



Executive summary

The Stronger Families Alliance

The Stronger Families Alliance is a unique network that fosters collaboration between Blue Mountains organisations and networks with a stake in early childhood development. The Alliance is guided by emerging international thinking about new ways in which communities, government and business can work together to counter seemingly intractable problems such as rising rates of child abuse and neglect, social isolation and the literacy divide.

The 28 Alliance members include all levels of government, business networks, NSW child and family organisations, and the community and university sectors. The Alliance is convened and resourced by the Blue Mountains City Council.

The Alliance has adopted the ecological model of child development, which promotes the positive influences on children by people and organisations outside the child and family sector, such as neighbours, social and cultural groups, business and government. The Alliance uses strengths-based theory and facilitation to promote networked relationships and shared leadership across the Blue Mountains city. In particular, appreciative inquiry – a strengths-based organisational development process – has driven the Alliance’s formation and direction setting, and collaboration outcomes planning has influenced the Child and Family Plan.

Drivers for change

Alliance members share a vision for change based on the following drivers:

International research

Neurobiological research reveals the phenomenal rate of brain development from conception to age three. It is now widely acknowledged that experience shapes brain development and that children’s formative experiences are shaped by their relationships with significant others. This biological evidence underpins the need for prevention and early intervention to support parents through pregnancy and early childhood. Research also shows that children are best served by practitioners and organisations that work holistically and think laterally about the needs of families. To respond to these new ways of thinking, a new service system structure, based on collaboration and prevention, was required.

Changes to family life

Society is changing faster than ever, and this in turn is changing the nature of childhood. Family life is increasingly complex, leaving many parents struggling to cope in the absence of support from traditional sources such as extended family, neighbours and the wider community. Rapid change requires that child, family and community services design new forms of family engagement and social support.

The rights of children

Landmark economic studies show that children who are educated, cared for and protected are more likely to grow into adults who contribute to their community’s economic and social development. Conversely, children lacking in basic human rights – care, protection, respect – are more susceptible to criminality, unemployment, and mental and physical problems as adults. Creating support systems that guarantee children’s rights is fundamental to the social and economic future of our communities.

The Child and Family Plan

The Child and Family Plan is a 10-year blueprint for the coordinated development of government, community and voluntary organisations working with children and families. The Plan is a synthesis of research and ideas from all Alliance members and is aligned with the Blue Mountains City Council's 2025 strategic plan. Alliance members will use the Plan to continue to develop a common philosophy and standard of practice across diverse services, guide resource allocation and strategic planning, contribute to program development, apply for funding and design governance structures. The Plan is a dynamic, flexible document that will be modified to reflect the new evidence and community directions that will emerge over the next decade.

The Stronger Families Alliance members

- Associate Professor June Wangmann
- Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre – Child-friendly Communities lead agency
- Blue Mountains GPs Network
- Blue Mountains Interagency – represented by Mountains Community Resource Network
- Blue Mountains Leisure Centres, Blue Mountains City Council
- Blue Mountains Libraries, Blue Mountains City Council
- Blue Mountains Neighbourhood Centres
- Blue Mountains Primary Schools, Department of Education and Training
- Centrelink
- Child and Family Health Team, Sydney West Area Health Service
- Children's and Family Services Forum – represented by Katoomba Children's Cottage
- Coalition Against Violence and Abuse – represented by Mountains Outreach Community Service
- Community and Early Years, Families NSW, Community Services
- Community Outcomes, Blue Mountains City Council – Alliance convener and Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks lead agency
- Connect Child and Family Services – Blue Mountains Consortium and School Centred Community Hub lead agency
- Early Childhood Intervention and Coordination Program – represented by Connect Child and Family Services
- Elizabeth Evatt Community Legal Centre
- Family Support Services – represented by Gateway Family Services
- Gateway Family Services – Moving Children Beyond Vulnerability lead agency, School Centred Community Hub lead agency
- Katoomba Chamber of Commerce
- Katoomba Mental Health Coordinated Care Team, Sydney West Area Health Service
- Mountains Community Resource Network
- Mountains Outreach Community Service – Paint the Blue Read lead agency
- Nepean Partnerships and Planning, Community Services
- National Parks and Wildlife Service
- Rotary
- Springwood Neighbourhood Centre – Child-friendly Communities lead agency
- Upper Blue Mountains Principal Network



The Plan is divided into three parts:

- **Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks**
- **Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability**
- **Part C: Creating Child-friendly Communities**

Part A: Strengthening Families through Neighbourhood Service Networks

The vision:

Every Blue Mountains family has access to a collaborative service network which is unique to their neighbourhood, supports child development and is a natural gateway into community life.

The outcomes:

- Parents nurture their child's ongoing development from the prenatal period onwards
- Children come to school with the skills and abilities necessary to achieve in the school environment
- Parents increase their social supports and community connections
- Collaborative, universal service systems are created at a neighbourhood level through School Centred Community Hub steering committees.

Part A is informed by strong international evidence about the importance of early intervention and social support for parents, the role of universal easy-to-access programs in building bridges to vulnerable children and families, the critical role of home-learning and formal early childhood education, and new ways of thinking about the role of schools. The Alliance's School Centred Community Hub program is a virtual Hub – a network of stand-alone services, civic organisations and business organisations with its nerve centre in a primary school, which becomes the focus for community development and child and family service provision. Each Hub is unique, offering programs and activities for babies, young children and parents. Future Hubs may have their nerve centre in a different service, as determined by the needs of each community. Hubs are governed by local steering committees that plan multi-service projects using interdisciplinary practice.

Part B: Moving Children and their Families Beyond Vulnerability

The vision:

Children are nurtured within strong and resilient families and communities that are able to keep their children and safe and well.

The outcomes:

- All children and their families have many different connections to others in the community
- Families promote the safety and wellbeing of their children
- Children and families receive an immediate and compassionate response aimed at meeting their basic needs
- Targeted child and adult services coordinate with each other and the universal service system.

International evidence informing Part B includes the effect of child abuse and neglect, the efficacy of strengths-based and family-centred practice, the need for services that attract vulnerable families, the importance of resilience in overcoming adversity, and the power of family/community connections in keeping children safe. The eight members of the Alliance's Blue Mountains Consortium have a track record of success in applying these principles to deliver successful multi-service, multidisciplinary programs.

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 outcomes:

- Learning is supported and valued from birth
- The community supports children and their families
- The built environment and public spaces are child and family friendly.

The evidence supporting Part C includes the role of communities in teaching new parents about child development, the importance of language-rich environments in promoting early literacy, the critical role of exercise and nutrition, and the positive impact of child-friendly urban design. The Plan also reflects current thinking about children's rights to safety and to being part of decision-making processes.

The Alliance has one program in this area, Paint the Blue Read, which was launched in 2009 to promote early literacy through community engagement.

Stronger Families Alliance governance model

