



Frankston North Communities for Children local evaluation

Final report

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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Abbreviations

CfC	Communities for Children
FaCS	Department of Family and Community Services
FaCSIA	Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
FaHCSIA	Department of families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
LGA	local government area
MSC	Most Significant Change
MSD	Melbourne Statistical Division
NGO	non-government organisation

A note on terminology

Throughout the life of the Communities for Children program, the term ‘initiative’ has been used to refer variously to local implementations of the program and to the individual activities funded to meet program objectives. To avoid confusion, in this final report the word ‘initiatives’ is avoided.

Also in this report, the terms ‘Communities for Children’ and ‘CfC’ refer to the Frankston North CfC site, as opposed to the CfC as a nationwide program, unless otherwise noted. The term ‘CfC activity’ is sometimes used instead of ‘CfC-funded activity’, for brevity.

Finally, ‘Frankston North CfC site’ is a concise term for the entire Frankston North, Karingal and Carrum Downs site. Comments about specific localities are distinguished by ‘Frankston North area exclusively’ or similar.

Summary

This report is the final document produced as part of the evaluation of the Communities for Children (CfC) Frankston North initiative. The evaluation has been conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, on behalf of the facilitating partner, Anglicare Victoria. It has sought to understand what outcomes this initiative has achieved for children, families and the community from the perspective of families and service providers.

CfC is one of four initiatives under the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA)¹ Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. This strategy aims to give ‘families, children and communities the opportunity to build a better future’ through fostering the implementation of ‘childhood initiatives and resources that can be used to achieve better outcomes for children, their families and communities’ (FaCSIA 2007b). The Australian Government has committed \$490 million to this program for 2004–2009, \$142 million of this being allocated to CfC (FaCS 2005).

Demographic data for Frankston indicate that children residing in Frankston North, Karingal and Carrum Downs (collectively referred to as Frankston North) are vulnerable to poor outcomes associated with intellectual development, health and general wellbeing. This, together with the high number of children living in the area, identified Frankston North as one of 45 sites in Australia appropriate for the implementation of the Communities for Children initiative (FaCS 2005). FaCSIA allocated \$3 million for the CfC Frankston site over the relevant period; this was distributed by the facilitating partner, Anglicare Victoria (FaCSIA 2006b).

A methodology called ‘Most Significant Change’ was used to examine the effectiveness of the CfC initiative at Frankston North. Program participants and workers were asked to share stories about the most important change they experienced as a result of their participation in CfC-funded activities and to explain why these changes had been important. These qualitative data have been used to give an overall picture of the initiative’s outcomes. The data collection for this evaluation was conducted in three phases.

Stories provided by participants indicate that Communities for Children had a range of benefits for children, parents, service providers and the Frankston North community in general.

The data collected for this evaluation provide a clear picture of the extent to which CfC has supported children’s acquisition of new knowledge and skills. The stories of parents and workers suggest that through their involvement in CfC activities children have developed better social skills and acquired an appreciation of social diversity. The data also indicate that programs supported by CfC have helped children improve their reading and other skills that have significant implications for their future social and academic success. The initiative has also helped children acquire an enhanced appreciation of music and to participate in regular physical activity.

The data also indicates that CfC has facilitated closer relationships between parents and their children. This has been achieved through a number of means, including helping parents acquire, in both formal and informal contexts, broader sets of parenting skills. Closer parent–child relationships have also been assisted through the provision of fun and novel activities that parents and children are able to undertake together.

¹ The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) was formerly known as the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and has since changed its name to Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). However, because CfC program began while the department was known as FaCSIA, that acronym is generally used in this report.

Parents were extremely grateful for the new skills and knowledge CfC allowed them to acquire, as well as the opportunities it offered them to participate in physical exercise and develop their own creativity. The knowledge they gained about services for families was also highly valued. Of particular importance for parents was the opportunity to 'get out of the house' and meet other parents experiencing similar challenges and with whom they could share advice and stories. Parents who had experienced depressive illness conveyed particularly well the importance of these social opportunities for parents' wellbeing.

Parents and carers of those children who are not well-supported by mainstream activities, whether due to cultural differences, language barriers or disability, were especially grateful for the social opportunities CfC provided them and their children. Families who 'fall between the cracks' in terms of services are often at risk of isolation and thus mental health issues. Communities for Children has undoubtedly been very important for these vulnerable families.

Findings indicate that CfC Frankston North not only benefitted children and their families but also the service networks, individual organisations and personnel providing CfC-funded services.

The support, extra promotion and cross-referral that were made possible through CfC's 'hub and spoke' model and through CfC's formal networking activities assisted services' development and their capacity to attract attendees.

The data also indicate that efforts that CfC Frankston North has put into facilitating networks among the early years workforce and sectors within it have been greatly rewarded. Service providers reported being more aware of other services to which they could refer clients and better able to implement initiatives that required the contributions of organisations additional to their own.

Individual workers also provided stories indicating that, on a personal level, their involvement with Communities for Children allowed them to develop their professional skills, make new friends and feel more connected and better able to contribute to their community.

Members of the wider Frankston North community also benefitted from CfC activities insofar as they were given the opportunity to come together with fellow residents in celebration of their community.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the Communities for Children (CFC) as implemented at the Frankston North, Carrum Downs and Karingal site (henceforth to be referred to as the Frankston North site). The evaluation was conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence on behalf of the facilitating partner, Anglicare Victoria. The evaluation has sought to establish what kinds of outcomes this initiative has achieved for children and families.

A methodology called ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) was adopted as the means of identifying outcomes for CfC. Consistent with MSC methodology, program participants, workers and volunteers were asked to share a personal story that illustrated the most important change they had experienced by virtue of their involvement with CFC, and to explain why this change was significant for them. Data collected through this method have been subject to thematic analysis. The MSC methodology was chosen in consultation with the facilitating partner and reflects the facilitating partner’s desire for qualitative data that indicated the *kinds of* meaning CFC held for service users and providers.

This local evaluation complements the national evaluation. Findings from this evaluation provide a nuanced view of service user and service provider experiences with Communities for Children whereas findings from the national evaluation are general in scope.

1 The CFC initiative

Communities for Children (CfC) is one of three central initiatives that were implemented under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy by the federal Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (now Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs). The goal of this strategy was to give ‘families, children and communities the opportunity to build a better future’ (FaCSIA 2007b) through facilitating the provision of programs and resources most needed by vulnerable families living in different regions. The Australian Government committed \$490 million to this program for 2004–2009, with \$142 million of this being allocated to CfC (FaCS 2005).

Recently, the Australian Government announced that CfC would receive funding for a further three years (until the end of the 2012 financial year). Communities for Children will now be part of the Family Support Program. This program has a similar but extended goal to that of Stronger Families and Communities: namely, to provide ‘prevention and early intervention programs to families with children up to 12 years who are at risk of disadvantage and who remain disconnected from childhood services’ (FaHCSIA 2009). Clearly, the change in the age of the target population has implications for the continuing relevance or importance of particular activities that have been supported by CfC Frankston North. Further comment on this is outside of the bounds of the current report.

According to FaCSIA, the main aim of CfC (as originally implemented) was to ‘positively impact on early child development’ by influencing the ‘social, economic and cultural environments of children and their families’ (FaCS 2005). This broad-based approach was grounded in early intervention and prevention theories which stress that each of these domains is important to children’s wellbeing.

The priority areas identified by FaCSIA for CfC – that is, those outcomes, activities and issues it was intended to address – are:

- child friendly communities
- healthy young families
- supporting families and parents
- early learning and care
- family and children’s services work effectively as a system

The CfC program was designed to meet the needs of children aged 0–5 and their families and was implemented in 45 communities across Australia (FaCS 2005; FaCSIA 2006b). These communities were selected on the basis of their low socioeconomic ratings and the fact that children make up large proportions of their populations (FaCS 2005). Through CfC, children and their families were provided services including playgroup programs, parenting services and community-building programs (FaCS 2005; FaCSIA 2006b; FaCSIA 2007b).

Each local implementation of CfC was supported by a network of community representatives, non-government organisations (NGOs) and representatives from FaCSIA (FaCSIA 2006b). At each site an NGO operated as a ‘facilitating partner’ (FaCSIA 2006b). The facilitating partner’s main role was to manage funding allocation to services providing activities that were considered best able to meet CfC outcomes. These services were known within the context of CfC as ‘community partners’.

Funding was allocated to services according to the four-year Community Strategic Plan and Service Delivery Plan which the facilitating partner (FP) developed in conjunction with local Communities for Children Committees (CCC). The CCC at each CfC site comprised representatives and stakeholders from the CfC site selected for involvement by the FP.

To measure how successful CfC had been in achieving outcomes, a national framework for evaluating the CfC project had been developed by an association of evaluators from NGOs (FaCS 2005). Each CfC site was to be evaluated by an NGO selected by facilitating partners (FaCS 2005).

2 Identifying early childhood risk factors in Frankston North

Early childhood development is an increasing focus of government policy in Europe and the UK as well as Australia. This owes, in part, to the accumulation of evidence in a number of research areas that the early years are important to the development of capacity, opportunity and quality of life across the lifespan. Findings indicate that social and economic disadvantage in childhood have enduring negative impact. Forms of social and financial disadvantage include the experience of abuse and/or neglect, having no carer in employment and having restricted access to services and amenities. These kinds of disadvantage are correlated with poorer educational attainment, poorer health and lower socioeconomic status later in life.

It is by virtue of Frankston North's identification as a 'disadvantaged' area – that is, as a location in which many families experiencing disadvantage reside (SEIFA index 2008) – that the Federal department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs selected it as one of 45 sites for implementation of the Communities for Children program.

CfC aimed to address some of the risk factors in particularly disadvantaged communities by funding locally devised and operated community initiatives intended to benefit preschool-aged children. This section of the report refers to early childhood risk factors and discusses their prevalence in the Frankston North area.

Defining early childhood developmental risk

Attempts have long been made to establish the relative contributions of nature and 'nurture', or genetic heredity and environmental factors, to healthy childhood development and life outcomes. Theorists vary in terms of the influence they attribute to one or the other of these categories.

Among those theorists who argue for the greater relevance of inherited factors to childhood developmental risk and children's future prospects are Baumeister and Bacharach. They contend that a child's general intelligence (which itself is taken to be genetically determined) is the 'most robust' predictor of a child's educational, occupational and health outcomes later in life (Bacharach and Baumeister 2000, p. 167). Other theorists argue that genetically inherited sensitivity to stressful events is a significant determinant of 'risk', or the chance of negative rather than positive future outcomes. Others again believe that outcomes like adult depression, substance dependency and development of criminal behaviour are reliant on genetic predisposition (see Costello et al. 2002; Monroe and Simons 1991; Kendler et al. 1995).

Other theorists emphasise the importance of environment to children's development and life chances. Frederick (2005) and Turner and Butler (2003) refer to a 'chain reaction' whereby poor social support early in life can increase individuals' chances of undergoing further negative experiences. Longitudinal studies have shown that poor psychosocial experiences in the early years increase an individual's risk of encountering difficulties later in life in terms of acquiring education, securing and retaining employment and maintaining relationships (Rutter in Frederick 2005).

Still other theorists refer to the interaction of social and biological factors in the creation of risk. Many contemporary theorists contend that early childhood should be subject to special attention because it is a time in which the brain undergoes rapid development. In early childhood, synapses – connections between brain cells – are produced at a greater rate than at any other point in a human's life. Synaptic growth, or how the 'brain becomes wired', is now accepted to be highly responsive to social and other environmental factors (see Cameron and McDermott 2007). This implies that influences to which children are exposed will have lasting effects on their brains and thus their cognition, emotion and behaviour (and their levels of competency, resilience and so

forth.) Those children who have been neglected or abused, for example, are at particular risk of developing maladaptive cognitive strategies and behaviour.

Below, individual risk factors are discussed in more depth in conjunction with a consideration of risk as it relates to children in the Frankston North area.

Frankston North, Karingal and Carrum Downs: early childhood risk factors

General area statistics

The Frankston Local Government Area (LGA) is located roughly forty kilometres south-east of the Melbourne CBD, and includes the suburbs of Frankston Central, Frankston North, Frankston South, Karingal, Carrum Downs, Seaford, Frankston Heights and Langwarrin/Langwarrin South (KPMG Consulting 2001).

According to the 2006 census, the population of the Frankston LGA was 118,951, with 6 per cent of residents being under the age of 5 (Frankston City Council 2008). While Frankston's overall preschool child population is similar to that of Greater Melbourne (at 6.3 per cent), the concentration of children in Frankston's suburbs is distributed unevenly. Around 8 per cent of Carrum Downs' population is under 5 years of age, where 6.5 per cent and 6.0 per cent of Frankston North and Karingal's populations, respectively, are of this age (Frankston City Council 2008).

Frankston North and Karingal have high levels of disadvantage: large numbers of residents are on low income, have low educational attainment, are unemployed and employed in relatively unskilled occupations. As such, children at Frankston are considered to be more at risk than children in other localities. Frankston North is categorised as the most disadvantaged suburb in the Frankston LGA, followed by Karingal. Carrum Downs is considered the fifth-most disadvantaged suburb (Frankston City Community Atlas 2007a).

Familial risk factors

Research from various sources has shown that the quality of children's attachment to family members is a predictor of their social and emotional development (Schore 2001; Vimpani 1999). Positive life outcomes are associated with strong, warm, familial relationships (Garbarino and Abramowitz 1992; Masten and Coatsworth 1998; National Public Health Partnership 2004). Egeland's longitudinal study concluded that children deprived of 'emotionally responsive parenting' are at risk of developing 'serious problems in all developmental areas'. These problems can endure and affect future life chances (Egeland et al. 1993, p. 523).

Parental separation and single parenting

Research conducted by Frederick and colleagues indicates that children are at particular development risk where they have minimal contact with a parent following their parents' separation (Frederick 2005). Parental separation itself can be highly distressing. It produces stressors for children like 'feelings of loss, changes in home and school, loss of friends and support networks, financial adversity, changes in work patterns of adults, parental depression and new parental relationships' (Davies in Frederick 2005). In 2001, Frankston was found to have a particularly high number of one-parent families; (13.8% of the population compared to 10.6% for Victoria generally) (Frankston City Community Atlas 2007b). This trend is particularly strong in Frankston North where 21.2 per cent of children lived in single parent families in 2006 (Chan, Cortis and Sawriker 2006, p.5).

Abuse, violence and neglect

Child abuse, family violence and neglect have also been associated with poor outcomes and developmental delay among children aged up to five years of age (FaCSIA 2007a, p. 8). Wolfe (2002) claims that abuse is a major risk factor for the development of mental health problems in childhood and that it can lead to poor adult functioning. Frankston North is considered a state government priority in terms of its strategy for addressing child abuse and neglect (Department of Human Services 2004a). The Frankston local government area has the second-highest rate of reported family violence incidents per 100,000 in Greater Melbourne (Doyle and Keleher 2006, p. 15). It has a considerably higher rate of child protection notifications (52 children per 1000) than for Victoria as a whole (32 children per 1000). Numbers of notifications made in Frankston North are particularly high, with notifications being made in relation to 82 children per 1000 (Doyle and Keleher 2006, p. 15). Such is the prevalence of child abuse in Frankston that the Frankston City Council outlined child abuse and 'issues of neglect and emotional abuse' as a 'top ten' priority issue in their 2002–2007 wellbeing plan.

Health and developmental factors

Malnutrition among young children constitutes a risk factor and is associated with disease and poor access to social services (Centre for Child Community Health 2000). In 2004, the Victorian Department of Human Services found that, of all populations in Greater Melbourne, Frankston residents spent the least money on fruit and vegetables (Department of Human Services 2004b). The 2006 Frankston City Health and Wellbeing study found that fast food stores outnumber fresh fruit and vegetable shops in Frankston, and that only 13 per cent of Frankston participants had access to fresh fruit and vegetables within 500 metres of their homes (Doyle and Keleher 2006).

Additionally, 12.3 per cent of Frankston's population reported having spent periods of time without food due to a lack of financial resources (Doyle and Keleher 2006). Findings from the 2007 Community Indicators survey are consistent with this data. In this survey, 11.5 per cent of Frankston participants stated that they had experienced food stress, compared with only 6.1 per cent of the Victorian population overall (Community Indicators Victoria 2007). Together, these facts suggest nutritional impoverishment is a widespread problem for children in Frankston. Given the rapid amount of development the brain undergoes in the early years and how dependent its proper development is upon nutrients, children stand to suffer particularly from poor nutrition.

In 2006, the Royal Children's Hospital conducted a study designed to ascertain levels of vulnerability to developmental delay among children in Victoria. 'Domains' of development that were considered to include physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication and general knowledge (Royal Children's Hospital 2006). Findings indicate that children in Frankston are particularly at risk of developmental delay. Around 45.9 per cent of children in Frankston North were found to be vulnerable in one or more domains. The proportions of vulnerable children in Carrum Downs and Frankston City considered vulnerable to delay were between 18.5 and 24.7 per cent and 24.7 to 45.9 per cent, respectively (Royal Children's Hospital 2006).

Findings from Frankston City Council's 'Putting Children First' report are consistent with these data. The report states that between 2002 and 2005, there was a 300 per cent increase in the numbers of children who were referred to programs designed to assist children showing developmental delay (McCartin 2005). Findings from these reports provide particular justification for the implementation of Communities for Children in the Frankston North area.

Socioeconomic factors

How easily a family is able to meet the needs of their children – that is, provide food and shelter, as well as emotional support, educational opportunities and other social goods – depends in large part on a family's income and the employment opportunities available to the family's main providers.

An OECD report states that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to 'develop the same level of skills and intellectual capital' as other children (OECD 2006). This has significant ramifications for the rest of their lives.

Household income

One indicator of a family's level of economic vulnerability is its weekly income. The 2001 census found that a percentage of households in the Frankston LGA greater than the average for Victorian households overall received low or low to medium incomes (Victorian Electoral Commission 2007). This is consistent with the finding from the Frankston City Health and Wellbeing Plan that over 50 per cent of households in Frankston receive incomes that fall within the first and second quartiles of income brackets (Doyle and Keleher 2006, p. 17). By comparison, only 44.5% of Melbourne's overall population receive incomes in the first and second quartiles (Doyle and Keleher 2006, p. 17). Frankston North and Karingal were in the top five of Victorian suburbs with high numbers of low-income households, with 40.3 per cent and 31.6 per cent of their populations, respectively, classified as low-income (Frankston City Community Atlas 2007c). These statistics together with the finding that large percentages of families in Frankston receive maximum Family Tax Payments (Department of Human Services 2002) suggest that children living in the suburbs of Frankston North, Carrum Downs and Karingal are at high risk of social exclusion based upon low household income.

Household unemployment

Household unemployment is another indicator of socioeconomic risk for young children. 'Household unemployment' can be defined as a household in which no occupants are employed and is 'associated with a lesser standard of living' and increased need for support services (Frankston City Community Atlas 2007a).

The Frankston local government area had a higher proportion of household socioeconomic disadvantage than the state average in 2001, with 7.6 per cent of people unemployed compared with a Victorian average of 6.8 per cent (Victorian Electoral Commission 2007). Of suburbs in the Frankston LGA, Frankston North had the highest unemployment rate at this time, with 15.3 per cent of the potential working population unemployed (Frankston City Community Atlas 2007d).

The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, measures the prevalence of low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and employment in relatively unskilled occupations among populations of different areas. The lower the score the more disadvantaged the locality is considered. The score assigned to the Frankston LGA (993) in 2004 was lower than the Victorian average (1015) and the national average (1000) (Insight Health and 2004). Frankston ranked as the twenty-second most socioeconomically disadvantaged area in Victoria out of eighty local government areas (Frankston City Council 2007a).

Frankston's score on the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage has two implications. It means, firstly, that many children in Frankston are growing up in families that struggle to meet their needs. Just as importantly, it means they are living in communities in which high levels of unemployment and low income are common. As stated within the National Agenda for Early Childhood, children's development is greatly influenced by their broader environment, or the communities in which they are raised (Department of Australian Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2007a). Communities characterised by high levels of unemployment can pose risks for children's healthy development. High levels of unemployment are often correlated with higher than average rates of substance abuse, divorce, child and spouse abuse, juvenile delinquency and suicide (Selig and Kugler 1985).

Access to services

Lack of access to social services like kindergartens presents a major risk to children's healthy development and future wellbeing. The Department of Family, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs claims that those who experience geographic, social and economic forms of isolation are in particular need of better services and better access to services (Barclay et al. 2004). A Monash University study of the health and wellbeing of the Frankston community found social isolation to be a significant problem within the Frankston LGA (Doyle and Keleher 2006).

There are a number of social support and health programs operating in Frankston that are designed to ameliorate the effects of isolation. However, as was determined by the health and wellbeing study, potential users of many of these services and workers from other organisations who could be referring clients to them are unaware of the services' existence (Doyle and Keleher 2007, p. 21). The same study found that 41 per cent of Frankston residents thought access to child and family support services required improvement (Doyle and Keleher 2007, p. 25).

Another study conducted in 2003 for the Frankston City Council found that at least 15 per cent of young children in the Frankston LGA received inadequate government support in the form of early intervention services (McCartin 2005, p. 13). The Brotherhood of St Laurence found in their study of barriers to service use among families in the Frankston area that several factors affected families' ability to take up services. Barriers mentioned included the location of services and lack of transport to these locations, the cost of services, the length of waiting lists for services, lack of childcare options, the behaviour of staff at services, and poor coordination among services. This study supported, as did the health and wellbeing study, that lack of knowledge about available services also impacted usage (Davies and Oke 2008).

An area of service delivery that residents of the Frankston local government area have had particular trouble accessing is healthcare; a 2001 study reported that 33 per cent of Frankston residents thought access to health services needed improvement (Doyle and Keleher 2007, p. 30). Frankston North is particularly under-serviced in terms of healthcare. Whereas, in 2001, there were 95 residents per GP in Frankston Central, Frankston North had 6395 residents for every GP (KPMG Consulting 2001, p.14). Even harder for Frankston residents to access were bulk-billing medical services. Carrum Downs residents were found to have the fewest bulk-billing primary medical practices in their area (Doyle and Keleher 2007, p. 29).

The difficulty families in Frankston experience in terms of accessing means of formal support is another indicator of the risks children in the area face to their healthy development, wellbeing and positive future outcomes.

Policy responses to early childhood risk and the CfC initiative

In the last decade, there have been considerable shifts in government policy in the United Kingdom, parts of Europe, the USA and Australia relevant to the protection and nurture of children in their early years. Broadly speaking, there has been a move away from a resource allocation model aimed at addressing, through discrete programs, entrenched problems already being experienced by particular 'disadvantaged' groups of children. Recent policy developments internationally recognise the need for a whole-of-government approach and the provision of *integrated* services at a primary prevention or early intervention level.

'Early intervention' can be defined in a number of ways. As implemented in the area of early childhood, early intervention can be understood as those measures that are designed to ensure 'positive early childhood development physically, mentally, socially and emotionally' (Rogers et al.2004, p. 6). Early intervention in childhood might be thought of as delivering benefits in three areas: child development, parent-child relationships and broader family relationships (Rogers et al.2004, p. 9).

According to Oberclaid, the recent emphasis in government policy upon early intervention has been stimulated, at least in Australia, by four main factors. These factors include a decline in developmental outcomes for children; changes in family structures and circumstances; new findings about brain development and decreasing efficiencies (or rising costs) in service delivery (in Grieshaber et al. 2006). The first three factors have been discussed to some extent above. The cost effectiveness of early intervention in early childhood is referred to in the next sub-section.

International policy and program responses

Neuman observes that in the last decade the OECD has recorded an ‘unprecedented surge of international attention’ to the early years of children’s lives (2002, p. 10). Many countries have seen the importance of integrating education, social welfare and health services so that the wide-ranging needs of families and children can be met ‘in a holistic manner’ (Neuman 2000, p. 14). The UK experience highlights issues pertinent to, and changes that have occurred within, early years policy in the last several decades internationally.

Between 1939 and the early 1960s the only significant form of welfare provided for children in their early years in the UK was childcare. State funding of childcare began during the Second World War as a consequence of the greater need for women to enter the workforce. In the 1970s social services departments took over regulation of early childhood services from public health departments, resulting in better integration, in some local areas, with education and other social services. There was no explicit government policy or coordinated action, however, to facilitate this kind of integrated service delivery UK-wide.

UK government policy during the 1970s came to be influenced by the theory of intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. It was accepted that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds need formal support if they are to reach developmental goals and have the same opportunities as other children. Consequently, a number of measures such as the Family Credit system and vouchers for nursery education were introduced. It was also at this time that integrated services were first implemented.

Labor came into power in 1997 and, through such policies as their National Childcare Strategy, made supporting children in their early years a priority. Since 2003, the government has created the posts of Minister for Children and Children’s Commissioner for England, established Children’s Trusts in all local authority areas and created Children’s Services Authorities in the same. It has invested millions in programs such as Sure Start (described below).

The early years policy trajectory in the UK is comparable to that in other Western countries.

In the United States in the last decade there has been a similar increase in the amount of government funding provided for children’s services beyond traditional childcare services and those available just for families most in need. The Federal government now funds a wide range of programs supportive of children’s broader developmental needs. White (2004) argues that this change is related, at least in part, to changes in the discourse of both advocates and policymakers relating to service provision for children. In recent times, those involved in the child care policy area ‘no longer talk only about “childcare” but also childcare’s explicit connection to early childhood development or early childhood education’ (White 2004, p. 666).

Within OECD countries, the new political interest in the early years has resulted in the creation of many new programs and the expansion of others. Head Start is a federally funded program in the USA that coordinates educational, health, social and mental health agencies to deliver services for disadvantaged families. Its main aims are to increase school readiness of young children in low-income families, and help break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool children with a comprehensive program to ‘meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs’ (Neuman 2002, p. 14). Whilst Head Start as a program providing for 3 to 5-year-olds has

been running since 1965, in 1995 it was expanded to include Early Head Start. Early Head Start provides services for pregnant women and children aged 0–3 years and families.

The Sure Start program in England, established in 1998, is based on Head Start. Like Head Start, it provides a range of services, including early education services, childcare, health and family support services. Services it provides include those that are universal and those that are tailored to meet the needs of particular local areas and populations. The main principles of Sure Start are that services are provided to parents and children that: increase their wellbeing and opportunities; are flexible and easy to access; begin from the first antenatal visit; are respectful and transparent; are community-driven and are professionally coordinated and outcome driven (United Kingdom Government 2009).

Findings on the success of broad, multi-stranded programs for children in their early years have been mostly positive. Lynch (2004) has concluded that, in addition to better social and cognitive functioning for children, these programs can provide such benefits as less family poverty, better parenting and better family and community cohesion. An evaluation of Early Head Start in 2005 (Head Start for children aged up to three years) found that child participants were more developmentally advanced than their peers (OECD 2005, p. 36). Parent participants had stronger parenting skills and better knowledge about children and parenting than members of a control group. It should also be noted, however, that not all evaluations of such programs have been positive. Researchers evaluating Sure Start in the UK in 2005 were unable to conclude that the program had met its goals (OECD 2005, p. 36).

Rogers et al.(2004) state that, intuitively, it would seem provision of support for young children will create future public savings in terms of services these individuals *won't* need as adults (for example, drug and alcohol support and justice-related services). More research on the economic benefits of early years programs, however, is needed. Some important studies have produced findings providing support, from an economic perspective, for investment in the early years. Lynch found that institutional provision of comprehensive services encompassing childcare, education, health and family support is capable of providing 'very high rates of return for participants, public and the government'. He found that the best early childhood programs return three dollars for every dollar invested (in Gammage 2006, p. 244). Rolnick has found that there is a 16% return rate, on average, for money invested in early childhood programs (in Grieshaber et al.2006).

National policy responses

Comparable to the approach of governments in other countries, prior to the 1980s Australian governments were inclined to address early childhood risk through providing individual, targeted programs at the tertiary level of intervention. Government funding, that is to say, favoured services for children who were already experiencing problems related to poor caregiving environments, their families' low socioeconomic status and/or poor access to services over preventative programs. Services provided by government, the private sector and non-government organisations (NGOs) at this time worked in relative isolation from one another (Grieshaber 2006).

The McMahon and Fraser governments, in particular, preferred helping children 'in special need' to implementing universal programs (Senate Community Affairs Committee 2006). 'Children in special need' were defined as those whose families were headed by single parents, parents who had migrated to Australia and/or parents who were suffering from serious illness, and those whose families received low incomes (Senate Community Affairs Committee 2006). The need to provide support for all children in their early years has since this time been viewed as increasingly important and, reflecting overseas policy trends, early childhood has been a particular focus of Australian Government policy in the last ten years.

Issues of early childhood were emphasised in federal election campaigns in 2004 with both major parties creating policies, at state and federal levels, targeting children aged 0–8 (Barclay et al. 2004;

Grieshaber 2006, Hayes 2005). In 2004 the federal government developed a National Agenda for Early Childhood. A cornerstone of this agenda was the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy under which Communities for Children was initially funded. The aim of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was 'to strengthen young children, their families and communities by investing in locally developed, whole-of-community projects that build resilience and the ability to deal with problems before they develop' (Davies and Taylor 2005, p. 2).

Most recently, the Council of Australian Governments endorsed a National Early Childhood Development Strategy to be further elaborated in 2010. The National Early Childhood Development Strategy has the aim of building a 'more effective and better coordinated national early childhood development system' (DEEWR 2009). Related initiatives will provide for children from before birth to eight years old and are broad in scope, intended to impact the health, safety, early learning and wellbeing of all children as well as provide extra support for disadvantaged children (DEEWR 2009).

Most states in Australia have also developed their own strategies. Tasmania, for example, has developed a 'whole of government' policy framework for the early years. Similar to federal policies and policies in other states, this agenda was developed in response to research findings on brain development and factors 'affecting the 'wiring of the infant brain', and from local and overseas studies on 'risk and protective factors affecting later child health and wellbeing' (Jenkins 2005, p. 5).

Communities for Children and other programs funded through the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy reflect current international interest in interventions that involve all levels of government in addition to business and non-government organisations and that are underpinned by a national framework that allows for individual approaches at the local level (Davies and Taylor 2005).

3 Methodology

The method chosen in conjunction with the CfC facilitating partner, Anglicare Victoria, for the evaluation of CfC Frankston North (from here on, to be referred to as CfC) is called Most Significant Change (MSC). The MSC methodology has two main components, each of which can be repeated over the life of a project. The first component involves collecting ‘stories’ from those users and providers of activities supported or funded by the program who have agreed to take part in the evaluation. Research participants are asked for stories that detail important changes they have experienced as a result of their involvement with the program. In some instances, stories are recorded in written form by the ‘storytellers’ themselves and in other instances they are provided verbally (and audio-recorded by the evaluators.).

The second main component of the MSC methodology is the ‘sifting workshop’. The purpose of sifting workshops is to provide individuals associated with CfC-funded activities to come together to analyse the stories that have been collected.

Most Significant Change

As mentioned earlier in this report, feedback was sought from consumers in the form of stories. These were collected using the Most Significant Change method (MSC).

The Most Significant Change method was developed by Davies in the 1990s for use in a rural development program in Bangladesh. It was originally formulated to overcome particular obstacles involved in evaluating complex community programs (Davies 1998; Dart and Davies 2005). MSC uses the experiences of participants as a starting point for project evaluation. This reinforces the importance of participant contributions in building theories about project impacts.

A particular strength of the Most Significant Change method is that it can provide detailed information regarding a program’s impact at the individual level or, in other words, upon individual clients and service providers. MSC is also a participatory research technique; it encourages individuals at all levels of a program to assess program impact. This has the potential benefit of encouraging greater participation in research across the program (Dart and Davies 2005). The MSC is especially well suited to evaluations that are small in scope; its focus is on qualitative data and can usefully use data from small through to large groups. For these reasons, the MSC was identified by the evaluation team together with the facilitating partner as the most appropriate methodology for the evaluation of Communities for Children Frankston North.

The first task of evaluators using the MSC approach is to generate interest in the methodology among program stakeholders and to encourage stakeholders’ commitment to participating in the evaluation (Dart and Davies 2005). The next step is to help community stakeholders identify ‘domains of change’, referring to (broadly defined) client or community needs, and social and service delivery variables it is intended that the program will impact. Evaluation participants are asked in the story collection phase to indicate the domain within which their story provides evidence of change having occurred.

As described above, the ‘story collection’ phase involves obtaining data on program achievements through eliciting stories from program providers and service users about changes to their life resulting from their involvement with the relevant program.

Important to the analysis of the data, and constituting the second main component of the MSC methodology, is the ‘sifting workshop’. Sifting workshops provide opportunities for individuals associated with the program to participate in a considered reading of the MSC stories. The task of workshop participants is to identify stories that are most representative of, or informative about, each

‘domain’ (or variable that the stakeholders had hoped the program would affect). To this end, stories are grouped according to the domains ‘storytellers’ had indicated were most relevant to their experiences with the program, and distributed among groups of workshop participants for discussion.

Particular limitations of the MSC methodology (as acknowledged by Davies and Dart) include that it has the ability to yield more data about positive than negative aspects of the program, regardless of actual levels of satisfaction among program providers and recipients. This is in part because many participants provide their comments directly to the evaluators. Speaking directly to evaluators can lessen participants’ sense of anonymity and make them reluctant to criticise programs from which they are receiving services. The sifting workshop process – given that workshops are largely composed of service providers – also encourages selection of positive and well-crafted stories as those most ‘representative’ of program outcomes.

The MSC methodology, however, has many advantages. One of the main ways in which the MSC method ensures validity is through providing ‘thick description’: that is descriptive data both within and about the story (Davies and Dart 2005, p. 67) with sufficient internal coherence to allow others to make their own interpretations (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The Most Significant Change technique and CfC in Frankston North

The MSC methodology can be adapted and modified to suit different research contexts. Differences between this implementation of the MSC methodology and standard procedure include that stories were collected, selected and analysed in three separate rounds rather than one. Another difference is that stories did not pass through a review stage within the organisational hierarchy of Anglicare Victoria – CfC’s facilitating partner – prior to the sifting workshops. Sifting workshops were the only ‘story sorting’ stage in which individuals outside the evaluation team were able to participate.

The most important difference between the present CfC evaluation and the normal MSC process is related to the composition of invitees to the sifting workshop. Ordinarily the sifting workshop is attended only by those individuals involved in the design, management and delivery of the program being evaluated. In the case of the CfC evaluation, recipients of services provided through CfC were also invited to attend.

Stories for the CfC evaluation were collected and analysed in three phases. Phase 1 was conducted from mid 2006 to mid 2007, Phase 2 from mid 2007 to mid 2008 and Phase 3 from mid 2008 to mid 2009.

MSC change stories were collected, in every phase, at the activity level. ‘Activity’ in the context of this report refers to those individual services such as Dive Into Reading that were selected by the CfC facilitating partner for funding. Within ordinary discourse about community services, ‘service’ can refer either to the categories of assistance an organisation provides or the organisation itself. The word ‘activity’ is used here instead of ‘service’ to avoid this kind of confusion. Distinguishing between organisations and the activities they provide is particularly important in the case of CfC given that some organisations provide more than one CfC-funded activity. Stories were collected from parents and workers (including managers, facilitators, teachers, other paid staff and volunteers) involved in the CfC Frankston North initiative.

Story collection methodological considerations

Data collection instrument

The data collection instrument or ‘story collection sheet’ (see Appendix A) used in each phase contained the following questions to which evaluation participants were required to respond:

- Tell us a story that represents the most significant change that has occurred for you through your involvement in this program?
- Why is this change significant for you?

In addition to responding to these questions, participants were required to select from a list of ‘domains of change’, the domain or domains of most relevance to their experiences within CfC. As stated above, a domain of change is a client or community need or a social or service delivery variable it is hoped a program will impact. Ten domains were initially identified at a stakeholder workshop in 2006. This first list resembled the list of priority areas for the Stronger Families and Communities initiatives but contained additional domains that, workshop attendees felt, made the list more relevant to activity participants. The large number of domains, however, proved at the pilot stage to be unwieldy. At the start of Phase 1, then, use of the five FaCSIA priority areas (see p.2) instead of newly identified domains was trialled. Evaluation participants appeared unclear about these priority areas, so the ten domains were reincorporated into the research instrument. These domains are: inclusive communities for all families and cultures; child and family physical and mental health; positive parenting skills; early learning and care; promoting child friendly communities; partnerships and professional development; sustainability; community members’ participation; children and family services working together and community participation.

In Phase 2, these ten domains were consolidated into eight. The domain of ‘sustainability’ was abolished on the grounds that no-one selected it in the previous round of story collection. The domain of ‘participation’ was combined with the domain of ‘community participation’. Stories previously associated with the excised domain were recorded as having selected the domain by which it was subsumed. The eight domains were retained for Phase 3.

Story collection process

The story collection process was described and discussed with activity providers at a workshop in November 2006 prior to the commencement of Phase 1. At this workshop activity providers were presented with two options in terms of how to collect stories. The first way was by distributing collection sheets to service users to fill in individually. The second way was to collect stories through group collaboration and discussion. All activities chose the first option. This means that service users wanting to take part in the evaluation were required to fill out a form and return it to employees from the relevant activity. Employees and volunteers of CfC-funded activities willing to share stories were also required to fill out a form and return it to managers or appointed story collectors.

The story collection process was again discussed at the Phase 1 sifting workshop in May 2007 with a view to increasing the response rate. Following this discussion, the main change decided on was that the research team would, where possible, collect stories through interviewing interested service users and workers (the collective term used here for both employees and volunteers) rather than relying on self-administration and mail. Conducting interviews was not, however, appropriate for every service – for example, the Post-natal Depression Support group – because of the vulnerability of activity users.

The vast majority of stories in Phase 3 were also collected through interview.

4 Evaluation findings

By the end of the third round of story collection, 168 stories had been collected from 35 activities representing around 80% of the activities that the research team approached. Not all activities were approached for stories. The activities invited to participate were selected on the basis that they constituted a diverse but representative sample of activities funded by CfC. Activities from which stories were collected are listed in Appendix B.

There are several reasons why stories were collected in phases. One of the most important of these is that activities funded through CfC Frankston North operated over different time periods. Another reason is that staggering data collection allowed findings to be analysed and presented in stages also. That findings were presented to activity providers over three different sifting workshops meant participants could learn about the benefits of the evaluation as it unfolded. Holding two sifting workshops prior a final workshop had the potential of attracting the participation of activities that were yet to provide stories.

In Phase 1, 32 stories were collected from 11 activities run by eight different organisations. Of these, 23 came from clients, one came from a volunteer and 8 came from paid staff members. In Phase 2, 84 stories were collected from 15 activities. In Phase 3, 52 stories were collected from 11 activities. At the conclusion of Round 3, 168 stories had been collected from 29 activities.

Activity providers were welcome to supply stories in all three rounds of story collecting. Four activities provided stories in two rounds. One activity provided stories in all three rounds.

There is a range of reasons why more stories might not have been collected from particular activities. Some activities declined to have stories collected at all. This is because of a perceived incompatibility between the services they provided and the story collecting method used by MSC. In the case of activities such as Developing Futures for Babies and Toddlers, service users typically had only had one instance of contact with providers. Questions relating to how their lives had changed as a result of their association with the activity were thus seen as not relevant to them.

That the number of agencies which provided stories and the number of stories that were collected from agencies which *did* provide data were not higher may be related to inadequate resourcing at the activity or organisation level. Where organisations are struggling to provide the most basic of activities they have been funded to deliver, evaluation tasks understandably can become a lower priority.

The range of stories that were collected, however, has provided an ample picture of the program's successes.

Domain selection

In each of the three phases of story collection, evaluation participants were asked to identify those domains that best correlated with changes they had experienced as a result of their involvement with particular CfC activities.

Table 4.1 describes the relationship between the domains presented for selection in the first round of story collecting and the Communities for Children priority areas as well as frequencies for selection of the different domains by evaluation participants. Table 4.2 provides frequencies for domain selection in the second and third round of story collection, when participants were limited to one domain per story.

These tables show that the most frequently chosen domains were early learning and care, promoting child friendly communities, child and family physical and mental health and partnerships and professional development. This indicates that, as a group, evaluation participants saw CfC as having delivered benefits to the full range of intended beneficiaries, that is children and their parents, workers and the community at large. In the first and second round of story collecting, domain selection emphasised the support that CfC activities was thought to have given young children – the main target of Communities for Children. The main domain selected in the third round of story collecting – partnerships and professional development – showed that workers and service delivery in general were seen to have genuinely gained from the program also.

Table 4.1 Domains selected by storytellers, Phase 1

Domain	CfC priority area	*Frequency Selected
Early learning and care	Early learning and care	13 (41%)
Inclusive communities for all families and cultures	Child friendly communities	8 (25%)
Child and family physical and mental health	Healthy young families	8 (25%)
Positive parenting skills	Supporting families and parents	7 (22%)
Promoting child friendly communities	Promoting Child friendly communities	7 (22%)
Partnerships and professional development	Family and children's services work effectively as a team	5 (16%)
Participation	Healthy young families	5 (16%)
Community members' participation	Child friendly communities	4 (13%)
Children and family services working together	Family and children's services work effectively as a team	2 (6%)
Sustainability	Child friendly communities	0 (0%)

*Note that percentages total more than 100 because, for Phase 1 of story collecting, participants were able to select more than one domain.

Table 4.2 Domains selected by storytellers, Phases 2 and 3

Domain	Phase 2 Frequency	Phase 3 Frequency
Early learning and care	20 (23%)	6 (12%)
Promoting child friendly communities	15 (18%)	8 (15%)
Child and family physical and mental health	11(13%)	9 (17%)
Positive parenting skills	9 (11%)	6 (12%)
Partnerships and professional development	9 (11%)	11 (21%)
Community members' participation	8 (10%)	6 (12%)
Inclusive communities for all families and cultures	7 (8%)	4 (8%)
Children and family services working together	5 (6%)	2 (4%)
TOTAL	84(100%)	52(100%)

Themes in the stories

The stories collected from activities can be usefully aggregated by participant-nominated domains. Stories underwent a second level of analysis involving open coding; that is, rather than stories having been sorted into pre-determined categories, themes were created around the content of the stories as they were read. Stories sorted by the open coding categories are presented below.

Stories received were overwhelmingly positive about the Communities for Children program. Both parents and workers identified in their stories a wide range of ways in which CfC-funded activities were able to strengthen their personal capacity and the community's capacity to raise and care for children. Some parents referred to the acquisition of social skills and self-confidence as the most important things CfC activities provided their children. Other evaluation participants pointed to particular skills such as reading as the most significant benefits their children received. Among those personal benefits parents claimed to have derived from CFC activities are better parenting skills and increased opportunities for social interaction with other parents.

Stories related by workers concerning CFC activities indicate that they also were able to identify the kinds of positive changes parents reported. Among those benefits that workers from CfC-funded activities claimed to have derived personally are improved professional skills and knowledge, and better working relationships with workers from other services. The reported changes and benefits are discussed in more detail below.

Note that the data collected through these stories have not been subject to quantitative analysis; that is to say, that frequencies for different categories of responses have not been calculated. From time to time throughout the text, however, it is noted when a particular category of response was made by a high number of respondents. This is consistent with the philosophy underpinning the Most Significant Change method which honours individual voices and perspectives. Providing frequencies for themes in qualitative data can create artificial hierarchies of importance and/or distract from the actual content of stories. Frequencies provided for participants' selection of domains (see tables) give sufficient indication of the dominance of particular themes in the data.

Also note that minimal distinctions have been made between data provided at Phases 1, 2 and 3. This is because 'phases' do not represent changes occurring over time in the lives of the one group of service users but rather refer to the different times at which data was collected.

Children

References in stories to ways in which children have benefited from CFC-funded activities were more common than those pointing to how parents or workers had benefited from the same. This reflects the child-focused nature of CfC-funded programs. Evaluation participants identified in their stories ways in which the CfC activities had assisted children's confidence and their capacity to interact with other children. They also indicate ways in which children were encouraged to learn and were aided in their development of new skills. Positive aspects of the programs for children as reported by evaluation participants are discussed further below.

Socialisation and self-confidence

Referred to in several stories was the importance of the opportunities CFC activities gave children for socialising. Across all three phases it was reported that CfC programs decreased children's isolation and encouraged them to make friends. A parent at Dive into Reading explained that the program helped her daughter by:

Better preparing her to the world of English. We speak Chinese at home. And [she can] socialise with other children and adults. She is an only child and we don't have relatives in Australia.

Several parents identified social skills as important to their children's 'future development'. A typical statement made by parents is:

(The activity) is very important for the development of the children, especially their social interaction. They sit down and talk and eat with other kids. They get to know each other and play with each other.

Parent, Koori Early Learning Group

Many parents identified ways in which children's social skills had improved as a result of their involvement in CfC activities. One parent from Open House Playgroup stated: 'My children can interact with other children, be creative and learn to be polite and responsible'. Another parent said that she appreciated that, through having attended a CfC activity, her daughter is 'helping with sharing and other things'.

Workers also recognised the value for children of the social opportunities provided to them by CfC activities. One worker reported about a young service user:

The girl participated in craft activities but when it came to 'mat time' she stayed by her aunty's side just watching. On the 29th of January, our very first session back for 2007, she ran over when I put the music on and jumped and jived to the beat – her rhythm was remarkable.

Worker, Early Years Locality Group

This worker explained why she considered this story to be significant in the following terms:

... it reminds me why I continue to run this program – you need to positively affect children from a young age so that through their learning life they will possess the confidence, good self esteem and courage to face life's problems.

Worker, Early Years Locality Group

Another worker provided a story about a child whose confidence developed rapidly during the time he was engaged in a particular CfC activity:

All the children showed lots of progress as the sessions moved along. However, [one boy] showed enormous change. He changed from a shy child who barely spoke, to a confident, outspoken boy who was laughing and talking with others. [One girl], who rarely mixes with the other children is now dancing a solo ballerina part in the Kinder concert. The confidence and camaraderie with the children formed a group that was very special.

Worker, Specialist Playgroup Activity

Not all changes reported by evaluation participants were as consequential as this one. Nevertheless, both parents and workers recognised the importance of the opportunities children were given to interact and communicate. Reported one mother:

My daughter really enjoys listening to the stories and nursery rhymes. She also loves seeing the other babies and mums.

Parent, Dive into Reading

Socialisation and marginalised populations

A particularly positive finding of the evaluation is that a number of CfC activities provided social opportunities for children who often struggle to be included in mainstream activities or to find activities suitable to their needs.

One parent found attending the Karingal Primary School Orientation Program invaluable for her son. She commented, 'Having a child with special needs and a significant delay, this program has helped [him] feel more confident about coming to school next year'.

Another mother commented that a program at Frankston Library was important in helping her daughter develop English language skills. She also personally benefited from this program as indicated in the following story:

I speak to my daughter in Cantonese and she needs to be in English world. With this opportunity she can meet other children at a similar age and listen to the stories. I also need the opportunity to speak to other mums ... I feel more happy and confident now. I can keep in touch with the community.

Parent, Dive into Reading

Another mother who attended the Inclusive Playgroup found it offered invaluable experience for her child who has a hearing impairment:

I have a child who uses Auslan, and in order for him to use that language in his community means a great deal to his future development. I believe that Auslan is an important language and that it should be used a lot more than it is and this is just a way of getting it out there more.

Facilitating the development of a Koori children's playgroup has been an especially important achievement of CfC Frankston North. It has given Indigenous children – whose backgrounds are often insufficiently acknowledged by, and who can feel left out in, mainstream activities – opportunities to participate in educationally and personally enriching activities.

According to Australian Research Alliance for Children and Young People, a majority of Indigenous and non-Indigenous education professionals believe Indigenous-specific services are better able than mainstream services to deliver 'culturally safe and strong care and learning environments' (2007, p.7). To develop the resilience to cope with mainstream values and learning, it is often argued, Indigenous children's identity needs to be based on their 'unique histories, cultures, languages and traditions' (2007, p.7).

All the comments elicited from parents about the Koori Early Learning Group suggest they gained much benefit and pleasure from it personally and felt their children had also. Particularly noteworthy about the parent comments is that they do not refer to the culturally-specific nature of the group. One reason for the lack of reference to culture might be that it is something of which particular individuals are less conscious where it is a characteristic they have in common with others rather than the basis of others' discrimination against them or a point of difference between themselves and others.

Comments from parents about how the Koori Early Learning Group benefited their children were similar to those made in relation to other early learning groups, including that it provides children with the capacity to 'mix and socialise' and undertake activities with other kids that are good for their development.

One parent attending the Koori Early Learning Group commented:

It is very important for the development of the children, especially their social interaction. They sit down and talk and eat with other kids. They get to know each other and play with each other.

In contrast to the parents, the two service providers associated the Koori Early Learning Group from whom stories were collected *did* mention the issue of Indigeneity. One worker emphasised the importance of Koori children receiving support prior to them beginning school:

It made me realise how important playgroup is, especially for Aboriginal kids, who can start behind. It has been really good to watch them develop.

Worker, Koori Early Learning Group

This worker saw the Koori Early Learning Group as preparing its young attendees ‘for the world’.

Children who are most easily accommodated by ‘mainstream’ health, educational and other services are those who have met relevant developmental milestones, have no disabilities are for whom English is their first language. Many parents of such children stated that their children also benefited from programs that are inclusive of those from diverse backgrounds. One parent involved in an inclusive playgroup had this to say:

Obviously, for children, it’s part of that whole acceptance and experiencing different people. Even with different nationalities, you see how children respond to people with different skin colours. It’s all part of their learning. It’s great to have that as part of the playgroup ...

Confidence in school

Many parents recognised that a range of Communities for Children-funded programs were important in helping their children prepare for formal education. These programs include those that were explicitly designed to help children get ready for school as well as those with different central aims. One parent from Inclusive Playgroup claimed that a major benefit of the program was that: ‘[it] gives them a chance to learn, and also, especially for my three-year-old, it would be a good opportunity for him to transition into kinder as well’.

The School Readiness and Transition program, the central goal of which was to make children’s move into schooling easier, was especially valued for its capacity to increase children’s sense of confidence in their academic capabilities and in the broader range of skills required for school.

Several parents also referred to the positive effect that the program had upon children’s attitudes towards or optimism regarding starting school. One mother said:

From the time my daughter ... was enrolled in the school there was a prep transition program that was offered which we took part in. From the first time she attended her outlook on school life has become very positive. She has been eager to come every second Thursday to meet her new friends, new teachers and her school buddy. The program, I feel, is a very beneficial program...

Parent, School Readiness and Transition Program

A second parent echoed this:

My child is very familiar and comfortable with her classroom and new teacher which makes me feel more comfortable about her coming. It has promoted confidence in her.

Parent, School Readiness and Transition Program

School staff members expressed a belief that the transition program promoted better relationships among families, the school and support services and helped students become more comfortable about attending school. One worker stated:

... A significant moment for me was the first day of school this year. The new prep children were comfortable in the school environment, as they had already gotten to know children and staff at the school. Families also felt comfortable and many were engaging with staff and other families in the school ... These events were significant to me because they represent that barriers are being broken down between service providers, schools and families in the community. Therefore we are better able to engage with families and children, and provide better assistance to those families and children in need.

Worker, School Readiness and Transition Program

Development and acquisition of specific skills

Parents and workers expressed satisfaction with the specific skills that children learnt as a result of their participation in CFC programs. Stories elicited through the evaluation suggest that many of the skills children developed were acquired in informal contexts and as a result of children having had the opportunity to observe and imitate each other. Children also acquired new skills through exposure to educational toys and other stimuli.

One parent said of the facilities children have access to at the Open House Playgroup:

We don't always have the time to give our kids the quantity and quality of playtime and learning time at home – but it can be given at the Open House Playgroup.

Some of the knowledge and skills acquired by children through their participation in CfC-funded programs were gained in formal learning environments, such as those activities whose purpose was to provide children dedicated reading time. Feedback provided by parents indicates that different CfC programs encouraged children to develop a love of books, stories, music and dancing.

Some parents claimed that their children had developed a love of books through their involvement with CfC activities:

After coming to story time for about three months, [my son's] interest in books has increased tremendously. Not only does he take a book from the shelf at home, attempt to read (as much as a two-year-old can!), but when he is finished he puts it back where it was. I have also noticed that his attention span has increased. He will actually sit and listen to the stories instead of running around ...

Parent, library program

Another parent shared the following story about her child:

I had taken Alice to a couple of the story times at the local library but found them too crowded for my two-year-old – she got lost in the crowd and couldn't get close enough to see the books. So the smaller group really appealed to me. Alice really loves the library now it has been personalised for her – she is learning to respect books and listen quietly, as well as having a wonderful opportunity to participate one-on-one with the librarian...

Parent, library program

This parent viewed her child learning to enjoy the library as significant because she felt libraries offer considerably more to children than just access to written materials and that they can continue to be rewarding over time:

I want [my daughter] to see the library as a normal part of her life, a place of entertainment and challenge as well as a resource – and not just a bookshop.

Parent, library program

Crafts offered at activities such as Dive into Reading were also valued. One parent commented:

We look forward to [the librarian's] story time and are very eager to listen and participate. The craft activities are very special to introduce craft skills. I haven't the money or time to come up with new ideas all the time, so [the librarian's] contribution to our week is much appreciated. We will treasure our works of art for decades!

Providing children the opportunity for enjoyment

A particular focus of stories provided by parents about CfC activities was the pleasure their children got from attending. In 21 separate stories, parents nominated as a main motivation for going to activities the pleasure their children derived from being with other children and

participating in the various programs. A parent from Tiny Tots Story Time spoke about what she most liked:

The delight in seeing my daughter's face light up as she sits with other children her own age all enthralled with the reader's story. She then loves singing songs too.

Stories such as this are important insofar as they provide clear indicators that families not only access CfC programs for practical and educational assistance but also to enhance their wellbeing. The importance of children 'having fun' is often underrated on the basis of an assumption that what is fun is not important. In fact, fun and enjoyment are not only allies in imparting to children skills important to their social or academic success but also are themselves central to good quality of life. Ginsburg states, in an article on the decline of children's playtime in contemporary society, that 'Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission[er] for Human Rights as a right of every child' (2007, p.182). He describes its value not only in terms of the contribution it is able to make to 'social-emotional learning' but also as a 'simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood (2007, p.183).

Many parents seemed intuitively to know the value of play and, consequently, referred to the following kind of gain as among the most important for their children:

It's a good place to come here to make friends. I bring my child every Wednesday. She loves listening to the stories.

Parent, Dive into Reading

Another parent who attended Parents' Place Café said:

The best thing about this program is meeting new friends, it gives an opportunity for children to have fun and it's a great outing.

Child exposure to new and different activities

Many mentioned the benefits of children being exposed, through CfC programs, to new activities and environments. Many parents indicated a belief that new experiences and changes to routine are important for their children's future development. A parent from Inclusive Playgroup referred to some of the reasons that being in a new environment is beneficial for her child:

It's been good for my daughter, other kids, more activities for them. You get an idea of what other kids are doing. Because she's starting to do more things, like learning and playing ... Like I said, it gets my daughter out, and she's enjoying every bit about it.

The stories some parents provided suggest that without CfC children would have engaged in a much narrower range of activities. The environments to which children are exposed throughout their early years are vital, having significant implications for their health and wellbeing across the lifespan (McCain and Mustard 1999). Children's proper intellectual development depends on their accumulation of varied and stimulating experiences, just as their healthy emotional growth requires that they are reared in nurturing environments. New experiences are also something that children and parents can benefit from together:

Joining playgroup has given us the opportunity to meet new people, to enjoy playing in a different environment that is friendly and relaxing.

Parent, Open House Playgroup

Parents

Parents and workers also identified ways in which the CfC Frankston North initiative was beneficial to the parents of children in their early years. Among those benefits that parents

mentioned CfC activities delivered them personally were enhanced enjoyment of parenting, improved parenting skills, opportunities for social interaction with other parents and improved fitness.

Parenting skills development and enjoyment of the parenting role

Some parents felt that the CfC activities they attended helped them develop better parenting skills and/or become more confident in their capacity to parent. One mother said of her participation in a parenting short course:

I found the group to be very interesting and the information I learnt was relevant and very useful to my role as a parent and a partner. I feel that this group helped me to prioritise the importance of my family and has given me the gift to be able to enjoy my children and motherhood. The facilitator's words were filled with compassion, care and hope that have given me faith and confidence in my ability as a mother and a wife. Because of this inspiration and encouragement, I know that I can be the best mother that I can be. The group atmosphere was also very supportive and accepting and I was able to freely share my concerns without being judged. This six-week course was fantastic.

Parent, Early Parenting Program

This story is especially important in light of the storyteller's personal circumstances. She explained:

... I have suffered from post-natal depression and have had difficulty being a parent and enjoying my children. I now feel that I have the confidence and ability to be the best mother that I can be.

Parent, Early Parenting Program

Another parent who attended the Parenting Together Program stated that she and her partner 'had learned positive techniques for providing better ways in dealing with (their) son and any negative behaviour'. One of the reasons she offered for her acquisition of these techniques being important is that they had encouraged harmony between herself and her partner.

It seems that parenting skills were not only learnt by parents in a formal capacity but also through observation of and interaction with other parents. One parent from Open House Playgroup stated:

It has been great getting to know the families. We have talked about and swapped ideas about our children from feeding, toilet training, bed time and so much more.

Other parents found that participating in CfC-funded activities had allowed them to develop a better appreciation of their relationship with their children and to enjoy parenting.

One parent gave the following reason why attending Dive into Reading was so important to her:

It puts a smile on my face, it makes me feel good and that rubs off on the kids. We enjoy the rest of our day together.

Workers within CfC-funded initiatives also referred to the importance of parents learning to enjoy parenting and have fun 'among the seriousness of parenting'.

Recognition of the importance of parents being able to enjoy and experience a sense of competence in their role as caregivers is reflected in initiatives such as the Victorian program Positive Parenting of Toddlers, like CfC, implemented under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

A number of stories collected suggest that involvement with CfC has allowed some parents to develop skills other than those directly associated with parenting. Skills were often acquired

through socialising and discussions with, and observation of, other parents, rather than through structured programs. One mother who attends Open House Playgroup described her experiences:

‘I am a housewife. If I stay at home, I will not have any idea or anything about being a mum. I come here, I can improve my English also’.

Another parent felt she had been given the opportunity to develop her creative skills:

Parents’ Café rewards my creative side for now I get to do fun stuff like make cards, paint, go on nature walks and do collages. I look forward to it every week.

Parent, Parents’ Place Cafe

Respite

Giving families a break from having to attend to the needs of their children is recognised as extremely important to parents’ wellbeing. Among the many studies to have established the importance of respite for children is that conducted by Boothroyd, Kuppinger and Evans (1998). They found that providing respite promoted better health in parents, assisted parents to care for their children and also gave children the chance to learn from and model other adults. The benefits of shorter ‘time out’ periods than would normally qualify as respite offers parents similar benefits.

Another way in which families benefited from CfC activities was through the opportunity they offered parents for ‘time out’. One volunteer described this benefit in the following way:

As a volunteer for Oz Child it gives me a chance to help and assist a family in need – i.e. whether it be to have a little time out for themselves or just to have a little more time with other members of the family. The time I spend with my family is very rewarding ... The parents even have a little of the load lifted off their shoulders for the time you spend with them as a little loving can be all they need.

Worker, Early Years Volunteer Support Program

One parent described particularly well the importance of being able to take a break from the usual tasks associated with parenting and her normal surrounds:

Being at home day in day out, being reminded of all the housework I had to do was depressing and mundane. I love coming to parents café because it’s my time-out – my break my time to relax and socialise.

Parent, Parents’ Place Café

Social engagement

The personal benefit provided by CfC activities that was most frequently referred to by parents participating in the evaluation was the opportunity for socialising. Around 40 ‘storytellers’ – some parents and some workers – mentioned the importance of parents being given the chance to meet others living in their area and participate in more social events.

Many parents stated that being able to meet other parents decreased their sense of loneliness and social disconnectedness. A parent from St Anne’s Playgroup said ‘I have had the opportunity to develop friendships with parents of other children who attend my son’s school and to increase my support network within our local community’.

A parent who attended Dive into Reading with her child told evaluators that ‘my daughter and I have more chances to get in touch with other adults and children’.

The opportunities that CfC activities offered parents to meet others was particularly significant for those who had recently moved to the Frankston area and were finding it difficult to get out and

meet new people. A parent from Parents' Place Café expressed her relief at having somewhere to go to get together with other parents:

If I didn't start coming here I wouldn't know any other mothers ... I'm new to the area so the friends are really important. Some activities are for us, not just for kids.

In addition to ameliorating social isolation, some parents reported that meeting parents had resulted in them feeling more supported in their parenting role. A number of parents claimed to have benefitted from the advice they received from other parents and having had others to talk to who were able to genuinely empathise with their situation.

Another mother from Parents' Place Cafe said about the significance of the activity for her:

The friendships you make is the most significant change. Knowing you have somewhere to go with friendly faces who will understand/comfort/support you whether you're going through something as serious as a partnership break-up or just a bad week trying to handle kids tantrums.

Involvement in community

Other parents referred more explicitly to the opportunity CfC activities had given them to feel part of the community. Much research has been undertaken in relation to the association between wellbeing and social 'embeddedness' or levels of 'social inclusion' (see, for example, Putnam 2001; Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). Most of the stories invoking the theme of community participation referred to how CfC activities were inclusive of a diversity of ideas and linked families with support systems.

Parents who felt their links to community had increased through their involvement in CfC-funded programs made comments such as the following:

Taking my daughter to the tiny tots reading session has re-introduced me to the value of being a member of my local library. It makes me feel closer to my local community.
Parent, Tiny Tots Storytime

For some individuals their greater involvement in the community was particularly meaningful:

I have recently lost my husband (who passed away two months ago after a long illness) and being part of this group has helped to continue normal life for my daughter (aged 2) and myself and also my son (aged 8) within the extended school community.
Parent, Inclusive Playgroup

Importantly, CfC helped break down the distinction between worker and service user.

Novelty

Numerous parents referred to CfC programs having exposed them to new activities, people and environments. This was significant to parents because it provided them a break from routine and an amount of mental stimulation. Encountering new stimuli provides an emotional boost; the experience of discovery is more often than not a pleasurable one. As a parent from Open House Playgroup explained:

... it's nice to get out of the house, to escape the mess and the chaos ... It's helped us as a family, because it gave us that little bit of a break from home, and interacting with others, rather than just the same ...

Another parent who attended the Koori Early Learning Group stated:

I went from working full-time to being a full-time stay-at-home mum. And because I was a foster parent I wasn't allowed to join a mothers group. So this was my only adult conversation. Everybody I know works. Without this I would be stuck in the house constantly... It was such a huge lifestyle change to become a stay at home mum, this is an outlet, meeting new people and stuff like that.

Fitness and general wellbeing

A number of parents who attended CfC activities aimed at keeping parents active provided good feedback about their experiences. Physical fitness is important for parents, as for all other individuals, in a number of ways. It can improve individuals' resilience against illness; increase their capacity to complete more tasks in a day with less effort, including those things important to the parenting role; and help them maintain a more positive frame of mind. By modelling 'health positive' behaviour, parents also encourage their children to be active (see Lee and Tinsley 2000 for a discussion of parents' impact on children's health behaviour). Fitness programs, like other programs, also give parents an opportunity to get out of the house and meet other people.

One mother who attended a fitness program offered the following as the most significant change resulting from her association with a CfC-funded fitness activity:

... the exercise makes me feel better. It gets me out of the house and meeting new people with babies which is important to me as I didn't know anyone with kids.

In response to the question of why this was significant, she offered:

It has made me more aware of what's about and helped me get over the baby blues to make me a better mum.

Parent, Physical Activity, YMCA

Another positive outcome generally associated with physical activity and experienced by participants in CfC-funded physical movement-based activities is increased self-esteem.

Several mothers reported feeling more self-confident after attending the activity. One said:

I was still carrying about four extra kilos and a flabby tummy after the birth of my baby. As a result of attending the fitness class for the last two months I have lost about one kilo and I can see a definite improvement in the tone of my tummy.

...

This is significant to me because I now have more self-confidence about my appearance and the results I have achieved to date have inspired me to do some exercise at home also.

Parent, Physical Activity, YMCA

The multi-faceted and versatile nature of the CfC structure is highlighted by the variety of skills that parents learned and benefits they derived from the initiative. Communities for Children to this point has been able to cater for a range of parents with different needs, aspirations and interests.

Family and child's relationship strengthened

Through imparting new skills to parents and providing them with the opportunity to meet other parents from whom they could derive support, Communities for Children has supported the strengthening of family relationships. The stories of several evaluation participants referred to improvements that had been achieved in relationships between parents and their children.

One parent who attended the Tiny Tot Story Time activity mentioned that the program:

Forms interactive and nurturing relationships and promotes loving ways of spending time with my baby.

Another parent explained that her husband's relationship with their daughter had improved since they began attending Dive into Reading. Their daughter had also developed a greater appreciation of reading which was described as important because:

Her dad reads to her every night and gets upset unless she sits and listens, as he really likes reading to her.

Although most stories pertaining to relationships focused on the connections between parent and child, some stories focused on the benefits that involvement in CfC helped parents reap in regard to other relationships. A handful of parents commented that their relationship with their partner had also improved as a result of their involvement in CfC funded activities. One parent who participated in a program at Frankston Library commented:

Prior to this course we [the participant and her partner] seemed to argue constantly on how to discipline our son ... We have a more democratic approach and we argue 90 per cent less.

These last comments indicate that CfC is helping achieve one of the central goals of initiatives funded under the Stronger? Families initiative, namely to create stronger families.

Accessibility of programs and services

Fourteen stories mentioned that CfC programs and services were highly accessible. By 'accessible' is meant anything that made CfC programs more comfortable and convenient. For some participants, this was defined in terms of convenient timing and location of programs and program flexibility. A parent from Open House Playgroup commented:

... the reason that I like [the service] is because this one still sleeps in the morning, you're not set on a time ... Just being able to bring them in, so that she's had a good sleep so she's not grumpy ...

Specific services or resources offered within programs that made parents feel more included were identified. A parent from Music and Movement explained that the innovative service they have developed attracts a wide range of parents:

Another significant thing this has done, it has brought families to kinder that otherwise wouldn't have come.

Some participants also mentioned they enjoyed the 'open' environment of certain programs which made parents and children feel 'welcome'.

Service providers

The stories provided by workers focused on two main themes: the gains CfC supported families to make and ways in which their own involvement in CfC activities helped them develop professional skills and networks. Comments pertaining to the benefits families obtained through their involvement with CfC are discussed above.

Workers' skill and knowledge development

Many stories show that workers benefitted professionally through their involvement with CfC. Skills that workers referred to having acquired include more general skills such as working within teams, managing a program and liaising with stakeholders through to those more specific to their profession such as relating to young children. Workers also reported that CfC activities had allowed them to increase their knowledge in several areas. The stories provided indicate that most skill and knowledge acquisition occurred in the course of workers doing their normal jobs: that is to

say the activities funded by CfC allowed workers to carry out high quality work that challenged their existing skill bases. Other skills and knowledge were acquired in the context of training.

Typical of the comments workers made regarding knowledge they had acquired through their involvement in CfC activities is the following:

Being a part of this network has increased my awareness of the facilities and services available within the community.

Worker, Frankston North Early Years Network

Another worker whose story was collected in Round 3 referred to skills acquired through the Leadership and Network Meeting:

This gives me new skills, it gives me strategies to deal with issues. For example, there was a 'building resilience strategy' to help me deal with people better.

The above comments from workers provide important evidence of CfC supporting desperately needed skill development in the area of early childhood services. There is currently a national shortage, felt as keenly in Victoria as elsewhere, of skilled childcare workers and workers in the child and family area. Programs such as CfC have not only helped existing workers to develop the capacity to take on more complex roles and caseloads but are facilitating expansion of the workforce by supporting programs that accept volunteers.

A simple statement provided by a worker from the Early Years Volunteer Support program gives an indication of the gains that individuals have made through their work as volunteers and the benefits the community stands to reap through the opportunities created for volunteers:

When I first met [X] she was very quiet and demure and not sure of herself and I've seen her blossom into quite a confident person, where she's capable of doing many tasks on her own.

A worker described the personal benefits through her work as a volunteer:

Being involved in my community as a volunteer (in a few capacities) has shown me how much can be achieved with team work and planning. Our various programs (school holiday activities, days out for older people, Puffing Billy, and many other community days) have helped me link into my community and make friends after moving into a new area. I am established and staying here because of these community spirit links.

Pines Pride Day, volunteer

Workers' networking

Over thirty stories provided by workers stressed the importance of CfC having supported the development of networks among those in early years services and the educational sector. One story provided by a worker in Phase 2 of the story collection emphasised the amount of time networks take to develop and in this respect questioned the anticipated outcomes of groups, such as the professional development, leadership and mentoring group, that were designed to strengthen relationships. Most stories looking at opportunities provided for mentoring, however, focused on the benefits that were achieved. For example, one service provider who attended the Frankston North Early Years Network claimed: 'If I had to create these links individually it would have taken much longer and I am sure that they would not have been as strong or beneficial'.

A recurring theme in the stories was the direct improvement that has been made to individuals' own services through networking. One worker stated that through networking with people from other programs, she had gained ideas able to be implemented in the program where she was employed.

Some workers' stories emphasised the importance of those professional networks supported by CfC to their achievement of greater understanding of and capacity to deliver program aims. One service provider said:

I now have a better understanding of early childhood services working together effectively to support better outcomes for families, children and parents.

A number of service providers spoke about how the professional development initiatives supported by CfC allowed them to get a better understanding of the roles that those working in other services played and make improvements to how they work together.

For example, one worker stated:

[I] gained insight into different roles people play in the community (and created) links with other agencies ... [What is most significant for me about CfC is the capacity for] project development and working cooperatively and collaboratively to better the outcomes for children and families in Frankston.

A few workers identified as a positive outcome of the strengthened relationships among workers, an improved capacity to provide families continuity in service provision. Better relationships among workers from preschools, schools and related support services can facilitate smoother transition to school for children and a better experience of this transition for parents and teachers.

One worker described the experience as follows:

One significant change that resulted from the Communities for Children activity is the connections that were built up between agencies and service providers. Before the transition program began at our school my role was to make connections with all local kinder and childcare places. This enabled myself and other individuals to provide continuity of care for all families.

Worker, School Readiness and Transition Program

The networking opportunities provided by CfC also allowed development of new and existing programs. One worker referred to the benefits of the activity, Playgroup in the Park:

Being involved in PCCN and being provided an opportunity to work with childhood development professionals and to create a new understanding of early childhood challenges for both parents and professionals [has been really significant]. It has also provided an opportunity to create new networks within the early childhood area, which has led to an ability to bring about much needed activities, such as Playgroup in the Park, through partnerships formed at PCCN.

Worker, Pines Community Childhood Network

Other workers referred to the benefits of the relationships that were fostered through workers' involvement in CfC professional development activities. One worker stated that the service she worked for had experienced increased success as a consequence of her 'development of relationships with people'.

Yet another worker claimed that she felt the networks were empowering for her, as by having access to more knowledge she was in a better position to help others in the community.

The promotion of professional networks not only assists service providers to better support their clients, but is in itself a manifestation of a stronger community, as professional networks create a sense of community among practitioners.

Enhancing the success of existing activities

A few service providers referred to the importance that the increased funding made possible through their association with Communities for Children to the success of their activity:

I've been running the playgroup for about four years now and I've got paperwork that shows that we had an average 6–9 children for each session, and now we're averaging 25. We received a grant last year. We can advertise, we've got our new cupboards for storage and more equipment.

Worker, Inclusive Playgroup

By increasing the chance of program success CfC has helped enhance the working life of early years activity providers. In itself a good outcome, this has the additional potential benefit of improving the quality of service delivery to families.

Personal benefits for workers

Workers emphasised the very personal benefits to themselves. For example, one volunteer said:

I believe I've got two new friends in my life. And I like being with kids. It's nice to know that at my age I can still give to the community.

Volunteer, Early Years Volunteer Support Program

Another couple of workers commented that involvement in CfC had helped them better understand the needs of the community and feel more a part of it. One worker stated:

I feel more connected both to the community and to those who work within this community ... I have been able to be more informed and able to provide knowledge.

Worker, Frankston North Early Years Network

A new worker within the Carrum Downs Community Group explained that her work had allowed her to better understand the challenges faced by members of the Frankston North community of lower socioeconomic status. She said: 'I am now more aware about other people and their lives. More aware of what is happening in my community'.

Community

The stories offered by parents and workers indicate they valued CfC not only for the benefits it has had for direct service users and employees but also for its impact on the broader community. Community-wide benefits are particularly difficult to identify and even harder to quantify. A 'community' (in this case defined in terms of shared geography) might be said to have gained from a social initiative when it experiences increases in: financial or social equity (the latter referring to access to social or public goods); its capacity to identify and solve problems, and its sense of cohesiveness or number of people who identify with and feel a part of their community. The underlying assumption is that a sense of belonging increases a sense of wellbeing or life satisfaction.

Communities for Children can indeed be said to have increased the opportunities community members have to come together in enjoyment and celebration and in this way enhance their sense of community belonging. The following story illustrates CfC's community-wide reach:

The event stemmed from feedback received from our local community and culminated in the achievement of a highly successful community event. The event promoted inclusive communities for all families and cultures and we estimate that 800 to 1000 local community members attended; where they came together and participated in a variety of activities and entertainment.

This event was significant to the centre as it highlighted that we have strong and established relationships with local families, volunteers and organisations. It brought the community together and engaged them in a family friendly community event.

Worker, Early Years Locality Group

Some evaluation participants suggested that exposing communities to new and different experiences – such as that referred to above – gives individuals and families greater opportunities to learn and be exposed to new ideas. This, in turn, encourages motivation to work towards positive ‘community vision[s]’ and connections.

Another worker provided a story that illustrates the ability of her program to involve others beyond the immediate beneficiaries of the program. By engaging children from a local primary school to design a logo, the program not only increased awareness in the community of the program but provided the child designers with a sense of being able to contribute to their community. Facilitating children’s capacity to contribute assists both their growing sense of efficacy and sense of identity as members of particular communities.

An important part of community enhancement is increasing community members’ capacity to solve their own problems. Learning new skills is an important means by which individuals can, on the one hand, develop a sense of independence and, on the other hand, improve their ability to help others and thus contribute to building a strong community. Two workers who contributed to this evaluation referred to the fact that support from CfC allowed them to engage a large number of people in their programs. One worker stated that bringing a broader range of people into the program ‘added another dimension to the group which is what has been needed’.

Where programs offering life skills such as parenting skills are concerned, benefits are experienced by more than just the program attendees, because participants often pass on skills they have learnt to their acquaintances. Where a single program is provided to a large number of participants in the one community or that community has access to a range of different programs promoting similar ideas, widespread knowledge diffusion can occur. By supporting so many programs that, in the first instance, provide information on child development and parenting skills and, perhaps more importantly, are underpinned by a philosophy of valuing and nurturing children, Communities for Children has helped make Frankston North a better place for children.

One anecdote provided by the Communities for Children Frankston North program manager illustrates the increase in child consciousness that arguably had been achieved by CfC. The organisers of a large music and entertainment event aimed at the general population of Frankston produced advertisements for the occasion. Distinguishing this poster from those for similar previous events was the inclusion of the words ‘child friendly’.

Negative experiences of Communities for Children

Only a handful of participants’ stories detailed negative experiences of CfC activities. Such stories referred to lack of program structure, tardiness, disorganisation and overcrowding.

The two stories below refer to the same service (Open House playgroup). The first focuses on difficulties relating to gaining access to the activity:

The most annoying bit about it is that we pay term fees, and there are other people who only pay weekly. And the people who only pay weekly can still get in. And if there’s more than twenty-five kids, you can’t get in ... and there has been times when my friends haven’t been able to get in, and they’ve had to wait in the foyer for people to leave ... and you couldn’t guarantee your kids to get too excited, because they might get to the door and might not be able to get in ... it is good, but it’s still annoying that I’m not here with my friends because they can’t be here at 9.30 because my friend’s got three little kids, so she wouldn’t be here at 9.30, she only gets out of bed at 10.00 ... Before it was still like a

kinder because like, [my son] is only two, and he really enjoyed meeting the same kids all the time...

While the story indicates this service's lack of capacity to respond to increased demand, also clear is that this activity is highly valued by this parent.

Another parent was particularly concerned with the program's lack of organised activity::

It's crap ... there's no structure. There are no sit down meal times ... the kids don't sit down and eat together, they're too busy doing other stuff ... This used to be a normal playgroup ... The kids are running from one activity to another. They're spending two seconds on each activity ... There is a music time that is ... never on time.

These two stories indicate that at least one service was seen by some participants as having failed to meet CfC program aims such as creating opportunities for parents and children to socialise and for children to learn. What needs to be noted, however, is that some of the same aspects of the program a couple of service users took issue with – such as the lack of rigid schedule – were seen positively by other parents.

That parents have such diverse perspectives on what their children most require from different services and personal preferences about the same provides particular justification for the Communities for Children program structure. That is, it provides support for a program with local providers? and so more likely to have a nuanced understanding of the needs and preferences of intended service users. It also supports the need to provide financial support to a broad range of community partners and activities.

Importantly, no negative stories were provided in the third round of story collection. The reasons for this are worthy of further exploration. A few possible explanations may be offered, however. The lack of such stories may point to commitment to improvement in service delivery on the part of the community partners and the capacity for rapid relevant learning. It may indicate success on the part of the CfC facilitating partner in ensuring all activities that experienced difficulties were given timely additional support.

5 Story sifting

Over the entire evaluation period, three sifting workshops were held, one after each round of data collection. The purpose of sifting workshops was to allow re-examination of the collected stories in terms of what they said about the success achieved in each 'domain'. Domains in the context of Communities for Children are those outcomes related to the CfC priority areas that are particularly relevant to the Frankston North site. It is the feedback received during discussions that provides the best insight into how participants conceptualise program success and what project outcomes they most value. Further, the workshop process itself is an expression of one of the aims of CfC insofar as it provides a forum in which to participate in community and develop personal and professional networks. This can be seen as one of the incentives for people to participate in the workshops.

Invitees to the sifting workshops comprised workers from community partner organisations, that is, those services providing activities through CfC, as well as the recipients of those services. Prior to each sifting workshop, workers from the relevant activities were sent initial and follow-up invitations. The evaluation team also requested that the facilitating partner (Anglicare Victoria) management remind the community partners whenever they were able of the importance of attending the sifting workshops. We had requested of the community partners in turn that they display on their premises posters that were sent to them as email attachments, to remind workers and alert service users to the upcoming workshops. The evaluation team also asked that workers inform parents about the purpose and time of the sifting workshops and encourage them to attend.

The sifting workshops attracted smaller numbers than anticipated. In particular, only one sifting workshop was attended by a service user (as opposed to service providers). There are a number of possible explanations for the small turnout. These include inadequate effort on the part of either the evaluation team or the facilitating partner to promote the sifting workshops among activity providers and poor compliance on the part of activity providers in terms of informing parents about the workshops. The most likely explanation for the low attendance by service providers, however, is lack of time. Early years service providers and those working in education are known to have onerous workloads. Additionally, many workers had found the reporting requirements for CfC and their obligations for both the state and local evaluation time-consuming. Given that attendance at the sifting workshops for the Frankston North evaluation was non-compulsory it is possible that workers identified this as the evaluation activity they would miss out.

Story sifting as usually implemented within the Most Significant Change methodology involves, as a first step, that the stories are distributed to the agency or agencies involved in program delivery to allow *them* to identify the most significant stories within each domain. However, because in the first round this level of analysis was undertaken by some but not all agencies, this stage of sifting was disregarded. Had there been a greater number of stories collected and subsequently selected at the agency level, only the selected stories would have carried over to the interagency sift. However, because a manageable number of stories had been collected, the entire complement was able to be considered at the interagency level; that is, within the sifting workshops. It was decided for the two subsequent rounds of story collection and analysis that sifting would be undertaken at the interagency level only.

For the sifting workshops it was decided to supply each small group with stories already identified with a domain. In some instances, groups (or pairs) were given stories for more than one domain. Each small group was given 25 to 30 minutes to consider the stories and select a story or stories they felt were the most significant within their domains. Representatives of the smaller groups were then required to report back to the larger group focusing on why they felt their selected stories were most significant and why those stories best addressed the relevant priority areas.

After each group's presentation, a facilitated group discussion was conducted with the aim of condensing reasons for a story being most significant into a smaller list of general qualities or identifying new factors that make a story significant.

The first sifting workshop was held in May 2007. Fifteen people attended, all of whom were workers. In all, eight community partners or organisations were represented. Eight people (six paid workers, one volunteer and a parent who had attended a CfC activity) attended the second workshop in October 2007. Seven people representing three organisations participated in the final sifting workshop in November 2008. This was the least successful of the three workshops insofar as only three organisations were represented, with one being the facilitating partner.

The selections of the sifting workshops are presented on the following pages under domain headings.

Improved early learning and care

Round 1

Significant change as described by storyteller:

Building a social circle for my 2-year-old and myself (being new to the country). We look forward to story time and are very eager to listen and participate. The craft activities are very special to introduce craft skills. I haven't the money or time to come up with new ideas all the time, so the contribution to our week is much appreciated. We will treasure our works of art for decades! Little Fins – Frankston library is a great intro to 'learning for life'.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

It can be very isolating with small children. We both look forward to story time. Meeting kids and parents. The opportunity to drop off and collect new books is fantastic. A small selection (of books, DVDs, and video) which can be browsed over is much better for us than going to Frankston Library which can be too much sometimes with children with you.

This story was felt to be the most significant because it encapsulated the main points made by all the stories within this theme, namely that early learning programs provide children with the opportunity for educational development while also offering mothers positive experiences. One workshop participant said:

... [the programs were] helping to build social skills for the children participating and that the mothers also looked forward to being out in the community and meeting other parents. This has helped their confidence and not to feel so isolated.

Round 2

Significant change as described by storyteller:

Our preschool son has had a structured and fun introduction to learning whilst being involved with other members of our community through the regular ‘Dive into Reading’ story time. Meeting other parents and their children reinforces the many skills I as a parent try to teach my child at home, i.e. manners, structure, attention, involvement, social skills, compassion, reading and craft, etc.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

‘Dive into Reading’ supports our efforts in preparing our son for school, structure and success. Whilst meeting families from our community and having fun. Thanks!

The story above was selected as the most significant story from the domain of ‘improved early learning and care’ in Round 2 for several reasons. Firstly, the story was thought to articulate a wide range of ways that children have benefited from learning. It also demonstrated the role the program has in providing children with skills required by the school structure, and hence in facilitating children’s transition to school. Like the story provided in Round 1, this story also refers to the chances this activity provided for the parent to enjoy social interaction with others.

Round 3

Significant change as described by the ‘storyteller’:

I was a parent attending here before I took over running the program. At the beginning I didn’t realise how important playgroup is. This prepared my daughter for kindergarten. She started kindergarten and then school with confidence, largely due to the social skills she learned in playgroup. Also running the program has definitely made a change to my life. It made me realise how important playgroup is, especially for Aboriginal kids who can start behind. It has been really good to watch them develop.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this story being significant:

(Because it gets) them ready for the world, especially school and kindergarten.

This story, like the story selected for Round 2, was thought to demonstrate well that parents grasp the importance of all early learning experiences to children’s proper intellectual development. This story shows that the parent, who subsequently became a worker, was able to make a connection between all the activities, as different as they are from those that children participate in at school, and the skills children require once they actually in school.

Child friendly communities

Round 1

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

The event stemmed from feedback received from our local community and culminated in the achievement of a highly successful community event. The event promoted inclusive communities for all families and cultures, and we estimate that 800–1000 local community members attended where they came together and participated in a variety of activities and entertainment.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

This event was significant to the centre as it highlighted that we have strong and established relationships with local families, volunteers and organisations. It brought the community together and engaged them in a family friendly community event.

The story was felt to be the most significant because it indicates involvement of a broad cross-section of the community in developing and participating in an event and because it was felt to have created effective community links, which is a Communities for Children goal.

Comments from the group included that the story demonstrated that the event had emerged out of ‘feedback from the community regarding needs’ and ‘addressed the community’s needs’. The event used a community development process in engaging the community which the relevant workshop group felt would be reproducible in future years. The group’s representative explained:

Families could run the event themselves again because they were involved in doing it.

The event was thought to have raised awareness in the community of organisations and programs available and showed that services were available to families from different backgrounds. For example, one person described how people came to the library because they had heard about the library services at the event.

Round 2

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

The special looks on the children’s faces after they participated in the activities with the snake man and the farm yard, and also the Beach House activities. The looks on their faces were quite special.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

Because it means that the event was worthwhile to this community as the children were so involved and enjoyed the experience.

The above story was chosen as the most significant under the ‘child friendly communities’ domain in Round 2 because it refers to children enjoying activities that they might never have experienced without Communities for Children.

It was felt to best represent the domain of ‘child friendly communities’ of all the stories in this domain because it gives a specific instance of children deriving much pleasure from their involvement in community.

Round 3

Significant change as described by storyteller:

It is good just being in a group space. My child has been able to learn social etiquette. And having the small space can be less overwhelming than at the main library.

Reason provided by storyteller for this change being significant:

It’s important because what they learn here is a preliminary of all the things they need to know at kinder and school.

This story was selected as the most significant of significant stories in this category by workshop participants in Round 3 because it provides an example of ways in which services that cater to the community at large can alter what they provide and how they provide it to accommodate the needs of particular groups of children and parents. Service providers’ flexibility in terms of where they are willing to offer activities allows parents who might otherwise be isolated to access services that link them with the broader community.

Related to this domain were the stories collected in Round 2 and 3 that were associated with ‘increase in community members’ participation’.

Increase in community members’ participation

Round 2

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

My son attends the music and movement program. The changes in him since starting the program have been amazing. He now has more confidence in group situations. He is also more confident in himself. He will happily sing and dance, interact in all activities, where before he would need me to be by his side constantly. Not only is the music and movement program fun and entertaining for the kids, they are learning too.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

To watch my child grow and develop through the music and movement program has allowed me to have peace of mind. I know that he is developing and will be ready for kindergarten next year.

The above story was selected as the most significant in this domain in Round 2 on the basis that it demonstrated the importance of assisting children to build confidence in interacting with other children and adults. The group members offered that the story revealed how the program has helped children move away from being ‘reliant on their parents for all their experiences’. Another benefit that workshop participants noted is the fact that ‘parents are given assurance that their children will have the confidence and skills to socialise with others when kinder and school starts’.

Participants in the workshop group believed this story best represented the domain because it illustrates how the program allows both parents and children to interact with others in the community.

Round 3

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

I'm a foster parent too, I've been fostering since 1972, it's only the second time I've come to a playgroup. We needed to come for the little fellow we've got, he's got a disability. It's been really good for him to interact with other children. And it's been really good social interaction for me too. It is the one place I can come to get where I get interaction.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

It's better than sitting on your bum doing nothing. Without this that's what I would be doing, or shopping spending all my money. Without the social aspect for me I wouldn't be doing it otherwise.

The relevant workshop group saw this story as especially significant insofar as it shows that the activity has provided the storyteller with opportunities for using her and her foster child's time in a more meaningful and positive way, spending time with others rather than spending money. It also indicates something about the 'inclusive' nature of CfC activities. The group also thought important the inference that could be drawn from the storyteller's generally positive tone that the playgroup's environment was able to support the needs of her foster child and that her child was accepted by the other children.

Improved child and family physical and mental health

Round 1

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

I have really enjoyed coming, the exercise make me feel better. It gets me out of the house and meeting new people with babies which is important to me as I didn't know anyone with kids.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

It has made me more aware of what's about and helped me get over the baby blues to make me a better mum.

The story was chosen because it provides a sense of the positive influences child and family activities are able to have upon a child's physical, social and emotional wellbeing from an early age. It was also selected because it highlights the importance of providing opportunities for social interaction for the child and parent. One member of the workshop group stated:

The child [is] interacting with other children, which we know is important no matter how young they are.

The group also felt that the story demonstrated the way the program assisted the parent to build on the community linkages available to herself and the baby, which they felt would have a 'ripple effect'.

The group believed the story addressed the priority area of ‘healthy young families’ because it demonstrated the importance of ‘improving access to ante and post natal care’ and because:

[the story demonstrated] the parent’s increasing understanding of the benefits to herself, family and community of a healthy lifestyle through exercise.

Round 2

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

Just like coming here and talking to all the girls has helped in everyday life. They also give advice, like for example on how to put her to sleep.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

It’s something to look forward to, to catch up.

The story above was selected as the most significant in the domain of improved child and family physical and mental health in Round 2 because it ‘captures the importance and impact that such an activity has on the parents’ lives as well as the children’s’. The group felt this story emphasised the benefits to children arising out of parents feeling supported and that it demonstrated that services like this encouraged parents’ confidence.

Workshop group members claimed that the above story best addressed the domain of ‘improved child and family physical and mental health’ on the basis that it indicated that ‘parents who feel supported during the early years of their child’s development are better equipped to continue nurturing their child’.

Round 3

Significant change as provided by the storyteller:

I have learned how to cope with PND and that I am not alone. That it’s not my fault, feeling the way I feel. How to deal with challenges and control how I feel.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

Because I am more understanding, more patient, don’t feel alone and now I know how to deal with the challenges that lay ahead.

This story was chosen because it provides a stark suggestion of where parents such as the one who provided this story would be if services like this did not exist. The parent indicated that before she started attending this CfC-supported activity she had felt alone, had had trouble dealing with life’s everyday challenges and felt her difficulties were her own fault. Like the two stories for Round 1 and 2, the story shows that the parent learnt skills that were central to her survival and that had significant implications for her child’s wellbeing.

Improved positive parenting skills

Round 1

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

When first asked to help out in playgroup, my first response was “yes – sounds like fun” but when I thought about it, I was a little nervous. What did I know about playgroup? For the first week and a half I went as an observer. Most of the faces were new to me – and I was new to most of the families. Now I am more comfortable with working out activities, reading to the children and dancing with the kids. It is nice to see families having fun together, doing craft together and occasionally being ‘silly’ together. We can get so caught up in the serious side of life; working, paying bills, and housework – that it is easy to overlook our ‘quality time’ with our children. They are only little for a short time and it is nice to see families enjoying each other in a fun and safe environment that playgroup offers.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

Never really having attended a playgroup with my own children, seeing how parents and their children interact on a ‘fun’ level is quite exciting to me. I am enjoying getting to know the different families – and for them to get to know me. Being involved with playgroup is helping me to learn that in life you do not always have to be serious. It is ok to be a bit silly and not be self-conscious about it. It is also helping me enjoy more quality time with my children.

This story was selected because it represented the importance of sharing experiences associated with parenting, ‘role modelling’ by other parents and learning in a supportive network. Comments included that the story gave rise to ‘the image of the village that raises the child’. This refers to the fact that, for healthy growth, children need to have exposure to and support or input from people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Group members also felt the story ‘confirms that parenting can be fun’ and included examples of parents ‘learning what’s fun and safe’. One person also felt that the story highlighted the need for children to learn and build resilience in a safe environment.

The story was also chosen for what it indicated about the storyteller’s personal development. Group members discussed the ways the story demonstrated the storyteller’s move towards ‘helping and giving in the community’ which they also saw as holding benefits for the community. One person explained:

Someone invited the mother to help and she took on leadership, she is empowered and will empower other Mums.

The group also felt it represented well the notion of supporting families and parents, in that it focused on the mechanisms of bond forming between parent and child and on:

Parents getting something they wouldn’t have got on their own for their children – time, money, getting messy, being a child.

Round 2

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

The most significant change for us has been in our communication and discipline of our 15 month old son, which has had a positive on our relationship. Prior to this course we seemed to argue constantly on how to discipline our son. Before we had children we believed we would be in agreeance (sic). However, things were very different in practice. I think before the course my husband was thinking that our son's behaviour was because I didn't discipline him during the day. He was annoyed with me and I felt unfairly attacked.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

Now he knows all toddlers behave this way and we have learned positive techniques for providing better ways in dealing with our son and any negative behaviour. We have a more democratic approach and we argue 90 per cent less. This is a great result. Thank you so much.

The above story stood out for the group from the second sifting workshop charged with looking at stories from the 'improved positive parenting skills' domain, because it demonstrates that the activity 'definitely improves parenting' and has a positive effect on parents' relationships with each other and with their children. Furthermore, the group felt that the story indicated the behaviour of children improved as a consequence of their parents having acquired new skills. It suggested that the parent learnt practical and specific techniques and that the program made a tangible positive difference to her way of interacting with her child.

Round 3

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

Running this program I find that the parents are really eager for the information. Even though they can read a book or go to the internet people still want that contact with a person. They really want to ask questions and be involved and find out information that will help them with their unsettled baby. Perhaps developing more of a routine so the baby has a more predicable day, therefore promoting good feeding and thus promoting good sleeping. So the parents seem to get a lot out of it and I find that very rewarding. People say that it has made a big difference, such as my husband. And I can eat our meals together now we don't have a crying baby. They learn from each other as well as from me, because they can relate to each others' stories. We go through all the developmental stages and milestones; we talk about that and about routine.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

Groups like this are very, very important because in this country in particular we tend not to be so connected to the extended family so much. We tend to go off on our own more and be independent and have their own house [sic]. So they don't have the supports they need, and they can get the support they need from the community in programs like this. Without programs like this some people would be lost, some parents get so sleep deprived that they try anything and they can develop very poor habits for the baby which are very difficult to change. So this helps to educate parents on how to overcome some of the problems they're dealing with.

As for the story selected in the second round, participants in the third sifting workshop saw the above story as important because it showed CfC activities as able to provide parents with tangible, practical skills able to be implemented at home. It also showed the importance of giving a human face to the provision of information and of ‘personalising’ the information. The group also stated that the story indicated that providing a base from which parents can seek out information, rather than making them dependent, can ‘educate parents on how to overcome their own problems’.

Increase in partnerships and professional development

Round 1

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

Since this program began: > greater liaison between school and Pre-School and Child Care Centres > parents have accepted children’s need for a longer introduction to the school environment > teachers are able to observe and work with children and to identify any concerns needing assessment > greater communication with children’s support services in Frankston community as needs are identified early > children begin school with confidence and a secure feeling enabling a “smooth start” for both parents and children > children are familiar with classroom, school grounds and teachers > buddy program begins in term 4 of Transition year, continuing until children are settled into their prep year > friendship groups are forming during Transition program which is helpful also to children who come from out-of-area or without pre-school education/experience.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

>children’s relationship with teacher and school community develops positively > program enhances children’s learning, with settled start > parents feel positive toward school and learning > program enhances children’s and parents’ emotional well-being.

The story was felt by workshop participants to be the most significant focused on professional partnerships collected in Round 1, as it highlighted the importance of children starting school prepared, parents’ positive feelings, inclusion of several different sections of the community and collaboration among families, the school and community organisations.

The story was felt to address the priority area of partnerships because it ‘highlighted the range of organisations and services that need to be involved to provide benefits to families’. One group member explained:

Collaboration sometimes occurs naturally but often needs to be organised.

Round 2

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

Being new to my role, my involvement in the early years network provides great opportunities for networking with people working in the field of early childhood development.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

If I had to create these links/networks individually, it would have taken much longer and I am sure that they would not have been as strong or beneficial.

The workshop participants from the second sifting workshop looking at stories within the ‘partnerships and professional development’ domain selected the above as most representative of this theme. They stated that it clearly and succinctly ‘points out the importance of partnerships’. They expressed the belief that it is ‘because of professional development, (that) continued learning is possible on an individual level and network level.’

Round 3

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

I work at a special school, so I can feel isolated from the mainstream schools. I get a lot out of coming here, it makes me feel part of the education community.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

It is important for other schools and preschools to know that the special school exists. I can improve outcomes for children.

This story was selected by members of the relevant group in the third sifting workshop as the most significant on this theme because it indicates the content of professional development offered through CfC is relevant to workers from a broad range of organisations. This includes an often-forgotten part of the early childhood workforce: those who work with children with disabilities. This story was also seen as highlighting the relationship between workers’ sense of being part of a community, their actual engagement with other workers in the early childhood field and the quality of the work they are able to do.

More inclusive communities for all families and cultures

In Round 3 a group of stories had been collected in relation to which the storytellers had indicated that ‘more inclusive communities for all families and cultures’ was the most relevant domain. In the third sifting workshop, the story below was seen as most significant:

Significant change as described by the storyteller:

I have been running Open House playgroup for the last year and a half. In that time, I have met lots of families. I, myself, have a young family with 9 and 7-year-old girls and a 6-month-old boy. It has been great getting to know the families. We have talked about and swapped ideas about our children from feeding, toilet training, bedtime and so much more. It’s also nice to meet the grandparents and dads and hear their ideas.

Reason provided by the storyteller for this change being significant:

(It’s) bringing the community together.

This story was seen as important because it indicated, not only that parents learn a great deal from each other by being able to get together in an organised capacity but also that CfC-funded activities support the inclusion of grandparents. This was seen as strong evidence of the relevance of CfC programs for all social groups and that the information and skills provided through the program had a good chance of being filtered throughout the community.

General reasons that make a story most significant

Thinking beyond the domains and formal priority areas of Communities for Children, workshop participants in each workshop were asked to state what they thought made a story significant or, in other words, what is important to know that Communities for Children is achieving. The stories were considered important where they contained evidence that:

Round 1

- CfC has had an impact on what happens at home.
- CfC has promoted the idea of life-long learning among parents and workers.
- CfC has linked families with other community programs and forms of support.
- Through CfC children have been provided services they would not have otherwise received.

Round 2

- Children are benefiting from what they have learned through CfC.
- Parents are learning through CfC activities.
- Parents are receiving assistance through CfC in terms of participating in and navigating social services and institutions.
- Children have increased opportunities for socialisation as a result of being involved in CfC.
- Parents have the chance to meet other community members through CfC activities.

Round 3

- CfC has helped increase parents' self-confidence with positive outcomes for children.
- CfC has helped improve the confidence of workers and volunteers.
- CfC has encouraged workers to see learning as a 'two-way street': workers can learn from parents just as parents learn from workers.
- CfC has helped increase service providers' knowledge of and respect for each other which has positive ramifications for service delivery to children and parents.
- CfC has helped facilitate a broader range of communication among workers and an understanding of the value of this.
- CfC has helped create meaningful connections between workers and parents.

It is noteworthy that the aspects of Communities for Children that were thought most important differed slightly from one group of sifting workshop participants to the next. Of particular interest is that participants in the third sifting workshop emphasised the benefits of the program for workers. That fewer benefits for workers were mentioned at the first sifting workshop also suggests something about the amount of time it takes for relationships to develop among workers and for knowledge from professional development programs to be absorbed and tested.

While there were differences among the sifting workshops in terms of what was considered to make a story significant, a common concern was that children, their parents and workers improved their knowledge and their skills in such a way that increased simultaneously their independence and interconnectedness.

It was discussed in the final sifting workshop that formal evaluations such as the present one are only one means of determining the success of a program. It is important that programs use other means of tracking program achievements and problems, including methods which are capable of

providing data more regularly. Accordingly, the evaluation team asked how the CfC facilitating partner and/or community partners determined on a day-to-day basis that their work was having an impact. Among methods mentioned were:

- review forms; ‘getting families’ feedback and thanking them for their help’.
- checking case notes and tracking changes.
- first person observation of growth in parents and in the parent and child relationship.
- seeking verbal feedback from parents and from service providers.
- witnessing other siblings of children already participating in an activity join the same activity.

It is particularly important that a program such as Communities for Children, supportive as it is of such a wide range of activities, employs multiple means of determining program effectiveness. This is because different methods are more or less successful at measuring different kinds of changes in different client groups or populations. The variety of methods used by the Communities for Children Frankston North facilitating partner, including both verbal and non-verbal information and self-report and third-person observation, is especially comprehensive.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

The scope of this evaluation was restricted to the experiences of service users and providers as reflected in the data – or ‘stories’ – collected by the evaluation team and feedback from the sifting workshops. The conclusions and recommendations made here are necessarily circumscribed, being limited to what could be inferred from these data.

The main aim of CfC was to positively impact early child development by influencing the ‘social, economic and cultural environments of children and their families’. More specifically, the program was intended to encourage child friendly communities, healthy young families, support families and parents, facilitate good early learning and care and allow family and children’s services to work effectively as a system. Findings from this evaluation indicate that the Frankston North implementation of Communities for Children was successful in addressing each of these aims.

Child friendly communities

Stories collected for this evaluation indicate that the broader community was able to support provision of activities for children in their early years and, importantly, children with little access on a day-to-day basis to varied and stimulating activities. The involvement of up to 1000 people in a community event in Carrum Downs (one of many large-scale one-off events funded through CfC) indicates CfC has been successful in encouraging interest in events with a focus on children. That school children were involved in the development of a Carrum Down Early Years Network logo is one indication that the Frankston North community, beyond becoming merely more ‘child conscious’, has acquired a highly developed understanding of ways in which children can be involved in community life.

Early learning

The variety of activities that stories collected for this evaluation indicate children have had access to through CfC-supported programs provides a clear picture of the extent to which CfC has supported children’s acquisition of knowledge and skills. The stories of parents and workers suggest that through their involvement in CfC activities children have developed better social skills and acquired an appreciation of social diversity. The data also indicate that children have gained an increased capacity to enjoy music and improved reading and other skills that have significant implications for their future social and academic success. Through providing services for a large cohort of children, CfC Frankston North can be seen to be paving the way for a better educated, more socially minded local community.

Parent–child relationships

Of special significance is the fact that CfC appears to have facilitated closer relationships between parents and their children. This has been achieved through a number of means including through helping parents acquire, in both formal and informal contexts, broader sets of parenting skills. Closer parent–child relationships have also been assisted through the provision of fun and novel activities that parents and children are able to undertake together. Positive shared experiences can foster a healthy form of inter-dependence and assist parents in enjoying their role as carers. A strong and caring relationship between a parent and child is one of the most important determinants of a child’s wellbeing across the lifespan.

Healthy families

'Health' in its contemporary usage takes in a broad range of considerations. With increased awareness of mental health problems and their antecedents in the broader Australian community, mental health is a particular concern of health promotion endeavours. Supportive of good mental health are self-confidence, resilience, a sense of efficacy and sense of social embeddedness. These are all social goods that, as just discussed, CfC activities delivered to children. Given current nationwide concerns about children's health and access to exercise it is notable that the data for this evaluation also show CfC provided children and their parents with a number of options for physical exercise. It is just as important that children and parents were given the opportunity to exercise together and, in this way, improve chances of exercise becoming part of their 'family culture'. Physical exercise is, of course, not only important for general health but also very important to a subjective sense of wellbeing and good quality of life.

Of interest is the similarity between benefits CfC has provided children and those which it has provided their parents. The data for this evaluation indicate that children gained from the increased opportunities for socialisation, acquisition of new skills and exploration of previously unencountered places and activities in their community. Parents benefited from similar things. Parents were extremely grateful for the new skills they acquired, especially with regard to creative and educational pursuits they were able to undertake with their children. The knowledge they gained about services for families was also highly valued. Perhaps of greatest importance for parents, however, was the opportunity to 'get out of the house' and meet other parents who were experiencing similar challenges and with whom they could swap tips, stories and a few laughs. Parents who had experienced depressive illness conveyed particularly well the importance of these social opportunities for parents' wellbeing.

Parents and carers of those children who are not well-supported by mainstream activities, whether due to cultural or language reasons or disability, were especially grateful for the social opportunities CfC provided them and their children. Families who 'fall between the cracks' in terms of services are often at risk of isolation and thus mental health issues. Communities for Children has undoubtedly been very important for these vulnerable families.

Family and children's services teamwork

The evaluation of the Frankston North implementation of Communities for Children indicates that Communities for Children has not only benefitted children and their families but also the service networks, individual organisations and personnel providing CfC-funded services.

Not all the activities that provided data for this evaluation owe their existence entirely to Communities for Children. Some activities would have operated irrespective of CfC's financial and administrative contributions. What the data have made clear, however, is that the support, extra promotion and cross-referral that were made possible through CfC's 'hub and spoke' model (comprising a broker/coordinating organisation and other organisations that deliver services directly) and through CfC's formal networking activities assisted services' development and capacity to attract attendees.

The data also indicate that efforts that CfC Frankston North has put into facilitating networks among the early years workforce and sectors within it have been greatly rewarded. Service providers reported being more aware of other services to which they could refer clients and better able to implement initiatives that required the contributions of other organisations.

Individual workers also provided stories that indicated that, on a personal level, their involvement with Communities for Children allowed them to develop their skills, make new friends and feel more connected and better able to contribute to their community.

The community itself has been a beneficiary of CfC insofar as CfC has funded a number of community-wide events that have allowed residents to interact with and support a diverse range of individuals.

Creating stronger families and communities

The Royal Children's Hospital and Frankston City Council found, in separate research mentioned earlier, that children in Frankston North were especially vulnerable to developmental delay. Explanations for this include poor access to nutrition and healthcare, high parental unemployment, high levels of social isolation that exist among Frankston residents, and lack of early intervention services in the Frankston area for young children. This evaluation has found that Communities for Children Frankston North has gone a considerable way towards addressing certainly the last two of these highly significant problems. This is to say that Communities for Children Frankston North has been integral to creating stronger families and a stronger community.

Recommendations

Particular strengths of the Frankston North implementation of CfC include the breadth of benefits it has delivered and range of groups and individuals it has assisted. The recommendations made in this report are based on an identification of these strengths and the need for the facilitating partner and community partners to build on them.

CfC Frankston North facilitating partner

- Positive feedback has been received from parents involved in the full range of activities from which stories were collected for this evaluation, from those whose purpose is to provide parents with 'time out' through to those designed to prepare children for starting school. The data indicate parents were as appreciative of leisure-oriented activities as they were of those activities that had more of a focus on health or their children's skill development. That is to say, the data collected through this evaluation provide strong evidence that the facilitating partner should continue to fund a diverse range of activities.
- The support already provided by the CfC Frankston North facilitating partner for activities that draw on volunteer labour has been shown to be highly appreciated by workers, volunteers and service users alike. As there is also urgent need across the state for more workers in the early childhood sector the CfC Frankston North facilitating partner could look at what other opportunities exist for volunteers across CfC-funded activities; undertaking volunteer work can help individuals to secure places in professional training courses and relevant paid employment.
- The data indicate that physical exercise programs supported by CfC have encouraged parents to undertake exercise at home and in their own time. That is, they have assisted families to develop healthier lifestyles. The success of particular programs (such as Home Interaction Program for Parents of Youngsters) indicate that families can be similarly encouraged to establish a strong culture of learning. The CfC Frankston North facilitating partner could investigate the possibilities of funding programs that foster parents' personal love of learning and provide them the knowledge and skills to become their children's teachers.
- Because an especially strong finding of the evaluation is that workers within the early years and educational sectors derived considerable benefits from training and networking opportunities it is recommended that networking opportunities be extended. It is important that the CfC facilitating partner organise regular or occasional meetings for community partners and other organisations in the early years and educational sectors. To ensure optimal use of time, meetings for the development of specific inter-agency projects should be held separately from those intended for the more casual exchange of information about service delivery and practice wisdom.

- To consolidate information and opinion exchange occurring at networking meetings, the sharing of new ideas, regular notification of feedback from service users to CfC partner organisations generally, and engenderment of new projects, the CfC facilitating partner could examine the options for introducing a website supporting online forums. Where the facilitating partner is concerned about the time involved in moderating forums they may impose limitations on the time period during which comments may be posted.
- A particular interest of Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) – Australia’s foremost research organisation focused on the needs of children – has been the encouragement of widespread cultural change with respect to the valuing of children. All activities funded by CfC have their own impact on the attitudes of the wider Frankston community towards children. Children in Frankston North may be even better served where the facilitating partner funds activities to contribute to a sophisticated community-wide campaign promoting, in various forms of media, the interests of young children.

CfC Frankston North Community Partners

- An aspect of particular CfC activities that was especially appreciated by parents and, according to parent and worker reports, children, was their capacity to serve a diverse range of clients. All activity planners need to explore ways in which parents and children whose English language skills are still developing or who have disabilities can be supported to use their services.
- An interesting finding of the evaluation is that parents personally enjoy a number of activities, particularly those that allow for physical movement and the expression of creativity. It is recommended that services presenting arts- and exercise-based activities for children make provisions where possible for parents to directly participate, in ways that are not to the detriment of children’s enjoyment or skill development. Giving parents (and carers) the opportunity to take part in creative and physical pursuits alongside their children not only facilitates the bond between parent and child but also affirms that parents, too, have the right to enjoyment. It also helps parents learn healthy and constructive ways of enjoying their leisure time.
- Given the value to parents of being able to interact with other parents and carers it is recommended that activities maximise the amount of time parents and carers have to talk with one another and, in particular, discuss issues relevant to the services being provided. This could mean, for formally structured activities, inviting parents to arrive up to fifteen minutes earlier. Other activities might find it more appropriate to organise occasional get-togethers to allow parents to swap experiences and advice.
- Feedback has indicated that some parents prefer activities such as playgroups that have a clearly defined start time and a distinct structure, whereas other parents appreciate being able to turn up to and leave activities any time within a broader timeframe. Community partners not already doing so could consider their capacity for supporting ‘flexible attendance’ of their activities. Ideally, community partners providing playgroups and similar could look at the possibility of offering their services in both highly scheduled and less structured formats.
- Given the importance of reinforcement for learning and behavioural change those programs aiming to foster these in parents– (exercise programs, for example, and those seeking to impart parenting skills) – should maximise their contact with parents after the conclusion of their services. This may be by way of sending out regular group emails or letters that build on some of the ideas presented in activities. Individuals are much more likely to continue with a self-monitored program of activity where they are furnished with reminders and helpful tips. Where resources allow, more personal forms of contact with former program attendees are encouraged.

- Where resources permit, activities could investigate opportunities for running more one-off events that involve the community as a whole, whether in contributing resources or merely attending. Such events serve the function of promoting awareness about services, and strengthening ties. Not only did these events receive particularly good feedback but there is evidence that holding community-wide events that cater well for children has an impact on children consciousness of the community as a whole.

Appendix A: Activities from which stories were collected and which participated in the research

Bi-lingual Playgroup / Inclusive Playgroup. St Anne's

This playgroup was run by a volunteer playgroup coordinator and a paid Auslan Coordinator (Deaf) who is fluent in Auslan. It was attended by hearing families, deaf families and families for whom English is a second language.

Carrum Downs: a Community for Kids Network

In August 2008 Carrum Downs: a Community for Kids ceased meeting as an individual network and were encouraged to join the Carrum Downs Community Group (CDCG). The CDCG had a commitment to early childhood through an early years representative position on their steering committee.

Carrum Downs School Transition Network

This network provided professional support and planning for staff in kinder, schools and childcare settings who facilitate the transition between the early years and education sectors.

Dive into Reading. Mahogany Neighbourhood Centre

Taking up from where Tiny Tots (see p.52) left off, this initiative for two to five-year-olds aimed to further develop children's love of books through storytelling, reading and related activities.

Early Parenting Groups. Maternal and Child Health Service

A range of parenting groups were run through the Maternal and Child Health service with the purpose of enhancing parents' knowledge and understanding of child development, their relationships, and their capacity for effective communication. The groups gave particular emphasis to dealing with emotions in a way supportive of parent-child interactions.

Karingal Early Years Community Network and Karingal School Transition Network

In 2008, the KEYCN and KSTN agreed to combine their meetings to create a forum focused on prevention and early intervention through cross-sector partnerships at the key transition points from birth to school.

Karingal Mentored Playgroup

This activity was a weekly, mentored playgroup for isolated parents and children 0-5 years in the Karingal area who were considered in some way vulnerable. The group provided a range of developmentally appropriate play and learning activities.

Karingal Primary School Transition Program

This program was designed to support children and their families in the transition from early years to Karingal Primary School. A range of activities was provided to enhance children's smooth transition from kindergarten to school. Some focused on the children, while others focused on the parent and child, allowing parents to also develop familiarity with the school.

Koori Early Learning Group. Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

This playgroup was targeted to Indigenous children. It provided them with culturally relevant activities. The playgroup implemented structured activities aimed at enhancing social skills and strengthening self-awareness as well as confidence.

Music and Movement. Mahogany Neighbourhood Centre.

The aim of this activity was to provide children fun through participating in musical activities including singing, instrument playing and movement. Children learned about sounds, music and self-expression through movement. The initiative also aimed to help children develop socialisation skills and build their confidence. Parent participation was welcome.

Open House Play Group. Lyrebird Community Centre

This playgroup is distinguished from others by the flexibility it offered. Parents could arrive at any time during the two-hour session. It targeted group was parents who were in particular need of support in their parenting role. Parents were assisted to interact positively with their children, learn about child development, form social networks and link with other community services.

Parents' Place Café. Mahogany Neighbourhood Centre.

This initiative aimed to promote parent and child socialisation, and to enhance community engagement and family health. Parents were given the opportunity to chat with each other and make new friends. Activities were provided for parents as well as for children, such as outings, guest speakers and skills workshops.

Physical Activity. YMCA

This project aimed to support sole parents and their children getting active, becoming part of their communities and enjoying more quality time with each other. It also aimed to build a foundation for positive, lifelong relationships between parents and children and supportive communities of interest focused around activity.

Pines Community Childhood Network.

The Pines Community Childhood Network (PCCN) was formed in recognition of the growing desire in the community to support and celebrate the importance of early childhood and family in all its forms. It was intended to bring together residents of Frankston North and others with an interest in Frankston North, so that a child and family-friendly community could be created.

Pines Pride Day. Mahogany Neighbourhood Centre

This was a one-day, 'not for profit' event aimed at bringing the community together for a family friendly activity-filled day in a safe environment. Children aged between 0 and 5 were catered for. Activities included visiting an animal farm, clowns, face painting, a jumping castle and puppets.

Post-natal Depression Support Group. Frankston City Council

The purpose of this activity was to provide support for women experiencing post-natal depression.

Professional Development and Leadership Reference Group

This group of early years professional and service providers met regularly to develop a coordinated delivery of relevant professional development opportunities that: enhance understanding and capacity to respond positively to vulnerable children and families; provide a means by which beginning early years staff members could establish mentor partnerships, and enhance the community's capacity to participate and contribute to decision-making on issues that affect families.

School Transition And Readiness. Frankston City Council

This activity offered workshops for parents in which information and advice was given to parents, activities were provided for children, and networks amongst the early years sector, the education sector and the community were fostered. Children at risk of a poor transition to school were a particular target of this activity.

That's Entertainment for Three-year-olds. Lyrebird Community Centre

This playgroup was for three-year-old children. Children attending the playgroup were provided entertainment and education through stories, music, art and other activities.

Tiny Tots Storytime. Mahogany Neighbourhood Centre

Aimed at zero to two-year-olds, this was a weekly activity aimed at developing children's love of stories, reading and books through storytelling and related activities.

Appendix B: Story collection form



Communities for Children Evaluation

Most Significant Change



Name of program you are part of:

Location:

Are you involved in the program as:

Parent

Other carer: (please specify):

How many hours per week do you look after this child? hours.

Worker

Other:

1. Tell us a story that represents the most significant change that has occurred for you from being involved in this program?



Communities for Children Evaluation

Most Significant Change



2. Why is this change significant for you?

3. Does this program bring change in any of the following areas? (please tick only one)

- More inclusive communities for all families and cultures
- Improved child and family physical and mental health
- Improved positive parenting skills
- Improved early learning and care
- Promote child friendly communities
- Increase in partnerships and professional development
- Increase in community members' participation
- Child and family services working more effectively together
- Other (please describe) _____

Adapted from *The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use*, Rick Davies and Jess Dart, Version 1.00 – April 2005, <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>

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