# Communities for Children National Forum Adelaide 2013 Report

By Dr Elspeth McInnes AM & Dr Victoria Whitington

University of South Australia

With acknowledgements of Associate Professor Gerry Redmond & Alice McEntee, Flinders University of South Australia

## Introduction

What do the next five years hold for Communities for Children? What can we learn from what we have been doing over the past decade? What can we be doing better and how might we go about it? These are some of the questions to be addressed in this overview of the proceedings of the National Forum of Communities for Children 2013, held in Adelaide in December that year.

The National Forum of Communities for Children 2013 brought together 160 delegates from 52 sites around Australia including every state and territory. The Forum discussions covered 5 key themes and these provide the content structure for the report. The themes were Collaboration, Operational Practices, Staff and Staff Well-Being, Communities for Children Voice and Social Isolation/Engagement. These themes reflect the complexity of the Communities for Children programme.

Communities for Children was implemented by the federal government in 2005 as a place-based programme which aimed to bring together services for families, to enable more families and children to access services they needed and reduce risks of either over-servicing or falling through the service gaps. The model provides funding to a locality specific Facilitating Partner which in turn generates relationships with Community Partners, to encourage collaboration between agencies at various sites to better meet the needs of families and their children aged from birth to 12 years. Services can include parenting support, group peer support, parent-child activities, adult learning, home visiting services, case management, school outreach and other family support activities. A feature of this structure is that providers come from different organisational bases, with diverse workforce skill-sets ranging across health, education and social work, diverse organisation missions and values and 'flat', or non-hierarchical relationships between Community Partners.

The Forum functions as an important opportunity for staff from diverse sites and organisations to come together to consider the achievements and directions of the Communities for Children programme. A key question for consideration by the Forum was the task of generating evidence in support of the programme's continuation. The question could be summarised as follows:

*How can C4C model be strengthened to support outcomes into the future and deliver better value for money?*

'Value for money' is defined in this document to include the following concepts:

- Investment in prevention of problems for children and families and opportunities to flourish;
- Reduction in the numbers of families needing help and the types and amount of help needed;
- Development of family and community social capital;
- More efficient and productive use of service resources;
- Easier timely access for children and families to the services they need

## Methodology

Each of the key themes discussed at the National Forum addressed elements of the 'outcomes into the future and value for money' question. Each theme was examined according to the Challenges, Change Drivers, Facilitators and Achievements emergent from the theme. Mixed tables of delegates were invited to share their discussions according to these categories. The data presented in this document is derived from the scripts of those discussions.

## KEY THEME 1: COLLABORATION AND INTEGRATION
### COLLABORATION & INTEGRATION: CHALLENGES
#### 1. Relationships

Relationships are really central to the optimal operation of C4C programmes. Relationships between individuals and amongst participating agencies are central to working together collaboratively to provide joined up services for families in their communities. Key challenges to the development and maintenance of the needed relationships include:
- Need for staff skill development in relationship building and maintenance
- Working across agencies, for example education and health, which have different languages and ways of operating
- Policy differences between agencies shape different agendas for engagement with families
- Need for dedicated time to develop relationships and build integration
- Pressure to achieve project outputs limits relationship building time
- Diverse organisation policies regarding operations create roadblocks
- Data collection around C4C operations does not measure or value relationship development
- Relationships with diverse clients and communities with whom the C4 C staff do not share a language are more difficult to form.

#### 2. Funding issues

Two main issues concerned with funding provide challenges for collaboration. The first concerns short funding cycles which undermine C4C operations as they necessitate "rapid staff turnover and instability". The second major issue relates to competitive tendering arrangements which require agencies which need to collaborate to achieve their goals, to compete for funding. This builds competition between agencies, not collaboration. There is a need for shared vision and understanding between Community Partners, as well as a level of funding certainty to allow for multi-organisational planning between Community Partners.

#### 3. Rural and regional issues

Distance in rural and remote communities requires additional time to engage in relationship work and makes services more expensive to provide and, sometimes, for families to access. Isolated communities with high levels of unemployment and consequent high reliance on government payments often experience high levels of unmet need. This means that visiting services can be swamped with demand and there are few resources for community capacity building. Continuing high levels of demand and high investments of time and money limit the opportunity for services to build integration between agencies.

### 4. Government departments and agencies

Government departments do not model collaboration or integration and use different service delivery models. Some government departments do however provide good managerial direction. Service mapping with facilitating partners is helpful to ensuring that services are reaching the needs of communities.

## COLLABORATION & INTEGRATION: CHANGE DRIVERS (WHAT IS MAKING THINGS CHANGE HERE?)

### 1. Work culture

The co-operative culture of C4C operations, including with Community Partners, is important to the development of a shared vision and language which transcends individual and organisation limits.

Working from a community development approach with shared action planning, supports the creation of innovative solutions and approaches.

### 2. Staff making a difference

Against the context of staff turnover and instability, committed staff with professional and relationship skills can make a big difference to sustaining collaboration. A high level of commitment is required from staff to make the model work. The requirement to make links across the community means that staff with empathy, leadership, and other personal qualities that enable goals to be reached, are needed. Such staff can be called 'champions' of the C4C process.

### 3. Government Policy

Government policy is a key driver of change at the programme level and at the community level. A change in one government policy can generate unforseen changes in demand at another point in the system.  The lack of government policy alignment at state and federal levels can create competing requirements for services and families. For example, definitions of terms like 'vulnerable' are different between different levels of government, so a family which may qualify for a service under one definition is excluded under another definition. The top down approach of government which limits the responsiveness of C4C operations means that C4C s are often operating with community difficulties that they cannot address.

## COLLABORATION & INTEGRATION: FACILITATORS (WHAT IS HELPING THINGS TO CHANGE FOR THE BETTER?)

### 1. Services Approaches to Families

Community services with diverse families with diverse needs have to find ways to engage parents and children across the spectrum of culture, health and education requirements. Given that children's well-being is central to the C4C model, the philosophical approach that best works in C4C is one that is child sensitive and puts children at the centre of thinking and practice. Working out what works best is often easier to achieve with small projects.

### 2. Quality of collaboration

The quality of collaboration between services often rests with the time invested in the relationship, the ability to establish a shared vision and mutual understanding and the use of everyday language rather than profession-specific jargon. The Facilitating Partner has a key role in promulgating the need for collaboration and establishing a service culture enabling the Community Partners to work well together.

## COLLABORATION & INTEGRATION: ACHIEVEMENTS/GOOD NEWS

### 1. Collaborations/partnerships

Many partnerships enable the work of C4C, from writing funding proposals to service provision. This fosters shared skills, shared vision and culture, positive cross-agency inter-personal relationships and effective referral networks. Some examples include partnerships between local service providers and local councils. Shared values and needs identification is critical to the success of such partnerships, which sometimes continue once the formal agreement has ended.

### 2. Workplace learning culture

Positive workplace cultures can spread to other services across Community Partnerships, value-adding to the programme model. For example the development of a culture of reflective practice can contribute to two-way learning between organisations and a shared appreciation of the strengths of different contributions.

### 3. C4C model design/approach

There are many good news stories for C4C. The 'soft-entry' approach used by C4C is successful in inviting family engagement. Co-location and funding of services, and the collective approach to designing community programmes, enable C4Cs to be responsive to local community needs. Examples of successful projects include Blacktown Kids Gym for Aboriginal families and a two way referral service with the Department for Social Services in NSW around the Building Australia's Future Workforce policy.

## COLLABORATION & INTEGRATION: SUMMARY

Collaboration between services, and the development of organisational structures and workforce skills to achieve this, are key achievements of the service delivery model. Defining collaboration as a process, rather than an outcome, has been a necessary feature of crafting shared 'mission' and values. These inhere in relationships between organisations and individuals which are developed over time and require conscious investment of resources in the process. Skill development, skill sharing and a 'culture of reflective practice' provide a basis to improve workforce capacity underpinning a 'no wrong door' 'soft entry' option for families. Community level strategic planning enables organisations to transcend particular service cultures, reducing competition between services and reducing 'contradictory' experiences for families. In these ways collaboration between community partners has enabled improved service access and delivery for families and improved services' understandings of community needs.

Recommendations for further improvement include:

- Continuous skill development in collaborative structures, resources and practices for C4C Community Partners
- Formal training, recognition and valuing of collaborative skills in the workforce
- Processes for recognising and sharing 'best practices' in work with families and children
- Continuous development of workforce skills relating to cultural minorities and socially marginalised families

# KEY THEME 2: OPERATIONAL PRACTICES
## OPERATIONAL PRACTICES: CHALLENGES

### 1. Logistical challenges

The role of C4C is to work with communities, yet determining what the boundaries of that community might be, and the levels of communities within it, is not always clear. C4C does not align with local government or electoral boundaries. As a result, making partnerships with local government and developing shared strategic plans and mapping community strengths is not easy. Government policy on particular communities, such as asylum seekers, makes it difficult for C4Cs to identify any possible role they might have in supporting these families. Other challenges for operations include where services are offered and client access to the programs offered due to transport infrastructure gaps, particularly in non-metropolitan areas without public transport services.

### 2. Funding issues

Funding uncertainty as a result of changes in government policies undermines operational practices. Funding, and the time that allows for service delivery, does not match needs. Also finite funding means that successful projects can only continue after their initial funding is exhausted if money is taken from other projects.

### 3. Approaches to service delivery

The C4C model is flexible and responsive, however those qualities present challenges. C4C needs to establish service delivery boundaries, offer targeted programs that do not stigmatise, track and meet community needs, all the while collaborating with partners which have a range of operational practices. This can create inconsistency in communication across C4C sites and tension between keeping programs on track and keeping to facilitating partner program guidelines.

### 4. Staffing issues

Relationship building and maintenance are central to the success of C4Cs, yet the very funding model used inevitably results in staff churn. As a result, relationships must continually be built. Relationships can also be derailed by individuals with difficult personalities. Recruitment of suitable staff thus presents continuing challenges.

### 5. Government policy and funding changes

Government policy change is a continual challenge because it militates against some degree of stability. Changes in C4C programme policy have an emotional impact on staff arising from uncertainty, wasted effort and adjustment to new language, new relationships, changed directions, new templates, data collection requirements and contractors. Policy changes in income support and immigration rules create changing needs in affected communities.

### 6. Lack of recognition for C4C

The complex role of C4C in working with partner organisations means that outcomes of the programme can be claimed by individual organisations, without acknowledging the collective C4C context.

## OPERATIONAL PRACTICES: CHANGE DRIVERS

### 1. Community needs

The connections between C4C and their communities allow them to understand and respond to community needs, consulting and also receiving feedback. These connections also give C4C communities a sense of ownership over programs. Word of mouth referrals bring families into services.

### 2. C4C Service Delivery Approaches

C4C is concerned with improving people's lives: it has an outcome focus and achieves its goals through establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships. The flexibility of the C4C model demands working in transparent way, and demands continual review and renewal. The capacity and communication skills of the C4C Community and Facilitating Partner staff are central to success. Co-location with Centrelink is also helpful. Advocacy at all levels of government can drive policy change to better meet community needs.

## OPERATIONAL PRACTICES: FACILITATORS

### 1. Staff capacity

C4C operations are facilitated when their staffs are innovative and creative, know the community well, come from diverse ethnicities, and are 'prepared, skilled and knowledgeable'. As a result, the community view them as credible.

### 2. Change of age range of children

The extension of the age range of targeted children to 12 years has facilitated operations because their voices can be 'heard in a meaningful way'.

### 3. Enabling structures and relationships

Relationships and enabling structures are at the heart of operational practices. Relationships with the Federal Government, enabling frank and fearless feedback about concerning issues are important, as are relationships with Facilitating and Community Partners. The resulting collaborative approaches allow services to connect and to cooperate and align operational practices. The role of the Facilitating Partner is a critical one. The quality of the Facilitating Partner relationships can have a considerable effect on C4C operations. Relationships amongst staff need to be built and maintained within and across partnering organisations over time. Enabling structures include having a shared language to talk, regular networking opportunities, state government representatives on communities so they understand C4C operations, creative approaches to funding to allow flexibility, and sharing operational practices with partners. The Service stream created between all involved with Building Australia's Future Workforce ensured that young/ jobless families do not slip through the cracks

## OPERATIONAL PRACTICES: ACHIEVEMENTS/GOOD NEWS

### 1. Re approach used: With families

The C4C approach to operational practices has produced many good news stories. It has enabled community members to develop skills so they can train other members. The no wrong door enables families to engage and referrals to be made via word of mouth. Its flexibility allows C4C to respond quickly to emerging needs. The approach builds on 'community strengths, local expertise and relationships'.

## 2. Re approach used: With other organisations

C4C's operational approach to work with other agencies, like primary schools, has enabled stronger relationships between them. Another example is working with Centrelink, regarding the program Building Australia's Future Workforce programme. C4Cs become adept at managing change to respond to changing needs of the community. Networking becomes a way of ensuring effective service delivery across shared language, knowledge and resources.

## 3. Re Community Partners

Community and Facilitating Partners are a real strength of C4C operational practices, as they spread networks and relationships. Community partners 'represent the community, and share resources, expertise and workload'. The operational reporting template they have used provides 'rich and valuable data', and also another engagement opportunity. Furthermore, the data collection by facilitating partners guides the focus of operational practices and builds capacity.

## OPERATIONAL PRACTICES: SUMMARY

A core strength of the C4C model is the opportunity for flexibility in service delivery and in operational practices varying with funding, clients' needs, and collaboration with other agencies. Strategic plans therefore also need to be effective and flexible. An example of local context is the mobility and distance challenge in regional and outer suburban areas. Whilst there are localised challenges, program based issues are driven by funding cycles and implementation guidelines, generating increased compliance work and, in some instances, activities that are not driven by good outcomes for families. This in turn affects staff recruitment and retention, making it challenging to sustain relationships with families and communities and between services. There is a need for greater two-way information flow between government and services and more opportunities for services to share knowledge and experiences.

Recommendations for further improvement include:

- Improving reliability and predictability of policy and funding cycles
- Forming a peak body and issues based reference groups to coordinate and to expand the collective knowledge and practice base of C4C services

# KEY THEME 3: STAFF AND STAFF WELLBEING
## STAFF & STAFF WELL-BEING: CHALLENGES

### 1. Relationships

The development and maintenance of relationships in C4C agencies is critical to staff well-being and takes time and therefore workload. Micromanagement results in feelings of lack of trust and diminishes staff well-being. The use of part time staff increases pressure on full time staff when issues need follow-up action.

### 2. High staff turnover

Rapid staff turnover is a characteristic of C4C sites which militates against the development and maintenance of relationships within the staff team and with the community. This in turn reduces well-being and willingness on the part of staff and the community to invest in relationships.

### 3. Government changes

Changes in government policies, the complexity of government departments - particularly changes in DSS representatives, the competitive tendering process and delays in funding decisions - works against staff well being because there is little job security, so staff just move on. There is limited funding for the work to be done, yet costs continue to rise, placing pressure on services.

### 4. Characteristics of C4C work

Depending on how they are managed, the characteristics of C4C work can be highly challenging to staff wellbeing. These characteristics include, the quality of leadership in the site and of staff management (including their focus on wellbeing, and allowing time for debriefing as needed), the goodness of fit between projects and staff working in them, the capacity to balance demands from all quarters, staff cultural issues, salary inequities between professional roles, the number of possible roles, and the growth of community partners. Rising numbers of Community Partners continually increase the complexity of C4C operations.

### 5. Workforce recruitment and professional learning

Staff well-being is supported when they have access to professional learning opportunities and as a result, the needed skill set. Recruitment needs to focus on applicants' skills, experience and connections.

## STAFF & STAFF WELL-BEING: CHANGE DRIVERS

### 1. Funding

Staff well-being would be enhanced by a more stable funding model

### 2. Community

Community needs shape the range of services offered by C4Cs and drive change to meet unmet needs.

### 3. Staff

Staffs are central to the operation and success of the C4C model, and so their wellbeing is critical. A number of factors are relevant here, management style including capacity to deal with conflict, regular mentoring and coaching, career progression pathways (often lacking), budget constraints resulting in cheaper but less skilled staff being employed, rapid staff turnover, champion team members who hold projects together, sharing of knowledge, and the employment of former clients. Leadership understanding that investing in staff will pay dividends is another contributing factor.

Workers in rural areas need to additionally manage boundaries between their work and their home lives.

### 4. Working with Community Partners

When C4C staff work flexibly and cooperatively with Community Partners, sharing information and planning, and evaluating programs together, staff wellbeing is enhanced as is safety.

### 5. Contracts

Contract arrangements are connected to staff wellbeing, with longer contracts that allowing career planning being preferred. Contract clauses defining roles and supervision arrangement are helpful to staff understanding the boundaries of their jobs.

### 6. Organisational culture

Staff wellbeing is enhanced in an organisational culture that embraces learning, 'reflection and change'. When meetings are relevant they build teams that are focused, connected and future oriented.

## STAFF & STAFF WELL-BEING FACILITATORS

### 1. Quality of management

Staff wellbeing is supported when management is competent. Competent managers listen to staff and use a caring 'person and family centred approach' which leads to trust relationships, motivation and good communication. They also value mentoring and staff training and identify and acknowledge achievements at corporate level.

### 2. Personal qualities

The personal qualities staffs bring to their roles are also relevant to their wellbeing. They need to be organised to set personal goals, manage the workplace demands and focus on outcomes.

### 3. Mutual peer support

The mutual support that staffs receive from their peers supports their wellbeing. Shared lunches and ensuing conversations, sharing of knowledge, having recharge time, 'fun and a sense of humour', and a focus on well-being are all helpful.  Well-being activities such as massage and games help deal with stress. Staff who document their work help their peers because it allows ease of handover and maintenance of momentum in delivering services.

### 4. Funding

Funding certainty promotes improved staff stability, skills retention and well-being .

### 5. Partnerships with higher education

Partnerships with universities and students (traineeships) enable sharing of skills and knowledge and new approaches to particular child and family needs.

## STAFF & STAFF WELL-BEING: ACHIEVEMENTS/GOOD NEWS

### 1. Sharing and networking

Staffs feel their wellbeing is supported when they have opportunities to get together like the C4C conference, monthly debrief meetings, and they can gather informally on Fridays after work for example. Sharing across sites, community capacity building through collaborative staff training and compassionate approaches are also helpful. The ideal C4C staff are 'Passionate and caring workers in supportive team environments who achieve outcomes for children and families'

### 2. Management

Managers who are person centred, who work closely with staff, who recognise that special skill set needed to work in a C4C setting and who are emotionally intelligent are part of the C4C success story that supports staff wellbeing. Flexible working conditions and regular supervision are other successes for staff.

### 3. Government relationships

Support from the Department of Social Services is a success story enabling staff to do their best.

### 4. Outcomes for children and families

C4C success occurs when there are positive outcomes for children and families. For example, one Aboriginal mother who was a C4C service user, moved to C4C paid staff, and is now studying at university. C4C needs to allow a career pathway for clients and staff. The exponential growth of community partners from 7 to 29 at one site is another story of success.

## STAFF & STAFF WELL-BEING: SUMMARY

The multi and inter-disciplinary nature of C4C work poses workforce challenges in finding, recruiting and retaining appropriately skilled staff, particularly in smaller regional or remote sites. Short term contracts and program discontinuity also feed into recruitment and retention problems shaped by policy and funding cycles. Staffs skills include being able to respond to community diversity, identify and support complex needs for children and families, as well as being able to lead or work in teamwork with other service provider staff. Because staff can be exposed to distressed children and families, the risks of 'vicarious trauma', 'burn-out' and over work are high. Staff also experience risks of being identified and targeted in small communities if parents become highly distressed. C4C sites have faced these challenges by recognising the need to invest in staff well-being. This includes a leadership culture which values and invests in staff well-being, allows appropriate time for work to be done, is flexible, family-friendly, culturally safe, celebrates achievements and sustains optimism and persistence in times of difficulty. Fostering a care ethic which includes caring for others and 'self-care' is an important enabler. C4C sites which embrace and foster career pathways for community members to participate, train and join the services workforce are able to embed and extend close positive relationships with the communities they serve.

Recommendations for further improvement include:

- Resourcing a process to introduce and embed a care ethic (self-care and caring for others) in all C4C sites;
- Requiring C4C sites to quarantine a budget component for staff-well-being;
- Encourage a community empowerment and development approach to supporting 'client' parents to acquire skills to join the service provider workforce;
- Developing a predictable policy and funding cycle to support the greatest possible certainty for employers and staff.

# KEY THEME 4: PROJECTING THE VOICE OF COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN
## PROJECTING THE VOICE OF C4C: CHALLENGES
### 1. Need to develop a clear recognisable widely used identity/vision statement

C4C needs a single national logo so that it has unified brand, and a clear national identity as a single programme. We need 'one clear vision statement about what we are and what we do'. It also needs a budget line for promotion however there is never sufficient money. It is tricky for C4C programs to be represented clearly in the media because reporters ask, 'who do we acknowledge?' A national evaluation would enable successes to be delivered to government.

### 2. Lobbying

The C4C model is a challenging one to sell via lobbying because it does not allow individual sites 'to have their own voice'. WE need a communication strategy for all C4C sites. We need to engage more with peak bodies and find a way to have a voice in larger NGOs.

### 3. Planning without knowledge of government priority areas

Planning is difficult in the C4C model because it must occur before government policy priority areas are known. Governments change their policies without evidence bases, and the constant changes make consolidation difficult. They also change the kinds of data they want, so we need a better system to evaluate programs.

### 4. Management instability

Contract managers often come with their own lens for strategic direction re C4C activity delivery. Constant change of DSS managers, impacts on ability to build relationships with local C4C site.

### 5. Interagency understanding of C4C model needs developing

The C4C model is a process or strategy more than a discreet programme, and this uniqueness makes it difficult to explain to community and government decision makers/stakeholders. C4Cs need a specific team who are charged with the task of getting the word out. We also need to promote the C4C model internally so best practice can be showcased. Aboriginal voices are needed in the model. Sustainability of funding is an issue; you cannot promote a program and then find that there is no funding. It is important that community partners understand and value C4C and see themselves as part of it.

### 6. Staffing turnover

Staff turnover inhibits the development of coherent C4C identity. Staffs from the different Community Partner organisations need to comprehend the totality of C4C activity, the roles of the various partners and their own place within that. That is hard to do in a short time frame.

## PROJECTING THE VOICE OF C4C: CHANGE DRIVERS
### 1. Publication/media

C4C needs a marketing approach, with a national website though DSS, and access to all DSS sites, blogs, linked in, apps, a social media strategy, so a web designer is needed. C4C could have a national day of action to raise awareness. Publishable quality reports may also help to disseminate C4C work. Consistent branding is needed to make C4Cs and their work visible to business and community sectors. Partner organisations need to commit to the C4C brand as well as their own

organisation identity. There is a need to systemically develop an evidence base to influence stakeholders.

### 2. Funding

Governments want value for money and C4C cannot easily demonstrate the depth and breadth of the value they contribute to communities. Longer funding cycles allow more strategic long term vision and stability to further develop the programme.  C4Cs need to influence government through the public service and through relationships with local parliamentary representatives at state and federal levels.

## PROJECTING THE VOICE OF C4C: FACILITATORS

### 1. Evaluation

C4C needs to evaluate projects, collect data and find measurable indices like the AEDI to show improvements which can be published in the media.

### 2. Advocating

Advocacy is needed to showcase the work of C4C. There needs to be 'clear and consistent information at all levels regarding C4C policy and direction. C4Cs need to show that 'we are community driven and have significant value in bringing about most significant change'. A coordinating body like DSS may help.  Economic arguments need to be put. C4Csites could nominate a team member as media contact, and ask prominent community members to be C4C champions. We could also get community and facilitating partners to promote our great work. The media likes a story so we need to get good news stories out.

### 3. Networking

Networking by attending conferences and forums helps build relationships and develop a C4C identity. Participating organisations need to be able to signal their own brand AND their C4C activity.

## PROJECTING THE VOICE OF C4C: ACHIEVEMENTS/GOOD NEWS STORIES

### 1. Advocacy

Ongoing evaluations that provide narratives about C4C and its work, and best practice have been used to inform policy change.

### 2. Creating needed relationships/collaboration

C4C's wide and deep community connections are good news stories as is the fact that our community and facilitating partners walk alongside us. A community newsletter with 500 member distribution disseminates C4C work. Some sites have local champions who talk about C4C value, eg the Logan federal and state government members of parliament, and the local government mayor and the police.  Some sites have built the capacity of local agencies which has allowed silos to break down in an environment of competitive tendering. The WA C4C has worked with local Early Years groups to promote relationships with the corporate sector. We have developed mutuality with our Aboriginal staff so that we walk alongside each other, learning together.

### 3. Events/ publications

Some C4C great news stories include a safety net website for kids, an art competition, an e-training calendar, the national media use of a Tasmanian story on cyberbullying, the 'we grow them up' forum conducted with the NT East Arnhem facilitating partner, a dance troop visit that engaged the local children, presenting at conferences, producing a book, and DVDs about C4C impact on families'

health and education. The SA Children, Communities Connections conference produced a book that has gone to a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition and is in over 80 academic libraries.

## PROJECTING THE VOICE OF C4C: SUMMARY

The diversity, flexibility and adaptability of the C4C model has much to offer communities but is accompanied by the difficulties inherent in complexity.  Multiple organisations, sites, activities, practices and strategies mean that it is difficult to formulate a singular coherent 'voice' for the program.  Branding and messaging of the C4C program cuts across organisational and place based marketing to communities of stakeholders. These stakeholders include families, communities, local service providers, state and federal government departments, professional associations and issues-based organisations.  These diverse stakeholders require different information, packaged to meet their needs from C4C sites involving multiple providers, professionals, community needs and family characteristics. In practice there are therefore many different voices with a multiplicity of perspectives, practices, agendas and issues. Client records and outcomes remain in the files of participating organisations and partners, each held separately and inhibiting the flow of cumulative evidence with regard to outcomes for families. A family might engage with multiple organisations, different activities, different issues, different children, and their 'story' remains hidden. The longitudinal cumulative story is invisible and restricted to snippets held with different organisations. Finding ways to collect cumulative evidence and outcomes across services remains a key challenge in the need to find better ways to communicate the C4C program stories to stakeholders.

Recommendations for further improvement include:

- Form a peak body to provide a program level 'voice' for C4C sites to government and professional stakeholders and to assist with program branding and messaging.
- Develop an evidence sharing protocol which would enable holistic family stories to be told (with the family's consent and de-identified)
- Develop a research agenda across the C4C program and publish research in academic, professional and place based fora.

# KEY THEME 5: SOCIAL ISOLATION/ENGAGEMENT
## SOCIAL ISOLATION/ENGAGEMENT: CHALLENGES
### 1. Approach of C4C including language

There are many challenges for C4C in reducing social isolation and increasing engagement. Some families do not know about C4C, while others who have had unhappy experiences with other services take time to trust and gain confidence in C4C. Still others have a fear of services. Some families have needs yet are isolated and are hard to identify, eg FIFO families, those with antenatal health needs and those with domestic violence. Services need to be literate in trauma-informed practice. The language used by services, and their number may make them less accessible. Aboriginal families may not be well understood due to staff's low cultural competency. Once relationships/ connections with families are established they need to be maintained. A strengths based approach is the preferred approach in an environment where deficit abounds. Our services have limitations regarding their time, their budgets and emotional costs to staff.

### 2. Transport issues

Services may be difficult to access for families due to transport availability. Some families who might access services do not want neighbours to know that due to stigma so branding of transport is an issue. Weather and distance are issues in remote and regional areas.

### 3. Local, state and federal government issues

Government policy can inhibit creativity in responding to and engaging with families.

### 4. Family issues

There are many family reasons for isolation and lack of engagement. Feeling vulnerable, fear of being reported and children being removed means families may not engage with services, also the stigma of receiving services, or even of being a member of a community where services are offered. Groups are not always inclusive in the way that they operate and so may not welcome new members. 'Highly confident participants make the less confident ones feel self-conscious.' Programs are usually designed for mothers and so tend to exclude fathers. Transient families are also likely to be isolated.

## SOCIAL ISOLATION/ENGAGEMENT: CHANGE DRIVERS
### 1. Listening to child, family, client, community voices

Engagement with services can be increased when listening to community, parent and child voices is made a priority. Advisory groups can also assist. Services need to be flexible and 'mindful and reflective and responsive to family feedback'.

### 2. Relationship building

Engagement can also be increased when relationships are prioritized. Relationship building takes time but does build trust. Initiating links via social media and via community leaders of particular groups are other ways of building engagement.

### 3. Self-understanding by workers

Isolation can also be addressed when C4C staffs are aware of their own value systems, the perspectives and assumptions they bring to their work. This awareness assists recognition and valuing of diverse strengths.

### 4. Meeting families where they are

C4C and other such service organisations cannot expect people who need services to come to them. They need to engage with people where they are, in schools, day-care centres, play groups, out of school hours care, the outdoors. C4C workers need to model this approach to other services. Building on existing family strengths by asset mapping their social contacts is another approach, as is helping families without labelling to understand the reasons for their isolation.

### 5. Government factors

Government policy changes result in services coming and going, affecting family engagement. There is a need to build synergies between NGOs and governments. Sometimes government language such as 'vulnerable' can be stigmatizing for families.

### 6. Project framing

Programs that are most successful in engaging families are small in scale, staffed appropriately, and the community hears about it via word of mouth. It is best to involve families when the mother becomes pregnant.

### 7. Project characteristics

Many characteristics affect a project's success in engaging families. They need to have a community profile as fun and safe, and offer a tangible outcome to the client. They need to be inclusive and welcoming so that clients bring their friends. There needs to be a child health nurse available. They need to be culturally inclusive so clients can hear and tell the stories of meaning to their ethnicity. Fathers need to be welcome. They need to be linked with other community services like libraries, housing and Centrelink. They need to be serviced by transport, and they need to offer clients networking and training opportunities. Offering meals alongside the programme and even a 'Service Grandma' so that children can access food are other characteristics. Programs are threatened by unstable workforce and the demand for refugee settlement services that exceeds capacity.

## SOCIAL ISOLATION/ENGAGEMENT: FACILITATORS

### 1. Relationship development with families

Programs are facilitated in many ways. Listening to families and children about what social isolation means for them and responding in policy and practice builds trust. Relationships are central and time is needed for building and strengthening them. No wrong door, the identification and referring of clients to domestic violence support services, offering a teen pregnancy program, PPP programs for men with drug and alcohol issues, and peer support networks for families, are all facilitators. The way that the initial contact is made with families sets up a blueprint for the development and strengthening of the relationship. It is important to do it in way that is attuned to the family.

### 2. Making engagement in project/events fun

Universally offered fun activities are attractive to isolated families, such as BBQs and Play cafés, alongside a quick outcome, such as baby welcome packages.

### 3. C4C approach/ perspective

The C4C approach engages families as it offers what families value. It is flexible so caters for transient families. Its philosophical approach puts children at the centre of the model. It offers programs for children, not an adult service model, so the approach is soft and open rather than highly targeted and exclusive. It values staff cultural competence. It makes community links – for example with school principals - and often delivers health and community services from one site.

### 4. Finding and creating suitable spaces to engage with families

C4C outreaches into the community, engaging with families in supermarkets, shopping centres, caravan parks, schools, libraries, and visits families at home. It locates transport with programs, transport without logos to reduce possible stigma around programme participation. It makes safe spaces for difficult conversations, and builds bridges between schools and services. It also resources schools, making them hubs so they are better placed to refer families to services.

### 5. Communicating the services offered

There are many ways of communicating about services, including newsletters, social media, letter box drops, local radio, texting; however getting community leaders to be C4C champions is also very effective.

## SOCIAL ISOLATION/ENGAGEMENT: ACHIEVEMENTS/GOOD NEWS

### 1. Critical reflection capacity

C4C reflects on its own practices and changes as needed rather than relying on community feedback to achieve best practice.

### 2. Events and programs

These are some examples of ways C4Cs have engaged with families and reduced isolation:

- Raymond Terrace project, gardening, flying squad to help families build gardens if they agree to help others to do the same.
- Playgroup offered in Kempsey and now clients are taking leadership roles.
- Family by family and Adopt a grandparent activity.
- Working with schools to offer programs such as Play is the Way and Kimochis (emotional understanding and control developed and then holding parent evenings with free BBQ to engage parents

### 3. Strategies

Successful strategies to engage families and reduce their isolation include the following.

- Naming programs so they attract dads,
- Linking child's family with adult focused services,
- Building relationships with schools,
- Offering playgroups and toy swaps in shopping centres,
- Using community members as workers to connect with community groups eg. Sudanese worker brought in the Sudanese community,
- Paying dads to attend and undertake work eg. putting together an ezine, providing transport to and from programs, photographing families at events,
- Offering programs outdoors so they are more flexible, accessible and open, particularly to vulnerable families.

## SOCIAL ISOLATION/ENGAGEMENT: SUMMARY

Outreach to the places where families and children participate in community life and to their homes is an important strategy to raise community awareness of C4C sites and to encourage access to services and supports. Being aware of and responsive to family needs is also necessary if families are to find any value in engaging with C4C sites. Fun child-focused activities such as a playbus, toybag swap, comic book project, cooking and dancing sessions are just some of the ways C4C sites have sought to build community ownership. Activities and services need to be inclusive of fathers. Services have learned that judgemental, deficit-based languages and practices inhibit engagement. Targeted approaches to families with greatest needs can also stigmatise and keep them away. Soft entry 'universal' service gateways are necessary for families to build relationships, a sense of trust and safety and feel part of a community which values and cares for them. Cultural competence is fundamental to positive relationships which enable families to engage with services as needed. Because education is a universal service for families, schools provide an ideal community hub to build links with family support services.

Recommendations for further improvement include:

- Resourcing and requiring cultural competence training for the C4C workforce
- Recognising the value of creating/providing a community for families as an outcome in itself
- Ensuring that badging, messaging and marketing does not script a deficit view of families
- Promoting peer support and word of mouth engagement strategies

## Conclusion

The C4C program has created significant changes in the ways services for families and children are offered. The collaborative integrated model which links services in selected communities enables better access for families and children and mutual professional learning across services, creating opportunities for new understandings of how to work together. C4Cs work to break down isolation of particular groups dealing with a wide range of issues, including health issues, cultural minority status, lack of income and other family resources, transport and location issues and lack of knowledge in the community about the services which are on offer.

The successes of the Communities for Children program are diffuse and difficult to quantify as records for individuals may be held across a range of services. There is however evidence of the following good news outcomes for families:

- Families who had not previously engaged with services have responded positively to C4C community outreach activities.
- Families perceive themselves as benefiting from C4C engagement.
- Families welcome a universal access approach which does not stigmatize participants or proceed from deficit assessments or aim to 'fix' them.
- Community activities which are welcoming and offer wanted services or opportunities have high acceptance by families.
- Individuals are able to make the transition from service receiver to service provider when able and motivated to access appropriate education and training.

There are also notable good news outcomes for services in the following ways:

- Services learn about each other and how they can work together.
- Staffs develop collaborative skills and share ideas and strategies which work well.
- Co-operating services develop new cross-disciplinary practices.
- The whole of the C4C becomes greater than its component parts.

Together these good news outcomes create a powerful narrative of community services development assisting families, staffs and organisations for the benefit of the community in ways which are attuned to the place based needs of that community. The continuation of this approach promises cumulative development of skills, knowledge, resources and social capital which can pave the way to new levels of services achievement and co-operation in working with families.