

***THE PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION PROJECT:***  
**ONE MODEL FOR WORKING IN DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES**  
**THROUGHOUT AUSTRALIA**

*An Overview*

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*Professor Ross Homel\**  
*Griffith University*

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## Introduction

The *Pathways to Prevention Project* in Brisbane has been operating since 2002 in a disadvantaged urban area of Queensland. However, planning began as far back as 1999, following the publication of the well-known Federal Government report *Pathways to Prevention*, written by Professor Ross Homel and colleagues. As the name suggests, the *Pathways to Prevention Project* is based on the thinking in this report.

The *Pathways Project* in Brisbane is the product of a partnership between Mission Australia and Griffith University, supported by funding from corporate and philanthropic sponsors, the Queensland Government, and the Australian Research Council. This partnership works because it has, in turn, allowed the development of extensive partnerships at the local level: partnerships with schools and preschools, partnerships with other helping agencies, and partnerships with local families and community groups, including the major ethnic communities and the indigenous community.

This document provides a brief overview of the project, and presents reasons why its approach to enhancing the wellbeing and life chances of children, young people and their families should be emulated in other disadvantaged communities throughout Australia.

The document begins with a brief account of social trends in Australia, highlighting the need for enhanced approaches to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups in our society. This is followed by a summary of the developmental approach to the prevention of social problems, explaining why it has such relevance to the needs of Australian children and their families at this time.

The remainder of this document outlines the programs and operations of the Brisbane project, and summarises the main results to date.

Not only have outcomes been measurably improved for children and their parents, preliminary economic and mathematical modelling indicates that these outcomes will deliver considerable savings to the government and the community in both the short and long term.

A concluding section argues that the *Pathways* approach is urgently needed in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia.

## **The Context – The Unequal Futures Faced by Australian Children**

For many children and young people, life in Australia has never been better. Literacy and numeracy levels place Australian children highly in comparison with other OECD countries at Years 3 and 9. General health indicators also tell an encouraging story, with increases in life expectancy, declines in perinatal and infant death rates, lowered incidence of maternal deaths in childbirth and reductions in reported rates of infectious disease for the community as a whole. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).

However, life has also become more complicated and challenging for many children and young people in Australia over the past half-century. Increased rates of divorce and family breakdown are an obvious sign of societal distress, but there are other pointers that all is not well.

As 2003 Australian of the Year Professor Fiona Stanley has observed (Stanley, 2001), indicators of developmental health and wellbeing are showing adverse trends amongst children and adolescents. This is in spite of Australia's wealth, generally high levels of education, and the kinds of positive trends noted above. Rising rates are being observed for low birth weight, neurodevelopmental disorders, asthma, type 1 diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, autism, mental health morbidities, child abuse and neglect, adolescent suicide, obesity, eating disorders, learning disabilities, behavioural disorders, aggressive behaviours and violence, school drop out and truancy, juvenile crime, illicit drug and alcohol use, teenage births.

Some of these problems (such as asthma and suicide) have trebled over the last 30 years and are higher than at any time in Australian history. What is it about modern Australia that is causing these increases? Such rising rates are not unique to Australia; most developed countries are observing similar trends. A unique aspect of the problem for Australia is that these indicators are worse amongst our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities and unlike other former colonies (New Zealand, Canada) ATSI outcomes are not improving at any age. There have been dramatic social changes for families and communities over the last 30 years.

Social, technological, workplace and economic changes appear to have had most benefit for the wealthier groups in societies, with increasingly adverse effects on the growing numbers and proportions of families and groups in relative and absolute poverty.

Changes which have occurred in the distribution of wealth, markedly increased inequalities in health, educational and most other outcomes, increasing family breakdown and blended families, undervaluing and neglect of children, changing patterns of women's work, in child care, the pace of work and life generally, stress and unemployment, tend to impact most negatively on those with least resilience.

The impact of these trends is exacerbated by the steady loss of faith and diminished levels of involvement in major institutions such as public schools, churches, and community associations – the main institutions that in previous generations have supported families and contributed significantly to child and youth development. To make matters worse, helping organisations, whether in the government or non-government sectors, are struggling to cope with the demands

being placed upon them, and have a sense that the approaches they are currently using are not working as well as they should.

For all these reasons *preventive approaches* have become popular in Australia in recent years. If it is possible to ‘get in early’ and influence for the better the direction of pathways leading to welfare dependency, crime or substance abuse, not only will our most disadvantaged citizens benefit, Australia as a whole will be a healthier, more cohesive society.

## **The Developmental Approach to the Prevention of Crime and Related Problems – Solving Problems and Saving Money**

As we have seen, *developmental prevention* involves ‘getting in early’ in some fashion to deal with child maltreatment and other problems in individuals, families, schools or communities that seem likely to develop later into fully-blown crime problems. Doing something about these kinds of problems, preferably before the damage is too hard to repair, strikes most people as a logical approach to crime prevention – even those who most strongly support ‘get tough’ policies. The twin challenges of course are to identify exactly what it is in individuals, families, schools or communities that increase the odds of involvement in crime and related problems, and then to do something about the identified problems as early as possible.

The good news is that we now have persuasive scientific evidence that the early intervention approach might really work. Indeed, we could not have written the *Pathways to Prevention* report or undertaken the *Pathways to Prevention Project* in Brisbane if it were not for the solid evidence produced in the last decade or so by an influential series of experiments that it is possible to work with young children and their families in such a way as to head-off future health, behaviour and crime problems (Farrington & Welsh 2003). There is quite impressive evidence for long-term effects from a range of studies that commenced in the United States before the 1980s, such as the Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart 1993), the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project (Olds et al. 1998) and the Seattle Social Development Project (Hawkins et al. 1999).

In most of the successful experiments the systematic delivery to disadvantaged families with young children of basic services or resources that are taken for granted by middle class populations in many countries eventually resulted in surprisingly large reductions in crime involvement amongst those targeted. It seems that simple things that everybody believes in and can feel good about, like baby health care or preschool, if they are done ‘right’, might be the key to successful crime policies.

“Doing it right” means adhering to the following general principles:

- Influencing the factors that create problems or barriers for children and families – working on *risk factors* in the usual parlance

- Strengthening positive influences in the lives of children and families – often referred to as building *protective factors*, or *increasing resilience*
- Working not just with individuals but also *influencing the contexts within which they live* – their families, schools, preschools, playgroups, peer groups, churches, and so on.
- Focusing on *key life transitions*, such as the transition to school. These are points at which things often go wrong for disadvantaged children, but they are also points at which families are most open to support from the wider community
- Creating *child-friendly communities and institutions* that can provide the backup that families need from time to time.

A key feature of our understanding of developmental prevention is that *social contexts* make a difference not only to the skills, strategies, or identities that individuals develop, but also to the *support* that is available when transitions are made. For example, transitions are made more easily when there are personal social supports, such as a network of friends. Transitions are also made more easily when social structures provide the information that is needed in order to know what a transition involves or are sufficiently flexible to allow for different points of entry or different understandings of what the transition involves. In an ideal world, the support available from “developmentally friendly” services and structures would be able to compensate for what may be lacking within individual families or their immediate social networks.

In effect, within developmental perspectives, neither the problems nor the solutions are seen as belonging solely to an individual.

Recent studies have indicated that well-designed projects that adhere to these principles have the ability to yield a positive return to both the public and private sectors (Karoly et al. 1998; 2001). Chisholm (2000) indicated the importance of early intervention programs and highlights that such programs not only provide positive social gains but financial gains to match.

Longitudinal studies have shown that in most cases program benefits significantly outweigh program costs. Statements claiming that an intervention produces \$10 in savings for every \$3 outlaid (Karoly et al. 1998) are beginning to attract attention to the fact that maybe these programs are economically feasible. Analyses of the crime reduction benefits of early intervention programs carried out by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Aos et al. 2001) show that nurse home visiting programs have a net financial benefit of up to (US)\$15,918 per participant, or a return of (US)\$3.05 for every dollar spent. Similarly, early childhood education programs for disadvantaged children (including the famous Perry Preschool Project) have an average benefit of (US)\$6,972 per participant, or (US)\$1.78 return on investment per individual. The comparable figures for the Seattle Social Development Project are (US)\$14,169 per participant, a return on investment of (US)\$4.25 per dollar spent.

As Steve Aos from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy stated at a conference a few years ago, by the standards employed by financial advisors (his previous career), early intervention programs are a very sound financial investment!

## The Pathways Project

*The Pathways to Prevention Project* is focussed on the transition to school in the most disadvantaged urban area in Queensland, and involves the integration of family support programs with pre-school and school-based programs in seven schools within a community development framework.

The *Family Independence Program* offers culturally appropriate activities and services that operate on the principle that the goal of improving the lives of children is inseparable from improving the lives of their parents, families and communities. The primary focus of the Family Independence Program is to a) promote positive parenting; b) reduce social isolation experienced by families, and c) prepare young children and their families for the transition to primary school.

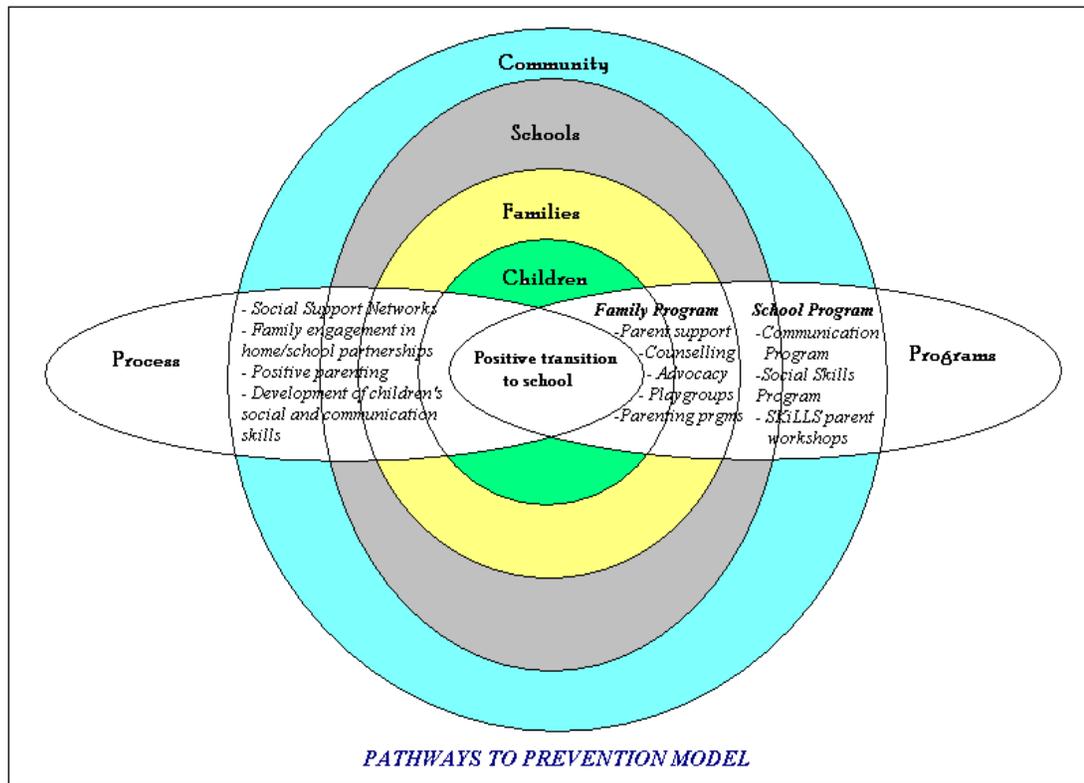
The primary focus of the *school-based program components* is to: (a) enhance children's communication skills, (b) enhance children's social skills, and (c) encourage the formation of strong and equitable home-school relationships which empower parents to participate more actively in their children's learning. Thus the *Pathways Project* offers a unique opportunity to provide a comprehensive intervention that integrates action at individual, family and school level (Figure 1).

Primary funding is for the period 2001-2003, although it is expected that the project will continue into 2004 and beyond. As noted earlier, the project is based on the principles of developmental prevention described in the Federal Government report, *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia*, authored by Ross Homel and his colleagues. The project has been made possible through a partnership of Mission Australia with Griffith University, supported in part by the Queensland Government. The key people at Griffith have been Ross Homel and Kate Freiberg at the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance and Ian Hay and Gordon Elias from the School of Cognition, Learning and Special Education.

Analysis of data collected to date indicates high levels of parent satisfaction with family-based programs and relatively greater levels of improvement in indicators of language proficiency, social competence and behaviour among groups of children who have participated in school-based programs compared to groups of children who have not.

A much more extensive array of outcome measures for families, schools and ethnic communities was developed in 2003, and has been integrated with process evaluation methods. A major report is due in July 2004.

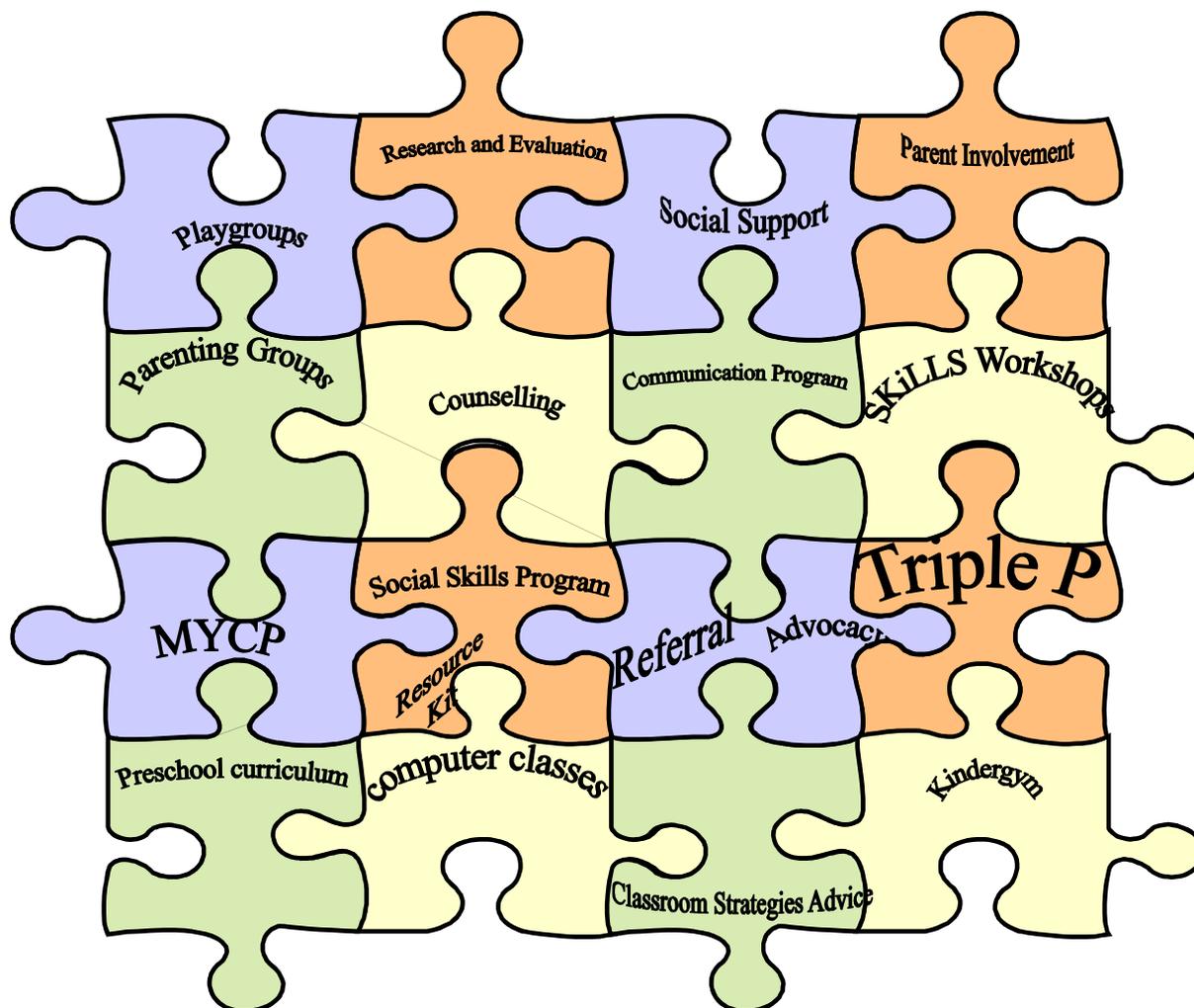
### Figure 1. The Pathways to Prevention model



The aim of any developmental intervention is to create the opportunity for sustainable changes in developmental pathways that might otherwise lead to behaviour problems, crime, or related problems. Specifically, the *Pathways to Prevention Project* provides an innovative intervention model within which a number of partners work together sharing a common strategic focus: to support families in promoting their young children's cognitive, social and emotional development. The work that has been undertaken to put this collaborative approach into practice has paved the way for the simultaneous implementation of a responsive and flexible range of intervention components in the key developmental contexts of family, school, and ethno-specific and community settings.

What is important within this project is not simply that there are, for example, programs which seek to promote positive parenting or enhance the individual skills of young children, *but that the family- and school-based programs fit together – they are mutually supportive*. This has been shown diagrammatically in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. The Pathways ‘Jigsaw’ of Programs – Everything Fits Together**

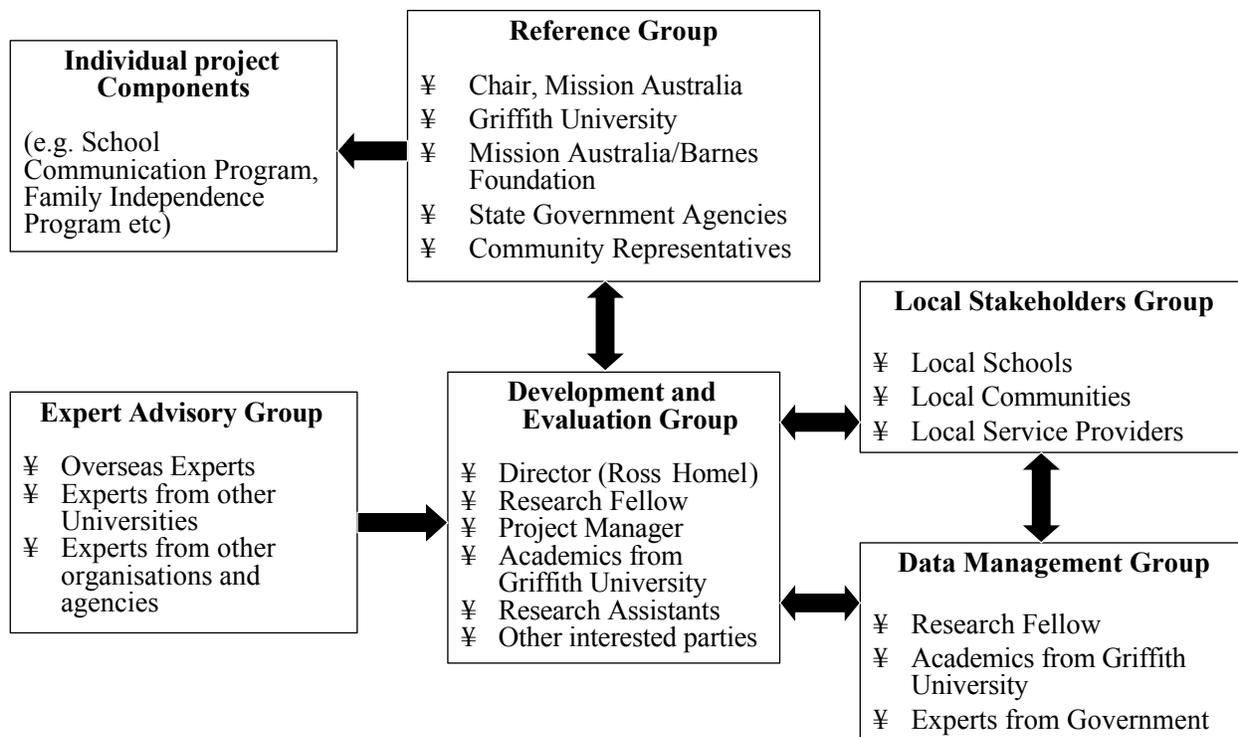


Within the *Pathways* partnership collaboration occurs between:

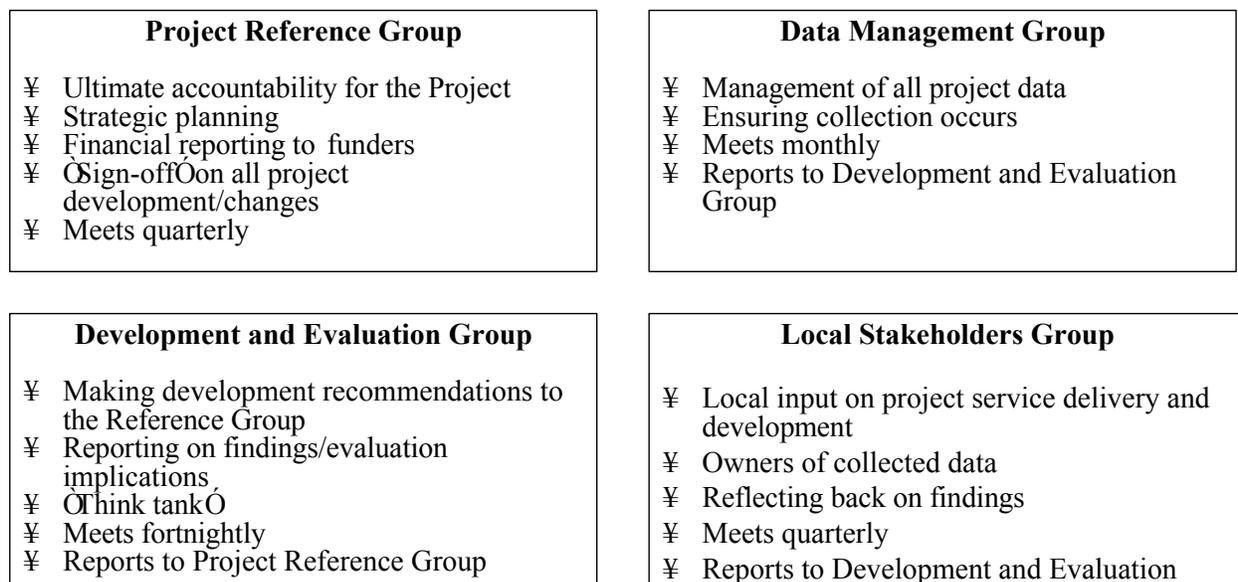
- Mission Australia and Griffith University
- Project team and community and families
- Project team and schools
- Schools and families
- Project team and service providers in the local project area

The project management structure is shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2.

**Figure 3.1. Project Management Structure: Roles, Responsibilities and Reporting**



**Figure 3.2. Project Management Structure: Roles, Responsibilities and Reporting**



Such “boxes and arrows” diagrams do not however tell the whole story. Partnerships at the community level, as opposed to the organisational level, are based on a very different set of dynamics. They take **TRUST**:

***T*ime** - it doesn't happen overnight. It took over a year to engage the community and build TRUST.

***R*espect** - for clients, stakeholders; partner organisations; the work of other service providers

***U*niversal** – a commitment to offer universal services to everyone in the target group to prevent stigmatisation of 'at risk groups'. Match workers to the cultural and linguistic demographics of the area.

***S*trengths** – a capacity to work with strengths that are already in the community- build on community and family strengths and existing networks.

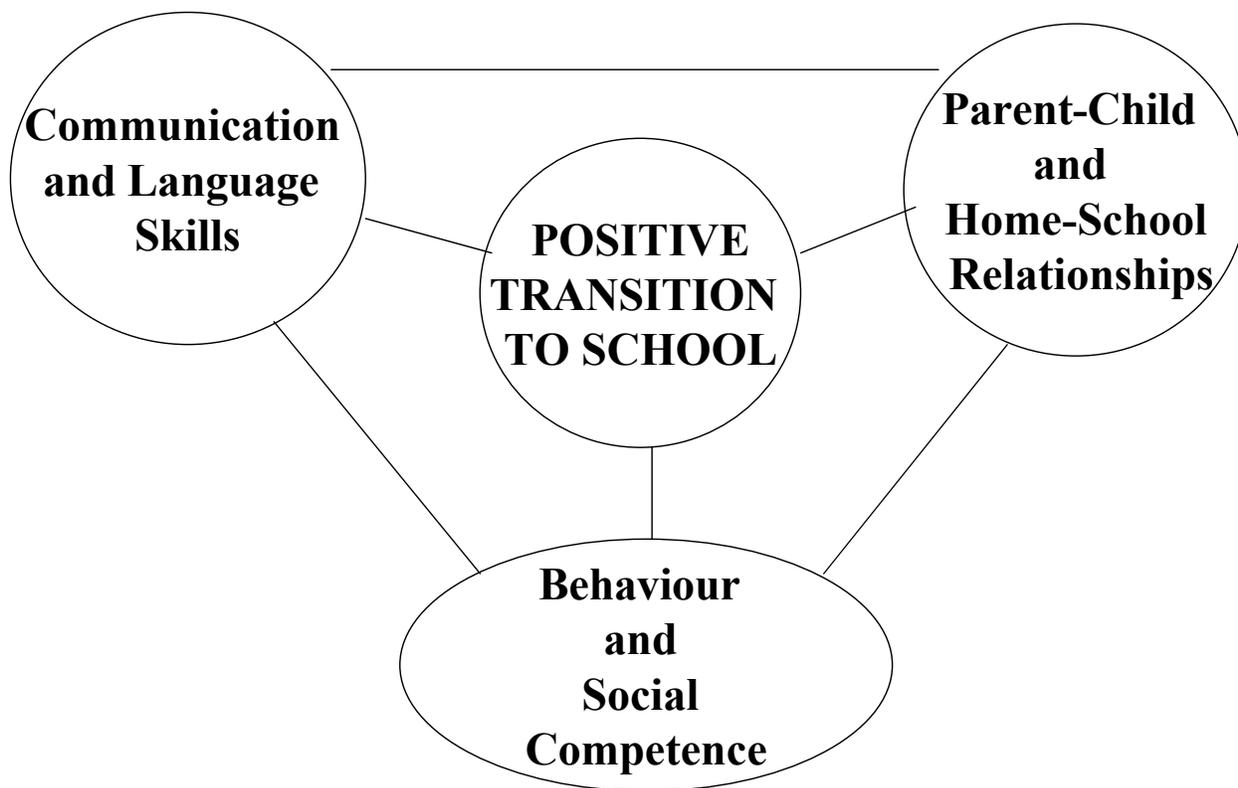
***T*ransparency** - take the time to explain what you are doing, why you are doing it and how it will be done to promote the benefits of services provided. Clarify any misunderstandings.

The project has been implemented and evaluated progressively, as funding and staff have become available, with each program being piloted before full implementation. In 2001 *a communication program* and *a social skills program* for four year old pre-schoolers (with related group-based programs for parents) were developed and tested by specialist Education Queensland teachers, and fully implemented in 2002. An alternative version of the communication program has also been developed (*SKiLLS - Supporting Kids in Language and Literacy Skills*), emphasising support for the family as a setting for enhancement of language and literacy in the preschool years. This is running parallel with the classroom-based version, and permits comparison of two methodologies.

*The Family Independence Program* assists parents, caregivers and families of 4-6 year olds in the preschools to create a stimulating home environment that is conducive to learning, through the provision of culturally sensitive services which include: counselling, parenting skills training, playgroups, advocacy, practical support and a wide range of group work and community development activities. Development of parent programs in 2002 and 2003 was guided by extensive surveys and other methods of data collection. These surveys are specially designed to explore the needs of the different ethnic groups in the area with respect to their families and links with schools, and provide the foundation for other community development activities.

Figure 4 shows the links between the child and family programs.

### **Figure 4. A Combination of Family Support and School Based Programs**



## **The Major Achievements and Outcomes for the Program to Date**

1. Each year a comprehensive range of child- and family focused programs has been established for a cohort of nearly 300 preschool children in seven schools, as well as their families .
2. The design and implementation of these programs has been undergirded by detailed information obtained from surveys of more than 300 parents and community leaders.
3. An acceptable level of participation from parents in project programs has been achieved, with more than 50% involved in one or more programs or activities (much higher than often achieved in projects in very disadvantaged communities).
4. Extensive community development activities have been commenced, with some innovative programs being developed at the instigation of the community and with their extensive input (such as the *language nests* for preschoolers and their parents within the Pacific Islander population).
5. *A greater improvement in receptive language skills* in the classes of preschool children participating in the communication and social skills programs was recorded than in other preschool classes receiving a standard preschool curriculum.
6. The positive effect of the Communication Program was particularly dramatic for *children from non-English speaking backgrounds*.

7. *A greater reduction in behavioural difficulties* in the classes of preschool children participating in the communication and social skills programs was recorded than in other preschool classes receiving a standard preschool curriculum.
8. The social skills program was most effective in improving the behaviours of children exhibiting “extreme behaviour problems.” The communication program had its greatest effects on children with less challenging , but still “borderline”, behaviours.
9. Children who participated in the social skills program showed greater improvement than the non-intervention group on a cognitive measure of planning ability.
10. Parents who expressed initial concern about their children’s language at the start of the year were slightly more likely to have overcome that concern by the end of the year if their child had attended one of the communication program preschools.
11. Successful implementation was achieved of child behaviour management courses (Triple-P) for parents, including Vietnamese parents with limited English:
  - a. all participants interviewed would recommend the program to other parents;
  - b. all preschool teachers interviewed would recommend the program to parents of preschoolers;
  - c. facilitators were well received by participants;
  - d. facilitators worked well as a team;
  - e. preschool teachers noticed a difference in some children’s behaviour;
  - f. the most successful program techniques implemented by the parents in the home included: time out, quiet time and the use of clear and concise instructions.
  - g. there were no areas of the program that any of the participants interviewed had problems or difficulties in understanding. Overall a very positive response was captured.
12. The Vietnamese, Samoan, Tongan and Indigenous Playgroups have provided a very positive experience for all caregivers and children involved. The Playgroups have assisted over 100 parents and caregivers to interact with their children and to access services and helped parents to interact with their children. The parents and children who have attended the playgroup have developed a range of skills and knowledge appropriate to the transitional period they are in.
13. The achievements of a community profile survey included:
  - a. **Recruitment of suitable ethnic researchers** – twelve researchers were recruited from the three target communities. Researchers were trained and provided essential input into the development of the research schedule.
  - b. **Gaining the confidence of community leaders** – researchers interviewed 61 community leaders from three communities.
  - c. **Obtaining interviews with leaders, parents and other relevant people** – in addition to community leaders the research team interviewed 94 parents.
  - d. **Securing commitment to the aims and philosophy of the larger project** – agencies, leaders, preschools and parents are now much more aware of the *Pathways to Prevention Project*.

- e. **Reflection on and analysis of interview and other data** – Obtained concise and accurate data pertaining to the needs and aspirations of families in regard to the raising of young children.

## Cost-Benefit Analysis

### *Long-term Effects*

One of the difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of early intervention projects is that many of the benefits are not evident until later in the participants' lives. This is particularly true in relation to crime prevention as the age of criminal responsibility is 10 years, with most young people first appearing in the juvenile justice system in their mid teens. The Juvenile Justice Simulation Model (JJSIM) has been developed to enable the simulation of the passage of young offenders through the juvenile justice system. This model allows for the comparison of the relative impact across time of different programs and policies, both in terms of numbers and costs. Simulation modelling provides a powerful methodology examining the impact of early intervention programs on offending by young people.

The initial results of the evaluation of *Pathways to Prevention Project* were simulated through the JJSIM. These results indicated that prior to the intervention, 15% of children were identified as 'at risk' of severe behavioural problems. ***After participating in the social skills component of the program 10% were identified as 'at risk', a reduction of 33% in the number of 'at risk' children in the community.***

A reduction in the initiation of offending is required to model the effectiveness of a crime prevention program. Longitudinal studies carried out in Brisbane indicate that 50% of children identified as 'at risk' at the age of five go on to offend as juveniles (Bor, Najman, O'Callaghan, Williams & Anstey, 2001). Extrapolation from these figures suggests that when these children reach offending age there will be a 15% reduction of the initiation of offending in the relevant community.

Simulations were run out to 2016 and these children would leave the juvenile justice system (turn 17) in 2013. The simulations indicate that the program would result in a 21% reduction in offending in the target community. This represents a substantial reduction of juvenile offending within this community. ***Furthermore, this reduction translates to an estimated cost to the Department of Families (juvenile justice court and corrections) over the last three years of the simulation of \$415,000.*** JJSIM only includes costs to the Department of Families does not include the extensive costs to the community and victims or to other government departments such as education, health, police, adult courts and corrections.

### *Short-term Effects*

Early intervention programs implemented in a disadvantaged area will advantage the community and society as a whole not only because of long-term reductions in criminal behaviours, but also because of a whole range of short-term benefits. These include:

- communities being offered the capacity to provide safe and positive environments;
- an improvement in the bonds between the family and schools;
- reductions in behaviour problems in schools, including reductions in truancy and exclusions
- the development of positive parenting practices
- reductions in child abuse and neglect

As we have seen, evidence on the cost-effectiveness of early intervention is gradually building. However, more evidence must be made available to decision makers highlighting the short-term benefits.

Little work has been done on determining the short-term benefits of early intervention programs, with most evaluations focusing on cost-effectiveness as opposed to cost-benefits due to the difficulty of placing a common value (in this case dollars) on social costs and benefits. However, if programs want to attract the increasingly rare funding dollar, they must be prepared to demonstrate to decision-makers that such programs do have a positive net return in the short-term as well as the long-term.

The economic analysis of the *Pathways to Prevention* Project involves the development of a methodology for determining the short-term costs and benefits associated with early intervention projects. Such a methodology will enable early intervention programs to have a tool for assessing short-term benefits which will help them compete on even ground with competing bidders. The results of this work will be included in the project report, due mid-2004.

## **The Need for the Pathways Approach in Disadvantaged Communities Throughout Australia**

*The Pathways to Prevention Project* has demonstrated the viability of an approach to the prevention of crime and related problems that works. It is based on a unique long-term partnership between a university and a national welfare agency that ensures that the best of what both sectors can provide is made available to children and their families living in the poorest urban area of Australia.

*The Pathways Project* is unusual not only for the innovative nature of its approach, working simultaneously with children, their families, schools and ethnic communities, it is unusual for the way it in which it has carefully measured outcomes and demonstrated through mathematical modelling that the approach yields significant financial benefits to the local community and to the nation.

Crime and related problems cost Australia billions of dollars each year. Children and young people in our most disadvantaged communities bear a much greater portion of this burden than those living in more privileged areas. Given the evidence that social inequalities are increasing in Australia, and that poverty has an increasingly geographic face, it seems a matter of common

sense that it would pay to invest in a proven model that can reduce the burden of the crime problem in disadvantaged communities throughout Australia.

Now is the time to take the *Pathways* model seriously and ensure that it can be implemented in many similar communities around Australia. Not only will this investment yield a high financial return, it will improve the lives of our most vulnerable young people, helping them to take their places as active citizens in a country we can all be proud of.

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