

Ermington Family Learning Centre

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage through parents and children learning together

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The Ermington Family Learning Centre provides educational opportunities for both children with learning difficulties from low income families, and their parents. The Centre specifically targets disadvantaged children and encourages the involvement of families, most of whom are vulnerable and isolated from traditional services. Because the focus is on children, many parents who would not normally use welfare agencies or seek professional support have accepted help from the Centre. The integrated but indirect approach has ensured not only sustained educational gains and improved self esteem in the children, but improvements in family functioning and the self esteem of parents.

At the Ermington Family Learning Centre, children with learning difficulties from low income families can receive individual attention. Many of the children are at risk in terms of school default, child abuse or drug abuse. Often the parents of these children have had very negative educational experiences, limited literacy and numeracy skills and a poor relationship with their child's school.

Unless appropriate intervention occurs, the cycle of educational disadvantage will be perpetuated for these children and families. The Centre aims to prevent school failure, family breakdown and continued dependence on welfare assistance by providing learning opportunities for children and their families through the creation of broad networks of professional and social support. The Centre aims to empower parents to participate confidently in the mainstream educational system.

The Centre provides an integrated approach to learning. Staff are committed to working with parents to overcome barriers that may hinder the learning process of their child. Similarly, the Centre works with the child's school, creating a partnership between the school, family and child.

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The Centre operates from a three bedroom cottage in Ermington in Sydney's western suburbs, located within walking distance of the Ermington shopping centre and library. It provides a 'home like' setting and is well known in the local community. The area is disadvantaged with a high proportion of low income families and public housing tenants.

The Centre demystifies the learning process. It demonstrates the value of parents and children learning together and provides a range of services to encourage this process. Children, accompanied by a parent, attend weekly literacy and numeracy tuition. Parents are also encouraged to attend groups incorporating life skills such as stress management, assertiveness training, parenting and first aid and, where relevant, adult literacy classes.

Centre philosophy

All families attending the Centre are poor and have children with learning problems. In addition, the families have to cope with issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, low self esteem, low levels of adult literacy, poor parenting skills, major health problems, limited awareness of nutrition, child abuse or neglect, spouses with husbands in jail and very little experience of work. Twenty per cent are Aboriginal and a further twenty per cent are of non-English speaking background. Most lack the knowledge or ability to access the range of community ser-

vices available, apart from basic financial supports.

Because of the extent of the social and educational disadvantage of the families, the assumptions underlying the program are paramount to successful outcomes for families.

These assumptions are:

- these families lack opportunity rather than ability and the programs provide an opportunity to grow and learn;
- feeling listened to and valued opens an opportunity for people to grow;
- parents and children learning together is a powerful source of growth;
- parents know their children best and want the best for them;
- focussing on what the parent is committed to rather than the problems they continually face gives children and parents the feeling of 'moving on' rather than being 'fixed up';
- people can accomplish their goals given appropriate support - the broader the network of support, the more the family is likely to achieve.

The guiding philosophy of the Centre is to empower people to overcome the cycle of poor education, low self esteem and dependence on welfare support. The Centre provides a safe learning environment where children and families are able to maximise their success in mainstream

educational settings and move towards greater independence and control over their own lives.

The Centre's aims, based on the assumptions listed above are:

- to provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged children with learning difficulties so they can operate successfully in mainstream schooling;
- to provide support and educational opportunities for the parents to empower them to provide for their children's healthy growth and development.
- to create broad networks of support, both professional and social, for disadvantaged families.
- to create a sense of partnership between the family, the school and the Centre.

Background

The Ermington Family Learning Centre was established by the McNeall Group of Companies (a private engineering company) in 1984 'to raise the horizons of disadvantaged children'. At that time it was called the McNeall Group Foundation.

The program offered by the Foundation underwent some early adjustments. The original focus was family support, however after eighteen months the decision was made to change the focus to education. Since 1985, the Centre has expanded to incorporate one full-time teacher/co-ordinator, three part-time teachers, and more recently, a part-time family counsellor and a full-time children's community worker.

The service began by seeing children after school and running parent and pre-school programs during school hours. In 1987, school principals from the surrounding schools requested that students attend the Centre for tuition during school hours. Approval was given by the Department of School Education and the link between the seven referring schools and the service has evolved to incorporate a playgroup, adult education classes, an Aboriginal mothers' group, children's groups and holiday activities.

In 1992 because of the recession, the McNeall Group of Companies was not able to continue sole financial support for the Centre. In early

1993, Burnside (a Uniting Church welfare agency) agreed to provide recurrent funding for the Centre with the McNeall Group of Companies continuing to provide the Centre's building. Burnside has incorporated the Centre into the range of welfare and educational services it provides to disadvantaged children and families.

Outline of the centre's activities

Referral

Referral is made through the principals of the seven participating primary schools, and only students from very disadvantaged backgrounds will be accepted by the Centre.

Up to thirty-four children are enrolled at the Centre at any one time. Strong links have been developed with the schools who are aware of the Centre's entry guidelines and the types of children who would benefit most from attendance: that is children whom they feel are hindered in their academic performance by factors in their family environment.

The Centre is working with schools to identify learning problems as early as possible. Older children enrolled in the Centre are assisted with the transition to high school, although tutoring from the Centre is phased out during their first year at high school. A former student can request short term assistance during high school years. A structure to monitor students progress through High School is being explored.

Many families referred to the Centre by the school require extra encouragement to attend. Many children in desperate need of the Centre's services would be denied access to them if staff were content to accept only those referred families who turned up for their initial appointment. Families who come to the Centre often have difficult social issues, such as alcoholism, drug dependence, sexual abuse, and family violence to deal with and circumstances to overcome in order to attend to child tutorial or adult group sessions. Consequently, regular attendance is often difficult for them. Once parents have clearly indicated their decision to participate, whether it is tutorial or group, staff operate on a principle of 'relentless

compassion' to ensure attendance. Invariably the reminder call beforehand or enquiry about an absence is seen as a sign of caring and regard by parents. Staff organise transport and often substitute times with notice, but regularly remind parents and students that they have choices, they can finish or have a break.

Further encouragement and practical assistance is often required to maintain a weekly commitment by parents to the educational programs. Centre staff are committed to ensuring very disadvantaged families are able to make use of the Centre's services.

Liaison with schools

Creating a sense of partnership between the family, the school and the Centre is a key aim of the Centre.

Communication between the school and the family may be non-existent, or it may have been characterised by conflict. At times, the Centre has advocated for the child to ensure access and equity in the school system, and at other times mediated to improve a relationship that has broken down between a parent and the child's school.

For example when Amy, aged 9, first came to the Centre, the relationship between the school and her mother was very negative with very little communication between them. Amy had a severe learning difficulty and was assessed as being three years behind academically. A referral to an Intensive Reading (IR) class had not been made by the school because it was felt that the child's mother was unable to give the transport and home study support that was necessary for the placement to be successful.

The Centre's first priority was to work with Amy's mother to get her involved and committed to Amy's education. They also felt they needed to advocate on Amy's behalf to the school for a referral to be made to the IR class. After intensive work with Amy's mother, the Centre was able to guarantee her support of the IR placement. Centre staff supported the mother during the placement and coordinated the follow-up between the mother, school and IR staff.

Amy is now making steady but slow academic progress. The improvement in communication between the mother and the school, however, has been dramatic. The Centre has successfully

built a partnership between the school and the mother. The mother's attitude towards the education of her daughter has also improved and, in addition, she is completing a course at the school (TTAL: Talk to a Literacy learner) and a First Aid course at the Centre.

Educational Program

On entry to the Centre, each student has an educational assessment (using standardised tests and curricula based on literacy assessments for phonemic awareness, reading and word attack skills, and numeracy assessments for basic facts and computational skills). A school history comes from the child's class teacher, and an individual program planned with the class and support teachers and parent all participating. The parent feels a sense of ownership of the program, and is acknowledged as a key person in the partnership.

Students attend an hour-long tutorial session at the Centre once per week with parents in attendance and parents agree to do follow-up work with their children at home. Sessions are tailored to suit each child. Focus is on literacy and numeracy skills and if necessary on behavioural adjustment. Centre staff integrate the tutorial work with school work and assess the child's progress in association with the school and the parent every six months.

The Centre's assessment of the child and the provision of extra services, in partnership with the school, is sometimes sufficient to produce substantial academic progress in the child. For example, Ben aged 10 was a very poor reader with virtually no word attack skills when he was referred to the Centre. After assessment, he was placed on the *Linda-mood Auditory Discrimination in Depth Program* which proved to be very appropriate and effective for him. He attended weekly tutoring at the Centre with his parents; was referred to an IR class; provided with extra support from his classroom teacher and STLD (Support Teacher, Learning Difficulties). This proved to be very effective and he has made substantial academic gains. His confidence and self esteem have increased.

A trusting relationship develops between Centre staff, parents and student during the tutorial session. The agreement to do follow up work

usually provides a context for discussion of such topics as home management, effective parenting skills, ways of boosting the child's self esteem, conflict resolution strategies, difficulties with the school or the parents' own literacy problems. From these discussions come referrals to counselling and other medical or welfare support or 'round table conferences' at the school.

In 1994, small group instruction was introduced for three groups on three afternoons. Staff have trained volunteer tutors from among parents and past students now in high school to be available to listen to the children read. Children receive assistance more frequently and more children benefit from Centre programs.

Activity and support groups for children

The development of a positive self image for each child is very important. To assist with the child's development and the family's well-being, the Centre offers family outings during the school holidays, a playgroup and groups for children. Holiday excursions are often the only all day family outings experienced by the children.

Children's Living Skills is a creative and innovative program that recently came under the auspice of the Centre. It provides a range of services for children: whole class self-esteem groups in eight local schools; all day workshops for children from any of these schools; self esteem groups for parents and children together; and community based drama groups. The Children's Community Worker who runs the program also provides after-school recreation groups and holiday excursions for children as well as advocacy, referral and emotional support for children and families.

Parent groups

Parent groups are organised to meet parent needs on the theory that having a parent stimulated by learning will promote the child's interest in learning. All groups arise out of parent requests. Planning meetings are held each term with parents, and outreach and literacy officers and counsellors from TAFE to suggest short and long term learning possibilities, to hear parents' interests and to help identify the directions they want to take.

For instance, one parent early in the program started with the craft and cooking course and later asked about spelling. The literacy classes at the Centre grew out of that inquiry. She went on to do literacy and New Opportunities for Women at TAFE, a secretarial course at a vocational college and has now found full time work. This has done as much for her son as for herself. From a difficult start in primary school, he is now progressing well in high school.

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Twenty-eight parents from the Centre have moved on to further education at TAFE or vocational courses elsewhere. One has completed both tertiary preparation at TAFE and a University degree and two Aboriginal mothers are currently at TAFE preparing for admission to University. Some do many courses at the Centre before they are ready to move on. Because they have difficulty accessing Australian-born adults with literacy needs, TAFE and Macquarie Community College provide literacy teachers, tutors and group leaders. They have seen how adults doing courses at the Centre move on to further education elsewhere.

The courses that have been run at the Centre, apart from the intensive, ongoing literacy/numeracy classes, include conflict resolution, stress management, new directions for women, first aid, cooking, assertiveness training, self-esteem, parenting, budgeting and nutrition.

One cooking course, for instance, also had a group leader to guide discussion over lunch. A recurring theme of that course was violence towards children. One single father of four thought corporal punishment necessary to discipline children, but after much discussion within the group, with staff outside the group, with other parents and with friends, he changed his approach from hitting to talking. This was a huge shift for him. When an irate man punched

him in the face in front of his children over a woman they were both seeing, he did not retaliate. He did not want his children to see him fighting. As the culture of his bikie friends was to be the best fighters, it was a strong test of his newly acquired values. As talking replaced hitting, his eldest son became less withdrawn and cringing, smiled and chatted more, related more easily to his peers, and his academic achievement, the ultimate goal of the Centre, also improved. There were also indications that his views made an impact on his friends as he was obviously well regarded in the group for his strength.

involved in some form of learning and some are employed at the Centre. These parents have now taken the initiative to set up a centre themselves where Aboriginal people can learn new skills. They are in the process of incorporation and are receiving support from many areas of the community.

Outcomes

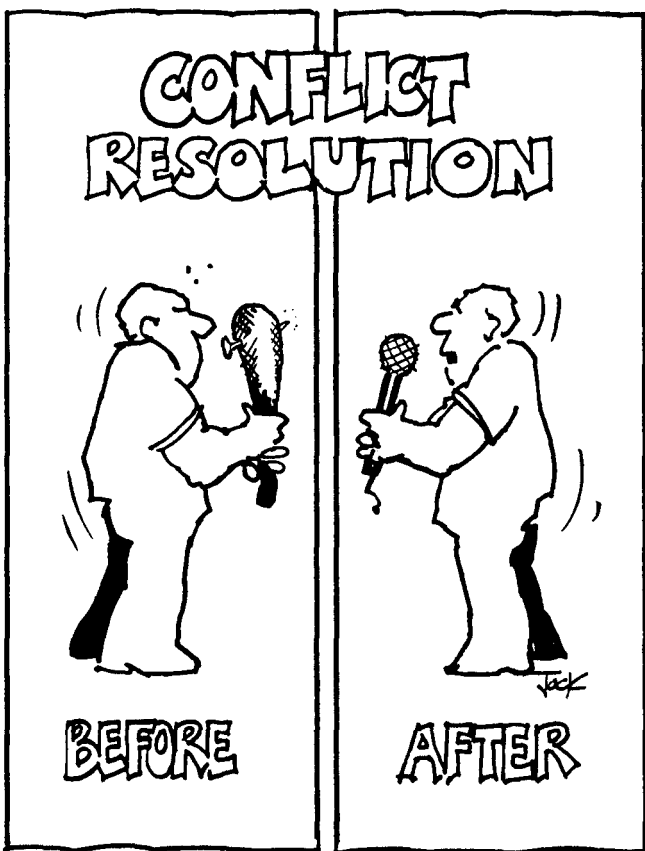
In the early years of operation, family crises were frequent and severe. Many parents became fearful that they were losing control of their children as they reached 10, 11 and 12 years old. Now, soon after beginning tutoring, a child can be linked with after-school groups, self-esteem groups or excursions with the Children's Living Skills worker. Parents can join groups to gain new skills and to meet other parents and families who are either readily linked with the Family Support Centre in the next suburb or with a range of medical services such as counselling, speech therapy and vision testing. As parents make more social links in the community, children join more community sporting and recreational groups which usually leads to significant modification of behaviour for difficult children. Parents' feelings of

old said to his younger brother recently, 'No Aaron, Mum's not trying to make you feel bad. She's just helping us to learn more.' As parents feel more in charge, threats to leave or 'kick the children out' or 'put them in a home' disappear, children lose their fear of abandonment, and the cycle of family breakdown begins to be broken. One of the least obvious outcomes of 12 months in an intensive literacy class is that one Aboriginal mother now feels welcome and comfortable in seven or eight other homes in the area and confident to invite people to her home. Prior to that she had no one in the area she could call a friend and racism was a big issue for her.

Role reversal between parents and their children is common in attending families. As parents build a broader adult support network, they rely less on their children for support, can provide more of the unconditional support the children need and thus enable the children to be children.

The Centre is seen by the community as an educational centre and not as a welfare service. Whilst the service aims to impact on overall family well-being, it begins by attempting to improve and sustain academic performance in the child. A recent survey of referring primary schools (unpublished report to Burnside by M. Kelly entitled *McNeill Foundation*, Jan 1993) found that nearly all children who attended the Centre showed improvements in literacy and numeracy test scales over a six month period. The most noticeable gain reported by schools was an increase in the confidence and self esteem of those children who attended the Centre. Improvements were also noted in concentration and the ability of students to work with other students.

The Kelly Report noted that schools and other community agencies consistently reported that the work the Centre does to encourage an educationally supportive family environment was its greatest strength. Parents reported that they felt 'more confident' in helping their child with homework and an increased number of parents reported that they were able to communicate constructively with the classroom teacher. The majority of parents also indicated a general improvement in their relationships with their child. Schools



The Centre has a policy of positive discrimination towards severely disadvantaged groups such as Aborigines, to ensure they receive equitable access to services. Centre staff supported the establishment of an after-school Aboriginal Study Centre by encouraging Aboriginal parents to attend meetings, helping them deal with breakdowns and conflicts, advocating on their behalf, and training them to deal with bureaucracies. Out of that Study Centre, an Aboriginal Parents' Group has developed to explore Aboriginality at more depth and for families to support each other. All parents are

powerless to control their children fades as parents report feeling 'in charge' and confident of being able to help them. It is this doubt in their ability to help their children that often typifies parents on entry, as against, when they leave, a confidence that they can manage and call on support when needed.

The most important outcome of the Centre's programs is the improvement in the quality of the relationships between parents and children and between parents and teachers as the concept of partnership becomes real. As one 10 year

