

Media Release

Children Communities Connections - Implementing a better way forward to Caring for our Children

A team of early childhood practitioners from **Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families** located at Corby in Northhamptonshire UK shared some of wealth of what they have learned in the past 25 years of developing a centre that has become a world leader in supporting families with children 0-5years at the Children Communities Connections Conference at the Mawson Centre in the north of Adelaide on November 13th & 14th.

More than 200 early childhood **practitioners, researchers, policy makers and consumers** gathered at the conference to grapple with the challenges of multi agency and multidisciplinary approaches to supporting families in the early years. They were greatly encouraged by the insights of 25 years of early childhood policy development in a parent & child centre presented by Heather Donoyou and Tracy Gallagher from the Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families pioneered by Dr Margy Whalley. Much of what they shared resonated strongly with the recommendations of former SA Thinker in Residence Fraser Mustard in his recently released report.

The conference also featured Associate Professor **Margaret Sims** Head of the Centre for Social Research at Edith Cowan University in Perth as well as key policy makers representing FaHCSIA, DECS, Families SA, Health SA, Business, the City of Salisbury, Non Government and Community organisations.

“Community is not happening informally any more and we need to facilitate it as a formal service”, suggested Professor Sims who has become well known internationally for her research into the effects of childhood stress on early brain development.

“Curriculum program and learning are often perceived as indicators of quality early childhood education but if children are feeling unloved, unsafe, unwanted and insecure they will not learn.

“The ability to think things through gets pruned away as neuron pathways develop in children who are maltreated”. In order to address the current escalation of child abuse reports “Our service delivery has to be ecological and we have to collaborate”.

As child protection reports treble and the cost of state care and incarceration of adults who have been abused as children balloons, despite the current economic downturn it remains imperative that all stakeholders invest much more heavily in early childhood initiatives. Currently as a nation we rank among the worst of the OECD countries in terms of investment in early childhood. What is happening at Pen Green is a clear example of what can be done to bring about significant change in socially and economically depleted communities where there is significant government and non government investment in the early years.

The conference was convened by Salisbury Communities for Children, part of an Australian Government initiative that has developed a number of ‘one stop shop’ parent and child centres in South Australia including one at Ingle Farm Primary School. Key early childhood stakeholder representatives from the departments of Family Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Education and Children’s Services, Child Youth & Women’s Health Services, the University of South Australia and the Salvation Army were involved in planning the conference.

The Minister for Families and Community Services and the Northern Suburbs **Jennifer Rankine** and **Allyson Essex** FaHCSIA Branch Manager Children & Parenting Support, officially addressed the conference which also included significant input from parents.

Plenary powerpoint presentations will soon be made available on www.salisburyc4c.org.au and DVD recordings of plenary sessions can also be ordered.