



# The Stronger Families Alliance

www.strongerfamilies.co

The Stronger Families Alliance is a unique network that fosters collaboration between diverse organisations to better support children, their families and their communities. The 28 Alliance members include all levels of government, business networks, NSW child and family organisations, and the community and university sectors. The Alliance is led and resourced by the Blue Mountains City Council in line with studies showing that convening agencies work most effectively when they are seen by other organisations as a neutral player with broad community representation.

The child and family sector includes health services, welfare services, primary schools, statutory child protection services, community sector services and early childhood education services. The ecological model of child development guides participation in the Alliance beyond the sector, promoting positive community influences on child development at all levels – family, neighbours, social and cultural groups, business and government.<sup>1</sup> For Alliance members, this has involved learning to

listen, talk and act together in a way that transcends sector and disciplinary boundaries.

The complex system represented by the Alliance comprises the parts (organisations and peak networks), the relationships between the parts, and the system’s purpose. To simplify this, the Alliance views itself as one large system whose joint purpose is to support the healthy development of children from the prenatal stage to age 12.

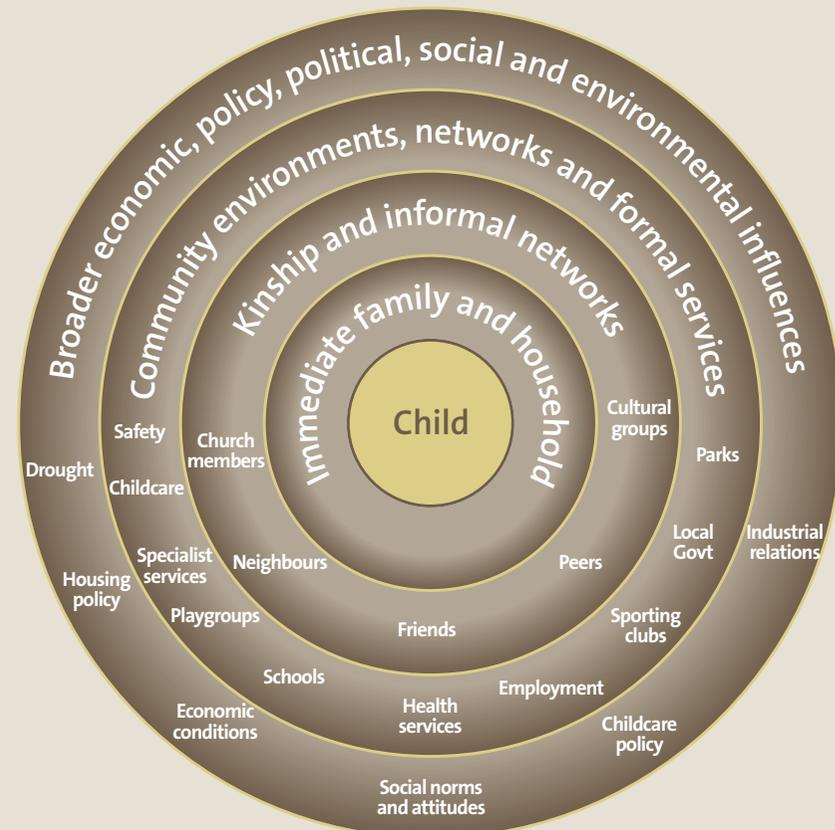


The least obvious part of the system, its function or purpose, is often the most crucial determinant of the system’s behaviour.

**DONELLA MEADOWS,**  
*THINKING IN SYSTEMS: A PRIMER*<sup>2</sup>



## Ecological diagram



## Drivers for change

### The new evidence base in early childhood

Early intervention is one of the central pillars of the Alliance's plan to ensure all children are given a chance to reach their potential. We now know that the majority of brain development occurs during pregnancy and in the first three years of life. Neurobiological evidence shows a phenomenal rate of brain development at this age. Importantly, it is now widely acknowledged that experience shapes brain development and that children's most formative experiences are their relationships with significant others. This biological evidence supports the need for early intervention – that is, providing support during pregnancy and through early childhood to ensure problems do not impede optimal development.<sup>3</sup>

In light of this evidence, professional organisations now support a prevention and early intervention framework – robust universal services (available to all children) that minimise more

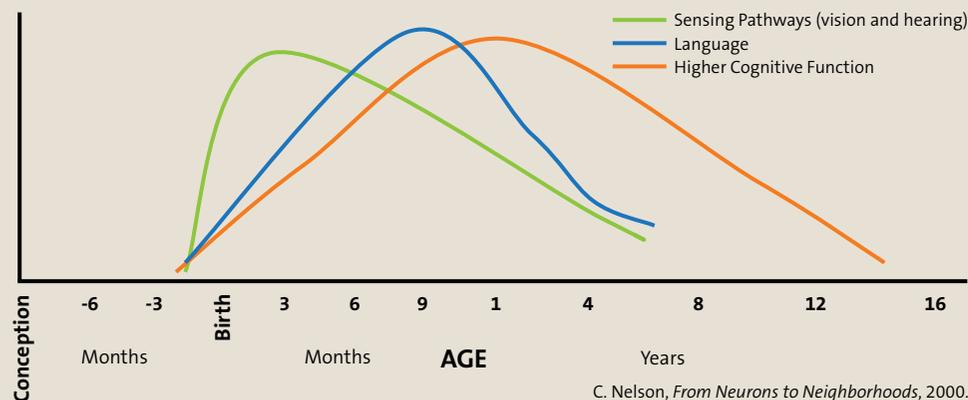
complex problems by acting as early referral gateways to specialised services. Problems are identified early because children and their families are seen by a variety of professionals, leading to effective interventions.<sup>4</sup> As children grow into adolescents, early intervention means continuing to offer services that engage young people and their families before problems become entrenched. Early intervention makes economic sense because services cost less to deliver and, as adults, children who have positive early experiences and relationships are

more likely to contribute economically and socially to their communities.<sup>5</sup> The other central pillar for the Alliance is the findings of extensive research across many disciplines showing that children are best served by a networked service system where practitioners and organisations work holistically and think laterally about the needs of families.<sup>6</sup> Here, professionals take the widest possible view of their sector – 'systems thinking' – operating beyond the boundaries of their discipline to share

information with other professionals, make referrals and run joint programs. Within this new approach the ecological model is paramount in broadening thinking about the range of community stakeholders who can contribute to excellent early childhood outcomes. The benefits of creating a responsive, collaborative system are profound, giving each child the greatest chance of good health and wellbeing from conception to adulthood. Potential problems are more likely to be identified early, and solutions can be tailored individually to harness strengths and address all aspects of a problem.<sup>4,6</sup>

The characteristics of an excellent integrated service system include shared philosophy and culture, leadership, common language, joint vision, an effective network structure, governance structures, a shared plan, and the strategic use of different service networking relationships (networking/coordination/collaboration and integration).<sup>7,8,9</sup>

### Human brain development occurs early in life



### Forms of linkage across different systemic levels

	COEXISTENCE	COOPERATION	COORDINATION	COLLABORATION	INTEGRATION
<b>Whole of government level</b>	Departments plan and fund services autonomously, with no reference to each other	Departments meet to share information about policies and services but do not do any joint policy development or planning	Departments develop joint plans to address particular needs and coordinate efforts to address these needs	Departments develop joint plans to address particular needs and pool resources to fund particular initiatives	A whole-of-government policy and funding framework is developed and guides the work of all departments
<b>Regional/community level</b>	Different levels of government, departments and non-government services plan and deliver services without reference to one another	Different levels of government, departments and non-government services meet to share information but do not plan or deliver services jointly	Different levels of government, departments and non-government services develop joint plans and coordinate efforts to address identified local needs	Different levels of government, departments and non-government services develop joint plans and pool resources to address identified local needs	A comprehensive community-based or regional vision and action plan is developed, backed by a formalised commitment from all stakeholders
<b>Service level</b>	Services operate independently and have no formal or informal links	Services operate independently but meet to network and share information	Services operate independently but coordinate to provide multi-agency services to families with multiple needs	Services operate independently but pool resources to provide a multidisciplinary/multi-agency service	Services combine to form a single entity (e.g. children's centre) providing integrated child and family services
<b>Teamwork level</b>	Multidisciplinary teamwork model	Multidisciplinary teamwork model	Interdisciplinary teamwork model	Interdisciplinary teamwork model	Transdisciplinary teamwork and key worker models



### The changing social context of early childhood

Strong, healthy families are the building blocks of strong, healthy communities. But the rapid pace of social and economic change means family life has become increasingly complex, leaving many parents struggling to cope in the absence of support from traditional sources such as extended family, neighbours and the wider community.<sup>10</sup>

Families have changed significantly. Despite rises in prosperity in the last three decades, the widening gap between rich and poor, coupled with increases in the cost of living, means more people are living in poverty. As a result, good developmental outcomes are in jeopardy for many children. Measures of social wellbeing, such as infant mortality, low birth weight, mental health and child abuse, have shown little improvement in recent years and, in some instances, are deteriorating. More children are obese or have asthma and other complex diseases. There are more sole parents, blended families and shared custody arrangements; at the same time, more

parents are working part time or full time and many are working extended hours.<sup>11</sup> Also under pressure are child protection systems, which are failing because of increased demand and lack of resources. National notifications of alleged child abuse and neglect almost tripled between 1999 and 2007.<sup>4</sup> Child and family services often prioritise treatment over prevention, resulting in a heavy burden on services working with families in crisis. Services and their staff operate in silos, isolated from other professionals, and service delivery is often fragmented. The Stronger Families Alliance creates links between organisations at a local government or regional level, enabling organisations to collaborate on service delivery and to move progressively from a treatment to a prevention focus.

### The link between children's rights and our future social and economic capacity

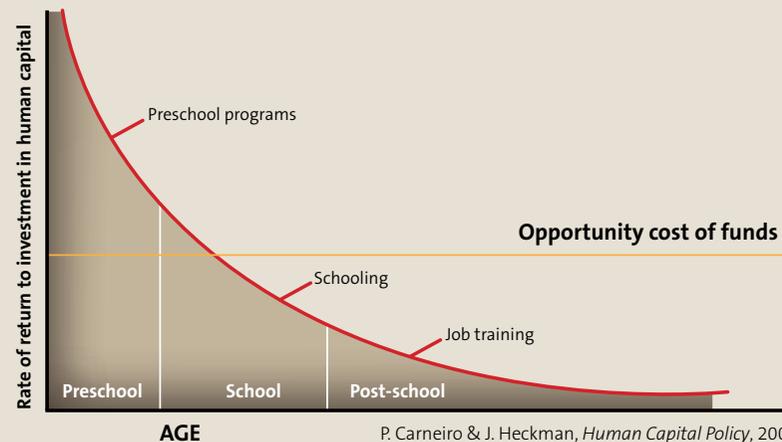
Many Australian children live without basic rights. Children's rights are outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the

United Nations in 1989 and signed by almost every country in the world. While Australia is a signatory to the Convention, it is one of few countries which has not put the Convention into legislation, meaning it has no legal status in this country. Every right spelled out in the Convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of children. The four core principles are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect

for the views of the child. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in healthcare, education, and legal, civil and social services.<sup>12</sup>

The goal of building a better child and family service system is to extend these basic rights to all children. Economic studies show that children who are educated, cared for and protected are more likely to grow into adults who contribute to their community's economic and social development than those who do not receive such support.<sup>13</sup>

### Early intervention and community benefit





## Creating and sustaining the Stronger Families Alliance

Since 2006, the Alliance has passed two of three recognised stages on the road to sustainability for networked multi-organisation structures: creating the Alliance and identifying shared problems (stage one) and direction setting (stage two). In stage three, roles and responsibilities will be formalised as the network finds a stable structure.<sup>7</sup>

Finding the right leaders to join the Alliance involved identifying the organisations and networks that contribute, directly and indirectly, to raising a child from the prenatal stage to age 12. The ecological map gave a broad perspective, ensuring that the largest possible range of stakeholders was invited.

The initial Alliance leaders – the Council, Mountains Community Resource Network and Community Services – emphasised the importance of each stakeholder’s potential contribution and explained the Alliance’s mission from

each stakeholder’s point of view. New evidence in early childhood research was used to engage leaders and their organisations.

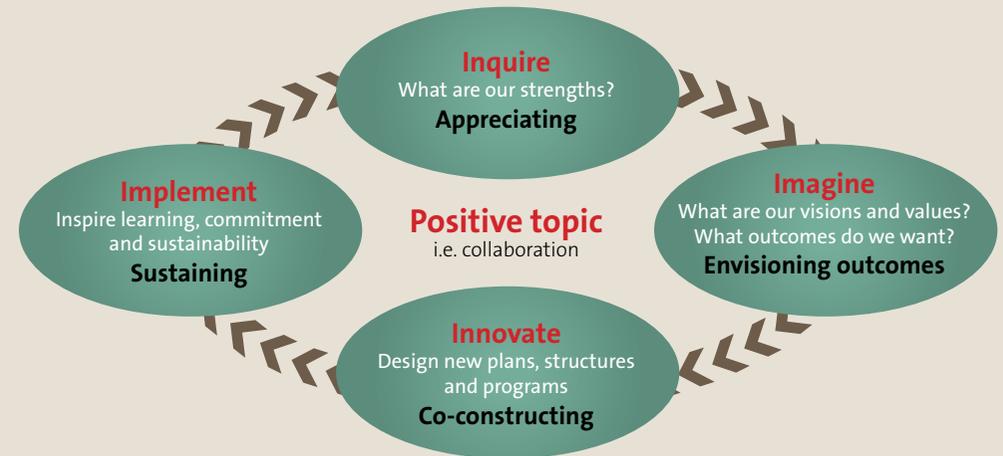
Organisational development involves the use of planned systems change to help achieve objectives.<sup>14</sup> The Alliance uses positive organisational development – strengths-based theory and facilitation processes that enhance relationships between organisations and unite unaligned single organisational purposes into a higher-order group purpose.<sup>15</sup> Group process design moves members through stages of development in the performance of tasks and the growth of inter-organisational relationships. Large group facilitation enables effective individual participation and is a catalyst for new forms of action characterised by consensus and commitment.

The Alliance used appreciative inquiry to form its vision and direction, consult with its partners and implement new programs. Appreciative inquiry is a holistic change approach that involves all group members and takes into account each member’s outlook, skills and

knowledge, as well as the group’s need to build a common culture and structure, and common practices and procedures.<sup>15</sup> Appreciative inquiry fosters accelerated relationship-forming and a mounting energy, commitment and momentum for change. This is achieved through a structured inquiry into strengths and instances where the positive topic is already occurring. Confidence is created,

enabling the groups to imagine the change and the role of each person and organisation. Processes from the design disciplines are then used to develop innovative programs and the service system to bring about change.<sup>16</sup> Experiential and reflective on-the-job learning is encouraged, alongside a focus on capacity-building through professional development.

### The stages of the appreciative inquiry process



J. Stavros & G. Hinrichs, *The Thin Book of Soar*, 2010.

Leadership is essential to change. Because networked organisations operate without hierarchical power structures, new methods of leadership are needed to help people work together. Facilitative leadership moved the Alliance forward, and collaborative leadership attitudes and skills generated new partnerships between leaders of diverse organisations. These new principles of leadership apply equally to formal and informal leaders in the service system.<sup>17,18</sup>

Translating the Alliance's vision and intention into a shared plan has been a significant challenge. The Child and Family Plan was developed using collaboration outcomes planning – identifying and translating outcomes into measurable objectives – in order to refine thinking, create consensus and develop a shared language to direct cohesive action across agencies.<sup>19</sup>

## Facilitative and collaborative leadership

### Collaborative leadership includes:

- Communicating a shared vision or new purpose for the system
- Building positive, strong networks
- Creating synergies between organisations
- Having the courage and patience to invest in long-term benefits
- Showing willingness to divert resources into new multi-service governance structures and programs
- Sharing power, control, credit, resources and funding
- Managing frustration and conflict, and engaging in difficult conversations
- Having the ability to balance the needs of the collaborative network with the needs of the individual organisations.

### Facilitative leadership includes:

- Understanding how group interactions impact on relationships and productivity
- Keeping group discussion and interaction focused and productive
- Being clear about expectations (goals, roles and decisions)
- Enabling participation in decision-making
- Building understanding in the group, especially during conflict
- Developing agreements and solutions based on the group's best thinking
- Securing commitment for projects and decisions
- Encouraging self-, group- and system-reflective practice.



Leadership is essential to change.

## The Alliance's structure and practices

### Structure

Throughout its development the Alliance has adopted different structures made out of various subgroups charged with completing specific tasks. Each subgroup was formed with an eye to diversifying organisational representation and to each member's interest in and talent for a particular task. The Alliance's current structure is divided into subgroups that drive service system change and, from this, subgroups that develop new programs on the ground.

One of the major challenges in changing the local child and family system structure is the lack of system change by state and federal governments, meaning that core and new service funding does not match the needs of new programs.

The Alliance is addressing this deficit with strategies to build sustainability into the local child and family system by:

- Developing robust governance structures
- Designing processes that divert renewable funding from services and programs into new multi-service programs (refocusing)
- Seeking funding for demonstration projects that show services how to refocus their funding
- Seeking funding to develop new evaluation and monitoring instruments that are tailored to the new integrated approach
- Seeking sponsorship outside traditional funding sources, such as from local voluntary groups and the business and philanthropic sectors.

### Practices

Children and their families will live happier, healthier lives if they are supported by services and programs that are flexible, responsive, solutions focused, and embedded in their communities.<sup>20</sup>

Evidence-based practice means implementing programs and practices that are proven to be effective. Professional development is critical because practices are updated and modified constantly in response to new research and observations by professionals about what fosters positive change in children, families and communities.<sup>21</sup>

The Alliance has adopted the following practices and approaches based on what has worked in its own community and others around the world.

*Strengths-based, family-centred practice* takes a positive approach to people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities. Child and family professionals understand that parents know their children best and want the best for their children; these professionals also recognise that each child and family is unique and that a child will prosper in a supportive, loving family and community. The ability of families to drive change for themselves is a central tenet.<sup>21</sup>

*Taking a community focus* involves designing programs and practices that complement the character and assets of a neighbourhood or town and that meet residents' needs and aspirations. Universal programs (open to all) that are located in places frequented by families, such as schools, and that are fun, safe and educational, are more likely to attract vulnerable or isolated parents. These programs can then act as an easy entry point to more specialised child and family services.<sup>22</sup>

Child and family practitioners know that *no door is the wrong door* – professionals learn to consider the holistic needs of children and families using their service, and think laterally about other agencies or people who can contribute. They can then refer the child and family to other services.

New programs can also be designed involving *coordinated or collaborative multi-service structures*. Here professionals from different services use interdisciplinary teamwork to support children, families and communities to address needs and achieve aspirations.