

POLICY OPTIONS

Family support programs: ensuring a healthy start to life

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Policy context

The Australian Government is taking a whole of government approach to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health with the ultimate goal of achieving health outcomes and health services for Indigenous Australians that are at least as good as that of the general Australian community. Family support and parenting education programs are recognized as a means of improving child and maternal health outcomes, and the Australian Government has invested in a number of programs including the Australian Family Nurse Partnership Program, which is based on the US Nurse Family Partnership. But, resource constraints limit the spread of such programs and therefore identification and exploration of the aim, theoretical underpinnings, and target populations of alternative programs will assist in developing a range of programs that ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families receive the appropriate level of parenting education and support to maximize the health and psychosocial well-being of children, young people, and their families.

Policy options

The following policy options are written within the context of improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child health outcomes as a core component of Closing the Gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

- > **Progressive Universalism:** Provision of high quality early childhood services to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and provision of higher levels of support to those families most in need has the potential to improve child and maternal health outcomes, and long term health and social wellbeing. However, implementation of the context of “progressive universalism” to early childhood care will have resource and workforce implications that will need to be thought through carefully prior to the incorporation of this concept into policy and practice.
- > **Antenatal and Postnatal Screening:** Antenatal and Postnatal Promotional Interviews are an evidence based, proactive and non-stigmatising approach to promoting the early psychological development of babies and young people, and assisting the transition to parenthood that could be used as a screening tool for all families as part of the implementation of “progressive universalism”. Suitably trained and supported Aboriginal Health Workers or child health nurses could conduct the interviews either in a primary health care service, in families’ homes, or in other suitable community locations. The full potential of the PIs can not be realised if health practitioners conducting the interviews are not appropriately and adequately trained and supported. Additionally, senior management must endorse the PIs as a core component of the health practitioners’ workload, with concomitant restructuring and/or amending existing work load to ensure sufficient time is available to conduct the interviews, complete the check list, and follow-up as necessary.

- > **Evidence based parenting support programs:** Not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families require intensive support programs to address parenting deficits and improve child and maternal health outcomes. Evidence based, culturally safe and locally appropriate interventions of varying levels of intensity that aim to increase participants' parenting skills and improve health and development outcomes need to be developed, trialled, implemented and evaluated to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are provided with the appropriate and necessary level.
- > **Intensive Home Visiting Parenting Support Programs:** Critical success factors of intensive home visiting support programs include well trained and supported staff that deliver a culturally safe, structured, programmatic, consistent program in sufficient dose to enable, support and reinforce parental behaviour change. Ideally, a home visiting support program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families would be integrated with primary health care and community services to enable delivery of a therapeutic intervention in addition to parental support and mentoring.

Key findings

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review identified three Australian Intensive Home Visiting Programs. As has been found previously in broader literature reviews, these projects reported some positive effects for some, but not all, outcome variables. Additionally, the lack of long term follow-up data means that the lasting impact of these programs is not possible to assess. The Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program (ANFPP) was included in this review as it specifically focused on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, and therefore of extreme relevance to this study. At the time of the Fellowship, there were no evaluation data available, nor was there any specific information about how the program is being implemented at the four sites, other than the inclusion of an Aboriginal Community Worker as a member of the home visiting team.

SITE VISITS

The Centre for Parent and Child Support (CPCS) South London and Maudsley National Health Service Foundation Trust, London, aims to develop, deliver and evaluate programs to improve outcomes for children, families and wider communities. The CPCS was originally established to develop and evaluate the **Family Partnership Model (FPM)** (formerly known as The Parent Adviser model). The conceptual framework and methodological approach to working with families inherent to the FPM underpins three programs developed and disseminated by the Centre: Antenatal and Postnatal Promotional Interviewing; the Empowering Parents Empowering Communities project; and the Helping Families Programme.

The **Antenatal and Postnatal Promotional Interviews** provide a proactive and non-stigmatising approach to promoting the early psychological development of babies and young people, and assisting the transition to parenthood. They provide a mechanism to foster an understanding relationship between parents and health visiting staff and act as a flexible, structured guide so practitioners can help parents explore their pregnancy, baby and adaptation to parenthood so together they can make better decisions about their family's needs.

Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities is a community-based program that originated in the inner London Borough of Southwark that involves training local parents in basic psychology so they are then qualified to deliver parenting groups in their own communities, and aims to provide cost-effective and accessible help for families whose families are experiencing behavioural difficulties. The EPEC parenting program "*Being a Parent*" was specifically developed for use by "peer facilitators", based on the assumption that parents would find it less stigmatising and more supportive to attend parenting groups run by local parents in similar circumstances to themselves.

The **Helping Family Programme** is an innovative parenting intervention developed for multi-stressed families living in complex social circumstances with primary school aged children who experience severe and persistent conduct problems. It aims to help the parents address their children's immediate behavioural difficulties, and help parents bring up their children safely, lovingly and with confidence that they are doing the best by their children. It focuses on reducing children's conduct problems to reduce family harm and increase resilience in parents and the entire family.

Early Start is an intensive home visiting service targeting vulnerable families in Christchurch, New Zealand. Families can be referred to Early Start from six months before the birth of a child up to one year after the birth. Early Start uses a planned, focussed and systematic approach to working with families, and aims to enable enrolled families to learn and apply nurturing parenting practices, discover personal strengths and abilities, develop new skills and practices and challenge negative and destructive life habits. Early Start has positively impacted on child health and wellbeing.

METHODS

This study combined a targeted literature review with researchers and service delivery personnel involved in family support and parent education programs. The Fellowship was conducted in November and December 2011, and involved a visit to the Centre for Parent and Child Support in the United Kingdom and the Early Start Parent Support Program in New Zealand. The Fellowship built on previously established relationships with the Early Start program, and established a positive relationship with researchers and service delivery personnel in the UK.

Literature review

A review of published and grey literature describing and evaluating Australian intensive home visiting family support programs.

Site visits

Discussion with international researchers and service delivery personnel involved in family support and parent education programs.

- > *Dr Crispin Day, Ms Meagan Ellis, Dr Daniel Michelson, Ms Michelle McGrath, Ms Ros Loxton, Centre for Parent and Child Support (CPCS), Kings College, London & South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.*
The Centre for Parent and Child Support (CPCS) aims to develop, deliver and evaluate programs to improve outcomes for children, families and wider communities.
- > *Mr Jo Harper, Torbay Family Health Partnership, Paignton, Devon.*
The Torbay Family Health Partnership is an intensive, sustained home visiting early intervention program that aims to support first time young parents within Torbay, Devon.
- > *Professor David Fergusson, University of Otago, Christchurch*
Professor Fergusson is the founder and director of the Christchurch Health and Development Study, a 30 year study of a birth cohort of 1265 children born in the Christchurch region in mid 1977 and is the chairman and evaluator of the Early Start programme, which is a Christchurch-based family support programme.
- > *Ms Hildegard Grant, Ms Jan Egan, Ms Heather Davidson, Ms Michelle Fagan, and Family Support Workers, Early Start Program, Christchurch, New Zealand.*
The Early Start Program is a research based fully evaluated long term and intensive home visiting service aimed at vulnerable Christchurch families caring for children under 5 yrs of age that commenced in 1995.

For more details, please go to the full report

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