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# EVALUATION

## National *Good Beginnings* Parenting Project Executive Summary



SOCIAL SYSTEMS  
& EVALUATION

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# EVALUATION OF THE GOOD BEGINNINGS VOLUNTEER HOME VISITING PROGRAM

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program is a major strategy of the *Good Beginnings* National Parenting Project whose goal is the creation of models of best practices to assist parents in building their self-confidence to raise healthier, happier children.

### On parenting and lack of support

Early experiences and the quality of nurturing and cognitive stimulation that a child receives in the first few years of life have a huge impact in later life. These early years are the period of most rapid brain development. Lack of early nurturing, chaotic and cognitively impoverished environments and intra-familial violence can result in failure to learn, emotional and relationship difficulties and a pre-disposition to impulsive and violent behavior (Perry 1997).

Families are the primary source of care, love and intellectual stimulation for young children, supported ideally by a network of extended family, friends and by good quality and accessible services. However, many parents today are isolated and lack support networks to help them in the difficult and highly demanding task of parenting.

Early intervention programs like home visiting are one way of supporting parents. Home visiting services have a long history in Britain and Europe and are becoming increasingly popular in the United States and in Australia as a strategy to address some of the difficulties faced by today's families.

### The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program

In 1996 the Minister for Family Services gave a development grant to the Lions Club of Greater Sydney (now joined with the Lions Club of Sydney) to develop a national approach to parenting education built around the creation of a network of *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Programs. The National Parenting Project was the result. The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program itself was originally developed as a Lions Club of Greater Sydney project. The Commonwealth Government funds the National Parenting Project, which is managed by NAPCAN under license from the Lions Club of Sydney.

The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program is a universal service provided free of charge to parents with babies or small children.

Families who choose to use the Program and who meet the criteria are linked to trained volunteers known as community parents. The volunteers are drawn from the local geographic area and are parents themselves. Once linked to a family the volunteers visit regularly to offer support, information and friendship. A coordinator recruits, trains and provides support and supervision to the volunteers.

Four *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Programs were established to test the effectiveness of volunteer home visiting in enhancing parenting skills for families with new babies and young children in distinctly different but disadvantaged communities. The pilot programs are located in inner western Sydney (New South Wales - urban), Katherine (Northern Territory - remote), Hobart (Tasmania - remote urban) and Moe (Victoria - rural).

The Program has been successfully implemented at all pilot sites and even at this early stage the evaluation has demonstrated very positive outcomes for families and local communities

## **Parents have been assisted**

Parents participating in the *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program were typically isolated, lacking support networks and often highly stressed. They hoped for guidance, support and companionship from *Good Beginnings*.

Nearly all had their hopes met. Mothers spoke about 'having found a friend' and gained 'little bit of sanity'. For many mothers *Good Beginnings* broke down the isolation they felt by providing companionship and 'someone to talk to'. They were supported, reassured and encouraged by the volunteers. Having a volunteer visit made a difference to the way the mothers (or fathers as the case may be) coped with day-to-day parenting and home routines.

Apart from general help and support, parents also acquired parenting skills. In many instances the volunteers acted as mentors to parents. They worked on sleeping problems, they helped parents tackle behaviour problems in older children, they modeled playing and reading to the children, they showed mothers that going to the park can be fun and they introduced them to local amenities,

Referring agencies confirmed that *Good Beginnings* had had a positive impact on the families that they had referred. Many workers saw as an important aspect of the Program that it provided 'someone there for the parents' and there were stories of significant personal growth as a result. Workers also corroborated that *Good Beginnings* had provided parents with information about relevant services and had linked them to services such as playgroups and child care that they may not otherwise have felt able to access.

While the *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program works with fathers as well as mothers, although not as frequently, there is a dearth of programs that address parenting issues for fathers and prospective fathers. The Moe and Hobart Volunteer Home Visiting Programs are testing initiatives for men in their role as parents and carers, which are showing promise.

### **A different and complementary service**

Concern is sometimes expressed about using volunteers for programs like *Good Beginnings*. This concern appears to be based on apprehension that they may be used inappropriately to provide a service that should be provided by professional paid staff.

*Good Beginnings* works in close collaboration with local agencies that provide services to families with babies and young children and the evidence is that it provides a different but complementary service to them. It has freed professionals from having to take on a 'befriender' or support role that they considered inappropriate for themselves. They welcomed it as providing additional support to the professional support they provided. The parents saw the volunteers as friends.

### **Quality, flexibility and cultural sensitivity**

*Good Beginnings* has worked in four diverse sites – urban, isolated urban, rural and isolated. While the Program has remained fundamentally consistent there have been subtle adjustments that have enabled it to respond to local needs.

The training, support and supervision of the volunteers are of a very high standard. The training program has been designed for the Australian context and volunteers found it comprehensive and relevant to their role as home visitors. Policies, procedures and the training program are well documented.

*Good Beginning* is piloting a program for Vietnamese parents to test the appropriateness of *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting in this cultural context. Funds have been received to pilot the program in an urban Aboriginal community. In each case there has been extensive prior consultation and *Good Beginnings* has been sensitive and responsive to cultural issues.

### **Community 'connectedness' and social capital**

Evidence is already emerging of improved community support networks for families and increased social capital in sites as a result of the *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program.

The impact of *Good Beginnings* on Clarendon Vale, a particularly disadvantaged community is likely to be very great both as a result of the *Good Beginnings* sponsored Clarendon Connect Program and of *Good*

*Beginnings* itself. The empowerment of local women who worked together on a *Good Beginnings* committee has already been noticed by agencies in contact with them.

## **Sustainability**

As well as creating and testing models of best practice (including volunteer home visiting) the *Good Beginnings* National Parenting Project has been testing whether programs like the *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program can become self-sustaining. At the National Office level *Good Beginnings* has been very successful. Current fund raising has virtually ensured that the National Office will be able to continue beyond the year 2000 and well over half a million dollars has been raised to expand the *Good Beginning* Volunteer Home Visiting Program to new sites.

The process of achieving sustainability at the pilot sites has been slower as local management committees have had difficulty coming to grips with the expectations placed on them for fund raising. However despite a slow start local management committees are now beginning to put in place fund raising strategies. Nevertheless it is still unclear whether self-sustainability is achievable at all pilot sites within the next twelve months.

## **Conclusions and recommendation**

The evaluation has demonstrated very positive outcomes for families and communities from the *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Program. It is now set to expand and should be supported to do so.

In view of the difficulties that disadvantaged communities face in fund raising it is recommended that the Commonwealth Government subsidy to existing *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting sites be extended to three years.