Hub services for parents

Coffee and chat mornings, supported playgroups, referral to specialist services, specialist services visits to play and social settings, parent programs, parent interest groups, further education, employment support, financial literacy, food co-ops, community events, become part of school community, access material support, baby health and early intervention advice

Hub services for children

Playgroup, transition to school, developmental screening while at playgroup, speech therapy playgroups, play gym, film nights, breakfast programs, referral to formal early childhood services, become part of school community, library and swimming programs

The vision

Every Blue Mountains family has access to a collaborative service network which is unique to their neighbourhood, supports child development and is a natural gateway into community life.

The Stronger Families Alliance's programs

The Alliance is creating neighbourhood-level, universal (for all children and families) collaborative service systems through the School-Centred Community Hub program. The program's lead agencies are Connect Child and Family Services and Gateway Family Services. The program uses a virtual hub model – a collaborative network of services and civic and business organisations housed in different locations.[22,23]

Each Hub is unique, offering programs and activities that meet the needs of babies, young children and their parents. There are several pathways that can be used to begin a Hub. One involves forming a steering committee that includes the school, parents, services and voluntary and business groups.

They then coordinate existing programs and implement new programs together. Another pathway involves several services coordinating a project that benefits local families, such as starting a supported playgroup or hosting a parent group. A steering committee is then formed as a second step.

A Hub develops into a collaborative service system through the development of multi-service projects and interdisciplinary practice. A central concern of steering committees is developing joint practices and processes that engage vulnerable children and families in universal services and refer families to targeted services. While Hub activities occur in many locations, placing primary schools at the centre of each Hub means the school community is the focus for community development and child and family service provision.[22,24] Future Hubs may have their centre in a different location; this would be determined by the needs and resources of each community.

Hubs use bottom-up community development principles with top-down parameters and governance, and will develop to include the following features:

1. Governed by the Stronger Families Alliance
2. Developed by a collaborative local steering committee
3. Aligned with the objectives of the Child and Family Plan, with each Hub's focus depending on community characteristics, funding and resources
4. Focused on reaching children at an early age (prenatal, babies and toddlers) through partnership development between primary schools, early childhood services and community service providers.

Using the Plan to link neighbourhood services

The Child and Family Plan helps organisations to use evidence-based programming and multi-service partnerships so that:

- Parents nurture their child's ongoing development from the prenatal period onwards (Outcome 1)
- Children come to school with the skills and abilities necessary to achieve in the school environment (Outcome 2)
- Parents increase their social supports and community connections (Outcome 3).

These outcomes can be met by individual and multi-service programs before communities have developed a School-Centred Community Hub.

A further outcome is:

- Collaborative universal services systems are created at a neighbourhood level through School Centred Community Hub steering committees (Outcome 4).

This is most efficiently achieved using a funded coordinator who works with a steering committee involving the school.

Steering committees plan new programs and referral pathways tailored to achieve the Plan's outcomes and objectives, taking into account the community's culture, strengths, resources and aspirations. Organisations can sit on a steering committee or coordinate with the committee. A service could join an existing Hub or work with the Alliance to develop a new Hub.

A snapshot of the evidence supporting the Plan

Early brain development and early intervention

Neurobiological evidence shows that most brain development occurs during pregnancy and in the first three years of life. Importantly, it is now widely acknowledged that experience shapes brain development and that children's most formative experiences are their relationships with significant others.[25] This biological evidence supports the need for early intervention – that is, providing support during pregnancy and through early childhood to ensure that problems do not impede brain development. The earlier families are offered support, and the more the support meets all the child's and family's needs, the more effective the outcomes for the child. For example, graduates from classic intervention programs performed better in school, were more likely (as adults) to be employed, were healthier and were less likely to be involved in criminal activities than vulnerable children of the same background who did not access early intervention services.[26,27]

The importance of social support for parents

Supported families are more able to contribute to their child's development than families who lack social support. Support enhances parenting capacity by reducing stress and encouraging effective thinking and problem-solving, resulting in more learning experiences for children.[28-31] Programs can link parents to support formally and informally, offering targeted support (e.g. groups for young parents) or general support such as parent interest groups, parent programs, community events or facilitated playgroups.[32]

Creating soft entrance points to universal and targeted services

The pressure of modern life means families are often isolated from traditional sources of help, such as extended family, friends and neighbours. However, universal programs that build in tailored support for vulnerable children can counter the loneliness felt by parents who have been reluctant to use specialist services such as those for child protection or domestic violence.[33] 'Soft entrance' refers to universal, informal community programs that are non-threatening and easy for all parents to access. Studies have shown that children in disadvantaged areas who use universal services, with tailored support for vulnerable children, are more socially developed and more self-regulating compared to children from a similar background in other types of programs.[34,35] Universal programs are effective because all children benefit, including the most vulnerable.

Who could join your Hub steering committee?

To identify possible committee partners, ask: "Who in our neighbourhood has a stake in the physical, social, emotional or economic wellbeing of families?"

Possible answers include:

- Bushcare groups
- Chamber of Commerce
- Clubs (e.g. Lions, Rotary)
- Community gardens
- Early childhood centres
- Early childhood nurses
- Early intervention services
- Family daycare representatives
- Family support services
- GPs
- Libraries
- National Parks and Wildlife
- Neighbourhood centres
- P&C associations
- Police
- Recreation centres
- Women's health services

The role of home learning and formal early childhood education

Highly regarded studies in the US and the UK demonstrate the vital role of home learning in shaping children's outcomes.[36-40] Building on the importance of the home, children attending quality early childhood programs show improved academic and social skills, better behaviour and lower stress levels compared to children who do not use formal early childhood education services.[41-44] These formal programs can also compensate, to some extent, for poor home learning environments. Access to quality early childhood education and care is therefore of particular benefit for vulnerable children and their families.[45]

New ways of thinking about the role of schools in communities and transition to school

The transition to school can be exciting and confidence-building when children and families feel at home in the school and there is excellent communication between home, school and feeder services.

Using schools as Hubs represents a changing approach to education in which families and the school become familiar with each other through programs offered at the school before a child starts classes.[46-49] In the six months before school, formal transition-to-school programs build relationships between teachers, parents and children.
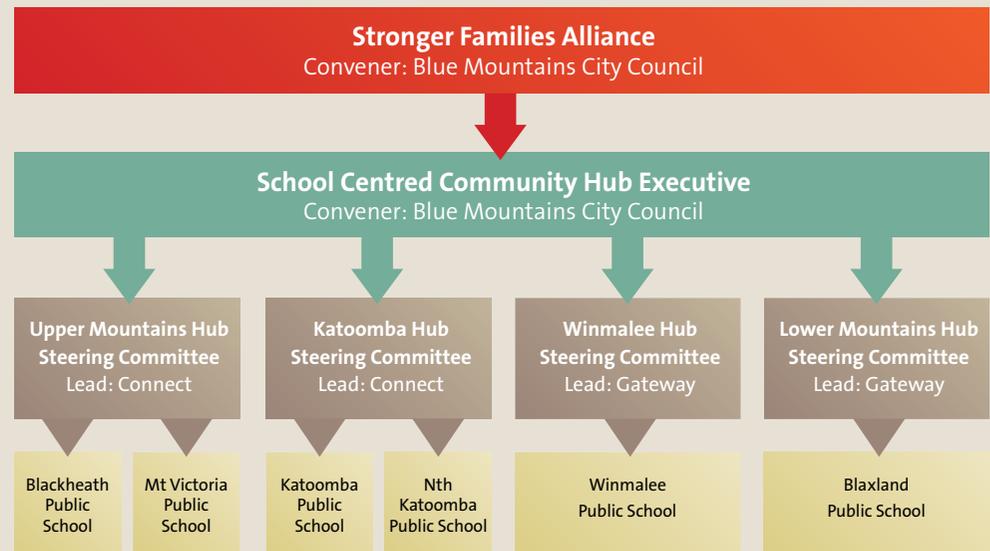
"
Using schools as Hubs represents a changing approach to education in which families and the school become familiar with each other through programs offered at the school before a child starts classes.
"

School Centred Community Hub governance structure

Stronger Families Alliance
Convener: Blue Mountains City Council

School Centred Community Hub Executive
Convener: Blue Mountains City Council

Upper Mountains Hub Steering Committee
Lead: Connect

Katoomba Hub Steering Committee
Lead: Connect

Winmalee Hub Steering Committee
Lead: Gateway

Lower Mountains Hub Steering Committee
Lead: Gateway

Blackheath Public School

Mt Victoria Public School

Katoomba Public School

Nth Katoomba Public School

Winmalee Public School

Blaxland Public School

> **The staff at playgroup were also concerned about him. It was then that I realised what a great service I had tapped into. Just by walking into this playgroup you had walked into a range of services that had all been conveniently linked together.**

Megan's story

Megan's son was diagnosed with high-functioning autism; this was first noticed when he attended a playgroup at the Blackheath Primary School Hub.

"My sister said, come along to the playgroup at Blackheath School. It's great, there are lots of toys and there's morning tea. I was hesitant, I didn't really feel like to talking to anyone. I had just separated from my husband, moving my two young children from Sydney to Blackheath. I felt really displaced. I didn't know where to begin reforming my life.

"I was also having a very hard time with my 22-month-old son. He would not stop crying. Everything was stressing him out and he seemed so miserable. I really felt like I was failing as a parent. But I needed to go to playgroup for my daughter's sake. So I went along.

It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I immediately felt welcomed by the women running the playgroup – you could tell they were there to support you as a parent. It kept me going through the week, knowing I would be coming back again to see my friends, my support group.

> I felt the joint forces of everyone link up to provide the best service possible for my child.

"I started slowly reaching out for help and admitting my true situation. It takes a lot as a parent to acknowledge that you are not coping. It also takes a lot to accept that there is something wrong with your child. I was secretly worried my son was autistic. I could not believe how helpless I felt.

"The staff at playgroup were also concerned about him. It was then that I realised what a great service I had tapped into. Just by walking into this playgroup you had walked into a range of services that had all been conveniently linked together. I had referrals and assessments and my son had a hearing test, brain wave tests, speech therapy and occupational therapy. I felt like I had got onto a great pathway.

I felt the joint forces of everyone link up to provide the best service possible for my child. I did not have to do all the running around to find the services – they were talking to each other for the benefit of my child.

"It has been fantastic to have an early diagnosis because my son has a greater chance of receiving help now before behaviours become entrenched. If he can learn to communicate at an earlier age, he will not be so frustrated and will be able to interact with others to have a happier life. I hope that because my child received early intervention he will be ready for school when the time comes."

Child and Family Plan

Outcome 1: Parents nurture their child's ongoing development from the prenatal period onwards

Parents and babies benefit from support programs offered from conception. Parents whose needs are met, and who are less stressed, provide more learning experiences for their children and are more able to respond to children's changing developmental needs. Children and families coping with issues such as domestic violence or child abuse and neglect are recognised, empathetically understood and referred to targeted services before children's development is compromised.

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
1.1 Parents increase their use of developmentally effective parenting practice	**Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures** > No. of parents accessing services and activities > No. of parents with first child 0–2 years accessing services and programs	> Provide parenting programs that (i) target behaviour change, (ii) promote reflection, (iii) focus on coaching and (iv) promote learning by doing > Engage parents in programs through their existing relationships and interests (e.g. GPs, teachers)
1.2 Children and their parents increase their number of engaging and supportive formal and informal relationships	> Parents report they were referred through word of mouth	> Deliver groups that are small and that promote deeper connections > Deliver groups that are convened around interest and run regularly > Build trusting relationships before delivering formal support
1.3 Parents are more able to build their families' social and economic capacity	> Parents report they were referred through supported referral	> Use two and three generation models that engage parent learning through their desire to see their child succeed > Offer educational opportunities for parents through or at school
1.4 There is an increased, helpful response to children and families experiencing child abuse and neglect and family violence	> Parents involved in program development and evaluation **Stronger Families Alliance measure** > Long-term and structured evaluation tools and referral tools are designed and used	> Deliver training about child abuse and neglect and family violence throughout the service system > Design training to increase empathetic understanding and change in attitudes towards children displaying symptoms of abuse and neglect > Sensitive and early referral to targeted services

Outcome 2: Children come to school with the skills and abilities necessary to achieve in the school environment

Between conception and the age of three the brain is developing at a phenomenal rate. Improving the learning environments of babies and children at home, in the community and through formal early childhood education services creates the foundation for children to succeed at school. Children in low-quality home learning environments are prioritised for access and support to use quality early childhood education services.

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks (continued)

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
2.1 Unborn babies and babies receive increased community programs that stimulate their holistic development	**Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures** > No. of programs that include unborn babies and babies > No. of parents accessing services and activities > No. of parents with first child 0–2 years accessing programs > Parents report they were referred through word of mouth > Parents report they were supportively referred > Parents involved in program development and evaluation	> Build parent and service provider awareness about the importance of the early years > Service providers with good relationships with parents distribute resources about babies' development > Create programs and groups for parents of babies to network with each other > Service providers with good relationships with pregnant young women personally link them to child and family services
2.2 Parents increase their understanding and practice about the use of home and family as a key learning environment for children	**Stronger Families Alliance measure** > Long-term and structured evaluation and referral tools are designed and used	> Provide parenting programs that (i) target behaviour change, (ii) promote reflection, (iii) focus on coaching and (iv) promote learning by doing > Build parent and service provider awareness about the importance of the early years > Service providers with good relationships with parents distribute resources about how to improve the home learning environment > Connect parents of children under three to library services, Paint the Blue Read, Early Words and other early literacy resources

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
2.3 Children, particularly vulnerable children, have increased access to quality early childhood education and care	**Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures** > No. of vulnerable parents who are referred to quality early childhood education and care > No. of opportunities created for prior-to-school services, schools and families to connect	> Provide social support to enter early childhood education system and sustain involvement (e.g. pick-up, referral, support so children are not stigmatised) > Provide early childhood teachers with opportunities to enhance their family-centred practice > Support CALD and Aboriginal people to work in early childhood services
2.4 Children and parents increase their capacity to settle into school	**Stronger Families Alliance measure** > No. of sites where existing transition-to-school activities and programs are coordinated > Long-term and structured evaluation and referral tools are designed and used	> Align teaching and perspectives of early childhood education teachers and school teachers through increasing their professional interaction > Provide 'child interest programs' for 3–7 year olds, run by early childhood services and schools together > Design transition-to-school programs that build positive child, family, community and school relationships

Outcome 3: Parents increase their social supports and community connections

Schools and other services and civic organisations work together to create events, programs and groups that enable parents to establish and maintain peer-based social supports and connection to their community. Schools work with the community to provide opportunities for parents of children from the prenatal years to 12 years old to connect with each other at school and other community spaces.

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks (continued)

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
3.1 Schools and other services increase the opportunities they provide to parents to build informal, positive and supportive relationships with each other **3.2** Schools and voluntary organisations increase the opportunities they provide for parents to connect with their community through their local school	**Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures** > No. of parents accessing services and activities > No. of parents with first child 0–2 years accessing services and programs > Parents involved in program development and evaluation	> Design events and programs to specifically achieve the type of relationship building you are aiming to create (e.g. friendship, connection to large social group, sense of community) > Use community development practice to identify common purpose groups for less engaged parents > Invite sports and other civic organisations to run 'come and try' events > Service providers actively link parents to 'come and try' events > Use assets-based community development to identify groups and community organisations to include or link with

Outcome 4: Collaborative universal service systems are created at a neighbourhood level through School Centred Community Hub steering committees

On the ground, service delivery collaborations are facilitated through neighbourhood-level steering committees. Quality multi-service program delivery is fostered through strengths-based, family-centred practice and interdisciplinary team work between service providers and voluntary organisations. The broadest range of stakeholders in family wellbeing are included in neighbourhood steering committees.

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
4.1 Schools and prior-to-school services increase their number of collaborative partnerships through Hubs	**Stronger Families Alliance measures** > No. of opportunities created by Hub steering committees for prior-to-school services, schools and families to connect	> Local school Hub steering committees represent holistic child, family and community service system, including parents
4.2 Child, family and community services targeting children prenatal to 5 years old increase their levels of outreach, collaboration and referral to targeted services through local Hub steering committees	> Percentage of feeder early childhood education services on Hub steering committees	> Include voluntary and business organisations in Hub steering committees > Steering committees formed and sustained through strengths-based organisational development practices > Prioritise early childhood education and school collaborative partnerships
4.3 Voluntary and business organisations are engaged in Hub steering committees	> No. and range of services and organisations on Hub steering committees	> Prioritise coordination of ante-natal, baby group and early childhood education workers at neighbourhood level through local Hub steering committees > Service and community development initiatives refocused to occur in schools and other places parents naturally go
4.4 Professionals in the child, family and community sectors increase their use of strengths-based, family-centred and interdisciplinary practice	> Extent whole of child and family sector and parents represented on Hub steering committees	> Develop tools and pathways that enable supported referrals from universal to targeted services > An executive Blue Mountains Hub governance structure oversees resource allocation, evaluation, replication, sustainability, funding and interdisciplinary learning and development