



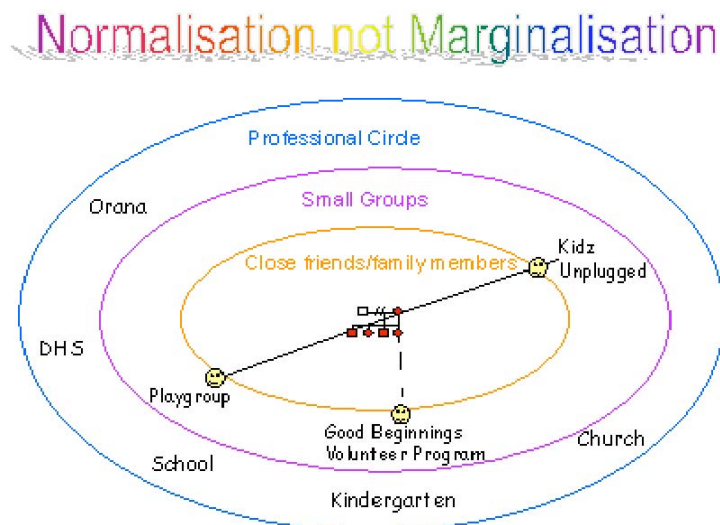
Orana Family Services

The GAIN Project – Growing an Inclusive Neighbourhood
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There is a saying that "It takes a village to raise a child". What does it take to raise a village? The "**Growing an Inclusive Neighbourhood**" (GAIN Project) is an early intervention and support project involving families with children aged 0 to 6 years. **The GAIN Project** provides a framework and strategy to raise the village to support and include vulnerable families through a number of highly integrated strategies that includes Community Education and Advocacy, Leadership Training, Good Beginnings Home Visiting Program, Confident Parenting – parent education, and Parents Plus - individual behaviour management support. The model of practice outlined in this paper can be demonstrated using three circles of influence, the outer circle – the professional/institutional realm, the middle circle – the place where friendship networks can be formed and the inner circle – the place where close friends and family members belong.

The model incorporates the family in their cultural and historical sub-system. This model provides opportunities for people who may be socially excluded from the life of the community through issues such as language barriers, disability, mental illness, criminal history, poor social skills etc. to become positively connected to their community. The model consists of three circles of influence two within the sub institutional realm, and one in the institutional realm. Figure 1 Circles of influence.

Figure 1.



The GAIN Project explores the conceptual possibility of linking both socially isolated and excluded families to community via supportive volunteers, volunteering and normative universal groups such as playgroups, pre-school music programs etc. The aim is to find long-term support and inclusion in a positive environment for families that are normally excluded from what could be a positive community. The hope is that this system through the groups and volunteers will provide a positive and inclusive community, which could provide pathways into participation in the broader community. This means true inclusion into community where people can access the social and economic benefits such as education, work and other resources.

SUMMARY OF THE MODEL: The model consists of three circles of influence, two within the sub institutional realm, and one in the institutional realm. The first circle, the professional/institutional realm is in the institutional realm, the middle and inner circle are in the sub-institutional realm. Figure 1 Circles of influence.

OUTER CIRCLE: The outer circle refers to the institutional realm. With child welfare families it refers specifically to the professionals in the child welfare systems that relate to these families and are responsible for trying to help them. It also refers to other institutions such as schools, kindergartens, churches that people become involved in.

Although professionals in these institutions can provide positive influences, they rarely become part of the inner circle, which can provide long-term support, and a sense of belonging. Institutions can be an avenue where small groups can be formed and positive social support networks developed, these form part of the middle circle.

MIDDLE CIRCLE: The middle circle consists of small groups or places where family members can develop a sense of acceptance and belonging, where long term friends can be made, and where family members are influenced by the group norms. As the family unit is a system that operates by rules, culture and ways of interacting so does a group. When working with child welfare families, one of the challenges for workers wanting to change family systems and the ways that members interact with each other is finding inclusive positive networks. These are the networks that can influence and change the history and culture of a family or family member.

For the cohesion and self-preservation of most groups, individuals who don't fit in become excluded within the group, and usually stop attending. One of the difficulties of integrating a family member who does not have the skills or appropriate behaviour or who does not adhere to the social norms of the group, is that they don't fit in, they become uncomfortable and don't want to be there. Neither does the group want them to be there. Unless you have people from within the group who are prepared to welcome and include them, stick with them if they behave in ways that are unacceptable within the group, whilst at the same

time providing positive role models and encouraging adherence to group norms and acceptable ways of behaving, then the process will fail.

People gravitate towards networks where they are comfortable and accepted, and if the only groups that accept them are negative, violent or abusive that is where they will stay and that is where their friends and peer groups will be formed. As this is the culture that individuals are socialized into, this same cycle will usually continue for the children in the next generation, creating intergenerational dysfunctional systems. The proposed model of intervention aims to provide opportunities for families to form more positive social networks and the chance to change this.

This model proposes using a system within an organisation where there are a number of groups that are connected within the system. It is also a system that has a value of welcome and inclusion of people of all abilities. In this type of system where there is leadership in the form of a team such as the GAIN Project team, it is possible to work through the team to educate the whole group on acceptance, welcome and inclusion of all. It is also possible to find a network of volunteers who will provide support and acceptance to vulnerable family members. It is relationships from the middle circle of influence that will change the inner circle of influence.

INNER CIRCLE: The inner circle consists of close friends of family members. Friends both form, and support who we are. In this circle people feel they can be whole rather than divided into parts eg. Worker, tax payer, parent etc. In this circle the personal and spiritual as well as the social and emotional are nurtured and developed. It is where personal relationships and the sense of belonging truly exist. When positive mentors or peers form part of this circle, this is when we can see major changes begin to occur in the lives of individuals.

When the positive influences within this circle are increased and long-term relationships are formed, the culture and history of individual family members can begin to change. In recognition of the need for inclusion of all the **GAIN Project** provides opportunities for participation and inclusion through several highly linked pathways as follows:

Community Education and Advocacy on the root causes of social exclusion and isolation, and people's right to be included in community life regardless of their social abilities. Community education is facilitated through the Confident Parenting Program, the Leadership Training Program, and presentations and seminars (community and interagency).

Leadership Training Program - Through volunteer and group development this strategy aims to build child friendly communities to support families and provides opportunities for the families to develop support networks. These groups are developed in consultation with established centres such as Churches, Schools, M&CH & Children's Centres. This is achieved through the:

- Development and training of volunteers to support groups & social network activities. This also provides opportunities for client families to become volunteers and participants.
- Development of more inclusive family support networks for families with pre-school children.
- Community networking events such as family fun days.
- Development of groups such as playgroups, post-natal groups, toddler activity group etc.
- Provision of visiting speakers to speak on topics such as nutrition, child safety, asthma care etc.
- Provision of opportunities for participation and reciprocity either through volunteering or participating in the groups.
- Volunteers to provide transport, support or at times a listening ear.

Groups that have been developed through the GAIN Project team and volunteers include an Arabic post-natal group, Arabic playgroup, Kidz Unplugged - music dance and movement groups, Young Parent's group, International Playgroup, other Playgroups, Turkish young mothers group, and a Vietnamese women's group & Turkish women's group. The Good Beginnings volunteer home visiting program supports these groups.

Good Beginnings is a volunteer home visiting program that supports parents in their parenting, this program is instrumental in assisting some of our most isolated families become participating members of the community. Through the friendship and support provided through the volunteer we frequently see isolated and marginalized families introduced into programs, and supported to be there. We have also developed a Parent Education Program to assist with parenting and any behavioural issues that may arise with children and families that we are supporting.

Parent Education - This parent education program was developed at the Mater Hospital in Ireland in 2003 by Sharry, Hampson, and Fanning and is called the Parents Plus Early Years Program. Orana has adapted this material for a broad based early intervention program called Confident Parenting and has named the individual behaviour management support Parents Plus.

Confident Parenting – This parent education program is specifically designed for families with children from 0-6 years. “Essentially, the parenting program invites parents to become responsive, child-centred parents who are ‘tuned into’ their children’s needs as well as self-aware and reflective about their own responses (and thus be able to choose them). Concretely, parents are invited to:

- Play and interact with their children in a child-centred and responsive way anticipating their feelings and wishes, in a way that they ‘connect with’ and enjoy their children.
- Develop an interaction style that is sensitive to the child’s developmental level and which promotes the child’s communication.

- Positively attend to and reward their children for good behaviour, while largely ignoring misbehaviour.
- Develop a co-operative assertive style of parenting, giving children choices and responsibility.
- Become self-aware of their reactions and learn how to respond to children in calm consistent ways.” (Sharry, Hampson, & Fanning, 2003). The Confident Parenting program is delivered in an open format with six sessions covering the following topics:
 - Being a Responsive Parent
 - Encouraging Positive Attachment
 - Promoting Children’s Language and Development
 - Helping Children Concentrate and Learn
 - Helping Children Appreciate Rules
 - Managing Tantrums, Mis-behaviour and Problems

Parents are able to access individual behaviour management support through the Parents Plus program if this is required.

Parents Plus Program offers individual assistance with parent education and behaviour modification strategies in pre-school, childcare and home settings and a transition from pre-school to school program. This support is available to children who are manifesting social/ emotional or behavioral difficulties and are aged between 2 - 6. The program aims to:

- Provide assistance for children who are displaying challenging behaviors to remain within pre-school and childcare settings and prevent exclusion.
- In-home support to improve parent skill and competence thus reducing stress within the family home.
- To improve the life of the child and assist them belong within the community.
- Provide assessment, casework and designing individual behaviour management plans for the child within their home and kindergarten/child care environment to assist the child and his/her carers.
- To provide guidance and support to kindergarten, preschool and childcare staff to increase their confidence and management of the child.
- To provide referral to other support agencies when necessary.

The strength of the GAIN Project lies with its holistic approach to individual, family and community development through the integration of the above strategies. The project provides early intervention and support not only for children at risk but also for parents whom may be isolated or excluded. This is achieved through the multiple pathways to and from groups, volunteering, behaviour management support, parenting education, and community education. There are also links into the internal service system of the agency such as family counseling and the external service system of other resources. This highly integrated approach aims to build protective factors and self-sufficiency in

children and communities and reduce risk factors that lead to negative life outcomes for children.

Orana's experience combined with current research recognises the need for an integrated community development approach to the promotion of child rights and the prevention of child abuse and neglect. The approach simultaneously addresses social forces and **community level factors** (Tomison & Wise 1999). Our assertion/assumption is that perhaps traditionally welfarist programs focused solely on the individual child or family seem destined to failure if they do not take into account a need for community integration. There is solid evidence that environment and life experiences in the early years have a powerful, long lasting influence on a child's development. Parenting young children involves stress and change, and parents face many challenges.

Research indicates that we can make significant inroads into intergenerational cycles of poverty, inequity, and violence by supporting children and families in the **early years**. *The Early Years Study* confirmed the importance of supporting families in this period of the family life cycle, when the foundations for cognitive, social, emotional, language, physical development and life long learning are laid (Early Years Study - Reversing the Real Brain Drain by the Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain and Dr. J. Fraser Mustard, 1999).

Research also indicates that the most effective approach to reduce social ills in our communities is a **developmental approach**, where the aim is to reduce **risk** and promote **resiliency** (Trenbley and Craig 1995). The core component of resiliency and community building is creating more supportive, friendly and **inclusive environments** (National Crime Prevention 1999). Numerous studies have shown that social isolation is associated with greater risk of child maltreatment (Garbarino 1976; Celles & Straus 1979; Wolock & Horowitz 1979; Straus 1980; Salinger et al 1983; Tominson 1996; Chalk & King 1998; Reppucci et al 1999) which is correlated to the social ills in the environment. These families do not only need "fix it" programs when they are in crisis, they need neighbourhood inclusive programs, where they can build supportive friendship and support networks around themselves, and participate in community life. The GAIN Project promotes holistic support to all families who have children in the early years and seeks new ways to strengthen links within local communities and improve families' access to services.

Orana Family Services is on a steep learning curve as we seek to develop this **strengths-based approach that integrates Community Development and Family Counseling where the clients are particularly involved in the Community Development process**. This essentially means integrating individual elements of service provision with collective community development processes, from a perspective that focuses on the strengths of each. Orana is developing an approach to working with individuals that acknowledges, fosters and develops their strengths regardless of the presenting issues (for example behavioural issues with children, violence or abuse, illicit drug use, trauma etc.) Orana staff also recognise that children and their parents are entitled to opportunities to participate in the life of the community , a community that is

inclusive of people regardless of culture, social ability, or economic circumstances.

It is essential that we discover the hopes and dreams of the individual and keep our focus on the dream whilst facilitating the client to manage the barriers that prevent their inclusion in community. As families recognize their capacities and their rights, opportunities must be developed to facilitate **participation** in community life. In turn, community groups and networks become empowered and more able to analyse, reflect on and act to change their own situation.

An essential ingredient that all staff working with these families and communities have is a respect of the individual and the existing strengths within the individual and community. Orana has embraced a **multidisciplinary approach** to community programming and the community development model has been built-upon through a staff professional development program around promoting links between clients, volunteers, groups, communities and the broader system in which people live.

Our volunteer program is integral in encouraging skill development and reciprocity, which leads to true participation. Our experience has been that volunteering frequently leads to people seeking employment, further education and economic self-reliance. Orana has had the opportunity to receive valuable input from some of our clients who have become volunteers in areas such as Professional Development. One of our volunteers took a session with our staff on “Street Wise, and what not to do with material aid”. This was an extremely valuable and informative session. We have also had the privilege of some client/volunteers co-presenting with staff at Conferences.

There can be a significant tension and balance between volunteer selection, risk and opportunities for participation in our programs. However, people need to be given opportunities and at times a second chance and trusted, we need to provide the support and opportunities through our volunteer programs and organizations for people to develop and be respected for the skills that they have to offer, regardless of their past histories or social abilities.

The GAIN Project evaluation states that some individuals involved in programs are both ‘consumers’ and volunteers. This suggests that the GAIN Project has been successful in providing multiple avenues for involvement and also in applying the notion of reciprocity within this program. The evaluation also states that “We have the strong impression that many individuals derive more benefit from fulfilling dual roles than they would from fulfilling only one of these roles.” (Orana’s Gain Project Evaluation Report April 2004. Dr Julie Contole and Dr Cas O’Neill) It also appears that some individuals prefer to begin their involvement as a consumer and then become a volunteer only after they have gained confidence. Others – and this may include the more severely excluded families – need to be engaged ‘to help’ before they are willing to accept other services from the organisation. (Orana’s Gain Project Evaluation Report April 2004. Dr Julie Contole and Dr Cas O’Neill). These themes are currently being investigated.

Child development and participation is seen in the context of their families and environment. The model developed in this paper incorporates the family in their cultural and historical sub-system. It looks at a community that can provide acceptance and the confidence needed to motivate behavioural change when necessary and support, information, opportunities for reciprocity and access to resources. This is achieved by the use of a network of groups, programs, staff and volunteers that are connected by a common belief and purpose of welcome and inclusion of people of all backgrounds and abilities.

True participation only occurs when children and their parents are valued and accepted with the abilities capacities and gifts that they have to offer and not as people that need to be fixed.

“When you accept me it frees me to be all I can be, and it frees you from the fear of my world”. Source unknown.

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