Promising Practice Profiles

Project title | The SDN Family Resource Centre
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Project practice | Provision of information, advice and support for parents with young children aged 0–8 in Sydney’s south-west who are accessing the SDN Family Resource Centre’s toy/resource library
Project undertaken by | SDN Children’s Services Inc (formerly Sydney Day Nursery)
Start date | June 2006
Focal areas | • Supporting Families and Parents
Program | Local Answers
Issue | The SDN Family Resource Centre model was developed to address a number of locally identified needs. SDN had operated a Resource Centre in the area for many years. The Resource Centre offered a toy library and a quality play space where parents and children could spend time together.

The Resource Centre, which is not part of the Local Answers-funded project, has over 4000 toys and resources available for borrowing, in all play areas (e.g., socio-dramatic, constructive and motor), picture books and resource books. Resources have been carefully chosen for their potential to both support the learning of children aged birth to eight, including those with disabilities, and their capacity to represent diverse ethnicities and cultures. The resources are stored in transparent boxes or bags and are displayed on open shelving to enable families to browse easily. Resources are colour coded by the type of play so that families can select toys according to their children’s interests rather than age. Families can borrow up to four items at once, for one calendar month, although many families return resources and borrow more frequently. Additional fees are charged if items are returned late, if they are lost or damaged. Families are asked to wash toys before returning them. In addition, Resource Centre staff disinfect all toys before returning them to the shelves for further borrowing.

The focus of the Centre was on play, with information available to parents about the value of play for children and how to provide quality play experiences for their child.

However, as families accessing the toy library became increasingly comfortable with the environment and with staff, who were often volunteers, they began seeking support and information outside the boundaries of the role and expertise of toy library staff and of the boundaries of existing funding. Families told us they wanted to be able to come to the toy library for their child and to be able to get information, advice and support for themselves as parents at the same place and from the same people. For instance, families consistently requested a “playgroup” within the Resource Centre, where they could play with their children with the resources available, meet other families and talk to staff.

As well, staff reflecting on their work, identified that families were not using the resources to their potential and wanted opportunities to model the usage of toys and resources to families. Further, staff noted that when families came to the Resource Centre they wanted to talk with the staff but this was not always
possible during the normal operation of the Resource Centre.

In addition, professionals in other local agencies identified the need for families to
be able to access professional information, advice and support in a non-targeted
environment, particularly for those parents no longer accessing early childhood
health services. Furthermore, professionals told us that they wanted to be able to
refer families to a resource centre where children’s play and early learning was a
focus, but also where there would be support for those families who found it hard
to access services or who would benefit from more individualised parenting
support.

Program context

SDN Family Resource Centre provides a range of resources (toys, parenting
advice etc.) for families with young children aged birth to eight years, in Sydney’s
south west. The focus client groups are:

• young parents;
• first time parents;
• culturally and linguistically diverse families;
• socially isolated families; and
• families with concerns with their children’s development.

Built on a history of service delivery and close working relationships with
community partners in the area, and utilising a previously existing Resource
Centre (Toy Library) as a foundation, the Centre responds to locally identified
needs by providing a non-targeted, non-stigmatising soft entry point as a base on
which to build layers of trans-disciplinary support for families. The Centre
complements and fully integrates with SDN Resource Centre and other services
in the local network to contribute to the provision of inclusive, comprehensive
services for children and families. As such, SDN Family Resource Centre
represents an “integrated model in action”.

As is illustrated in the attached model (see Figure 1), the CENTRE services are
hierarchically arranged. At the primary or universal level, and open to all
members of the community, the Centre contributes a qualified early childhood
education teacher to the staff of the existing children’s Resource Centre (Toy
Library). The Resource Centre aims to be accessible to as many families as
possible by being responsive to the needs of families, flexible, affordable and
inclusive.

At the targeted or secondary level, the Centre offers Stay and Play sessions
(facilitated playgroups) where parents and carers focus on playing with children
in a quality play environment, supported by the early childhood education teacher
and a family resource worker (social worker). Also at the secondary level are
Parent Groups, offered in partnership with Relationships Australia, that provide
opportunities for parents to come together to focus on issues of concern or to
access new information, in the company of staff with whom they have a
relationship and who they can trust.

At the highest or tertiary level of intervention, Individual Family Support delivered
by a trans disciplinary team offers intense, individualised, intervention for families
with the wide range of challenges that some parents face.
As identified above, the key delivery occurs at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels by providing the following services:

- adding a qualified early childhood education teacher to the existing Resource Centre;
- Stay and Play sessions;
- parent groups; and
- individual family support.

Among the most exciting and promising aspects of the Centre is the way that it not only caters for families with diverse experiences, interests and needs, through the non-stigmatising, universal “soft entry point” of a mainstream, previously existing, Resource Centre, but that it also, for those families who require additional support. It provides a seamless transition both into a range of integrated services offering increasingly intense and individualised intervention strategies, and out to external services.

As can be seen from the model (see Figure 1), the range of internal programs available for families represents a hierarchy. Families may enter at the primary, secondary or tertiary level to access programs that range from mainstream, universal programs, to increasingly individualised and supported programs.

At the primary level of service delivery, the Centre complements and builds on the work of SDN’s existing Resource Centre. The Centre funded project enables the Resource Centre to better meet the identified needs of families by:

Adding a qualified early childhood education teacher to the existing Resource Centre

Centre funding “adds value” to the existing toy library by enabling the employment of a qualified early childhood teacher. Having an early childhood teacher in the library means that families have...
access to consistent, high-quality child development and early learning information as well as information and support to access local early education and early intervention services. In addition, the Resource Centre benefits from the teacher's early childhood expertise. For instance, the teacher uses her early childhood knowledge to select, purchase and advise on the appropriateness of learning resources and creating positive learning environments.

Providing Stay and Play sessions
At the secondary level, are Stay and Play Sessions—facilitated playgroups, offered one day a week for an hour and half, during school terms, in a room adjacent to the toy library. Staff prepare the play space with a range of toys and craft activities designed to enhance children's development and promote adult–child interactions. The play sessions focus on children and adults playing together in a quality play environment, supported by the early childhood education teacher and the family resource worker (i.e., a Social Worker). Staff also encourage and support families to talk with one another to assist in the development of social networks. In addition, families have the opportunity to talk with the early childhood teacher and the family resource worker on a range of issues. The sessions provide the opportunity for parents to enhance their relationship with their child, to build their skills and confidence and to seek advice and support from the staff and other parents. The sessions also provide staff with opportunities to build relationships with the parents and children and to identify those children and families who may benefit from more individual, specialised support.

Parent Groups
Also at the secondary level are Parent Groups that provide opportunities for parents to meet, focus on issues of concern and/or access new information, within a supportive group environment and in the company of staff with whom they have a relationship and who they can trust. Parent groups are run four times per semester in a room in the same building as the Resource Centre. On-site child care is provided. The topics and issues covered in the groups are typically those raised by families during their conversations with staff and are decided following consultation with families. The groups are facilitated by outside agencies, such as Relationships Australia, local experts, such as the local early childhood nurse and dietician, or Centre staff. Some of the topics covered to date in the parent groups are: parenting issues, pampering parents, communication and learning, and play in children’s development.

Individual Family Support
At the tertiary level is Individual Family Support—the most intensive intervention of the Centre. Individual support provided by the trans-disciplinary team, offers families opportunities to have help with the wide range of challenges that some parents face. This can include (but is not limited to) assistance with housing, parenting strategies to use at home, nutrition, family violence, problems with child care, and child development concerns. Staff work closely with a wide range of local agencies and networks to help families access the support they need while keeping them connected with mainstream activities.

Key practice ingredients
In this section, the key factors of the Centre are discussed which through careful reflection on and evaluation of the program contribute to the success of the Centre in meeting the needs of a range of families. These factors are that the Centre:

- represents an integrated approach to service delivery;
- is responsive to local conditions;
- develops trusting relationships with other agencies;
- is “play” focused;
- is trans-disciplinary; and
- is soundly grounded in theory and evidence of what works and is outcomes focused.

The program represents an integrated approach to service delivery
SDN's Centre represents an integrated approach to service delivery. Procedures for accessing the different programs have been established with the intention that families experience a seamless transition from one program to another. For instance, there are no troublesome referral processes that families must complete in order to access programs, and no additional criteria are required (families must simply be members of the Centre). Furthermore, staff work across the range of programs which means that families do not have to establish new relationships with unknown professionals nor restate their history, concerns and needs. The community consultation
prior to the establishment of the Centre has highlighted the need that families wanted this continuity with the professional with whom they had established relationships.

In addition, the relationships staff develop with local agencies (see below) increases mutual understanding and knowledge about the diverse services that are available for families in the area, as well as an appreciation of ways those services might assist families. This enables Centre staff to respond appropriately to individual family needs and requirements, as well as facilitating the referral process.

**The Centre is responsive to local needs**

Another critical factor for the success of the Centre is its responsiveness to the local conditions and needs. In part, this responsiveness is due to the long history of service delivery that SDN Children’s Services has in the area. This has contributed to a deep appreciation of local conditions. Importantly, however, prior to establishment of the Centre in-depth community consultation was undertaken with families and local services that established the need for a Resource Centre.

In addition to this initial consultation, the staff of the Centre engage in on-going community consultation. This can be deliberate and formal (such as conducting family surveys twice a year and holding reference groups of local community partners four times a year), or can also be incidental and informal (such as conversations with families using the Centre, or external local services). Such consultation takes time, energy and effort, but the relationships formed, the wealth of information gathered, and the engagement of key stakeholders, enables responsive program delivery that meets the needs of the local community and makes this consultative process well worth the investment.

**Development of trusting relationships with other agencies**

As well as consulting with local agencies, the staff of the Centre work to establish and maintain trusting relationships with local agencies in order to support and facilitate interagency cooperation and co-referral. Once again, SDN Children’s Services' history in the area is important in this regard; it has developed a positive reputation in the area for providing a suite of services that respond in diverse ways to support local families, and over the years trusting relationships have developed with other local service providers who have direct contact with families (e.g., local early childhood health centres, and Migrant Resource Centre). In addition, Centre staff maintain close relationships with local services in a range of ways such as, through being actively involved in local networks, inviting local services to deliver programs in Centre parenting groups, through participation on the reference groups and co-referral. The development of these trusting relationships with other agencies fosters collegial collaboration and the sharing of ideas, expertise and resources, and facilitates families' smooth transition across services when required and so has multiple benefits, for the Centre professionals involved and ultimately families.

**A focus on play and toys**

A critical factor contributing to the success of the Centre is that its focus on play and toys "normalises" families' engagement with the program.

At a primary level the play focus creates a universal “soft” entry point. All children play, it is a normative condition of childhood and the main process through which children grow and develop. The resources in the toy library are accessible to, and have potential benefits for all families with young children in the local area. In fact, the primary motivation for families accessing the Centre, as revealed by the Family Surveys, is access to the Centre's large range of high quality, developmentally appropriate, stimulating, educational toys for their children. As such, the Centre is not "problem focused" and does not imply deficit, and thus reduces the potential for the feelings of stigmatisation that some families may experience when accessing targeted early intervention.

Indeed, in contrast to feelings of deficit, families borrowing the resources often feel they are being proactive in supporting their children’s development, which in turn contributes to families’ feelings of positive parenting and empowerment.

Second, the early childhood teacher arranges the environment in ways that both demonstrates how play and toys can be utilised to foster children’s development, and creates a secure and comfortable space that supports families conversing. As play is a “safe topic” it gives families and Centre staff a focal point for engaging in meaningful but non-threatening conversations and thus creates a “window of opportunity” for Centre staff and families to develop trusting relationships.

Importantly, once trust is developed, and this may take some considerable time, the Centre provides a safe space for families to “open-up” and discuss issues that may be of concern to them and which can then be addressed.
It is this focus on play that has been particularly instrumental in the Centre’s ability to attract a
diverse range of families, including traditionally hard-to-reach families, such as those from
culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and those with a child with a disability.
Interestingly, there is also high utilisation of the Centre by fathers, and the focus on play and toys
is considered one of the key factors of their engagement in the Centre. This
hypothesis/assumption is currently being tested and is under further investigation.

A trans-disciplinary team

A further factor that is instrumental to the success of the Centre is the trans-disciplinary nature of
the team. The Centre draws on the skills, knowledge and expertise of professionals from a range
of areas. The key worker in the Centre is the early childhood teacher, who has skills, knowledge
and expertise both in ways play and toys can be utilised to foster children’s development and in
family and community engagement. The family resource worker, who attends Stay and Play
sessions, is a social worker and has expertise in providing individualised family support.
Furthermore, the early childhood teacher and family resource worker can draw on the expertise of
other co-located professionals, including special needs teachers, occupational therapists, and
speech therapists. To facilitate this trans-disciplinary work strategies have been established such
as team meetings and professional networking opportunities for sharing the broad range of skills, knowledge and understandings.

Soundly grounded in theory and evidence of what works and outcomes focused

The final critical factor in the success of the Centre is that its practices are firmly grounded on
sound philosophical and theoretical understandings, evidence of “what works” in early intervention
and clarity about the desired outcomes. Specifically, the Centre is based on:

- an image of the child as strong and capable;
- understandings of development as a dynamic and ecological process that places the
  child within the context of their family and the local community;
- an understanding of the importance of providing a range of early intervention strategies
  that support children’s and families’ wellbeing;
- core values about the importance of play in children’s and families’ lives; and
- commitment to using family-centred, strengths-based, capacity building approaches in
  early intervention service delivery.

Further, the program is built on understandings from evaluations of other programs as well as on-
going critical reflection and evaluation of the program itself.

Importantly, organisational practices have been established that support the transition of “theory
into practice”. For instance, theories and understandings are overtly discussed and shared by all
staff involved in the Centre, and staff are supported in their professional development to deepen
their understandings of these concepts through activities such as mentoring, staff training, support
for attendance at conferences, sharing of resources and opportunities to engage in critical
reflection on their work. Furthermore, staff were actively involved in developing the program logic
(or theory of change). The benefits of such practices are that they led to clear understandings of
how the activities of the program, and each individual team member's actions contribute to the
program’s overall goals and outcomes for families; this in turn contributes to staff’s engagement
and connection with the program, their involvement in documenting and communicating evidence
of outcomes, and their willingness to engage in on-going reflection and modification of the
program, that ultimately leads to a highly responsive program, focused on achieving its specified
outcomes.

Research base

As noted above, a critical factor in the success of the Centre is that it is soundly grounded in
theory and evidence of “best practice”. Below is a summary of the literature and evidence on
which the Centre is based.

Supporting parenting through Integrated and trans-disciplinary models of service delivery

The literature tells us that parenting, whether it be performed by parents or other family members,
such as grandparents, aunts or siblings, is a challenging process, particularly so for those families
who are isolated, inexperienced or have additional challenges (Levy-Shiff, Dimitrovsky, Shulman,
& Har-Even, 1998). Given the compelling evidence that children’s early life experiences can have
profound effects on their subsequent development (Power & Hertzman, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips,
2000), there has been increasing recognition of the need to support families in their parenting role
and a number of early intervention strategies have been promoted as appropriate methods for
providing this support. However, many families who might benefit from the support offered by
early intervention, do not access these programs because they find them stigmatising (The Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH], 2006). Further, a lack of coordination between services can result in families facing difficulties accessing the programs most suitable for their needs and/or transitioning between programs (Scott, 2005).

The Centre integrated model of service delivery is based on evidence that stronger families are achieved through comprehensive and coordinated responses focused on prevention, early detection and early intervention (Moore, 2008); as well as evidence that increased cross-sectoral collaboration and co-ordination at the service provision level will promote health and wellbeing of children and families (Tomison, 2002). For instance, the CCCH (2006) argued for greater integration of services through a tiered model of interconnected, primary, secondary and tertiary services. They argued that this model has a number of benefits, including more effective identification and response to clients’ emerging problems and reduced stigmatisation (CCCH, 2006). Integration could also lead to greater collaboration between professionals and sharing of expertise across the programs (CCCH, 2006). In addition, an integrated approach promotes consistency across programs, lessening confusion for parents whilst at the same time reducing the risk of duplication. The Centre represents such an integrated model in practice.

The trans-disciplinary nature of the Centre model of service delivery is based on the understanding that such an approach integrates expertise of team members and families, supporting efficient, comprehensive and co-ordinated service delivery and reducing the number of professionals with whom the child and family has to interact (Bruder, 1994). As well, evidence shows that achievement of outcomes in early intervention depends on joint working and enduring collaborative arrangements between children’s services and relevant partner agencies (Jones, 2007). Further, evidence shows that partnerships, with children, families and professionals working together are important for building child-friendly communities as are opportunities where children and parents can share in the learning process (Howard, 2006). Within the Centre, an early childhood teacher and social worker work together to provide a child and family-centred approach to intervention. They are also able to draw on the expertise of other professionals, such as a speech therapist, occupational therapist and special needs teacher, within the co-located services – as well as link parents with one another and contribute to families’ social connectedness.

**Play-based intervention**

The Centre is based on core values about the importance of play in children’s and families’ lives, as well as strongly held beliefs about children’s right to play (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). Over a century of research attests to the important contribution play has for children’s optimal development in all domains—cognitive, social, physical, emotional and language (Ginsberg, 2007). Play enriches all aspects of children’s lives and they learn best in social and physical environments that support playful interactions (Copeland, 1995). Two ways the Centre support children’s play is through toy libraries and facilitated play sessions.

The literature tells us that toy libraries, such as that in the Centre, provide valuable resources and support for families and have a number of benefits for both children and families including promoting children’s development (Rettig, 1998); providing families with information about children’s development and growth and expected behaviours and advice on appropriate toys, activities and play for their children, as well as promote positive parenting (Kent & Silver, 2005). They also have the potential to increase families’ social capital as they offer families the opportunity to meet with other families, to develop supportive networks and access information about local services (Kent & Silver, 2006; 2006b). Toy libraries are particularly valuable for vulnerable families such as those from low-socio-economic background, those with a child with a disability and isolated families (Bjork-Akesson & Brodin, 1992; Rettig, 1998)—groups that are among the program’s target groups.

The literature also suggests that playgroups provide informal settings where children aged birth to school age and their families and/or carers can interact with each other and engage in play activities in a relaxed and friendly environment. Playgroups can support children directly by providing opportunities for them to engage in development enhancing play and social experiences (Erwin & Letchford, 2003; Freiberg et al., 2005; Plowman, 2002; Sneddon & Hayes, 2003; UnitingCare Burnside, 2004). They can also support children indirectly by providing parents with information and supporting positive parenting practices, that enhance children’s growth and learning (Plowman, 2002). In addition to assisting families to acquire new skills and knowledge about their children’s development and the ways they can support this, playgroups can provide psychologically valuable affirmation of families’ existing parenting practices. Moreover, playgroups can provide opportunities for families to develop social networks (Plowman, 2002). In relation to communities, playgroups have the potential to enhance community cohesiveness and capacity. In particular, Kim et al. (2003) found that playgroups can be especially beneficial for supporting the
play of children with disabilities. In relation to parents, McBride (1990) found a positive relationship between fathers’ engagement in playgroups and their feelings of responsibility for, and competence in, parenting. It is also argued that playgroups are particularly valuable for vulnerable or hard-to-reach families, as they provide a non-stigmatising entry point into family support programs (UnitingCare Burnside, 2004; Plowman, 2002; Sneddon & Hayes, 2003). The Centre optimises the potential of the Stay and Play sessions to achieve these positive outcomes by engaging an early childhood teacher and social worker to facilitate the groups.

**Child centred, family-focused, strengths-based, capacity-building approaches to early intervention service delivery**

The Centre is child-centred and family-focused based on understandings from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003) that places the wellbeing of children in the context of their families and community whilst recognising the complex interplay of internal, individual or biological factors, with external, social, environmental and relational factors (Garbarino, 1990; NICHD, 2000). The Centre takes a family-centred, strengths-based, capacity-building approach to service delivery, based on evidence that such practices positively influence both child and family outcomes. These outcomes include: reducing isolation and stress; increasing sense of belonging and control; increasing social networking and capacity to negotiate sources of support; increasing parenting confidence and use of effective parenting practices; contributing to a sense of empowerment and higher levels of well being (Dunst, 2000, 2002; McCashen 2005; Moore & Larkin 2005; Saleebey 1996, 1997; Scott & O’Neill, 1998). Staff within the Centre stay alert and attuned to the multiple challenges that many families attending the program face, and aim always to work with the families to assist them build on their existing skills and knowledge to increase their capacity to find solutions to presenting problems.

**Inclusive, non-targeted model of service delivery**

The Centre is an inclusive, non-targeted model of service delivery based on the philosophy that “all children and families belong to the community” (Centre for Community Child Health, 2003); on evidence that non-targeted services are successful in attracting vulnerable families (Statham, 2000); and a belief that non-targeted, non-stigmatising services result in prevention of problems and early identification of children and families at risk while reinforcing the view that help-seeking is everyone’s right (Harbin & McNulty, 1990. In particular, the existing Resource Centre that is available to all families in the community, represents a soft entry point into more targeted and intense programs.

### Outcomes

The success of the Centre’s employment of an integrated, trans-disciplinary model of service delivery is demonstrated through its achievement of outcomes, arranged hierarchically as:

1. access and utilisation of the Centre by traditionally hard-to-reach families;
2. transition of families across the programs and into local services;
3. child and family outcomes:
   - positive changes in children’s development;
   - improvement in families’ parenting skills; and
   - an increase in families’ social networking.

### Evidence of outcomes

SDN’s Centre is a funded under the Local Answers program and as such has limited funding to conduct evaluations. However, a recent evaluation of the Centre was conducted by an internal research team, over a 9-month period from September 2006 to May 2007. The evaluation focused on Centre processes, outcomes for children and families, and to a lesser extent community. Following approval from SDN’s Research and Ethics Committee, data were collected from several different sources including:

- administrative records;
- Centre staff professional reflective journals;
- Centre members’ questionnaire survey;
- parent group satisfaction survey;
- local services survey; and
- researcher field observations.

This evaluation showed that the Centre was successful in:

- attracting traditionally hard to reach families;
- supporting families’ transitioning across the programs; and
- had several positive outcomes for children and families.

Evidence for these outcomes is presented below.
Traditionally hard-to-reach families access and utilise the Centre

Examination of administrative records showed that during the evaluation period the Centre delivered services to 112 families:

- 48% were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds speaking 20 different languages;
- 35% were first time parents;
- 1 family identified as Aboriginal; and
- 3 identified as having a child with a disability.

Analysis of enrolment forms identified that the Centre membership is primarily families with young children. A significant proportion of member families were first-time parents. First-time parent families are likely to be limited in both their parenting experience and their knowledge of available resources, and so potentially benefit greatly from the support the Centre offers. Nonetheless, a number of families had three or more children suggesting that the Centre continues to have benefits even for families with a great deal of parenting experience.

Membership of the Centre includes families from a diverse range of language backgrounds. However, only one family identified as Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander. Notwithstanding there may be other Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander families who did not identify as such on their enrolment form. Importantly, CALD families attending the Resource Centre were just as likely to transition into Stay and Play and Parenting Groups, as members generally. It would seem, then, that CALD families feel welcome in the Centre, and find the resources and support offered to be beneficial. The ability to attract CALD families may be a result of the careful consideration that has gone into selecting resources, and providing information in multiple languages.

Families transition across the programs and out to local services

Administrative records revealed that:

- 87% of the membership visited the Centre regularly (at least once a month);
- 31% of these attended Stay and Play sessions;
- 6% participated in parenting groups; and
- 14% accessed individualised support.

These findings indicate that many members are utilising a range of programs offered by the Centre. In addition, evidence from the professional reflective journals indicates that families are transitioning across the integrated services and out to external local services. An example of this appears in the following case note:

Ali takes his son to the SDN group for children with disabilities, PlayLinks. There he got to know the SDN Family Resource Worker who visits the group regularly. With her support, Ali has now joined the resource centre and has started bringing his son to Stay and Play so that he can meet parents of children who don’t have disabilities and so that his son can play with other children and learn from them.

Positive child and family outcomes

Ultimately, the purpose of families accessing the range of services within Centre is to improve outcomes for children and families. The evaluation cannot show direct causal links between children’s or their families’ engagement in the Centre, and changes in children’s development, as this would require further research, including randomised controlled trials. Further, the Program chose not to measure children’s growth and development, using standardised instruments, as these were considered too intrusive. Nevertheless, professional observations, augmented by parents’ perceptions of how the program contributed to their children’s growth and development, and their perceptions of their parenting collected in family surveys suggest that the Centre has positive benefits for both children and families.

Child outcomes

Professional observations indicated:

- positive changes in children’s development in a range of domains but particularly in regards to children’s socialisation skills. For instance:
  - [week 1:] Child only wanted to play with craft activities and would not engage with other materials or children. Sat in corner alone.
  - [week 2:] Child sat quietly on mothers’ lap during music activity.
  - [week 3:] Child happily explored the room. Joined in with clapping sticks during group time.
Parents reported:

- both attendance at the Centre, especially Stay and Play, and materials borrowed from the Resource Centre, contributed to their child/ren’s growth and development. One parent in a survey noted:
  
  “The toys at the Centre and the advice given by staff has been very helpful. My son wasn’t sitting up, the staff gave me some suggestions of ways I could encourage him to roll over and now he is much stronger and can hold up his head.”

- increases in their child’s confidence and participation in the Stay and Play group. Evidence from the evaluation suggests that Stay and Play may be particularly beneficial for those children who find it difficult to separate from their family. The structure of Stay and Play is probably an important element here, as it provides opportunities for children, supported by their families, to engage in small group activities, such as music circle times. By providing a safe and supportive environment, families’ attendance at Stay and Play can ease children’s separation anxiety and may be of assistance in preparing children for transition to childcare and/or school.

“P” [a mother] commented that since her daughter had been coming to Stay and Play sessions that she had become far more confident and could now separate far more easily.

- Allison joined the resource centre to just borrow toys, but as she got to know the staff she told them about difficulties she was having at home with her children. Eventually she started coming to Stay and Play where the staff modelled ways to help her play with her sons and to guide their behaviour safely. As she built a relationship with staff she told them she had experienced violence at home and was having difficulties dealing with the consequences of recent separation. The Family Resource Worker has been able to meet with Allison privately and together they have developed a plan for ongoing support with other local agencies.

- Sarah commented that Stay and Play gave her an opportunity to play “one on one” with her child. As a mother of three children, she said she found it very difficult to find time to play alone with her youngest child. She commented that attending Stay and Play was her daughter’s “time”, and it provided an opportunity for her to “reconnect” with her daughter; she was observed spending the whole session playing on the floor with her daughter with a range of resources. Asked what was different about Stay and Play compared to other playgroups, she mentioned that other, parent run playgroups, were primarily for parents, usually mothers, to socialise, whereas, because Stay and Play was a facilitated playgroup, it enabled parents to play with their children whilst also providing support and the opportunity to socialise for those that needed or wanted it.

- One parent who attended a parent group wrote in a post-group feedback survey:
  
  “[receive] some new parenting “tools”, meet other mums with similar aged children, learn how to be a well grounded, stable and the best mum that I can be.”

- Another commented:
  
  “Met some lovely ladies and walked away feeling far more prepared for parenting that coming home from hospital with a new baby”.

Family outcomes

Professional observations indicated:

- positive changes in parenting efficacy.
  
  J., who had previously expressed concern with her parenting, engaged in eye contact, smiled, laughed and talked with her children. She followed the lead of her 2.5 year old in her play and kept the one year old involved too. Staff reaffirmed the positive parenting strategies she was engaging in.

- parents’ increasing social connectedness. For instance:

  Mai and Li met at Stay and Play. At first they talked mainly about what their children were doing and more general topics. After coming for some time, staff have observed that they are talking to each other more about themselves, their concerns and worries, are sharing information about what is available in the local area for parents and children and are celebrating together when something exciting or interesting happens. Mai and Li and some other parents from Stay and Play now meet up at other times as well, or go to the park together after Stay and Play.
Parents reported:

- in a pre and post test survey, over a six month period, there was an increase in parents’ self assessment of their:
  - knowledge of appropriate toys for their child;
  - understanding of their child’s behaviour;
  - understanding of their child’s development;
  - connection with other families in the area;
  - confidence in their parenting skills; and
  - awareness of local services.

[Note: Pseudonyms have been used to protect privacy]

**Policy analysis**

The SDN Family Resource Centre project is a positive example of a Local Answers funded project. The project reflects a growing trend to seek ways to enhance existing universal children’s services to better meet the needs of disadvantaged families and those desiring parenting and other supports.

**Evaluation**

The SDN Family Resource Centre project has undergone an internal evaluation. The findings of this evaluation are reported in An evaluation of SDN’s Child and Family Resource Centre (Wong & Cumming, 2008).

**Project related publications**

**References**


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**Contact**

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**Website**

http://www.sdn.org.au

**More information**

More information on the SDN Family Resource Centre and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website.

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**Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia**

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