



From strength to strength

The Stronger Families Alliance is a pioneering network of organisations working together to build a better life for the children and young people of the Blue Mountains.

The Alliance has come a long way since 2006, when a handful of child and family professionals set out to find more effective ways of supporting families, powered by the knowledge that strong, healthy children are the bedrock of enduring communities. The group was concerned at the rising number of children who were needlessly falling through the cracks because child and family professionals often worked in isolation from each other. Their vision was simple but profound: a plugged-in network of people with a shared purpose – to enhance connections with all local families and guarantee quick specialist help for those with complex needs. The response was overwhelming. In the spirit of the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child, 46 Alliance partners now take a cradle-to-career approach in the best interests of children up to age 18.

Who is in the Alliance?

- Early childhood care and education centres
- Primary and high schools
- Aboriginal services
- Health services: community, women's, mental, primary and allied care
- Child, youth, family, disability services
- Community development, neighbourhood centres
- Voluntary organisations
- Local government: recreation, parks, libraries, economic development
- State and federal government
- Environmental services
- Businesses
- Churches



Everything in place

Today's Alliance is a potent blend of experience and agility, able to respond quickly with new programs and services based on the latest Australian and international evidence. Members are locals who share the aspirations of their neighbours and understand the unique challenges that come with living in a ribbon of villages along the ridgeline of a World Heritage park. Patchy public transport, unemployment and remote living can isolate parents and jeopardise the development of young people. The Alliance's place-based approach considers the unique conditions in every neighbourhood and then promotes caring connections between families and services such as neighbourhood centres and parents' groups.

“ The Alliance has helped me work systemically, to see the big picture. This stops the ‘pass the parcel’ thing where vulnerable people are passed from service to service. ”
- Social worker

The Alliance's blueprint for change, *The Child and Family Plan*, was launched in 2010. It describes a collaborative service system that tackles problems such as child abuse and neglect, isolation, and the literacy divide. Family agencies, schools and community groups work together on prevention and early intervention programs for children aged 0-12 to stop budding problems becoming entrenched. Progress has been substantial but the increasing complexity of daily life demands new responses to emerging issues and the latest research.

Now, teachers and health professionals are detecting a growing malaise among teenagers, who are more anxious, less resilient and prone to behavioural problems and self-harm. Backed by research that says the teenage years are crucial for brain development, the Alliance has expanded its brief to pursue wellbeing and resilience for teenagers up to 18 years. High schools, TAFEs, industry, youth organisations and business are collaborating on programs to smooth the transition into adulthood.

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, lead 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

Leading into the future

The Stronger Families Alliance is known for leadership and innovation. It is one of the earliest examples of a collective impact (CI) network in Australia. A CI project is characterised by a common agenda, shared measurement, backbone support, mutually reinforcing activities and continuous communication. A system for measuring progress is next on the agenda. The Alliance backbone is a convenor employed by the Blue Mountains City Council, which plays a crucial role as a neutral participant.

“ The Alliance has reconfigured my thinking about the way schools can support children and families – we have a responsibility to act. ”
- School principal

The early years have produced a robust network that is deeply grounded in the community. In the next phase, the Alliance will seek ideas for a *Child and Youth Plan* that captures the aspirations of people, young and old, and uses the best strategies to safeguard the health of future generations. The new plan will continue to confront the issues being faced by communities everywhere – what do we want for our children and young people, what changes do we need to get there, and how do we measure progress and sustain the changes?

