



# Ready Services

## Child and Family Friendly Services



**Enhanced Best Start Ready Services Project**

**Summary Report**

**June 2015**

## Summary

The Ready Service Audit Tool has been developed as part of the Greater Shepparton Enhanced Best Start project which was funded from 2011-2014.

Enhanced Best Start funding in Greater Shepparton has had four planning components, of which the Ready Services initiative was one strategy. It aimed to promote and sustain increased participation rates in Maternal and Child Health (MCH) and Kindergarten services for vulnerable children and families, with a particular focus on children referred to Child Protection and/or Child FIRST.

There were two phases to this project. The first involved a review of the current literature (see Appendix 1) and the development of the 'Ready Services Audit Tool'. This tool was piloted with six kindergartens and four MCH centres in Mooroopna and Tatura. At the completion of the pilot, the audit tool was reviewed and updated based on feedback from participants and the Enhanced Best Start Reference Group. The project report from this pilot phase summarised the findings and recommendations in relation to making services more family friendly.

Phase Two of the Ready Services project was to extend the work carried out in the pilot phase to include all MCH and state funded kindergarten services in Greater Shepparton. It also aimed to promote the ongoing use of the tool to develop and maintain a shared understanding of a welcoming, inclusive 'ready' service and to sustain ongoing strategies to ensure best practice.

The six areas considered in the use of the Ready Services Audit Tool are ***Accessibility, Communication, Physical Environment, Inclusion, Relationships with Families and Reflective Practice.***

The Greater Shepparton Best Start Early Years Partnership and the Enhanced Best Start Reference Group (now the Early Years Reference Group) are committed to using the recommendations identified through the completion of the Ready Services Audit Tool to continue work with relevant stakeholders, practitioners, services and agencies to promote and support improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families in our community.

## Background

The City of Greater Shepparton (COGS) was selected as one of the first Best Start Demonstration sites in 2002 and over the last twelve years the Greater Shepparton Best Start Program has continued to build significant capacity and expand resources within the early years services sector. The program has also initiated and supported a range of community based initiatives and activities to promote the best possible start in life for young children in our community.

In October 2010, Greater Shepparton was one of two municipalities in Victoria to receive three-year funding for Enhanced Best Start. Community consultations undertaken in 2011 and local practice knowledge indicated that families who are experiencing very challenging circumstances in regard to social, financial and personal vulnerability find difficulty in accessing and consistently participating in universal early years services for their children. This adds to their level of vulnerability in terms of the children not gaining the learning opportunities and benefits of these

programs for their ongoing development. Wider research undertaken in Phase One, such as the Breaking Cycles, Building Futures' audit tool and the Linking Schools and Early Years initiative within the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) support this view.

Late in 2012, Enhanced Best Start funding provided the opportunity to reflect on and seek to identify what key factors would make universal early childhood services such as MCH and kindergartens (preschools) more 'user friendly' and promote the engagement of vulnerable families. Community consultation and planning to answer such questions resulted in the Ready Services Pilot Project in Mooroopna and Tatura in 2013, with support from Communities for Children to fund the audit visits in Tatura. An Action Plan resulted from the audit visits and some of the issues and service improvements identified have already been actioned and achieved.

In 2014, Enhanced Best Start funding provided the opportunity to expand the pilot project to include all MCH and kindergartens services in Greater Shepparton.

Phase Two aimed to support all local services to identify key attributes and develop a shared understanding of a welcoming, inclusive 'ready service'; to promote self reflection for practitioners in regard to strategies and practices which promote inclusion; to outline any relevant infrastructure concerns; to consider wider industry and funding issues; and to foster the use of the Ready Services Audit Tool as an ongoing component of all MCH and kindergarten services in line with best practice.

The uptake and regular use of the Ready Services Audit Tool across MCH and kindergarten services in Greater Shepparton will support management groups and practitioners to assess the readiness of their services and develop strategies to address identified issues. Used consistently across these services, it should promote ongoing reflection and a consensus around the parameters of local service delivery and how 'ready' services are to engage, interact and maintain effective relationships with all families and their children.

## **Service Participation**

All of the 15 Maternal and Child Health services and 32 state funded kindergarten programs in Greater Shepparton were included in the project.

## **Service Support**

A range of strategies was developed to engage all services in undertaking the Ready Services Audit Tool. This included each service reflecting on current practices, identifying opportunities for extension of those practices as well as for implementing new initiatives, and undertaking a self rating process for their service in the following areas:

1. Accessibility
2. Communication
3. Physical Environment
4. Inclusion
5. Relationships with Families
6. Reflective Practice

## **Information Collection**

A hard copy of the audit tool was mailed to each service along with the information and a request to complete the tool. A follow up telephone call and/or email provided the opportunity to discuss any queries, organise a mutually agreed visit time with a member of the Best Start team and to provide an electronic copy of the audit tool if requested.

## **Group Training**

Group training was provided to Council managed services through team meetings for MCH and kindergarten staff. Services or staff who were unable to attend or requested additional assistance were provided with an individual visit to support them in understanding the aims of the project and to complete the audit tool.

## **Service Visits**

Services not managed by Council were contacted for individual visits and could choose whether to complete the audit tool prior to the visit and then use the visit to clarify any issues or to organise a visit to both discuss and complete the tool. These visits comprised face-to-face interviews to discuss all aspects of the project and gather each service's input into the completed audit tool.

## **Other Support Strategies**

Ongoing email contact and telephones calls were provided to all services in addition to the group training and individual visits. This helped services in clarifying any issues as needed, providing feedback and feeling well supported in participating in the project.

## **Outcomes**

For the purpose of the Enhanced Best Start Reference Group, an audit analysis of all completed audit tools was undertaken and presented as a report with summary findings and recommendations. The reference group used this information to plan future work around the area of 'ready services' that would benefit all universal services across Greater Shepparton and which fell within the parameters of the Enhanced Best Start project.

From an individual service perspective, educators and management were encouraged to use the tool to discuss and reflect on current good practice, along with opportunities or areas for improvement identified in any of the six areas. It was suggested that services use the tool on an annual basis and complete the 'Ready Services Audit Summary and Action Plan' document (page 14 of the audit tool) to address any identified areas of improvement or to enhance current practice / strategies over the coming year.

# Appendix 1

## Literature Review

Currently, there is limited research evidence which explores how individual early childhood services consider the range of factors that make their service effective in engaging and sustaining the involvement/participation of vulnerable children and their families. This literature review considers some current research and practice tools which have been developed to assist in identifying and responding to the needs of children and families in difficult life circumstances who struggle to access and maintain ongoing participation in universal early childhood services.

However, there is a significant amount of practice wisdom in the field and this leads us to try and identify what key facets services need to consider and include in everyday practice in order to be truly inclusive or 'ready services'.

In the Children's Ground Literature Review undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne in October 2011, it states that:

"Focus must also be given to *how* services are delivered rather than *what* is delivered".

The report goes on to outline how the universal service system that is needed to support children and their families has not undergone significant change over the past fifty years or so, but over that time, there has been quite dramatic economic and social changes which have significantly altered the conditions under which families are bringing up their young children. The effect of these changes can clearly be identified in the worsening physical and mental health, social adjustment and overall well-being of young children and our early years services are struggling to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged families.

The nature of these social and economic changes has also made it more likely that the resulting problems now facing society and governments are key contributing factors in an increase in the complexity of issues faced by vulnerable families that are not able to be resolved through traditional service delivery and/or approaches.

The report makes clear statements around the need for early childhood and family support systems to be reconfigured to be able to respond more effectively to these changes and better meet the needs of families with young children. It also asserts that there are a wide range of 'structural, familial and relational barriers' that can prevent families from using available services and thus decrease the chances for young children to be involved in appropriate, ongoing learning experiences which shape their current and future life opportunities. Without significant system change and the reduction or removal of such barriers i.e. the provision of 'ready services', the gap between advantage and disadvantage will widen for vulnerable children and families.

Engaging vulnerable families in child and family services is discussed by Dr Myfanwy McDonald in the CAFCA Practice Sheet 'Are disadvantaged families "hard to reach"? Engaging disadvantaged families in child and family services', September 2010. She suggests that families who "are especially difficult to engage are sometimes referred to as disadvantaged or 'hard to reach'." However, this term can be misleading because it may imply "difficult, obstructive or indifferent behaviour" on behalf of families and does not acknowledge that the services themselves may be

'hard to reach' or inaccessible for families. She outlines some of the challenges families may confront in accessing services including:

- the location of a service where lack of private or public transport can be a barrier for families
- a service may be daunting if the family has had no previous experience or has had a negative experience with other similar service environments
- lack of knowledge about the service system and eligibility criteria.

She sees a non-stigmatising approach as valuable and says that this should be consistently demonstrated in practitioners' attitudes as "both parents and children value practitioners who treat them with respect and see them as more than just their 'problems'."

She also promotes an approach that offers a range of flexible ongoing strategies "to bring about long-lasting changes in engagement." Her report outlines the key elements in engaging and working effectively with disadvantaged or vulnerable families:

- Relationships with families
- Relationships with communities
- Relationships with other services

She also asks key questions such as:

- How are you promoting your service - what message are the images in your promotional materials conveying?
- Could the setting be at all intimidating to the families you are trying to reach?
- Would a less formal word of mouth e.g. 'bring a friend' approach to promotion be more suitable?
- Is the information you're providing suitable for the families you want to reach?
- Is your service accessible to families from diverse language and different abilities?

She asks practitioners to consider how many families experience social isolation and have a history of poor relationships with mainstream services. This makes it difficult for them to make initial contact with services and to develop relationships of trust with service providers and the strategies and key points outlined above may help service providers to make access to their program as easy as possible for vulnerable families and their young children.

In 'Breaking Cycles, Building Futures', Brotherhood Of St Laurence, 2004, several key factors are put forward around the need to reduce barriers and promote inclusion for all families, but with a strong focus on the needs of vulnerable families and their children. These focus is on the need for universal early childhood services to develop 'multiple, simultaneous strategies within each service' which are supported through 'a range of policies and practical initiatives' and will enable the service to be ready to engage and interact with vulnerable families rather than waiting to affect change after they arrive.

The report states that "services need to:

- be affordable and well publicised
- be geographically accessible
- provide outreach and support with transport
- provide a family-friendly and culturally inclusive physical environment

- employ skilled and responsive staff working from a family-centred, culturally sensitive perspective
- promote social connectedness through informal supports
- establish strong reciprocal links with other relevant services (universal and specialist).

Amongst the most critical factors is workers' ability to:

- establish a positive, non-judgmental relationship with all children and parents
- proactively engage and sensitively follow-up vulnerable children and parents who are at risk of 'dropping out'."

The related audit tool looks at areas such as:

- service location, how it is advertised, access for all abilities, transport, operating hours and cost-effectiveness
- relationships with families and supporting them to connect with others
- ensuring cultural sensitivity and providing value for effort
- establishing strong reciprocal links with other services targeted to vulnerable families
- encouraging practitioners to consider how they can effectively track and document patterns of service use and develop/maintain awareness of children and families who experience poor attendance or are at high risk of exclusion.

The report for the 'Linking Schools and Early Years Project, Outcomes Framework' undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, February 2008, outlines the aim for all children to "enter the formal primary education system ready to engage and be successful in school." It recognises that moving towards this goal is reliant on many factors including the key role played by children's participation in high quality early years services. However, the report also acknowledges that "not all children participate in early years services, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are often less likely to participate."

The project is based on the Ready Child equation (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005):

"Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Children Ready for School."

The report outlines how 'ready' early years services can connect with other services to address barriers to children's access to services and their ongoing learning and development.

The project focuses on strengthening links between families, early years services and schools, and aims to support the engagement of families who have not previously participated in universal early years services. Actively connecting with these families can help to overcome the barriers faced by vulnerable children.

According to the 'Universal Access to Early Childhood Education' report from the Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, April 2009, there needs to be recognition of a shift "in respect of ideas about social inclusion, vulnerability, ability and disability, and cultural and ethnic diversity." It puts forward some of the key elements that will support true inclusion, including that of families who seem to be 'out of reach':

- Programs that adopt flexible and universally applicable approaches that are designed 'from the ground up' to be inclusive

- Policies and practices that reach out to engage with vulnerable families where the service actively removes barriers to attendance from the families' perspectives
- Greater attention being given to the relationship between professionals and potential recipients of services."

The results of this study suggest that service providers will need to be "both constant in their offer of help, and flexible in terms of the type of help that they are able to provide". It also focuses on the willingness to work collaboratively with those who may "feel unheard, unable or unwilling to trust."

A report which has a central focus on looking at the need to be more proactive in integrating service delivery to young children and their families is 'Moving Forward Together. *A guide to support the integration of service delivery for children and families*' from the Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital/Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne, June 2010. This report points out that, even in a well-off country like Australia, "a significant number of babies and young children are still experiencing relative disadvantage resulting in learning and speech delays and other impediments that are often characteristic of lack of contact with formal health and family-based services."

It goes on to outline the need for change in the way that we deliver early years services and the importance of genuinely engaging the community so that the needs of all families are articulated and acted upon in service delivery, especially those of families who "traditionally do not engage so readily with services" and who are the "very group we most need to engage and hear from."

In 'Research Snapshot three – Engaging Families' from the Linking Schools and Early Years project, Murdoch Children's Research Institute/Centre for Community Child Health, December 2012, there is a strong focus is on "welcoming and family-friendly spaces and activities...to provide formal and informal opportunities for families to spend time in early years services...". There is also an acknowledgement that "*relationships [with parents] are helping us support families in a coordinated and responsive way instead of being reactive*". It also goes on to state that an open door approach and ongoing communication, such as sharing information with families in easily accessible ways, are key elements in offering a 'soft' entry into the service's activities and programs.

As part of 'The Fatherhood Engagement Research Project in South Australia, 2009 – 2010' by the Government of South Australia, an audit tool was developed which covers the following areas:

- Service Culture and Environment
- Service Relevance and Accessibility
- Strategic Planning and Accountability
- Staff Skills, Knowledge and Attitude

The report goes on to outline how we need to do "much more to address service barriers and shape our.....child and family services" so that active participation is encouraged and supported. These are key areas for all services to consider in terms of their readiness to engage and support all families, including fathers and especially applicable to families who do not readily access universal services to promote their children's learning and development.

In their article in Australian Social Work, "Vulnerable Families' Use of Services: Getting What They Need" (June 2012), Butler, McArthur, Thomson and Winkworth ask us "What Do We Know about Families Who Experience Disadvantage? They discuss the "growing recognition in Australia and in



other countries that some people face complex challenges and multiple disadvantages in their everyday lives” and that “it is often this very group who may be excluded from services and other opportunities.” A qualitative study explored how vulnerable families defined their needs and levels of support from services, as well as their experiences in working with a range of service systems and networks. Families also provided important information as to how their needs could be met effectively when accessing resources and services and these showed a need to focus on how “program design and individual service provision need to be based on principles of responsive, respectful service, and collaboration.”

Based on a review of the barriers to vulnerable families accessing mainstream services, Katz, LaPlaca and Hunter (Barriers to inclusion and successful engagement of parents in mainstream services, 2007) identify a number of strategies which can be used by services to engage families, especially vulnerable families:

- Personal relationships between providers and service users.
- Practical issues and patterns of delivery
- Consultation, information and targeting
- Service culture.
- Community development approaches.

It was also put forward that the use of resources was a key issue and that often, resources were designed to be added to an existing service or program to enable and support the inclusion of a particular individual or group of vulnerable children. Katz, LaPlaca and Hunter favour a model where resources are identified to support the “alternative approach of strengthening the inclusivity of the entire program and service philosophy.”

Consideration of the results of the above research and practice knowledge demonstrates the need for universal early childhood services to identify and put into place strategies and practices that promote their ‘readiness’ so they can enhance accessibility for vulnerable families and support their ongoing involvement.

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