



Stronger Families
Alliance

Child and Family Plan





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Foreword

01

Strong, healthy children are our future. The Blue Mountains City Council and the Stronger Families Alliance share a vision of vibrant communities where child and family services work together with one aim – maximising the wellbeing and resilience of children and their families.

The Alliance is a unique network that fosters collaboration between child and family organisations. The Alliance was established in 2006 by the Council's Child and Family Services Development Officer, the Mountains Community Resource Network and Community Services. The Alliance represents 28 government, community agency, peak, civic and business organisations working with children from the prenatal stage to age 12. Ultimately, the Alliance aspires to involve every Blue Mountains organisation or group working directly or indirectly with children and their families.

The Alliance applies the best international research to the challenge of solving seemingly intractable problems – such as rising rates of child abuse, social isolation and the literacy divide – which often have their roots in poor early childhood experiences. Evidence shows that, because most brain development occurs in the first three years, we need to work preventatively to ensure children gain the most benefit from early childhood. Child, family and community organisations can work collaboratively with each other and the voluntary and business sectors to design new solutions for the 21st century.

In 2008, the Council took the lead role in resourcing the development of a strategic plan. The resulting Child and Family Plan is a 10-year roadmap for developing a unified and collaborative service system in the Blue Mountains.

The Plan is a synthesis of research and ideas from all Alliance members and is aligned with the Council's Sustainable Blue Mountains 2025 strategic plan.

The Child and Family Plan is a dynamic, flexible document that will be adapted over its life through to 2020.

Another notable aspect of the Plan is the use of prototyping – initiating small-scale projects to refine ideas. This process resulted in two new programs, the School-Centred Community Hub program and the Paint the Blue Read program. The Alliance will use the Plan to continue to develop a common philosophy and standard of practice across child and family services, guide resource allocation and strategic planning, contribute to new programs, apply for funding and design governance structures.

Dynamic neighbourhood service networks that provide care, education, friendship, fun and support are our most important safeguard against the isolation of modern life. The Blue Mountains City Council is a proud partner in this ground-breaking venture, which capitalises on our greatest asset – active residents and strong organisations that care deeply about the health and wellbeing of children and their families.



Daniel Myles

Mayor, Blue Mountains City Council



Executive summary

The Stronger Families Alliance

The Stronger Families Alliance is a unique network that fosters collaboration between Blue Mountains organisations and networks with a stake in early childhood development. The Alliance is guided by emerging international thinking about new ways in which communities, government and business can work together to counter seemingly intractable problems such as rising rates of child abuse and neglect, social isolation and the literacy divide.

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 convened and resourced by the Blue Mountains City Council.

The Alliance has adopted the ecological model of child development, which promotes the positive influences on children by people and organisations outside the child and family sector, such as neighbours, social and cultural groups, business and government. The Alliance uses strengths-based theory and facilitation to promote networked relationships and shared leadership across the Blue Mountains city. In particular, appreciative inquiry – a strengths-based organisational development process – has driven the Alliance’s formation and direction setting, and collaboration outcomes planning has influenced the Child and Family Plan.

Drivers for change

Alliance members share a vision for change based on the following drivers:

International research

Neurobiological research reveals the phenomenal rate of brain development from conception to age three. It is now widely acknowledged that experience shapes brain development and that children’s formative experiences are shaped by their relationships with significant others. This biological evidence underpins the need for prevention and early intervention to support parents through pregnancy and early childhood. Research also shows that children are best served by practitioners and organisations that work holistically and think laterally about the needs of families. To respond to these new ways of thinking, a new service system structure, based on collaboration and prevention, was required.

Changes to family life

Society is changing faster than ever, and this in turn is changing the nature of childhood. Family life is 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. Rapid change requires that child, family and community services design new forms of family engagement and social support.

The rights of children

Landmark 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. Conversely, children lacking in basic human rights – care, protection, respect – are more susceptible to criminality, unemployment, and mental and physical problems as adults. Creating support systems that guarantee children’s rights is fundamental to the social and economic future of our communities.

The Child and Family Plan

The Child and Family Plan is a 10-year blueprint for the coordinated development of government, community and voluntary organisations working with children and families. The Plan is a synthesis of research and ideas from all Alliance members and is aligned with the Blue Mountains City Council's 2025 strategic plan. Alliance members will use the Plan to continue to develop a common philosophy and standard of practice across diverse services, guide resource allocation and strategic planning, contribute to program development, apply for funding and design governance structures. The Plan is a dynamic, flexible document that will be modified to reflect the new evidence and community directions that will emerge over the next decade.

The Stronger Families Alliance members

- Associate Professor June Wangmann
- Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre – Child-friendly Communities lead agency
- Blue Mountains GPs Network
- Blue Mountains Interagency – represented by Mountains Community Resource Network
- Blue Mountains Leisure Centres, Blue Mountains City Council
- Blue Mountains Libraries, Blue Mountains City Council
- Blue Mountains Neighbourhood Centres
- Blue Mountains Primary Schools, Department of Education and Training
- Centrelink
- Child and Family Health Team, Sydney West Area Health Service
- Children's and Family Services Forum – represented by Katoomba Children's Cottage
- Coalition Against Violence and Abuse – represented by Mountains Outreach Community Service
- Community and Early Years, Families NSW, Community Services
- Community Outcomes, Blue Mountains City Council – Alliance convener and Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks lead agency
- Connect Child and Family Services – Blue Mountains Consortium and School Centred Community Hub lead agency
- Early Childhood Intervention and Coordination Program – represented by Connect Child and Family Services
- Elizabeth Evatt Community Legal Centre
- Family Support Services – represented by Gateway Family Services
- Gateway Family Services – Moving Children Beyond Vulnerability lead agency, School Centred Community Hub lead agency
- Katoomba Chamber of Commerce
- Katoomba Mental Health Coordinated Care Team, Sydney West Area Health Service
- Mountains Community Resource Network
- Mountains Outreach Community Service – Paint the Blue Read lead agency
- Nepean Partnerships and Planning, Community Services
- National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Rotary
- Springwood Neighbourhood Centre – Child-friendly Communities lead agency
- Upper Blue Mountains Principal Network



The Plan is divided into three parts:

- **Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks**
- **Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability**
- **Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities**

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks

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 outcomes:

- Parents nurture their child's ongoing development from the prenatal period onwards
- Children come to school with the skills and abilities necessary to achieve in the school environment
- Parents increase their social supports and community connections
- Collaborative, universal service systems are created at a neighbourhood level through School Centred Community Hub steering committees.

Part A is informed by strong international evidence about the importance of early intervention and social support for parents, the role of universal easy-to-access programs in building bridges to vulnerable children and families, the critical role of home-learning and formal early childhood education, and new ways of thinking about the role of schools. The Alliance's School Centred Community Hub program is a virtual Hub – a network of stand-alone services, civic organisations and business organisations with its nerve centre in a primary school, which becomes the focus for community development and child and family service provision. Each Hub is unique, offering programs and activities for babies, young children and parents. Future Hubs may have their nerve centre in a different service, as determined by the needs of each community. Hubs are governed by local steering committees that plan multi-service projects using interdisciplinary practice.

Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability

The vision:

Children are nurtured within strong and resilient families and communities that are able to keep their children and safe and well.

The outcomes:

- All children and their families have many different connections to others in the community
- Families promote the safety and wellbeing of their children
- Children and families receive an immediate and compassionate response aimed at meeting their basic needs
- Targeted child and adult services coordinate with each other and the universal service system.

International evidence informing Part B includes the effect of child abuse and neglect, the efficacy of strengths-based and family-centred practice, the need for services that attract vulnerable families, the importance of resilience in overcoming adversity, and the power of family/community connections in keeping children safe. The eight members of the Alliance’s Blue Mountains Consortium have a track record of success in applying these principles to deliver successful multi-service, multidisciplinary programs.

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities

The vision:

All members of the community understand the different ways they can support children to reach their full potential.

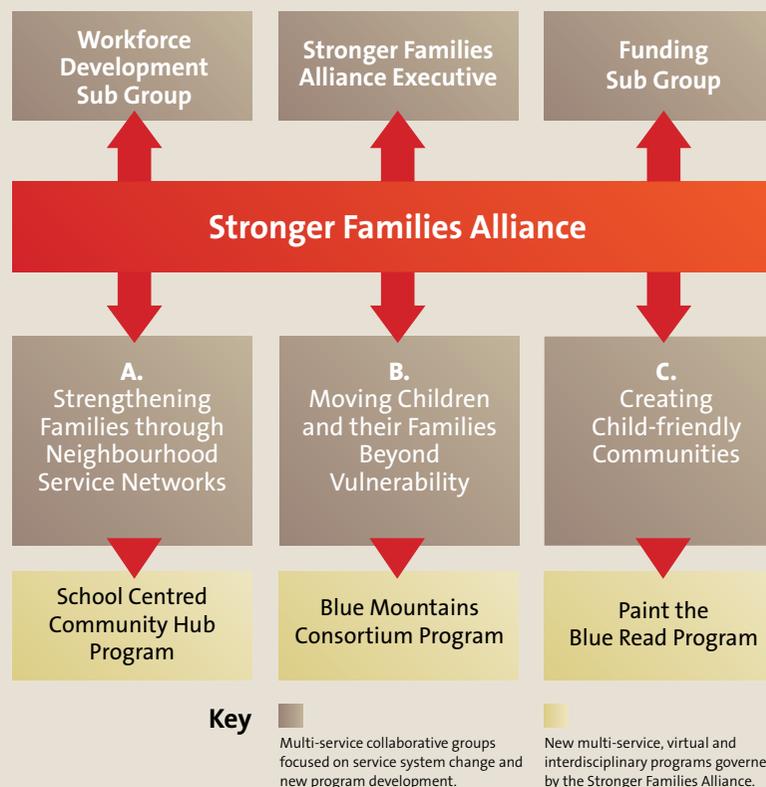
The outcomes:

- Learning is supported and valued from birth
- The community supports children and their families
- The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly.

The evidence supporting Part C includes the role of communities in teaching new parents about child development, the importance of language-rich environments in promoting early literacy, the critical role of exercise and nutrition, and the positive impact of child-friendly urban design. The Plan also reflects current thinking about children’s rights to safety and to being part of decision-making processes.

The Alliance has one program in this area, Paint the Blue Read, which was launched in 2009 to promote early literacy through community engagement.

Stronger Families Alliance governance model





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.¹ 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.

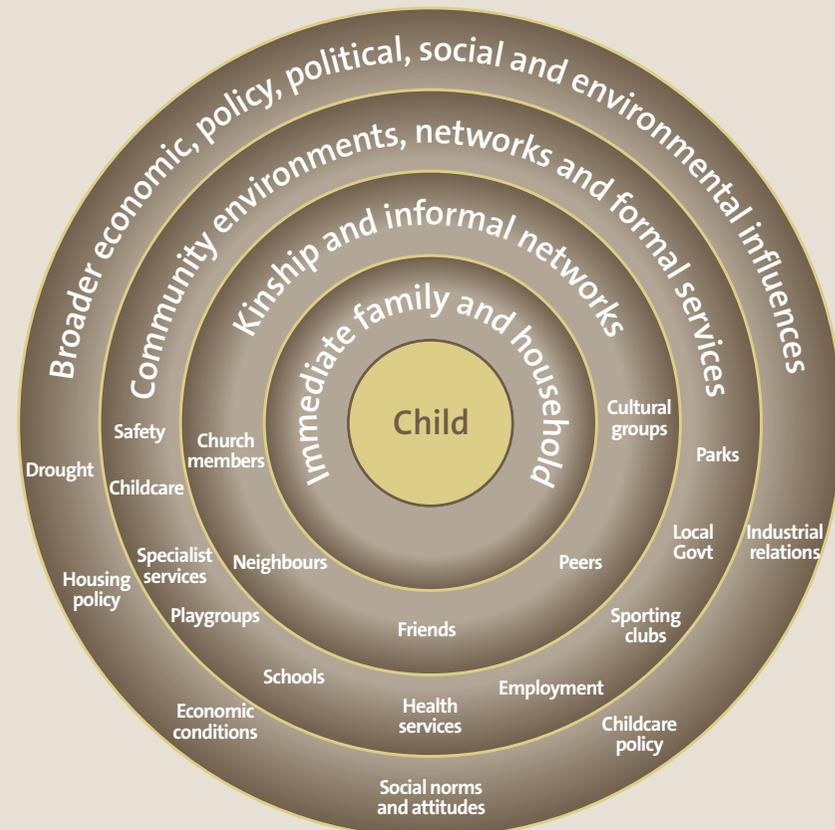


The least obvious part of the system, its function or purpose, is often the most crucial determinant of the system’s behaviour.

DONELLA MEADOWS,
*THINKING IN SYSTEMS: A PRIMER*²



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.³

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

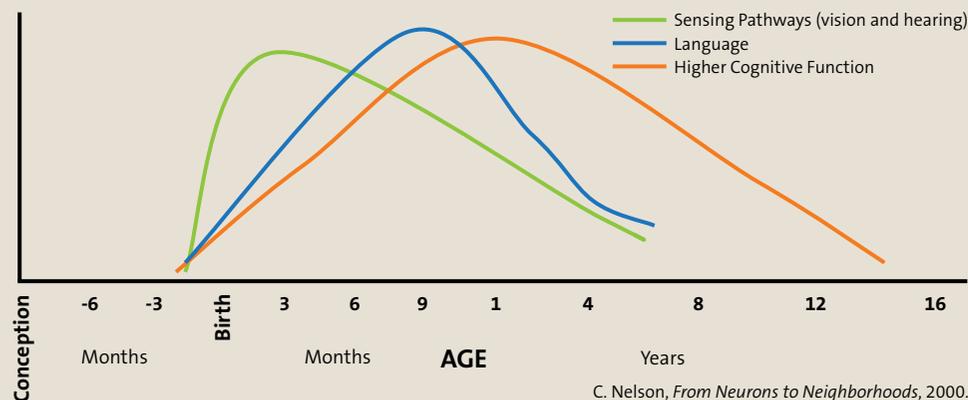
complex problems by acting as early referral gateways to specialised services. Problems are identified early because children and their families are seen by a variety of professionals, leading to effective interventions.⁴ As children grow into adolescents, early intervention means continuing to offer 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.^{4,6}

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).^{7,8,9}

Human brain development occurs early in life



Forms of linkage across different systemic levels

	COEXISTENCE	COOPERATION	COORDINATION	COLLABORATION	INTEGRATION
Whole of government level	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
Regional/community level	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
Service level	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
Teamwork level	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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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 2007.⁴ 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

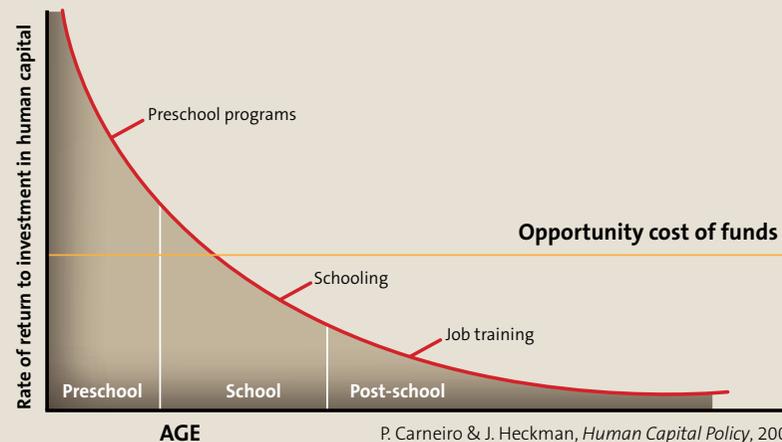
Many Australian children live without basic rights. Children's rights are outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the

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.¹²

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.¹³

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.⁷

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.

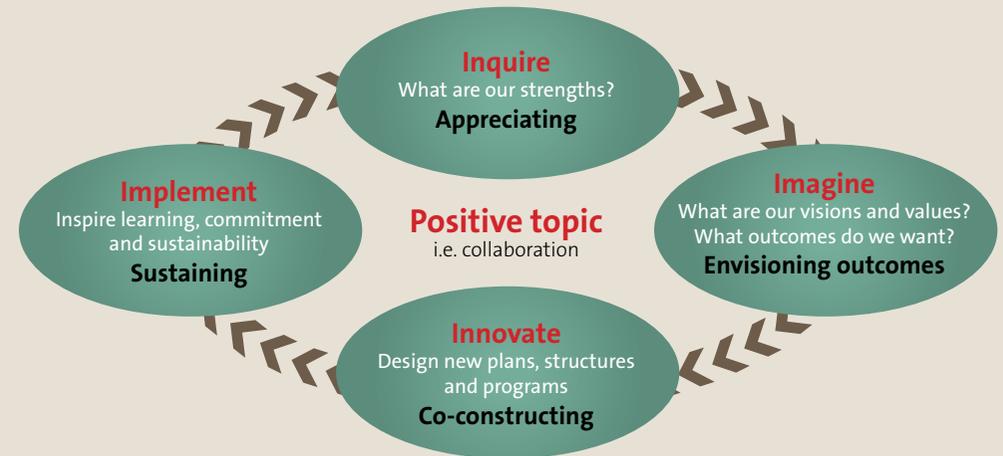
Organisational development involves the use of planned systems change to help achieve objectives.¹⁴ The Alliance uses positive organisational development – strengths-based theory and facilitation processes that enhance relationships between organisations and unite unaligned single organisational purposes into a higher-order group purpose.¹⁵ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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



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.^{17,18}

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.²¹

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.²²

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.



Using the Child and Family Plan

The Child and Family Plan was developed by the Alliance as a tool to help its members think ecologically and act as one. The Plan contains 11 outcomes for children and their families and will be used to develop a common philosophy and standard of practice across child and family services, guide resource allocation and strategic planning, contribute to new programs, apply for funding and design governance structures. The Alliance will seek funding to formally evaluate and monitor the Plan.

The Plan is divided into three parts:

- **Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks**
- **Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability**
- **Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities**

Individuals, organisations and sectors using the Plan

Individuals

The Plan sets out evidence-based methods for people working directly and indirectly with children and their families. These methods include:

- Considering the ‘big picture’ – understanding how all people and services contribute to the child and family service system
- Using shared outcomes to plan service delivery
- Creating coordination and collaboration with other workers
- Having an interdisciplinary practice approach
- Using holistic referral – the who, when and how of family referrals
- Applying strengths-based, family-centred practice.

Organisations

The Plan outlines evidence-based development topics for organisations working directly and indirectly with children and families. These topics include:

- Using shared outcomes to set service development priorities
- Aligning strategic plans across organisations
- Coordinating and collaborating with other services
- Designing multi-service programs
- Contributing to a more holistic referral network
- Collaborating on funding applications
- Having flexible approaches to service planning across the local government area.

Child and family sector development

The Plan contains priorities to advance child and family interests within and beyond the Blue Mountains. These priorities include:

- Adopting outcomes-focused systems planning
- Planning for the equitable spread of resources across the local government area
- Identifying emerging issues and coordinating a response
- Prioritising areas for advocacy
- Raising the credibility of the sector in the eyes of decision-makers
- Attracting new funding
- Raising community awareness about child wellbeing.

Top-down and bottom-up ways of using the Plan

Top-down

The Plan is used in a top-down way when Alliance members collaborate to create service system changes or programs to meet the Plan's objectives. The Plan has already been used in this way to:

- Create the School Centred Community Hub and Paint the Blue Read programs
- Source joint funding for the Alliance
- Integrate the Blue Mountains Consortium into the Stronger Families Alliance
- Create interdisciplinary workforce development approaches and events
- Form the Moving Children Beyond Vulnerability and Child-friendly City subgroups.

Bottom-up

The Plan is used in a bottom-up way when professionals and services use the Plan's outcomes, objectives and strategies independently to introduce new practices, programs and directions.

For example:

- The Plan's objectives were used to frame a community consultation process
- A neighbourhood centre redeveloped its community development worker job description to align with the Plan
- The Children's Week committee uses the Plan to set funding priorities
- Early childhood services and schools have begun transition-to-school programs
- Services have developed or sourced training to teach the Plan's methods to staff.

Reading the Plan

The Plan is organised into three parts, each with a set of outcomes. The outcomes each have objectives, measures and strategies. The outcomes and objectives show what change will happen. This part of the Plan is fixed. The strategies show how the objectives can be achieved. Evidence-based strategies vary depending on services. The strategies listed in the Plan are a resource for services and the community to build on.

Outcomes – Ideal result for children, families, services or the service system

Outcome One: Parents nurture their child's ongoing development from the pre-natal period onwards

Parents of children in support programs offered free consultation. Parents whose needs are met, and who are able to respond, 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, child abuse and neglect are recognized, empathetically understood and referred to appropriate services before children's development is compromised.

32 A. Family well-being promoted through connection to suburb level collaborative service systems

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
1.1 Parents increase their use of developmentally effective parenting practice	Service Measures SFA Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote parenting programs that (i) target behavior change (ii) promote reflection (iii) focus on coaching and (iv) learning by doing. • Engage parents into programs through their existing relationships and interests (i.e., teachers)
1.2 Children and their parents increase their number of engaging and supportive formal and informal relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No. of parents accessing services & activities through SCCH • No. of parents with first child 0 – 2 years accessing services / programs through SCCH. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver groups that are small and promote deeper connections • Deliver groups that are covered around interest and run regularly. Small groups more effective than big groups for deeper bonding • Build trusting relationships before delivering formal support
1.3 Parents are more able to build their families' social and economic capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents report that they were referred to SCCH through word of mouth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 & families experiencing child abuse and neglect and family violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents involved in program development & evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver training about child abuse and neglect and family violence throughout the program systems. • 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.

Objectives – Evidence-based and measurable targets to achieve the outcomes

Service measures – Suggest how organisations can track progress against outcomes and objectives

Alliance measures – Show how the Alliance will track progress against outcomes and objectives

Strategies – Evidence-based programming and practice that can be used to achieve the objectives

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

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks 15

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.

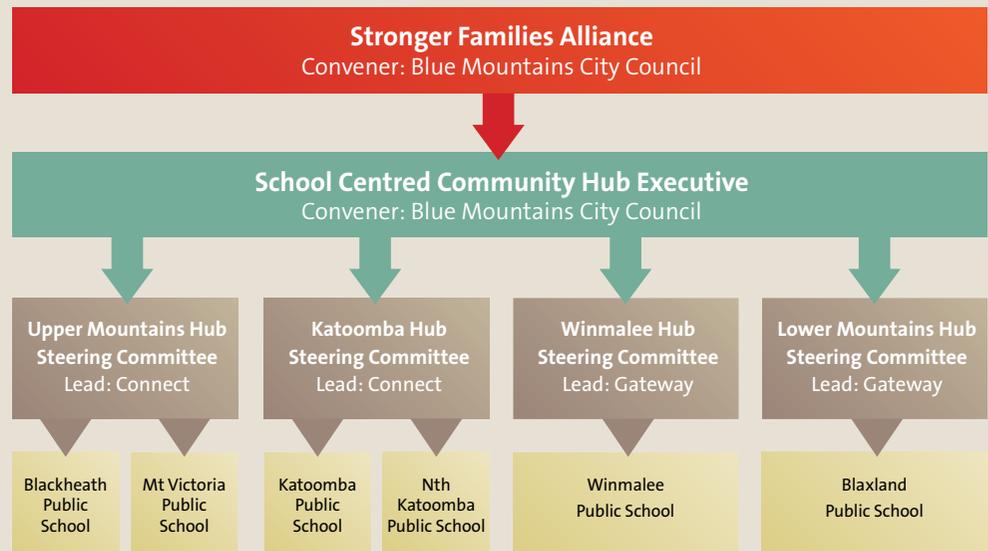
Using schools as Hubs represents a changing approach to education in which families and the school become familiar with each other through programs offered at the school before a child starts classes.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁹ In the six months before school, formal transition-to-school programs build relationships between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



Megan's story



“

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 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 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.”

The vision

Children are nurtured within strong and resilient families and communities that are able to keep their children and safe and well.

The Stronger Families Alliance's programs

The Alliance has one subgroup that works with targeted services to design multi-service programs for vulnerable children and their families. The group also contributes to professional development.

A second subgroup, the Blue Mountains Consortium (BMC), is a group of eight early childhood and human service organisations in the Blue Mountains, with Connect Child and Family Services as the lead agency. The BMC developed separately to the Alliance and joined the Alliance in 2009. The organisations share founding members, an evidence-based organisational development process facilitated by Blue Mountains City Council, and a common vision for an integrated and strengths-based service system. The BMC has developed

a collaborative case management system which delivers multi-service, multidisciplinary support to vulnerable children and their families.

Using the Plan to move children and their families beyond vulnerability

The Child and Family Plan includes outcomes that reduce vulnerability and enable children and families to access support more easily. The following three outcomes can be used by universal child and family services and targeted child and adult services:

- All children and their families have many different connections to the community (Outcome 5)
- Families promote the safety and wellbeing of their children (Outcome 6)
- Children and families receive an immediate and compassionate response aimed at meeting their basic needs (Outcome 7).

A further outcome focuses targeted adult services on the 'child behind the client',

promoting the needs of the children of parents who use targeted adult services (e.g. services addressing poverty, mental health, domestic violence, homelessness, or drug and alcohol abuse):

- Targeted child and adult services coordinate with each other and the universal service system (Outcome 8).

This outcome links the targeted and universal systems to better enable families to build broad social support networks.

A snapshot of evidence supporting the Plan

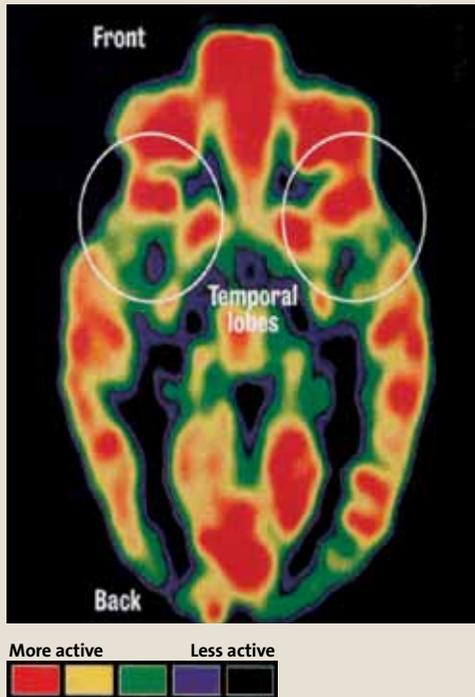
The effects of child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and child neglect are among Australia's major problems. The greater the abuse or neglect, the greater the cognitive and physical impairments that can exist throughout the child's adult life.⁵⁰⁻⁵⁷ The cost of abuse in Australia (e.g. physical and mental health care, criminality, welfare dependence, poor education outcomes, productivity losses) was estimated in 2007 to be \$6 billion.⁵⁸

Definitions of child abuse and child neglect change constantly as more becomes known about the factors that can harm children, compromise their development and deprive them of the community resources they require to grow. Definitions generally include physical, sexual and emotional maltreatment; added to these can be exposure to family violence, and systems abuse (the abuse of children by the systems designed to protect them). Abuse need not be physical. Chronic and harmful neglect compromises the healthy development of more children than abuse, and neglect is often associated with poverty.⁵⁹⁻⁶¹ This is why services that deal with issues such as poverty, mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse need to consider the needs of clients' children.

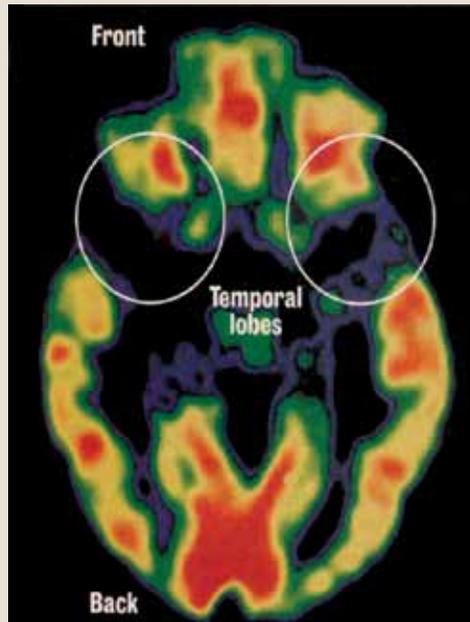
The abused brain

A healthy brain



This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (centre) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.

An abused brain



© Centre for Community Child Health 2006

This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian orphan, who was institutionalised shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top), which regulate emotions and receive input from the senses, are nearly inactive. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.

Strengths-based and family-centred practice

In the past two decades, community-based programs have shifted focus from deficits to strengths. Deficit models create change by identifying and attempting to fix family problems. The change towards strengths-based practice was prompted in part by a recognition that targeted deficit approaches were failing many families.⁶² A strengths-based approach builds on the positive skills, knowledge and attributes that families do have to support their children's development. Family-centred practice is based on establishing respectful partnerships with families, building on strengths and tailoring ways of working that fit family goals and social, cultural and political contexts.⁶³

Balancing risk and protective factors

Children's lives are shaped by risk and protective factors. In the past, programs often focused on reducing risks, but the emphasis is now on building protective factors. Strengths-based practice helps professionals identify and strengthen protective factors. Protective factors include children's positive skills and attributes, such as an easygoing or independent temperament, problem-solving skills or special talents. Protective parenting factors include breastfeeding, positive relationships with extended family, religious faith, giving children positive attention, and family harmony. Increasingly the community is seen as a key provider of protective factors in children's lives. Communities can provide positive social networks, access to recreational and educational opportunities, and avenues for community participation.⁶⁴



Building family community connections with...

Early childhood services, school groups for parents, Girl Guides, organised sport, extended family, playgroups, community fun days, play dates with friends, baby groups, parent programs, parent hobbies, parent further education, extracurricular activities, volunteer groups, library programs, community gardens, bushcare

Engaging with vulnerable families

Families most in need of services and support are least likely to access services. To bypass this blockage, new types of professional/family relationships need to be created. Engagement methods must be respectful and non-stigmatising, and fit with what families say they need. If the immediate needs of families are met, it is more likely they will participate in programs that support long-term change.⁶⁵ Success has been achieved using a strengths-based approach and addressing the factors that limit parents from participating. For example, parents who are economically stressed will prioritise basic needs (such as food and housing) over nurturing and home learning.⁶⁶⁻⁶⁷ When these basic needs are met, parents have more time for their children's non-material developmental needs. This requires communication and coordination between child- and family-focused services, and services working with parents on issues such as housing, mental illness or drug and alcohol abuse.

The six primary factors needed to engage vulnerable parents with services are:

1. High-quality relationship between the parent and the service provider
2. Shared decision-making
3. Cultural awareness and sensitivity
4. Using non-stigmatising interventions and settings
5. Minimising the practical or structural barriers to accessing services
6. Providing crisis help prior to other intervention aims.⁶⁸

Promoting resilience

Resilience allows a person, family or community to prevent, minimise or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. Resilient children cope with challenges, believe they are capable, and use interpersonal and network skills to obtain support. Resilient families share celebrations, routines, recreation, traditions and time. They support each other, communicate well, solve problems together and prioritise family equality, spirituality, truthfulness, hope and health.⁶⁹

The power of family/community connections

Children from families with extensive social support often have more positive outcomes. Reaching out to the community builds resilience, because social support reduces stress for adults, leading to more effective parenting.⁷⁰ A core component of early intervention and child protection work is connecting

families to friends, community groups, and social support and education services. This is also true for targeted services working with issues such as housing, mental illness or drug and alcohol abuse. Connecting children and families to community activities and universal support is a primary way to increase the protective factors operating in children's lives.

Resilience in children

Resilience results from a combination of some or all of the following factors. Do children:

- Have someone who loves them unconditionally?
- Have an older person outside the home they can talk with about problems and feelings?
- Receive praise for doing things on their own?
- Feel they can count on their family being there when needed?
- Know someone they want to be like?
- Believe things will turn out alright?
- Do endearing things that make people like them?
- Believe in a power greater than seen?
- Try new things?
- Like to achieve?
- Feel that what they do makes a difference?
- Like themselves?
- Focus and stay with a task?
- Have a sense of humour?
- Make plans to do things?

E. Grotberg, *A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children*, 1995.

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities

The vision

All members of the community understand the different ways they can support children to reach their full potential.

The Stronger Families Alliance's programs

The Alliance's child-friendly city subgroup is developing child-friendly community programs. The first program, Paint the Blue Read, was launched in July 2009 and promotes early literacy so that children enter school ready for reading. Mountains Communities Outreach Service is the lead agency. Activities include reading tents at community events, book character dress-ups, visits by mascot Billy Bookie, and annual reading days at businesses, libraries, schools and other places visited by children.

Using the Plan to create child-friendly communities

Because every part of the community impacts on a child's development, the Plan provides a common focus for services, businesses, environmental organisations, government agencies and voluntary organisations to create three child-friendly city conditions:

- Learning is supported and valued from birth (Outcome 9)
- The community supports children and their families (Outcome 10)
- The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly (Outcome 11).

A snapshot of evidence supporting the Plan

Ecological model of child development

Research on the early years of life draws heavily on the ecological model of human development, which shows the complex system of relationships children are part of.⁷¹ The model emphasises

the dynamic interactions between children and their environments and shows the many influences on children's development that arise from a diversity of relationships.⁷²

In an ideal community, families have energy left over from meeting their own needs to reach out and support others. Communities that create these conditions produce better outcomes for children.^{73,74} Child-friendly communities provide children's programs and infrastructure such as libraries and recreational facilities, and social spaces that welcome children (e.g. baby change tables, sweet-free shopping counters, toys in public foyers, children's menus). Societal influences also impact on children. In early childhood services, child-to-adult ratios and funding are critical. At a national level, employment practices, maternity leave provisions, access to medical and dental care, and the esteem given to child and family professionals impact on the ability of parents and professionals to care for children.

Reaching out to new parents

Communities that value children pass on collective knowledge about children's development. However, rapid economic and social change have isolated many families from traditional sources of knowledge, such as extended family and neighbours.⁷⁵ New community activities and programs can help parents respond to children's needs and stimulate their holistic development. These need to be offered in various ways that are attractive to all parents as part of core service provision, including placing information on child development on the internet and using mass media.⁷⁶

Learning through play

Children learn through play, and communities that value children create opportunities for children's play and encourage play in public spaces. Children thrive when they can play in structured and unstructured ways, inside and outside the home. Play-based programs and experiences contribute significantly to literacy and numeracy and help address inequity and social exclusion.⁷⁷



However, misunderstandings about the need to protect children from risk have restricted opportunities for play in community and natural settings. Children from the ‘bubble-wrap generation’ are less capable of being safe outdoors and lack experiences of autonomy, independence, freedom and choice.⁷⁸ It is important that communities provide spaces and opportunities for play, but it is equally important that adults or older peers supervise these environments and are available to support children’s learning.

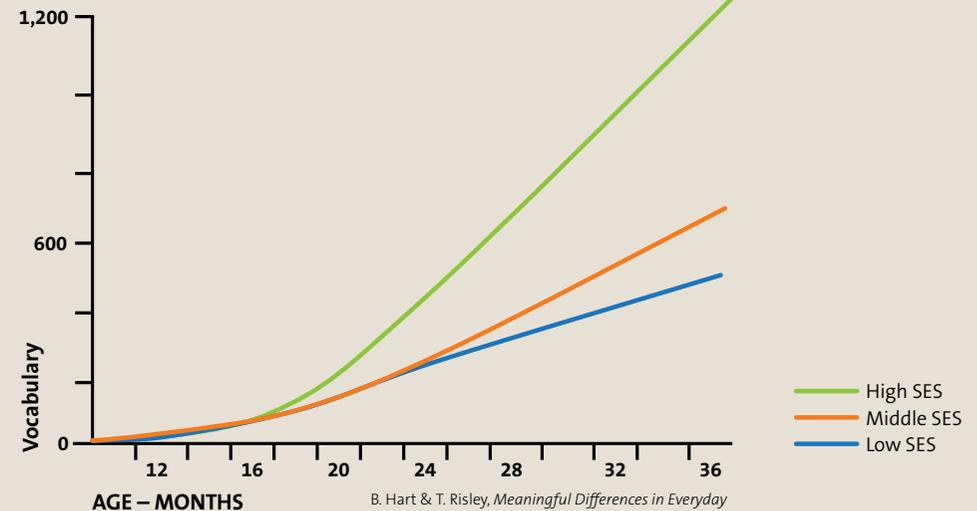
Language-rich social environments support early literacy

In a child-friendly community, everyone is encouraged to talk, sing, read and listen to babies and young children. Because children’s literacy depends on their command of language, stimulating the language development of babies and toddlers is the first step to adult literacy. Neurological research shows the importance of learning in the early years, when neural pathways are being

laid down rapidly. This is the time for establishing the foundations for formal literacy and numeracy skills usually associated with school-aged learning.⁷⁹

The community can play a significant role in ensuring that families with fewer resources are supported to understand how to stimulate early childhood literacy and access early literacy resources.

The beginning of the literacy divide: Vocabulary growth of children of different socioeconomic status (SES)



Did you know?

Children engaged in outdoor structured or unstructured play will learn:

- Motor skills such as weight transfer, balance and jumping which are used by adults to maintain active, healthy lifestyles
- Communication and interaction skills as they negotiate game rules with peers, resolve conflicts and take turns
- Language and literacy skills as they create story scripts around their actions, negotiate rules and learn left/right discrimination
- Mathematical and science skills as they judge and adjust distance and speed, and judge relative size and sequence size.

Promoting healthy physical development through exercise and nutrition

Obesity is a global epidemic. Around 23 per cent of Australian children are obese due to diet, genes, lifestyle or exercise.⁸⁰ Obesity prevention is more complex than simply expecting parents to balance diet and exercise – community interventions are also critical. For example, foods high in fat are more satisfying than fruit and vegetables, meaning families living in poverty are more likely to eat fatty food because it costs less and tastes good. Furthermore, people are less likely to exercise outside the home if they believe their neighbourhood is unsafe.⁸¹⁻⁸³ Obesity prevention programs therefore need to be coupled with programs that promote affordable and healthy food, include community safety initiatives and aim to change negative perceptions about public safety.

Children's rights to safety and decision-making

The Child and Family Plan promotes two children's rights – the right to safety and the right to contribute to decision-making. Child protection is the embodiment of a child's right to safety and protection.⁸⁴ While governments legislate for child safety, communities and families are responsible for addressing child safety and protection. Children learn about decision-making when they are consulted about community life. Evidence shows that programs, amenities and spaces for children are more effective when children's points of view are considered in their design.

Business interests in child-friendly communities

Business and community wellbeing are inextricably linked: business benefits from a better-prepared workforce and the community benefits from productive businesses.^{85,86} Business engagement in community initiatives is therefore vital.⁸⁷ Businesses can contribute to a family-

friendly neighbourhood by creating welcoming environments for children, implementing employment practices that reduce parental stress and increase productivity, and strategically partnering with organisations that deliver social benefits to children and their families.

Child-friendly urban design and service planning

Urban environments designed with children in mind are attractive, safe and accessible for all people, not just children. Children are nurtured in communities that plan for their needs, with well-designed community centres, libraries, shops, medical facilities, parks, nature reserves and early childhood education services – all linked to public transport.⁸⁸ Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that children's emotional and behavioural development is influenced by their parents' perceptions of their neighbourhood. Children in families who viewed their neighbourhoods as safe, clean, well provided with facilities, and conducive to a sense of belonging showed good developmental outcomes.

In comparison, children living in areas of high disadvantage had lower levels of concentration, were more likely to feel sad, worried or fearful, and had significantly more problems with their peers. The impact on children of living in a low socioeconomic area was reduced when parents felt a sense of belonging, trusted their neighbours and knew where to find services.⁸⁹

Environmental sustainability

Children need positive images and experiences of nature to feel hopeful about the environmental future of our planet and therefore motivated to protect the environment. Children will respond more positively to programs, and think and behave more sustainably, if they are given experiences that enable them to appreciate nature rather than programs that create fear by focusing on issues such as extinction or deforestation. It is important to assess the ecological impact of programs when building sustainable child- and family-friendly communities.⁹⁰



Organisations driving the Plan's implementation

25

Alliance members are implementing the parts of the Plan most relevant to their organisation or network. Members contribute to the Plan's implementation in different ways. They contribute through making changes within their own organisation, participating in Alliance programs and governance structures, and contributing to Alliance subgroups developing new initiatives. The members at the top of the following boxes are contributing to the whole part of the Plan they are listed under. Members contributing to specific outcomes are listed under individual outcomes.

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks

Organisations contributing to whole of Part A

Community Outcomes, Blue Mountains City Council (Part A lead agency); Connect Child and Family Services, and Gateway Family Services (School Centred Community Hub lead agencies); Family support services; Neighbourhood centres; Primary schools

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

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Communities and Early Years, Community Services; Mountains Outreach Community Services (Paint the Blue Read lead agency); Rotary clubs

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

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Children's Service and Family Forum; Communities and Early Years, Community Services; Libraries; Mountains Outreach Community Services (Paint the Blue Read lead agency); Rotary clubs

Outcome 3: Parents increase their social supports and community connections

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Communities and Early Years, Community Services; Rotary clubs

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

Children's and Family Services Forum; Mountains Community Resource Network

Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability

Organisations contributing to whole of Part B

Gateway Family Services (Part B lead agency); Connect Child and Family Services (Blue Mountains Consortium lead agency); Centrelink; Nepean Partnerships and Planning, Community Services

Outcome 5: All children and families have many different connections to others in the community

Blue Mountains GP Network; Family support services

Outcome 6: Families promote the safety and wellbeing of their children

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Early Childhood Intervention and Coordination Program; Elizabeth Evatt Community Legal Centre; Family support services; Katoomba Mental Health Coordinated Care Team, Community Health

Outcome 7: Children and families receive an immediate and compassionate response aimed at meeting their basic needs

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Children's Service and Family Forum; Family support services; Katoomba Mental Health Coordinated Care Team, Community Health; Rotary clubs

Outcome 8: Targeted child and adult services coordinate with each other and the universal service system

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Community Outcomes, Blue Mountains City Council; Elizabeth Evatt Community Legal Centre; Katoomba Mental Health Coordinated Care Team, Community Health; Mountains Community Resource Network

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities

Organisations contributing to whole of Part C

Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre and Springwood Neighbourhood Centre (Part C lead agencies); Community Outcomes, Leisure Centres and Libraries, Blue Mountains City Council; Nepean Partnerships and Planning, Community Services

Outcome 9: Learning is supported and valued from birth

Mountains Outreach Community Services (Paint the Blue Read lead agency); Rotary clubs

Outcome 10: The community supports children and their families

Blue Mountains GP Network; Child and Family Health, Community Health; Coalition Against Violence and Abuse

Outcome 11: The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly

Child and Family Health, Community Health; Katoomba Chamber of Commerce; National Parks and Wildlife Service

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.

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>1.1 Parents increase their use of developmentally effective parenting practice</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of parents accessing services and activities > No. of parents with first child 0–2 years accessing services and programs > Parents report they were referred through word of mouth > Parents report they were referred through supported referral <p>Stronger Families Alliance measure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Long-term and structured evaluation tools and referral tools are designed and used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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)
<p>1.2 Children and their parents increase their number of engaging and supportive formal and informal relationships</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>1.3 Parents are more able to build their families' social and economic capacity</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>1.4 There is an increased, helpful response to children and families experiencing child abuse and neglect and family violence</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>2.1 Unborn babies and babies receive increased community programs that stimulate their holistic development</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>2.2 Parents increase their understanding and practice about the use of home and family as a key learning environment for children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Parents report they were referred through word of mouth > Parents report they were supportively referred > Parents involved in program development and evaluation <p>Stronger Families Alliance measure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Long-term and structured evaluation and referral tools are designed and used 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>2.3 Children, particularly vulnerable children, have increased access to quality early childhood education and care</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>2.4 Children and parents increase their capacity to settle into school</p>	<p>Stronger Families Alliance measure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>3.1 Schools and other services increase the opportunities they provide to parents to build informal, positive and supportive relationships with each other</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of parents accessing services and activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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)
<p>3.2 Schools and voluntary organisations increase the opportunities they provide for parents to connect with their community through their local school</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of parents with first child 0–2 years accessing services and programs > Parents involved in program development and evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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
<p>4.1 Schools and prior-to-school services increase their number of collaborative partnerships through Hubs</p>	<p>Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of opportunities created by Hub steering committees for prior-to-school services, schools and families to connect > Percentage of feeder early childhood education services on Hub steering committees > No. and range of services and organisations on Hub steering committees > Extent whole of child and family sector and parents represented on Hub steering committees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Local school Hub steering committees represent holistic child, family and community service system, including parents > 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 > 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 > 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
<p>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</p>		
<p>4.3 Voluntary and business organisations are engaged in Hub steering committees</p>		
<p>4.4 Professionals in the child, family and community sectors increase their use of strengths-based, family-centred and interdisciplinary practice</p>		

Outcome 5: All children and families have many different connections to others in the community

Family community connections are a primary way to keep children safe. Family community connections play a critical role in enhancing families' ability to raise their children. Targeted services explore new ways to incorporate family/community connection-building into core practice and program design.

Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>5.1 Children and families have increased opportunities and support to connect to their community</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Strengths and Stressors survey and/or other evidence-based tools show the safety and wellbeing of children has increased 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Provide training, development and mentoring opportunities for professionals working with vulnerable parents to (i) understand the evidence base underpinning the importance of family/community connection-building and (ii) know how to identify and nurture family/community connections
<p>5.2 Children and families have new connections to their community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of existing services and projects that use strengths-based, family-centred practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Coordination level links developed between the targeted service system and the universal child and family service system > Family/community connection-building for families is central to all aspects of case planning

Outcome 6: Families promote the safety and wellbeing of their children

Children are most safe when their parents and carers have the ability and resources to create safe home and community environments. Services partner with families to achieve this. Services form trusting and respectful relationships with families, identify protective factors operating in children's and families' lives, and use strengths-based practice to promote parents' skills, knowledge, resources and ability to plan for their future.

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>6.1 Services establish trusting relationships with children and their families to build protective factors and resilience</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Strengths and Stressors survey and/or other evidence-based tools show the safety and wellbeing of children has increased 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Service providers increase their understanding and ability to apply strengths-based practice > Service providers base their practice on the unique context of each client's life
<p>6.2 Families increase their capacity to identify and use their unique knowledge, skills and resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of services and projects that use strengths-based, family-centred practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Service providers fully understand the role of protective factors in creating children's safety and resilience > Service providers who work with parent clients increase their knowledge and capacity to support child development and attachment
<p>6.3 Families increase their ability to plan for their future</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Service providers look for children's skills and talents, and source resources to promote these > Establish transparent systems enabling clients to co-write service records > All Alliance policy and joint funding application documents use strengths-based language and perspectives

Outcome 7: Children and families receive an immediate and compassionate response aimed at meeting their basic needs

Adequate parenting occurs when families' basic needs are met. Services recognise that families are more likely to engage with services if their immediate requests for assistance are met. Helping parents address material concerns is therefore central to the work of targeted services. Joint advocacy and networking with services providing material needs such as housing, nutrition, transport and health is a core component of the work.

Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability (continued)

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>7.1 Vulnerable children and their families have increased access to programs that give practical assistance</p>	<p>Service measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of existing services and projects that include giving and/or sourcing practical assistance > No. of existing services and projects that include giving and/or sourcing what families say they immediately need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Service providers understand how to recognise and engage vulnerable families > Service providers have increased skills and networks to support the immediate needs families have identified themselves > Gain funding that enables vulnerable children to participate equally in early childhood education and primary school > Gain funding and establish partnerships to increase the material resources available to vulnerable families
<p>7.2 Vulnerable families receive assistance that they consider meets their immediate priority needs</p>	<p>Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of Alliance services reporting that they are more successfully engaging vulnerable families > No. of Alliance services reporting they have better knowledge of resources available for vulnerable families as a result of new Alliance programs > No. of advocacy campaigns Alliance members have initiated and/or contributed to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop coordination-level links with services and organisations providing material support to children and families > Services advocate for the particular needs of children within existing campaigns focused on meeting basic needs (e.g. needs of homeless children)
<p>7.3 Services join or initiate advocacy campaigns targeting the basic needs of vulnerable children and families (e.g. nutrition, health, housing, transport)</p>		

Outcome 8: Targeted child and adult services coordinate with each other and the universal service system

Adult-targeted services recognise and plan for the needs of their parent clients' children in their case planning (i.e. alcohol and drug, mental health, domestic violence, housing and material support services). Networks for targeted services are established to increase knowledge, resources and practice about meeting the needs of children. All targeted service providers understand that community connections are protective for all children, particularly vulnerable children. Children and their families are supportively referred to the universal service system to enhance their community networks.

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>8.1 Adult-targeted services working with vulnerable parents include consideration of children's needs in their case planning</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Times per annum workers in different sector silos train together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Provide training and development opportunities about (i) early brain development, (ii) basic child development, (iii) responsive parenting, (iv) helpful first responses to children and (v) the benefits of community connections to increase the safety and wellbeing of children
<p>8.2 Adult-targeted services increase their coordination to better meet the needs of the children of their parent clients</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Training recipients report their knowledge or practice has been improved through training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Create networking opportunities to connect service providers working with vulnerable parents
<p>8.3 Child- and adult-targeted services increase their parent clients' community connections through service networking and supported referral to the universal service system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Networks for targeted services are established, maintained and well attended by a diversity of services > Network participants report change in knowledge and practice in meeting the needs of the children of their clients > Supported referral tools and pathways are designed and used by a diversity of targeted and universal services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop tools that enable supported referrals and pathways from targeted to universal services > Provide opportunities for professionals working with vulnerable parents to increase awareness of and connection to the universal child and family service system

Outcome 9: Learning is supported and valued from birth

Community attitudes are critical when creating a child-friendly community. Recognising that children learn from birth, communities will ideally work together to create environments that maximise children’s learning opportunities. Effective promotion of services is important as the children most in need of formal services are the least likely to receive them.

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>9.1 Community knowledge of how to give children a good start in life, from the prenatal period onwards, is improved</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of communications published about parenting and health > No. of Early Words resources distributed <p>Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Blue Mountains rates of (i) birth weight and (ii) breastfeeding > Australian Early Development Index child development outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The importance of developing early literacy from birth is promoted, particularly through the Paint the Blue Read program and Early Words resources > Use health promotion principles to promote broad community knowledge of child development from the prenatal period onwards > Services design campaigns together where one key child development or parenting message is promoted > Use soft entrance activities, such as playgroups and events, to distribute resources about quality home learning environments
<p>9.2 Children are actively engaged in opportunities to play and participate within the community</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of Paint the Blue Read events in the Blue Mountains > No. of events that include intergenerational or literacy activities for 0–12 year olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Community events contain activities for 0–12 year olds, including those with additional needs > Community events include intergenerational activities > Literacy activities for young children are part of community events, particularly through the Paint the Blue Read program > Local government services target children aged 0–5



Objectives

9.3
Promotion and practice targeting increased access to early childhood education are established and progressed

Measures

- Stronger Families Alliance measures**
- > Community Services statistics showing total preschool and childcare places and usage in the Blue Mountains
 - > Australian Early Development Index statistics showing early childhood education participation rates

Strategies

- > Use health promotion principles to promote broad community knowledge about the value of formal early childhood education
- > Use soft entrance activities such as playgroups and community development events to promote formal early childhood education

Outcome 10: The community supports children and their families

The community establishes and promotes initiatives that support healthy lifestyles for children. All community members see issues that impact children’s healthy development, such as dislocation, disadvantage, abuse, neglect and family violence, as a community responsibility and know what to do to help children and families in these circumstances. Decision-makers and program providers encourage children’s input into decision-making.

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities (continued)

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>10.1 Initiatives supporting healthy lifestyles for children are established and promoted</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of initiatives and services that prevent obesity > No. of communications about health published > No. of child consultations > No. of new initiatives that give people a chance to build neighbourhood-level relationships > No. of multi-sector professional development opportunities around <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) poverty, (ii) child protection, (iii) family violence and (iv) obesity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Include incidental physical activities within existing programs > Establish breakfast clubs in schools so no children miss breakfast > Promote broad community knowledge about ways to increase child physical activity and improve nutrition > Local government services provide physical recreational opportunities for children
<p>10.2 Initiatives are established that increase community responsibility for families impacted by social isolation and disadvantage</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Create events and initiatives that give people opportunities to connect with each other (e.g. meet your neighbour day, welcome baskets for new residents, neighbourhood parties, intergenerational events) > Set up common-interest social groups that can be self-sustaining (e.g. parents with babies or toddlers groups)
<p>10.3 Initiatives are established that increase awareness that child protection and family violence are a community responsibility</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Promote the use of National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) resources aimed at raising awareness about child protection and family violence > Utilise existing days to help community members know how they can help prevent child abuse and neglect and family violence (e.g. White Ribbon Day, Child Protection Week, International Children’s Day)
<p>10.4 Children’s input into public participatory and decision-making processes is increased</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Design developmentally appropriate child consultation processes > Consider innovative approaches to child consultation (e.g. use older children as interviewers, use community cultural development practice)

Outcome 11: The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly

All sectors, including business, play a role in creating and sustaining a community that actively includes children. Public infrastructure is designed to promote children's safety and their need to learn through play.

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>11.1 The built environment and public open space are better designed to include children and stimulate their development</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of professional development opportunities provided to Blue Mountains City Council staff to increase their knowledge of child-friendly city design and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Provide information to Blue Mountains City Council staff about child-friendly urban design and services > Promote resources that show services and businesses how to create child-friendly public space (e.g. NSW Family Services Principles of Practice)
<p>11.2 The mobility of children and their families is improved through infrastructure that is environmentally sustainable and safe</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of metres of new footpaths and bike tracks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Infrastructure development supporting walking and biking is prioritised > Advocacy to rail and bus providers to improve services for families
<p>11.3 Businesses demonstrate increased child- and family-friendly practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of businesses in selected neighbourhoods demonstrating child-friendly practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Link with the Blue Mountains Business Advantage program to promote business's role in supporting a child-friendly city
<p>11.4 Community awareness around environmental sustainability is increased</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of partnerships formed between the environmental sustainability and community development sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop links between the community development and environmental sustainability and education sectors

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Stronger Families Alliance

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