrumental in helping them to understand the HIPPY activities and in building their confidence:

> Role play with tutors helps you to understand what to expect and do. It gives you confidence and helps you adapt the activities to your child.

Group meetings were described by consultants as an essential feature of HIPPY, and are seen as providing parents with opportunities for group learning, to learn about local community services, and to socialise and build social connections:

> Building relationships between parents doing HIPPY that will go beyond their time in HIPPY. It's an opportunity for sharing experience and tips

Although parents expressed a range of views and degrees of support for group meetings, some felt that group meetings gave them a break and provided a safe play space for their children.

Low program cost

Most respondents reported that the absence of fees for participating in HIPPY was a very important factor in motivating them both to enrol and to remain engaged. Some parents noted that having so many components provided free in each activity pack made it easier to appreciate the value of the program, and to remain involved. One parent pointed out the scarcity of free early childhood programs:

> There are not a lot of programs around for three to four-year-olds that are free.

Provider factors contributing to family retention

Service delivery style, referral pathways and staffing were identified by parents and tutors in the focus groups as provider factors that contributed to family retention.

Service delivery style

Flexibility in delivery was reported by both parents and home tutors as a factor that helped to retain parents in the program. Since most parents involved in HIPPY are described a 'time poor', they place great value on being able to access the program at a time, pace and place that suits them:

> I started a new job, and the home tutor is very flexible. She doesn't put pressure on me.

> You do it when you can, and you can catch up, or go slow. This is important because life gets in the way of lots of things you need to do.

Referral links and social inclusion

Referrals to other services and information about community resources were also reported by parents as contributing to engagement and retention in HIPPY.

> HIPPY helps us get referrals for support with our child if they have special needs.

> HIPPY staff help raise parents' awareness about other services.

Tutor–parent and coordinator–parent relationships

The quality of the tutor–parent relationship was widely reported as critical in reducing parents' isolation, providing a source of support and helping some families stay in the program. In addition to valuing the regular contact with their home tutor, parents also valued the understanding and encouragement they received from both tutors and coordinators, particularly during 'tough times':

> The home tutor provides a lifeline to the parent. (Parent)

> Parents like having someone to talk to for support and social connection. (Home tutor)

> Parents appreciate us reflecting that they are doing a good job as a parent. Many would never be told this. (Home tutor)

Despite facing difficult circumstances and challenging personal issues, several parents reported that support from HIPPY staff helped them to remain in the program:

> I wanted to stop when my child behaved poorly towards the tutor, but the tutor didn't make me feel bad, and they helped me find more support

> I moved out of the catchment area, but the coordinator was very flexible and supportive. They allowed me to continue with the program, by meeting my tutor half way.

> I went on holiday and fell behind in the program. When I came back, the tutor offered to help me catch up. She was ready to spend her entire weekend helping me with the catch up activities.

> The HIPPY coordinator helped set up a weekly planner to support me fit time in for HIPPY. This helped me to catch up and stay in the program.

Tutor and coordinator responsiveness to parents' wider needs were reported as helping families to stay involved the program. These parents appreciated the ability and willingness of HIPPY staff to help them deal with issues not directly related to HIPPY:

> Tutor was very supportive—they helped me with shopping, counselling, and accompanied me to my appointment ... This really helped me to stay in the program.

Tutor quality

Working with families who are experiencing complex needs requires both technical skills and strong interpersonal and communications skills (McDonald, Moore & Goldfeld 2012). This finding has important implications for HIPPY staff selection, training and ongoing support, and ultimately for parent retention. Within this context, parents, tutors, coordinators, and line managers were asked what skills and attributes successful tutor had, or should have. Figure 4.4 highlights that being 'supportive and flexible' and 'being a people person' were the most frequently identified 'personal qualities' a tutor should possess.

Figure 4.4   Personal qualities of tutors rated as important by parents
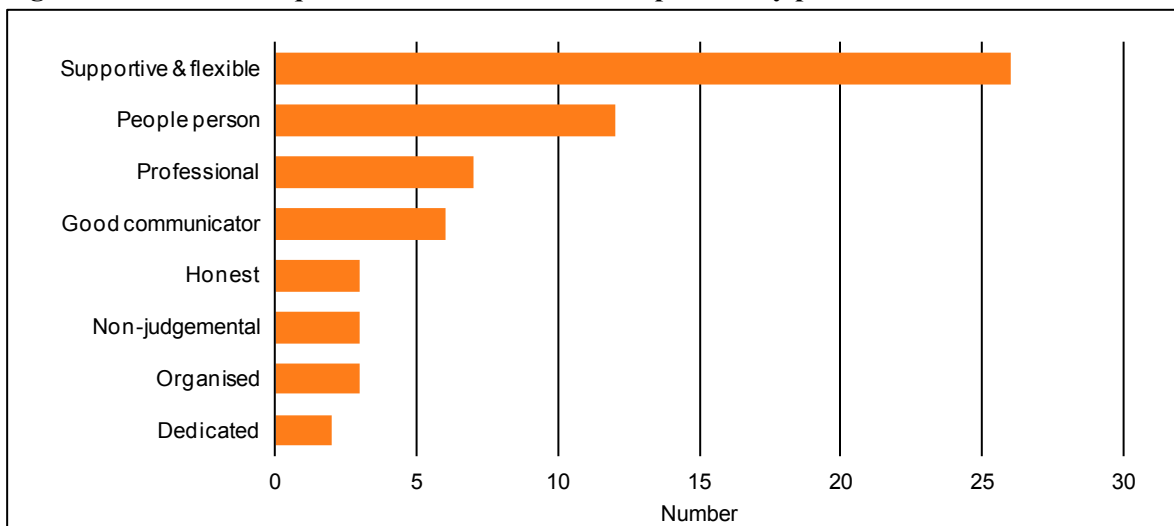
Parents also reported that having completed HIPPY as a parent, and being able to share personal experience of parenting strategies, were important 'life experiences' that tutors should have:

> Have good insight of the program and ability to provide tips on how parents could engage children in doing the activities.

Good at referring on and providing good info about children and their learning.

Has done the program with their child.

They are parent themselves [and therefore] understand family commitments.

Coordinators, home tutors themselves, line managers and consultants confirmed the importance of these qualities for a successful tutor. Several coordinators and line managers also felt that passion and enthusiasm for the program and for 'higher aspirations' were very important factors contributing to home tutor success:

Being passionate about HIPPY and not working for money because it doesn't pay much.

Enthusiasm about wanting to make a difference in their own life and for others.

[Tutors] have to have warmth, empathy, be bubbly—these skills are not easily trainable.

Our most successful tutors have some drive and they want to improve themselves.

There is a hunger to pass on their knowledge to other parents.

HIPPY consultants indicated that empathy, good listening skills and the ability to reflect and report parents' feedback were among the more qualities they valued in tutors:

Non-judgemental—to support families without judging. The other skills can be taught.

Ability to capture what they hear and take back to the coordinator.

4.4 What needs to be done to improve retention of families?

Retaining families in HIPPY is dependent on change and improvements across a number of program and provider factors. Coordinators in the 2014 survey were asked to write down their top three suggestions to improve retention of families in HIPPY. Participants in the 2013/14 site visits also provided recommendations for improvement.

Program factors to improve the retention of families

Figure 4.5 identifies the areas of the HIPPY program structure that HIPPY coordinators felt needed to be changed or improved in order to boost parent retention rates. The most frequently mentioned program factors were 'program length' and 'materials/content design'—which are somewhat interlinked— and 'extra funding' to enable services to be more responsive to families' needs. Changes to these program factors were also raised during focus group discussions in the site visits, along with suggestions for changing the group meetings, and the client feedback processes.

Figure 4.5   Coordinator perspective—Program factors requiring change to improve retention (n = 38)
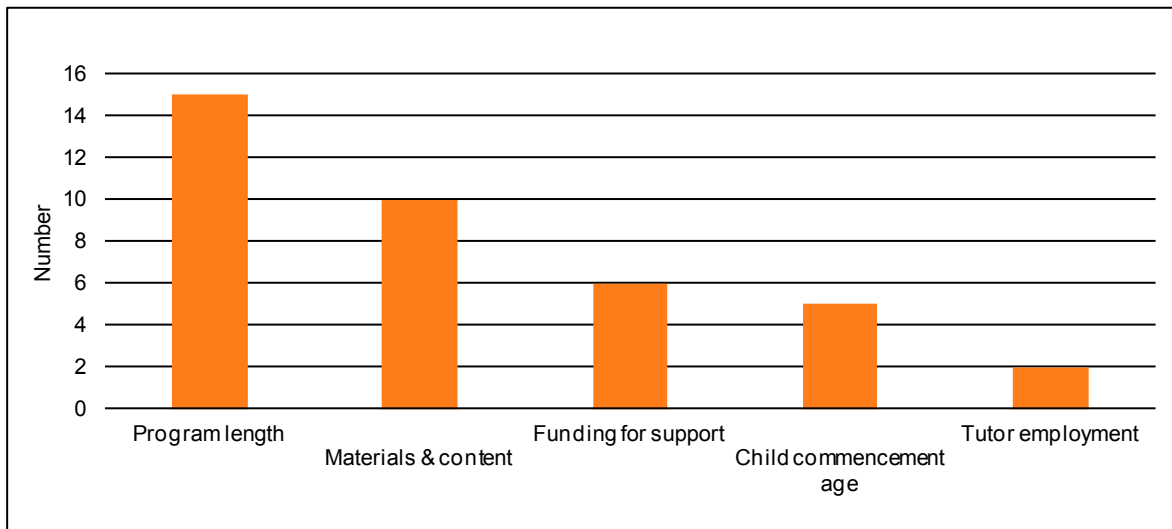
Length and start time of the program

As noted earlier, some parents identified the two-year length of the HIPPY program as a barrier to ongoing retention, with the first year described by some parents as 'too intensive', and the second year described by some as conflicting with the child's first year at school. To overcome the issue of tired and busy children in the second year of HIPPY, some parents and tutors suggested that HIPPY should be timed to conclude earlier in the first year of school. This view was also supported by some consultants:

> I think two years is too long for many families, although the important feature of the second year is supporting parents [and] children during the transition to school. I think a program that ran through to the middle of the second year (e.g. June) would still support families in the transition to school period. (Consultant)

Some parents, home tutors and coordinators suggested that a mid-year finish of the HIPPY program could be achieved either by changing the starting age to 3–3.5 years or by changing the length of the program to 18 months or less:

> Make HIPPY 18 months long or start 6 months earlier so that the second year can be completed in the middle of prep year. (Tutor)

Reducing the length of the program raises questions such as how much exposure to HIPPY is enough to achieve or improve school readiness. Coordinators were asked in the national survey what minimum HIPPY dose might achieve significant effects or benefits for the child. Figure 4.6 shows that 56% of coordinators believed that the minimum HIPPY dose required was 6 to 12 months. A further 30% identified 12 to 24 months as the minimum dose, while 14% indicated that they felt 6 months or less of exposure to HIPPY could still achieve valuable outcomes.

Figure 4.6   Coordinator perspective—What is the minimum HIPPY dose required for there to be a significant benefit for a family?
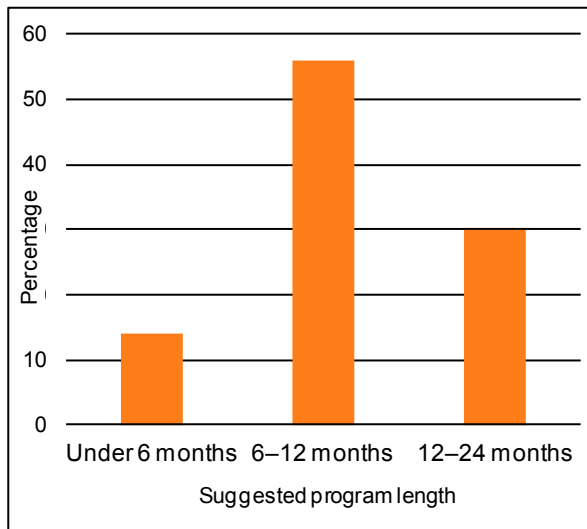
Analysis of responses according to the main cultural backgrounds of HIPPY parents at each site found that coordinators at Aboriginal sites and some other sites generally recommended 6 to 12 months as the minimum HIPPY dose required to achieve significant effects. Coordinators at CALD sites, however, generally indicated that 12 to 24 months was the minimum dose.

Modifying the materials or the number of activities

Some participants suggested that program materials would achieve their intended effects more quickly if the contents were more accessible to parents and children. Parents and tutors indicated that some packs and activities needed to be less wordy and more visual, that story books needed to be shorter and that workbooks needed to be made more accessible to vulnerable families, particularly those struggling with English literacy. In this regard, one coordinator offered an alternative to the current activity packs:

> The invention of three packages: 'a, b, c grade' packages that families can choose from, so that they can start at a beginner level, be happy when they have achieved that and then move voluntarily to the next level, so they feel that they are achieving, rather than falling behind and not completing successfully.

Some participants suggested that the number of activities in each pack in the first year (Age 4) could be reduced in order to make pack completion easier. Some coordinators suggested that fewer packs might be a more effective approach:

> Perhaps fortnightly Age 4 packs, or 20 weeks of Age 4 delivery and 10 weeks of Age 5, possibly 30 weeks in total rather than 45? I don't think reducing the number of activities in the Age 4 packs is viable. There are currently six each week. I think it would be hard to get parents to accept the need for a home visit if there were fewer than six in a pack.

Although there was no consensus around minimum dose, or the optimum number or activities in a pack, or total time spent in HIPPY, there was active consideration of a range of options with the aim of ensuring each child and family remained involved until school readiness had been improved or achieved.

Extra funding

Coordinators indicated that the task of building better relationships with parents was part of their own role, particularly in terms of linking parents to other services. Several coordinators suggested that additional funding would enable them to work longer hours, and thereby provide the local family support necessary to increase retention:

> Provide coordinators more time to link with families and provide support.

> More money to pay coordinators to work full time to have more contact with families.

> The budget is tight; we need additional funds if a tutor leaves so that the coordinator is able to be paid for extra hours worked (while trying to find a replacement tutor).

Some coordinators also suggested that tutors should be funded to make extra visits or provide extra support to help retain vulnerable families:

> We need more money to pay tutors to visit CALD or struggling families, especially during parent group weeks

> Increasing funding would allow tutors with vulnerable families more time to support them.

One line manager raised the challenge of continuing to pay base rates to tutors, noting that low pay can impact on the motivation and retention of tutors, which in turn affects the retention of families, since the relationship between the tutor and families is key to engagement and retention:

> Cater for award increase in tutor salaries. The current Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Award is on a sliding scale. Tutors are paid according to the award and compulsory new salary rates is now more of a challenge as these increases impact on the HIPPY budget.

Ensuring that tutors are happy, motivated and feeling appreciated is important in terms of their ability to maintain quality relationships with families. Some aspects of tutor payments such as reimbursement of travel expenses appear to be at the provider's discretion, and several respondents suggested that home tutors should be paid for the time spent travelling to and from parents' homes, indicating that tutors are not always fully compensated for the costs associated with home visits such as petrol and travel time:

> Travel and costs associated with it—sometimes tutors have to travel huge distances to visit parents, and the cost of fuel is not reimbursed. (Line Manager)

Numerous respondents also recommended more funding for professional development activities for both coordinators and tutors, with a view to improving their skills and knowledge in working with and retaining families with complex needs.

Group meetings

Attendance at group meetings was reported as low at numerous sites; and as a consequence some sites run parent group meetings less frequently. Some tutors and coordinators suggested that these meetings should be scheduled more flexibly according to site and age groups. Suggestions from coordinators included holding group meetings every four to six weeks and giving HIPPY parents more ownership of the meeting agenda:

> Parent groups are challenging not just in Australia but internationally. Although parent groups can and do work, sites should have a go at developing a model for a functional and sustainable parent group meetings (Consultant)

Improving the parent feedback process

Several participants stressed the importance of not only training home tutors to monitor the level of parent engagement, but also providing a 'safe space' for coordinators to discuss with parents and tutors possible reasons for parent drop-out, and how to use this information to improve retention.

Provider factors to improve the retention of families

When asked what local or provider factors contributed to parent retention, coordinators reported that keeping families engaged and interested, flexible delivery, and staff personal qualities and training were very important (see Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7　　　　　　　Coordinator perspective—Provider factors contributing to retaining families

Keeping families engaged and interested

Respondents made the following suggestions that can be used by local providers to help keep HIPPY families engaged in the program:

- Connect with families through regular phone calls, text messages—to see how they are going

- Use online technology to keep families informed (dependent upon access to such technology)

- Provide continuous positive feedback and reinforcement strategies that focus on the strengths and effort that parents put into HIPPY

- Encourage other family members to be involved in the program, especially where parents lack confidence about teaching their child

- Offer incentives such as transport; financial rewards, e.g. gift vouchers, door prizes; food; graduation activities and celebrations of child and family successes

- Be clear about what families want and expect from the HIPPY program. Check regularly to see they are getting this out of the program. One consultant raised the idea of a parent portfolio including formal certificates of attendance and completion that might contribute to their CV and aid their employment prospects.

Flexible program delivery

Most coordinators and tutors commented on the need to take into account the different learning skills of family members, and not to place unrealistic expectations on families:

> Take into account different ways through which people learn. And have some flexibility about the way the program is delivered to parents to better suit their 'learning style'

> Individualised program delivery for the most vulnerable families

Other recommendations related specifically to the activity packs and working hours:

> We need the flexibility to merge packs when parents have been slowed down.

> Flexibility around delivery time and length to account for family routines, including school holidays

> Visits to most vulnerable families, even if not supplying materials.

Some coordinators and line managers also suggested extra support for families who have English as a second language by offering translated material and oral recordings of the activities, and/or by employing bilingual home tutors.

Tutor personal qualities and training

As noted above, most respondents highlighted the critical role of the home tutor in building a high quality relationship with the family, and delivering a high quality in-home program. Coordinators consistently suggested investing in time and training to enhance tutors' competence and confidence, and foster a flexible, friendly, professional, supportive and non-judgemental approach.

> Relationship, relationship and engagement—it all comes down to the strong relationship between tutor and family which is built on trust, respect [....] a sense of humour is important

> [Recruit] a tutor from the same cultural background as your families.

> Provide tutors with adequate HIPPY training and extra training on how to really understand their families, and techniques such as incidental counselling

Some respondents stressed that quality training should enable tutors to unpack the issues that arise in their work, to think and talk about how to deliver the program, as well as to discuss parent engagement in the program. One respondent felt that coordinators should provide tutors with the opportunity to practise HIPPY 'language' (e.g. the 5 essential features and the 10 guiding principles) in order to build their confidence to promote the benefits of HIPPY during home visits, as well as in the broader community.

4.5 Summary: factors that support retention

Challenges associated with retaining families in HIPPY include:

- individual level factors such as family circumstances including time commitment, illness, lack of secure employment and housing

- program level factors such as structure, including length and intensity of the program, home visits, role play and group meetings; materials, including teaching guidelines and quality; and funding. The development of an effective process to discuss and record exit reasons with

parents and tutors will also assist HIPPY program staff to obtain better data about the causes of parent exits.

- provider level factors such as coordinator and tutor training and supervision, tutor turnover and complaint procedure.

Although there may be challenges involved in retaining the more vulnerable families, there is currently no agreed HIPPY definition of 'more vulnerable' families. Of the fifteen sites that identified a problem with retention, only five sites reported that the families who exited were, in their view, among the most vulnerable. Although HIPPY staff acknowledge that vulnerable families who are at risk of exit are dealing with a range of complex life issues, the staff were also generally of the view that vulnerable families can be retained in HIPPY—with the right amount of support and flexibility.

Feedback from HIPPY staff and parents indicated that factors that help to support the retention of families in HIPPY are a mixture of individual factors such as child engagement and parent confidence as a teacher; program factors including quality of HIPPY packs, curriculum alignment with the national EYLF, delivery methods, and program cost; and provider factors such as service delivery style; referral pathway and social inclusion; tutor–parent relationship, and tutor quality. Participants indicated that potential areas for improving retention include:

- actions to be taken by HIPPY Australia: consider changes to the length of the program, improve materials and modify the number of activities, review group meetings, and improve the feedback process

- actions to be taken by the HIPPY sites: keep families connected; be more flexible with program delivery, and provide more training and supervision for tutors and coordinators

- action to be taken by DOE: provide extra funding for targeted improvements.

Although improvements in retention will come from changes to the mix of these factors, developing the 'right mix' will require the coordination of HIPPY program management, local providers and local families.

5 Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to improve the recruitment and retention of families.

Recruitment

Improvement options include:

- Clarify and communicate to all HIPPY providers, including line managers, coordinators and home tutors, that the core family eligibility criteria are having a child aged 4, and living in the catchment area.

- Provide formal advice to HIPPY providers about opportunities and mechanisms to identify and recruit a range of families, with a focus on parents from lower socioeconomic and highly disadvantaged backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, diverse ethnic backgrounds and hard to reach families, depending on the HIPPY catchment area.

- Develop a good practice guide for the recruitment and retention of families in HIPPY, and provide good practice training to HIPPY coordinators and home tutors, including developing local networks, improving parent group meetings, success factors and strategies for retaining families, improved collection of parent information about their needs, and program expectations.

- Support HIPPY providers to develop and document their processes for encouraging referrals of appropriate families by local health, welfare, schools, early learning centres, playgroups, family services and government agencies in the catchment area.

- In consultation with HIPPY providers, develop new national HIPPY communication and marketing strategies including simplified messages and revised promotional resources to assist in the recruitment (and retention) of families. The materials and resources should highlight the nature, benefits, aims, length and flexibility of the HIPPY program.

- Consult with HIPPY providers about site catchment issues and opportunities to recruit intended target families. Where appropriate, seek DOE approval for changes to site boundaries.

- Where possible, work with the funding agency (Department of Education) to ensure clarity of ongoing funding and timely funding for HIPPY providers.

Retention

Improvement options include:

- Ensure the 5 essential features of HIPPY are understood and delivered at each site. To improve retention rates, investigate a more flexible approach to providing the two years, including starting HIPPY earlier (age 3–4 years) and associated changes to Age 5 activities.

- Improve home tutor access to quality training by reviewing existing training programs and resources, and facilitating access to accredited training.

- Review the Age 4 and Age 5 activities and resources to ensure continuing family relevance and appropriateness for culturally diverse HIPPY families.

- Encourage and empower local providers to focus more effort on retaining socioeconomically disadvantaged clients by enabling flexible HIPPY delivery options and by improving links between 'at risk' clients and other local support agencies.

- Provide additional funds to local agencies where greater delivery flexibility (e.g. tutors undertaking more travel, home-based or 'catch-up' work) is required.

- Ensure frequent formal and informal assessment of parents' levels of engagement and satisfaction with HIPPY. In particular, establish mechanisms that enable parents (particularly those 'at risk') to provide confidential positive and negative feedback about their experience, their feelings of competence and their motivation to continue.

- Improve the mechanisms for recording complaints and other standard parent feedback within the HIPPY Australia database, to ensure HIPPY providers are formally aware of parents' levels of program satisfaction, and capture early exit reasons.

- Train HIPPY staff in the use of mini-scripts and related resources to promote the benefits of continued HIPPY engagement for HIPPY parents and children.

- Adopt greater use of direct and indirect incentives to retain families struggling with engagement/retention, e.g. vouchers to support travel to parent group meetings, cultural celebrations of key program milestones and 'success' levels, regular child and parent graduation ceremonies in years 1 and 2.

- Adopt more consistent use of reflective practice strategies between coordinator and tutor to support parental engagement and achievement, and tutor progress.

- Provide more consistent, high quality and documented training for tutors, which supports high quality relationships between parents and tutors, and which supports tutors with their employment aspirations and prospects.

- Ask all HIPPY sites to consider how individual and provider factors might impact on family recruitment and retention.

- Undertake further investigation of high-performing sites with the aim of developing a consolidated, agreed and robust list of critical success factors.

Appendix A: Ten guiding principles for HIPPY

1. All young children learn.

2. All children mature across the same developmental areas, and learning and development are multidimensional and interrelated.

3. All parents want the best for their children.

4. Parents are the primary and most important educators of their children.

5. Parents can and do teach their children.

6. Parents can support and teach other parents.

7. Children's learning is enhanced when parents understand children's growth and development.

8. A parent's role in supporting their child's learning is enhanced with consistent support and access to appropriate materials and techniques.

9. Respect and acknowledgment of diversity enhance children's and parents' sense of belonging.

10. Connections between parents and community build a family's capacity to care for and educate their children.

Appendix B: HIPPY alignment with the national Early Years Learning Framework

Table B.1 shows alignment of the HIPPY curriculum (drawn from analysis of consultants' comments) with the five learning goals of the national EYLF.

Table B.1 HIPPY alignment with the National Early Years Learning Framework

The five learning goals of the EYLF	HIPPY materials/curriculum
Strong sense of identity	Through giving children agency (choices) • Allow children to have a go at a range of activities and decide if they like them or not. • Encourage parents/family members to tune in to their child's interests, strengths and areas requiring support or practice. • Support parents/family members in understanding that all children are unique and have their own learning styles and rates of learning—and this is to be celebrated.
Connections with their world	Through generalisation / 'everywhere learning' • Customise generalisation to make connections for each individual child. • Make connections between themes and events in the HIPPY books and the child's world and experiences. • Expose children to themes and events that are new or less familiar. • Use objects from the natural environment or the home. • Use activities that tune in to everyday routines. • Help children observe, listen, think and communicate about their world through activities.
Strong sense of wellbeing	Through building and enhancing parent–child relationships • Provide an opportunity for parent and child to spend time together, have fun, learn, solve problems, be close and learn about each other.
Confidence and involvement in their learning	Through building children's love of learning and their own identity as an active learner • Develop qualities of learning such as resilience, persistence and curiosity that will support their learning in formal education settings and the home. • Encourage parents/family members to have a go. • Offer children the opportunity and confidence to do different things and in different ways.
Effective communication skills	Through supporting children's thinking • Build in open-ended questions to support children in thinking and responding. • Support parent/family members in waiting for children to think and respond. • Help children build vocabulary and narrative skills and a love of listening to and telling stories.

Appendix C: Report from HIPPY Inala

The following report is from a small complementary study commissioned by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and undertaken at the HIPPY Inala site to gather insights from parents who had exited the HIPPY program.

The report was prepared by Ms Jacqui Ruhle, Coordinator of HIPPY Inala, and Associate Professor Deborah Askew, Research Director of Inala Indigenous Health Service.

"Why would anybody leave?"

Researching why parents exited HIPPY early

Partners
Brotherhood of St Laurence
HIPPY Australia
Southern Queensland Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care
(Inala Indigenous Health Service)

Researchers
Ms Jacqui Ruhle and Associate Professor Deborah Askew
June 2014

INTRODUCTION

The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) was developed in 1969 by Professor Avima Lombard and her team at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This experimental program aimed to address the educational disadvantage experienced by refugee families living in Israel. Professor Lombard's work has now grown to become an internationally recognised program, with HIPPY operating in 10 countries and three more countries delivering HIPPY inspired programs.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence holds the licence to operate HIPPY in Australia and sponsored the first Australian HIPPY site in Fitzroy, Melbourne in 1998. In 2007 the Australian Government recognised the potential of HIPPY as a two-year parenting and early year's enrichment program and provided funding for a national roll out. By 2015, HIPPY Australia will be active in 100 communities across Australia.

HIPPY Inala commenced in 2009 during the first phase of the national roll out. Inala is a vibrant multi-cultural community with Brisbane's largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The catchment for HIPPY Inala includes the surrounding suburbs of Acacia Ridge, Carole Park, Goodna and Wacol.   Inala and the surrounding suburbs are rated as Level 1, highly disadvantaged in the Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA). The Australian Early Development Index recognises up to 51.3% of children in the HIPPY Inala catchment as developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains.

The Inala Indigenous Health Service (IIHS) is well positioned to deliver HIPPY in this location. Dr Noel Hayman, the Clinical Director, was one of Queensland's first Aboriginal doctors and established the service in 1993 with one Aboriginal nurse. From a one room clinic co-located in a mainstream general practice, this clinic has now grown to become the Southern Queensland Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care, with a purpose built, stand alone clinic providing comprehensive primary health care, integrating specialist outpatient care, community engagement and health promotion, teaching of health professional students and trainees, and research.   The service is spread over four sites, including an outreach clinic at Carole Park, and provides a monthly fly-in medical service to Cunnamulla.

Families enrolled in HIPPY Inala are culturally and socially diverse which reflects the community we work in.   These diverse families are united by the shared aspiration of wanting their children to have access to more social and economic opportunities than the current generation. Similar to all HIPPY communities across Australia, the HIPPY Inala community recognises that education is a vital key to unlocking this potential and positively influencing the future of their children.

Integral to HIPPY is the fundamental belief that families are their child's first and most important educators.   HIPPY believes that all parents want the best for their child and by providing appropriate resources and guidance we can engage *parents and children in the joy of learning" http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au/about_HIPPY.html*

Despite this philosophy of working to empower parents in the crucial role as their child's first educator, many sites are challenged by the number of families who exit HIPPY before the end of the program.

In 2013, Brotherhood of Saint Laurence began an evaluation of recruitment and retention related issues across all HIPPY sites.   The value of speaking to families who had left the program early was recognised as an intrinsic part of this research. HIPPY Inala was offered the opportunity to contribute to this research by interviewing families who had withdrawn early from the program and provide an analysis of their feedback.

METHOD

Who did we speak to?

- As a small-scale qualitative research project, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 parents who exited the program early and one parent who, despite coping with significant health issues and personal, social and financial pressures, was still enrolled.
- It was felt that parents who exited from 2011 onwards would be reflective of the current HIPPY program and practices.
- To achieve a range of feedback and experiences, we invited families who participated in HIPPY for different lengths of time; from several weeks to a year. Several parents had previously had one child graduate, only to exit early with a subsequent child.
- Potential participants were contacted by telephone and/or mail and invited to participate in a discussion with the coordinator, for the purpose of gathering information for the research project.
- One parent verbally declined the offer, several had phone numbers that were no longer connected and some did not reply to voice and/or text messages.   The most successful recruitment strategy was when parents were contacted via telephone, early in the morning during school holidays.
- Participants could elect to meet with the coordinator in any venue they felt comfortable. Six interviews were held in family homes, one at a local fast food outlet, one in a workplace and one at the Inala Indigenous Health Service.
- To protect the confidentiality of participants, we chose to change their names to pseudonyms.
- Participants were thanked for their time and feedback with a Coles/Myer gift voucher.
- HIPPY Inala recognises that not all adults who are engaged in HIPPY are the child's biological parents. Some are grandparents, foster carers, older siblings and extended family. For the purpose of this report, we will use the general term "parent" which reflects the relationship of our research families.

What did we want to know?

By examining the key reasons why some participants exited early, we hoped to identify any program-based factors that contributed to their decision to withdraw early. Some of these factors may be amenable to change and implementing these potential changes may make the program more accessible for all families.

- We asked families if they found aspects of the program to be influential in their decision to leave HIPPY and if they had any recommendations to reduce or remove those factors.

- We were interested to gain feedback from families regarding strategies they suggest would have supported their continued engagement with HIPPY.

Closely linked with this is the concern that parents who exited the program early may not have acquired "enough" HIPPY skills for the program to have any desirable or positive outcomes for the child and/or parents.

- We asked parents if there was anything they learnt and/or now do differently with their children as a result of HIPPY.

Who participated?

Participant 1: Catherine

Catherine has enrolled twice but did not complete HIPPY with either child. During enrolment with her first child, Catherine was undergoing a relationship breakdown and health issues. Catherine's second child had undiagnosed additional needs including a significant speech and language delay. This child now attends a local special education unit.

Participant 2: Fiona

Fiona has enrolled in HIPPY twice. Fiona's first child graduated from the program, her second child exited at the end of the first year. Fiona is a single parent with 9 children and works afternoon/evening shifts in a local factory. Fiona's eldest daughter (Linda) was helping to do HIPPY with the children. During the second HIPPY child's enrolment, Linda was returned to her birth country by extended family members, leaving Fiona without support.

Participant 3: Justine

Justine enrolled in HIPPY with her third and youngest child. Justine completed one year of HIPPY. During this time, Justine left her partner due to relationship issues and subsequently returned when she discovered she was pregnant. This unplanned pregnancy caused further friction as the family dealt with unstable housing.

Participant 4: Layla

Layla has 5 children and enrolled in HIPPY with her second youngest child. Layla exited at the end of the first year. Layla's eldest daughter (Jane) later enrolled in HIPPY and reached graduation with her own child (Layla's granddaughter). Jane was offered a position as a Home Tutor but had to decline due to transport issues.

Participant 5: Megan

Megan was enrolled in HIPPY for several weeks with her fifth and youngest child. Megan was concerned when her child was unable to do the activities. This experience and discussions with HIPPY staff was a catalyst for Megan to pursue a developmental assessment and her child is now enrolled in a special education development unit.

Participant 6: Susan

Susan enrolled in HIPPY twice. Susan's first child graduated from HIPPY, the second child exited at the end of Year 4. Susan works full time. Her partner frequently works away from home requiring Susan to be sole carer for their 3 children in his absence.

Participant 7: Tania

Tania was enrolled in HIPPY for 25 weeks. Tania has 7 children and joined HIPPY with her youngest child. Tania exited the program when several stressful events occurred; including her husband being diagnosed with cancer and her teenage daughter unexpectedly leaving the family home for a period of time.

Participant 8: Ursula

Ursula enrolled in HIPPY twice. Her first child reached graduation with HIPPY Inala. Ursula moved from the area and was transferred to an alternate HIPPY site to enrol her second child. Ursula completed 12 weeks with her second child, but exited when she developed chronic health issues related to high blood pressure. During this time Ursula's mother passed away and her youngest daughter (HIPPY child) was ill for several months with a long-term respiratory illness.

Participant 9: Victoria

Victoria is enrolled in HIPPY with her son (Year 5) and daughter (Year 4). Victoria has five children, with her older two children from previous relationships. Victoria and her partner are currently unemployed and face multiple challenges including health issues due to prior substance abuse, social and financial disadvantage and limited formal education.

WHAT WE FOUND OUT:

Discussions with parents were focused on four key areas which provided a framework for the presentation of the results:

- Why the participants enrolled in HIPPY
- What was their experience of HIPPY
- Why they exited
- What are their post-HIPPY reflections

Why the participants enrolled in HIPPY

Preparing their child for a successful start at school was the primary motivation for all families to enrol in HIPPY. Each parent mentioned the role of HIPPY in providing positive early learning experiences which would equip their children with school readiness skills.

Parent's spoke about the recent changes to the first year of school (prep) due to the introduction of the national curriculum and the resulting move away from play based learning to formal teaching. Prep remains non-compulsory in Queensland, but with many schools performing assessments on children before they commence, parents' anxiety regarding the expectations on their child has increased. Parents wanted to ensure their children were "ready" to enter school.

- *"I wanted to expose him to formal learning. Give him a head start, go into school already knowing these things"*
  Tania

Participants did not anticipate they would learn anything when doing HIPPY with their children. When questioned, parents agreed that they enrolled in HIPPY because of the perceived benefits for their child; the acquisition of parenting skills or knowledge did not appear to be a significant incentive for enrolment. Despite this, most parents could articulate what they had learnt or gained from doing HIPPY.

What was their experience of HIPPY?

Most participants were positive about their experience of doing HIPPY. Parents spoke positively about:

- the resources, in particular the story books
- the time spent with their child while doing HIPPY
- and the satisfaction from their children learning skills and concepts

1. Resources

HIPPY aims to remove barriers to participation by providing all of the resources needed for the activities. In addition to the storybooks and activity packs which are licensed to HIPPY, we also

provide craft materials (pencils, glue, scissors, sticky tape, chalk, wool, paddle pop sticks etc) and items specific to some activities (for example; bean seeds).

Providing all of the materials to families free of charge addresses any issues associated with economic disadvantage, but also reduces other barriers such as time spent sourcing materials. One working parent stated how providing the materials assisted her in being able to utilise her time more efficiently:

- *"I liked how everything was provided. It made it easier when I was working… and coming home exhausted"*
  Susan

When questioned about the resources, parents highlighted the quality of the storybooks. A parent commented on how the English/Samoan bilingual book "A Piece of Home" was particularly valued by her family:

- *"I loved the resources. The storybooks, particularly the Samoan language one. We have kept all the storybooks"*
  Tania

An Aboriginal parent discussed how she felt compelled to adapt the resources in order to reflect her family's culture and identity:

- *"Would have been nice to have more culturally relevant materials. The wording was sometimes a bit… American. I changed the terms, said things like "Nan" and going to "Stradbroke Island"*
  Susan

Many parents stated they have kept the resources and the children continue to read the storybooks, with children being able to identify a favourite storybook. One parent commented that after reading the story "Adam's Salad", her children who were both enrolled in HIPPY, continue to call any salad "Adam's Salad" and it has become a part of the family's vocabulary.

The value which families placed on the resources was evident, and one parent hopes to pass the materials on to future generations. Catherine, aged 41 years, discussed how she wasn't able to complete HIPPY with her children at this time in her life, but wants her "future" grandchildren to have the opportunities HIPPY brings:

- *"I have kept all the books and folders. They are in the cupboard for the future grandkids one day"*
  Catherine

2. Time spent with their child

A common theme was that HIPPY helped parents to prioritise time for their child within busy families and lives. Parents spoke about the time pressures of managing work commitments, health issues and the demands of other children. The HIPPY child was often the youngest child in the family, and parents identified how doing HIPPY ensured they spent individual, constructive time with the child.

- *"HIPPY helped me schedule time with him, one on one time. I'm not a routiney person otherwise"*
  Tania
- *"I wanted an opportunity to work with the kids… I wanted to have an investment in them"*
  Susan

Most parents could recall an activity or experience they enjoyed doing with their child. Two parents mentioned a nature based activity that required them to go outdoors and collect stones and leaves.

- *"We really liked that one. It was quality time. It helps you find time for them, one on one"*
  Catherine

For most families however, the requirement to continually commit the time each week became a stressor and a contributing factor to them exiting the program. Several parents commented on the importance of being able to work "*at my own pace"* to sustain a long-term engagement in HIPPY.

3. Children's Learning

All parents agreed that their child had learnt skills from HIPPY, with learning about shapes and colours being frequently mentioned. This may be because the shape and colour activities occur early in the program so all participants had knowledge of them, the activities use a set of brightly coloured shapes which children enjoy and the concepts are relatively simple for parents to assess their child's learning and understanding.

Why they exited HIPPY

The families we spoke with agreed that the decision to leave HIPPY is not made lightly. When questioned about why they left the program, parents identified situations and challenges which appear to be complex, interrelated and multi-faceted.

We have classified the parent-identified reasons for leaving HIPPY into four broad categories:

- HIPPY program
- Child's abilities and response
- Parent's self-efficacy
- Life stressors

It is important to remember that many of these reasons do not exist in isolation. The interplay between several factors can be immensely significant in a parent's decision to leave the program.

For example; a parent's stress related to a relationship breakdown may impact on her interactions with her child when attempting to do HIPPY, which will impact on the child's engagement with and enjoyment of the HIPPY activities. This can result in a negative experience for both parent and child, with the parent then questioning her own capacity to teach her child or the appropriateness of the program.
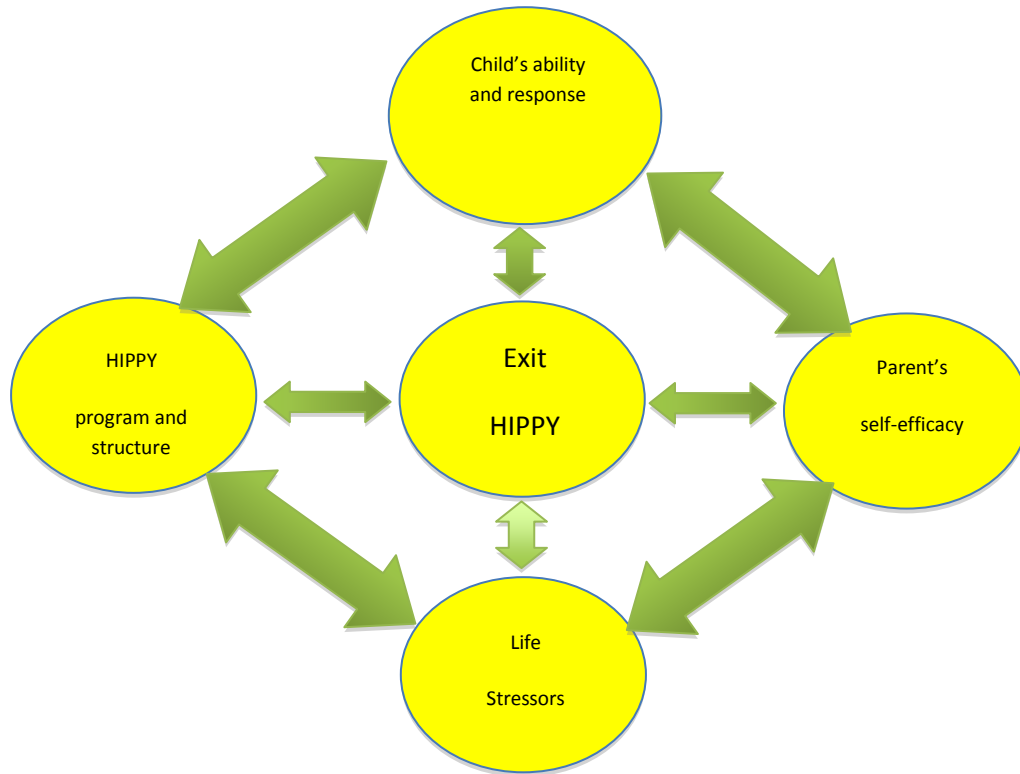
1. HIPPY - program and structure

As stated earlier, parents were generally positive about the program's intent and quality of the resources. However, some factors of the program structure did create challenges for families.

Time commitment:

Parents are required to schedule time to meet with their tutor each week (in Year 4) or fortnightly (in Year 5) in addition to finding time to do the activities with their child.

In Year 4 the activity packs are delivered weekly with approximately 6 activities per pack. Many parents commented this was time consuming and difficult to sustain over a long period of time. The weekly delivery of packs created an expectation of what parents *should* be doing and resulted in some parents feeling pressure to "keep up" with the delivery cycle.   Several parents recommended reducing the weekly visits to fortnightly. This would match the current delivery cycle in Year 5 and support busy families in scheduling time for HIPPY.

- *"Once or twice a month would be good, with phone contact in between"*
  Justine

Most parents commented they found it difficult to regularly find time to do HIPPY with their child amidst the multiple, competing demands of family life. Some parents tried to schedule a set time, others used a more *adhoc* approach of doing HIPPY when the child was interested. For several parents this proved to be a significant challenge and difficult to sustain.

- *"I was always trying to fit it in. I tried it at settle down time, after bath and dinner. I tried to sneak off with her into the bedroom, but the other kids kept coming in too… It was too time*

*consuming. She wasn't concentrating and a bit too long overall (*two year program duration)*"*
Layla

The two-year commitment was a consideration for families struggling to find time for HIPPY. Some parents felt they couldn't sustain the level of involvement required over two years and most parents recommended a reduction in the program time frame. When asked to suggest the ideal length of time for HIPPY, half of the parents recommended reducing the program to one year.

- *"One year is long enough. In prep now, the children are already busy. They have 100 magic words to learn and homework"*
  Ursula

However, this finding needs to be considered in the context of our study participants, all of whom had exited the program early due to multiple stressors.

Repetition of Activities:

Several parents commented that their child found the activities to be boring and repetitive.

- *"Sometimes he would say, do we have to do this again?"*
  Tania

One parent commented that her daughter was bored by the style of the HIPPY packs and repetition of activities. This parent then purchased commercial early learning books that she described as "colourful and not repetitive". When the parent attempted to reintroduce HIPPY, her daughter would ask "which type of homework?" and would then disengage if it was HIPPY.

HIPPY Australia has restructured some of the Year 4 activities with the updated packs being delivered nationally to families in 2013. These packs aim to reduce some of the repetition of activities. The participants that were interviewed for this research had exited the program prior to these changes taking place.

In addition, HIPPY Inala is currently participating in a 2014 trial with new activity packs and processes which are more responsive to families and the individual learning styles of children. When I discussed the recent innovations with families they felt the adaptations were positive and one parent enquired if she could re-enrol. Discussions with parents did suggest however, that these changes need to be viewed in context of the whole family lifestyle and other stresses. Changing the format of the packs is an important modification, but in this study, the activity packs were not the singular reason why parents have exited.

2. Child's ability and response to HIPPY

As mentioned earlier, all of our participants had enrolled in HIPPY to provide their child with educational skills which will facilitate a successful transition to school. The child's response to HIPPY often becomes a key factor in determining a parent's decision to persist in the presence of other challenges or to exit the program.

When the child is engaged in HIPPY, responding positively to the activities and acquiring new skills and knowledge, the parent receives positive feedback about HIPPY and her capacity to teach her child. Often the child can become the driver of the program, requesting the parent spends time doing HIPPY as soon as the tutor has visited with new materials.

- *"It was no problem, the kids were happy. They wanted to do it all in one day!"*
  Fiona

If the activities do not engage the child, or the child struggles to complete the activities, this can increase parental frustration and contribute to HIPPY becoming a negative experience.

- *"Most times she looked forward to it…But then I would set everything out and she would lose interest… concentration was her biggest problem"*
  Layla

To overcome this, HIPPY recommends parents adapt the activities to meet their child's learning style, attention span or developmental needs. In order to do this, parents may require continuing guidance from the tutor as they develop an understanding of how their child learns and confidence in how to individualise the program to suit their child. HIPPY may also involve both parent and child learning new communication techniques and ways of interacting, which take time to acquire.

A child's response to HIPPY is also determined by his/her developmental level. In one family, involvement with HIPPY highlighted their son's undiagnosed developmental delay:

- *"He was fine when the container came out. He liked all the crayons and shapes but he couldn't do the activities. Maybe the activities were a little bit hard, all new? He hadn't done that before. I was comparing him to C.* (nephew who could do HIPPY activities*). Then I could see the differences, speech and everything else. HIPPY motivated me to get him into learning"*
  Megan

In this family, the parent was initially disappointed and challenged by her child's inability to do the HIPPY activities. The outcome was positive however, when Megan pursued clinical assessments and understood that her son had additional needs and required specialised support. Megan expressed gratitude to HIPPY for motivating her to "*get him into learning*". For Megan, the brief contact with HIPPY had a profound impact on her son's development and learning.

3. Parent's self-efficacy

It was evident when speaking with the interview participants that many had expectations of themselves and felt a sense of inadequacy or failure when unable to meet their expectations.

Some of this expectation is implicit in the weekly program delivery, structure of the activity packs and the number of activities delivered each week.

- *"If the parent is dedicated and focused, you **should** be able to do four activities a week"*
  Catherine

Parents also felt a level of accountability to the tutor and expressed feeling "bad", "guilty", "at fault" and "flustered" at not having been able to do the previous week's work. One parent commented that the tutor told her to "just do what you can", but she still felt ashamed at not having completed the work.

- *"I am a responsible person, I don't like to see the disappointment (*from the tutor*)… I felt guilty… bad"*
  Ursula

Parents may also measure themselves against the perceived achievements or progress of other HIPPY families. A parent, who was dealing with a number of personal challenges, commented on HIPPY playgroup as a place where she compared herself against others and felt inadequate. Catherine believed that other parents at playgroup appeared to have ordered lives and were capable of completing HIPPY each week, which only served to increase her own sense of failure and shame:

- *"Other parents at playgroup looked like they had it all together, no problems"*
  Catherine

As mentioned previously, HIPPY may require families to learn new parenting skills and ways of interacting with their child.   For some this is stressful and causes further self doubt about their parenting

- *"I really wanted to do it, but he didn't want to. Maybe because it was me?*
  Megan

4. Life Stressors

This research revealed some of the challenges and situations families were dealing with while enrolled in HIPPY.   Some families had to deal with multiple stressors (for example; sole parenting and working late shifts or health issues and being isolated from extended family) in conjunction with financial and social disadvantage. These parents indicated that it was the interplay between several factors which precipitated their decision to exit from HIPPY.

Health

- *"I found it hard to sit and do HIPPY. I was emotional, probably because I was pregnant"*
  Justine

- *"I was sick; I don't feel fresh when the tutor comes… I didn't have the energy, I couldn't manage my time"*
  Ursula

The father of one HIPPY child was diagnosed with cancer and required hospital visits and treatments which made it difficult to schedule HIPPY visits. Another parent was coping with mental health issues in conjunction with her child having undiagnosed additional needs, both of which impacted on the parent's capacity to deliver the program and the child's ability to engage with the activities.

<u>Sole Parenting and lack of family support</u>

Many of the participants were sole parents and/or had no family support to do HIPPY. This contributed to a feeling of being overwhelmed by the demands of the program and the challenge to regularly engage their child in the activities.

- *"Doing it by myself was hard"*
  Layla

- *"… I thought I didn't have enough time… my partner works away"*
  Susan

The issue of support was paramount for the women in this research project. As one parent stated, having support to do HIPPY was also beneficial for her child:

- *"It wasn't solely me. Sometimes my oldest daughter helped, sometimes my husband. It was enough to encourage him, he loved it when dad did it with him"*
  Tania

Another parent illustrated the role of the tutor in not only delivering the program, but also in supporting the parent's engagement and approach to HIPPY:

- *"I had a bond with (tutor 1). She was more flexible, I really liked (tutor 2), but she didn't seem as flexible"*
  Susan

Two parents spoke about how the tutor role could be developed into a more practical, hands-on support for families:

- *"If tutors could sit with mum and the child and do a bit together it would be useful"*
  Catherine

- *"It would be good for the tutors to stay and help"*
  Layla

One parent expressed how HIPPY fit with her family's religious values and this possibly motivated her to persist despite chronic health issues

- *"We are Muslim, we always have to learn"*
  Ursula

<u>Relationship Instability</u>

During the course of HIPPY enrolment, several participants experienced relationship breakdowns. This resulted in stress for each family member and often the children experienced further upheaval as they adapted to shared care in their parents separate homes.

- *"I have 4 children and other stuff going on…. I had personal issues and was dealing with a relationship breakdown"*
  Catherine

One family was coping with the impact of having a parent incarcerated for a long-term prison sentence, and the emotional and financial hardships this involved.

Another parent discussed how the stress of a teenage daughter disconnecting from the family, leaving the family home and having *"boy problems"* made focusing on HIPPY difficult. This family located their daughter and managed to bring her home, their priority was on assisting her to settle back into the family and continue her education.

Housing Instability

Many HIPPY families live in social housing or private rental accommodation. Several families were forced to move during their time with HIPPY. The unstable nature of housing can be a reflection of economic insecurity due to loss of employment or relationship breakdowns.

Due to relationship issues, one parent moved house several times during her one year with HIPPY. This parent discovered she was unexpectedly pregnant which caused further conflict with her partner and extended family.

Children with Additional Needs

Two children entered the program with undiagnosed additional needs. One child had a high-level speech and language delay and exhibited behaviours which were on the Autistic Spectrum. The second child appeared to have a global developmental delay; was not toilet trained and had limited expressive language and comprehension skills. These children could not fully engage with the HIPPY activities and prior to their special needs being identified, parents did not know the reason for this inability to engage and assumed responsibility for the lack of engagement. Both children now attend a local Special Education Development Unit, and the parents have regained some confidence in their parenting.

"Why would anyone leave?" Victoria's Story

It is not to be assumed that all families who are dealing with complex challenges will exit the program early. Some families appear to find strength and purpose through the program, such as Victoria who we interviewed for this research, and is still enrolled in HIPPY.

Victoria, a mother of five children, views HIPPY as a vehicle to positively influence her children's life outcomes. Victoria is motivated to guide her young family through many of the obstacles she has encountered.

Victoria discussed the concerns she has for her children growing up in a community in which many residents face social and economic disadvantage; "*You know what it's like around here… There are drugs everywhere, that whole street; everyone is doing Ice or something*".

In addition to neighbourhood factors, Victoria also wants to protect her children from repeating her past patterns of behaviour.   Victoria has a history of substance abuse and she experienced domestic violence in previous relationships. Victoria suffers health impacts from her previous lifestyle such as

dental decay. The father of her eldest child is in jail and although her son has written to his father several times, he still waits for a response. Victoria has three children to her current partner, Charles. Two of these children are enrolled in HIPPY and Victoria plans to enrol her youngest child when she is eligible.

Both parents are currently unemployed. Charles, who has battled heroin addiction, plans to return to work in one of the trades he has previously worked in. Financial disadvantage impedes these plans. Without reliable transport, Charles cannot undertake employment that requires tradesmen to move between locations.

Victoria enrolled her first child in HIPPY "*to help me with teaching my kids. I want to teach them the alphabet and writing… Charles can't read well and left school in Year 9*".

Victoria explained how HIPPY has helped to develop her parenting skills "*I have learnt a lot. When I was a kid, I can't remember learning letters… It was different from when I was a kid. I never had time with my mum. She was a single parent, working all the time*".

HIPPY has also assisted Victoria in understanding her children's strengths and learning styles, "*I thought it might have been a bit hard for him* (Yr 5 HIPPY child). *Because of his speech problems. But he understands more than I thought he would!*"

When questioned about what might be one of the biggest challenges for a parent in HIPPY, her response was, "*With five kids it is hard to find time, individual time. HIPPY makes me find time for them*"

Victoria has adopted an approach to HIPPY which suits her family. She offers HIPPY time to her Year 5 child when he comes home from prep and before her Year 4 child returns from kindergarten on the bus. Often her son is tired from prep and Victoria states, "*I wait for them to want to do it. I don't pressure them…. She's* (Year 4 child) *always asking to do HIPPY homework!*"

Victoria disagreed that the HIPPY delivery cycle or presentation of the activity packs caused her any negative feelings of stress, "*No. With her, I am more laid back the second time. I do it in my own time*".

Victoria suggested that part of her ability to remain engaged in HIPPY is the level of support she has from her family, "(My eldest son*) and Charles help out and do some too. They have more patience than me*".   Victoria also expressed the importance of the tutor's role, "*You explain it all really well to me… and if things are too much I let you know*". As Victoria's tutor, I believe we have a relationship built on mutual respect.   Victoria feels confident to make decisions about her engagement with HIPPY and appears to feel safe to voice her opinions and decisions.

Charles and Victoria have made a commitment to their children. Aware of the challenges their family faces, they are actively working towards building a strong future for their children. This family can be measured against any definition of disadvantaged, but assumptions cannot be made about them. Charles and Victoria have ensured their children are connected to positive, supportive services and agencies such as the local football club, Inala Indigenous Health Service, Deadly Choices and HIPPY. The people within these organisations help provide Charles and Victoria with support to raise their children and navigate a safe future.

Victoria was proud to inform me of her children's goals for the future; "(Eldest son) *wants to be a doctor*! (Second son) *wants to be a chef,* (Year 5 HIPPY child) *wants to be a soldier,* (Year 4 HIPPY

child) *wants to be a dancer and has pulled up all the carpet in her room so she can dance on the floorboards. And the little one, she just wants to be big!"*

HIPPY Inala recognises the role this family has granted us in sharing their parenting journey. When I asked Victoria if she would like to speak to me for this research project which explores why parents exit the program early, she replied *"but why would anyone leave?"*

What happened after HIPPY? Post-HIPPY reflections:

Most parents were able to reflect on HIPPY and identify what they had learnt from their time in the program. Participants in this research project had exited the program up to three years ago and believed the knowledge they acquired in HIPPY still positively influenced their parenting.

1. Awareness of role as child's first teacher

HIPPY in Australia is underpinned by 10 guiding principles (HIPPY Australia, 2009). Six of these principles directly relate to the role of parents in teaching their children:

- Principle 3: All parents want the best for their children

- Principle 4. Parents are the primary and most important educators of their children

- Principle 5. Parents can and do teach their children

- Principle 7: Children's learning is enhanced when parents have knowledge and understanding of children's growth and development

- Principle 8: A parent's role in supporting their child's learning is enhanced with access to appropriate materials, techniques and consistent support

- Principle 10: Connections between parents and community build a family's capacity to care for and educate their children

In affirmation of the guiding principles of HIPPY, many parents could articulate how the program had helped them acquire knowledge and/or skills which assisted them in their role as their child's most important educator.

- *"For me, it reinforced the importance of parents being the educator. It was different to when we were young. You just went to Year 1 and came home and maybe watched Sesame Street"*
  Susan

- *"Before HIPPY I never played with my kids. I was boring. HIPPY encouraged me, pushed me to spend time helping my kids…It was good for me… I felt like I was going back to school. I was happy, I had nothing to do before"*
  Fiona

A common response was how HIPPY helped parents understand that children are always learning and daily life with children provides many opportunities for incidental teaching:

- *"It opens up your mind to different ways of teaching your kids. Involving them with cooking and doing things around the house"*
Susan

- *"HIPPY gave me a clue. Something new always explained. Small things I can do with them now… activities in the kitchen, gardening. It gives me a clue, then I can elaborate"*
Ursula

2. Enduring changes in parenting

Some of the most compelling statements from participants related to the lasting changes they have implemented in their parenting through involvement with HIPPY.

Several of the research participants have adult children and had an established parenting style, some participants had exited up to three years ago, and others were busy with work and commitments to extended family. However, when questioned if they continue to do anything differently with their children as a result of HIPPY, many participants agreed that their parenting had been positively impacted:

- *"I value time with them. Helping them with homework now… I didn't really do that with the older kids"*
Susan

- *"HIPPY helps parents be with them, play with them, do homework with them…. Now I take them to the park every day. Before HIPPY I didn't take them to the park"*
Fiona

The growth in parenting skills has a ripple effect, which benefits all children in the family, not just the child enrolled in HIPPY.

An example of how HIPPY has contributed to a change in one family's style of communication is illustrated by Justine's statement:

- *"I look at them face to face and let them see my eyes, mouth and my face. I listen to them and respond to their talking… I look at them, right to them and let them talk to me… I talk to him* (her 18 month old child) *like an adult and ask him to do things and he does it!"*

3. Ease of transition into school

Parents also commented on how HIPPY had lasting benefits for their child. Parents reported that their HIPPY child appeared more confident and prepared for school than their older non-HIPPY siblings.

- One parent recalled how her HIPPY children reacted differently to her older children when they started school. *"He didn't cry, he just wanted to get started".* This parent was proud of

her HIPPY children's good results at school *"they know everything from HIPPY… my kids love to read because of HIPPY"*
Fiona

- *"It has had an impact on him. With his level of communicating. We did lots of talking and his perception is a lot deeper than the others (*older siblings) *from all the time spent talking with him"*
Tania

- *"It helped with him going to prep. Writing his name and all that. The others (*older siblings) *didn't have all that"*
Susan

CONCLUSIONS:

The women involved in this research project came from a diverse range of families, cultural backgrounds and educational levels. The interviews captured only a small part of their individual HIPPY journeys, yet revealed some of the considerable challenges our participants were coping with at the same time as being enrolled in HIPPY.   The stressors encountered during their time with HIPPY were at once unique to each participant, but also representative of the families we work with at HIPPY Inala.

 Discussions with the participants identified some shared perceptions of HIPPY. All parents enrolled in HIPPY because of the aspirations they have for their child. Parents wanted to invest their time and efforts into providing strong early years foundation for their children. Parents understood that this early years investment could ensure their children have successful life outcomes; both at school and in adulthood.

While parents enrolled to advantage their child, the interviews revealed that support for the parent is paramount in maintaining engagement in the program. When participants were asked about their recommendations to increase program accessibility and fidelity, the value of receiving *support* resonated through their reflections.

Many families were dealing with multiple stressors during their period of enrolment in HIPPY. These stressors involved poor health, unstable housing, relationship breakdowns and the demands of sole parenting in conjunction with the child not engaging with HIPPY, the parent's own feelings of capability with the program and the commitments of the program itself.

The interplay between multiple stresses can create an overwhelming situation, which may result in parents struggling to find the time and energy to spend on HIPPY.

 If the child enjoys doing the activities with the parent, this can contribute to a positive feedback cycle or loop, which may encourage the parent and motivate her to continue. As the parent and child participate in the activities and enjoy time spent interacting with one another through HIPPY, the positive feedback loop is strengthened. When the tutor comes to visit, the parent may also feel encouraged by the tutor's recognition of her efforts and this can provide more positive feedback.

Alternately, a negative feedback loop can be created when the family is coping with multiple, competing demands, the child may be resistant to HIPPY or struggles with the activities and the parent may doubt her abilities to "teach" her child or the value of the program. Parents' low feelings of self-efficacy may be compounded when the tutor comes to visit and the parent feels guilt or shame that she hasn't completed the previous weeks HIPPY activities.

One of the key messages, which appeared throughout our discussions, was the importance of parents feeling supported to do HIPPY. Several women received this support through partners or older children. Other parents related how they felt alone and isolated and found it difficult to do HIPPY "*by myself*". The level of support required may fluctuate depending on the external pressures or challenges a family is facing, or in response to the parents' own level of capacity.

The power of feeling supported:

We would like to suggest that support could be fundamental in contributing to a positive parental feedback loop by:

1. Engaging (and maintaining engagement) of parent and child in the program

2. Empowering the parent as she learns new skills and knowledge and applies this to her own children

3. Encouraging and acknowledging the parents efforts, achievements and growth

Engaging

The current expectation is for tutors to role play the weeks activities with parents, and parents re-create the activities with their children throughout the week.

Several parents recalled how they had felt alone when attempting to do HIPPY with their child, with no support from a partner, family or friends. They expressed how they struggled to find time to do HIPPY and maintain their child's interest. These parents suggested that time spent with the tutor and their child, co-operatively participating in activities, would have made a difference to their continued enrolment.

For some parents, the possibility of having tutors work with them and their child would help to:

- provide practical experience of preparing and using the resources while navigating the HIPPY scripting during the activity
- participate in quick, time-rich and successful HIPPY experiences
- demonstrate and apply HIPPY techniques such as the 3C's,
- create a positive home learning environment

If a parent has had difficulty engaging her child or maintaining her child's attention, the tutor can use this time to help the parent select activities that the child will enjoy and can be completed quickly. By doing at least one activity with the child and parent, the tutor is able to work with

participants in an authentic situation and provide encouraging feedback that may motivate the family to continue with HIPPY during the week.

Empowering

HIPPY recommends that families adapt the program to suit their child's individual learning style or developmental needs. In our experience, parents often believe they do not have the skills, confidence or knowledge to make these adaptations. Parents appear reluctant to make any adaptations to the program; concerned their child may miss out on vital learning if they omit activities or parts of activities. Deciding to omit or adapt activities can compound the sense of guilt parents expressed about not having done enough HIPPY each week; concerned they may be viewed negatively by the tutor. Many parents feel supported when making these decisions in collaboration with their tutor.

When requested, "hands-on" tutor assistance could be a useful technique to provide guided scaffolding of the parents learning. Working directly with parent and child can provide the tutor with an ideal opportunity to guide the parent's awareness of how her child learns and to ultimately support the parent to take control of the decision making process. As the parents' knowledge, confidence and self-efficacy increases, the tutor can withdraw.

 Individual adaptations to the usual level of tutor involvement would require collaboration between the parent, tutor and coordinator, with each decision being made to ensure the parent is continually supported towards self-determination.

We recognise that HIPPY is a learning journey for all parents, many of whom come from diverse backgrounds with differing beliefs and cultural norms regarding child rearing and education. Coordinators and tutors would need to ensure that their assistance is always respectful, with the aim to build a parent's confidence and capacity, not undermine it by doing HIPPY for the parent.

Tutor training and supervision sessions are important opportunities to enforce that this responsive, flexible approach of individually adapting HIPPY to suit the parent's needs, is a key component of the program. This is a strategy to empower parents to take ownership of their HIPPY journey, not a lesser option for those who are "falling behind".

Encouraging

HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) in Australia and New Zealand focuses on the *interaction* between parent and the child, in contrast to HIPPY International, which focuses on *instructing* the child. HIPPY Australia has developed activities and resources that enhance the child's learning, parental capacity and strengthens the bond between the parent and child. The parent- child relationship is enriched through participating in activities that foster language and communication skills, social and emotional development and time spent together in play and exploration.

In our research, most parents agreed they had learnt new skills and knowledge, or communication techniques from their involvement in HIPPY, regardless of how long they were enrolled in the program. We recognise that the achievements of parents deserve to be recognised and

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acknowledged in order to strengthen the 'positive feedback loop' and the parent's sense of self-efficacy. The small steps made along the way to graduation need to be valued, in addition to providing encouragement to parents who may be struggling with the program.

Encouragement is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "giving support, confidence or hope to (someone)". The role of the tutor is to support and mentor a parent throughout the program, and providing encouragement is essential to this process.

Across HIPPY sites there will be a rich variety of ideas and processes that coordinators and tutors are currently using to recognise parents' achievements or to provide encouragement when families are struggling. We would like to suggest HIPPY Australia collates these site-based strategies to create a shared resource of ideas and incentives. Viewed as a collaborative working document, all sites can contribute ideas as they develop them and use the contributions of others to enrich their own work. With the knowledge that many of our families are facing considerable challenges to participating in HIPPY, it is essential that their commitment and growth is regularly honoured.

From the discussions with participants in this research, it has become evident that any amount of HIPPY can enhance a parent's active involvement with their child. Many HIPPY Inala parents agreed they had learnt new skills, knowledge and ways of interacting and communicating with their children, which they have continued to use after their enrolment in HIPPY

When families create these new pathways of communication, build a strong culture of learning within the home and foster positive, lifelong dispositions towards learning they are empowering not only their children, but in the sentiment of our research participant Catherine, possibly even their "*future grandchildren*".

As William Ralph Inge wrote "*the proper time to influence the character of a child is about a hundred years before he is born*".

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