

# Building Stronger Communities with Children and Families



# Building Stronger Communities with Children and Families

Edited by

Karl Brettig

with the Children Communities  
Connections learning Network

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Building Stronger Communities with Children and Families

Edited by Karl Brettig

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2015 by Karl Brettig and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7468-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7468-7

If it takes a village to raise a child should it be a cyber-village, an urban village or should we all go back to the country?

*About the Children Communities Connections Learning Network*

The Children Communities Connections Learning Network is a network of child and family practitioners, researchers, family and community groups who are learning together to build stronger communities for children. A range of related resources from the network can be found at:  
<http://www.salisburyc4c.org.au/learningnetwork.php>

# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	xi
Foreword .....	xii
Acknowledgements .....	xiii
Introduction .....	1
<i>Karl Brettig</i>	
<b>Chapter One.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Building Stronger Communities with Children and Families</b>	
<i>Karl Brettig</i>	

We are living in a time of accelerating change. How are families coping with the rapid social changes in urban environments brought about by new technology, infrastructure and modern lifestyles? What is the perspective of children in all this? Can we recreate the kind of village that effectively supports children and their families in the urban sprawl?

<b>Chapter Two .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Reaching Out to Generation Y &amp; Z Mums and Dads</b>	
<i>Lesley-Anne Ey</i>	

Does electronic social media networking represent new way of connecting in place of the decline of other community organisations? How do child and family services engage with these new ways of connecting? We know that social networking sites can become a haven for anti-social behaviours but can they be used to build the kind of community interaction that supports good parenting practices and enhances child development?

**Chapter Three..... 36**  
**Integrating Practice across Substance Abuse, Family Violence**  
**and Mental Health**

*Karl Brettig with Michael White*

Many children who are in ‘out of home care’ are there because their parents have significant substance misuse, domestic violence or mental health issues or more likely a combination of these. How might we go about developing a more holistic, whole of family, integrated approach to working with children and families impacted by these issues?

**Chapter Four ..... 51**  
**Breaking Down Barriers to Integrated Service Delivery**

*Karl Brettig*

If we are to optimize child and family support services so that families most in need of them receive the kind of support that will bring about better outcomes, then we need break down the barriers that stand in the way of this happening. We need to develop child and family friendly services in ways that engage those who need them on a scale and intensity that addresses barriers at every level. In Australia Communities for Children is a model that attempts to do this and this chapter looks at how it has been implemented in one of the sites.

**Chapter Five ..... 68**  
**Using a Whole of Family, Government and Community Approach**

*Karl Brettig*

The debate about universal and targeted support for families has continued because both are important. Whole communities, service providers and families need to work together in an integrated way in order to raise children effectively. This is particularly important in preconception care, in utero and in the first three years of life. Building on from the previous chapter we look at some encouraging developments in terms of implementing a whole of family, government and community approach.

**Chapter Six ..... 89****Closing the Gap and Engaging with Cultural Diversity***Karl Brettig with Robert Taylor*

How do these principles work when viewed through the lens of other cultures? What do they say about working towards closing the outcomes gap for Aboriginal families? How do we work with differing cultural approaches to raising children? What have we learned and how do we move forward with this?

**Chapter Seven..... 104****Embedding Wellbeing and Creating Community in Classrooms***Elspeth McInnes, Alexandra Diamond and Victoria Whittington*

Without a doubt developments in neuroscience are changing the way we think about child development. Working with children in classrooms needs to be trauma informed if the kind of support that will optimise learning is to take shape. This chapter looks at how the education sector can implement changes in the way we go about facilitating learning experiences that include social and emotional learning as well as achieve academic progress.

**Chapter Eight..... 128****Measuring Population Outcomes***Jane Swansson with Margaret Sims and Susan Lane*

Implementing a whole of community approach presents us with a significant challenge in terms of how we measure the outcomes of such an approach. A traditional case management model has some clearly defined measures around which ‘client data’ can be readily collected and made available. However when it comes to using a community development based model of providing family support, more complex population measures are needed. How can we use such measures to track whether we are making a difference?

**Chapter Nine..... 145****Developing and Implementing a Community Strategic Plan***Karl Brettig*

What are the practical steps involved in implementing family support in local areas using a community development approach? This chapter goes through the steps used in planning and implementing the Communities for Children model, including some of the challenges likely to be encountered and examples of how they might be overcome.

**Chapter Ten ..... 164**  
**Integrating Multi-agency and Trans-disciplinary Services**

*Karl Brettig*

How do we work across services? How do we go about implementing integrated services that incorporate a range of agencies and disciplines? Can governments really work together effectively with NGO's, families and community groups? Do integrated service models really work? This chapter looks at some of the major challenges being encountered by those who are attempting to redesign the service system.

**Chapter Eleven ..... 176**  
**Growing a Community of Practice**

*Michael White*

Communities of practice develop shared practice when practitioners interact around problems, solutions and insights. What are some of the key elements that make communities of practice work? What is needed for an effective interagency and interdepartmental consultative committee to function well?

**Chapter Twelve..... 192**  
**Building Child Friendly Communities**

*Karl Brettig*

This chapter draws together various strands from previous chapters and outlines some of the changing characteristics of rural, urban and cyber communities. We look at child friendly urban planning and consider some key elements in need of development to build stronger communities with children and families.

Contributors..... 213

Index..... 216

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1-1 Challenges identified by families with young children
- 4-1 AEDI 2009 & 2012 results for the number of children vulnerable on one or more domains
- 4-2 Activity in the kitchen at FamilyZone
- 4-3 FamilyZone end of year celebration
- 5-1 Partnerships developed to deliver integrated services
- 5-2 The Family Place at Logan in Brisbane
- 8-1 AEDI 2009 & 2012 results for the number of children vulnerable on two or more domains
- 8-2 Percentages of children found to be vulnerable in the two amalgamated groups of suburbs in 2009 and 2012
- 8-3 Salisbury C4C's population results and the corresponding performance measures from FamilyZone evaluation and reports
- 11-1 Types of Community of Practice Structures
- 11-2 Principles to support flourishing Communities of Practice
- 12-1 Parent and child oriented learning gradient and key elements
- 12-2 Factors contributing to literacy development
- 12-3 Changes in characteristics of rural, urban & cyber communities
- 12-4 Critical periods for development of neural pathways

Cover photo: Alan Steven

## FOREWORD

The Building Stronger Communities concept of using a whole of community approach to supporting families is to be commended. The increasing destabilization of community networks, emerging variety in family formation and the changing face of society as a whole, often leave individuals and groups isolated, without basic support networks and feeling alone and hopeless in the face of life challenges. Add to this the evolution of technology and its impact on communication both personal and corporate and it's time to create new and strengthened avenues of understanding and engagement for response to community need.

How does today's community educate children for the age they live in? How does a community rigorously create safe environments and respond to need; where a healthy, sustainable, cohesive, emerging culture and where the capacity to live life to its fullest is not a dream but a distinct possibility. The writers of this work provide some strong concepts for consideration. A challenge to present thought and process.

I commend this thought provoking work for your reflection and response. Bravery is needed to inhabit a changing and demanding world with confidence and integrity. A willingness to evolve but not haphazardly - instead with wisdom and intentional strategic response to demand. These writers are showing us reason and possibility. How brave are we?

Geanette Seymour, Colonel  
Director  
The Salvation Army  
International Social Justice Commission

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A publication like this would not be possible without the contributions of many inspiring people who have shared our Communities for Children journey. Special thanks to the teams at the Salvation Army Ingle Farm and FamilyZone Hub, in particular Alan Steven, Kathlene Wilson and Jacquie Dell who have contributed unstintingly throughout the initiative. Also to Karen Stott, Jane Swansson, Naomi Thiel, Michael White, Janet Pedler, Mark McCarthy, Cathie Bishop, Michael Edgecomb, Robert Taylor, Katrina Shephard, James Lenigas, Lisa Wynne, Shonah Wright-Jones, Mary Fewster, Janet Kilford, Patricia Griffiths, Cathy Lawson, Joanne Menadue, Mario Trinidad, Carol Perry, Shirley Hallion, Kaye Conway, Paul Madden, Kirsty Drew, Lisa Osborne, Margaret Hunt, Helen Whittington, Rosemary Forgan, Angela Jolly, Geoff & Kalie Webb, Paul & Wendy Hateley, Dale Holman, Meryl Zweck, Paul Regan, Lynette Caruso, Mira Zivkovic, Susan Lane, Helen Lockwood, Yvonne Bentham, Greg Were, Cathy Haakmeester, Kylie John, Elizabeth O'Connor, Grant Pearson, Elaine Nitschke, Janet Muirhead, David O'Brien, Gerry Dillon, Lea Stevens, Julie Kalms, Nicky King, Kathryn Jordan, Nadia Caruzzo, Kerry Bowering, Tracy Buchanan, Gabrielle Kelly, Gael Little and Rebecca Pressler who have all made significant contributions. Also thanks to organisations who have partnered with us including the Department of Social Services, Lutheran Community Care, Relationships Australia, Centacare, Save the Children, the Schools Ministry Group, the City of Salisbury, UniSA deLissa Research Centre and the Department for Education and Child Development. Thanks also to South Australian C4C colleagues Helen Francis, Jan Oliver, Sue Christophers, Jan Chorley, Fiona Dale, Annie Adams, Teresa O'Brien, Craig Bradbrook, Sam Haskard and Janine Carger who have made the communities of practice ethos a productive reality. Thanks to the many other contributors from the national C4C community some of whose activities are documented in this book though there are many more that could have been. Special thanks to Margaret Sims, Elspeth McInnes, Alexandra Diamond, Victoria Whittington, Gerry Redmond, David Ludwig, Wayne Maddox, Anne Jurisevic, Dorothy Scott, Margy Whalley and Tim Moore for their commitment to practice based evidence and to all who have reviewed chapters and provided suggestions and feedback. Finally special thanks to Ruth, Daniel, Joel, Emma and all the families who work together for the benefit of children, their families and communities.



# INTRODUCTION

KARL BRETTIG

There can be little doubt that the early years of a child's life are critical in relation to the kind of outcomes they will experience in later life. Evidence continues to accumulate that early childhood experiences, particularly between conception and around two years of age, have a huge impact on the lives of children in their later years.

There is now an expanding body of literature on the determining influence of early development on the chances of success in later life. The first 1,000 days from conception to age two are increasingly being recognised as critical to the development of neural pathways that lead to linguistic, cognitive and socio-emotional capacities that are also predictors of labour market outcomes in later life. Poverty, malnutrition and lack of proper interaction in early childhood can exact large costs on individuals, their communities and society more generally. The effects are cumulative and the absence of appropriate childcare and education in the three to five age-range can exacerbate further the poor outcomes expected for children who suffer from inadequate nurturing during the critical first 1,000 days (Atinc & Gustafsson-Wright, 2013, p1).

The USA and Australia ranked 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> respectively in an Economist Intelligence Unit 2012 report on benchmarking early education across the world (EIU, 2012). In Australia 75% of child wellbeing indicators were in the middle or bottom third of all the OECD countries (Stanley, 2014). The UK ranked 4<sup>th</sup> while the Nordic Countries were rated at the top of the index. Nordic countries are prepared to pay higher taxes because they understand the significance of investing in the early years. Other countries are also beginning to translate what neuroscience is telling us about child development into policies that effect significant change in early childhood education. The differences between what western countries are doing in this space make interesting reading.

The development of the current Finnish system began in the 1960s and has progressed to its current emphasis on outdoor education in the

preschool years and away from computer games and screen time. Their class ratios are low with an average of eleven students per teacher and their teachers all have a three or four year bachelor's degree in education. The proportion of male teachers is also significantly larger in Nordic countries. This is not an accidental statistic but rather an intentional policy based on an understanding of the significance of male and female role modelling. They only start formal schooling at age seven, believing that children need time to be children before we begin to 'educate' them to become citizens often 'made in our own image'.

The UK saw the implementation of over three thousand Children's Centres between the launch of the Sure Start initiative in 1998 and 2010. They represent a bold attempt to recreate a child friendly 'village' environment in every urban community that provides the kind of support families need in the crucial early years. Despite some cutbacks resulting from the global financial crisis and the change to a conservative government, much of the initiative remains intact.

The US began its Headstart initiative back in the sixties, however its impact has been limited perhaps by its tepid embrace of the social and emotional development domains in comparison to its focus on the physical and cognitive domains. The development of a population measurement tool in Canada that includes all of these domains, the Early Development Index (Janus *and* Offord 2000) has contributed significantly to our ability to better determine if real progress is being made.

Australia has contextualised this instrument in the form of the Australian Early Development Census and implemented this nationally as it sets out to achieve a turnaround in terms of the levels of vulnerability of its children. It is lagging behind other countries in delivering improved outcomes for children (McKenzie et al, 2014) being somewhat hamstrung by having three levels of government which contributes to fragmentation in relation to service provision. An Education Indicators in Focus report rated Australia as having the lowest expenditure on early childhood educational institutions as a percentage of GDP of all the OECD countries (OECD, 2013). The states are seen as the providers of universal services for children but it is the commonwealth that realistically has the level of resources needed to make the kind of investment in early childhood that should make a significant difference. The Communities for Children initiative is one significant commonwealth investment, reliant on genuine partnership with the states, which aims to take up the challenge of

converting community services into community centric services (Fitzgerald, 2012).

Complex early childhood trauma often leads to ongoing problems for generations with very significant economic implications if there is no effective intervention. The current ‘merry go round’ of services risks the re-traumatisation and escalation of symptoms of those seeking help. If those who seek support encounter an uninformed, fragmented service system that attempts to shunt them from one service to another, they can become more at risk of being re-traumatised than actually getting help.

Experience is now known to impact brain structure and functioning and in the relational context of healing this includes **experience of services**. Neural integration is not assisted – indeed is actively impeded – by unintegrated human services which are not only compartmentalised but which lack basic trauma awareness (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012).

While the political arm wrestling across the globe continues, just maybe it’s time to prioritise what children and families would like to see happening. Too often they are the neglected voices that fail to be heard amongst the noise being generated by everyone else with an agenda. Can we build stronger communities by also listening to what they have to say about what they would like to see rather than trying to do it without them?

## References

- Atinc, T., & Gustafsson-Wright, E., (2013). *Early Childhood Development: the Promise, the Problem, and the Path Forward*, Brookings Institute, p 1. Retrieved from: <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/11/25-early-childhood-development-atinc-gustafsson>
- Economist Intelligence Unit, (2012). *Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world*. Retrieved from: [http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/publications/sw\\_report.pdf](http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/publications/sw_report.pdf)
- Fitzgerald, R., (2012). *Towards a National Agenda for investing in Child Development*. Children Communities Connections 2012, Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFkXII7wEug>
- Janus, M. & Offord, D. (2000). Reporting on readiness to learn at school in Canada. ISUMA: Canadian Journal of Policy Research, 1(2), 71-75.
- Kezelman, C.A., & Stavropoulos, P.A., (2012). *Practice Guidelines for Treatment of Complex Trauma and Trauma Informed Care and Service Delivery* pub. Adults Surviving Child Abuse, p xxxi.

- McKenzie, F., Glover, S., Mailie, R., (2014). *Australia's Early Childhood Development System*. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.australianfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/AFP-Early-Childhood-Development-What-We-Know-141212.pdf>
- Stanley, F., (2014). *Australian children's wellbeing in 2034: closing the gap between our aspirations and our effort*. Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/184>

# CHAPTER ONE

## BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES WITH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

KARL BRETTIG

A forum with representatives from a range of disciplines including early childhood, local government, community services, town planning and architecture was convened in South Australia in 2012 to take a collective look at building child friendly cities. Participants were asked to bring something with them to the workshop. It involved taking time to remember a place we loved to visit as a young child and think about what it was that made this place so attractive. That simple exercise profoundly affected my view of the world from the perspective of a child as it did that of many others who participated in the experience.

For me it had to be our quarter acre backyard in Lobethal. There were two places consisting of a couple square metres that were particularly important. The first one was a heap of sand about five metres from our back door. The second one was the crusty little dirt patch between the house and the shed. My memories about the heap of sand are a bit vaguer than the vivid memories of the dirt patch. I was about 2 years old when mum was quite happy to let me go outside the door to play in that sandpit. I know that because she often told me later that I was quite happy to play there for hours on end and that was highly acceptable for a mother with four children.

The dirt patch was something else. The earth was much better to work with than the sand. You could use a makeshift grader and build roads. You could add water to dirt to make mud and introduce some sticks to build houses and sheds. You could build whole communities if you had enough time there before one of your brothers or parents came along and implemented their alternative plans for the site!

At a time when many families are imploding and communities are becoming increasingly chaotic we do well to reimagine the kind of childhood environment that might enable children to flourish when they become adults. This is particularly so in the light of what recent neuroscience is telling us about the importance of the early years as is summarised by the maxim ‘give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man’.

According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer the test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children. He also wrote about why we need to listen to what they are saying.

The truthfulness of a child towards their parents is essentially different from that of the parents towards their child. The life of the small child lies open before the parents and what the child says should reveal to them everything that is hidden and secret, but in the converse relationship this cannot possibly be the case (Bethge, 1955, p326).

Very young children have an honesty that renders them able to make hugely important contributions to the development of strong families and communities. How many of us take time to listen to what children are telling us? How well do we accommodate their needs in terms of planning community architecture and the daily schedules of families? How well does our legislature take their needs into account? What values in relation to them do our workplace practices reflect? How well are our communities designed to support the needs, interests and rights of children?

There is a village in Italy where a bell rings out across the valley every time a baby is born. The chimes announce to every member of the community that they all have a new responsibility. Each member of the village is reminded to think about what they can do to support the new arrival at the time of birth and as they grow and become mature members of the community (Pritchard, 2010). Strong communities are built around healthy child development and social planners recognise that children have the inherent capacity to bring people together.

Most mixing across social groups takes place between children. It is these contacts - in nurseries, playgroups, schools and in public spaces – that provide opportunities for adults to meet and form relationships. Children provide a common ground and shared interest between people in different tenures. Moreover, people with children tend to be among the most active in community groups” (Silverman et al, 2005).

Can we recreate a child-friendly village within the urban sprawl? Can we redesign child friendly cities and meeting places as we collectively reimagine childhood? Can we see more functional families and communities come into being?

## **What has changed?**

During the past few decades we have seen momentous shifts in terms of the way communities function. Indications are that the next few decades will see even more changes as we roam deeper into cyberspace and experiment with family support structures. Most indicators point to a significant escalation of social problems in terms of child protection, family violence, mental health and substance misuse issues. To the wave of societal dysfunction we are adding cyber bullying, sexting, social network addiction and a whole new spectrum of psychiatric disorders. These include such diagnoses as Mixed Anxiety Depression, Social Communication Disorder, Sexual Sadism, Gender Identity Disorder, Binge Eating Disorder and Substance Related Disorders (American Psychiatric Association DSM V, 2013)

In Australia it is estimated that 12 - 23% of children are witnessing domestic violence (Price-Robertson, Bromfield & Vasello, 2010), 13.2% of children live with at least one adult who regularly binge drinks (Dawe, 2006) and 4-8% of males and 7-12% of females experience penetrative child sexual abuse. These children are at risk of developing severe anxiety and social disorders. Most parents of children involved with child protection services have a history of family violence, substance misuse or mental illness and the severity and complexity of these problems is the highest among the children in out of home care (Scott, 2012).

In addition to child abusive adult behaviour, the implications of child exposure to the plethora of often violent and sexualised electronic games, media and television programming are only beginning to emerge. Although the rate of teenage births in Australia has remained steady among teenagers aged 15-19 yrs since 2006 (Council of Australian Governments, 2012) in South Australia the number of children under fifteen having abortions increased from 16 to 26 between 2009 and 2010 (2012 Report). It is concerning that children are becoming sexualised at a younger age. The rise in occurrence of the autism spectrum disorders is also quite alarming. Estimated at 1 in 150 in 2000, it rose to 1 in 88 in 2008 (ADDM Network, 2000-2008). What has changed between 2000 and

2008? Do we need to wait years for clear links to be established before we act to stem the deterioration of the social and electronic media environment experienced by young children or are we content to put our faith in the development of new drugs to reorder their brain chemistry?

The reality is that many parents and caregivers feel powerless to act as they become caught up in the multiple and complex effects of the enormous shifts in the way we have begun to think about family and community life. If children are fast becoming designer commodities is it any wonder communities crumble as insecure babies soon grow up to become very insecure adults? It's not just the complexity of the issues families are having to deal with, the decline in neighbourhood social capital is also impacting on the kind of outcomes we can expect for children (Edwards & Bromfield, 2010).

If adults do manage to negotiate our complex educational, economic and social systems we then put them under pressure to reach ever higher performance standards. This is seen in many elite sports programs and artistic institutions. Added to this we idolise wealth and prosperity as the measure of success. Under the pressure of it all is it any wonder depression and suicide rates are rapidly increasing?

## **Listening to children and families**

So back to the sandpit. We don't have enough of them around these days. It seems there are too many occupational health and safety risks. We're worried about needles and glass and litigation. At Penn Green in Corby UK we have what is widely regarded as one of the most advanced urban centres for children and their families in the world. It has a humungous sandpit – geographically distant from all coastlines, they have recreated a beach at the heart of their centre! A number of years ago Salisbury Communities for Children began to establish a child and family hub at Ingle Farm in Adelaide. We didn't have a sandpit for all the aforementioned reasons until the site coordinator came up with a solution. A lockable sandpit: it literally has a big wooden cover that can be opened and closed.

At Reggio Emilia in northern Italy an inspiring education initiative has been developed around learning to listen to the 'one hundred languages' of children. "Children are to be taken seriously and listened to," says Reggio Children President Carla Rinaldi. "Learning from the learning processes of

children is the teacher's role" (Rinaldi, 2012). Much of her thinking stems from consulting children using community development principles.

We need to build not only a school for the children but a place for the community and the city... The first key element is to talk together. The second is to learn by doing. Document how the children interpret the space and change the space. Our responsibility is to observe what the children do in the space.

Here education is seen as a communal activity where children and adults explore together. This opens up new ways of looking at the nature of the child as a learner, the role of teachers and the way the school environment is organised and the curriculum is planned.

Building communities with children and families means we need to take into account what children and families are looking for in terms of the kind of environment and supports they need. We need to draw on established community development principles and include the perspective of children. As adults we can easily become very caught up in our own wisdom and miss the insights that come through a child's eyes. Indeed a certain well known Jewish rabbi is reported to have called a child to stand in front of his followers and said;

Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Mathew 18:3)

At the 2012 Child and Youth Friendly City Forum one of the children came up with the suggestion that Adelaide needs to link its tram system with the airport as a top priority. How sensible is that if you are one of those who have tried to commute to and from the Adelaide airport and find a cost-efficient alternative to taxis and expensive car parks. Another suggested to his dad that it wouldn't be a bad idea to store his toys at ground level rather than on top of a wardrobe. As 'grown ups' we are capable of missing things that should be obvious.

Australian National Children's Commissioner Megan Mitchell sought out the voices of children during a 'Big Banter' in 2013. One of the messages she received from a young person in relation to social media websites was incisive.

I think that children under a certain, valid and mature age should NOT be permitted to go on social media websites, such as facebook and twitter because they are still children, yet they are flicking through inappropriate photos or videos of themselves or others. It's just not right! Students in my class are mainly all on social media websites, this is completely unheard of because they take photos in class, on the oval or during lunchtime, either without the teacher seeing or without other students knowing, it's unfair because the victim is oblivious to the damage that could be done on those websites. Some photos could include invading of privacy, nudity or inappropriate comments such as swearing. (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014.p17)

Other messages she heard included expressions of concern about growing up with violence and drugs.

Life would be better if nobody got hurt and children felt safe all the time – 4 year old child

Life would be better for children and young people in Australia if there was no drugs and violence. I've been beaten up and bullied. I complained about it but it didn't fix the problem - 13 year old child from the Northern Territory (Mitchell, 2014).

An Australian research project looking at what 108 middle school children (8-12 yrs) thought was important in their communities identified a number of key ingredients that contribute their vision for a strong community (Bessel, 2014).

1. **Relationships:** Family; Time with Parents; Friends; Good Neighbours; Caring People; Being Listened To; Community Get-togethers.
2. **Safety:** Positive Interactions; No Violence; No Bullying; No Drunkenness.
3. **Physical Places:** Home; A Good Environment; Inclusive Spaces.
4. **Resources:** Financial Security; Public Services.

Of course we can't always give children what they want. They need boundaries as well as opportunities to explore. What they want their parents to do is not always wise but it should at least be considered. When their honesty brings disclosure of adverse circumstances in their families it is critical that everything possible is done to engage their parents and caregivers in the conversation as soon as possible. If we look at the list of ingredients identified in the research we can be very encouraged that children seem to have a pretty good idea of what they need for healthy development. Parents have the responsibility to nurture and train their

children but that does not preclude listening to their voices. In terms of caregiving in general, we also need to get better at listening to the concerns of children who may be experiencing abuse while in care. They are citizens in their own right (Hoffman-Eckstein et al, 2008) even when they are very young. They cannot flourish without adults to nurture them, but that doesn't mean they aren't entitled to be heard and can't make important contributions to our communities.

And we need to listen to what families want. When the Australian Government came up with the Communities for Children initiative it stipulated that sites implement a comprehensive consultation before Community Strategic Plans were developed. So often the process is the other way around as governments and agencies develop plans and then put them out for consultation. The message that comes across is that such consultations are mere tokenism designed to establish that there was a consultation process prior to implementation.

The problem is that if this process is not followed there will be little community ownership of whatever grand schemes governments and agencies may initiate. The consultation needs to happen at the beginning of the process. Families need to be asked what they would like to see developed. At Salisbury Communities for Children in the north of Adelaide parents and caregivers didn't have too many problems articulating what they would like to see when they were consulted.

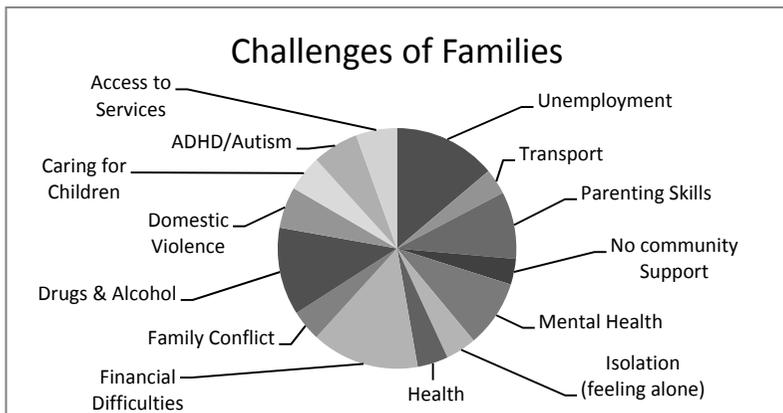


Fig 1-1 Challenges identified by families with young children

When 38 parents with young children were asked at a local shopping centre about the challenges their families were struggling to deal with, they identified the issues in Fig 1:1.

In terms of improving services they also had some clear ideas about what needed to change.

Parent's needs in the community mainly focused on better medical services, better playground facilities and a 'one stop shop' where they could easily access information relating to young children and families (Nechvoglod, 2005).

Successfully engaging with the medical community seemed a long way off when we started but it began to happen once we had established some credibility as an initiative and the medical community began to learn that we really did want to make a difference. We had some limited success in the establishment of better playground facilities, though the risk averse driven processes of local council were something of a challenge. Probably our most effective strategy has been a 'one stop shop' child and family hub and satellite centres. It has continued to be driven by the invaluable perspective of what children and families wanted to begin with and continue to want to see happen.

What families wanted was what they were keen to access when it was implemented. There have been very high participation rates of families since FamilyZone was launched in 2006. In 2011 a total of 3,119 adults and 2,368 children participated directly in eligible services. This level of participation has been consistent since 2008. A 2011 evaluation concluded:

The evaluation data identify that positive achievements of FamilyZone Hub in terms of the benefits delivered to children and their families are substantial and significant (McInnes & Diamond, 2011).

Communities are not static they are fluid. Their level of functionality changes depending on the particular dynamics at work at any given point in time. What worked well at one period in time may easily fail as changing demographics and cultural trends emerge and new developments take shape. Good community developers need to be constantly attuned to what children and families are saying about their needs and aspirations.

## **Can we recreate a village among the urban sprawl?**

If it takes a village to raise a child can we recreate the village amongst the urban sprawl? In the seventies some tried to do just that. In the halcyon days of the counterculture about twenty of us tried living together in a very large double story house in Adelaide in South Australia. Our little community consisted of a few employed workers, students, 'street-people', bikers and drug dependant drop-outs we thought we were attempting to rehabilitate. Suffice it to say it was a very intense and, at times, harrowing experience. From Queen Street in Norwood our little community moved to Brompton in the inner west of Adelaide where we established some 15-20 community houses within a few kilometres of each other. The smaller groupings re-established some sense of stability and normality although, after about five years, the pressure of a few fairly naïve idealists trying to rehabilitate quite a few very traumatised young people took its toll and the urban village experiment ended.

My partner and I then became involved with a number of families attempting to develop a semi-rural community in the Adelaide Hills. This time we collaborated with a few more experienced 'middle class' types, a number of individuals and families seeking respite from the vagaries of life and a vision to contribute to the community through spiritual retreats and various other activities. Over a ten year period we managed to rebuild a burnt out mansion which had formerly been the residence of one of the foremost members of the national convention of 1897, which framed the Federal Constitution. In the process we had a role in providing a retreat for quite a few who needed it and a movement that saw some renewal of spiritual life take place in faith communities across Australia... and we learned a whole lot of new ways to eat zucchinis, including how to turn them into cakes and muffins!

Village life was challenging and while we were there we brought two children into the world. They both turned out pretty well which probably had a lot to do with the strong nurturing role of their mother in the early years, though the village also played its part. However it was far from perfect, including the fact that the unit we moved into when the children arrived was perched on a second story, so we had to locate the mandatory sandpit on the balcony. The children did however have about forty acres of bushland and garden to explore, some animals to enjoy and plenty of mud for mum and occasionally dad to scrape from their boots.

We can easily be idealistic about what a return to village life might look like and forget about the division and conflict between families and neighbours that is often inherent to village life and which eventually led to the dissolution of this community. A degree of independence may be preferable where too much interdependence causes debilitating disputes. Today however, most experience the challenges of living in large urban communities, which often results in isolation and is a far cry from village life. Before having children parents need to seriously consider the kind of environment in which they are most likely to flourish.

No doubt others have been more successful at recreating the kind of village that significantly supports children and families living in the urban sprawl. At least one prominent social commentator presents a compelling case for a return to life in a rural community (Dreher, 2013). Generally however it must be said that times have changed and many of the protective factors of neighbourhood villages and towns we once knew have been largely eroded. Significant changes in the social environment, workplace practices and media accessibility are contributing to increased family breakdown and a significant loss of social and moral capital. Communities benefit from quality parenting but are adversely impacted when parents struggle with family discord, isolation, poverty and lack of support.

## **The advent of positive psychology**

If we are to see improvements in family functioning we need to significantly change the way we think about building stronger communities in which to raise children and we need to radically redesign the way support services are delivered. Our focus on specialist services, counselling and individualised case management has been expensive and limited in its effectiveness. The era of deficit-focussed, pathological psychology has in recent times been challenged by the rise of positive psychology and strength based approaches. Since the time Martin Seligman's daughter challenged his grumpiness (Seligman, 2012) he became a pioneer in developing an alternative way of thinking about the human psyche. Has a century of pathological diagnoses resulted in much improvement in human wellbeing? Seligman's daughter thought not. So he began to explore human virtue and character. Because in our wisdom we had deemed these to be outside the scope of measurable scientific investigation, the elements of wellbeing were largely ignored by the social science community for a couple of centuries. While non-western

communities have continued to value their significance, the lack of scientific investigation of their validity muted their significance. The voices of the children have continued to cry out and at least one eminent professor listened.

In the western world we now have many different forms of community. We have virtual communities, school communities, faith communities and communities built around a variety of subcultures and ethnicities. Each has strengths and deficits. Healthy communities require “leadership with character, freedom with virtue, business with integrity and trust, the rule of law with the cultivation of habits of the heart, education with an emphasis not only on grades and credentials but on the meaning of life and medicine with human and ethical values as strong as the drives of science and technology” (Guinness, 2012). Without such elements communities become unsustainable and something that looks more like a ghetto emerges. How do we discover and develop strengths and protective factors in communities that will enable children and families to flourish in our increasingly complex societies?

The Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) handbook (Peterson & Seligman 2004) has made some inroads into this task. As a Thinker in Residence in South Australia in 2012 Seligman engaged in an investigation into how positive psychology could impact whole school communities. He found that teachers particularly are impacted powerfully by this challenge and many have identified that this is why they went into teaching in the first place. Among other places, he developed this idea at a symposium on ‘Wellbeing before Learning’ facilitated by the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development. The theme captured well the intent of the impact of his residency on school communities and has resulted in an ambitious State of Wellbeing initiative.

In 2013 Salisbury Communities for Children evaluated a ‘wellbeing classroom’ activity which involved developing the social and emotional wellbeing of children as a platform for improving learning outcomes. It included elements of positive psychology as well as opportunities for year 2&3 students to understand and process the impact of trauma in their lives. The enthusiasm and willingness to try new approaches such as typified by a teacher involved in the initiative, was a real key to its outcomes. We’ll look at this in more detail in a later chapter.

The advent of positive psychology with its emphasis on positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose and accomplishment (PERMA) is a hopeful development that has the potential to lead to a more holistic, integrated approach to service delivery across education, health and community services sectors. This is particularly the case for older children although it's potential for early childhood is now beginning to be explored.

## **Towards a framework for building stronger communities**

Although attempts of educators to address impacts of early childhood trauma are significant, clearly prevention and early intervention are the most effective strategies to improve outcomes for children and families (See Fig 12-1). Parents and caregivers are responsible for about 80% of the brain stimulation the first few years of a child's life and all sectors of the community need to work collaboratively to achieve significant change. Mary Eming Young lists a number of imperatives that need to be included in any effective child development framework (Eming Young, 2010).

The experience of many countries in acting to create building blocks for a comprehensive, integrated approach to early child development points to the need for a framework of collaboration across sectors and silos within countries. This overall framework must be grounded in the science of early child development, and both public and private sectors must be engaged. No one sector can do it all, and no single blueprint can possibly fit the specific needs of every country. Yet, the overall framework applies to all and reflects the experience of many. To build national ECD systems, all countries will need to do the following:

1. Shift the education paradigm and involve parents in children's development.
2. Expand services to include children under age 3 and parent education.
3. Assure quality programming through training.
4. Institute a monitoring system to measure population-level outcomes of children's development.

It's all about children and families and the role of professionals is to support them in their roles. Children need to be included in all our planning. Parent education needs to be part of just about everything service providers do and it needs to become 'liked' on Facebook and other social media. Of course too much well-intentioned advice giving will end up confusing parents and we need to understand that very well. It's much more about listening to parents and children and then perhaps responding with practical support.