



Inquiry Into Children With No One to Turn To

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UnitingCare Burnside's Recommendations

The submission attached from UnitingCare Burnside supports and expands the following recommendations to the inquiry.

1. UnitingCare Burnside supports the swift and effective enactment and resourcing of structures within Government which will support children having someone to turn to:

- full enactment of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998
- adequate financial resourcing of family support services and the Families First program, with a special emphasis on the funding of programs that strengthen bonding and attachment between children and their parents/caregivers. This will ensure that families are the first port of call for children to turn to.
- adequate resourcing of the Children's Guardian role to ensure the Guardian is an effective person to turn to for the State's most vulnerable children
- evaluations of services with roles in providing services to children and young people, to ensure their practice is evidence-based and effective
- implementation of recommendations from the Crime Prevention through Social Support Inquiry and other relevant inquiries
- development of adequate standards for youth work

2. UnitingCare Burnside supports appropriate and targeted support to agencies/ Departments involved in providing services to children and young people to:

- implement adequate training to workers on respectful work practice with children and young people, and effective advocacy for children and young people
- provide adequate wages and conditions for those who work with children and young people, thus increasing the community expectations of professionalism in this work and promoting staff stability in the sector
- provide adequate supervision and support for staff to ensure best practice in their relationships with children and young people
- provide venues, transport and working hours to access children and young people flexibly
- regularly assess and review programs to ensure scarce resources are being used effectively.

3. UnitingCare Burnside supports the development of government campaigns which validate and support the role of children within our communities, acknowledge their citizenship in the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1. Introduction

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is an Agency of the Uniting Church in NSW working with disadvantaged children, young people and families. Burnside provides services including out of home care, family counselling, family support, alternative dispute resolution in families, support for young people who are homeless and activities aimed at preventing child abuse and neglect. We welcome the opportunity to provide input to the Commission for Children and Young People, based on our experience in the field.

Burnside's Statement of purpose:

Burnside stands in the Uniting Church traditional of compassion and concern for justice. Our role is to enhance the life opportunities of disadvantaged children and families.

Our service goals are:

- ▶ To protect and nurture children and young people who are unable to live with their families by providing quality care;
- ▶ To develop preventative services aimed at children and young people at risk of abuse and/or admission to care;
- ▶ To strengthen the capacity of vulnerable young people and families within the community;
- ▶ To assist in the development of networks and self-help initiatives which support families and strengthen communities;
- ▶ To promote just and equitable social structure aimed at reducing causes of social disadvantage.

Burnside has been providing substitute care services since 1911 and has developed a range of other innovative programs that work with children and young people who are vulnerable or may have "no one to turn to". We pride ourselves on service innovation, respect for children, young people, and their families, and integrity in our service provision. We strive to be a best practice organisation and have sought to nurture a culture of critical scrutiny of our own programs, developing an evidence base for our programs and a child focussed approach to providing all of our services.

2. What does having no one to turn to mean?

Having no one to turn to has multiple meanings and contexts. A child or young person can feel entirely isolated in what others may perceive as a warm family environment. While poverty is a crucial factor in social isolation, there are children and young people who are comfortable materially, but still isolated and alone.

Burnside works with families to assist them to become supportive and empathic to the needs of their children and young people. Where it is not possible for the child or young person to turn to their family, Burnside works with the child and family to identify other supports. The Family Decision Making program (operating in partnership with DoCS in Western Sydney and Orana Far West) has developed a successful and productive structure for crisis work in this area.

We commend the Commission for asking children and young people themselves about what it means to them to have no one to turn to – because only they can tell us what it means.

The children and young people who access services in Burnside have often experienced high levels of stress and distress that are related to:

- Family conflict
- Abuse and neglect
- Lack of access to support in schools
- Homelessness
- Substance abuse (both their own and that of their families and significant others)
- Social security “breaching”, resulting in many young people having very reduced income or no access to income at all.

All these factors are barriers to children and young people finding trusted and consistent adults to share their problems and issues with, having ‘no-one to turn to’. These experiences often create a general feeling of alienation, and have impacts on health and well being, development, learning and life chances. In turn, many of these children experience isolation from their peers, are excluded from school or only allowed to attend school on a part time basis (“partial attendance”), become homeless or transient, and engage in a range of risk taking behaviours that may impact on their health. Burnside has researched the evidence for these statements in other publications.

Case Study

Maria is 16. She is currently accessing the living away from home benefit under Youth Allowance. Maria is living in supported accommodation for young people who need to live independently because of major personal issues that impact on their safety and wellbeing. Her relationships with both her mother and her father have deteriorated so far that she is unable to access any parental support and they are openly hostile towards her. Maria accesses support from Burnside to deal with the many stresses she faces as a young woman trying to create her own life without family and social support.

Maria is currently undertaking numeracy and literacy courses in order to assist her to undertake studies to gain the NSW Higher School Certificate. She has also been classified a "job seeker" under the Centrelink guidelines and must seek at least three jobs per week.

Maria describes her feelings as "overwhelming emotional stress". While she is successfully managing many competing priorities (such as providing all of her own food, paying bills, looking after her health), she wonders if it is fair that she should have so many cares at her young age and how much longer she will be able to deal with her personal experiences and maintain her capacity to study and seek work.

3. Children's Citizenship

The main barrier to children and young people being able to access the information and support they need is the way our society views them as 'less than' full citizens, with limited rights within the wider society. This view is challenged by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular the key element of participation (Article 12) which sets out the child's right to express their views in all matters affecting the child, and the child's right to be heard. The Convention affirms that a child's views should be valued, and to be valued children must be heard. To be heard, children must be invited to participate in decisions made in ways they understand (Rayner, 1995).

The fact that the Convention has not been incorporated into Australian federal domestic legislation reflects the lack of commitment by the federal government to this important point of inclusion. If there is no support for a concept from the nation's leaders, it is difficult to engender it at other levels.

Burnside believes that creating the conditions for enabling children to exercise their citizenship rights is the most important pathway to inclusion of children and young people (particularly those who have experienced economic, social and educational disadvantage) in the community in a way that is centred on their needs and desires.

Burnside believes that citizenship is the experience of being a valued contributor and participant in the social world. A citizen is a person who by their contribution to daily experiences, is enriched by and enriches the life of our community and as a participant in decision making processes has a share in our community. The rights of citizens are protected and opportunities are available for them to access information and education to participate in the full life of the community. Citizenship brings with it a range of responsibilities and reciprocity of experience that creates strong and dynamic social interactions (Burnside 1999).

The key to the exercise of citizenship is effective relationships. We believe that relationships offer children the opportunity to learn and practice social interaction and define a sense of themselves within a broader social context. The experience of relationships precedes the exercise of citizenship. When children are denied the opportunity for healthy, supportive relationships, this may have a strong impact on their future engagement in the community as citizens.

Relationships should be based on children and young people's expressed needs, be sustained and lead to a range of other relationships, with other individuals, groups and the very social institutions that will change the way children and young people in need will be dealt with. Relationships are interactive and are the crucial underpinning of citizenship.

Therefore, there is a critical need that opportunities for relationships and a concerted effort to provide opportunities to gain the social/personal skills that come out of relationships, be developed and focussed on those children and young people who have no one to turn to.

Burnside believes that it is important to provide opportunities for children and young people to learn social skills which will help them engage successfully with their peers and other adults (see the Case Study 'Skills for Life Children's Group', following).

Burnside therefore believes that the main barriers to children and young people accessing the supports and information they need in society are:

- The issues of unequal power and respect
- The limited body of knowledge on how to involve children
- Changes within society which have resulted in increased alienation of parents and extended family as the 'first port of call' for children and young people in distress.

Hart (1992) argues the validity of children's input despite their differing levels of communication, and states that the onus is therefore on practitioners to find methods that help them speak about issues of interest to them in ways most comfortable to them. Burnside supports this approach, and incorporates it into our organisation's culture.

Case Study: Skills for Life Children's Group

The children's groups run at Burnside's Airds/Bradbury Family Centre work with children and their families who have experienced many aspects of social disadvantage, such as social isolation, economic disadvantage and unemployment.

Skills for Life, a social skills program for children, is focussed on children with limited social skills that are negatively impacting on their behaviour. The group is designed to provide a positive experience for the children, focussing on developing life skills and building on children's existing strengths and life experiences.

The group uses a number of strategies to engage children and develops clear expectations for behaviour in the group. Group leaders model respectful ways of relating to one another and to other children and use a range of strategies to resolve conflict. For many of the children participating in the group, it is a new opportunity to develop positive styles of personal interaction.

While these groups are fun, they also enable children to develop the skills they need to engage positively with the world. This is particularly important in helping children to become connected to schools, other caring adults and social groups - which is crucial for positive experiences of school and personal achievement in school. The skills the groups aim to enable children to develop and practice include making friends, developing relationships with teachers and parents, coping with stress, becoming more aware of how their behaviour affects other people and developing confidence and self-esteem.

Case Study: Mentoring at DOORWAYS

Burnside DOORWAYS is based in Dubbo and provides an accommodation, support and referral service for young people ages 16 – 25 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. DOORWAYS is a drop-in centre that includes assistance with accessing and brokering accommodation, referrals to other services, casework, a mentoring project and a health clinic in partnership with local GP's through the Division of General Practice.

The mentoring project addresses one of the issues highlighted in a review of DOORWAYS in 1999. The reviewer found that "all clients are without significant family or friendship networks that sustain them emotionally. Most clients do not have strong confident adults who act as role models assisting them..." (Kirilik 1999).

The mentoring project recruits, trains and supports volunteers who share Burnside's values and are committed to how DOORWAYS works. Those mentors are screened and trained and matched up with young people who access DOORWAYS who are interested in the program. More than 15 mentors have been matched with young people since the beginning of 2000. The Mentor Support Worker provides ongoing training and support to the mentors.

The mentor's relationship with the young person ranges from casual meetings, to closer relationships. Mentors provide practical support to young people through offering them someone to talk to on the phone, visiting the young person at home (particularly for young women with small children), going out for dinner and in several cases even offering accommodation.

Young people's experiences of mentoring show that the key aspects of mentoring are relationship building and the connections with other people and organisations that help the young people become part of the community. This kind of relationship builds in young people a capacity to exercise their citizenship rights.

4. Structural Approaches to Effective Support of Children and Young People

Whilst in an ideal world children and young people would, no doubt, turn to their personal networks to help eg family, extended family, friends, there are some children and young people who unfortunately do not have these supports. Therefore agencies such as Burnside need to be pro-active and responsive in order to gain the trust of this group.

Burnside is committed to basing its approaches and programs on evidence from Australia and overseas, and to regular evaluation of its programs in order to ensure that a culture of participation is active within the agency.

4.1 Investing in Relationships & Services

Within Burnside, our core values drive our organisational culture and thus the way we provide our services. Our core values are: **Respect, Integrity, Innovation, Care and Equity.**

We believe that the way we work helps children and young people with no one to turn to find someone they can trust, build up relationships with workers and peers. It is also crucial to assisting families to help them become more supportive and empathic to their children.

4.2 Investing in programs

Burnside invests in innovative programs that are consistent with our strategic direction and meet the expressed needs of the communities we work in. We also ensure that the programs for which we are funded by government are run with a focus on the children, young people and families for whom the services are available, and invest in extra provision where this is necessary.

Burnside has also invested in contracting well evaluated overseas programs such as NEWPIN, and has carefully monitored its adaptation to the Australian environment. When developing and choosing programs, a strong evidence base is essential. Burnside urges all government departments in NSW to adopt a similar approach rather than ad hoc funding of 'pilot programs' followed by no evaluation and either no further funding or wider application, depending on the political decision. It is irresponsible to waste scarce resources which could be targeted at effectively meeting the needs of children and young people in NSW.

4.3 Investing in people

Burnside invests in the people who work in our organisation, ensuring that we recruit and maintain the best staff. This means that we offer salaries that reflect the seriousness of the work being undertaken, put in place staff development and supervision opportunities, and work on ensuring that we are clear about our expectations for people in all positions.

People who work with children and young people are not valued for the important contribution they make to the children they work with and the community as a whole. Adequate wages and conditions for these workers are an essential first step to raising their status and thus their skills and knowledge base.

4.4 Commitment to advocacy and social justice

As an agency we encourage our staff to be active advocates for the people who use our services, and to facilitate clients in advocating for themselves within systems. We also invest in a program that pursues social justice through broader policy, research and advocacy aimed at influencing social policy and advocating for structural change in the interests of children, young people and families.

4.5 A culture of participation

The participation of children and young people in services is part of the culture of our agency. We firmly believe that participation is a way of working that is based on building relationships founded on respect and trust. This involves sensitivity to any potential barriers to participation as well as the active development of skills to support participation in both workers and the people who use our services.

Agencies can create and maintain environments in which children and young people are unable to have their voice heard. Meetings can be arranged at inappropriate times, venues can suit the needs of the adults rather than children, and transport can fail to be arranged. Information can be withheld, jargon and terminology used as a barrier. These are all aspects of the unwillingness of adults to share power with children in decisions that affect their lives.

Burnside is currently developing a major piece of research on how to hear the voices of children and young people in out-of-home care, in collaboration with Dr Jan Mason from the University of Western Sydney, and with a SPIRT grant.

4.6 Working with what children and young people want

We believe that children and young people are experts in their own lives and that by enabling them to articulate what they want, and then working with that, is the only way that we can provide a service that meets their own needs.

Effective consultations and the development of positive relationships between workers and children and young people address these barriers. Effective agencies embed a culture of inclusion within their work with children and young people.

4.7 Continuous monitoring and improvement

We constantly review and monitor our work, looking for opportunities for growth and ways to use program resources more effectively. This includes using independent evaluations of programs, encouraging internal review and being prepared to change the services we offer to better meet the needs of the community in which we work.

The other important aspect of our work is that we help children and young people identify adults/services who can help them and develop relationships with their peers that may be of assistance when difficulties arise.

5. Program Approaches to Effective Support of Children and Young People

There are a number of themes that underlie all of our programs, and we believe that major investment in these areas is necessary to meet the needs of children and young people with no one to turn to in NSW. These themes are:

- Getting in early
- Never giving up
- Building trusting relationships
- Advocacy and Partnership
- Creativity

5.1 Getting in Early

A conventional approach to getting in early means early intervention in child abuse and neglect, early intervention in pathways and early identification in problems related to school, mental health etc. However, we also believe that getting in early also means getting in early with parents to help them learn to tune into the needs of their children through support, activities like play groups, parent education and involvement in early childhood education.

There is firm evidence of long term positive results from early intervention in child abuse and neglect for preventing child abuse and neglect and contributing to long term positive outcomes for children's health and educational outcomes.

Professionally run early intervention projects are crucial to support families to become more focussed on the needs of their children and develop skills to assist with parenting, help children learn social, interactive skills to use at school in order to combat disadvantage.

Case Study: Kidzone at Burnside Family Learning Centre, Ermington

Children need a degree of positive self-esteem combined with a capacity for seeing other's points of view in order to participate in larger social groups (Hart, 1992). In services such as the Early Learning Centre, the focus is on the children at risk within the education system developing mastery over their communication skills, building friendship networks and asking peers for help when needed. Groups for the development of social skills in vulnerable populations increase their sense of power and competence within potentially hostile systems such as the Department of Education.

Case Study: NEWPIN's Family Play Program

Burnside's NEWPIN program works with very disadvantaged and vulnerable parents in Bidwill and Doonside in Sydney's western suburbs. This Program builds supportive networks with children and parents.

The Family Play Program re-connects parents with their children through positive interactions in play, rebuilding relationships and creating stimulating experiences to enhance children's development.

The Family Play Program helps parents become aware of and responsive to children's needs through play. Family Play gives parents and children opportunities to build their self esteem and enhance their relationship.

5.2 Never Giving Up

Children and young people who access our services often have behavioural, mental health or other problems arising from their experiences. This results in a high level of disruptive and acting out behaviours as the children and young people develop trust in us as part of their environment.

Just as families try to be there for their children in need, our programs try to be there for the child or young person regardless of their behaviours. While the behaviours may need modifying, in order to ensure that the child or young person is safe and able to participate in their community, the child or young person is valued for who they are.

An important aspect of not giving up is ensuring that services are not able to screen out "problem" young people. Services think of young people with problems, not problem young people.

High Intensity Services and Aftercare

We have had spectacular results in the High Intensity Programs through keeping on with young people. Burnside has committed itself to working with the most vulnerable children and young people in the out of home care system through our work in contracted services. Through episodes of violence, rejection, illegal behaviours and acting out far beyond the norm in out-of-home care, in Burnside workers have maintained the view that there is always a space for that young person to return to when issues are resolved. Many young people have maintained contact with workers long after they have left services, and still seek them out for help with issues or to celebrate successes with, as they would families.

Case Study: Family and Youth Services (Western Sydney)

In 1997 the FAYS (Family & Youth Services) program was transformed from a residential, family restoration service into to a non-residential service offering casework, community placements and ongoing support. Each caseworker works intensively with a small number of young people. In a recent external evaluation of the program, young people said their outcomes included:

- *stability of placement after instability/insecurity*
- *family reunification*
- *improved self esteem*
- *improved relationships with family members*
- *educational improvement, securing employment and viable independence.*

One service provider commented:

“Burnside go above and beyond- they are there for the young person....They can use crises to facilitate change, very hands on, face to face relationship building..”

Schools have, until recently been downplayed as a primary agency with a key role in enhancing the child's sense of connectedness to their community. According to a US study by Resnick et al (1997,p.6) school and schooling is perceived by the child as the '*primary source of connectedness with adults, and with the broader community as perceived and experienced by the adolescent*'. Burnside seeks to support this vital link between young people and their community through active support for positive educational outcomes.

Case Study: Marnie's Story

Marnie is a young Aboriginal woman who is almost sixteen and has been in a Burnside High Intensity Program for about eighteen months. When Marnie came to Burnside, she had not attended school for fifteen months. Her school attendance since primary school had been erratic and transitory as her family had moved around a lot. Marnie has an extremely troubled background including extreme abuse and neglect, homelessness and as a result has serious issues with anger management. When she was placed with foster carers through Burnside, Marnie had already been excluded from one of the local high schools. That high school refused to have her back. The other local high school said that if Marnie was able to prove herself in a another setting by establishing a pattern of attendance over six months, they would consider "taking her on".

Burnside placed a very high value on Marnie's desire to attend school and her right to have access to educational opportunities. We believed that whatever needed to happen should happen to facilitate her return to education. This required an absolute commitment to following through with Marnie's wishes and not giving up on Marnie's education.

Initially, Marnie was able to attend an education program through an Aboriginal youth program. Marnie had been involved in that program before and while the program were happy to include her, they were sceptical about the possibility of changes to Marnie's behaviour. Burnside was very involved with the program in order to support Marnie and her foster carers (both permanent and respite).

Burnside met fortnightly with the program and paid for extra teachers and excursions as necessary. Marnie completed that program in 1998 and showed enormous commitment to continuing on in order to go to high school.

At the beginning of 1999 Marnie, Marnie's foster family, and Marnie's Burnside caseworker had to find another appropriate educational program outside the school education system. Marnie participated in an adult educational program that was aimed at young people who were unable to go to school. As part of that program she was able to attain a certificate that showed she had achieved certain competencies that were comparable with school standards.

Marnie started attending a local high school for three mornings a week, having shown a consistent level of attendance and commitment at other programs. Marnie attended the high school for three mornings per week for a month and progressively increased her hours there. Marnie had to work very hard to manage her anger and cope with the institutional setting and although this was very challenging for her, she stayed in the school for most of the year.

Going to school helped Marnie's self esteem enormously and she says she felt "normal" and part of the crowd, an experience that was very new for her. Marnie was invited to sleep over at a friend's house for the first time during her first month in school.

Marnie chose not to return to school this year, but she believes that the experience has been very valuable and she is now attending a TAFE course that allows her to attend in a flexible way and access support from an Aboriginal outreach worker. Marnie is also living independently with support from her foster family and continued support (at least weekly contact) from her Burnside worker.

5.3 Building Trusting Relationships

Having someone to turn to involves trust. Helping young people trust (as much as their experiences allow) is vital to the whole process of engagement and in long-term relationship building.

Importantly, this trust (if the child's family cannot provide this) should be with workers and services, but also beyond service providers - this links to building communities and families to help children and young people make connections. (Child Protection Council, 1997).

Trust is developed if adults demonstrate an ability to listen to and hear what young people and children are saying, and make the effort to communicate in ways appropriate to children and young person's communication skills. Trust is developed when adults demonstrate respect for the child or young person's ideas, and for their place as citizens in society. Trust is developed when adults take time to explain confusing issues to children and young people, and listen to and act on their concerns.

Study Centres: *On Track* in Macarthur

On Track Study Centres provide support to young people who experience social and educational disadvantage in the Macarthur region.

Youth workers previously attached to The Drum Youth Drop-in Centre are now based in the study centres. They help students who would like support, information, advocacy or someone to talk to about difficulties. Youth workers may offer assistance on a one on one basis or in groups.

Youth workers are reporting that young people are connecting with them and approaching them with many personal and school related issues.

5.4 Advocacy and Partnership

Advocacy is a crucial part of our service and leads to building credibility and giving young people a sense that someone is on their side. It is also about development of strategies that will see change in the long term through changing young people's circumstances (eg. access to accommodation, social security), and in helping young people develop the skills to access services (eg. counselling, health). It is important for children and young people to gain skills in advocating for themselves - ie building up self confidence, self esteem and social skills (exercising citizenship), and also building up a network of people to turn to, as no service can offer this alone.

Burnside's social justice focus demonstrates that it is important to work both systemically and individually, and our service gives support to workers who advocate for children and young people through time, debriefing, training and advice.

Partnership with other services eg. NSW Health, the Department of Education, the Department of Community Services, are all seen as essential by Burnside in order to deliver the most comprehensive services to children, young people and their families. Partnerships help focus agencies on putting aside differences to work on providing the best service for the child or young person. It has been demonstrated that 'cultures of blame' easily develop between agencies working in the same areas with the same populations (Scott et al, 1999), and partnerships actively work against this in the best interest of the client.

In a paper presented at the Youth Models Conference in Adelaide, 1999, Anne Heath, the then Acting Manager for Youth Services and Aftercare in South-West Sydney identified the following reasons for working collaboratively in partnerships:

- collaborative work maximises resources and allows service delivery by a small team in a large area
- collaborative work assists all services to develop consistent work practices despite different agency philosophies
- collaborative work practices allow key workers to have a major impact on decision making in other agencies and departments
- collaborative work allows young people more choice in negotiating for service
- collaboration reduces duplication of work
- collaboration promotes integrated service delivery.

Where resources are scarce, it is obvious that the best, and most ethical, way of maximising them in order to ensure there are people there when children and young people at risk need them is through collaboration with other government or non-government agencies focused on the needs of the child.

Case Study: Mobile Youth Krisis Service (MYKS)

MYKS is a youth suicide prevention initiative in partnership with NSW Health on the Central Coast.

MYKS works in partnership with many other services - trying not to separate out "suicide" from other issues a young person may have.

MYKS believe that when a young person discloses feelings of despair and raises suicide with a worker they trust, it is important to respect that trust and not "pass young people on". Therefore, MYKS resources workers to keep them connected with young people in crisis as well as offering direct work with young people until the crisis has passed.

MYKS advocates strongly and persistently for young people to get the services they need after a crisis has passed.

5.5 Creativity

Creativity and flexibility needs to exist at all levels of service delivery in order to best meet the information and support needs of children and young people.

Within interpersonal interactions, *workers* with children and young people need to have:

- time, to listen and hear the concerns
- an ability to use venues where children and young people are most comfortable (NOT offices)
- the ability to ensure that the child/young person has access to a variety of avenues to express their concerns eg theatre, art, dance.
- knowledge of wider avenues and supports the child or young person can access
- the ability to explain options according to the child's communication skills
- respect for the child or young person's decisions
- understanding of when it is appropriate for the child or young person to have the final say, and when it is not.

The *system* the worker is part of needs to provide:

- a flexible approach to working with children and young people: emphasis on outcomes, not highly structured inputs
- transport available for workers to go to children and young people, not always expecting them to come to the worker
- 'soft entry point' services eg drop in centres, study centres, fast food venue, where children and young people will feel comfortable
- flexible working hours to meet the needs of children and young people at critical times
- supervision to ensure respectful and professional practice, and to debrief workers
- regular assessment and evaluation of programs to ensure scarce resources are not being wasted in the delivery of information and support to children and young people.

It is easier to be creative and flexible when the organisational focus is on supporting the child and young person, and not on strategies which support bureaucratic processes.

Case Study: The Bridge Health Clinic

The Bridge is a health clinic that aims to give young people who are homeless greater access to health care. The Bridge is a partnership between Burnside DOORWAYS and the Dubbo/Western Plains Division of General Practice.

Young people aged 12 – 24 years, whether or not they are clients of DOORWAYS, can access the clinic for free (with or without a Medicare card). A roster of GP's from the local area work from a room at DOORWAYS two afternoons a week. Half of the time is available for "drop-in", and the other half for appointments.

The GPs and workers at DOORWAYS are planning to work collaboratively including regular joint team meetings.

Case Study - Woraninta

Woraninta is a word from an Aboriginal language that means 'to play with the children'. Woraninta is a playgroup for children and their parents who attend the Coopers Cottage Methadone Maintenance Unit.

Parents using the service had asked for a group for their children and themselves to participate in while they were attending the Unit. The parents expressed their concerns about the affect that regularly attending the Methadone Clinic and witnessing them receiving their Methadone was having on their children. They also raised their concern about their children following the same path of substance abuse and felt that a playgroup would be a good start for addressing some of these issues. Burnside was approached to become involved and after undertaking research in the area discovered that there was a need for this kind of service.

Given the difficulties and isolation experienced by children whose parents are drug using (such as social isolation, exclusion by peers), Burnside saw this as an excellent opportunity to access families who were very isolated and often had difficulties engaging with mainstream services.

The service is funded by Burnside and provides weekly play sessions at Coopers Cottage Methadone Maintenance Unit in Campbelltown for children 0 – 6 years (although older children frequently attend, particularly in school holidays).

The weekly play sessions are based around short play activities for the children and offer parents an information source on parenting and children's activities. Free tea and coffee is available for the parents. Initially only allowing their children to participate while they received their methadone dose, the parents gradually developed trust with the staff and began to stay longer, often involving themselves in their child's play. In the early days of the play group, the parent's focus of discussion had been on aspects of the drug subculture they were involved in, but over time their interest and enthusiasm for information and discussion about their children's growth and development became the primary topic for discussion.

The interaction between the staff and the parents allowed staff to plan activities that were suited to the needs and interests of the group. Parents were asked about the type of activities they wanted, the suitable format for the group, the frequency of sessions and the most suitable day for the sessions. By demonstrating that this information had actually been incorporated into the planning and provision of the sessions, parent's input was validated and a sense of ownership developed.

Parents and children began to ask for ideas to do at home, for information about children's behaviour and development, for assistance with enrolment in preschool and school. Children proudly took home craft and art works. Parents requested recipes for play dough and paint.

Immunisation and early childhood health clinics are also held during some weekly sessions, facilitating contact between participants and other services. Handouts on children's growth and development were also available for parents.

Parents also approached staff at the playgroups to discuss particular issues that were arising with their children and were referred to other Burnside programs or other organisations for assistance.

At the end of the first program in 1996, many of the parents had regularly attended the playgroup and there was a tangible growth in positive relationships between parents and their children. As a result, Burnside developed the Woraninta Kit (with the assistance of the Child Protection Council of NSW), which provides the resources for running a Woraninta group.

6. Conclusion

Burnside suggests the following strategies to transform agencies into more child and young people focussed services:

- expectations by funding authorities should include regular program evaluations, using feedback from the children and young people involved in the service
- programs and agencies should regularly examine research and program evaluations for best practice strategies for working with children and young people, and that all programs are evidence-based
- agencies should provide training and supervision for all staff involved in listening and talking with children and young people to ensure they have access to the latest research and strategies in this area, and that their interactions are respectful and open
- wages and conditions for workers with children and young people are adequate to ensure the quality, consistency and creativity of staff in this area
- standards should be developed and applied to all services working with children and young people, and should include an emphasis on open and respectful communications with children and young people.
- agencies and Departments that already target their services to children and young people eg children's services, Department of Education, must be aware of their important role in supporting children with no-one to turn to, and work in partnership with other agencies to ensure the needs of these children and young people are best met.

7. References

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