

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities

The vision

All members of the community understand the different ways they can support children to reach their full potential.

The Stronger Families Alliance's programs

The Alliance's child-friendly city subgroup is developing child-friendly community programs. The first program, Paint the Blue Read, was launched in July 2009 and promotes early literacy so that children enter school ready for reading. Mountains Communities Outreach Service is the lead agency. Activities include reading tents at community events, book character dress-ups, visits by mascot Billy Bookie, and annual reading days at businesses, libraries, schools and other places visited by children.

Using the Plan to create child-friendly communities

Because every part of the community impacts on a child's development, the Plan provides a common focus for services, businesses, environmental organisations, government agencies and voluntary organisations to create three child-friendly city conditions:

- Learning is supported and valued from birth (Outcome 9)
- The community supports children and their families (Outcome 10)
- The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly (Outcome 11).

A snapshot of evidence supporting the Plan

Ecological model of child development

Research on the early years of life draws heavily on the ecological model of human development, which shows the complex system of relationships children are part of.⁷¹ The model emphasises

the dynamic interactions between children and their environments and shows the many influences on children's development that arise from a diversity of relationships.⁷²

In an ideal community, families have energy left over from meeting their own needs to reach out and support others. Communities that create these conditions produce better outcomes for children.^{73,74} Child-friendly communities provide children's programs and infrastructure such as libraries and recreational facilities, and social spaces that welcome children (e.g. baby change tables, sweet-free shopping counters, toys in public foyers, children's menus). Societal influences also impact on children. In early childhood services, child-to-adult ratios and funding are critical. At a national level, employment practices, maternity leave provisions, access to medical and dental care, and the esteem given to child and family professionals impact on the ability of parents and professionals to care for children.

Reaching out to new parents

Communities that value children pass on collective knowledge about children's development. However, rapid economic and social change have isolated many families from traditional sources of knowledge, such as extended family and neighbours.⁷⁵ New community activities and programs can help parents respond to children's needs and stimulate their holistic development. These need to be offered in various ways that are attractive to all parents as part of core service provision, including placing information on child development on the internet and using mass media.⁷⁶

Learning through play

Children learn through play, and communities that value children create opportunities for children's play and encourage play in public spaces. Children thrive when they can play in structured and unstructured ways, inside and outside the home. Play-based programs and experiences contribute significantly to literacy and numeracy and help address inequity and social exclusion.⁷⁷



However, misunderstandings about the need to protect children from risk have restricted opportunities for play in community and natural settings. Children from the 'bubble-wrap generation' are less capable of being safe outdoors and lack experiences of autonomy, independence, freedom and choice.⁷⁸ It is important that communities provide spaces and opportunities for play, but it is equally important that adults or older peers supervise these environments and are available to support children's learning.

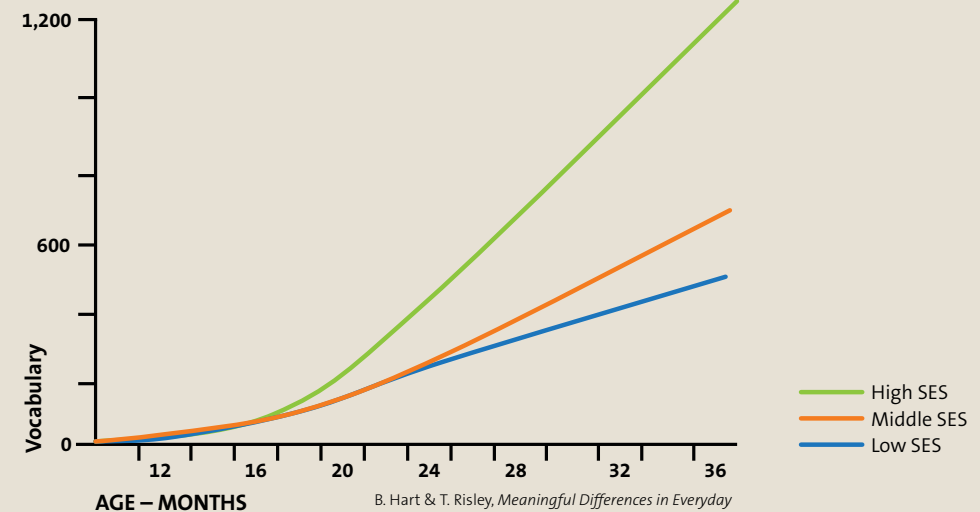
Language-rich social environments support early literacy

In a child-friendly community, everyone is encouraged to talk, sing, read and listen to babies and young children. Because children's literacy depends on their command of language, stimulating the language development of babies and toddlers is the first step to adult literacy. Neurological research shows the importance of learning in the early years, when neural pathways are being

laid down rapidly. This is the time for establishing the foundations for formal literacy and numeracy skills usually associated with school-aged learning.⁷⁹

The community can play a significant role in ensuring that families with fewer resources are supported to understand how to stimulate early childhood literacy and access early literacy resources.

The beginning of the literacy divide: Vocabulary growth of children of different socioeconomic status (SES)



Did you know?

Children engaged in outdoor structured or unstructured play will learn:

- Motor skills such as weight transfer, balance and jumping which are used by adults to maintain active, healthy lifestyles
- Communication and interaction skills as they negotiate game rules with peers, resolve conflicts and take turns
- Language and literacy skills as they create story scripts around their actions, negotiate rules and learn left/right discrimination
- Mathematical and science skills as they judge and adjust distance and speed, and judge relative size and sequence size.

Promoting healthy physical development through exercise and nutrition

Obesity is a global epidemic. Around 23 per cent of Australian children are obese due to diet, genes, lifestyle or exercise.⁸⁰ Obesity prevention is more complex than simply expecting parents to balance diet and exercise – community interventions are also critical. For example, foods high in fat are more satisfying than fruit and vegetables, meaning families living in poverty are more likely to eat fatty food because it costs less and tastes good. Furthermore, people are less likely to exercise outside the home if they believe their neighbourhood is unsafe.⁸¹⁻⁸³ Obesity prevention programs therefore need to be coupled with programs that promote affordable and healthy food, include community safety initiatives and aim to change negative perceptions about public safety.

Children's rights to safety and decision-making

The Child and Family Plan promotes two children's rights – the right to safety and the right to contribute to decision-making. Child protection is the embodiment of a child's right to safety and protection.⁸⁴ While governments legislate for child safety, communities and families are responsible for addressing child safety and protection. Children learn about decision-making when they are consulted about community life. Evidence shows that programs, amenities and spaces for children are more effective when children's points of view are considered in their design.

Business interests in child-friendly communities

Business and community wellbeing are inextricably linked: business benefits from a better-prepared workforce and the community benefits from productive businesses.^{85,86} Business engagement in community initiatives is therefore vital.⁸⁷ Businesses can contribute to a family-

friendly neighbourhood by creating welcoming environments for children, implementing employment practices that reduce parental stress and increase productivity, and strategically partnering with organisations that deliver social benefits to children and their families.

Child-friendly urban design and service planning

Urban environments designed with children in mind are attractive, safe and accessible for all people, not just children. Children are nurtured in communities that plan for their needs, with well-designed community centres, libraries, shops, medical facilities, parks, nature reserves and early childhood education services – all linked to public transport.⁸⁸ Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that children's emotional and behavioural development is influenced by their parents' perceptions of their neighbourhood. Children in families who viewed their neighbourhoods as safe, clean, well provided with facilities, and conducive to a sense of belonging showed good developmental outcomes.

In comparison, children living in areas of high disadvantage had lower levels of concentration, were more likely to feel sad, worried or fearful, and had significantly more problems with their peers. The impact on children of living in a low socioeconomic area was reduced when parents felt a sense of belonging, trusted their neighbours and knew where to find services.⁸⁹

Environmental sustainability

Children need positive images and experiences of nature to feel hopeful about the environmental future of our planet and therefore motivated to protect the environment. Children will respond more positively to programs, and think and behave more sustainably, if they are given experiences that enable them to appreciate nature rather than programs that create fear by focusing on issues such as extinction or deforestation. It is important to assess the ecological impact of programs when building sustainable child- and family-friendly communities.⁹⁰

Outcome 9: Learning is supported and valued from birth

Community attitudes are critical when creating a child-friendly community. Recognising that children learn from birth, communities will ideally work together to create environments that maximise children’s learning opportunities. Effective promotion of services is important as the children most in need of formal services are the least likely to receive them.

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>9.1 Community knowledge of how to give children a good start in life, from the prenatal period onwards, is improved</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of communications published about parenting and health > No. of Early Words resources distributed <p>Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Blue Mountains rates of (i) birth weight and (ii) breastfeeding > Australian Early Development Index child development outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The importance of developing early literacy from birth is promoted, particularly through the Paint the Blue Read program and Early Words resources > Use health promotion principles to promote broad community knowledge of child development from the prenatal period onwards > Services design campaigns together where one key child development or parenting message is promoted > Use soft entrance activities, such as playgroups and events, to distribute resources about quality home learning environments
<p>9.2 Children are actively engaged in opportunities to play and participate within the community</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of Paint the Blue Read events in the Blue Mountains > No. of events that include intergenerational or literacy activities for 0–12 year olds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Community events contain activities for 0–12 year olds, including those with additional needs > Community events include intergenerational activities > Literacy activities for young children are part of community events, particularly through the Paint the Blue Read program > Local government services target children aged 0–5



Objectives

9.3

Promotion and practice targeting increased access to early childhood education are established and progressed

Measures

Stronger Families Alliance measures

- > Community Services statistics showing total preschool and childcare places and usage in the Blue Mountains
- > Australian Early Development Index statistics showing early childhood education participation rates

Strategies

- > Use health promotion principles to promote broad community knowledge about the value of formal early childhood education
- > Use soft entrance activities such as playgroups and community development events to promote formal early childhood education

Outcome 10: The community supports children and their families

The community establishes and promotes initiatives that support healthy lifestyles for children. All community members see issues that impact children’s healthy development, such as dislocation, disadvantage, abuse, neglect and family violence, as a community responsibility and know what to do to help children and families in these circumstances. Decision-makers and program providers encourage children’s input into decision-making.

Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities (continued)

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>10.1 Initiatives supporting healthy lifestyles for children are established and promoted</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of initiatives and services that prevent obesity > No. of communications about health published > No. of child consultations > No. of new initiatives that give people a chance to build neighbourhood-level relationships > No. of multi-sector professional development opportunities around <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) poverty, (ii) child protection, (iii) family violence and (iv) obesity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Include incidental physical activities within existing programs > Establish breakfast clubs in schools so no children miss breakfast > Promote broad community knowledge about ways to increase child physical activity and improve nutrition > Local government services provide physical recreational opportunities for children
<p>10.2 Initiatives are established that increase community responsibility for families impacted by social isolation and disadvantage</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Create events and initiatives that give people opportunities to connect with each other (e.g. meet your neighbour day, welcome baskets for new residents, neighbourhood parties, intergenerational events) > Set up common-interest social groups that can be self-sustaining (e.g. parents with babies or toddlers groups)
<p>10.3 Initiatives are established that increase awareness that child protection and family violence are a community responsibility</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Promote the use of National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) resources aimed at raising awareness about child protection and family violence > Utilise existing days to help community members know how they can help prevent child abuse and neglect and family violence (e.g. White Ribbon Day, Child Protection Week, International Children’s Day)
<p>10.4 Children’s input into public participatory and decision-making processes is increased</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Design developmentally appropriate child consultation processes > Consider innovative approaches to child consultation (e.g. use older children as interviewers, use community cultural development practice)

Outcome 11: The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly

All sectors, including business, play a role in creating and sustaining a community that actively includes children. Public infrastructure is designed to promote children's safety and their need to learn through play.

Objectives	Measures	Strategies
<p>11.1 The built environment and public open space are better designed to include children and stimulate their development</p>	<p>Service and Stronger Families Alliance measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of professional development opportunities provided to Blue Mountains City Council staff to increase their knowledge of child-friendly city design and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Provide information to Blue Mountains City Council staff about child-friendly urban design and services > Promote resources that show services and businesses how to create child-friendly public space (e.g. NSW Family Services Principles of Practice)
<p>11.2 The mobility of children and their families is improved through infrastructure that is environmentally sustainable and safe</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of metres of new footpaths and bike tracks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Infrastructure development supporting walking and biking is prioritised > Advocacy to rail and bus providers to improve services for families
<p>11.3 Businesses demonstrate increased child- and family-friendly practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of businesses in selected neighbourhoods demonstrating child-friendly practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Link with the Blue Mountains Business Advantage program to promote business's role in supporting a child-friendly city
<p>11.4 Community awareness around environmental sustainability is increased</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > No. of partnerships formed between the environmental sustainability and community development sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop links between the community development and environmental sustainability and education sectors