

# VACCA

## EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

### Overview of Presentation

- In this presentation the research underpinning the program is briefly overviewed;
- The values, core components and the proposed model will be articulated;
- Details of the consultation with the Indigenous community will be provided; and
- What the Early Intervention program looks like today will be presented.

### Overview of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

- The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) was established in 1978 as a statewide Aboriginal community controlled and operated service.
- VACCA's objectives include the preservation, strengthening and protection of the cultural and spiritual identity of Indigenous children and to provide culturally appropriate and quality services which are responsive to the needs of the Indigenous community.
- Our strengths are in our particular understanding of Aboriginal ways of caring for children and the complex matters of kinship and social structure. Our knowledge of the local community is invaluable, with workers in the organisation knowing members of a child's family, or what is going on in the child's local community. This knowledge is seen to be of greatest value in determining the best interests of Indigenous children

## SERVICE SYSTEM

- The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency has for a number of years provided tertiary services for the Aboriginal community of Victoria. A number of our programs work directly with child protection.
- Of major concern is the under representation of our families in early intervention and prevention programs.

# Introduction

- The VACCA Early Intervention Program is a holistic service response with a child, family and community focus.
- The historical processes of devaluing the rights of Indigenous people and the removal of children have greatly undermined the:
  - development of cultural identity,
  - flow of knowledge and understanding of child development and
  - culturally appropriate models of parenting.
- As a consequence, many of our families are vulnerable and require support, in "bringing up" their children.
- The intention of this program is to provide support, in a culturally appropriate manner prior to issues intensifying, thus avoiding the need for more intrusive and disempowering interventions.

## **VACCA'S Early Intervention Program aims to:**

- Be child centered, family and community focused, reversing historic trends of being primarily child focused.
- Draw attention to the importance of family preservation and competency
- Build on existing cultural strengths and capacities of Indigenous families and communities
- Promote and develop positive Indigenous child rearing practices
- Strengthen identity, cultural and intergenerational links.
  
- Foster resilience in the early stages of the child's development
- Provide multiple levels of support to families and communities in their desire to care for their children
- Improve the lives and opportunities of Indigenous children
- Stem the ever increasing flow of Indigenous children into tertiary services, such as Mental Health, Child Protection and Juvenile Justice

**Developing a framework that would fit with these aims and**

## **produce effective outcomes for the Indigenous community is based on:**

- An understanding that Indigenous cultural and parenting practices have been eroded as a direct result of a Government policy that removed Indigenous children from their parents and community
- Research that has an evidence base
- A review of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian and overseas community based family welfare programs

## **The Impact of The Stolen Generations on Indigenous communities**

- The Bringing Them Home report (1997) highlighted the particular issues confronting Indigenous families and why parenting has become such a challenge. The report highlights that the historical emphasis of past Government policies and the removal of Indigenous children was and still is to some extent, responsible for eroding the integrity of the family and undermining the strength and capacities of the Indigenous community.
- Whilst the majority of Indigenous families are providing nurturing experiences for their children, there are some sections of the community who are struggling to do so.
- The breakdown of Aboriginal family structures and a decline in parenting skills are trans generational issues.
- The practice of removing children from families over several generations has impacted on attachment and parenting capacities.
- The placement of children in institutions away from their family and community has resulted in a loss of identity and has meant that many children were subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse.
- These experiences have directly impacted on our families parenting capacity and in their ability to create the social, emotional and nurturing environment necessary for promoting healthy development and well being.

## **Findings from “mainstream” research**

- Our findings through the research were clear:
  - That carefully designed and implemented intervention programs can make a positive difference to the lives of young children and their families, especially those who are at risk. (Albee and Gullota 1997 Pfeiffer and Reddy 2001, Shankoff and Phillips 2000)
  - Early childhood is now recognized as a crucial period in human development, during which the foundations for future well-being are established. A child's development is a dynamic process shaped by a wide range of factors including their own characteristics, the quality of the child -primary caregiver relationships, as well as the nature of the broader social environment in which they are raised. (Ochitree & Moore 2001)

## **FACTORS THAT PROTECT CHILDREN**

**Some of the factors that protect children and help them to become resilient are characteristics of the children themselves. These include:**

- **An easy temperament**
- **Good health**
- **Absence of a disability**
- **Ability to relate to positive role models**
- **Demonstrates a range of interests**
- **Has good peer relationships**
- **To belong to a stable and supportive community**
- **Knowing who they are and where they are from**
- **Having a strong Aboriginal cultural base**

## **Increasing Resilience and well being**

- **Specific factors that impact on the capacity for increasing resilience and well being in Indigenous communities include;**
  - Across every measurement of socioeconomic status and well being, for example: health, education, housing employment and income, and across all age groups and geographical circumstances, Australia's Indigenous people are severely disadvantaged and disproportionately so when compared to the rest of Australian society (Jonas 2000)
  - The lack of Indigenous universal and secondary services across the state often results in intervention occurring too late to be effective as many Indigenous families will not use mainstream services.
  - Many Indigenous families are fearful of using mainstream services given their role and history in the Stolen Generations.
  - Underutilisation of family support services - often short episodes

- As a consequence of the above, many Indigenous people in Victoria are very socially isolated and marginalized.
- Prevention on a broad scale requires a wrap of complementary programs and strategies.
- No single program or service can be expected to solve all the difficulties on its own, but each can contribute to an environment which is safe for children and their families, supporting their positive development and well being.
- Inter-organizational collaboration and the creation of comprehensive services. This requires the building of partnerships between services .
- Adopting a holistic and strength-based approach to service delivery will help create a more positive outlook for children, families and their communities.

## Effects of Trauma on Indigenous Families and Communities

- To work earlier with families will bring challenges. The most significant being to address the impact of unresolved “trauma” on our families. The impact of trauma on our families is well documented:  
 “Indeed, ‘The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report’ (Robertson 2000) noted that many Indigenous people are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. To survive over the years, many Aboriginal people have had to suppress and/or deny their feelings of distress and despair. This pain has become internalised within the family, expressing itself in destructive behaviours such as family violence, alcohol and drug abuse and suicide (Atkinson 1994: 10). Thus, this enacting of trauma is seen as a form of ‘coping mechanism’ (Robertson 2000: 31).” (Stanley, Tomison & Pocock, 2003, 9)

### **Importance of a Culturally Appropriate Response Underpinning the Early Intervention Model**

This is reflected by an understanding of the following:

- Many Aboriginal people have particular issues engaging with mainstream services. Often their reluctance is based on a lack of trust and fear that their parenting is “not good enough”

- Underestimation by service providers of the importance of building a trusting relationship & that this takes time.
- Showing respect for parents and for their views and values - being mindful that everyone is an expert about their own life and with support will reach the best possible solution for them self.
- Having hopeful but realistic views about what change is possible.
- Showing an awareness of the child and family being part of a broader extended family and community.
- Having a multi faceted approach to intervention - multi service programming which doesn't rely on one approach, but knows the family and can build a network of services around the needs of children and their families as required.
- Not underestimating the importance of having workers in the program that are Indigenous and are more sensitive to the values and interests of Aboriginal people. Community respect for the workers and team are critical components for successful program implementation and delivery.
- Including activities that are family focused eg ceremonies, celebrations and cultural events.
- Including in programs' activities that reflect and incorporate Indigenous art, music, story telling and dancing.

## **“Strength” based Perspective**

### **Culturally appropriate strength based perspective**

- Is based on the belief that Aboriginal people have strengths and competencies that they and others lose sight of when problems and grief dominate their lives.
- An emphasis on developing coping skills, managing feelings such as anger and frustration to maximize functioning both within the family and within the broader community

### **Cultural Appropriateness has an Understanding of Grief:**

- Assisting Indigenous people understand the events of the past and the legacy of the Stolen Generation and develop strategies to address the specific issues impacting on them in a contemporary environment.
- Having the capacity to link this history to their present, can help to depersonalize and move on from a position of shame.
- Without some understanding and exploration of grief, loss and trauma “parenting” is made more difficult and confidence and competence more difficult to achieve.

## **What did the research say - Program components**

**Research indicated that the Core Components of the Program include:**

- Community Education
- A combination of child and family focused supported group programs, that have a quality framework and can be evaluated.

- Parent Education
- Professional Home Visiting
- Volunteer Elder/Mentoring Program
- Practical Support & brokerage funds
- Referral to specialist services
- Forming partnerships with key Indigenous and mainstream services to enhance outcomes.

## **Who would be the Target Group for the Early Intervention Program**

Access to the Early Intervention Program is to be universal, that is, any Indigenous child and family is to be able to use the service.

The program is to be able to meet a range of needs within the community and able to develop specific or targeted responses for:

- Parents and prospective parents who have grown up outside their family environment with little or no contact with their extended family network of Indigenous community.
- Parents who require support and assistance to break the continuing cycle of removal.
- Parents who because of personal or family crisis, have children who are unable to reside in the parental home.
- Teenage parents who are struggling to care for their children at the same time as experiencing major personal developmental changes.
- Children who are in the out of home care system with Indigenous or non-Indigenous carers.

## **Referral Source**

Referrals for the Early Intervention Program would come from a range of community service organizations who target families with babies and young children. VACCA programs such as the Family Support and Lakidjika (VACCA's Child Protection Service) would also be a major referral source as would be services who specifically target Indigenous families including:

- Koorie Early Childhood Field Officers.
- The Aboriginal Health Service
- Koorie Hospital Liaison Officers
- Maternal Health Nurses.
- Early Childhood Services such as Yappera
- Mainstream child & welfare services providing out of home care for Indigenous children
- Women's Refuges
- Education workers

The Community Education component of the program works actively with these services to ensure appropriate and timely referrals. These programs and services also offer opportunities for partnerships

## **The Early Intervention Model Components in detail:**

### **Community Education**

#### **Goal:**

To promote protective and nurturing environments for the 0-8 years age group and their families

**Target Group:**

Indigenous families, communities and organizations.

- The Community Education will revolve around particular Early Intervention themes including "Having Fun with Kids" or "Fathers Matter Too".
- Themes will have universal appeal and be non- stigmatizing
- It might be beneficial to have an Indigenous "patron" to help convey the message

**Activities include:**

- Developing resource materials including posters and pamphlets which promote positive Indigenous parenting
- Identifying and incorporating current resources in respect to Indigenous child rearing and parenting information.
- Community Education Seminars eg Helping children get ready for school.
- Promoting partnerships between Indigenous organizations in the development of Early Intervention Services.
- Promotional Activities , for example "Indigenous Playgroup Week"

**Supported Play groups:**

Our long term aim is that there will be 3 types of Supported Playgroups

- Universal
- Specialist and according to need
- Children in Care

**What the Literature says about Playgroups**

Playgroups have been identified as an emerging and growing program area for the early years service system because of their potential to meet a range of needs in both the child and the parent.

Playgroups have the potential to fill the gap between the support received by parents from Maternal Child Health Nurses and the next accessible and affordable service for the child- which is either pre-school or school entry.

Playgroups for disadvantaged families or communities lapse without the support of an

experienced facilitator. Where playgroups are facilitated they appear to have a positive impact on the bringing up of children and their pathways into pre-school or primary school.

Playgroups are Universal Services providing benefits to both parents and children

Playgroups can promote cultural identity and community connectedness

### **Play Groups promote the value of play**

- Play is vital in a child's life and is a way of children making sense of their world.
- Play experienced at Playgroups encourage interactions between mother/father and child.
- Play provides an opportunity for children to explore, be creative and to use their imagination.
- Play helps to develop gross motor skills such as throwing, catching, jumping and fine motor skills such as threading, drawing and painting as well as their social skills.

## **Parenting Education Programs**

### **Goal:**

- The development and implementation of a group program which will focus on a range of issues which impact on parenting. This is a parenting education/discussion group and is different from a play group as children are not present.

### **Framework:**

- Playing Happy Families Model – Developed by Parenting Australia

### **Target Group:**

- Programs to be developed for families with or without children in their direct care.
- The flexibility of the program makes it suitable for any group of parents with similar aged children, issues and experiences.

## **Working in Partnership**

The development and delivery of Early Intervention Services must be responsive to the unique features of the particular Indigenous community.

Brokering networks and partnerships between people, institutions and agencies will provide families with the services they need. Tomison and Wise (1999)

Exploring the opportunity to do joint work with other Aboriginal Services where relationships and trust have already been established would appear to make sense.

## **Services in the Metropolitan area which offer opportunities for collaboration include:**

### **Metro Partnerships:**

- Aboriginal Health Service
- Aboriginal Advancement League
- MAC Centers - Yappera
- KODE School
- Indigenous Pre-School Advisors
- Koorie Hospital Liaison Programs
- Beyond Blue - Depression Task Force

### **Rural Partnerships:**

- Aboriginal Co- Operatives
- Health Services

## **Mainstream Partnerships**

Whilst partnerships will primarily be with Indigenous organizations, working collaboratively with mainstream services may also be required in order to gain expertise and knowledge.

The concept of working collaboratively and developing inter-organizational linkages with mainstream services will require significant attention. Forging partnerships must be understood in the context of:

- Impaired trust
- Indigenous people being reluctant to access mainstream services because of historical factors
- Mainstream services lacking culturally appropriate skills and understanding

The process of developing collaborative relationships takes time.

The initiatives will build on existing relationships and identify new opportunities.

Memorandums of Understandings or Agreements will be part of any partnership opportunity.

### **TRAINING:**

It is envisaged that workers in this program will be Indigenous and have a good knowledge of Indigenous culture and community. However, all workers will be given cultural training to ensure consistency in service provision.

**Early Intervention workers should have knowledge of Indigenous child and family rearing practices including:**

- Development of atypical infants and young children including those with sensory, motor, cognitive and socio-emotional disabilities
- Functioning and structure of families, family dynamics and the role of families in promoting development
- Team and interagency collaboration, service coordination and advocacy
- The relationship between child, family and community in promoting well being .

### **Early Intervention workers should have the skills to:**

- Assess infant, child and family needs
- Demonstrate use of effective intervention strategies and apply current and culturally appropriate approaches in early intervention and preschool years.
- Create developmentally and culturally appropriate learning environments using strategies to adapt activities and materials to the needs of children.
- Collaborate with families and professionals in the design and delivery of service.
- Perform service coordination (case management) responsibilities jointly with families.

This has been adapted from the work of Klein and Campbell 1990

### **Strategies to assist workers gain relevant training and knowledge include**

- Developing resources and training modules to be delivered in- house.
- Distributing information on existing relevant training programs and early childhood programs.
- Developing Indigenous specific resource materials in relation to Early Intervention and child development .
- Recognizing the cultural needs of Indigenous children as an additional specific content area.

## **Evaluation**

VACCA has over several years has positioned itself in the community as a lead agency on Indigenous child and family welfare issues. Through the development of the Early Intervention Program it can further add to this position by disseminating information on effective, best practice early intervention models and support.

- It is important that the Early Intervention Program be underpinned by evaluation and an evidence base to ensure appropriate service development and continuous improvement.
- To achieve a best practice framework, there must be adequate funding for the program and for evaluation.
- Piloting the program and completing an initial evaluation, prior to broader implementation is envisaged.

- The program will have an action research model of evaluation.

## Implementation

- Two Supported Playgroups commenced in March 2004, at the East Preston site on Tuesdays, and at the KODE School in Glenroy on Fridays.
- The second group planned for the KODE School did not commence because at the time there appeared to be insufficient demand.
- However, there is now a “waiting list” for both sites, and a second group in each location will begin in the second semester of 2004.
- The playgroups were initially held from 10.00am till 12.30pm; however, in May, the parents attending requested a later start, and on a trial basis playgroups have been rescheduled for an 11.00am start.

## Attendance

Both playgroups have a “core” of 8 to 10 family groups, with an average attendance of 10 to 12 children at each group, ranging in age from 0 to 5 years. Playgroup Staff feel that this is an optimal number. A suggestion that the KODE group be “split” to accommodate new members was strongly vetoed by the group, indicating the strength of the feeling of belonging within the group. Whilst this strong identification as a group has the potential to be “exclusive” of new members, that has not been the experience to date.

- acceptance engendered by other members of the group.

## Staffing

The Co-ordinator, and two Early Childhood Development Workers form the core staff group for each of the playgroups, with feedback that this is the minimum number required to supervise, facilitate activities, prepare meals and be available to provide guidance when required to parents in their interactions with their children and other group members.

- Although not originally envisaged as part of the model, the Community Education and Resource Development Co-ordinator is present at all the playgroups. Tasks undertaken by this key member of the staff include:

- Preparation of "Playgroup bags" for new members, including the decoration of the calico bags by the parent and child.

## Elder/Volunteer participation

- Elders have now been involved in some playgroup sessions, assisting with activities around traditional culture and history. Further involvement of Elders will be a priority in the second half of the year.

## Transport

- Transport is offered to all families who are unable to easily get to the playgroups. Transport for the KODE group is provided by CDEP and Enmaraleek staff, who use the KODE school mini-bus, supplemented by VACCA staff picking up some families in work vehicles. A part-time bus-driver uses a family group home mini-bus to transport families for the East Preston group.
- The majority of families attending are transported to and from the groups. This has presented issues to staff around the time taken because of the large geographic area to be covered. Two trips are required for both groups, with the result that families on the second trip miss some of the activities early in the session. It has become impossible to include some families who could benefit from the group because of these difficulties.

## Interface with other VACCA programs

The Early Intervention Program is strongly linked to VACCA's Family Support Program through its management structure, and because both programs work in a voluntary way with families who may be experiencing a range of problems in their day-to-day life, or who are, by virtue of the history of Aboriginal people in Australia, are to some degree vulnerable.

- Referrals to the Playgroups are received from all other programs at VACCA, and from other Indigenous organisations,

or from families themselves or other community members.

## Summary

- At this stage indications are that the VACCA Early Intervention Program and Supported Playgroups have wide acceptance in the local Indigenous community. The playgroups are clearly seen by participant families as non-threatening, supportive and fun, and by professionals as an appropriate way to support Indigenous families in the region.
- Issues of community ownership and decision making versus professional ownership, values and beliefs have challenged the staff during implementation on a number of occasions, and will be reflected in the evaluation report.
- Whilst future directions for the Program will be informed by the ongoing Action Research framework and evaluation, and governed by the availability of funding, it is clear that the positive benefits to date support and vindicate the early work undertaken in developing the model.