

**St Luke's Anglicare: Anglicare Australia Awards Submission**

**The Early Years program**

The Early Years Program represents a break-through innovation in the delivery of parenting education to vulnerable families. It does this by 're-framing' the parenting issues into an educational goal; parents participate in a Certificate II in Child Development which is a stepping stone to employment in child-care or welfare. It also has multiple side benefits such as exposing parents to child care workers and even leads to the confidence to leave children in casual child-care- itself a breakthrough for many mums.

St Luke's Anglicare Family Services team has been engaged in developing group work programs for the past four years. It was recognised that the paramount issue bringing parents into Family Services was their struggle with managing behaviours displayed by their children.

Parenting skills are traditionally formed by a person's recollection of their parent's practices, or by grandparents, parents and extended family helping younger parents to develop these skills over time. Many of the parents who came to Family Services for support were separated from these ways of learning, either by geography or because their own family relationships were not strong.

In response to this need, it was decided that the Family Services group work programs would focus on building both parents' capacity to feel confident in managing difficult behaviours, but also to look at ways of preventing those behaviours from developing in the first instance by building strong and healthy family relationships.

Family Services staff were reluctant to use some of the established educative parenting programs because their experience had been that the families they were working with found them boring... and so did the staff.

Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT) is a multi-disciplinary, educational provider which offers over 400 full time, part time and short courses annually. With campuses established throughout Central and Northern Victoria, BRIT aims to provide flexible and relevant training opportunities to business, community and individuals.

Although there was no formal relationship with BRIT and St Luke's prior to this program BRIT saw this as an ideal opportunity to assist in a community services capacity. The children's' services staff, along with the senior management team at BRIT jumped at the chance to assist in this innovative idea, and the Early Years program was born.

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BRIT staff identified that the attrition rate for programs similar to this was generally high. As a result, a St Luke's family worker would be engaged to mentor and support each participant by providing transport, coaching and encouragement for the participant to not only stay in the course but to apply their learning's to their own children in a way that addressed some of the presenting issues.

With BRIT organising the majority of funding, and St Luke's contributing \$160 per student, the program was advertised to current Family Services clients, and through Maternal Health services in the region. The program was aimed at students with challenging circumstances who may not have been able to afford the money or time to study.

Eight mothers enrolled, and BRIT staff member and mother of four, Carla Jeffrey commenced teaching the program. Each Thursday morning for two hours at St Luke's 136 House, the students learnt three community service based competencies with a strong focus on parenting skills.

With St Luke's 136 House already set up in a family friendly manner for staff and clients, it was further utilised as a flexible learning environment, with classes being conducted in the lounge room, and the students' 14 children looked after on site by a qualified child care worker. The children were welcome in the class room to see their mothers, which meant the skills they were learning could be put into practice immediately.

The Early Years program was a unique way for St Luke's to provide an opportunity for parents to get back on track with their parenting skills, and be social with other parents in the community. This two hour session each Thursday focussed on three key competencies:

- Support the development of children in the service;
- Communication with children;
- Ensure children's health and safety.

Participants were chosen by St Luke's; some due to access reasons, and others because they were identified as 'at risk' clients. The small class size was imperative to the program's success, as it allowed for some ownership amongst the participants to simply show up to each session, If it was a larger group, there was a possibility some students would not actively participate, or fly under the radar. The small group allowed for all students to contribute to the success of each class.

From St Luke's perspective, the Early Years program needed to be an opportunity to provide clients with education and parenting skills in a non traditional way. For some clients, this was the only access to further education ( for a variety of reasons) they had experienced. Due to the flexible nature of the program, the supportive environment encouraged achievement from each person.

Of the eight students who enrolled in the class, five successfully completed three competencies. This was a fantastic outcome for the program, and proved that providing a real life learning experience was a positive way to teach these students. The change in their parenting skills was also apparent, and this could be assessed as the children were often in attendance with their parents.

Group work seems to not only normalise the experience, but to give them immediate and useful information about their children's' development and an understanding of why they behave in certain ways. To teach individuals and get these kinds of results on a case by case basis would take weeks, or even a year, but in a classroom setting, it seemed to make sense, and the students gained increased self esteem and a concrete belief in their ability.

For some students, this program gave them the confidence to gain employment, pursue academic options, but all of them are better parents. The results show that this is an effective way to teach, learn and change behaviour, and has the potential to be implemented in communities nationally.

#### **Evaluation:**

To ensure that the Early Years objectives were being met, an evaluation of the students was conducted at the mid way point, and conclusion of the program. The mid way evaluation was perhaps the most important for St Luke's, as it identified a client's needs in terms of additional support or assistance. The final evaluation not only took into consideration the thoughts of the students that completed the program, but also those who (for whatever reason did not complete.

All feedback was positive, with students sighting that the program had given them meaning and purpose to their lives. With five out of eight initial students completing last year, the 2009 program is proving even more successful, with seven out of eight initial students due to complete and eight enrolled in Maryborough.

One key question in the evaluation process for students was "What have you learned?" All participants felt they had vastly increased knowledge and confidence about parenting and what their child needed from them as a parent. They also felt that it had given them more confidence to access other learning or employment but most because they now felt more confident about using childcare themselves to do this.

Some participants spoke about going to childcare centres to interview them about the possibility of leaving their children there, and how they felt more confident about what to ask, and how to decide if it was an appropriate place to leave their child.

Initially the students felt that the parenting skills learned were perhaps more valuable than the employment opportunities the program would provide. One participant remarked that "it was so valuable that everyone should have to do it".

The first program of Early Years in 2008 delivered real and sustainable outcomes for participants. These included:

- Five out of eight participants completed the group in 2008. This is a high completion rate given the circumstances of the participants.
- Two of the eight have gone on to further education.
- One has become a facilitator of a playgroup.
- One is exploring further study options.
- One gained employment and has now become supervisor at the store where she works.
- All participants have increased confidence in parenting and an increased understanding of the needs of their children.
- All report an increase in their self-esteem and self-belief about what they can accomplish in their future.
- All report that they have changed the way they parent their children – they feel these changes are for the better and include things such as – altering their children's eating habits; changing the way they play and view play with their children; changing the way they discipline their children.

**Sustainability:**

BRIT are now running the program in one other town and on-going funding is secure through TAFE funding with additional support likely from Family Services brokerage funds and Job Network providers.

**Adoption:**

The program has recently received much interest at the Statewide TAFE awards where it was awarded the State prize for Innovation in Community services. Variations on the model are now being developed by BRIT in relation to our mental health programs with a focus on careers in human services as the learning outcome.