
EVALUATION

National *Good Beginnings* Parenting Project Executive Summary



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting and Parenting Program was developed in Australia and has as its goal:

The creation of a caring environment with families, communities, service agencies and governments working together so that children can achieve their full potential.

Research has shown that the experience and quality of nurturing and cognitive stimulation that children have in their first few years of life have a profound effect on their later wellbeing. Poor parenting in these early years can have adverse effects in later life.

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

Early intervention programs like home visiting are one way of supporting parents.

The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting and Parenting Program

In 1996 the Minister for Community Services gave a development grant of \$60,000 to the Lions Club of Greater Sydney¹ to develop a national approach to parenting education built around the creation of a network of *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting Programs.

Good Beginnings subsequently established volunteer home visiting programs in four sites late in 1997 with the aim of testing the effectiveness of volunteer home visiting in enhancing the parenting skills of parents with babies and small children. The four sites were Katherine (Northern Territory), inner Western Sydney (New South Wales), Hobart (Tasmania) and Moe (Victoria).

Successive Commonwealth Ministers for Family Services have funded the program, which until November 28, 1999 was managed by NAPCAN under licence from the Lions Club of Sydney. *Good Beginnings* Australia, an incorporated company established as a Public Benevolent Institution now manages *Good Beginnings* under licence.

The *Good Beginnings* Volunteer Home Visiting and Parenting Program is a universal free service to parents with babies or small children. Families who choose to use the Program and who meet the criteria are linked to trained

¹The Lions Club of Greater Sydney has now joined with the Lions Club of Sydney.

volunteers known as community parents. The volunteers come 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 and/or family support worker recruits, trains, supports and supervises the volunteers.

Rapid Growth

The pilot stage *Good Beginnings* Home Visiting and Parenting program finished in November 1998. The evaluation of this stage showed that the program was reaching isolated parents who lacked social support and were highly stressed. Parents and referring agencies reported very positive outcomes from *Good Beginnings'* intervention.

Good Beginnings has grown rapidly since then and now includes two Men's Programs, a program targeting prisoners who are parents, a major community development project (Clarendon Vale Connect), an Aboriginal program, a school based interagency project and two additional volunteer home visiting and parenting programs. A combination of Commonwealth funding and donations from private foundations and other sources have made these developments possible.

The current evaluation, which covers the period from 1997 to 1999 inclusive, focuses on the four original sites, including the Men's Programs at those sites and Clarendon Vale Connect.

Versatile and adaptable

The original *Good Beginnings* sites were chosen because their diversity enabled testing of the volunteer home visiting model in distinctly different communities. After two years each site has developed varied services to meet local needs and conditions. Home visiting, however, has remained the core of *Good Beginnings* at each site.

Across all sites, *Good Beginnings* received 410 referrals over the approximately two year period, mostly for home visiting although in Katherine for other services as well. Referrals to Hobart and inner Western Sydney (urban) were over double those to Moe (rural) and Katherine (remote). *Good Beginnings* provided home visiting and/or family support type services to 53% of the families referred. Lack of volunteers severely limited the number of families inner Western Sydney could visit.

Typically parents (mainly mothers) visited by *Good Beginnings* were isolated, depressed, stressed and lacking social and emotional support. Except in Katherine where the percentage was higher, only about half those visited were first time mothers. In Hobart and Moe about 40% were single parents. In inner Western Sydney 29% of those visited were multiple births. Parents were usually referred to *Good Beginnings* by health and other professionals for support or because they were isolated.

Emotional and Practical Support

Parents were very positive about *Good Beginnings*. Ninety-three percent of those interviewed felt that having *Good Beginnings* visit had been worthwhile for them. Ninety-eight percent would recommend the program to other families.

Two clear themes emerged about what made *Good Beginnings* worthwhile for parents. Firstly, *Good Beginnings* had provided them with emotional support – someone to talk to, reassurance and companionship. Secondly, it had given them some practical support with their babies and small children. In inner Western Sydney *Good Beginnings* had helped parents get out of the house to go to the shops or to appointments, to playgroup or the park.

The things that made *Good Beginnings* worthwhile for parents closely reflected what they had wanted from *Good Beginnings* and what the professionals referring them had expected *Good Beginnings* to provide. The themes represent logical responses to the reasons for referral and are consistent with some of the research on postnatal depression.

In Katherine *Good Beginnings* provided the Positive Parenting Program, family support and supervised access as well as home visiting. These services were well regarded by parents and professionals alike. Family Youth and Children's Services made several referrals to *Good Beginnings* for family support and other services where serious child abuse was an issue.

Partnerships

All sites have embarked on a range of initiatives to support families. A hallmark of these initiatives is that they are being undertaken in collaboration with other government and non-government agencies. These initiatives have been warmly welcomed by other service providers in the community.

In Katherine *Good Beginnings* has established a highly successful New Baby Group in collaboration with Parents as Teachers. The New Baby Group gives mothers who might not consider home visiting the opportunity to socialize and share experiences with other mothers.

Good Beginnings Moe has now expanded to cover the Latrobe Shire. In partnership with the Latrobe Regional Hospital it has launched a volunteer program to assist families who have a child with a disability participating in a home-based therapy program.

In inner Western Sydney *Good Beginnings* has joined with the Lewisham Public School to develop a project to 'help unlock the cycle of poverty, unemployment, violence and despair' experienced by many local families.

In Hobart *Good Beginnings* volunteers visit the Queen Alexandra Maternity Unit to educate new parents about the Personal Health Record in a project jointly coordinated with Family Child and Youth Health Services.

Clarendon Vale Connect – Building Social Capital

Good Beginnings initiated the Clarendon Vale Connect project modeled on the successful New South Wales School Community Centres project when it became obvious that the community was too dysfunctional for volunteer home visiting. In a little over twelve months Clarendon Vale Connect has effectively galvanized residents, local and State government agencies and the Clarence Council to work together to improve conditions in this highly disadvantaged community.

Already the Project's achievements are significant and include a project to redevelop rundown park and waste land into well planned recreation areas, the renovation of a disused childcare facility to provide a community resource, improved safety for residents and two new play groups. Clarendon Vale Connect has been awarded an Australian Crime Prevention Award. It was recently funded for a further three years by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

Men's Programs

Good Beginnings in Hobart and Moe have fathering as a focus and both sites have received funding from the Commonwealth of \$50,000 over two years for men's programs. Traditionally although fathers are involved in antenatal classes, there has been little attempt to identify or meet their particular needs. In Hobart, the *Good Beginnings* Coordinator has been working in partnership with Hobart hospitals to change that. A men's conference was the major event for the Moe Men's Program in 1999.

Ongoing Evaluation

With the diversity of sites, *Good Beginnings* presents an ideal opportunity to test over time what works, with whom and under what circumstances. The evaluation exposed some problems with the database that threatened this potential. However, *Good Beginnings* proposes to redevelop the database, which will substantially enhance *Good Beginnings'* capacity for ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Sustainability

At the national level *Good Beginnings* has been extremely successful in attracting funds from both government and private sources. The sites, however, have struggled with fund raising. Club 200, which was launched in November 1999, promises to provide an important income stream for the National Office and for the individual sites.

Conclusions

Good Beginnings has continued to show the very positive outcomes for families and communities identified during the pilot phase of the project. In addition, it has shown considerable capacity to adapt services to local conditions and to initiate new and varied projects in partnership with other agencies to meet community needs.

The expansion of *Good Beginnings* to new sites is fully justified by the findings of the evaluation.