

Research Evaluation

The Stronger Families Alliance



What is the Stronger Families Alliance?

The Stronger Families Alliance is a network of organisations working together to build a better life for children and young people in the Blue Mountains. Forty-six partners from community, child, youth and family organisations, health, business, education and governments collaborate to deliver the right support at the right time. Alliance members respond quickly with new programs and services based on the latest evidence about what works best to counter child abuse and neglect, isolation, mental health issues and the literacy divide.

A research team from Charles Sturt University has found that the Stronger Families Alliance has made a substantial difference to the lives of children and their families in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.

The team evaluated the work of the Alliance nine years after it was launched, asking whether a range of organisations, including schools and family services, were changing their way of working and whether this aligned with the Alliance's *Child and Family Plan*, written in 2010, when the network was working with children aged 0-12. The Alliance now covers young people up to age 18. Researchers interviewed 15 service providers and analysed existing quantitative data. They found that the Alliance had been successful in working toward the aspirations in the plan, and developing service collaborations "that support great outcomes for children and families".

“ Such strong collaborations are often attempted but they are hard to achieve. The model for change adopted by the Alliance has been highly successful. ”
- Research report

The positive response to the Alliance's work was "extremely strong". Alliance members understood how to work more effectively with children and families, were better informed, worked more collaboratively with other agencies and created new prevention and early intervention programs by using funding more effectively. People knew what they were trying to achieve, and why; the ideals of the network were woven into their daily work, rather than being vague and unrelated. Leadership was critical. The Blue Mountains City Council played a vital role, championing the need for change while building the capacity of the system.

Real change for children

The Stronger Families Alliance has created meaningful change for children and their families. Members believe that Blue Mountains agencies now function as a genuine alliance with a common purpose. Being part of a high-functioning network means frontline staff are familiar with all local services, so are more able to quickly match people to the right agency and coordinate services to address needs. For families, this translates to better, faster more comprehensive support when it is most needed.



The Alliance has been the catalyst for agencies to adopt new practices, work collaboratively and develop programs in partnership with each other. Former members who have moved to other regions note the stark contrast with new workplaces, which are less collaborative and less able to meet the needs of families.

The longevity of the Alliance, and the stability in core membership, is persuasive evidence of success. Alliance members are busy people who invest time and energy because their work together makes a difference. The growing membership is also a marker of achievement. The Alliance has been the catalyst for:

- Swift responses to families in need
- Early identification of at-risk children
- Easy access to information and advice for families
- Innovative prevention and early intervention programs using existing funding
- Deeper understanding about the role of agencies that work directly and indirectly with children
- Widespread adoption of collaborative, evidence-based practices by agencies and schools
- Lasting commitments to keep improving the community and service system
- A communication network that ensures the right help for children with complex needs

The research findings in this document are set against five foundations for successful collaborations and assessed against international research.



“ To me, the SFA is three words: we, us, our. ”

1. Provide prevention and early intervention services to tackle problems before they become entrenched.

International literature

- There is clear evidence that early intervention programs have long-term efficacy and deliver cost benefits to society (Fox et al, 2015).
- Longitudinal research shows conclusively that many health and wellbeing problems experienced by adults have their origin in early childhood. The current approach of waiting until problems have a significant impact before trying to remediate them is expensive and ineffectual. It is more efficient and effective to instead develop policies and programs that aim to intervene early in the developmental pathway (Centre for Community Child Health, 2006; Moore, 2008).

CSU research findings

- The Alliance's long-running School-Centred Community Hubs are a showcase for practical, successful prevention and early intervention. Supported playgroups and community events for families are often attended by other service providers, enabling parents to seek advice and support without formal referral, or to simply become aware of what is available in the community. School involvement means children and families are known to the school, receive early support if needed and are ready to learn when they start kindergarten.
- Community events that offer health and support services provide an informal, soft entry point for families who may be reluctant to speak out when they need help.
- Agencies used *The Child and Family Plan* to set prevention and early intervention goals.
- The Alliance's 2013-14 Output Evaluation lists more than 50 new work practices underpinned by prevention and early intervention.
- Cultural change within agencies has led to greater engagement with families and enhanced the quality of services.

Alliance example

When Blue Mountains City Council library staff were exposed to research about the importance of reading, rhymes and songs to the development of infant brains, they came up with Babytime. While stories are read to babies in the library, parents can make friends, breaking down the isolation that may contribute to post-natal depression, child abuse and lack of harmony at home. Activities that connect families to community, parenting resources and services are woven into the program. The success of Babytime led to the Books 4 Babies Kit for newborns and the Summer Reading Challenge.



2. Shared, evidence-based practice.

International literature

- Collaborative, evidence-based approaches to working with children and families are considered to be the most effective way of mitigating threats to children's development and wellbeing (Moore 2009; Corter & Pelletier, 2010).
- Evidence-based practice is based on what the research says works for children. By using evidence-based practice, practitioners increase the likelihood that their interventions will improve children's developmental outcomes (What works for children group, 2003; Mertz et al, 2007).

CSU research findings

- The Alliance is underpinned by theories and philosophies that have transformed the way members work with children and families.
- The Alliance organised 20 "inspiring and stimulating" professional development sessions with national experts in a range of areas including engaging and working with vulnerable children, prevention and early intervention, creating child-friendly communities, and community collaboration. Participants from many sectors described their experiences as "transformative", influencing their personal and professional lives, and accelerating change within agencies.
- *The Child and Family Plan* was guided by the latest international research and was used to formulate the professional development program.
- The Alliance has shared knowledge across the network about the latest and best evidence of what works for vulnerable children.

Children benefit from strengths approach

A strengths approach respects the dignity and worth of each person, harnessing their capabilities and potential to tackle difficulties.

Being an Alliance member exposed me to the strengths-based approach and the crucial step of positive engagement with families. There are frequent discussions and research circulated about the importance of a strengths approach in all our work. Being an Alliance member promotes a can-do sense, seeing what has been achieved by other organisations encourages optimism in the face of challenges and generates new ideas that make a difference. As a result, we have changed our practice and internal systems to attract and enrol more vulnerable children. By building positive relationships with families early and assisting them to solve the practical tasks needed to enrol and sustain engagement with our service, they are staying longer with the service, which means we can provide education to children who most need it.

- Early childhood centre manager

Alliance example

Early in the life of the Alliance, a disparate group of services found common ground in their search for new ways to support at-risk children who were hard to reach. For the first time, professionals working in domestic violence, family support, community health, disability, mental health and drug/alcohol shared best practices and set up new referral pathways. Together, they corralled their strengths using appreciative inquiry, generating fresh enthusiasm and warding off professional burnout. Now, child and family practitioners know and trust each other and families have faster access to coordinated services.

“ I go to each Alliance meeting with a sense of optimism. People don't hang around if it's not effective. ”

3. Foster deep collaboration.

International literature

- Service collaborations that create positive outcomes for children provide access to multiple services ... in a cohesive and holistic way and recognise the impact of family and community contexts on children's development. Through respectful, collaborative relationships, they actively seek to maximise the impact of different disciplinary expertise in a shared intent to respond to family and community contexts (Press, Wong & Sumsion, 2010).
- Consistent factors underpin collaborations that work for children. These include a well thought-out implementation and change management process, using an outcome framework, taking a local approach to needs analysis and planning, using evidence to guide decision-making and developing a shared approach to working together (ARACY, 2015).

CSU research findings

- The Alliance has fostered long-term relationships between agencies, resulting in more partnerships between diverse services, many new initiatives and programs, and the widespread exchange of knowledge.
- Collaboration between agency managers has become a model for change, generating partnerships between frontline staff and resulting in faster access to services for families.
- Through collaboration, participants understand the place of their agency within the service system, allowing them to accurately refer children to the best professional help.
- *The Child and Family Plan* is a valuable reference when agencies develop strategies and goals. Participants describe it as a "guiding tool for keeping on track". The



Bushfire disaster spurs network into action

In October 2013, one of the Blue Mountains' worst bushfires destroyed 210 houses. Immediately after, we were overloaded with families who needed immediate trauma counselling and urgent practical help. This was beyond one agency, so we rapidly set up a way to manage the chaos. The school hub had all the connections in place. We used the many services in our networks to get the word out through neighbourhood grapevines about what was available, such as goods and services. But just as importantly, the network let us know what families needed. Many parents had lost homes, so they were stressed and struggling to look after children. Hub services – the neighbourhood centre, church, schools, a family support service – moved quickly and put together a holiday program. The children loved the program and it is now an established event.

- Neighbourhood centre manager

- collaborative process used to write the plan unified members and reinforced commitments to the Alliance's vision and outcomes, culminating in a celebratory launch.
- The success of the plan is attributed to its co-development, strong evidence base, accessible language and professional look.
 - Service systems will revert to status quo when they are under extreme pressure. A marker of the strength of collaboration was the smooth, efficient response to the 2013 bushfire emergency – members worked quickly to help families in crisis and coordinate with other agencies, such as the police.

Alliance example

The popularity of School-Centred Community Hubs is a testament to the benefits of deep consultation among services. The Blackheath pilot hub was established to reach isolated parents and offset socio-economic disadvantage. Schools and child services that had previously worked separately collaborated with residents and the first hub activity – a supported playgroup – opened at the primary school. Now, thriving hubs offer programs in 12 schools in Mt Victoria, Katoomba, Lawson, Hazelbrook, Winmalee and Blaxland supported by a plethora of local groups such as churches and service clubs.

4. Creating a child-friendly community.

International literature

- Communities that are supportive of children, both in their social fabric and urban design, prevent complex problems arising in the lives of families, and have a significant impact on children's overall wellbeing (Centre for Community Child Health, 2011).
- Neighbourhoods with high degrees of social capital provide a buffer against the impacts of disadvantage on children's wellbeing (Centre for Community Child Health, 2011; Villanueva, et al, 2016).
- Social isolation is a significant risk factor to child development and family functioning. Conversely, children and young people with access to a high quantity and quality of social support have better outcomes in most developmental domains (McPherson et al, 2013; ARACY, 2006).



CSU research findings

- The Alliance includes organisations that shape children's neighbourhoods such as National Parks and Wildlife, and Council services including urban planning, neighbourhood centres and business.
- Professional development forums have attracted staff from many organisations, not just those working directly with children. This has generated dynamic debates that are the hallmark of effective collaborations and led to child-friendly programs such as Bush Trackers and Paint the Blue Read.
- Children have been consulted on urban design for parks and playgrounds, activities for events and festivals, and ways of making Council services more child-friendly e.g. libraries, family day care, aquatic centres.
- Many workplaces welcome children with books, toys and play spaces.
- Community development helps children reach their developmental milestones. For example, Paint the Blue Read encourages parents to read at home with pre-school children, which fosters learning at school.

Alliance example

Bush Trackers encourages families to use the Blue Mountains World Heritage Park as their backyard by providing maps for children's bushwalks. Children were provided with diaries to record their favorite walks, and the words and artwork now feature in 18 maps that are available in shops, schools, tourism outlets and the Alliance website. Bush Trackers is a community partnership between schools, Blue Mountains City Council, environmental organisations and the tourism industry.

“ I now understand collective impact ... each person has value, the whole is bigger than the individual. ”



5. Driving change with leadership.

International literature

- Achieving systems change requires leadership that champions the need for change while building the capacity of the system to generate change. Purposeful and informed leadership which inspires, facilitates and models the change, is critical to the development of strong and effective collaboration (Glasby & Peck, 2006; Horvath & Morrison, 2007; Press, 2012; Siraj Blatchford, I., & Siraj Blatchford, J., 2009).

CSU research findings

- In collective impact, diverse organisations work to a common purpose. One component of success is the efforts of an organiser, known as the backbone – in this case, the Blue Mountains City Council’s Community Outcomes Team. The Council was viewed as the right organisation for this role due to its neutrality, its respect for the autonomy of Alliance partners and its capacity to lead steady, sustainable change.
- The leadership attributes of the Alliance convener, employed by Council, have driven change. Essential qualities of the convener included holding a vision for change, an ability to see the big picture, modelling collaboration, persistence, excellent listening skills and strategic thinking. These attributes have been adopted across the Alliance through a distributed leadership network and embedded in the governance model.

- Alliance members shared the drive for change and the work of the backbone was carried out in partnership with the Executive.
- The Alliance selected tools and strategies to drive change, such as appreciative inquiry and collective impact (used for systemic change) and strengths-based approaches (working with families). The emphasis on systems and strengths has shifted attitudes, generated deeper understanding of goals and enhanced work practices.

Alliance example

Since 2006, Alliance leaders have modeled new ways of working collaboratively, which has flowed on to agency managers and frontline staff. This distributed leadership model is reinforced by the Alliance governance system, which was created and then improved over time by the leadership group.

Making connections

Examples of Alliance programs that connect families and communities:

- **School-Centered Community Hubs**
One-stop shops in 12 schools that link parents to child and family services
- **Bush Trackers Program**
Bush walks for kids by kids, led by NSW National Parks and Wildlife
- **Paint the Blue REaD**
Flagship early literacy program involving 30 organisations and businesses
- **Positive Education Program**
School programs to promote resilience and mental fitness

Need to know

- Evaluation commissioned by Blue Mountains City Council 2016
- Report authors: Frances Press, Sandie Wong and June Wangmann, Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE), Charles Sturt University
- The evaluation is based on qualitative data collected from 15 Alliance members and quantitative data provided by the Alliance
- Stronger Families Alliance website: www.strongerfamilies.co
- References and original Stronger Families Alliance Evaluation available at: www.strongerfamilies.co/evaluation-2015.html

