



Australian Government
Department of Family and Community Services



Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004

**Early Intervention - particularly in Early
Childhood**

Issues Paper

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Early Intervention - particularly in Early Childhood

Written by

Associate Professor Patricia Rogers

Professor Gay Edgecombe

Ms Sue Kimberley

With the assistance of

Professor Lesley Barclay

Mrs Roslyn Humble

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Summary

This paper has been developed as part of the evaluation of the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (the Strategy). One of the principles underpinning the Strategy is the importance of early intervention, and one of the funding initiatives, in the Strategy is 'Early Intervention', which focuses on three areas for early intervention: parenting; family relationship support; and playgroups.

This paper sets out a number of key ideas in early intervention, especially in early childhood, and their implications, to guide the next stage of the evaluation, which will look in detail at the projects funded under the Strategy.

The first issue is the different meanings given to the term '**early intervention**'. While it always refers to 'catching problems early', sometimes this refers to **prevention**; sometimes to **early remediation**, and sometimes the term is used to focus on **early intervention in early childhood**.

The second issue is the way in which early intervention works – through resolving problems before they lead to **secondary problems** or become **entrenched** in terms of behaviour or brain development. Despite the importance of early intervention, it is also necessary to not overstate its importance. A focus on early intervention and prevention should not mean giving up on those who have existing problems, who will probably need considerable help to address them. Nor should it mean becoming complacent about individuals and families that have received early intervention support. Positive outcomes can be understood as resulting from the mix of risk factors and protective factors. While early intervention projects seek to **reduce risk factors** and **increase protective factors**, positive long-term outcomes for individuals and families often require further support along the way, particularly at times of subsequent transitions.

The third issue is whether early intervention services are **universal** or **targeted** to those who are either at most risk or who have been identified as having problems. Targeted services may appear to be more efficient in delivering services to where they are most needed, but universal services have a better chance of providing support before problems appear or become entrenched. Because universal services work with all families, targeted services are informed by what all families need. Universal services also avoid damaging 'labelling' effects. For similar reasons, **strengths-based** approaches, that focus on identifying and building on the existing strengths of individuals, families and communities, are seen to be more effective than **deficit-based** approaches that focus on people's gaps and inadequacies, and can reinforce perceptions of incompetence.

Related to this is the fourth issue of intervening at **transition points** in people's lives, such as the birth of a first child, when they are most likely to be both in need of assistance to meet new challenges, and more receptive to new ways of doing things. This approach also supports a universal approach to service delivery.

For the remainder of the paper we focus particularly on early intervention in early childhood, from pregnancy to starting school. We begin by summarising the growing research on the importance of early intervention in early childhood – how it is important for child development, for parent-child relationships, and for family relationships between couples or the extended family. Early intervention in early childhood frequently aims to reduce certain risks and/or promote certain protective factors falling within the domains of child characteristics and situations, parents and their parenting styles, family factors and life events, and community factors.

Drawing on previous research, evaluation and policy documents, we discuss a number of features that are characteristic of effective early intervention services and illustrate these with projects funded under the Strategy: A number of studies have identified similar lists of key characteristics of effective early intervention services for families with young children (DHS, 2001; Johansen *et al*, 1994). The most recent of these, the review of Early Intervention Parenting Programs and Good Beginnings Prototypes (RPR Consulting, 2004) has summarised them as follows:

- Responsiveness to local needs and consumer participation;
- Holistic approaches that build community connections;
- A focus on family strengths and building skills;
- Accessible and inclusive approaches;
- Early intervention in the child's life and at key transition points, with a long-term preventative orientation;
- Effective coordination and inter-sectoral collaboration;
- A skilled workforce;
- An outcome, evidence-driven approach.

The paper discusses ways in which projects funded under the Strategy, which are short-term in funding, can contribute to developing and supporting such services, which need to be ongoing:

- Research or policy development;
- Capacity development of existing services;
- Short intervention projects to engage families and then link them to ongoing services (for example, a workshop or community event);
- Demonstration or replication projects that will then be supported by other agencies, including universal services;
- Seed funding for a service that will then become self-sufficient.

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There are potential problems in funding short-term projects in this area. It is important to avoid:

- Brief, under-resourced projects with overly ambitious goals and insufficient links to, or knowledge of ongoing services and organisations;
- Duplication of existing services;
- Short-term funding of a service that needs to be ongoing.

Later components of the evaluation will look at the extent to which Strategy projects have displayed these characteristics of effective projects, and their plans and achievements in terms of sustainability. We will be doing a study of early intervention projects, and an investigation of sustainability among Strategy projects (including some early intervention projects).

The paper is being distributed widely to organisations managing Strategy projects, to staff in the Department of Family and Community Services, and to other interested individuals and organisations to guide the implementation of current projects, to inform future policy and project development, and to guide the evaluation.

Feedback on this paper is most welcome, and can be sent to the Evaluation Project Director Dr Patricia Rogers, CIRCLE at RMIT University, 124 Latrobe Street Melbourne VIC 3000, fax (03) 9925 2998, email Patricia.Rogers@rmit.edu.au.

1 *Early Intervention in the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*

1.1 *The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*

The \$225 million Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is an Australian Government initiative to help build family and community capacity to deal with challenges and take advantages of opportunities. It has a special focus on those at risk of social, economic and geographic isolation.

The Strategy consists of seven linked initiatives that provide funding and support for projects in the community and four broader initiatives. The seven initiatives are either community- or family-focused and are as follows:

Community-focused initiatives

- Potential Leaders in Local Communities;
- Local Solutions to Local Problems;
- National Skills Development for Volunteers Program;
- Can Do Community.

Family-focused initiatives

- Early Intervention Parenting and Family Relationship Support;
- Stronger Families Fund;
- Early Childhood Initiative.

Broader initiatives

- Greater Flexibility and Choice of Childcare;
- Longitudinal Study of Australian Children;
- National Skills Development of Volunteers (non-linked project component, including International Year of Volunteers activities in 2001);
- Can Do Community (non-linked project component, including webpage and awards.

This report focuses on projects funded under the seven linked initiatives. By 20 February 2004, over \$78 million had been allocated to 615 projects funded under these initiatives.

1.2 Principles

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is underpinned by a set of eight principles. Two of these relate to notions about early intervention:

- **Encouraging a preventative and early intervention approach.** Prevention and early intervention is about helping and supporting families and communities early on, before problems become entrenched. Over recent years the Federal Government has spent significant amounts on prevention and early intervention initiatives including relationship education, preventing domestic violence and child abuse, youth suicides and homelessness.
- **Supporting people through life transitions.** Transitions are times of major change in people's lives and include events such as finding a job, entering a committed adult relationship, having a baby, approaching retirement and coping with grief. It is recognised that people often need extra support or access to information and advice during these times and are often very receptive to new ideas.

Many Strategy projects work directly with families around various key transition times to achieve better outcomes for families and children. These projects include parenting education and skills projects, playgroups and relationship education projects. They may focus on child development, parenting or families (single-parent families, couples and/or extended family).

1.3 Early Intervention, Parenting, and Family Relationship Support Initiative

In addition to these principles, which underpin all projects, one of the seven linked funding initiatives focuses specifically on early intervention. By February 2004, 168 projects, totalling \$24,962,356, had been funded under this initiative. It has three components: Parenting; Family Relationship Support; and Play Groups:

- **Early Intervention – Parenting** 95 projects, totalling \$13,559,756, ranging from \$3,180 to \$937,132. The average (median) was \$121,173.
- **Early Intervention – Family Relationship Support** 61 projects, totalling \$10,266,442, ranging from \$6,000 to \$535,034. The average (median) was \$144,546.
- **Early Intervention – Playgroups** 13 projects, totalling \$1,136,158, ranging from \$6,193 to \$322,910. The average (median) was \$60,000.

2 Key ideas in early intervention

2.1 What is meant by 'early intervention'

Early intervention refers to catching problems early. There are four different ways in which the term is used:

- **Prevention** – intervening before problems develop;
- **Early remediation** – identifying and addressing problems before they become entrenched or lead to other problems;
- **Intervening at critical transition points** - along a causal pathway;
- **Early childhood** – ensuring positive early childhood development physically, mentally, socially and emotionally.

This paper begins by discussing prevention and early remediation approaches generally, and then focuses on early childhood.

2.2 How early intervention works

Early intervention works through resolving problems before they lead to secondary problems or become entrenched. For example, learning difficulties can lead to secondary problems such as negative ways of behaving at school that persist even after the learning difficulties have been addressed.

Problems become entrenched by becoming embedded in habitual ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. New research (eg Shonkoff & Philips, 2000) has shown the importance of experiences in early childhood in terms of brain development (this is discussed in more detail later in this paper), and it can be difficult to change patterns of thinking and feeling, even when these are not constructive.

Habitual behaviour is also difficult to change once it has become established. Therefore many early intervention projects seek to work with individuals and families to develop positive practices from the start, such as parenting practices from birth. For this reason, many projects focus on particular transition stages in people's lives, when they develop new patterns of behaviour to respond to the changed circumstances. Many projects work by providing 'scaffolding' for a while to buttress people in their new behaviour, through practical and emotional support.

Despite the importance of early intervention, it is also necessary to not overstate its importance. A focus on early intervention and prevention should not mean giving up on those who have existing problems, who will probably need considerable help to address them.

Nor should it mean becoming complacent about individuals and families that have received early intervention support. Positive outcomes can be understood as resulting from the mix of risk factors and protective factors. While early intervention projects seek to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors, positive long-term outcomes for individuals and families often require further support along the way, particularly at times of subsequent transitions. Shonkoff and Phillips, (2000, p.4) in their book 'From Neurons to Networks' state explicitly:

The timing of early experiences can matter, but, more often than not, the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout the early years of life into adulthood...

Perhaps the most important is the unequivocal conclusion that what happens during the first months and years of life absolutely does matter, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult wellbeing, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile base for what follows.

Goodnow (2003) has eloquently summed up this aspect of early intervention:

Our progression throughout life does not follow a single straight line

Is not a lockstep pattern.

It is instead marked by stops and starts, by steps, transitions, detours,

By times of staying on track, changing directions, returns and recoveries.

There is more than one path to a good or a poor outcome,

And from the same start, you can have different endings.

At the same time:

It makes a difference if we start on an effective track,

And if we are helped at any point to stay on track,

To make the best choices at choice points,

To recover from poor starts, getting off track, taking a wrong turn.

2.3 Cost-benefit of early intervention

Early intervention is often justified in terms of its cost-effectiveness – that it is cheaper and more effective to address problems early before they become entrenched and more difficult to change, or cause secondary problems.

While this is a common-sense proposition, and supported by some of the research, much of the empirical evidence currently available comes from a small number of prevention programs. Because of the nature of the impact of early intervention, it can be difficult to gather evidence about the final outcomes, the activities that have contributed to it, and the various other factors that have influenced it. Internationally and within Australia, considerable work is being done to investigate this issue. For example, Olds *et al* (1997) reported results of a 15-year follow-up of prenatal and early childhood home visitation by nurses and found a reduction (compared to a control group that did not receive the program) in the number of subsequent pregnancies, the use of welfare, child abuse and neglect, and criminal behaviour on the part of low-income, unmarried mothers for up to 15 years after the birth of the first child.

2.4 Types of transitions

Transitions may relate to stages of physical development (such as birth, infancy to toddler, childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood to old age, and dying).

They may relate to social norms associated with developmental stages (such as, playgroup, pre-school, starting primary school, starting secondary school, starting post-secondary education or training, entering the workforce, partnering, family formation, pregnancy, childbirth, parenting children and adolescents through their various stages, retirement and other transitions within the family).

Transitions may also relate to other significant life events (such as divorce, blended family formation, bereavement, migration, becoming aware of being same-sex attractedness and coming out, acquiring a disability or chronic health condition, and so on).

Many Strategy projects focus on the transition of becoming a parent for the first time, or the transition of subsequent births.

2.5 Universal or targeted services

It may appear appropriate to target early intervention services to those at particular risk of adverse outcomes, rather than to provide a universal service.

Example of a universal project:

A program provides support to parents of children under five within a Shire, through counselling, parenting information, and individual and family support.

Example of a targeted project:

A Community Outreach Support Worker will support young women under 19 years of age who are parenting or pregnant and who have experienced homelessness or have little support.

There are, however, two reasons why targeting might not always be the best policy, particularly for services that focus on early childhood. Firstly, there is more risk of a delay in intervention if families are not already engaged in a service from pregnancy and birth, and therefore less chance that potential problems can be averted before they arise or become entrenched. Secondly, there is the risk that the process of targeting particular families or individuals can lead to labelling effects, where their identification leads to self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. Instead it is often better to provide universal programs to support all families and individuals, with additional support to those who need more.

Examples of concerns about targeted services:

One of the projects documented concerns expressed by families when they sought to engage them in the parenting program:

*Where is it being held? I don't want people to think I'm not a good parent.
Will I know other people? I don't want other parents to know I'm not coping.*

However there is not always sufficient funding to be able to offer universal access. For this reason, many projects aim to provide universal coverage to individuals and families undergoing particular transitions – and to provide higher levels of services to those who need more assistance.

Other projects target clients but work to avoid labelling effects. One way to do this is to focus on the transition as the cause of potential problems, rather than the failings of individuals. Another way is to ensure that projects use a strengths-based approach that explicitly identifies and builds on the existing strengths of individuals, families and communities (this is discussed in more detail later in this report) rather than deficit-based approaches that focus on people's gaps and inadequacies, and can reinforce perceptions of incompetence.

3 Early intervention: in early childhood

There is growing evidence from a range of disciplines that confirms the importance of early intervention in early childhood. This period is variously defined, but often refers to the period beginning in pregnancy and continuing until the child is five years old or at school. There is sometimes particular attention to the year before and after birth.

Early intervention in early childhood can have significant long-term benefits in three areas:

- child development;
- parent-child attachment; and
- broader family relationships between parents and/or the extended family.

Much of the research literature focuses on the first of these.

3.1 Child development

Much of the recent attention to early intervention in early childhood has focused on the impacts in terms of child development, particularly brain development:

Appropriate care, nutrition and stimulation affect the actual 'wiring' of neural pathways which are essential to development and learning. Throughout life, new experiences trigger brain growth and the 'rewiring' of existing pathways...

Brain development and learning continues throughout the lifecycle but there are prime times or critical periods that are important for children's development. (Shore, 1997; Keating and Hertzman, 1999) (DHS, 2001)

3.2 Parent-child relationships

Early intervention in early childhood can also seek to have an impact on relationships between parents and their children, particularly in terms of the attachment of infant and caregiver. Attachment appears to influence biological as well as social and emotional development of the infant and is itself negatively influenced by continuing maternal depression (Vimpani, 1999).

3.3 Other family relationships

Early intervention in early childhood can also seek to improve the quality of other relationships in the family (between couples, and between parents and the extended family), which in turn can be a protective factor increasing children's resilience.

Pregnancy, particularly the first pregnancy, can cause unexpected stressors on the relationship between parents. Research by the Centre for Family Health and Midwifery has shown new fathers often struggle to re-establish their relationship with their partners and establish a relationship and confidence in caring for the infant (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Barclay (1997) showed pregnancy was a time when communication between partners often declined and their relationships were put under serious stress as a result of alterations to sexual activity. The work of Webster (1994), in Queensland, shows that pregnancy is a time when men who feel out of control may resort to physical violence with their partner

3.4 Transitions in early childhood

A major transition focus for early childhood is birth – for children and for parents. Other important transitions include various developmental stages during early childhood (introduction to solids, walking, talking), and social transitions, such as starting childcare and starting school.

Some universal services pay particular attention to 10 different transition points during early childhood, and provide particular support at each of these times.

4 Characteristics of effective early intervention in early childhood

A number of studies have identified similar lists of key characteristics of effective early intervention services for families with young children, including a review of the evidence base conducted for the Victorian Department of Human Services by the Centre for Community Child Health (DHS, 2001) and a discussion of the attributes contained in the definition of primary for children and adolescents by the U.S. federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Johansen et al, 1994). To ensure that this issue paper builds on previous work commissioned by FaCS, we have used the most recent of these, the review of Early Intervention Parenting Program and Good Beginning Prototypes (RPR Consulting, 2004), which has summarised them as follows:

- Responsiveness to local needs and consumer participation;
- Holistic approaches that build community connections;
- A focus on family strengths and building skills;
- Accessible and inclusive approaches;
- Early intervention in the child's life and at key transition points, with a long-term preventative orientation;
- Effective coordination and inter-sectoral collaboration;
- A skilled workforce;
- An outcome, evidence-driven approach.

This list will provide a framework for reviewing early intervention projects funded under the Strategy. We have therefore quoted extensively from their descriptions of these characteristics, and will use these to guide the analysis of evidence about projects to be conducted as part of the next stage of the evaluation.

4.1 Responsiveness to local needs and consumer participation

Effective services strike a balance between being evidence-based and locally responsive.

Services need to be locally relevant and acceptable to the families they are designed for, by consulting with those likely to use the programs and gaining feedback from those who have (Oberklaid 2003). This feature contrasts with the use of prescriptive programs that are based on a body of 'expert' knowledge on parenting that impart the same knowledge to all parents using the same process (Jewell 2003). Responsive programs are most consistent with adult learning theory and have greatest capacity to be 'culturally competent'. While services need to be responsive, they also need to build from a knowledge base about parenting and family functioning.

(RPR Consulting, 2004, pp. 15-16)

4.2 Holistic approaches that build community connections

Effective services provide a range of services, not just one type of service, work with the whole family, not just one parent, and link families into ongoing community services.

Current research emphasises that early intervention programs are more likely to have significant outcomes when they are part of interconnected, multi-faceted approaches, which recognise the range of factors that influence family functioning and are delivered with reference to other key systems such as schools and other social institutions and community networks. Longitudinal research has found that collaborative models that partner home visiting with child care, parent group meetings and other support services are the most cost effective means of enhancing child development and lowering the risk of educational, health and social benefit (Oberklaid 2003; Homel 1999).

The research evidence indicates that programs that adopt whole-of-family approaches, working with parents and children together, may be more effective in achieving long-term benefits. Whole-of-family approaches are also inclusive of fathers, grandparents and other caregivers (Tomison and Poole 2000).

Building parental awareness of and capacity to access community support services is critical given the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of many social problems affecting families. Recent research also highlights the importance of strengthening informal peer and social support networks. There is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating the extent to which families who become clients of child protection or child welfare services are socially isolated. Similarly, research evidence reveals significant improvements in family functioning when their integration into local community networks is facilitated (Tomison and Poole 2000).

(RPR Consulting, 2004, p. 16)

4.3 A focus on family strengths and building skills

Effective services balance the need to build parents' skills and the need to use a strengths-based approach. Strengths-based approaches work to explicitly identify and build on existing strengths, rather than focusing on deficits and filling gaps. They also work collaboratively with families to plan and implement programs, rather than having the agenda totally set by the expert staff.

A strengths-based approach that acknowledges and builds on a family's existing skills and capacity for change is consistently identified in the research on resilience. Associated with this strengths-based approach is the capacity of professionals to develop a collaborative partnership with families to achieve positive family relationships. Research evidence points to the importance of building trusting and consistent relationships between professionals/volunteers and families (Oberklaid 2003).

The skills needed for effective parenting have been identified in a range of studies and include 'monitoring and supervision, setting rules and limits, positive role modelling of communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and providing engaging age appropriate activities' (Zubrick et al, 2000). These skills have been shown to be empirically associated with child well being and measures for parenting styles have been found to be useful in measuring aspects of these skills.

(RPR Consulting, 2004, p.17)

4.4 Accessible and inclusive approaches

There is considerable diversity across families, and effective services respond to this, recognising there can be different needs among mothers and fathers, young and old parents, and people from different cultural and language backgrounds.

Service delivery needs to be inclusive of, and responsive to, the needs of all families including those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and children or parents with a disability. Programs should be appropriate to the needs of different groups taking into account the make-up of the local community. Wherever possible, personnel should represent the program population in gender and ethnicity. Services also need to be accessible in terms of convenient and flexible locations, and the times they are available (Oberklaid 2003; Michigan State University 1999-2000).

(RPR Consulting, 2004, pp. 19)

4.5 Early intervention in the child's life and at key transition points, with a long-term preventative orientation

The need for continuity of service over a long period poses significant challenges for short-term projects such as those funded under the Strategy. (This point is discussed in more detail in the next section.)

Research evidence clearly indicates that early intervention approaches are most effective when implemented early in a child's life and at key transition phases when individuals are often more vulnerable (Lally et al, cited in Homel 1999). Transition from primary school to high school, for example, is a critical period for both children and young people.

The research evidence clearly shows that short-term interventions have limited benefits particularly for disadvantaged groups (Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson; Homel 1999). Conversely, the most successful programs are sustained over a longer period, and operate within a service system that provides continuity of support and smooth transitions between sequential services as children move from infant to toddler to preschool child, for example, or an individual's needs change (Michigan State University 1999-2000).

(RPR Consulting, 2004, p. 20)

4.6 Effective coordination and inter-sectoral collaboration

The need for effective co-ordination across services poses significant challenges for small projects whose resources might be totally directed to meeting the immediate needs of their clients, rather than working with other agencies to build networks.

The existing infrastructure of services for children and their families has evolved over many years in an ad hoc manner, with multiple layers of funding streams and narrow funding criteria. As a result services are fragmented and poorly coordinated, and families often have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need.

The research evidence clearly shows that an integrated, comprehensive system, which provides continuity of support and addresses all the needs of families, is essential to sustain positive program outcomes (Michigan State University 1999-2000; Oberklaid 2003). Building this system requires a strong commitment to effective coordination and collaboration at both policy/program and service delivery levels. Effective coordination at the local level is also imperative to ensure that individual families are linked to the services that best meet their needs.

(RPR Consulting, 2004, pp. 20-21)

4.7 A skilled workforce

A key component of effective early intervention services are appropriately skilled and supported staff – both front-line staff and managers, both paid staff and any volunteers.

Programs need to employ staff with appropriate skills and experience and ensure access to ongoing opportunities to enhance their skills and competencies. Although qualifications are important, the personal life experience of service providers should also be considered. Core skills (across all types of early intervention programs) include an understanding of family dynamics, knowledge and skills in working with children, capacity to work with other services, and effectively plan and evaluate services.

Depending on the specific type of program, other skills are also essential such as group facilitation and understanding of adult learning. Similarly where volunteers are used, it is essential that they are trained, supported and supervised to allow them to provide a high quality service to families. Program models that use volunteers should be based on clearly defined roles and responsibilities for paid and volunteer staff.

(RPR Consulting, 2004, pp. 21-22)

4.8 An outcome, evidence-driven approach.

Accessing and using available evidence to guide programs is another important element of effective services. The Strategy aimed to assist this through focusing on the evidence-base for programs to strengthen families and communities.

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The design of programs needs to be firmly and clearly based on the outcomes being sought, use approaches that (based on existing knowledge and experience) are most likely to achieve these outcomes, and use evaluation (through processes which involve all stakeholders) to inform ongoing program development. Evidence-based practice involves 'integrating individual practice expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research as well as considering the values and expectations of clients' (Gambrill 1999).

(RPR Consulting, 2004, p. 22)

5 Achieving long-term outcomes through short-term projects

5.1 Roles for short-term funding in early intervention

Given the need for comprehensive, ongoing services, there are still useful roles that can be performed by short-term projects, such as those funded under the Strategy.

- Research or policy development;
- Capacity development of existing services;
- Short intervention project to engage families and then link them to ongoing services (for example, a workshop or community event);
- Demonstration or replication projects that will then be supported by other agencies, including universal services;
- Seed funding for a service that will then become self-sufficient.

It is also possible for a project to combine elements of these.

Example of a project with an element of building capacity of existing services:

This project is developing a training manual in consultation with other key stakeholders and the project Reference Group for use by other agencies as a best practice guide to supporting parents to develop parenting skills and to practice in a family focussed way.

Example of developing community capacity: ...

Component 3: The development of community relationships where other extended family members and or identified neighbours/volunteers act as a support person and model to the family providing parenting education and family strengthening. While this strategy would be targeted for the wider community it would be particularly appropriate for our Indigenous community. Such relationships will increase sustainability of support and build community capacity

In the next stage of the evaluation, we will be looking at the early intervention projects to identify which projects included elements of these roles.

5.2 Potential risks in short-term funding for early intervention

When funding for early intervention is of a short-term nature, there are risks that the services funded will also be short-term. This can potentially lead to one or more of the following problems:

- Brief, under-resourced projects with overly ambitious goals and insufficient links to, or knowledge of, ongoing services and organisations;
- Duplication of existing services;
- Short-term funding of a service that needs to be ongoing.

The Strategy's emphasis on the evidence-base and building partnerships between agencies in a region aimed to reduce the first two risks. The third risk was addressed to some extent in the focus on sustainability as a selection criterion, although this was sometimes addressed in terms of the sustainability of outcomes for participants (which is also important), rather than the sustainability of the service for subsequent participants.

The Review of Early Intervention Programs and Good Beginnings Prototypes (RPR Consulting, 2004) pointed out with concern:

The number of pilot programs or programs with fixed periods providing support to parents is also a concern. Of the main programs listed above, most are recurrent but individual service providers are contracted on fixed term contracts. Many of those interviewed raised the frustration of pilots or short-term programs that do not allow time frames that can help build sustainable communities. This is particularly true in areas of high need and in programs targeting Indigenous communities, where continuity of service provision is required to address the complex issues challenging these areas.

Developing new models or pilots that do not build on existing infrastructure is wasteful and does not ensure ongoing service provision in areas that will need continued parenting support.

(RPR Consulting, 2004 p.32)

It is worth repeating its succinct statement on short-term interventions:

The research evidence clearly shows that short-term interventions have limited benefits particularly for disadvantaged groups (Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson; Homel 1999).

(RPR Consulting, 2004, p. 20)

It is therefore important for short-term projects to link participants to ongoing universal services for the future.

Example of a short-term project linking participants to ongoing support and services: ...

A project provided a short group program for young mothers before and after birth, providing information and assistance to help them with the transition to being parents. Importantly, the program included two components to ensure ongoing support for families after their involvement in the program ended: links to ongoing services (including referrals, visits to facilities, visits from service providers to the group, working with service providers to become more accessible for young mothers) and the development of an ongoing parents group to provide peer support.

The sustainability of outcomes for participants is an important aspect of sustainability. Another important aspect is the sustainability of the project in some form, where an ongoing need exists. Some projects have addressed this through seeking to build capacity in the community or in the auspice organisation.

Example of a short-term project building continuing community capacity: ...

This is a three-year project working with Indigenous men around parenting issues. As well as providing direct services to current project participants, it includes establishing 100 Aboriginal mentors to work with boys in schools to build ongoing community capacity around parenting and family support.

The issues around sustainability – of projects, organisations, and outcomes – are explored in more detail in the issue paper on sustainability.

In the next stage of the evaluation, we will be investigating the issue of sustainability in more detail, including reviewing the plans for sustainability made at the start of projects, their plans at the time of completion, and what has happened since funding ended.

6 What next?

The detailed analysis of early intervention projects and the sustainability follow-up that will be undertaken in the next phase of the evaluation will examine the following questions:

1. Which types of early intervention, and which life transitions, were the focus of projects?
2. How many exhibited the features of effective EI projects, such as the use of strengths-based approach, links to comprehensive services, and sufficient capacity to be flexible and responsive?
3. What were the plans for sustainability for the service, and to what extent were these realised?

7 References

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