

Family resource programs

Strengthening families and communities

Marion Gledhill

This paper argues the need for comprehensive provision of family resource programs. All Australia's families should be able to access the support, information, skills and resources that are necessary for optimal child development and for prevention of child abuse and neglect. The paper argues that there is a significant gap in the general availability of primary prevention family services in Australia. Family resource programs are discussed in terms of their goals, guiding principles, and service models. Examples of these programs both overseas and in NSW are described.

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Preventive family services are often seen as a continuum of service provision, which range from universally available services (primary prevention), through early intervention services to assist families identified as 'at risk' (secondary prevention), to intensive, crisis intervention services (tertiary prevention). While this concept is only a theoretical construct, it does provide a framework for planning the range of services needed to support families and to prevent child abuse and neglect.

In recent years increasing attention has been given to the area of primary prevention. In 1993, the National Child Protection Council of Australia published its National Strategy for preventing child abuse. This strategy has as its goals:

1. to prevent child abuse;
2. to create an environment which supports families and communities and helps them to meet their responsibilities to care for and protect children.

The objectives are:

1. to identify and change attitudes and behaviours which are harmful to children and to promote attitudes and behaviours which nurture and support children;
2. to identify and change factors which contribute to harmful parenting practices and create a community environment which better supports

and assists adults in parenting children;

3. to teach children how to form non-exploitative relationships and to develop children's emotional care and personal safety skills.

The framework through which these goals will be achieved has four complementary sub-projects:

1. information and public awareness;
2. knowledge and skill development;
3. policy and project development;
4. local prevention initiatives and services.

This paper recommends comprehensive provision of family resource programs as a significant strategy in prevention at the primary level to achieve the goals and objectives of the National Child Protection Council of Australia's National Strategy.

The need for service provision at the secondary and tertiary levels is strongly affirmed, and it is acknowledged that community need for such services currently exceeds their availability. However, at the same time, increased provision of primary prevention services is essential to reduce the numbers of families needing more intensive interventions.

Family resource programs can be provided by a variety of community organisations. Organisations which

offer family support services at the secondary and tertiary levels of prevention are particularly well placed to provide family resource programs, so as to provide a comprehensive and integrated range of family services.

This paper argues the need for universal access to services at the primary level of prevention. Family resource programs should be available in every local community.

To strengthen families, public policy needs to support the development of community-based family resource centres throughout our country. Just as there is a public library in every community, there needs to be a family support program in every community. (Gimperling, in Staton, Ooms & Owen, 1991)

PRIMARY PREVENTION

Primary prevention programs offer resources to enable families to avoid situations, conditions and patterns of behaviour that could become damaging. Family resource programs provide primary prevention by offering services to improve the overall well-being of families. Such programs provide services to families as they experience normal life-cycle problems. These programs provide information about child development and parenting, often through parent education classes and group discussions. By providing families with education, resources and support, families are strengthened and serious child and family problems are prevented.

Don Edgar, former Director of the Australian Institute for Family Studies, has written that research shows a strong correlation between locally accessible support services working together in strong networks, and lower levels of child abuse, domestic violence, delinquency and family breakdown. 'The finger in the dam is less effective than building a new dam based on stronger foundations.' (Edgar, 1988)

In January 1987, the National Family Support Program commenced. Guidelines were agreed between the

Commonwealth and States/Territories. The national goal was:

To provide support to families to develop their coping skills, and their competence to provide an adequate child rearing environment by ensuring the equitable distribution of a range of appropriate services throughout the Commonwealth.

... research shows a strong correlation between locally accessible support services working together in strong networks, and lower levels of child abuse, domestic violence, delinquency and family breakdown.

The national objectives were:

- To support families with dependent children in their parenting role.
- To develop a national network of support, referral and self-help services with a preventive and educative emphasis.
- To encourage the development wherever possible of generic services available to all families, rather than specialised services appropriate to the needs of a few, or which only meet some support needs.
- As far as possible, to co-ordinate and co-locate services with existing community structures so that
 - (i) services do not duplicate existing suitable administrative structures; and
 - (ii) services are, and are seen to be, accessible to all families in a community.
- Where families undergoing particular stresses can be identified, to give them priority of access to services.

As a result of the initiative in establishing the National Family Support Program, many family support programs were funded across Australia. However, in 1988 these programs became the sole responsibility of the State and Territory governments and the National Family Support Program ceased to exist.

Since this time, family support services in most States and Territories have, for a variety of reasons, moved away from their broad primary prevention focus as outlined in the objectives above, to a focus at the secondary (and sometimes tertiary) levels of prevention, ie, services to assist families and children at risk or in crisis. A major factor in this shift away from primary prevention has been that State and Territory departments for community services have sought to align the functions of family support services more closely to their own responsibilities in child protection. As a result, there has been an increasing tendency to refer on to family support services those families with complex difficulties who require intensive ongoing work.

Although some family support services can still be identified as being at the primary prevention end of the continuum of preventive services, there is a significant gap now in many areas of Australia in primary prevention services, accessible to all families in a community, which can strengthen families with resources and support at a community level and prevent the negative outcomes of child abuse and neglect, delinquency, and family breakdown.

FAMILY RESOURCE PROGRAMS

Most family resource programs share the following goals:

- to improve the capacity of families to master a broad range of developmental tasks as they experience life cycle changes;
- to improve the quality of all family relationships, and the relationships of family members to their external community, including schools, institutions, and the workplace;

- to minimise stresses that may harm the family;
- to improve each family's link to social resources and support.

(Pooley & Littell, 1986, p. 43)

Wolcott (1989), of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, writes:

Coordination across a range of community services is necessary - developmental, preventive, educational, and remedial - to provide families with the information, the skill, the emotional and practical resources to cope with the pressures, tensions, ordinary life cycle transitions or extreme crises that can occur. In the Institute's view, prevention of problems through more extensive family support service provision is an essential part of any comprehensive policy aimed at family wellbeing and a more productive and vital society.

Family resource programs extend beyond the preventive approach to promotion; beyond simply avoiding a predictable problem to a concept of optimalism. This means providing an environment conducive to the optimal development of children through support of the family and maintenance of a viable community.

Since it is extremely difficult to identify who may experience problems as they grow, all families become the target population. Attempts to target 'at risk' children are imperfect and often miss children with developmental delays or families with serious relationship problems who are members of the supposedly non-risk population. A belief in prevention and in universal access makes claim on society to ensure a baseline of good beginnings for all children because it is their right.

In their discussion *Societal Interventions to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect*, Hay and Jones (1994) note that:

An increasing number of programs are targeting their prevention efforts towards entire communities and their residents ... they aim to change public perception regarding child maltreatment as well as to heighten awareness about the need for education and support services.

The US National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect has funded nine demonstration projects applying the community approach to prevention programs. Although the evaluation of the demonstration projects is still under way, implementation lessons are already being learned, including:

- that it is better to focus on positive parenting than to talk about child abuse prevention;
- the importance of developing collaboration with other agencies;
- the importance of involving community residents in planning from the start; and
- the need for programs to accommodate the changing concerns of the community.

(Hay and Jones, 1994).

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Family resource programs are based on certain guiding principles:

- A focus not on problems but on enhancing child development and reinforcing family competencies and strengths. Building on family strengths is seen as the primary way to support and strengthen family functioning.
- A holistic view of the parent as a total person, recognising that positive feelings of self-worth enable parents to be more effective in their parenting roles.
- A holistic approach to families, valuing each member, including fathers and other significant members, and encouraging the

development of healthy family relationships.

- Partnership between parents and professionals. Parents are involved in determining what services or information the program should offer and which ones they want to use. Staff aim to enable and empower parents to control their own lives and find their own solutions to problems.
- Accessibility - programs are integrated with local communities and often operate on a drop-in basis, providing an informal, comfortable setting. Availability out of normal working hours is important, in the evenings and at weekends.
- An ecological approach, by which children cannot be seen as separate from the family and community in which they live. Programs are community-based and tailored to respond to the culture(s) of the families living in that community. Programs build interdependencies between families and communities.
- A recognition of the value of support. There is evidence that the often devastating results of isolation and loneliness can be alleviated through the development of social networks and that such support is associated with more responsive interaction with children and strengthened coping capacities. In recognising the necessity of support, the term no longer implies deficits but, on the contrary, speaks to the strength and capacity of a family to develop friendships, to make linkages with other groups, and to seek advice and information. The fact is support programs increase a family's ability to cope, rather than provide a system on which families become dependent.

(Weissbourd and Patrick, 1988)

In order to raise their children, all parents need emotional support and practical help. They also need specific information, advice, and feedback about child health and development, basic child rearing practices, and

information about where to go for special kinds of assistance when crises or problems occur. Parents usually get this help from various informal sources - relatives, other parents, neighbours, friends, and community-based organisations. Less often they seek help from more formal sources such as health, welfare and education professionals. Parents' need for support and information cuts across socioeconomic and educational lines. Some groups of parents are especially in need of strong support systems, for example, recently arrived migrant parents, single parents, parents of children born with disabilities, teenage parents, and parents with low incomes.

In order to raise their children, all parents need emotional support and practical help.

Family resource programs provide the chief elements of social support - information, guidance, feedback, practical assistance, and emotional and peer support.

These projects assume that parenting is a demanding and important job and that parents want and need reinforcement in their role as parents. This need is largely ignored by our society, for although a large percentage of our population are or will be parents, few resources are provided for them. Only limited resources are available, targeted primarily towards families who have serious problems. Almost nothing is offered to those who are experiencing the typical problems that normal families encounter.

(Pooley and Littell, 1986, p. 28)

SERVICE MODELS

To accomplish their goals, family resource programs provide all or a combination of some of the following services:

- **Parent education groups** are designed to increase parents'

understanding, knowledge, and skills in specific areas. Common topics of these groups include parenting and child development, parent-child interaction, family relationships, child health and nutrition, building self-esteem, discipline, and family communication.

- **Parent support groups** provide opportunities for parents to share their experiences, concerns, and feelings as well as their interests and ideas in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and trust. These groups are effective vehicles through which parents' feelings of self-confidence and competence are increased and communication and problem-solving skills and coping abilities are bolstered as they broaden their network of support and increase access to information and resources.
- **Parent-child groups** provide child development activities for parents and children together.
- **Child care** is provided by most programs while parents are participating. Some programs provide an occasional care service where parents can leave their children during their own social, recreational or work-related activities.
- **Drop-in time** provides unstructured periods when parents can be with family resource program staff members and one another on an informal basis.
- **Lending libraries** make a variety of materials about parenting and child development and/or developmentally appropriate toys and activity ideas available for loan.
- **Newsletters** provide information about program activities, child development and parenting, and listings of local events, resources for families, and 'news' about participating families such as the birth of a baby.
- **Advocacy** takes place for individual families and in response to the overall needs of families in the community.

- **Information and referral services** link families to community resources.
- **Crisis intervention and short-term counselling** respond to parents' special concerns about their children and the special needs of families.
- **Home visiting** reaches out to families who do not easily access centre-based programs.
- **Social and recreational activities.**

Centre-based programs provide a variety of these services to families at one location. They become a centre in the community for families where parents can obtain support and information for themselves both as parents and as people, become involved in self-help and peer support networks, learn about other community resources, and participate in special social and recreational activities with their families.

Centre-based programs hold the greatest potential for providing comprehensive services and for serving the largest number of families.

Linking centre-based family resource programs to family support services which operate largely at the secondary level of prevention has advantages in utilising the expertise with families already on hand in these services, and in providing ready access to secondary level family services should these be needed for particular families.

The service models described above are not an exhaustive list. Other innovative service models are possible. 'Outreach' programs into communities, such as public housing estates and Aboriginal communities, have already been trialled by family support services in NSW. Such programs have discovered that the first point of contact with parents may not be directly in relation to their role as parents. Projects which address concerns of parents as residents or as members of particular communities may be a point of entry which can also encompass addressing their need for support, information and skills as parents.

EXAMPLES OF FAMILY RESOURCE PROGRAMS

Overseas, family resource programs are found in both the UK and the USA. 'Family centres' are widespread in the United Kingdom. (De'Ath, 1990)

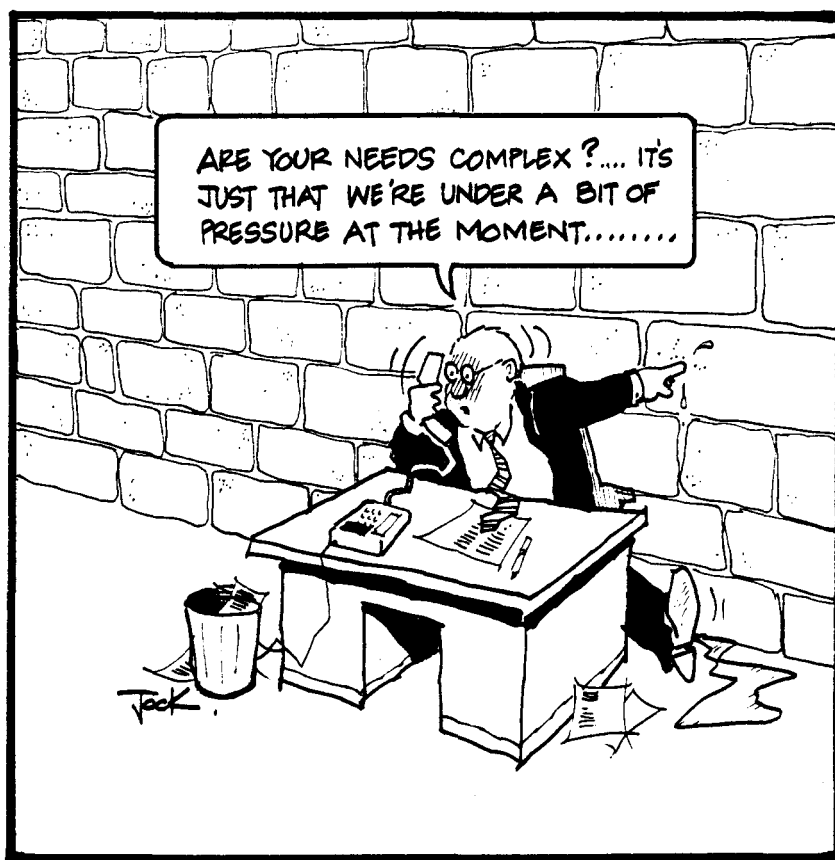
In the UK, 'family centre' is a generic term for any provision for parents and children where a range of services is offered to families living in a defined area and where the centre acts as a base for carrying out many of the activities. Similar principles and activities apply as described in this paper.

A study of family centres run by the Children's Society in the UK was carried out between 1988 and 1992. These family centres were located in highly disadvantaged areas. One of the conclusions of the study was that open access and support for community resources is likely in the long run to benefit more families as part of a preventive neighbourhood based strategy not restricted to referred families. (The Children's Society, 1992)

School-linked family resource programs are expanding in the USA. This strategy is used as a way to reach parents via an agency with which they have frequent natural contact.

In the USA there is a growing movement to develop family resource programs in every community.

Thousands of families are served by seven Family Focus centres located in the Chicago area. At each centre, professionals work with trained community members to provide developmentally appropriate activities for the children, discussion groups, classes, support groups, 'come as you are' drop-in times, and home visits for the



parents. Each Family Focus centre provides programs based on the specific needs of its constituent families and surrounding community. Parents work with staff to formulate project plans and policies. In the atmosphere of trust and friendship that develops, staff members are able to provide appropriate assistance at key times - from warm words of advice to skilled crisis intervention - and parents are able to enhance their capacities as both parents and community leaders.

Programs offered include:

- discussion groups for parents;
- child development programs and parent-child activities;
- tutoring for school success;
- discussion groups for fathers, along with instruction in child care skills;
- developmental child care provided while the parents participate in other project activities;
- crisis intervention counselling.

School-linked family resource programs are expanding in the USA. This strategy is used as a way to reach

parents via an agency with which they have frequent natural contact. Schools are also increasingly recognising that learning readiness of children is often interrelated with family factors. Thus various programs are being developed to meet the learning readiness needs of children by involving and supporting parents and local communities. This does not mean that the programs are necessarily auspiced by schools, they can be run by community agencies, but are located in school premises and linked to school programs.

One example of these programs is the Family Resources and Youth Services Centres in the state of Kentucky. These centres are designed to help build the family and community support that will enable a child to succeed in school. Family resource centres are linked to elementary schools, and youth service centres are located in or near middle schools and high schools. (Staton, Ooms & Owen, 1991, p. 32)

Core services of these family resource centres include access to, or provision of, child care, health and education services for new and expectant parents,

education to enhance parenting skills (through home visits, classes, etc), support and training for child care providers, and health services or referral. Among the core services offered by the youth service centres are family crisis and mental health counselling, employment counselling, youth training and placement. All centres are required to involve parents in project design and management.

In NSW, examples can be given of family resource programs which are available to all families in the community. Forbes Family Link Up has been developed since October 1992, and is a community development and support program for families in rural communities. The activities it offers are:

- community resources, such as information on government services, local rural, health and welfare information; ideas and resources for families with children; small lending library of such resources; feeding and changing facilities and a play corner;
- initial counselling - 'someone to talk to' - and referral to other appropriate services;
- mutual support groups for parents;
- courses for parents, eg, *Living with three- and four-year-olds*;
- publication of a newsletter containing information and parenting ideas and production of a brochure for new residents.

Banksia Family Centre of Wyong Shire, in the Central Coast area, is a family resource program which:

- promotes community support and education to families;
- works with the entire family;
- provides drop-in times, discussion groups, educational workshops, life skill classes, social events and other planned activities for parents and children;
- is a focal point for a number of family-oriented agencies.

The Shop Family and Children's Centre at Waterloo, an inner suburb of

Sydney, offers programs open to all, with a focus on supporting parents of children aged 0 - 5 years, particularly sole parents and parents of non-English speaking background. The Shop is a resource centre for local families. Activities include playgroups, discussions and courses of interest to parents, groups for survivors of domestic violence, monthly excursions, and provision of information, advocacy and referral. The workers also provide a counselling service and will do initial home visits. Free, quality child care is provided for all groups.

Burnside-Bidwill Community Support operates on a service philosophy which enables the people of Bidwill (which is largely a public housing area in the western suburbs of Sydney) to take responsibility for shaping the response of the organisation to the needs of the area. Home visits are offered, as well as parenting and relationship groups, skill development groups and recreational groups. Resourcing of the local community and support in negotiating services from government organisations and the legal system are available.

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At a different level is the NSW Inter-Agency School Community Centres Pilot Project. Recognising the significance of families, and the importance of early childhood for education, the NSW Departments of School Education, Health, and Community Services have collaborated to fund a two year pilot program to establish four inter-agency school community centres. This project aims 'to influence the planning and integration of service

delivery to better meet the needs of families with children from birth to five years' (quoted from leaflet on the project, 1996). The school is promoted as a community centre, with services and activities provided at the school to link families with the education, health and community services available in the area to support children's development and to encourage and support families in their parenting role. Evaluation of the project is being undertaken in 1996, but experience to date indicates the positive potential in this approach to strengthening communities and offering access to all families.

Family support services in NSW operate principally at the level of secondary prevention. However most manage to maintain at least a component of service provision at the primary prevention level. This is usually through group programs provided at their centres which are made available not only to referred families, but also advertised throughout the community for other families to access. Examples of such group programs are:

- *Enjoy being a parent* course; a fathers' group, *Beyond beer and the barbecue* (Parramatta Holroyd Family Service)
- *Fresh Start* recovery seminar for people separated and divorced; an evening fathers' group (Lower Mountains Family Support Service)
- *Mid-Week Club* for children aged 5 to 10, with dinner at a fast food outlet, then drama focussing on healthy ways to express emotions; a women's group, *Keeping children safe*; a men's group on *Parenting* (Armidale Family Support Service)
- Assertiveness course; protective behaviours (Moree Family and Adolescent Support)
- Sole parent group; an ADD parent support group (Namoi Family Program)
- *Ideas for parents* course; *Facing the challenge - fathering in the 90's* (Cowra Family Support Service)

- Literacy and numeracy women's group; playgroups at outreach locations (Bathurst Family Support Service)
- *Children don't come with manuals* program; a parenting program in a local school for parents of children with ADD/ADHD (Orange Family Support Service)
- *Terrible Twos* program (Upper Hunter Family Support Service)
- Parenting group; living skills program; playgroup (Port Stephens Family Support Service)
- Parenting adolescents course; stress management course (Careforce Liverpool Family Support Service)
- Course for parents with toddlers (Warragamba/Silverdale Family Support Service)
- Outreach mobile playgroup; Koori playgroup; parenting courses (Burnside Coffs Harbour Family Support Service)
- *Responsive parenting* course; craft group; young mums' support group; ADD support group (Taree Family Support Service)
- Self esteem/personal discovery group; parenting group (Ballina-Byron Family Support Service)
- Health issues for Pacific Islander women (Careforce Marrickville Family Support Service)
- Parenting groups; blended family group; craft; playgroup; adolescent group; budgeting/budget cooking (Gosford City Family Support Service)
- Self-esteem course for children 7-9 years; older women's support group (Bondi Beach Cottage)
- *Life experience counts* for people wanting to enter the workforce (The Backstop, St George Family Support Service)

Although there is rhetoric in funding departments about greater emphasis on prevention, the reality is that pressure to accept referred families with complex needs poses a threat to the continued provision of programs available

to all families in the community. There is great need for an expansion of comprehensive family resource programs which bring together at the one location a full range of primary prevention services, available to all families in the community. These programs work well when linked to more intensive support services for families. Every family should be able to access readily available information, resources and support for their optimal development, and for the prevention of escalation of difficulties into major crises. ⚙

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