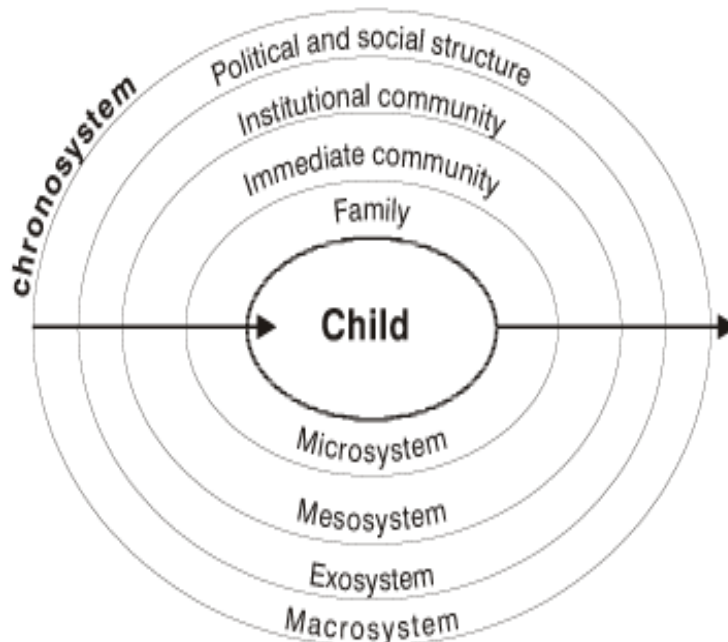


Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry – Good Beginnings submission 29/4/11

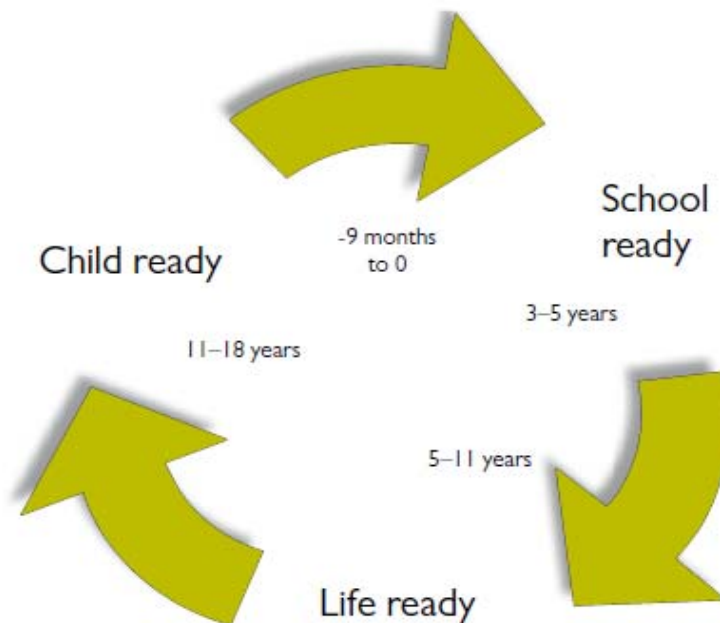
Good Beginnings Australia builds better outcomes for children through programs and services within the community that seek to build parental capacity. Children spend more time at home than anywhere else – it is only through the parents/carers that we can change the future of Australian children. Good Beginnings programs and services are aimed at communities who have a high rate of children at significant risk. Based on Good Beginnings experience this submission focuses on the first 4 questions. As part of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare Inc (CFEECFW) this response also forms part of a broader collective response.

1. The factors that increase the risk of abuse and neglect occurring and effective preventive strategies

The ability to anticipate issues before they arise for the child i.e. 'early in life – early in life pathways'. Getting to the problem before it manifests. It is important to have programs that rebalance the current culture of 'late intervention' to social problems. Programs being based on giving all children the social emotional bedrock they need to achieve and to pre-empt those problems. The alternative to the inter-generational cycle of dysfunction is to use early intervention to create a virtuous circle i.e. school ready, life ready, child ready. Good Beginnings very much supports the 'Public Health Model' and proposes the Ecological Model and Virtuous Cycle as models that enable a 'think child think family' approach.



Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development*. Harvard University Press



Allen, G. (2011). *Early Intervention: the Next Steps*. An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government

2. Strategies to enhance early identification of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk including the role of an adult, universal and primary services. This should include consideration of ways to strengthen the capacity of those organizations involved.

One of the best methods of early intervention for a young child who is unable to reside in the family home, is a kith and kin placement with a view towards a permanent care placement. This method of intervention is most stable for a young person, holds less social stigma for a child, is most manageable from a professional perspective and most conducive to achieving outcomes for the child.

Permanent care is the ultimate outcome for child protection clients who enter the system at a young age and are not able to reside with immediate family. Whether this permanent care is with a kith and kin carer or another individual identified as a suitable carer, it is the preferred option whenever possible.

An example of the early identification outcomes to be achieved include:

- Young children are in the care of their kinship network
- Young children who are disadvantaged and faced a difficult beginning will have equal opportunities to their 'advantaged' counterparts (or something like that)
- Disadvantaged children are connected to and achieving academic success

- The community is responsible for supporting and caring for children who are disadvantaged

3. The quality structure, role and functioning of family services ; statutory child protection services, including reporting, assessment, investigation procedures and responses; and out-of-home care, including permanency planning and transitions; and what improvements may be made to better protect the best interests of children and support better outcomes for children and families.

The following points cover a negative pattern that is all too clear in the Child and Family system. At each of the following bullet points early intervention methods need to be identified and considered. Good Beginnings through this submission is advocating for a transition to permanent care program (further details are provided in Summary):

- Young child is unable to live with parents. First response to family breakdown is for child to reside with kith or kin. High percentage of children involved in Child Protection start in an informal kith and kin placement.
- Child suffers emotional issues associated with family breakdown, abuse, neglect, etc. Child will start to act out at school and challenge 'grandma' (example for purpose of discussion) in the home environment.
- Both school and home start to feel strained as those close to the child struggle to understand and manage the emotions and behaviour presented.
- Child feels more rejected by responses to his/her behaviour. Acts out further.
- School breaks down. Child has no structure in day. Feels further rejected and becomes more difficult to manage in the home setting. Becomes increasingly difficult to re-engage in school. 'Grandma' struggles to see how placement is sustainable with non school attending child who is hard to manage.

(Placement with 'grandma' breaks down. No parents. No Grandma. No school. Angry and hurt child. Unfortunately, due to systemic issues, Child Protection and its accompanying service system are often not able to offer 'Grandma' more support when the child was young and first entering then system.)

- Child Protection find another placement for the child, with strangers in a home setting. This will generally break down as child challenges carers in an attempt to self protect.
- Child is now hard to find a placement for as he/she is hard to manage in a home setting. A few more attempts may be made. Child is grappling with significant issues relating to family, however is often too hurt and scared to engage in therapeutic measures to ward off the detrimental impact of this pain. After a couple of further attempts of living with other families who the child is aware are paid to care for him or her, home based placement is no longer an option.

- Educational prospects continue to diminish. New, and often inappropriate, peers are found.
- Child is placed in residential care. Rostered staff care for child in a setting with other children with challenging and high risk behaviours. These children will generally not attend school nor engage in a day program. They are often significantly hurt and damaged children and young people. Coping mechanisms such as drugs and alcohol, criminality, self harm and high risk behaviours are employed.
- The child or young person is now at the pointy end of the service system. After years of feeling hurt and rejected, the child has little self worth and hope for the future. He or she may be hard to engage professionally.
- Without positive and meaningful professional engagement, this child may well continue to engage in harmful and destructive patterns of behaviour for years. Until such point, he or she is nearing 18, the legal age of adulthood, with little to no education, minimal independence skills and significant unresolved issues. Not to mention a system that then holds no responsibility for his or her wellbeing and future.

Programs with early intervention methods need to be developed to ensure:

- An exit point for the system
- An assessment and support process for Kith and Kin placements
- A program that transitions young children that are deemed suitable to Permanent Care

4. The interaction of departments and agencies, the courts and service providers and how they can better work together to support at-risk families and children

From extensive experience within and working alongside the Child Protection system, a deficit within their approach is clearly a lack of capacity to assess kith and kin placements and permanent carers and support these new placements. These young children, in somewhat stable placements, are overlooked, until their need escalates.

The process of identifying, assessing and establishing these placements can be somewhat time consuming and often overlooked by Child Protection, due to workload demands.

By all accounts, it is reasonable that DHS are placing priority on permanent care as a means of creating throughput within the system and enhancing opportunities for children.

Kith and Kin and Permanent Care is a cost effective exit point from Child Protection that places little strain on the system, when operating effectively.

Summary

In summary an example of a Good Beginnings early intervention program is outlined below and demonstrates how the sectors could work together to achieve the best results for the child:

Good Beginnings to accept referrals from Child Protection where a child is residing in a kith or kin placement and needs a formal assessment. If assessed as suitable, Good Beginnings will support this placement for a period of three months after the placement is established. If this placement is maintained and deemed suitable for Permanent Care in the future, Good Beginnings will provide follow up assessment and support.

Good Beginnings to accept referrals from Child Protection where they identify a child who has been in the Out of Home Care System for some time, is subject to a long term Court order and is in a relatively stable kith and kin placement. If Child Protection deems the carer to be suitable to provide long term care for the child, Good Beginnings will offer the service of transitioning that child and the carer to permanent care.

If referral relates to either kith and kin placement or a permanent care placement, Good Beginnings will offer the following intervention:

- Engage the child and carer/family and provide support.
- Identify a plan for the future, applying **case management** principles.
- Employ and exchange behaviour management strategies derived from the **Incredible Years** package to support the home environment. (It is inevitable that there will be issues that need addressing to enhance stability and sustainability of placement)
- Incorporate the school support system if it is deemed appropriate, as per Incredible Years framework.
- Good Beginnings will conduct **Part A and Part B components of the Permanent Carer assessments**, as outlined in the Children Youth and Families Act and provide the associated report to Child Protection. In the instance of assessing kith and kin placements formally, we will complete the assessment commenced by Child Protection, by undertaking the Part B component of the assessment report.
- Where required, Good Beginnings will **facilitate** supervised access with parents.
- Good Beginnings will remain involved with the family (FSW) until such time as the **PCO is granted in the Children's Court**.